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Truth of the Trains

Abstract

This article discusses the "orphan trains" movement of the late 19th century and also discusses whether or not a more personal or objective approach to studying history is more accurate.

Truth of the Trains

Kate Miles

Which is more likely to deliver the “historical truth,” an account given through the rose-colored glasses of memory, or a dissecting, questioning, and critiquing analysis? It would seem that the latter technique would result in more realistic and factual conclusions, but what if the subject itself is of a personal and emotional nature? In this instance, the possibility of a sentimental account being the best presentation of the truth must be considered. For example, the focus of this paper is the Orphan Train Movement—the little-known practice of transporting eastern city children to farms and small towns in the Midwest throughout the second half of the 1800s and into the 20th century. These children were pulled off the streets, removed from orphanages, jails, and asylums, and sometimes turned over by parents who could no longer take care of them. Then they were shipped west and deposited into families that wanted a child of their own or a cheap farm laborer. While a rather significant number of children from New York City and other large eastern cities were “placed out” in the West, the practice has received little historical attention. What has been written about the orphan trains is very sentimental; the majority of articles and books simply follow the journeys and experiences of individual children. These accounts seem naive and simplistic when compared to a work like Marilyn Holt’s *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*; a book that analyzes motives and experiences with a little more realism than most other sources. But the question remains, does one of these methods come closer to finding historical truth?

Cowering in a dismal alley, scrounging through the trash, a shivering child draped in rags searches for a place to lay his restless head, only to wake at the dawn of another hopeless day. The orphan child is indeed a pitiful picture. Fiction writing has long used the image of the helpless orphan: sometimes the child dies to escape the pain of life, other stories have the long-lost wealthy family discover the little waif and whisk the child away to its rightful life of pampered luxury, still others involve an intervening benefactor who takes pity on the suffering child and finds it a loving home. Titles like *The Little Match Girl*, *A Little Princess*, and *Little Orphan Annie* remain familiar to children and adults today, even though stories such as these became popular during the 1800s.

I must admit that I have always liked these stories about poor, suffering children who, when things could get no worse, find themselves rescued by a heroic adult figure. The transition from an unloving and despairing life to one filled with joy and happiness is a comforting and heart-warming story to read.

The topic for this paper actually comes from a series of books that I discovered while in junior high school. I am amazed that I had not learned of this movement prior to picking up a book at the public library, and had I not stumbled across that particular shelf, probably never would have. Award-winning young adult author, Joan Lowery Nixon, wrote a series of four books entitled the *Orphan Train Quartet* that followed six brothers and sisters on their trip west. The books told the experiences of the children and their new families; some had good experiences, others were abused, but in each book, the children eventually became happy and adjusted to their new lives. Overall, these books painted a very sympathetic and approving picture of the orphan trains, though they did portray the sadness and shock initially felt by the relocated children. Reading these books made me see only the good of the system, because despite the monumental changes that took place in their lives, the children were all better off than they were in the slums of New York City. This viewpoint is common in popular accounts of the orphan trains. It is a bias that I have been forced to examine in myself and in my sources while writing this paper. Researching this topic, I have uncovered some of the other, not-so-charitable forces behind the orphan trains, and I have become aware of a few practices that definitely were not "happily ever after" scenarios for the placed out children. Though these articles neglect many of the shortcomings of the orphan trains, they are strong in portraying the orphans' experiences on their journeys to new lives in the West.

The Orphan Train Movement was not at all obscure during the years of its operation, 1854 to 1930. Over the span of these decades, it is estimated that over 150,000 children were sent west by the Children's Aid Society and similar organizations.¹ The peak year was in 1875, when 4,026 orphans rode the trains to new lives in the country.² The orphan trains are usually associated with relocation to the Midwestern states, but during the years of their operation, the orphan trains have deposited children in states as far as Florida and Texas, as well as in rural New York State and New Jersey. The majority, however, landed in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, Indiana, Kansas, and Michigan. It seems that Bloomington-Normal area was the recipient of several trainloads of orphans. On May 5, 1880, the *Daily Pantagraph* included an announcement regarding the expected arrival of forty orphaned boys and girls; the headline read, "Another Consignment of New York Youngsters for McLean County."³

These children were wards of the courts, asylums, and orphanages; others were pulled directly off the streets or removed from filthy homes in alleys, wharves, and crowded apartments. Many were given away by one or both parents, or taken from unfit families by judges, police officers, and social workers. The growing number of homeless children and the escalating crimes attributed to them led to the realization that a problem existed; it was getting worse as more immigrants arrived and competition for already low-paying jobs grew.

New York City's total population in the middle 1850s was 500,000 people; at this time, Chief of Police George W. Matsell estimated that at least 10,000 homeless children roamed the city. Through the course of their work, the Children's Aid Society concluded that there were actually as many as 30,000 children living in the streets.⁴

Charles Loring Brace was one individual who recognized the desperate plight of the young people; he created the Children's Aid Society in 1853 to help homeless children get off the streets, obtain an education, learn Christian values, and find work. The Orphan Train Movement is attributed to Brace, though the practice of removing poor children and other undesirables from urban centers had been practiced in Europe many times in the past.⁵ The placing-out system designed by Brace was unique, though; the children were not necessarily adopted, nor were they indentured to their new families. Children were given away for trial periods; the foster family or the orphan could decide at any time that the arrangement was not going well and seek a home elsewhere. Agents of the Children's Aid Society were supposed to check up on all children, but poor documentation, a low number of workers, and a steadily increasing number of orphan train riders made this impossible. According to Brace's plans, all prospective foster families were to be interviewed and evaluated by local committees before a child was given to them; depending on the age of the child they selected, the rules for its upbringing were different. According to one poster, boys under twelve "must be treated by the applicants as one of their own children in matters of school, clothing, and training." Older children were expected to work for their board and clothes until they were eighteen years old; at that point they were free to leave, or should be paid for their labor.⁶

The orphans selected to go on the trains were chosen carefully to insure that there would be no unwanted children upon arrival at their western destinations. The children were scrubbed, trimmed, and given a new pair of clothes and shoes. Many of them had no possessions other than a Bible, given to them by the Children's Aid Society. They would ride in groups of varying sizes, accompanied by at least one adult agent from the Society. For nearly every orphan, the trip involved many new and unusual sites. After days of travel, the train would finally stop at a small town, where a town hall, church, hotel, or other large meeting room would be packed with curious onlookers and applicants for the children. The orphan train riders were seated on a stage as information about them was read. Then interested men and women would come forward to talk to and examine the children more closely.⁷ At this point, the experiences of orphan train riders begin to vary drastically; many became treasured new members of loving families, while others never found a place to call home. A person could essentially take a child to use for any purpose. Even though applicants were screened by local committees prior to becoming foster parents, many children ended up in bad situations. Though the Children's Aid

Society tried to keep brothers and sisters together, many times it was impossible. The entire experience reminded many orphans of a livestock sale or a slave auction. One rider remembers: "That was an ordeal that no child should go through. They pulled us and pushed us and shoved us."⁸ Applicants for children would examine their teeth and feel their muscles, as well. The agents tried to match each child with a loving family, but unfortunately, some children were treated as cheap laborers. This problem is fairly widespread in the children's testimonials of their experiences as orphan train riders. Elliott Hoffman Bobo remembers one boy whose foster parents "kept him on the farm, wouldn't send him to school, worked him eighteen hours a day in the field and he just lost his mind." Bobo recalls, "I refused to go home with this farmer, too."⁹

The need for cheap farm labor was just one of several aspects of American culture and life during the 19th century that was not clearly emphasized in many stories of the orphan trains. Nonetheless, many factors—some more altruistic than others—account for the popularity and success of the Orphan Train Movement. Charles Loring Brace, the movement's founder, was an urban reformer who saw the underprivileged classes of New York not only as the cause of many of the city's problems, but as a group of people who desperately needed help. His own book, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*, and a collection of his personal diary entries and letters illustrate motivations and prejudices that are not revealed in many contemporary works on this subject. As I mentioned earlier, the only secondary source I have discovered that analyses the orphan trains from this perspective is *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*, by Marilyn Holt. She addresses reasons for the orphan trains' existence that range from a need for cheap labor in the West, to changing views on childhood and the family; these aspects of the orphan trains were not discussed by most other writers on the topic.

Articles either praise or critique the Orphan Train Movement. It is a highly emotional and sensitive issue. Whenever personal experiences serve as a major source of information about a subject, readers must be cautious. Since the individual experiences of orphan train riders vary so drastically, it is easy for a historian to look for accounts that match a preconceived agenda or stance on the issue. Therefore, if we are looking for historical truth, it may be difficult to find an unbiased account. For example, "The Children's Migration," by Annette Riley Fry, gives a quite positive account of the orphan trains, calling them "one of the most heartening chapters in the social history of America."¹⁰ She did present arguments opposed to the practices of the orphan trains, but this was overshadowed by the fact that nearly every orphan's account she gave was positive. Her sympathetic position might be explained by examining the caption of a Children's Aid Society agent's photograph: "Agent Charles R. Fry, our author's husband's grandfather."¹¹

If you were to pick up Donald Dale Jackson's article from the *Smithsonian*, a different side of the orphan trains would reveal itself. Jackson is much more critical of the system than Fry is, so his article tells a very different story. In his work, the accounts given by orphans express great ambivalence; while most say that their lives are okay now, they recall feeling alone, unloved, overworked, and unaccepted. One orphan recalls, "There was no hugging or kissing and they never said they loved me."¹² Jackson calls the system "callous and barbaric" and sums up his article with the words of critic Henry W. Thurston, who referred to the orphan trains as "the wolf of the old indenture philosophy of child labor in a sheepskin disguise of a so-called good or Christian home."¹³

Inconsistencies like these are present in every journal article that I have found. The facts are similar, but the conclusions are different. Writers who choose to base their studies of the orphan trains on the actual testimony of the placed out children are able to pick their evidence from a large body of written and verbal accounts. Every writer seems to take a certain position on the issue and then construct their evidence to condemn or justify the orphan trains. This is a common occurrence in the writing of history; authors sweep opposing views under the rug and emphasize the material that supports their premise. Looking again at the two paragraphs preceding this one, I might be guilty of this as well. I have quoted places in the articles that reinforce my claims about the polarity of Fry and Jackson's works, and I have made little note of other places in the text where concessions are made to the opposition. This practice hurts the search for historical truth, but in my opinion, truth is relative; there cannot be one right answer to every question. The orphan trains were a brilliant success to some people, and a terrible failure to others. They caused some orphans abuse and misery, while others found love, happiness, and prosperity. Just as individual orphans assign different degrees of merit to the Orphan Train Movement, contemporary writers are doing the same.

Regardless of the degree to which a book or article praises or condemns the orphan trains, the majority are very shallow in scope. The subject of orphan trains has largely been treated as a social history issue, a human interest story, rather than as a scholarly topic probed by historians. On the surface, this treatment is justified and is a fairly sufficient way to reach the goals of most writers. The purpose of many journal articles and books is to tell the stories of individual orphan train riders, or simply to inform a general audience of this practice's existence. The strengths of these works lie in their re-creation of the system and in preserving the memories and testimonies of the orphan children. Some did scratch the surface of Charles Brace's philosophies and reasons for starting the orphan trains, but they focused too heavily on a few of his humanitarian views to completely discuss his contributions.

These works also seem to ignore the issues that go beyond the experiences of the riders themselves. There were many important social and economic

forces driving the orphan trains that have been distorted or completely disregarded by most researchers and writers. A commonly found explanation of the orphan trains was that they simply "ferried orphaned and abandoned kids from the congested East to new families and new lives in the heartland." They were "aimed at giving deprived youngsters a fresh start in what was viewed as a more wholesome atmosphere."¹⁴ This is certainly true, but it is not the whole story. The following evidence examined by Marilyn Holt was almost completely left out of most other works, and while it may seem trivial at first glance, it provides an entirely different explanation of why the orphan trains chugged into existence.

Religion had a great deal to do with the ideals of the orphan trains. Brace was a minister, and believed that the young orphans could be transformed by the "implanting of moral and religious truths."¹⁵ Most of the articles mentioned Brace's religious zeal, but they did not explain the prejudice that this belief caused. Religion was a large part of society at this time; those who did not conform to Protestant Christian views of an upright and virtuous lifestyle were looked down upon. The poor were separated in to those who were "worthy" and those who were beyond redemption. Holt brings to life the widespread ethnic, racial, and gender prejudices of this society, and the absolute necessity that religion played in any social movement at this time.

To Charles Loring Brace and his contemporaries, many of society's problems were caused by the growing poverty stricken class. In his own writing and in the critical analysis of Marilyn Holt, it seems that Brace's motivation to help the orphans was not purely charitable; he was also driven by fear that these children and their multiplying class could ultimately threaten all of society. "The class increases; immigration is pouring in its multitude of poor foreigners, who leave these young outcasts everywhere in our midst[.] These boys and girls...will soon form the great lower class of our city [and] if unreclaimed, [will] poison society all around them."¹⁶ In my opinion, this does not seem to be an overly charitable and humanitarian comment by our acclaimed social reformer. Brace's views seemed to be mirrored by "those who possessed property-interests in the city."¹⁷ It is strange that a "missionary" was so concerned with property, politics, and society's ideals.

Another of the analytical insights of Holt's book is that many of Brace's justifications of the orphan trains were based on an idealized view of the West. Much of society's conception of the West involved no understanding of the harsh realities of farming and rural life. For some reason, they felt that rural places were free of vice and crime; they were places in which the orphans would learn morals and lead upright lives. According to Brace, children were valued in the West, and the "same opportunity is given to working children as to all other children. They share fully in the active and inspiring Western life. They are molded by the social tone around them, and they grow up under the

very best circumstances...."¹⁸ Quotes similar to this one were mentioned in some of the journal articles, but the authors still failed to address this blatant misconception of Western life. Holt recognized this faulty thinking, and illustrated the impact that it had on the social acceptance of the orphan trains.

Other factors that are important in understanding the orphan trains are also illustrated in Holt's book. They include the effects of immigration on the poorer classes, farmers moving to the cities in search of work, as well as the increased industrialization of the cities. These situations caused increased competition for jobs and more overcrowding in living spaces. Holt's book is unique because she devotes several chapters to explaining these social, cultural, and economic influences on the orphan trains. *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* does not rely on storytelling or memories in its research. Much of her primary source information is taken from the writings of Brace, newspaper and magazine articles of the time, and from the records of the Children's Aid Society. This major difference between Holt and all of the others puts her book on an entirely different analytical level.

In researching the orphan trains, it seems that I have come across two major issues concerning historical truth. First, is it possible that articles reaching different conclusions about the success of the movement could all present "good" accounts of the western migration of orphans? I will have to say no, because though there are varying interpretations of the orphan trains' achievements, some of them are more historically accurate than others. The articles in question are based primarily on the stories of the orphan train riders, and the truths they present are relative. It must be noted, though, that historical accuracy does not always depend on the overall message that the writer sends. For example, Jackson's article is more critical of the movement than the majority of others, but he still wrote a good historical account. Historical truth suffers the most when the opposing view is completely neglected. The best example of this fault that I found in my research is the article by Annette Riley Fry; her account is entirely too favorable to be considered as good as the other articles. She barely mentions children who were unhappy with their new lives and the reasoning of those opposed to the Orphan Train Movement. Though on an individual level, one orphan's opinion and experiences are just as significant as those of another, to use only positive experiences of orphans, as Fry did, is misleading and not a good portrayal of a historic event. Also, not all evidence represents the mainstream views of the orphans, so it would be faulty reasoning to consider each possible account to be representative of the whole movement. For these reasons we are able to determine that all works on the subject are not equally good, even though in most historical issues, especially those with such varied personal effects, one absolute truth is impossible to achieve.

This brings me to the other issue of truth. It has been established that one view of the orphan trains can be just as valid as another if it represents

mainstream views, but is there one method of approaching research on the orphan trains that brings us closer to a full understanding of the movement? Marilyn Holt's scholarly and analytical method of research is very good at "presenting the nuts and bolts of the system, [and] clarifying its workings and scope" in an unemotional and even-tempered way.¹⁹ We must wonder, however, does the importance of learning about the orphan trains lie in understanding the motivations behind them, or in understanding the experiences of the children who rode them? Of course, the value of different portrayals depends on the wants of the reader. If someone is looking for a human interest story, or is interested in genealogy, an account based on the experiences of the orphans is more appropriate. On the other hand, for a person who is more interested in how the orphan trains compared to other reform movements of the middle 1800s and how society viewed its operations, a more investigative and analytical source would be beneficial. After reading both types of analysis, I believe the two methods complement each other well. I have gained a deeper understanding of this social movement by being exposed to some of the not-so-charitable aspects that underlie it, but it is impossible to see the real effects of the orphan trains without hearing about the children's experiences in their own words.

Looking back over this paper, I must determine what I have accomplished. No discovery of absolute historical truth has been reached, but then again, I didn't really expect to. What I did hope to show is the important lesson that I have learned in collecting so many different sources of information. No matter how much research one does, sometimes there is still no "right" answer. Though all accounts are not equal, there are different approaches to take in the analysis of the facts and there are different conclusions to be drawn. My main failure in this paper is that I became too deeply interested in my topic. At some point I began to care if I misrepresented it; and I became discouraged when I realized that in my own eyes it would be impossible to do this subject justice within the confines of a ten-page research paper. There comes a point when historians must stop looking for more evidence and make do with the incomplete picture that they have been able to piece together. Writers must come to a point where they decide what information is vital and what must be laid aside. I have unfortunately reached the point where what has been unsaid must remain that way, but it is my hope that the complexities of the search for historical truth have been adequately illustrated in this analysis. As long as curiosity and wonder still surround a historical subject, like the orphan trains, the absolute truth has not been realized.

Endnotes

¹⁹Figures concerning the number of children placed vary from text to text. This estimate is taken from Donald Dale Jackson, "It Took Trains to Put Street Kids on the

Right Track Out of the Slums," *Smithsonian* 17 (August 1986): 99.

²Leslie Wheeler, "The Orphan Trains," *American History Illustrated* 18 (August 1983): 21.

³"More Orphans," *The Pantagraph* (Bloomington, IL), 5 May 1880. Another notice of an orphan train's arrival is found in the April 30, 1881 *Pantagraph*.

⁴Annette Riley Fry, "The Children's Migration," *American Heritage* 26 (December 1974): 6.

⁵The practice of removing convicts and poor people from cities was not a new idea. The British system of "transportation" had been shipping these undesirables to North America and Australia since the 1700s. Also, in Germany there was a system known as "The Friends in Need" that placed poor city children in the homes of rural families. Marilyn Irvin Holt, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and Lincoln, 1992), 44-45.

⁶Andrea Warren, *Orphan Train Rider* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 34.

⁷*Cawker City Ledger* (Mitchell County, KS), 14 April 1886; *Jefferson County Tribune* (KS), 13 January 1911; *Star Courier* (Columbus, KS), 21 June 1894. Text of newspaper articles found on the Internet. Website is entitled *Orphan Trains of Kansas*. <http://kuhttp.cc.ukans.edu/carrie/kancoll/articles/orphans/index.html>.

⁸"The Orphan Trains," 1997. Quote by orphan train rider Hazelle Latimer. Taken from transcript of *The American Experience* with David McCullough. Found on the Internet at <http://web-cr02.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/orphan/orphants.html>.

⁹*Ibid.* Quote by orphan train rider Elliott Hoffman Bobo.

¹⁰Fry, "Migration," 81.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 9.

¹²Jackson, "It Took Trains," 96.

¹³*Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁵Holt, *Orphan Trains*, 46.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years' Work Among Them* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, Publishers, 1880), 79.

¹⁸Charles Loring Brace, "The Little Laborers of New York City," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1873, 330.

¹⁹Helena M. Wall, review of *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*, by Marilyn Holt, *Journal of American History* 80 (September 1993): 684.