



North American Association of Christians in Social Work
A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work

PO Box 121
Botsford, CT 06404
www.nacsw.org
888.426.4712

**ORPHAN TRAIN RIDERS TO NEBRASKA: A LOOK AT LIFE
EXPERIENCES**

By: Sandra Cook-Fong, Ph.D.

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2011
October, 2011
Pittsburgh, PA**

Orphan Train Riders to Nebraska: A Look at Life Experiences

Dr. Sandra Cook-Fong

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Abstract

Very little academic research exists about the Orphan Trains that transported at least 150,000 children from New York to other states from the 1850s through the 1920s. This era is a very important part of child welfare history. This presentation will take an in-depth look at this mass movement of children across the United States and attain first hand accounts from the riders.

The researcher interviewed orphan train riders and/or their family members in semi-structured interviews to collect data regarding their personal experiences. Information regarding the interactions between the agency personnel and the riders, assessment processes for determining family placement, advertising for potential receiving families, and newspaper accounts of the process were data also collected.

Information regarding biological family disruptions as well as attempts at reunifications is examined. Memories of the riders and the attempts to assimilate the experience into their adult lives are detailed. The riders detail their own lives and the impact the Orphan Train has made on them. The resiliency of the riders will be emphasized.

Orphan Train Riders to Nebraska: A Look at Life Experiences

Introduction

As social workers involved in child welfare agencies struggle to find the best approaches to assist the children placed under their supervision, it may be helpful to examine again the beginnings of child placements. Before the public sector was involved in child placement private agencies were established to deal with the problems encountered when children were orphaned or abandoned. During the latter half of the 19th century the practice of placing out children emerged from private agencies. Thousands of children were placed using the Orphan Train strategy.

Literature Review

Orphan trains transported an immense number of children from New York to less populated western states between 1854 and 1929. The actual figure fluctuates between 150,000 to 350,000 children placed out, depending on the source. Of these placements, approximately six to seven thousand were to Nebraska” (Orphan Trains, 2003). Charles Loring Brace, a minister in New York, worked with others to found the Children’s Aid Society in 1853. Brace had a passion for homeless children and believed that institutions were unfit; he also viewed city life as unhealthy for proper development of children and saw the west as the answer to improving the lives of New York children. The Children’s Aid Society (CAS) and similar institutions developed orphan trains to send kids west to families that could provide better lifestyles and opportunities (Fry, 1974).

Brace worked diligently to obtain funding for the orphan trains. He wrote and spoke for financial support and sought donations from the wealthy, which resulted in the CAS becoming one of the top charities in New York (Wheeler, 1983). Railroads offered discount transportation

for the children, and receiving families and communities often donated money back to the CAS. Obtaining proper funding was the mere beginning of the placing out process.

There is often a misconception that all children involved in placing out were orphaned, but actually a large number still had living parents who were simply unable to provide a good life. Children arrived at the Children's Aid Society for various reasons including, those brought by parents, kids that volunteered themselves, orphans, and referrals from courts, prisons, and institutions (Cook, 1995). The majority came from orphanages and some were also recruited off of New York's streets. "American-born children made up the biggest single group, followed by immigrant children from Germany and Ireland" (Fry, 1994, p. 28). Younger children were preferred because they were easier to place and fourteen-years-old was the common limit. Most children that were placed were white; handicapped individuals and criminals were turned away because the CAS feared no families would accept them (Warren, 1996). Furthermore, African Americans were rejected because of prejudices, the smaller number in New York, and the fear of the CAS that people would improperly label it as slavery (Cook, 1995).

"Once a new company of children was formed, they were bathed and given two sets of new clothes, including a hat, a coat, and shoes" (Warren, 1996, p. 33). Many of the riders that we spoke to though did not have anything except the clothes they wore on the train. Other procedures that often made the children feel special were receiving a Bible and lessons in manners for their trip west. Children were not allowed to take any personal keepsakes because the CAS believed that their old lives should be left in the past (Warren, 1996). For this reasoning, children also were not allowed to contact their birth family and no information was released (Debnam, 2002). Although, individuals of legal age could access their records if they had not been adopted.

Groups varied in size, usually consisting of 10 to 40 children with at least one agent on each train. Groups were arranged approximately three times monthly and normally left New York on Tuesday (Graham & Gray, 1995). According to Warren (2001), "Most agents had backgrounds as teachers, social workers, or ministers and were committed to the children and

their welfare” (p. 30). The orphan trains that left New York made a number of stops in which the placing out routine occurred. The first orphan train carried 46 boys and girls to Dowagiac, Michigan, and before the movement ended 46 other states received placements (Debnam, 2002).

A great deal of preparation was required for the arrival of an orphan train. Signs were put up in towns a few weeks prior to a train’s arrival to advertise; the CAS also created local screening committees in the towns to approve families’ applications (Warren, 1996). These committees usually consisted of prominent community members, such as bankers and judges. One downfall of this informal process was that committees rarely rejected applications, which led to some undesirable situations (Jackson, 1986). Advertisements appeared in local newspapers and the arrival was often announced in church (Fry, 1974). As a result of the advertising, extremely large crowds showed up to meet the orphan trains all across the country.

The viewing of the orphans was normally at a community building, commonly the courthouse or church; children were lined up and families could walk through and choose the child they wanted to take home. Those that were not chosen boarded the train and hoped for better luck at the next stop. (Cook, 1995). The viewing often caused feelings of judgment and rejection and even seemed inhumane to some. “Most remember the experience as the worst part of being an orphan train rider” (Warren, 1996, p. 46).

Placing out was an informal process; the child or family could end the placement at any time because there was no contract or money involved. In the beginning, the agreement was simply verbal that families would supply good education and care for the children, but with time formal contracts evolved. If a situation were unsatisfactory, the CAS agreed to pay for the child’s trip back to New York (Holt, 1992). Agents were required to maintain contact with children and make follow-up visits until those placed were adopted or became legal adults. The CAS or biological parents kept custody of the children unless an adoption occurred (Cook, 1995). Adoption was not familiar until the 1900s, so most orphan train riders were never formally adopted. Nevertheless, a majority of riders did choose to take their new family’s name (Warren, 1996).

Charles Loring Brace passed away in 1890, but the orphan trains continued with the leadership of his sons Charles and Robert (Holt, 1992). Not everyone agreed with the placing out process of the orphan trains. Some Catholics complained that the process was aimed at converting children to Protestants; others accused the CAS of leaving problem children in the west (Jackson, 1986). Yet another worry was about children getting abused. An estimated one-fourth of children was maltreated or used as servants, but most of these children were placed in new homes (Debnam, 2002). Controversy surrounded the orphan train system during its existence, but the majority of children placed had success stories and improved lives.

The second largest agency in placing out was the New York Foundling Hospital, which operated “baby trains” to transport babies and young children to better living conditions. The main purpose was “to prevent infanticide” (Fry, 1994, p. 36) because of the growing problem in New York. Babies could be placed in a cradle by the front door or mothers could stay and assist. Baby trains differed from the CAS system in numerous ways. Children were matched with a family before they left New York; a tag with a number or the family’s name was pinned to the child’s clothes, so the family could identify their new child immediately. Moreover, agents went through pastors, who informed parishes of arriving baby trains and pastors helped with follow-up visits. Groups sent west on baby trains were also larger at times than those of the CAS (Fry, 1994).

The orphan train movement “survived wars and economic upheavals, criticisms and accusations, and even the death of its chief advocate” (Holt, 1992, p. 161), but it could not withstand a changing society. According to Orphan trains (2003), “Changing attitudes toward keeping families together, new state and local laws funding foster care and prohibiting out-of-state placement, and child labor legislation brought about the end of the orphan trains in 1929” (p. 1). In addition, social workers placed more emphasis on keeping families together and promoted public assistance for mothers in poverty. Mothers and children received assistance from laws such as “widows’ pensions, sickness insurance, compulsory education, and curbs on child labor” (Fry, 1994, p. 73). Training emerged for working with poor families, and social

reforms also occurred. Some states even passed laws that restricted immigration of children (Cook, 1995). Although 1929 marked the conclusion of the orphan train movement, its effects are everlasting.

Methodology

Participants for the study were recruited using a snowball technique. The first participants were contacted at an annual reunion of orphan train riders. The riders then provided names of others who might be interested in participating. Information was obtained from 10 different riders or their family members. Eight of the respondents were actual riders of the trains, one participant was the spouse of a rider, and one was a child of a rider. Semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted for eight of the participants and two individuals were interviewed via telephone. All face to face interviews were tape recorded to insure accuracy of the information that was given.

A 10 item questionnaire was constructed which asked participants the age they were when they rode the train, the circumstances that led to their placement, their destination, and any memories of the ride or placement process, including interactions with the agent from the Children's Aid Society. Additionally, they provided information regarding attempts to contact biological family members, information about biological siblings, and their overall experience with the placing out process. They were also asked when they first started talking about the orphan train experience.

Information was obtained about five male and five female riders. Family members provided information on two of the male riders who were deceased, however one of the men had written his own account of his life. The riders interviewed ranged in age from 103 to 78, with the

average age of 89.6 years. All the respondents were White.

Additionally, copies of archival data were gathered from participants, historical societies, and newspapers. Advertising brochures, newspaper accounts describing the details of the train's arrival, as well as follow up stories that listed the children and their receiving families, pictures, contracts, and photographs were collected.

Results

Public Announcements, Committees, and Contracts

A copy of an original public announcement was obtained from the family of one of the riders. "Wanted Homes for Orphan Children – A company of children under the auspices of the Children's Aid Society of New York will arrive at Madison, November 20. These are children from the orphanages, both boys and girls, two years and up. They know nothing about street life, well disciplined, well dressed, intelligent children. Parties taking children must be endorsed by the local committee. Children must be sent to church, Sunday school, day school, properly clothed and cared for until they are 18 years old." The names of the committee members are listed and the location and times of "distribution" are announced. It also states that the agent will give an address. "Come hear the address and see the children."

Generally, the week prior to the train's arrival there was a newspaper story indicating the number of children who would be arriving and the name of the agent accompanying them. The name of the committee personnel and the site where the children would be seen were included in the articles. The week following the arrival of the children, the papers usually printed the names of the receiving families and the children each family received. The paper accounts stated if other children were continuing travelers on the orphan trains.

The Children's Aid Society's agents established a committee of local citizens who were

charged with obtaining information about the potential receiving families and giving approval for the families. The committees were prominent people in the community, such as bankers, clergy, county judges, and farm implement dealers. One form lists the son of the former governor of the state as a member of the committee.

A contract was signed by the receiving family, the agency and the local committee member who recommended the family. The contract had several significant provisions in it. The receiving parent agrees to provide for child until the age of 18. According the Children's Aid Society's Placing-out form, "...the Society reserves the right to remove the child previous to legal adoption if at any time the circumstances of the home become such as in the judgment of the agent are injurious to the physical, mental or moral well-being of the child." The receiving family agreed "to care for him in sickness and in health, to send him to school during the entire free school year until he reaches the age of 14 years, and thereafter during the winter months at least, until he reaches the age of 16 years; also to have him attend Church and Sunday School when convenient, and to retain him as a member of my family until he reaches the age of 17 years, and thereafter for the final year, until he is 18 years old, to pay the boy monthly wages in addition to his maintenance in the amount thereof to be previously determined after consultation with the Society's local agent and his approval." The family also agreed to "keep him at all times as well supplied with clothing as he was when I received him". The contract also stipulated conditions for the removal of the child if the arrangement was unsuitable. After five years had lapsed "the Society cannot be called upon for removal". The family also agreed to "write the Society at least once a year, and should I change my address I will notify the society".

Agents

The agent of the child placement agency did make home visits where they conducted a

rudimentary assessment of the living conditions, the general character of the family, and completed a form which was kept in the child's case file in New York. It was noted by two riders of the orphan trains that the agents conducted yearly follow-up visits with the family and child until the child reached the age of majority. Additionally, two riders indicated that the agent delivered them to their home, but did not visit subsequently. Both indicated that the lack of follow-up visits were probably because they were adopted by the receiving family.

During later visits the agent met with the child and the family members individually. One rider recalls running from the agent when they came to the school, since it was a new agent and he feared being taken from his family. The agent then filed a report with the society which detailed the visit and the agent's assessment of the functioning of the child and the family.

Circumstances surrounding the relinquishment of the child

None of the riders interviewed were orphans as defined by having two deceased parents. Only two of the children had a parent who was deceased; one a mother and one a father.

Four of the riders were abandoned when they were infants; two were less than 6 months old when abandoned. The other two did not include information about their age at abandonment, although one later found that her biological parents were not married at the time of her birth.

One rider's biological mother provided "improper guardian ship" after the death of the father. One children was "taken from the family" presumably because of improper care. One mother relinquished her children after her husband deserted the family and took the youngest son. A neglectful mother resulted in one biological father relinquishing his two sons so they could experience a better life; the boys were 5 ½ and 3 years old. In another family four siblings were taken to an orphanage after the death of their mother when their father was unable to care for them. The father had indicated that he would return for them when times were improved. He

never returned and three of the four children rode the orphan train to Nebraska.

Two riders have never attempted to find their biological families or ascertain the circumstances surrounding their status as orphans.

Train Ride and Placement

The ages of the children when they rode the trains ranged from nine years old to a little less than 2 years old. The average age was four and a half years.

Only two of the participants in the study remember the actual train ride to Nebraska. One was eight years old when he rode and recalls the adventure of riding cross country on the train. He stated that they all slept in the train seats and the agent on the train monitored them to insure they “did not run around in the train too much”. He recalls having sandwiches and milk during the trip out West. When they arrived at a destination they were taken to homes for a meal and then returned to the agent. “All fourteen of us were seated in chairs in a semicircle on the stage of the old Madison Opera House, and anyone who wanted a child or two could take their pick” (Johnson, 1997). He further recalls the agent instructing the audience that the children should be well taken care of, not mistreated, and raised as their own children. The other rider recalls using the restroom on the back of the train, where the waste went right onto the tracks. The riders stated that they had no suitcases when they arrived and they report only one set of clothing per child, which contradicts other sources that stated the children all had at least two changes of clothing.

The “baby trains” generally took children between 2 and 4 years of age. The three participants who rode the baby trains were all less than 3 years of age when they rode. They were also more likely to have pre-arranged placements. According to one rider, “the Fondling Hospital’s policy (was) to sew the name of the child, date of birth, and name and address of the

party to whom the child was assigned, in the coat of the boy and in the hem of the dress of the girl.” She also explained that each child had a number corresponding to the “Receipt for the Child” which was signed by both parents accepting the child.

Six of the riders were adopted by the receiving families. One rider stated that the families had to wait a year prior to adopting the children. Three children who were not adopted identified closely with the receiving family and always used the receiving family’s last name. The other individual not adopted retained his biological family’s last name.

Several of the riders were accompanied by siblings. One female rider recalled that she rode with one older sister, a younger sister and 29 others. She had an infant sister who stayed in New York. All three sisters were separated when they were placed. Another rider reported that he rode with two brothers and 11 others. His older brother was placed in a home close to him and he and his younger brother were placed together. A third rider who rode with his brother found that he and his brother were originally placed together with an older couple. After approximately 5 months the couple reportedly could not care for both of them so they sent the boys on another orphan train where d they were separated in the subsequent placement. Many of the sibling groups did maintain limited contact with each other even as children.

The two individuals who were not adopted by the receiving families report that their biological families contacted them when they reached the age of majority. One reported that his father wished for him to return to New York. However he was happy with his life and circumstances in Nebraska so declined the invitation. The other individual stated that he received letters from both his biological mother and father when he returned from military service during World War II. When later stationed in New York, he hitchhiked to the town where his father lived and made contact with him and met his paternal extended family. He maintained limited contact with his biological father and knew the location of his mother, but never initiated

contact with her.

Resiliency is defined as “the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks” (Benard, 1993, p. 44). What a fitting description of orphan train riders; they were emerged into a lifetime worth of experiences that most of today’s population can’t even fathom. Research shows that individuals who encounter adversity are more likely to succeed than those who have an easy childhood. Statistics also show that the majority of people who had an unfit childhood thrive later in life (Shapiro, & Friedman, 1996). Not only have the orphan train riders survived their troubled past, but many have developed into very successful individuals.

References

- Benard, B. (1993). Fostering resiliency in kids. *Educational Leadership*, 51, 44-48.
- Cook, J. F. (1995). A history of placing out: The orphan trains. *Child Welfare*, 74, 181- 197.
- Debnam, B. (2002, June 10). Orphan trains. *The Mini Page*, p. 1, 3.
- Fry, A. R. (1974). The children's migration. *American Heritage*, 26, 4-10, 79-81.
- Fry, A. R. (1994). *The orphan trains*. New York, NY: New Discovery Books.
- Graham, J., & Gray, E. (1995). *The orphan trains: The American experience*. Public Broadcasting Service.
- Holt, M. I. (1992). *The orphan trains: Placing out in America*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Jackson, D. D. (1986). It took trains to put street kids on the right track out of the slums. *Smithsonian*, 17, 94-103.
- Johnson, M. E. (1997). *Orphan Train Riders: their own stories*. Vol 4. Baltimore: Gateway Press.
- Johnson, M. E. A history of the orphan trains era in American history. *Orphan Train Heritage Society of America, Inc*. Retrieved on May 26, 2003 from: <http://www.orphantrainriders.com/otm11.html>
- Orphan trains. Retrieved on May 20, 2003 from: sites/mnh/orphans/index.htm
- Shapiro, J. P., & Friedman, D. (1996). *Invincible kids*, 121, 62-69.
- Warren, A. (1996). *Orphan train rider: One boy's true story*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Warren, A. (2001). *We rode the orphan trains*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Wheeler, L. (1983). The orphan trains. *American History Illustrated*, 18, 10-23.