"I had the whole future ahead of me, and I didn't know what to expect."
-- Elliot Bobo

Eighty years ago, Elliot Bobo was taken from his alcoholic father's home, given a small cardboard suitcase, and put on board an "orphan train" bound for Arkansas. Bobo never saw his father again. He was one of tens of thousands of neglected and orphaned children who over a 75-year period were uprooted from the city and sent by train to farming communities to start new lives with new families. Elliot Bobo's remarkable story is part of*The Orphan Trains*

The story of this ambitious and finally controversial effort to rescue poor and homeless children begins in the 1850s, when thousands of children roamed the streets of New York in search of money, food and shelter--prey to disease and crime. Many sold matches, rags, or newspapers to survive. For protection against street violence, they banded together and formed gangs. Police, faced with a growing problem, were known to arrest vagrant children--some as young as five--locking them up with adult criminals.

In 1853, a young minister, Charles Loring Brace, became obsessed by the plight of these children, who because of their wanderings, were known as "street Arabs." A member of a prominent Connecticut family, Brace had come to New York to complete his seminary training. Horrified by the conditions he saw on the street, Brace was persuaded there was only one way to help these "children of unhappy fortune." "The great duty," he wrote, "is to get utterly out of their surroundings and to send them away to kind Christian homes in the country."

In 1853, Brace founded the Children's Aid Society to arrange the trips, raise the money, and obtain the legal permissions needed for relocation. Between 1854 and 1929, more than 100,000 children were sent, via orphan trains, to new homes in rural America. Recognizing the need for labor in the expanding farm country, Brace believed that farmers would welcome homeless children, take them into their homes and treat them as their own. His program would turn out to be a forerunner of modern foster care.

Elliot Bobo was eight years old when he was put on a train. His mother had died when he was two. "Far as I know, my father hit the bottle pretty heavy, and they took us away from him." The Children's Aid Society gave him the small suitcase he still has. "I had all my possessions in there, which wasn't much. No shoes, just a change of clothes." He did not know--no one knew--where he or the other children would wind up. Placement into new families was casual at best. Handbills heralded the distribution of cargoes of needy children. As the trains pulled into towns, the youngsters were cleaned up and paraded on makeshift stages before crowds of prospective parents. Elliot Bobo remembers the ordeal:

A farmer came up to me and felt my muscles. And he says, "Oh, you'd make a good hand on the farm." And I say. "You smell bad. You haven't had a bath, probably, in a year." And he took me by the arm and was gonna lead me off the stage, and I bit him. And that didn't work. So I kicked him. Everybody in the audience thought I was incorrigible. They didn't want me because I was out of control. I was crying in the chair by myself.

Elliot Bobo eventually found a warm and loving home. The Children's Aid Society liked to point with pride to other success stories, like those of street boys Andrew Burke and John Brady who grew up to become governors of North Dakota and of Alaska, respectively. But the record of placements was mixed. Some of the farmers saw the children as nothing more than a source of cheap labor. Hazelle Latimer, an orphan train rider featured in the film, remembers a farmer with "old dirty hands" examining her teeth. There was also evidence of abuse by foster parents. Many of the older boys simply ran away; some children were rejected by their new parents.

As *The Orphan Trains* so poignantly reveals, even those for whom the journey ultimately was a triumph found the transition from one life to another almost always painful and confusing. "I would give a hundred worlds like this," wrote one child from her new comfortable home, "if you could see my mother," Brace himself grappled with the dilemma: "When a child of the streets stands before you in rags, with a tear-stained face, you cannot easily forget him. And yet, you are perplexed what to do. The human soul is difficult to interfere with. You hesitate how far you should go.