

# ORPHAN TRAIN

By Dory Oda

Hannah perched erect on the edge of her seat.

“James, sit up straight. They’ll be looking at you as we come into the station.”

Child number 8 complied accordingly.

“Everyone, be sure your red number is attached and visible.”

Directing her attention to the sniffing child two rows ahead, she said, “Katie, come here. It’s okay, sweetie...your brother has a new family now. When you get older, you can go visit him. Maybe it will be your turn this time.”

Hannah pulled little number 20 close with her right arm, all the while sheltering another tiny warm body against her left side. Two older boys squirmed in their seats, jostling the small children they held in their laps. It was time to wake their tiny charges.

“Next stop, Greenville. Ten minutes to Greenville,” came the announcement from the conductor.

The little bundle resting against Hannah’s left side stirred, yanking Hannah back to the present.

“Iva Mae, sweetie, we’re almost to Greenville. Please wake your brother and get ready.”

“Oh, we don’t need to go, Miss Hannah. Me and Elmer knows nobody want us. I’m too skinny and he’s too little. Besides, if I got picked, who would take care of him?”

She put her arm around Elmer in a protective motion. Their older siblings had already been claimed by needy families at previous stops. They were strong and able-bodied, suited for farm work.

Hannah smiled. That little girl never failed to lighten her mood. It was, in fact, likely true that no one would choose either of them. It had happened at Fairfield, then at Hamilton, and again at Middletown.

The orphans paraded out onto the train platform to be examined, poked, and interrogated by the farmers and families of the community, most of whom were desperate for farm help.

Hannah had been on duty when the seven Teeters children approached the orphanage with their parents last October. She motioned her fellow housemother to a back window.

“Look at them, Dorothy. On foot, every one of them, and not passing a word between them.”

“It’s not nice to say, but they don’t look very clean, their clothes are rags, and they surely aren’t dressed warm enough for a day like today,” Dorothy said.

“Not a one of them has a wrap.” And then, “Oh my, Dorothy. That’s the saddest thing I’ve seen in a while.”

Both women fell silent as the children’s father, a slim, hunch-shouldered man in shirt sleeves, turned his back while his wife kissed each child on the forehead. Without a word, the couple walked away, retracing their steps, not once looking back.

Still observing the children through the back window, Hannah spoke quietly. “Those poor babies.”

The children watched until their parents were out of sight. When they could no longer be seen, the eldest opened the door and led his siblings inside. The boy motioned his siblings to sit on the floor while he approached the young man at the reception counter.

“We’re the Teeters and our Ma and Pa cain’t keep us no more ‘cause our farm got flooded.”

His voice cracked, but he struggled on with a rehearsed speech.

“This here’s the girls – Elvina, Flora, Lilly, and Iva Mae. Us boys is William, baby Elmer, and me. I’m Joseph.”

He dropped his head and quickly swiped his eyes. Apparently finished, he sat next to shivering siblings and waited. When one of the younger children started to whimper, Joseph simply shook his head with a great amount of authority for one so young. The whimpering stopped, but the tears kept coming, and proved infectious. Within minutes, all six younger children streamed tears, eyes straight ahead, small hands grasping desperately onto larger ones.

Meanwhile, Hannah made her way through the orphanage toward the front lobby, and within minutes, emerged from a side door. Barely a moment later, and most unexpectedly, she sat on the floor with them, gathered little ones into her arms, onto her lap, and close against each side, comforting, soothing, and stroking curly heads. In retrospect, she realized that in those first moments, she loved the little girl now looking earnestly into her face.

“Greenville, next stop. Now arriving Greenville.”

Taking Iva Mae by the hand, who in turn held tight to Elmer, Hannah moved through the aisles, wiping smudges off little faces, cautioning restless imps to be on their best behavior, and reminding the older to watch over younger charges.

“Children, be sure your numbers are straight.” Hannah’s practiced hands gave a tug here and a smoothing there as she continued. “Now don’t forget your suitcases -- they contain a new set of clothes and a coat for each of you. Ready? And remember, if you are chosen, I will be around next spring to visit and make sure you are happy and well.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” came the unison reply, as at each of the stops.

Every orphan train took a tiny piece of Hannah's heart, as she released the children she had come to love into the hands of strangers. Unmarried, with no children of her own, the orphans became her family. As they entered Greenville, Hannah steeled herself for what would come next.

The screeching of the train's brakes, the conductor's announcement, and the excited chatter of those waiting rang a familiar tune in Hannah's ears. Most had seen an article in the newspaper. Some were there to choose a child, some were curious onlookers and others just wanted to be a part of the excitement.

The train skidded to a stop, and Iva Mae skipped down the aisle toward the exit door with Elmer in tow. Hannah motioned to them.

"Stay close to me."

"Yes, Ma'am," they said together.

She led the parade of orphans onto the platform and lined them up for the townsfolk. As the last boy took his place, she held a hand up for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please form a single line. You may ask the children any questions you like, but please don't touch them. If you select a child, please bring him or her with you to the sign-out book at the end of the line. Fill in all the information, and especially the child's number so I can find you and the child next spring."

The two little ones huddled close as Hannah watched unions form. The first man in line, older and alone, passed the girls, but stopped to examine the older boys.

"You... can you lift a bag of 'taters? Do you mind some hard work? You can have a room of your own, and a hot breakfast every day. Come on, boy. What's your name?" He stopped at the end of the platform to record his name and Charles Gibson, #5.

The next couple stepped forward, and Hannah met their cold blue eyes. She tucked Iva Mae in closer, relieved when the couple walked away with James Altman, #8.

Scanning the crowd, Hannah was startled to find a man and his wife toward the back of the line studying her with open curiosity. For a moment, Hannah appreciated how her orphans must have felt. In self-defense, she stared back, and was again surprised when the man's face broke into a sunny smile. It was the kind of smile that lit up his whole face The kind of smile that made Hannah smile back despite herself. She was amused as he poked his wife and pointed her direction. Hannah thought the woman looked...well, "comfortable." The comfortable woman waved, and Hannah found herself waving back. Did she know these folks? Not likely.

She looked back just in time to see Katie, #20, walk off the platform, hand in hand with a friendly-looking younger woman. Hannah smiled and waved goodbye, fervently hoping the best for the little girl.

Hannah was still waving when she felt a tap on her shoulder and looked over to see the comfortable woman and her husband had come up the back steps to speak to her.

"Miss, we don't know you," the comfortable woman began, "but we want this pretty little girl right here. She needs some fattening up and some good ole home cookin'! I hope you don't mind, but Oscar and I just fell in love with that little gal and we was afraid somebody else would snatch her up if we waited through that big line." Still smiling, Oscar nodded.

"This little girl?" Hanna said, but she knew. Iva Mae.

"Yes, that one -- #14. Hi darlin'! What's your name? Did you ever have your own room? We got a great big farm and a pony named Jeepers waitin' for you at home. And I know it might feel a little funny, but I want you to call me Mama just as soon as you can. And this is your new

Daddy.” Again, the man smiled and lit up the platform. “Now we can’t take the little boy--just you--but you’re gonna love it at our house!”

Oscar finally got a word in. “Do you like poetry, little missy? You’ll like the poems from James Whitcomb Riley. I’ll pull you in the red wagon, and we’ll teach you to ride Jeepers! We’re gonna have so much fun! Have you ever heard ‘Little Orphan Annie?’”

“No sir, I haven’t, but it sounds nice.” In an odd counterpoint to Hannah’s melancholy heart, she was pleased that Iva Mae remembered her manners.

“Miss Hannah? Will you take care of Elmer?” Iva Mae kissed her little brother, then pried his fingers apart from her own, as a smattering of tiny tears finally leaked out of the corners of her eyes. “I love you, Elmer, and I love you, Miss Hannah.” A quick hug, and #14 was gone.

Hannah picked up Elmer, and they clung to one another. Hannah did her best to comfort him as she blinked back tears. The line of townspeople had come and gone, leaving eight lonely children to carry their suitcases back onto the train. They needed Hannah’s love more than ever now.

“Don’t worry, darlings. We have another stop tomorrow, and I’m sure you will find a new family. Shhh...come sit with me. It’s going to be okay.”

Day led to evening, evening led to nightfall, and, one by one, the children fell asleep. Drifting in and out of sleep, Hannah prayed, “Lord, please take care of the least of these, and especially watch over Iva Mae Teeters.”

And He did.

## Dedication/Epilogue:

This fictional story is based on the true-life experiences of the seven Teeters children and is dedicated to my husband's grandmother, Iva Mae Teeters Staight Durr, an orphan who grew into a beautiful, talented adult with the help of loving adoptive parents.

Iva Mae was chosen by a family in Greenville, OH, who loved her, treated her well, read James Whitcomb Riley to her, and pulled her in a red wagon. She was never officially adopted, though she took Oscar and Flora Staight's last name and entered school as Iva Mae Staight.

Elmer was not adopted off the orphan train, but later ran away from the orphanage. A farm family took him in and kept him until he was grown.

Iva Mae grew into an outgoing and colorful woman who loved gardening, needlepoint, playing the organ, painting and ceramics. She was a member of a garden club, entering her arrangements in the Darke County fair. She was married and had two children of her own, Jacque and Barbara.



Iva Mae's older sister, Elvina, eventually found and reunited all seven of the Teeters brothers and sisters with the help of Miss Ida Janet Acom of the Children's Home in Cincinnati. Some of the written correspondence between Miss Acom and Elvina still exists today and is held by one of Iva Mae's children. We do not know if any of the Teeters children ever saw their birth parents again.