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The Orphan Train Movement and its Influence on Child Welfare Policy in Kansas

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The Orphan Train Movement

In the mid-19th century, New York City (NYC) teemed with destitute children who roamed the streets, begging, or stealing to keep alive. Orphanages proliferated, but the need was unmet. The New York Children's Aid Society (NYCAS) began relocating vagrant children to the rural west. Founder Charles Loring Brace believed that children might be spiritually and physically saved if they were removed from the moral decay of the cities. The railroads provided a cheap, convenient method of relocation.

Over 75 years, more than 200,000 children were relocated. This Orphan Train Movement (OTM) addressed opposing problems: an abundance of destitute children in the cities and the high cost of caring for them, but a shortage of workers in rural areas. Although many children's lives were improved by relocation, others experienced indenture and abuse. The OTM waned with the rise of Social Work and recognition of sociology as a science rather than an act of Christian charity.

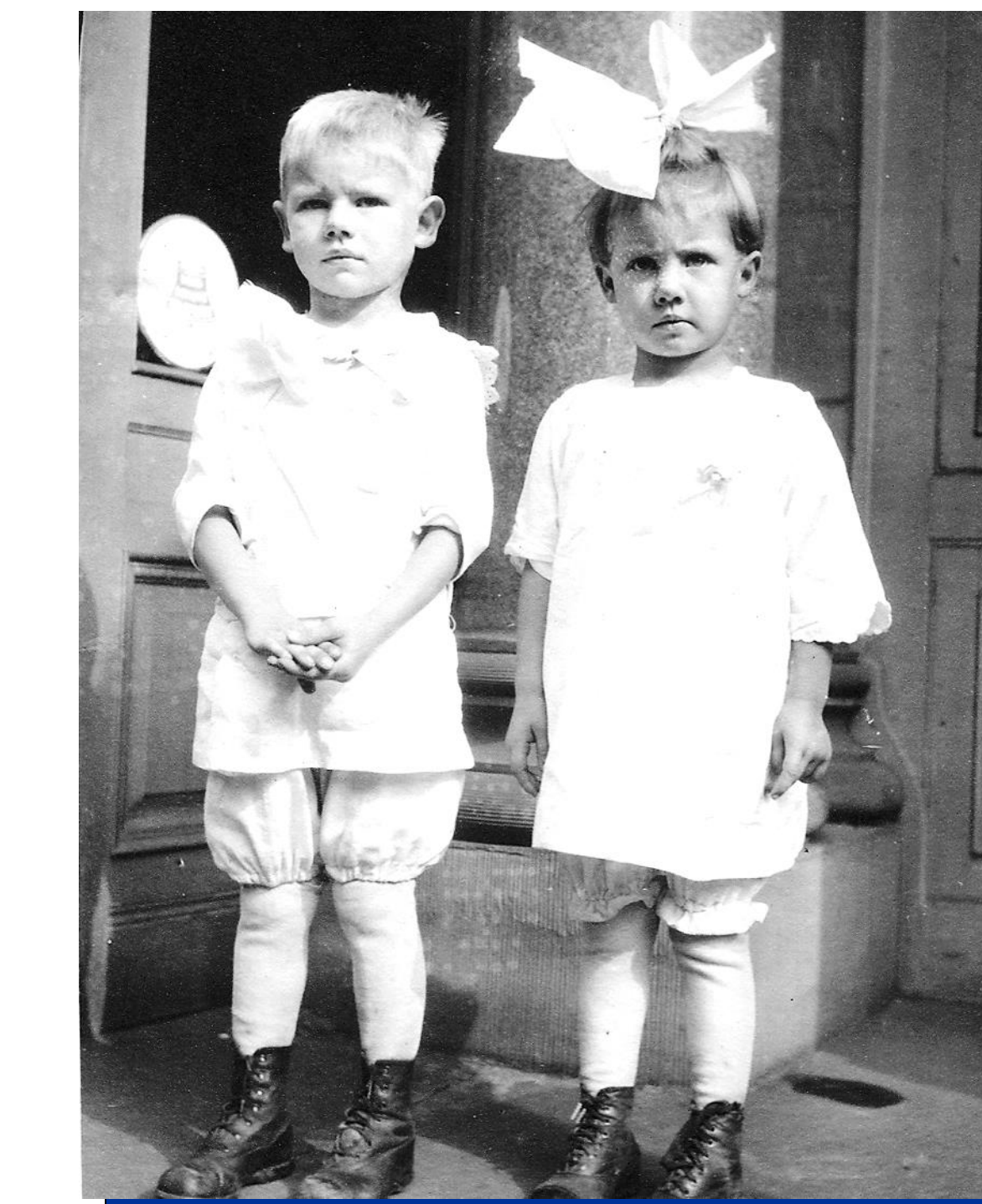
In 1867, Kansas received its first OT; more than 4,100 children were placed out in Kansas by 1910.



Photograph courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society

Adoption Laws

At first, there were no formal requirements regarding the children who were placed out; hence the children had no legal status. This legal limbo wasn't questioned since the children were largely orphans and foundlings. During the next 75 years of the OTM, society began to recognize its collective responsibility to nurture and safeguard all children. Kansas, for example, enacted its first adoption law in 1864. By the turn of the century, newspaper announcements from the NYCAS outlined the expectation of adoption.



Foster Care

The roots of American foster care can be traced to a colonial replication of an Old World system of payment to foster parents in exchange for room and board. There was no expectation of payment to care for orphans who arrived by train, but families were promised free labor in exchange for their care of the children. Foster care, or "boarding out" as it was called in the 19th century and the OTM both shared the conviction that growing up in a private home was preferable to institutional life. With foster care, however, there was an increased emphasis on pre- and post-placement investigation and management, unlike the NYCAS which, despite promises to the contrary, conducted only sporadic follow up visits.

As criticism of placing out mounted in the late 1800s, the Aid Society began to use local institutions as intermediaries to find homes for the children. Kansas responded by limiting out-of-state placements. Further restrictions were enacted in 1901 when Kansas became one of the first states to attempt to regulate the arrivals. Several months later, Governor William Stanley ordered an investigation of the intent to place out 20 children in Kansas, saying "We cannot afford to have the state made a dumping ground for the dependent children of other states, especially New York." Despite the Governor's objections, placements continued with the ostensible approval of the state's board of charities.

Child Labor

The absence of help on the Kansas prairie was seen as a matter of life and death for the farmer and his family. Farm workers leaving the land to enlist in the Civil War contributed to the labor shortage. The OTM provided a source of work through the relocation of children. Another approach to child labor in rural communities was the "rented child". In this instance, wages were sent to the parents until the child reached the age of majority. It was even suggested in 1857 that if enough children were relocated to serve as workers, there would be no need for owners to retain their slaves.

Skepticism in Kansas about the use of children to meet this need was seen as early as 1855 with the first laws in the Kansas Territory, providing rights to basic education and fair treatment for indentured "apprentices." One provision to the law, sympathetic to the institution of slavery, illustrated the mixed feelings about child labor, however, by acquitting anyone who committed homicide in the process of "correcting" an apprentice. Even to this day, labor laws contain significant loopholes allowing for minors to be employed by their parents, especially on farms.

"Arriving in Schoenchen [Kansas] in 1910 at the age of six, Teresa was given over to a childhood of hardships and beatings. Placed in a German-speaking family and knowing no German, she was considered a difficult child, and was eventually placed by the family in a Kansas orphanage. The root of the problem was an assumption made at the Foundling Hospital. Teresa, with a Germanic surname, was assumed to be German-Catholic, when in fact she was of German-Jewish descent. Her placement was doomed from the beginning."

— Holt, p. 112



Children of the Kansas Orphan Trains



Suggested Readings

- Holt, MI. *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press; 1992
- Trammell, RS. Orphan train myths and legal reality. *The Modern American*. Fall 2009:3-13
- Douglass, BJA. The orphan trains of 1853-1930 and their effect on the development of adoption policies and practices. *Social Work Perspectives*. 1993;5:36-42

Conclusions

The Orphan Train movement illustrates the evolving concept of childhood in the 19th century. Placing out became the impetus for many Kansas child welfare laws and can be seen as a forerunner of today's foster care system.

Photographs courtesy of the National Orphan Train Complex, Concordia, Kansas, unless otherwise stated.