

Irish Children and the Orphan Trains

Why do we often use the term “do-gooder” in a pejorative sense? What is wrong with “doing good”? One example of an organization which was founded by “do-gooders,” and which has a special relationship to Irish immigrants in nineteenth century New York City is the Children’s Aid Society. At the end of the day, was the work of the Children’s Aid Society “good work” or was it an instrument of an ideology alien to the Irish immigrant?

The United States’ 1860 census indicated the 1,500,000 immigrants claimed to be born in Ireland, many of these mainly urban dwelling immigrants living in poverty. In that time, some of the reformers who hoped to improve the lot of the residents in a violent and dirty New York City believed that poverty was a result of moral failing, a Calvinist tenet believed by people other than Calvinists. They felt that the problems of immigrants could best be met by the absorption of the newcomers into the mainstream Protestant religions. They



knew that the adult Irish-Catholic population would be unlikely to convert, but their children might be fertile ground for Protestant proselytization. As early as 1853, legal statutes allowed reformers to remove children from poor parents. For instance, if a child were truant or if a parent could not be located or the child were arrested for a second time, the child could be placed into a Protestant institution, such as the Children’s Aid Society. From the 1860’s through the 1880’s, Irish children made up a disproportionate number of children placed by the Society. In 1870, the Irish made up 44% of New York City’s population and 56% of the Children’s Aid Society placements. In 1880, those numbers were 39% and 50%.

The Children’s Aid Society was created in response to teams of children whom the police called “street arabs” who filled the alleys and sidewalks of the City. Some of the children had been abandoned or abused by their parents or were orphans with no one to care for them. Some children lived a hand-to-mouth existence and depended on their wits to avoid the police and social workers. One of the wealthy New Yorkers who became concerned about the children was Charles Loring Brace, an ordained Methodist minister. In 1853, he and other wealthy New Yorkers founded the Children’s Aid Society of New York. The Society planned to provide shelter, education and employment opportunities for these poor children, but the number of children who needed help overwhelmed the Society’s resources. Areas such as the notorious Five Points, estimated to be 75% Irish and called the worst slum in the world by Charles Dickens, fed children into the estimated population of 30,000 (in 1854) abandoned children in New York City. It was from the Five Points and other poverty areas that Brace was to recruit many of his children. Over taxed by the volume of needy children, Brace and the Children’s Aid Society developed a plan to send many of the children to the rural Midwest by train to be placed as foster children with farm families or with the families of trades people in small towns. The Orphan Train was born.

One social philosophy of the time was the belief that the American Protestant nuclear family, guided by the devotion of the American woman, was the best setting for rearing children in America. The Rev. Brace feared that, owing to their sheer numbers, this unguided multitude as adults would assume too much influence over the body politic: “They will influence elections; they may shape the policy of the city; they will, assuredly, if unclaimed, poison society all around them...” By placing children in the Protestant West, severed from previous associations, the Society hoped to break up the threat of the immigrant. Another factor was that the emigration of the children from densely packed New York City would relieve the City of its market surplus of labor and fill the need of labor in the Midwest. From the start of the Orphan Trains in 1854 until their end in 1929, perhaps 250,000 children were placed on farms or with merchants in the Midwest, mostly through the Children’s Aid Society.

The United States at this time possessed a seemingly unlimited area of arable land. Consequently, the need for farm labor was enormous. In Charles L. Brace's book *The Dangerous Classes of New York*, he describes how the street children were distributed to the Midwest. Circulars were sent to city weeklies and the rural papers, yielding hundreds of applications from farmers and mechanics requesting "a perfect child": "The girls must be pretty, good-tempered, not given to purloining sweetmeats, and fond of making fires at daylight, and with a constitutional love of Sunday School and Bible lessons. The boys must be well made, of good stock, never disposed to steal apples or pelt cattle, using language of perfect propriety, and delighting in family worship and prayer meetings more than fishing or skating parties." Some requested children with blue eyes, fair hair and blond complexions. Since these conditions were difficult to meet, a second method for distributing was adopted, basically a children's auction.

The children were formed into companies of approximately thirty, put under a western agent to supervise them, and notices were sent to local postmasters announcing the date and time a trainload of orphans would arrive in a community. On the appointed day a meeting was called in the church or town hall where people came forward to adopt the children. Of course, this program had its detractors who claimed that this scheme was a form of proselytizing, that every child was made a Protestant, that names were being changed, and that the children were being treated as slaves. Rev. Brace felt that a good farmer's home in the West was far superior to life in an asylum. Brace wished to interrupt the four stages of the "fortunes of the street waif": homeless child; young thief; drunkard; and imprisoned criminal. In practice, these adoptions were unsupervised. There was little or no follow up to assess the quality of the placement, leaving the children at the mercy of the randomness of the selection process.

Although the need for hands to work was substantial, no one community was large enough to be able to absorb all of the children in a group. Hence, the "shipment" of children was broken up, including the separation of siblings. Some children were not adopted and were sent back to New York. Fear of rejection led the Children's Aid Society to encourage children to adopt "sales" appeals, such as little song and dance routines or direct sales appeals: "Can I be your little by (or girl)?" Some of the children had been placed with the Children's Aid Society by their parents temporarily until the family's finances improved, but even some of these children were placed, never to see their parents again.



In 1869 in reaction to the criticism that the Children's Aid Society was converting Catholic children to Protestantism, Catholic Charities started sending orphans to the West on trains called "Mercy Trains." The Mercy Trains were managed by the New York Foundling Hospital which had been established in 1869 by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. The Catholic program placed the children before they were escorted by a Sister to their new homes on the Mercy Trains.

In 1875, the New York State Legislature passed the Children's Law intended by leading Protestant reformers to expand the placing out system and guarantee payment to maintain the children until they were placed. The Catholic Union, a male lobbying group, won support for an amendment stipulating that children be cared for in institutions of their own religious background. The Sisters

of Charity were quick to react and began accepting all children at whatever the rate the government required. Almost bankrupt prior to the law, the Sisters were able to survive and provide a valuable service

to homeless children. Other Catholic institutions followed.

The Children's Aid Society did not believe in practices that indentured the children or that placed them in apprenticeship systems which gave the adults that took the children complete control over them. Brace always reserved the right to break any contract at any time if the foster home failed its obligations to the

children. Children had to be treated as part of the family, not as household help or hired hands on the farm. But could the Children's Aid Society monitor compliance to these noble principles when there was little supervision in the field? How much attention was paid to the emotional duress of being uprooted from a familiar setting, of being separated from brothers and sisters, and of having no advocate who could undo the placement or solve a problem? Of course there were success stories. The Children's Aid Society likes to point out that two of the street boys they placed grew up to become governors, Andrew Burke of North Dakota and John Brady of Alaska. Owing to the resilience of children, no doubt there were many more success stories, too.

The Children's Aid Society: Do-gooders or ideologues seizing on a social disaster to foster their own aims?

(written by Joseph McCormack, November 2003)

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