“Orphan Train History” by Children’s Aid Society

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The children ranged in age from about six to 18 and shared a common grim existence. Homeless or neglected, they lived in New York City's streets and slums with little or no hope of a successful future. Their numbers were large - an estimated 30,000 children were homeless in New York City in the 1850s. Charles Loring Brace, the founder of The Children's Aid Society, believed that there was a way to change the futures of these children. By removing youngsters from the poverty and debauchery of the city streets and placing them in morally upright farm families, he thought they would have a chance of escaping a lifetime of suffering.

He proposed that these children be sent by train to live and work on farms out west. They would be placed in homes for free but they would serve as an extra pair of hands to help with chores around the farm. They wouldn't be indentured. In fact, older children placed by The Children's Aid Society were to be paid for their labors.

The Orphan Train Movement lasted from 1853 to the early 1900s and more than 120,000 children were placed. This ambitious, unusual and controversial social experiment is now recognized as the beginning of the foster care concept in the United States.

Orphan Trains stopped at more than 45 states across the country as well as Canada and Mexico. During the early years, Indiana received the largest number of children. There were numerous agencies nationwide that placed children on trains to go to foster homes. In New York, besides Children's Aid, other agencies that placed children included Children's Village (then known as the New York Juvenile Asylum), what is now New York Foundling Hospital, and the former Orphan Asylum Society of the City of New York, which is now the Graham-Windham Home for Children.

Some of the children struggled in their newfound surroundings, while many others went on to lead simple, very normal lives, raising their families and working towards the American dream. Although records weren't always well kept, some of the children placed in the West went on to great successes. There were two governors, one congressman, one sheriff, two district attorneys, three county commissioners as well as numerous bankers, lawyers, physicians, journalists, ministers, teachers and businessmen.

The Orphan Train Movement and the success of other Children's Aid initiatives led to a host of child welfare reforms, including child labor laws, adoption and the establishment of foster care services, public education, the provision of health care and nutrition and vocational training.

Resources

The last generation of Orphan Train riders is still living in towns across the United States. They keep in touch with each other through the National Orphan Train Complex and through Children's Aid. Based in Concordia, Kansas, the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America helps members establish and maintain family contacts, retrace their roots and preserve the history of the Orphan Train Movement.

http://www.childrensaidssociety.org/about/history/orphan-trains