



Office of the Child Advocate

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Orphan Trains: The Nation's First "Foster Care" System

By Tom C. Rawlings
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Did you know that one of America's first efforts at caring for children whose parents were unfit or deceased was to place those children on a train and send them to live with families on the developing frontier? Between 1853 and 1929, over 100,000 – perhaps as many as 200,000 -- neglected or orphaned children rode the "Orphan Trains" from New York City and other teeming metropolises of the East Coast to the growing farm communities of places such as Indiana and other parts of the Midwest.

Remember that in the 1850s, there were no laws protecting children and no government agencies to rescue them from abuse or abandonment. At the same time, thousands of immigrant families were coming to America and, too often, leaving children destitute on the street. Men like Rev. Charles L. Brace believed they could help these poor children by removing them from the streets of the city and placing them with farm families in the Midwest who could give them good homes. Too often, these children were removed from their living parents with no court intervention and with no due process of law.

With the assistance of Brace's Children's Aid Society as well as churches and civic groups around the country, the Orphan Train movement began. Children were removed from the city streets and placed on trains to smaller communities, where farm families would take them in and give them room and board. Often the children were physically examined at the train depot by prospective foster families to determine if they were sufficiently strong and healthy to undertake farm work. Sometimes these children were used merely as cheap farm labor; at other times, they became members of the family.

The system had mixed results. Some children were treated as virtual slaves, while others prospered with a new, loving family. Passengers on the orphan trains grew up to be governors of Alaska and North Dakota. But in recent years, many have questioned the wisdom of the movement. In the place of orphan trains, we have developed a nationwide system of government agencies whose mission is to protect children and, when necessary, remove them from their homes into foster care while attempting to reunify them with their birth families.

One of the lessons of the "Orphan Train" is that no matter how well-intentioned folks may be, sometimes their methods of saving children in need are misguided or poorly executed. The Office of the Child Advocate was specifically created to help intervene when citizens have concerns about our child protection system. Working independently from, but in partnership with, the state's Department of Human Resources, we try to make sure that children in need are receiving appropriate help from the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS); that communities have the resources and advice they need to protect abused and neglected children in their communities; and that policymakers understand the needs of children and families in our state.

If you'd like to know more about the orphan trains of the last century, visit www.orphantrainriders.com. If you'd like to know more about how the Office of the Child Advocate is helping abused and neglected children in this century, visit us at www.gachildadvocate.org.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached at tom@gachildadvocate.org