



'Grain Train on the Move

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Touching lives across the globe The Orphan Grain Train a 'hands-on mission project'

By SHERYL SCHMECKPEPER, Norfolk Daily News

It sounds so simple.

Just find out what people need and ship it to them.

In reality, the process of getting Bibles, clothing, food, medical supplies, farm equipment and much more from the United States to Africa, India, Asia or even New Mexico or Arizona is far more complicated.

But almost every day, Clayton Andrews and the staff at the Orphan Grain Train figure out how to get it done.

"If you don't work with the right people, the merchandise will end up on the black market," Andrews said.

Andrews is no rookie when it comes to getting merchandise from one point to another. The 89-year-old owns and operates Andrews Van



The Rev. Ray Wilke (left) and Clayton Andrews started the Orphan Grain Train in 1992. Here, they stand at the opening of the warehouse in Norfolk in front of one of the Orphan Grain Train trailers.

Lines, which is situated just a block from the Orphan Grain Train offices in the downtown Norfolk area.

While Andrews still stops at the Andrews Van Lines office occasionally, he spends most of his time at the

Orphan Grain Train office, where he oversees the process of transporting tons of donated goods around the world.

Andrews didn't necessarily plan to spend his retirement years managing a non-profit organization.

In fact, in 1992, when the Rev. Ray Wilke told Andrews he wanted to find a way to get a shipment of goods to Latvia, Andrews was going to avoid getting involved.

"In my mind, I was going to say no, but I said yes and the Orphan Grain Train

was born," Andrews said.

Wilke's desire to send aid to the country that formerly was part of the Soviet Union stemmed from a visit there that same year. The people begged for help, said the senior pastor

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at Grace Lutheran Church in Norfolk.

He envisioned a train that would travel through America's Midwest, picking up cars of donated grain along the way, until it reached a port from which the grain would be shipped to Eastern Europe.

Wilke kept his promise to the Latvian people. Within a year of that visit, the first container of goods arrived there.

"Since that time, with God's blessing and a generous outpouring of time, talent and contributions, the Orphan Grain Train has become a hands-on mission project," Wilke said.

The name reflects a passage from the book of John in the Bible that says, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you."

The organization is now a recognized service organization of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Although the Orphan Grain Train does use trains to transport containers of goods from major cities to ports, it also relies on trucks, ships and boats to get merchandise around the world.

The process can result in piles of paperwork and numerous e-mails and phone calls — all meant to ensure that the merchandise gets to the registered recipient on the other end. In fact, before a shipment leaves a warehouse, Andrews and his crew make sure the items being shipped are allowed into the country of destination. If not, once it arrives, the shipment may sit on the dock, and the government may charge a daily storage fee.

"The hardest part is getting it through customs," Andrews said.

Once they confirm that all of the items will be accepted, Andrews and his staff have to make sure there is someone at the other end qualified to take responsibility for the goods.

"We can't ship a 40-foot container to an individual. It has to be sent to a registered organization," Andrews said.

Most of those organizations are faith-based.

And while the Orphan Grain Train is known for shipping clothing, medical and school supplies and other small items, it also is proficient at getting much larger items to sites around the world. Examples include farm equipment to the Middle East; portable medical clinics, kitchens and dormitories to Asia; an MRI machine to Nicaragua and a fresh water system, clinic and hospital to Africa.

And they haven't forgotten the needy in America.

In addition to responding to natural disasters here and abroad, the Orphan Grain Train routinely sends aid, for example, to Indian reservations in New Mexico and Arizona, the Dakotas and Montana and to coal miners in the Ohio Valley. While some of that aid originates from Norfolk, much of it comes from one of the 19 divisions scattered around the country.

Established and operated by volunteers, the Grain Train divisions often serve the people in their area. For instance, the California-Nevada-Arizona division has sent clothing to needy in Tijuana, Mexico, while the Ohio division gathered furniture and appliances for seminary students in the area.

Those regional divisions also gather and ship goods overseas.

In 2008, the Orphan Grain Train shipped 147 semi-loads — 63 that were sent overseas and 84 sent in response to domestic disasters. In addition, 52 smaller 14-foot or 16-foot trailer-loads and vanloads were dispatched in response to floods and tornadoes here in the United States.

In the past 17 years, the Orphan Grain Train has shipped around 63.2 million pounds of merchandise to needy people. That translates into 1,580 semi-loads.

Richard Jostes, the director of development for the Orphan Grain Train, estimates that it costs between \$9 and \$12 to ship each box, and each 40-foot container holds 1,200 boxes.

Funding comes in the form of donations from churches, organizations and private citizens, including, for example, three children in Maryland who sold lemonade to raise money to buy three pairs of boots for orphans in Russia.

But what makes the Orphan Grain Train stand out from other service organizations is its ability to operate with just five paid staff members. In fact, less than 3 percent of the \$10 million yearly budget goes to wages and other administrative costs.

"Less than 3 percent spent on administration is due to an all-volunteer staff nationwide, with only five paid personnel at Norfolk. Our outreach activities in recipient countries and U.S. projects are also carried out by volunteers," Jostes said.

Clayton Andrews says he knows why the Orphan Grain Train has grown to be one of the most successful service organizations in the world.

"It's easy," he said. "We're doing God's work."

Fact:

In the past four years, the Orphan Grain Train has shipped 147 semi-loads of supplies and merchandise to the Gulf Coast to aid the Katrina recovery efforts.

‘But that is life’ ‘God’s work’ offers hope to poverty-stricken Russians

By SHERYL SCHMECKPEPER, *Norfolk Daily News*

The photos are much too graphic to publish in a newspaper.

“Be careful . . . they are hard to look at,” wrote Nikolay Devyatkin in the e-mail that accompanied the photos.

“But that is life,” he added.

Devyatkin was right. The photos show bodies covered with large red and black blotches where charred skin has been removed. Their heads are swollen and disfigured. Oxygen tubes run into their mouths.

The bodies belong to Djasur Khamdamov and Oskar Kartunen — young burn victims. Djasur suffered burns over 98 percent of his body in a gas explosion. Sixty percent of Oskar’s body was burned when a heater in his home malfunctioned and started on fire. He was just a year old at the time.

In spite of the severity of their wounds, both children survived, perhaps because they were treated at a burn unit in St.

Petersburg, Russia, that was lucky enough to have a “dermatome” — a tool that Devyatkin calls a “precious” skin grafting instrument.

Without the help of the Orphan Grain Train — and, specifically the Rev. John Reehl and his wife, June — the hospitals wouldn’t have their dermatomes . . . prisoners wouldn’t have their medicines, orphans wouldn’t have their clothing and none would have much hope.

The Reehls, who are from Grand

Island, Neb. don’t really want a story written about them. They don’t want to take credit for what they call “God’s work.” But a little background will make it easier to understand the reasons why they’ve made Russian orphanages, clinics and prisons their special mission.

Reehl — who is also a lieutenant

used over and over again.

“The blood testing machine was broken, the autoclave was broken . . . the dental chair was broken. They couldn’t fix teeth . . . they just had to pull them,” Reehl said.

The poverty can be blamed on the fall of communism and the rise of capitalism in Russia in the early 1990s.

“There is a huge gap between rich and poor in the society with an unbelievable level of corruption and greed,” Devyatkin said.

After witnessing the situation there and in some of the clinics, the Reehls arranged for shipments of medical supplies to be sent through Lutheran Hour Ministries and the Orphan Grain Train.

But their mission didn’t end there.

For several years after retiring from ministry in the United States, the Reehls lived and worked in Kaiserslautern, Germany, which is home to an American military base. From there, they made regular trips into

Russia, which helped them enlarge the reach of their ministry to include 54 orphanages, five prisons and three hospitals, two of which specialize in treating young burn victims. Another of the hospitals has a ward for indigent elderly.

Devyatkin served as an interpreter during one of the couple’s visits and has been involved in the mission work



This boy received a pair of boots through the “Warm Boots for Russia” initiative, which was begun by The Rev. Terry Timm and his wife, Ruth, when they were missionaries in Russia. Timm now serves as pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Leigh, Neb.

colonel in the Army National Guard — retired from full-time ministry about 10 years ago. He and his wife traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, on a mission trip, visited a prison housing 1,300 women and were appalled when they learned that the prison doctor did not have a single aspirin tablet and had only one pair of rubber gloves that she washed so that they could be

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‘But that is life’ (continued from page 3)

ever since.

Now, he and his two assistants help carry out the Reehls and the Orphan Grain Train’s work, by serving around 3,000 orphans and 100 elderly people.

Among those orphans is Melnichny Rouchei who was found abandoned in a garbage dump. Another one is Oleg Ulin, who, Devyatkin says, has chronic heart problems and needs an operation.

“He is from one of our most distant orphanages — over 200 miles of very dented roads,” he added.

The chance of either of these boys being adopted is slim, Reehl said. In fact, just a small percentage of infants will find permanent homes. The rest will grow to adulthood in the orphanages, where life can be harsh, despite the efforts of caring workers and dedicated volunteers.

“The government has told the orphanages they will pay salaries and buy basic food and that’s it. It’s up to employees to do the rest — buy

clothing, toys and supplies,” Reehl said.

So the Reehls — with the help of a couple of their children — recruit sponsors to donate \$280 a month to furnish the orphanages with basic medical and hygiene supplies. Medicines and pharmaceuticals are purchased in Russia because they are less expensive, which means the donated money goes a lot further.

An initiative called “Warm Boots for Russia,” provides winter boots for children. The Rev. Terry Timm and his wife, Ruth, started that particular program. For just \$15, supporters can buy a child a pair of boots — and a Bible. The Timms previously served overseas with the Grain Train.

The Orphan Grain Train continues to ship clothing, shoes, blankets, medical equipment — and hope.

“A doctor running a small hospital received two semi loads of equipment and put a hospital back in order. In the highlands, people teaching

with chalkboards needed erasers. We brought them erasers . . . and they cried,” Reehl said.

The programs are working.

Djasur Khamdamov, the young burn victim, has returned home to a “normal life.” Although 3-year-old Oskar Kartunen remains in the hospital, he is expected to recover. Many of the orphans who receive aid provided by the Orphan Grain Train are thriving.

And prisoners are coming to Christ.

“One day . . . a former prisoner came to me who was from the TB and HIV section. She was just released from prison. Smiling with a toothless smile, she asked me to pass a small toy she had made for John (Reehl). She was grateful for his visits and said that now she does not feel loneliness, and the Bible gave her a foundation to stand on and to keep living,” Devyatkin said.

But neither the Reehls nor Devyatkin want any credit for their service.

“I don’t play golf . . . I don’t fish. This is a source of joy and an opportunity to serve in a meaningful way,” Reehl said.

Devyatkin took it one step further.

“Life is short and what is left after us is either the good or bad deeds we do,” he said.



This child is one of the 3,000 Russian orphans who receive aid from the Orphan Grain Train.

Fact:

The Orphan Grain Train supports 54 orphanages in Russia.

Filling The Need

Drought spurred domestic relief efforts

By *SHERYL SCHMECKPEPER, Norfolk Daily News*

It was the crying of hungry cattle in western Nebraska that prompted the Orphan Grain Train to start its U.S. relief program.

In 2002, cattle had nibbled away the little bit of grass that managed to survive years of drought in that part of the state. Eventually, only the sandy soil remained.

Cattle can't live on sand.

"The Rev. (Ray) Wilke went out (to inspect) and the grass was white," said Richard Jostes, the Grain Train's director of development. Wilke started the Grain Train in 1992.

Eventually, then-Gov. Mike Johanns appointed the Orphan Grain Train as the statewide coordinator for what became Operation Haylift.

Volunteers solicited donations of hay from ranchers and farmers in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. The federal government opened the Conservation Reserve Program acres to mowing. Area farmers donated their time to mow and haul the hay; farm machinery dealers provided much of the equipment.

In 10 months, 330 semi-loads of hay had been delivered to needy ranchers and their cattle.

Since then, the domestic relief program has come to the rescue of people involved in tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, wildfires, blizzards and the terrorist attack of Sept. 11.

The efforts are coordinated by Vern Steinman and Aaron Walter, both retired Norfolk businessmen who share an office in the corner of

the Orphan Grain Train's corporate headquarters in Norfolk.

When a disaster happens, the two wait for someone from the area to call and ask for assistance.

"They call and say, 'This is what we need,' and we try to fill that need," Walter said.



The Orphan Grain Train has become proficient at converting shipping containers into bedroom, shower and storage facilities. Here, Orphan Grain Train's Hammar trailer lifts a volunteer village bedroom unit at Greensburg, Kansas.

Often, the biggest need is for storage containers, office space, housing, kitchens, clinics and other facilities for the volunteers who often pour into the area.

Those needs prompted the conversion of 40-foot shipping containers and semi-truck trailers into such facilities.

In some cases, the trailers and containers were converted by local volunteers, while students at Northeast Community College remodeled others.

"The best shower units are old refrigerator trailers because the floor is corrugated," Walter said.

A trailer used to transport hanging meat was converted into a kitchen.

In the past four years, around 40 of the renovated containers and trailers have been shipped to the Gulf area, and some are being used in unusual

ways.

For instance, because most homes and other structures along the Gulf were either destroyed or heavily damaged, fishermen had no place to do their laundry and store their nets.

"We put them along the east side of the coast and rigged them

to have water for washing machines,"

explained the Rev. Dave Buss, who oversees operations at Camp Restore and Camp Biloxi, where volunteers efforts are coordinated in New Orleans and Biloxi, Miss., respectively.

The containers are hauled to the sites on the flatbed semi trailers driven by volunteer drivers, some of whom

are also Northeast students.

In addition to coordinating the placement of converted containers, Walter and Steinman arrange for shipments of fresh foods and other supplies to disaster areas.

When the camps in New Orleans requested fresh meat, the two saw to it that a semi-truck load of hams was shipped there.

They also shipped loaders, Bobcats and other equipment.

In addition to responding to disasters, the Orphan Grain Train supports a number of ministries here in the country.

For instance, in 2008, 45 semi-loads of supplies were shipped to The Ysleta Mission and Cornerstone Children's Ranch on the Texas border. Another 13 semi-loads were sent to aid Native Americans in South Dakota and New Mexico.

An Army of Volunteers 'Priceless' efforts around country fuel Orphan Grain Train

By SHERYL SCHMECKPEPER, *Norfolk Daily News*

Neat stacks of identical brown boxes line the length of the former Walnut Grove feed mill building where the Orphan Grain Train warehouse is located in Norfolk.

Tracheotomy tubes, catheters, surgical gowns and gloves and more medical supplies crowd the shelves in the back of the warehouse, while metal walkers fill a small loft.

Stuffed animals spill out of a barrel, and bicycles hang from the ceiling.

Piles of clothing are stacked on the long tables that stretch down the middle of the warehouse's front room.

On most days, the Orphan Grain Train warehouse is buzzing with volunteers who come from all over the Midwest to sort the clothing, shoes and other items donated by the people around the country.

Before being packed, each piece of clothing is examined. Dirty clothing is washed; torn clothing is repaired; buttons are replaced.

Volunteers knowledgeable about medicine sort the medical supplies, while others repair bicycles. Others operate forklifts that move the pallets full of boxes.

Doug Trampe, who directs activities at the warehouse, estimates that around 3,000 volunteers have worked at the warehouse since it opened in 1998.

They have packed around 52,000 boxes that have been loaded into around 1,000 containers and either trucked to some other part of the country or to Omaha, where they are loaded onto a train that is bound for a shipyard.

Most volunteers come because they want to serve.



Doug Trampe stands amid some of the hundreds of boxes in the Orphan Grain Train warehouse that are ready to be shipped.

Jane Ternus of Humphrey wasn't ready to retire three years ago when her husband, Jim, sold his business.

So the Humphrey woman works

at the Orphan Grain Train four days a week.

The pay doesn't come in dollars and cents. Instead, it's doled out in satisfaction.

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An Army of Volunteers *(continued from page 6)*

“This makes me feel good,” she said.

More volunteers man the 20 regional division offices and warehouses scattered around the country — so many that Clayton Andrews, who founded the Orphan Grain Train with the Rev. Ray Wilke — hesitates to even estimate the total. “Hundreds . . .,” he said.

More volunteers work at missions, schools, clinics and other facilities supported by the Orphan Grain Train. Volunteers do more than pack boxes and load trucks.

In 1998, they helped replace more than 130 miles of fence in the Dakotas that had been destroyed by the blizzards and resulting floods that had ravaged the area the year before.

The estimate in donated man-hours was more than 4,000. The value of the donated trucking, labor and food, as well as \$86,000 worth of posts and wire, was more than \$400,000 for the project.

In 2004, volunteers helped feed fellow

volunteers who had come to Hallam, Neb., to help citizens clean up debris left when a tornado destroyed much of the town.

More volunteers drive the trucks that transport goods around the country. They include Lloyd Dennert of Columbia, S.D., who has logged more than 500,000 miles.

Students at Northeast Community College’s truck driving

school also drive trucks at times.

It’s impossible to note every job filled by volunteers. Yet their value has not been lost on Trampe and other Orphan Grain Train officials.

You know the saying, Trampe said. “Volunteers aren’t paid because they are worthless; they’re not paid because they are priceless.”



Volunteers load a container of goods bound for Belarus. They are (from left) Carl Bendixen, Bill Baker, E.L. Long, and Alan Bonig.

This newsletter contains four of six news stories which first appeared in the Norfolk Daily News, August 3 through 8, 2009. The Daily News editor wrote: “Since its inception in 1992, the Orphan Grain Train has shipped more than 63 million pounds of goods around the world and has expanded to include 19 divisions situated around the country. This week, the Daily News is looking at some of the people behind the Norfolk-based organizations and some of their special projects.”

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