

“Where Go The Children?”

Child Autonomy and Nineteenth-Century Philanthropy within the Orphan Train Movement

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By

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Where go the children? Travelling! Travelling!  
Where go the children, traveling ahead?  
Some go to foreign wars, and  
Camps by firelight -  
Some go to glory so; and some  
go to bed!

...  
Some go to thinking over ever nobler themes  
Some go unstarved, but ever bravely whistling,  
Turning never home again only in their dreams.

- James Whitcomb Riley, "Dream March" from *The Book of Joyous Children* (1902)

### **Introduction**

Between 1854 and 1929, more than 250,000 children were transported from the United States' large eastern cities to new homes in rural regions of the frontier in a phenomenon known broadly as the 'Orphan Train Movement'.<sup>1</sup> Early iterations of the program primarily placed children aged five to fourteen in adoptive families, but within just a few decades full infant to late teenage initiatives were active.<sup>2</sup> Children would travel in groups of roughly thirty to fifty and be watched over by a 'western agent' under the employ of a sponsor philanthropic organization. Assemblies traveled across the frontier most commonly to Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska but at times as far as Colorado, Texas, and Wyoming. Notices advertising the children's arrival and availability were placed in town newspapers ahead of time, and local pastors or justices of the peace would be contacted to recommend families for placement. Convoys could stay at local churches or hotels for no more than a day or two, and adults could

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen O'Connor, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Nelson, *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 25.

arrive anywhere within that time to claim children. Those not selected would simply move onto the next destination.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of western travel on the future of these children varied. Some riders were reported to have become mayors and governors of their new frontier homes, while others were later charged with thievery or murder. Many also led seemingly ordinary lives.<sup>4</sup> The full extent of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse befalling them is unknown but was clearly present, and full records of the fate of most child participants do not exist.<sup>5</sup> However, one legacy of the movement is indisputable: orphan trains pioneered American foster care and continues to indirectly impact the lives of children today. This mode of child placement functioned for seventy-five years as a charitable project without any formal government oversight.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to prevailing narratives and modern historiographical understandings characterizing the Orphan Train Movement primarily as an adoption program for homeless children, primary sources from the overseeing institutions reveal orphan trains to have served more as employment initiatives than as family-building. In this context, impoverished or recently immigrated white children from intact families were assimilated into dominant Protestant American culture through domestic settings, while being simultaneously seen as exercising a natural sense of autonomy in economic endeavors on the frontier so as to improve their self-sufficiency.

This paper aims to study the concept foreign to most contemporary readers of philanthropic organizations encouraging young children to engage in work placements, not only

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<sup>3</sup> Burton Z. Sokoloff, "Antecedents of American Adoption" *The Future of Children*: Volume 3, No. 1, 17–25, 1993), 20; O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> *The Orphan Trains* PBS American Experience, 1995, URL: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07660a&AN=cclc.816219&site=eds-live>, (35:14).

<sup>6</sup> Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 167.

for economic opportunity but also as a means of moral guidance. I will initiate this exploration by establishing childhood as a historically contingent phenomenon to support my subsequent argument investigating the contemporaneous cultural acceptability of child labor and autonomy. Subsequently, my essay undertakes an examination of organizations supporting orphan trains as situated within the normative worldviews prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century, while a discussion of key terminologies serves to enhance clarity for the remaining sections. My investigation will then delve into primary sources, including instances of application for or departure from placement, in which child autonomy emerges as a primary consideration of orphan train orchestrators. Overall, my examination of orphan trains concludes by urging historians to evaluate the ethical dimensions of past philanthropic initiatives - particularly those involving children - within prevailing societal frameworks of the past in order to ultimately foster a more critical examination of today's philanthropic and charitable efforts.

### **Establishing Childhood As A Historically Contingent Phenomenon**

Childhood itself is a phenomenon of which the scope, definition, and implications vary through time and space. Steven Mintz eloquently establishes a theoretical framework of childhood's variety in his book *Huck's Raft* as he categorizes childhood not only as a biological stage of human development but rather as a "social and cultural construct that has changed radically over time."<sup>7</sup> The view of childhood as a well-cared for and sheltered phase of life ideally dedicated to education and leisure is a recent development, consistently assumed only at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Prior to this cultural shift, many American children were expected to contribute to their families in ways that warranted parental sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> In fact, there

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<sup>7</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, viii.

<sup>9</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, viii.

has never been a moment in time when the majority of children in the United States experienced the cared-for and idyllic childhood portrayed in today's popular media.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, "childhood" may be understood as a phase of life that many still experience suffering within on the same socialized basis as adults. In this sense, the history of childhood serves as a practical frame for understanding all political and social events of the U.S. From colonization, slavery, war, industrialization, westward expansion, and immigration, children have been on the forefront of all major American developments. Furthermore, given children's unique needs, their experiences are specially poised to reveal the evolution of bureaucratic institutions, the public sphere, and the welfare state.<sup>11</sup> Mintz claims that understanding children not simply as products of socialization through strategies such as schooling and entertainment, but as "active agents in the evolution of their society,"<sup>12</sup> allows historians to better recognize children as the autonomous, resilient, and capable citizens they are and have always been.<sup>13</sup> However, a critical challenge in studying the history of childhood is the fact that children often do not have the ability or opportunity to tell their own stories. The historical record tends to be limited to the media and institutions created by adults (and at times for adults) that reflect notions of childhood and childrearing instead of children's realities. In this sense, understanding the experiences of children in the mid-nineteenth century requires attention to the broader cultural and legal circumstances that influenced the view of children during this time.

### **Normative Practices and Worldviews of The Mid-Nineteenth Century**

During the early 1850s, American culture developed a revolutionary new vision of domesticity. Due to changing work patterns making it more common for individuals to be

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<sup>10</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, vii.

<sup>11</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, viii.

<sup>12</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, viii.

<sup>13</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 4.

employed outside of their homes, the distinction between the public and private spheres became starker than ever before. As a result, American society embraced an idealized view of the family as protection from the outside world, often referred to by historians as the ‘The Cult of Domesticity.’<sup>14</sup> A key element of this phenomenon, ‘The Cult of True Womanhood,’ placed emphasis on white middle-class family life and the role of the mother as the provider of nurture in an attempt to cultivate public morality and perpetuate the Protestant-American work ethic.<sup>15</sup> This constellation of moral frames led to the formation of benevolent women’s societies, organizations in which the implications of the Cult of Domesticity sequestered women and their sphere of influence to that of the home and family. White middle-class women who were not expected to otherwise work outside the home, used this space to develop networks allowing them to speak to moral issues.<sup>16</sup> Motivated by temperance - the belief that drinking destroyed families and the thought that younger children were thought to be drawn to drink in impoverished environments - various national and state-level societies of white women tasked themselves with shaping public morality and the upbringing of children to cultivate a more virtuous American future.

While the home was increasingly viewed as the protector of children, many were left without one. During the mid-nineteenth-century there were more displaced children than ever before in U.S. history.<sup>17</sup> Between 1847 and 1854, 1.2 million immigrants arrived from Ireland due to the ongoing potato famine, and 11 million more non-Anglo-Saxon or Protestant Eastern Europeans and East Asian immigrants arrived between 1870 and 1900.<sup>18</sup> Large eastern hubs such

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<sup>14</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 13; Marilyn Irvin Holt, *The Orphan Trains*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>16</sup> America in Class From The National Humanities Center. “The Cult of Domesticity” Accessed February 1, 2024. URL: <https://americainclass.org/the-cult-of-domesticity/>.

<sup>17</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 3.

as New York and Boston did not have adequate infrastructure to support this influx of immigration, and the dire health conditions in which these people were often forced to live resulted in both death and parental loss for many young children.<sup>19</sup> ‘Vagrant’ children living on the streets supporting themselves through begging, stealing, prostitution, or selling newspapers and flowers became a fixture of city life at the time.<sup>20</sup>

These unhoused children also found themselves in a complex moral and historical nexus in which American society increasingly moved away from institutionalization to solve social ills. For most of American history, displaced children had been situated in institutions such as orphanages or child refuges, in which the main goals were simply to keep children alive, limit their exposure to temptation often by neglecting proper education or care, and minimize the financial and ethical burden on the communities of which they were a part.<sup>21</sup> However, during the 1840s, childrearing manuals by authors such as Catharine Beecher and Horace Bushnell suggested that children were malleable beings who could be taught moral virtue by tender upbringing, rather than creatures of original sin.<sup>22</sup> This ethical shift was largely led by the work of benevolent women’s societies, as their work in support of temperance furthered frameworks in which individual’s morality was seen as cultivated through proper training, akin to contemporary understandings of physical fitness.<sup>23</sup> This change in child-upbringing brought about an understanding that if domestic support could properly cultivate moral righteousness and create educated and virtuous children, neglectful caretaking was not only harmful to individuals but likely a threat to society itself.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sokoloff, *American Adoption*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> O’Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> O’Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 10.

Crucially, the Civil War was also a key factor in both the increased number of displaced children during the 1850s and 1860s, and in the move away from institutionalization.<sup>25</sup> Here it should also be noted that the realities of enslavement and indigenous erasure as institutions that both created and situated displaced children warrants specific study unto themselves. However, this paper will instead focus on the (usually white) children who were considered ‘institutionalized’ according to the constructs and limitations of prominent child advocates of the time. Institutionalized children prior to the war were often recently immigrated or from deeply impoverished families, regardless of their orphanhood status. Yet, the Civil War highlighted to the American masses that even middle-class and elite white children could suddenly lack both family and money in the wake of violent conflict.<sup>26</sup> Growing public sympathy for such children, alongside the on-going shift in understanding of moral development, were key factors that motivated reformists away from institutions failing to foster virtuous character or productive working skills and towards the domestic sphere as a solution.<sup>27</sup>

Once this view met the perspective that the influx of immigration would breed a culture of foreign vice threatening dominant White Protestant culture, concepts of the family and domestic settings as a refuge for moral reform and encouragement of assimilation quickly began to develop. Poor families were thought to behave more in line with the routine of the public sphere than the protected private sphere of home. Therefore, these domestic units were thought

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<sup>25</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Leading up to, during, and after The Civil War, the American psyche became even further fascinated with the image of the orphan and orphan culture. Literary works such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide Wide World* (1850), set a well-received precedent for influential media in which a child embarks on adventures centered in movement and change alongside the presence of benevolent adults informed a cultural understanding that orphanhood itself could be categorized under potential for improvement. Claudia Nelson notes that the emphasis of orphans in popular culture speaks to the U.S’s view of itself and its own cultural identity as young and coming into our own through a journey of rebellion against parental authority. In this sense, the United States is both an orphan itself and an adoptive parent for those who immigrate.



to risk the inherent virtue of children by exposing them to vice.<sup>28</sup>In this regard, the *right* moral American home was both seen as imperiled by the dangers of ruly, impoverished, and displaced children, while also holding the potential to save them.

These normative cultural views must be understood as predicted by an existing economic system that both relied on and displayed the ability to reward the labor of white children.<sup>29</sup>

Especially in the case of displaced children, many Americans believed pre-adolescents were autonomous individuals capable of making decisions about their employment and futures, and that moral guidance, rather than general adult support, was necessary in domestic settings. The acceptance of child labor was likely key in reaching that conclusion. Especially for young men, the apprenticeship system created a class division emerging from decisions of young teenagers and those who had only recently entered puberty.<sup>30</sup> Young men could either begin factory work and be doomed to a life of unskilled repetitive labor, or stay in school until their mid-teens and then enter a clerkship or a paid training program. This arrangement made possible the phenomenon of ‘young dandies’ in which employed bachelors could use their earned wages to engage in city culture such as theater, music, saloons, and other settings in which they could socialize both with each other and women. Such economic and social freedom allowed young white men the ability to gain a sense of personal independence and financial freedom that categorized them as active entities separate from the home, even as young as fourteen or fifteen

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<sup>28</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> It cannot be stressed enough that child labor of the mid-nineteenth-century varied greatly by class, gender, ability and most obviously by race. At the same time white children were selling flowers and newspapers, the labor and bodies of Black children were still legally considered commercial commodities. Young immigrant girls from Asia were commonly smuggled into nonconsensual sex work. Indigenous children were taken from their families and unmistakably worked to death in residential schools sponsored by the American government. Numerous other instances of physical, emotional, and spiritual exploitation of children of color are the foundation of U.S. infrastructure. Therefore, it is crucial to make clear that this paper discusses child labor predominantly within the scope of white poverty, as that is primarily how prominent Protestant advocates of (white) children likely would have considered it, and how the majority of histories concerning the Orphan Train Movement record it.

<sup>30</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 139.

years old.<sup>31</sup> While such lifestyles likely sound strange and detrimental in twenty-first century understandings of adolescence, these practices were situated at a time in which American society was on the brink of both legally and culturally categorizing childhood as a distinct phase of life, but formal laws that would protect children against exploitive labor, censure media for children, and define concepts age of consent and statutory rape would not be enacted until the late 1880s.<sup>32</sup>

A further normative concept of the 1850s relevant to the cultural background of the Orphan Train Movement was a specifically positive understanding of the West as the context for the unique physical and moral opportunities many people believed that children were more likely to access on the frontier. Indeed, the living situation of impoverished children in large eastern cities was likely unsanitary and ultimately dangerous. Awareness of this peril, paired with the belief that fresh air was a crucial ingredient to physical health and mental clarity, gave rise to various philanthropic groups actually creating ‘fresh air programs’ in which impoverished children would take day trips to the country or beach.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the frontier as a beneficial environment to permanently send children seemed like a natural conclusion.

Communities in western states and territories were also desperately in need of children. These communities were predominantly made up of either single men or men who had left their families to pursue their fortune.<sup>34</sup> Even as late as 1870, for example, men slightly outnumbered women and children on the Kansas/Missouri border, whereas in areas such as Indiana and Tennessee there was an average of two children for every grown man. And on the Western edge of Kansas the same year, men outnumbered women eight to one, and children twenty to one.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 139.

<sup>32</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 156.

<sup>33</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Elliott West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 15.

<sup>35</sup> West, *Growing Up with the Country*, 17.

The demographic imbalances of the frontier created unique family dynamics, as women were more likely to protest moves west given the sacrifice of established domestic communities and the support of nearby families and female friends. As a result, not only did frontier communities form experience with more isolated families than back east, but caused additional stressful mental repercussions for the matriarchs of families.<sup>36</sup> Movement was also much more common on the frontier than back east. One county in rural Iowa reported that seven out of ten people in the workforce moved on to other communities between 1850 and 1860, resulting in broader communal understandings of and acceptance for the struggles of emigration.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, on the East Coast, many believed that women on frontier farms were being overworked to early graves due to increased housework without assistance.<sup>38</sup> Slightly older children were expected to work in these frontier settings as well, and labor teetering on the line of domestic and commercial incorporated itself into cultural perceptions of positive childrearing practices alongside developing notions of the Protestant-American work ethic.<sup>39</sup> Not only *could* children be put to work, but it was viewed that they *should* be in order to instill family values, especially in the West. While child labor was slowing in the East, the child's working sphere in the West was becoming more expansive, both in prevalence and in disregard of gender.<sup>40</sup> Boys engaged in labor traditionally considered women's work, such as sewing and cooking. Girls, far more often, also moved into the realm of men with work including herding, plowing, and harvesting.<sup>41</sup> Given the understanding that work was a crucial exercise in the development of moral and physical health, as well as that frontier communities were drastically in need of

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<sup>36</sup> West, *Growing Up with the Country*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> West, *Growing Up with the Country*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> West, *Growing Up with the Country*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 20.

additional labor, children and the American West were seen as having a developmentally beneficial symbiotic relationship. Children needed work and fresh air to become morally and commercially sound citizens, and the West needed child labor. These views were especially applicable to recently displaced children who had either immigrated themselves or were from Irish, Italian, German, and Polish backgrounds, as common culture could justify their physical labor necessary for assimilation into dominant Protestant-American morality while also furthering the colonial practices of westward expansion to promote the prevalence and power of white communities on the frontier.

While rampant violence sparked by racial tension, domestic abuse, and nature itself likely took a toll on all individuals living in these communities, the idealized combination of the frontier and youthful opportunity remained prominent in the American psyche. In the now contested remark, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley eloquently summarized the nation's advice to its budding youth by writing: "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country."<sup>42</sup>

### **The So-Called "Orphan Train Movement"**

Ultimately the normative concepts in nineteenth century American culture created ideal conditions for the design and acceptance of relocation to the West as a solution to the superfluity of impoverished children. The migration of children was pioneered as a self-proclaimed charitable project of multiple philanthropic organizations, the most prominent of which was the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of New York, a still-functioning nonprofit now known as Children's Aid NYC. Led by its founder, Minister Charles Loring Brace, CAS came to be in 1853 with the mission to provide social services to alleviate child poverty in the city. Initial

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<sup>42</sup> Oxford University Press. "The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations" (1999) URL: <https://books.google.com/books?id=o6rFno1ffQoC&pg=PA351>; *Encyclopedia Britannica* "Biography of Horace Greeley" accessed February 1, 2024. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Horace-Greeley>.

programming included fresh air programs, lodging houses, and industrial schools teaching children marketable skills such as carpentry and sewing.<sup>43</sup> Even before CAS began its adoption efforts, it was revolutionary in being one of the first organizations for social reform to maintain records on individuals, conduct home visits, and employ trained case workers instead of volunteers for selection and placement.<sup>44</sup> These advanced strategies enabled CAS to begin sending children west (an idea often credited to Mr. Brace) only a year after its formal inception as a charity. The first group of orphan train riders departed for their new homes in October of 1854.<sup>45</sup>

Crucially, CAS, as an overseeing organization in orphan train programming, centered the concerns of socially focused Protestants and their religious bias at the forefront of placements.<sup>46</sup> This emphasis was strengthened through partnerships with organizations such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). As one of the most prominent benevolent women's societies, WCTU was a leading influence on dominant childrearing practices and spearheaded the kindergarten movement.<sup>47</sup> WCTU primarily supported orphan trains by operating local institutions, the principle of which was the Orphan's Home Association of St. Joseph County in Mishawaka, Indiana. This establishment utilized formal partnership with CAS to provide temporary shelter to children awaiting placement in the West.<sup>48</sup>

While CAS and WCTU were leading organizations in orphan train work, other prominent agencies throughout the country - such as the Foundling Hospital, Boston Children's Mission,

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<sup>43</sup> O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 167.

<sup>45</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 164.

<sup>46</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> The South Bend Tribune, "A Look Back: Home for Orphans in St. Joseph County Established in 1882" Accessed February 1, 2024. URL: <https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/news/local/2018/06/03/a-look-back-home-for-orphans-in-st-joseph-county-established-in-1882/46348081/>.

and Philadelphia Woman's Industrial Aid Association - ran similar but distinctly separate programs.<sup>49</sup> All these contributed to this 75-year span of child relocation that has become more broadly known as the 'Orphan Train Movement.'<sup>50</sup> Yet, during the period in which orphan trains ran, none of the agencies used the term in any internal or public-facing documentation or publications. Rather, these organizations referred to their programming as 'the Emigration Department,' 'Home-Finding Department,' 'Department of Foster Care,' 'Family Placement,' or in the case of The Foundling Hospital, 'Baby Trains' and 'Mercy Trains.'<sup>51</sup> In the relevant historiography, a leading theory is that the phrase 'Orphan Trains' was likely coined by a journalist sometime in the early 1900s but was not widely used until as recently as 1978 after the release of a CBS fictional miniseries 'The Orphan Trains.'<sup>52</sup> Many scholars who have written on this subject, including Burton Sokoloff, Stephen O'Connor, Marilyn Holt, and Caludia Nelson argue that the term 'Orphan Train' misrepresents the placement efforts of these organizations, primarily because less than half of these children were actually orphans, and up to 25 percent had two living parents.<sup>53</sup>

Riders of orphan trains, seen as in need of moral guidance and work placements, might today be better categorized as having run away to become self-reliant in response to the existing economic infrastructure of child labor, never have had a sustainable familial home to begin with, or having had one or two living parents who could not support them due to their own institutionalization or incarceration. Some surely even had caring and present families actively disrupted by out-placement organizations. Language used at the time to classify children included terms such as 'foundlings' 'bastards,' 'paupers' or 'waifs' rather than 'orphans' to

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<sup>49</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, vii.

<sup>51</sup> O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, viii.

<sup>52</sup> O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, viii.

<sup>53</sup> O'Connor, *Orphan Trains*, xii.

suggest those whose parents were ill, institutionalized, or incarcerated, as well as children abandoned, born out of wedlock, or simply to impoverished families.<sup>54</sup> In some circumstances, posters advertising the arrival of children in rural areas used the phrases ‘children of unhappy fortune’ and ‘children thrown friendless upon the world’ as the only description of their origins and backgrounds.<sup>55</sup>

The discordant and inconsistent use of certain key phrases in existing scholarship concerning these programs and the children who experienced them begs clarification of the historical terms used in the remainder of this essay. In regard to the programs themselves, I will use the terms ‘placing-out’ or ‘out-placement.’ Not only were these terms used by CAS at the time, but ‘out’ intentionally distinguishes the placement of children west from placement in institutions such as orphanages and asylums.<sup>56</sup> ‘Placing-out’ also encompasses both the collaboration between organizations, as well as the distinct missions amongst them. When categorizing active organizations that facilitate placing-out programs, such as CAS or WCTU, I make no distinction among more recent usage of terms such as ‘philanthropic’ ‘charitable’ and ‘nonprofit.’ While these terms have both legal and structural distinctions today, the exact inner workings of both the programming and funding revenue of these organizations during the 1850s are outside of the purview of this project. Their categorization is difficult in view of the muddy legal designation distinguishing institutions as ‘orphanages’ at the time, and the lack of comprehensive adoption law until the 1920s.<sup>57</sup>

With respect to the children who participated in placing-out programs, the term “orphan” is clearly not an accurate description. However, later twentieth and twenty-first-century terms

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<sup>54</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> PBS, *The Orphan Trains*, 12:33; Sokoloff, *American Adoption*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 28; Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 10.

used to describe children with limited access to resources or fluctuating guardianship, such as ‘disadvantaged’, fail to characterize the distinct cultural and economic potential of children as understood by adults of the nineteenth century. Therefore, in the interest of conveniently incorporating historical nuances into my discussion of the children who were placed-out as well as their varying backgrounds, I will hereby refer to them broadly as ‘ragamuffins.’ The term originated as a Middle English epithet for a ‘ragged’ impoverished person, and its earliest known literary use is William Langland’s poem *Piers Plowman*, in which Ragamuffin is the name of a demon. During the late nineteenth century, the term ‘ragamuffin’ began to be used to refer to children in masquerade costumes during ‘ragamuffin parades’ in which they would parody begging and receive gifts of fruit, candy, and pennies.<sup>58</sup> Considering these connotations, I have chosen to utilize this historically grounded term as simultaneously marginalizing and endearing, to remind my reader that these individuals were in fact children, albeit not all orphans in the traditional sense. The history of ‘ragamuffin’ as the name of a figurative demon also symbolically draws attention to the fear of the moral repercussions that were thought to be the United States’ future if these children were not properly assimilated into White American Protestantism, and the usage of ‘ragamuffin parades’ emphasizes the historiographical framing of childhood itself as often placed by adults, akin to costuming, onto the experiences of very real individuals.

### **Ragamuffin Autonomy in the Views of Placing-Out Orchestrators**

In accordance, then, with widespread nineteenth-century beliefs, leading supporters of placing-out programs such as the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) saw it as not only beneficial to place ragamuffins in settings where

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<sup>58</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary, “The Strange History of Ragamuffin” accessed February 1, 2024. URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/the-history-of-ragamuffin-parades#:~:text=Origin%20of%20Ragamuffin&text=In%20Middle%20English%20the%20word,the%20name%20of%20a%20demon.>



they received familial care, but also wanted those children to express a natural sense of autonomy by pursuing economic enterprise in western regions to better care for themselves. Attention to the writing of key figures, internal documents from the organizations, and publications such as newspapers and advertisements demonstrate that placing-out programs were viewed by their creators more as a rural employment opportunity encouraging assimilation into Protestant work ethic for the seemingly betterment of society as a whole than as a fully-fledged system of adoption aimed at creating life-long familial ties.

The most obvious evidence of these motivations can be found in the writing of Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the Children's Aid Society and its long-term president and treasurer for over thirty years. Many scholars depict Brace not only as one of the strongest advocates of out-placement, but as its mythic creator.<sup>59</sup> On this point, clarification of his role and reputation is useful. Born in 1826 in Hartford, Connecticut, Charles Brace studied at divinity school and eventually began missionary work. He quickly developed strong convictions as a Social Darwinist, fearing that a disadvantaged class would inevitably drag down the progress of society.<sup>60</sup> After working in New York workhouses and penitentiaries, he determined that there was no use in reforming adults and decided that focusing efforts on children was a more strategic tactic to disrupt the threat of the impoverished on otherwise polite society.<sup>61</sup> Placing-out is not a distinctly Bracian, or even American idea. It is rooted in the British strategy of 'transportation' in which impoverished individuals were nonconsensually sent to Cape Town or New South Wales under incarceration after charges of rebellion to populate colonies with communities of white

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<sup>59</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 42.

<sup>60</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 43.

laborers.<sup>62</sup> The American pursuit of Manifest Destiny was a parallel context ripe for similar programming.

While the origin of placing-out clearly lies outside Brace's purview, his extensive writing on the topic has placed him at the center of most 'Orphan Train' histories. For over three decades Brace was frequently interviewed concerning placing-out, continued to host talks on the future of American morality, and wrote multiple published books on social work, the most prominent of which was *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872). While a full exploration of this text and its over 300 pages of stark advocacy for ethnic cleansing warrants a more focused critique, drawing attention to a few of its key ideas can outline the moral framework through which we can understand both Brace and the Children's Aid Society approach to ragamuffins. When describing children living on the streets, Brace writes: "The classes increase; 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."<sup>63</sup> When describing an early iteration of a CAS workschool, Brace highlights his hope that ragamuffins take their moral teachings into their existing homes and families to further spread his goal of assimilation:

When the work had time to grow ripe, 'Mother's Meetings' might be organized, and the connection between the school and the home might be made a more binding and vital one, As time went on and the schools had justified their existence in the community, some of these meetings were held, but it was found that better agents than the society's teachers and visitors were the children themselves. The habits they learned at school were carried by them into their homes, and thus in the natural, unconscious manner that seems most analogous to the methods of nature in the physical universe, the influence of the school was extended through the neighborhood in which it was situated.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Holt, *The Orphan Trains*, 46.

<sup>64</sup> *The Life of Charles Loring Brace, Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*, edited by Emma Brace. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1894), 163.

Brace's writing also showcases his view of child autonomy and labor as legitimate considerations in his social work. When discussing the first CAS workshop in Wooster Street, where ragamuffins were purportedly taught marketable trades such as sewing and carpentry, Brace wrote:

We soon discovered that if we could train the children of the streets the habits of industry and self-control and neatness, and give them the rudiments of moral and mental education, we need not trouble ourselves about anything more. A child in any degree educated and disciplined can easily make an honest living in this country.<sup>65</sup>

Here, even prior to placing-out programs, Brace and by extension CAS viewed labor as a meaningful avenue to moral and financial liberation for ragamuffins. However, training workshops were ultimately deemed a failure as they were designed to be self-sustaining, but workers were too inconsistent to keep the project open. When discussing this failure in a letter to his cousin in 1853, Brace credits the 'stupidity and ignorance of the parents' as a primary reason ragamuffins are unable to access their full potential, while also clearly stating that his main goal is to "help these fellows help themselves" due to the legitimacy of their autonomy:

You must not think of me as tending delicate, fatherless children, or anything of that sort. I have to do mostly with rough, hearty, poor boys, and with friendless children who have learned how to take care of themselves - such as I do love or like. *I think there is nothing in the world so interesting as a healthy, manly boy, and the attempt to help these fellows to help themselves is the most pleasant to me possible.* The worst of it is the stupidity and ignorance of the parents, who can't be talked to or driven into saving their own children.<sup>66</sup>

After placing-out programming began and Brace's writing shifted to directly reference CAS efforts, his discussion of ragamuffin independence and autonomy supersedes mentions of adoption purely for the sake of familial ties. In a letter requesting financial support for CAS, Brace writes, "As a poor boy, who must live in a small house, he ought to learn to draw his own

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<sup>65</sup> *The Life of Charles Loring Brace, Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*, 161.

<sup>66</sup> *The Life of Charles Loring Brace, Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*, 161. Emphasis added.

water, and to split his own wood, kindle his fires, and light his candle. As an institutional child, he is lightened, warmed, and watered by machinery.”<sup>67</sup> Brace also places heavy emphasis on the unique benefits of the American West to unlock ragamuffins’ potential to care for themselves, as in this excerpt from *The Dangerous Classes of New York*:

The United States have the enormous advantage over all other countries, in the treatment of difficult questions of pauperism and reform, that they possess a practically unlimited area of arable land. The demand for labor on this land is beyond any present supply. Moreover, the cultivators of the soil are in America our most solid and intelligent class.<sup>68</sup>

Evidence from the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union offers a useful counterpoise to Brace’s writing. Delegates from all state chapters of the WCTU convened in October of 1886 for a national conference, and while the meeting’s subsequent annual minutes do not speak directly to their involvement in placing-out programs as it was likely not a national initiative, they do provide insight into the prevalence of individual autonomy in WCTU notions of childhood. In the Corresponding Secretary’s Report on ‘Juvenile Work,’ the executive officer writes:

I do not think it wise or desirable to encourage too much of the military idea. It does not seem to me proper that the W.C.T.U. should foster the military spirit. While I believe in military discipline as the best in an organization made up of children, I would not by that system teach the spirit of war to them, but I do believe that we can adapt and adopt the best that there is in this sort of discipline.<sup>69</sup>

While this passage regards a particular WCTU corps of youth laborers, its underlying sentiment is that children, albeit not specifically ragamuffins, should be given flexibility and decision-making power in their own lives and work.

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<sup>67</sup> *The Life of Charles Loring Brace, Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*, 171.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*. 3d ed. with addenda. (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1872), 225.

<sup>69</sup> Woman's Christian Temperance Union. *Minutes of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union at the... Annual Meeting in... with Addresses, Reports, and Constitutions* (Saint Louis, 1886), 91.

*The Minutes of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union Annual Meeting 1886*

also emphasize the importance of connection to nature in employing work efforts to cultivate morality as seen in the following passage from the “Report of National Superintendents on addressing Kindergarten”:

The work of our society is to help create the *right* sentiment; to interpret Froebel in the true and highest sense, some of this interpretation depends on its great value as our primary Garden where the mother-teacher is physiologist of body, mind and soul, - *the tie between Nature, God, and Humanity's childhood*. Our Department of Heredity declares that every child has a right to be well born. The Kindergarten, that he has a right to be *well trained*. We would form the child for ‘plain living, high thinking and right action at the very outset of life.’<sup>70</sup>

Here, the mention of “the tie between Nature, God, and Humanity’s childhood” clearly implies that a primary foundation of WCTU childrearing beliefs is a connection to the outdoors, specifically in the context of cultivating “well trained” individuals. The final sentence of this passage is especially pertinent as it unveils the WCTU’s view that proper childhood training includes the skills needed for “plain-living” (labor and the ability to financially support oneself) alongside “right action” or correct moral guidance. Notably, the WCTU is cited as tracking the “organization of western areas” in its “Juvenile Department Section,” in which an executive officer of the organization draws the conference’s attention to the need to promote WCTU youth programming in all western states and territories.<sup>71</sup> This mindset reveals why it's unsurprising that the WCTU supported CAS's placement efforts.

### **Ragamuffin Employment, Application, and Departure**

While figures like Brace and the leadership of the WCTU clearly valued the development of practical and thriving labor skills as a cornerstone of their efforts, the most compelling

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<sup>70</sup> *Minutes of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union Annual Meeting 1886*, 157. Emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> *Minutes of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union Annual Meeting 1886*, xi.

indication that placing-out organizations perceived ragamuffins as possessing a level of autonomy markedly distinct from twenty-first century notions of childhood is the fact that a considerable number were presumed capable of autonomously opting for western placements, and often applied to do so.<sup>72</sup> The following is a passage from the “Annual CAS Report of February 1858,” depicting the process through which ragamuffins would apply for its out-placement program:

In view of the great sufferings threatening the class of seamstresses and trade girls, suddenly thrown out of employ in the beginning of the Winter, our Society resolved to open a Branch Office, for the purpose of supplying them with homes, and places in the West ... An immense number of girls at service at once applied for the opportunity; but it was resolved in the beginning to use the money subscribed alone for trades girls, and those of the very best character. Accordingly, the most of these were rejected, and applications admitted from the class especially intended. Each girl was also required to bring two or three good references.<sup>73</sup>

This passage is then followed by a note that, at the time of the report, each child was initially expected to pay travel expenses prior to departure and, if unable to do so, was expected to sign an agreement stating that travel expenses would be deducted from their wages after arrival.<sup>74</sup> In the CAS Annual Report of 1859, a segment of the programming section reads:

The main and distinctive feature of the work of the Children’s aid Society is the sending of destitute and homeless children to homes in the country. As is well known, we have no power of indenture, and no legal restraint over the children, so that they go voluntarily, and are received by their employers, solely on condition of their good behavior.<sup>75</sup>

This report shows that, unlike formal adoption practices, CAS did not claim legal assertion over ragamuffins. The mention of ragamuffin travel as both voluntary - and to “employers” rather

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<sup>72</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Children's Aid Society New York, N.Y. *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society*. (New York: The Society, 1858-1873), 15.

<sup>74</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1858*, 16.

<sup>75</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1859*, 7.

than families - demonstrates that out-placement programs were seen by their creators as a work opportunity.

This view is aligned with Brace's own published articles implying that ragamuffins were capable of making informed decisions about their own lives. "The Poor Boy's Astor House" appeared in the April 1876 issue of *Harper's*. There, Brace shared that the CAS Newsboys' Lodging House recruited residents via a card addressed to children themselves reading that "Boys wanting homes in the country must apply to the superintendent."<sup>76 77</sup>

Even as programming details of out-placements evolved and stepped away from formal application processes, CAS Annual Reports still discussed and advertised relocation west as something ragamuffins could and should decide to do themselves. In the CAS Annual Report of 1873, a section titled "A Poor Girl's Greetings to the Girls at The Girls' Lodging-House" reads:

Dear Girls - To some of you I am a stranger, to others I am not; but I take the pleasure of giving you my opinion of the West ... When first I took the notion to go West, I was just thinking how nice it would be to get a ride in a two-horse wagon; but how much better it was to get the ride in reality than to be thinking of it! ... Now, my dear girls, I would advise you to come West, if you would like to be treated as one of the family. - P.C.W.<sup>78</sup>

This address to potential child travelers highlights a sense of family welcome experienced by a ragamuffin who relocated west, but it primarily draws attention to the freedom that can be achieved in this new environment and ends with a plea from one ragamuffin to another to make the decision to join. CAS Annual Report Documents of this sort are especially nuanced sources because not only do they provide insight into the thoughts explicitly shared by leaders (and at times participants) of out-placement programs, but they also show which information and

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<sup>76</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Both girls and boys were able and encouraged to apply. However, there was a notably disproportionate gender balance in early out-placement, as girls and young women were less likely to opt into a program where they might be placed as domestic servants and exposed to physical/sexual abuse.

<sup>78</sup> Children's Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1873*, 73.

narratives CAS wanted to advertise publicly to their funders and stakeholders. Messaging to ragamuffin audiences strengthens the claim that CAS viewed them as autonomous stakeholders that reasonably might access such a document, as opposed to members of a marginalized community that CAS's charitable efforts were paternalistically serving.

In some instances, organizational orchestrators of out-placement programs used language clearly privileging employment over familial acceptance. In the CAS Annual Report of 1859 a 'Western Agent' tasked with checking up on placed ragamuffins - an accountability measure that did not occur nearly as often as sometimes advertised - wrote, "Some, whom we had seen once in the most extreme misery, we beheld sitting, clothed and clean, at hospitable tables, call the employer 'Father!' loved by the happy circles, and apparently growing up with as good hopes and prospects as any children of the country."<sup>79</sup> Here, the emphasis on the novelty of referring to "the employer" as "father" and the subsequent promotion of this passage in an annual report clearly highlight a view of out-placement as centered in labor, hence distant from later understandings of adoption. This dissonance is further emphasized by the fact that about a third of placed-out ragamuffins stayed in contact with their biological families back east, and nearly ten percent of ragamuffins ran away from their placements.<sup>80</sup> Some were reported as having left placements assigned by CAS to find other work opportunities in the West because of inadequate wages or physical and sexual abuse.<sup>81</sup> Out-placement programs generally explicitly stipulated that either party could terminate the agreement, at times leaving ragamuffins alone on the frontier.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Children's Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1859*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 166.

<sup>81</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Nelson, *Little Strangers*, 23.



The notion that ragamuffins were considered able to agree to employment - that they then had the freedom to leave should they find the conditions unsuitable - can also be seen in descriptions of the programming in less official capacities. In February of 1896, CAS agent B.W. Tim Angel wrote to the Vice-President of Chicago Burlington & Quincy Railroad, George B. Harris, requesting passes for the line. In this letter detailing the placing-out program, Angel simultaneously implies that all the children are orphans or homeless while also elaborating on children being able to travel west to improve both their own and their poor families conditions:

The Children's Aid Society is engaged in placing orphan and homeless children in western homes, and hundreds of poor families with children are annually aided to the points in the West *where they are enabled to better their conditions*. Many hundreds of children have been placed in homes along the line of your railroad. Mr. Schlegel visits these children and a general oversight is kept over them for some years." goes on to say "May I ask you to still extend the courtesy of your road to this charitable enterprise?"<sup>83</sup>

The belief that children, some as young as seven or eight years old, were not only considered capable of improving their own conditions through labor but also that of their impoverished families was widely accepted. This perspective, normative enough to be incorporated into pleas for funding, not only accepted the existence of an underage workforce as the reality in out-placement programs but also recognized its structure as a form of "charitable enterprise."

### **Claims of Out-Placement Success**

Finally, the distinctiveness of viewing ragamuffins as autonomous individuals operating within out-placement - an employment system distinct from contemporary models of foster care and adoption - is most prominently underscored by examining how both organizations and frontier communities defined and promoted their perceived success. In accordance with normative views of the period, the underlying intent of ragamuffin labor was assimilation into

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<sup>83</sup> George B. Harris "Correspondence - Children's Aid Society." Newberry Library Special Collection, CB&Q 3H 5.15, Box 144, Folder 20g1, 1896-1897. Emphasis added.

White Protestant American culture. This goal could then be achieved in the prevailing view through employment and baseline moral guidance, not necessarily true life-long family relationships. Of the two thirds of ragamuffins placed by CAS who did not run away from their placements, very few were ever formally adopted by families.<sup>84</sup> Accordingly, in early out-placement offers, CAS seemed to define success as simply effectively placing ragamuffins in new homes. For instance, the 1858 Annual Report section entitled “Children to the Country” includes the passage, “The most important feature of our operations in this direction have been the large companies sent to the West under charge of Mr. C. C. Tracy. These expeditions have, of course, required great judgment and skill, and have been carried out with remarkable *success*.”<sup>85</sup> Saliently, CAS felt able to categorize the program as successful just four years later and before ragamuffins had properly grown into adulthood. This claim of effectiveness is not surprising considering that annual report documents primarily served as promotional materials aimed at garnering support and funding for out-placement initiatives.

Additional sections titled “Letters from Children” highlight personal stories aimed at persuading the reader of the positive impact of out-placement, each including its own title such as “The Young Farmer” and “A Wild Boy Changed.”<sup>86</sup> These sections as well focus on the value of ragamuffin autonomy and prior nuanced experience, such as the example of a young English boy who expresses gratitude for his placement and shares that he hopes to earn enough wages to bring his family to the United States from England by next summer.<sup>87</sup> In another story titled “A Homeless Children Becomes a Man,” a previous ragamuffin describes attending school and

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<sup>84</sup> Sokoloff, *American Adoption*, 20. While Sokoloff does acknowledge that the majority of ragamuffins were never formally adopted by their placement families, many likely established loving and secure family relationships.

<sup>85</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1858*, 12. Emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1877*, 68-69.

<sup>87</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1877*, 64.

living with a woman who suffered from “the palsy.” Despite being clearly grateful for his placement, he still feels the need to inquire after the biological mother from which he was separated::

I can never forget your kindness to me. Had you never taken me from my poor, miserable home, what would have been my condition today? ... I have kind friends, and all I should ask for, and all the privileges which make life pleasant. Yet there is one thing which I ask of you - will you try and find out the whereabouts of my mother. If only I could see her!  
Yours truly, W.B.<sup>88</sup>

While this letter conveys a sense of loss, CAS seemingly found the young writer’s sorrow no obstacle to their publication of his words as promoting their work.

As time went on and ragamuffins placed in the mid-1850s reached adulthood, organizations more clearly categorized ‘success’ and ‘results’ as the long-term conditions of these individuals. In November of 1873, the section titled “A Western Agent’s Report” reads:

Of the older children, those who were ten, eleven, twelve years of age when located in 1856-61, are now all of age, and like many of other people’s children, have gone to ‘seek their fortune’ elsewhere, or have become so blended with the community that the facts of their early history are forgotten.<sup>89</sup>

While some emphasis here falls on children’s being incorporated in new communities as a measure of success, even those noted as having gone to “seek their fortune” apparently independently, or away from their original placements, are included. The 1877 Letters From Children section includes stories titled “A Bible Teacher,” “A Waif, Then A Wife,” and “About To Be Lawyer,” all of which depict children as having been able to raise themselves out of ragamuffinry into respectable adulthood through skilled labor made accessible by out-placements.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1877*, 67.

<sup>89</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1873*, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Children’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society 1877*, 64-68.

Similar criteria for success encompassing ragamuffin independence are evident in newspaper articles and advertisements promoting out-placement programs. For instance, *The Fort Scott Daily Monitor* of Fort Scott, Kansas, published a brief article on April 1, 1880 announcing that western agents would be checking on the placements of children:

Out of several hundred children located in this State, but one or two have turned out badly; and this small proportion of black sheep out of such a large family is a very low percentage. Indeed we were very much surprised to learn that the labors of the society had so uniformly resulted in benefit to the children. Considering the revolutionary contrast between the life abandoned and the life they lead here it is marvellous [sic] that more of them do not grow restless and discontented. Without exception, we believe, the smaller children located in Kansas are still in the families to whose care they were originally assigned, while some of the larger boys, ascertaining they could earn wages at neighboring farmers, have voluntarily changed their abodes. These changes are natural, as the boys are human, and prefer to not work simply for a home when they can get compensation in addition.

The mention of “larger boys,” likely still early adolescents at the oldest, “voluntarily change[ing] their abodes” as a natural result clearly serves as an example of this phenomenon. The article goes on:

Altogether, the evidence satisfactorily proves the society to be engaged in and performing a beneficial labor for the children. They are removed from the vice-breeding and enervating alleys and idleness of large cities to the healthy and moral farms of the West, much to the advantage of humanity in general and the children in particular.<sup>91</sup>

The article’s conclusion reinforces that out-placement organizers focused on the distinctive characteristics of the West as a conducive backdrop inspiring ragamuffins to improve their circumstances, and more broadly, facilitate their assimilation through labor.

Ultimately, the following passage from a section of Brace’s *Dangerous Classes of New York* titled “A Waif Reclaimed” seemingly sent in by an out-placement employer, serves as a

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<sup>91</sup> Orphan Train Depot. Artifacts of the Orphan Trains." Accessed February 1, 2024. URL: <https://orphantraindepot.org/history/artifacts-of-the-orphan-trains/>.

superb summative sentiment: “Mr. Macy [Western Agent] Dear Sir, With regard to Sarah, I would say that she is a very good little girl, and is also useful to us, and I think, fitting herself to be useful to herself at a future day.”<sup>92</sup> Here little Sarah stands as a poignant emblem for all ragamuffin train riders, showcasing that her “usefulness” not only to her placement family, but to herself, was intricately woven into her journey westward.

### **Ragamuffins and the Public Sphere Today**

For present-day readers, it is essential to illuminate that - despite the stark contrast between nineteenth-century placing-out and twenty-first century notions of adoption - the Orphan Train Movement was in its time considered authentically charitable because of its emphasis on autonomy, individual decision making, and child labor. In fact, the reception of this programming was highly positive, surpassing even the expectations of its architects. An excerpt from a letter written by Miss Frances E. Willard, National President of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union to the superintendent at the time of Children's Aid Society demonstrates the program's favorable reception:

I have carefully studied your plan for helping children without parents. It is to remedial philanthropy what the discovery of perpetual motion would be to invention. It is likely all great discoveries - simple, practical, just the thing. We wonder where our wits were that we did not think of such a plan long ago. Persistently followed out on a large scale, it will change the face of civilization, cure poverty, kill our crime, and fetch forth the millennium. Henry George's Single Tax, Edward Bellamy's nationalism, even prohibition itself is not more of a discovery for grown folks than this is for tootsie wootsies. Long may it wave.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Brace, *Dangerous Classes of New York*, 260.

<sup>93</sup> Chauncey McCormick. *Chauncey McCormick Papers*. Newberry Library Special Collections, 1896-1897.

Placing-out programming was seen as revolutionary for the time, and its original organizers would have been perplexed to learn of its decline in later decades as a result of the perception of its detrimental repercussions for some of the children they intended to serve. In this sense, critical study examining the Orphan Train Movement as a whole through the well-intended lens of its founders and supporters clearly perpetuated, notes historic challenges to the ways that today's nonprofit organizations and charitable institutions broadly translate culturally contingent views into programming *for* marginalized groups.

Among the roles of the historian is to engage in ethical considerations and reflect on the epistemology of history, and oftentimes this results in an inclination to retroactively categorize prevailing practices as shortsighted or destructive according to contemporary frameworks. However, one should carefully avoid categorizing normative beliefs of the past as altogether absurd or destructive simply due to their distinction from current understanding. This due caution should not understate critiques of out-placement as having largely perpetuated the abuse of children for the purpose of furthering white supremacy, colonization, and economic exploitation. However, contextualizing programming decisions as normative in their historical circumstances actually aids in combating the inequitable power structures of today that out-placement itself perpetuated. Rather than repeating the same historical ignorance of past charitable enterprises, it is crucial to rigorously scrutinize the philanthropic initiatives of our own time as contextually contingent public service work that may likely result in unintended consequences to be examined and highlighted by future generations. Especially when addressing issues facing children and the work advocating for certain policies or solutions to them, recognizing normative beliefs and practices as historically contingent becomes imperative. Such an acknowledgment informs

strategies for the development of more comprehensive programming or policy measures, better ensuring their capacity to sustainably enhance the lives of real people in a meaningful way.

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