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“Placing-Out”: Dealing with Vagrant Children in 19th Century America

Working Paper No. 73

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Abstract: This inquiry seeks to convince the reader that motivations of 19th century aid societies were not necessarily rooted in the welfare of vagrant children, but rather in the goals of bolstering American agriculture and creating a new generation of farmers out of children that likely would have otherwise proved a direct social and economic burden. While apprenticeships have a long history in the United States, the joining of apprenticeships and indentured labor formed a 19th century system of placing children out into rural homes as contracted workers. This system, as social movement from above, offered economic benefits to farmers and the agricultural industry, while it placed participating children at a disadvantage. The management of the system—regarding the welfare and care of the children—has been found to have been lacking, generating a range of problems, including the fragmentation of family members, with some only recently rediscovering their family connections in the 21st century.

JEL Classification Codes: D02, D63, J13, J43

Key Words: Agriculture, Aid Societies, Orphan Trains, Placing-Out,
Vagrant Children

This inquiry seeks to convince the reader that the motivations of 19th century aid societies were not necessarily rooted in the welfare of vagrant children, but rather in the goals of bolstering American agriculture and creating a new generation of farmers that would have otherwise been a direct social and economic burden. The wider history of child labor in the American colonies began with the indenturing of children as apprentices, allowing for their passage across the Atlantic into the New World. Some children were indentured to alleviate financial stresses for their families, while others were indentured due to their *lack* of a family. This pattern emerged once again in the 19th century United States, as soaring rates of child homelessness and petty crimes created a crisis within Northeastern cities. A simultaneous crisis was emerging in the rural communities outside of these cities—and further to the West—as industrialization began wearing away at the traditional family structures and labor pools of agricultural society.

An elite group of Northeastern cities—like New York and Boston—took issue with the growing classes of poverty-stricken immigrant families, forming various aid societies that boasted of their efforts to assist. A prominent figure rose in New York—as both a man of faith and as a man of wealth—who founded the Children’s Aid Society of New York (CASNY). One Charles Loring Brace (1826-1890) who had founded CASNY introduced an innovative system that would remove at-risk children from the slums of Eastern cities and transport them to farms as far West as

the territory of New Mexico. The economic variables at play in this exchange of housing and education for labor were not secondary. Rather primary motivations were in economic terms and related to an effort to reduce the threats associated with what Brace (1872) identified as the “dangerous classes.” The colonial apprenticeships of children evolved, and by the 19th century a system identified as “placing-out” came into vogue.

The Evolution of Colonial Apprenticeships into Systems of “Placing-out”

The practice of indenturing children into apprenticeships manifested within the American colonies as an undertaking for overseers of the poor. Social and labor law historians John Murray and Ruth Wallis Herndon (2002) trace the practices that established an American precedent for bound child labor, and the economic factors that influenced their evolutions. Up through the 1850s, when the placing-out system was initiated, *binding out*—the indenture of children by their parents to a master—remained an appreciated practice. While the practices of indentured servitude and slavery that founded the American economy were being replaced, the indenture of children continued. Apprenticeship, one of the earliest forms of indenture for children, maintained its importance throughout the history of child labor in the United States.

Apprenticeships were similar in some ways to other indenture systems, though they were completed in the hopes of having a vocation or career that the apprentice could draw on for the rest of their lives. The pauper apprenticeships that dominated the primitive social welfare systems of the Northeast in the 18th century tied children to masters, similarly to how later aid organizations tied children to their farm families. Murray and Herndon (2002, 361-362) assert that in these 18th century instances there was more engagement on the side of the welfare officials than there came to be in the 19th century. In the 18th century there were strict legal guidelines in Massachusetts for the education and wellbeing of the children bound into state-sanctioned apprenticeships, and these expectations were enforced by regular visits to the homes to examine them. While this did not guarantee good treatment, it established an expectation for those to whom the children were bound.

The situations of the many children on the streets of cities like New York varied in their actual status of housing, how many parents or caretakers they had, and how they might go about earning money. Many of these children were born to immigrant parents, or were immigrants themselves, and the opportunities in Eastern cities were few and far between for those who were underage. While there were odd jobs available where a child might earn what even in the 19th century amounted to spare change, it became increasingly popular for children and young people to increase their activities of petty theft, pickpocketing, and robbery. While

the elites primarily took issue with the “dangerous” classes and their activities as threats to a peaceful daily life, others were aware of the social implications of a sharp increase in the numbers of young boys placed into prisons and asylums.

An Early Adventure in Child-Placing: Charles Loring Brace (1929, 77) offers insights into the initial efforts of CASNY and highlights Brace’s disillusionment with institutional reformation—and institutional life in general—for children taken off the streets. At its start, Brace (1872, quoted in *An Early Adventure in Child-Placing*, 1929, 77) had intended to form industrial schools that worked in tandem with lodge-houses, allowing for the training of the future working class and the maintenance of their general wellbeing. This system was flawed in a number of ways, but the primary problem with the proposal rested with its heavy costs—unappealing to the taxpayers of New York—and the overwhelming number of children that would have qualified for the system. Engineering a new system, CASNY retained their goals of removing children from volatile situations on the street and found a way to do so that was both much cheaper and placed children in family homes.

Brace (1872, cited in *An Early Adventure in Child-Placing*, 1929, 84) placed an emphasis on the positive aspects of family life and moral education. His work depended on the cooperation of farmers and their families, and he was also aware of the increasing demand for labor on farms to the West. Apprenticeships

for skilled trades were harder to come by than were positions on farms, and to labor in agriculture was also to learn the trade. *An Early Adventure in Child-Placing: Charles Loring Brace* (1929, 78) exhibits the notions held through the 19th and into the 20th centuries that farm work and life doubled as education; it was thought that the general farmer found it disagreeable to treat their children—their greatest labor asset—as mere servants, and preferred to train them well so that they could better maintain their farm. This idealistic understanding of rural American life failed to account for realities of a life of bound labor.

In her essay “Reflections on the Demand and Supply of Child Labor in Early America,” Gloria L. Main (2009, 211) identifies the evolutions of child labor, through its various forms of indenture and apprenticeships, as being inherently tied to the economic systems of individual localities. The locations to which these children from Eastern cities were sent covered the integrated states of the time—with a select few being sent to far Western territories—and varied drastically in environment, social understandings, and economic stability. Main (2009, 212) marks systems that place children into homes for which they labor as being understood on economic terms; the costs were compared and weighed before considerations for the emotional and physical wellbeing of the children in question came into play. The social benefits for children—as preached by Brace and those in aid societies like CASNY—were positive externalities for systems that aimed to

foster a morally educated working class while dismantling a class that threatened a rise in unsavory urban activities.

Placing-out From an Economic Standpoint

In “Supply and Demand: The Mutual Dependency of Children’s Institutions and The American Farmer,” author Megan Birk (2012, 88-89) teaches us that the contracts between the farm families and CASNY were emotionless documents which solidified the commodification of the child. The fiscal clauses within the contracts only bolstered the farmers’ ability to look at the relationship between themselves and the children as one of free labor. The children from CASNY were assigned to a family, and the expectation was that they would remain there until they were released from the system as they reached adulthood. There were few qualifications needed for a family to take in a child, and the screening process was often a hurried affair completed in the same moment of introduction and claim during the assigning process. That the family was Protestant Christian and had a farm was often enough for a contract to be signed.

These contracts were adopted by other institutions who placed children, along with a policy that required the farmer to pay the child a flat fee at the end of their indenture. The amount varied between fifty and two hundred dollars, though some were allowed to pay in articles of clothing or material goods. This payout

was not guaranteed, and the negotiation of amounts put strains on the relationships between the children and those to whom they were indentured. A very small minority of these children were paid in some form of wage over their time working, but this was often used as a loophole to amend the clause of a final payout. Murray and Herndon (2002, 379) cite the lack of legal competence or advocacy on the part of the children as the primary factor in the maintenance of systems that failed to pay them; their payment was often not hinged on their labor or its quality, but on the vagaries of the labor market and the financial situation of their individual farms.

The undertaking of placing-out systems involved low overhead costs, especially in the perspective of the funds that were raised by the elites and philanthropists of New York. The costs were typically limited to the price of a set of clothes and a one-way ticket West. The public officials tasked with caring for these children, either within the city or as chaperones on their journey West, were caretakers of the barest means. They had few responsibilities regarding the wellbeing of the children, aside from getting them to their final destination, and even this was seen as out of their control should the child leave the train early. The system was largely informal, and its moralities and the implications of the lack of records and standardization will be discussed in the next section.

The process of assigning children from their migratory groups at train stations to families in need of their labor was not perfect, but it was a rare event when a chaperone would be left with a holistically unwanted or unclaimed child. Advertisements were placed at stations, in marketplaces, and in churches announcing the upcoming arrival of the children. Some farmers would write ahead with requests of age, gender, or able bodied-ness, while others would pick the children as they met them coming off of the train. The other children would be assigned to or claimed by farmers at an event similar to an auction. Contracts would be signed, hands shaken, and the children brought to the farms where they would be asked to labor until they reached adulthood. This form of indenture paired with child labor fueled farms in the West into the 20th century and through the First World War. The complexities of child labor in conjunction with war and its social consequences were primary catalysts for the dissolution of the placing-out system in the 1920s.

The Moral Dilemmas of “Orphan Trains”

While the lack of clear paperwork leaves the total number of children moved by the Orphan Trains to be unclear, it is estimated that there were as many as 250,000 (though 200,000 is commonly accepted as a basal estimate) children migrated out of Eastern cities between 1853 and 1929. The peak of these movements took place

after the Civil War, when the need for labor in the West coincided with high numbers of “vagrant” children in the East. This number looks drastically larger when compared to the original report of the number of children on the street that prompted CASNY to take action. The New York Chief of Police released a report in 1849, which was in turn used in the *First Annual Report of CASNY* (1854, 4), that identified the homeless, criminal and vagrant children in New York as nearly 10,000 strong.

In “Forced Migration and Immigration Programs for Children,” authors Madeline Engel, Norma Phillips, and Frances Della Cava (2018, 469) assert that the placing-out system belongs to a history of social movements from above. Other social movements might be initiated by those seeking to enhance their own rights, while a movement from above is initiated on behalf of a disenfranchised group by an organizer or patron. The interests of larger society, as preached by Brace and others, were a primary motivator for the removal of vagrant children from urban sites. Engel, Phillips, and Della Cava (2018, 471) bring awareness to the high proportion of children who had both parents and homes, but belonged to social groups in which it was accepted for them to wander the streets and perform odd jobs. The lack of effort on the part of authorities to find and contact parents of children picked up off the street, a common means of collecting individuals to send

West, led to the permanent separation of countless children from their families and communities.

Without the presence of labor laws, and with the added complications of contractual agreements that failed to include the children themselves in their signing, the treatment of many of these children was revealed to be poor. The failure to establish a rigid expectation of familial connection and emotional responsibility resulted in frequent rejections of children based on their labor abilities, or lack thereof. The systems were contemporarily criticized, comparing the children to the enslaved people they allegedly replaced. Birk (2012, 89) asserts that the data of rates of placements corresponding to seasons shows a heavy association between planting and harvesting seasons, and peak surges of requests for children. Due to the clauses meant to protect the children from a dissatisfactory placement, farmers would be able to send the children back once the brunt of the work had been completed, leaving them to float through the system as seasonal hires.

Engel, Phillips, and Della Cava (2018, 471) identify yet another motivation behind the Orphan Trains as the goal of assimilating immigrant children into the Protestant Christian class. Those who rode on the Orphan Trains were, as previously mentioned, predominantly immigrants. The majority of riders were Italian Roman Catholics, Irish Catholics, or Jewish Eastern Europeans. All riders

placed through CASNY rides were raised in Protestant Anglo-Saxon homes, and younger children and babies were often renamed. The goal of assimilation was clear, and in the name of improvement the forced assimilation of ethnic and religious minorities prevailed. The unwanted behaviors of children on the streets were attributed not only to their lack of formal education, but to a perceived lack of proper moral guidance. The Protestant families to which they went were instructed to raise them with a conscious devotion to religious practices and moral codes.

Studying the responses of riders and their descendants, Engel, Phillips, and Della Cava (2018, 474) identify genealogy and an investigation of historical child labor rights as leading studies that revealed the previously unacknowledged and hidden histories of the Orphan Trains and other placing-out systems. The effects of removing children from living parents and family members, without proper investigation into their domestic situations, have led to a web of uncovered relations for many ancestors of riders. What was once heralded by philanthropists and social management program administrators as innovative and effective is now a system that—while it was legal and accepted at the time—violates our modern understanding of child labor and rearing. The practice of contractually tying children to farms for labor, without ensuring their continued well being or compensation, created a system that further mitigated the economic potential of a

vulnerable population, and more importantly actively worked to dismantle undesirable domestic situations and minority families.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to convince the reader that the motivations of 19th century aid societies were not rooted in the welfare of vagrant children, but in the goals of bolstering American agriculture and creating a new generation of farmers that would have otherwise been a direct social and economic burden. The organizations that ran these programs were motivated by the desire to bolster the labor force; products of escalating rates of petty crimes and incarcerations of children, the placing-out systems founded in the 19th century abused the lack of child labor and welfare laws. Often forgotten in the history of indentured work in the United States, the Orphan Trains and the systems they inspired moved upwards of a quarter million children, over the course of 75 years, away from their living families in the cities of the East to farm families in the West.

The late 1980s and the 1990s saw a surge in the research and investigations done regarding the history of placing-out systems. Increased interest of Americans in their genealogical pasts has led to the discovery of ancestors of these systems. The unfortunate truth is that the lack of clear records over the span of 75 years left countless families, including those today, without the means to find each other.

The children who sought their living families once they were released from their contracts were often left without any real means of searching. This was done in the name of developing social theories and modern yeoman-ism, and in the public hopes of these organizations that the children would grow up to be productive citizens. The actual outcomes of these programs, however, failed to create the adopted rural class they wished for, and instead fostered a system of the separation of families and of contract-bound labor with little to no compensation for the childhoods given up on the fields.

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