

Historical, genealogical group hears Adkins on 19th century orphan trains

In a closet hidden behind a filing cabinet in the basement of an old building on East 22nd St. in New York City several years ago was revealed a historic treasure dating back 149 years.

Edith Lambert, a retired employee of the society, by studying the building's architecture discovered the closet and found stored away in boxes hundreds of letters, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings and diaries of Charles Brace.

The irreplaceable collection tells the story of over 100,000 children who for 75 years, were sent by train to communities outside the city in the hope they would be given loving homes and a chance for a better life.

Using a video entitled "The Orphan Trains" produced for public television, Ruth Adkins presented the story of these children to the Poweshiek County Historical and Genealogical Society at its monthly meeting.

Children in rags

"When a child of the streets stands before you in rags with a tear-stained face, you cannot easily forget him and yet you are perplexed what to do," said Charles Loring Brace, a young minister, son of a prominent Connecticut family, who had come to New York City to complete his seminary training.

He was horrified with the conditions of the hundreds of destitute children of the city. He wandered the streets talking to the children and recording their stories.

He found children being sent out every day to beg for money. Others joined gangs or sold rags and matches. Newsboys as young as nine could be found at midnight drinking coffee in shops, smoking and talking of gambling.

Police had begun to arrest children as young as five. By 1850, 10,000 children prowled the streets and 1,000 a day were moving into

the city from rural areas and Europe.

Brace to the rescue

It became an obsession of Brace to rescue these children from such deplorable conditions. Some reformers wanted to send them to Houses of Refuge or other institutions where they could be trained, but Brace thought these skills would be of little use to them. He felt the best place for the children was the expanding farm country of the West where he hoped they could be placed in fine Christian homes. They would be expected to work but the foster parents would be asked to house and feed the children, treating them as their own.

In 1853 Brace founded the Children's Aid Society. Its purpose was to arrange trips, raise money and obtain legal permission for relocation. Brace and his colleagues visited reformatories, orphanages and homes to recruit likely children. Many parents surrendered their children in hopes they would have a better life. This often meant an unexplainable break with family.

Trains carried children

Trains carrying the children out of the city were called "Orphan Trains." Three times a month agents arranged children by age in groups numbering from six to 150. They usually left New York City on Tuesday, arriving at their first stop on Friday. The children slept in their seats and never left the train. Trips usually took three or four days.

Each child had a suitcase with a change of clothes. These were their only possessions. Children never knew what the future held for them and it was a great worry and concern. Agents tried to comfort the children, giving each a small Bible and spoke of the good homes that awaited them. Sometimes, they

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One child was given an addressed envelope from his father when he boarded the train with instructions to write when he was settled. The child put it in an inside pocket and went to sleep. The next morning the envelope was gone. He and another child were on the floor looking for it when a caretaker came along and asked them what they were looking for. The boy told her and she said to get up and stop searching as he would not need the address anymore.

Children prepared to be viewed

As the trains grew near their destinations, the children were readied for distribution. They washed and changed into their new clothes. Notices had been placed in local newspapers urging people to come see the homeless children on the stage in a meeting hall. As the children waited to be displayed, they were encouraged to make a good appearance. Sometimes they were asked to walk down the aisles so potential foster parents could look them over.

A group of ministers, lawyers, bankers, doctors and other leading citizens was formed at each location to check qualifications of possible recipients of children. All placements were on a trial basis and dissatisfied children could leave. If children were not chosen, they were escorted back to the train and taken to another town where the process was repeated.

Most children lived satisfactorily

A goal of the society was to visit each child once a year but with only a handful of agents to visit thousands of children, this became impossible.

However, the overall conclusion was that most children lived satisfactory lives. In interviews with

adults who lived through the experience the separation from family was, for many of the children, the best possible solution. Some said it saved their lives. Others expressed the despair and loneliness they felt wondering where their parents were and why they didn't want or search for them.

Unhappy children drifted from farm to farm, some ending up back in New York City. Stories were told of children landing in reform school or on the dole. Even though every placement was not successful, Brace was convinced removal from the city was the best solution for most children.

Finding a treasure trove

For 75 years, children were sent out a total of 47 states. They lived in sod houses, cabins, shopkeepers' homes and homes of the wealthy. Brace was acclaimed as the most influential child "saver" of the 19th century.

Over the years the children wrote their fears, hopes and loneliness to Brace and his colleagues. Those were the treasures found in the hidden closet in the basement on East 22nd Street in New York City.

The vision changed in the 20th century and the virtue of work for children was replaced with the benefits of play for their emotional well being. As a consequence on May 31, 1929, the last Orphan Train stopped in Sulphur Springs, Texas, with three young boys.

In pondering his momentous decision that changed the lives of thousands of children, Brace was quoted as saying, "The human soul is so difficult to interfere with that you hesitate how far you should go."



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