



## *Orphan!* by John R. Weber

**Subjects:** Orphans—Fiction; Adoption—Fiction; Voyages and travels—Fiction; Friendship—Fiction

**Book Lists:** Grade 7, North America

**Props:** Train conductor hat, train whistle



*(Wear conductor hat, blow train whistle)* All Aboard! *(Take hat off)* As the soot, smoke and cinders from the coal tender and freight cars swirled around Homer and Jaime, they half-ran out of the ditch where they had been hiding in last year's dry grass. They trotted alongside the train, tossed their bundles in, grabbed the edge of the train door and pulled themselves up. Homer slapped the wooden floor. "All right. We'll be in New York in no time." Homer was happy—now. He and his best friend Jaime, were on their way to New York. But the decision to go had not been a happy one.

It all started just a few days ago on Homer's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. That evening he had been sitting in the kitchen eating dessert when his pa said, "Homer, you're an orphan." Homer's mouth fell open and his eyebrows shot up, almost disappearing behind the shaggy blond hair that always hung over his forehead. A bit of cherry pie fell off the end of the fork he held in his trembling hand and plopped onto his plate. He was an orphan? Not the eldest son of Aaron and Linda Meiers who would one day take over running the family farm? No? He was an orphan? His folks explained, well his adopted folks explained that in 1920, when he was just 2 ½ years old, he had traveled on an orphan train from New York City to the Iowa farmlands. The Meiers had been given permission to adopt a child from the trains and that's how they had ended up with Homer. Now they didn't tell him about the adoption to upset him. It was just time for him to know. They didn't want anything to change. He was still their son.

But all Homer heard was the word—*orphan*. He was devastated. The Meiers weren't his real parents. He couldn't stay in that house anymore. He was an orphan, orphans didn't have homes. In the middle of the night, he packed a bag and left. He decided to go to New York to find his real parents. But he didn't want to go alone. So he snuck into his best friend's house, woke him up and convinced him to run away too.

So there they were, sitting on a train headed east. Never mind that they didn't have much money, or food, or water. Never mind that they had never been outside of their little town except to visit the county fair. They would figure it out as they went along.

But these boys will run into trouble almost immediately. Arrested, beaten, and robbed, they are about to be killed when they are saved by Smilin' Jack. Smilin' Jack is a hobo who takes them under his wing. He introduces them to the life of a hobo, its code of conduct and unforgettable characters. He teaches them how to ride the rails and not get caught, how to find shelter in the Hobo Jungles that are scattered across the country and how to work for food. But riding the rails is hard. It's dangerous, unpredictable. And during the 1930s Great Depression there were not just hobos but bums and criminals hopping trains.

Follow Homer and Jaime as they jump one train after another, crossing the country in search of Homer's past. And perhaps if they are lucky, they will even find his future. *(Hold up book)* Read *Orphan!* by John R. Weber.

