

THE ORPHAN TRAIN MOVEMENT: TALES OF THREE RIDERS

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The Orphan Train Movement, as it was later called, removed children from the streets and orphanages of New York City (mostly) from 1854 to 1929. Believing the bucolic atmosphere and hard work of the rural life would provide a better atmosphere in which to grow up, the various organizations of New York City and Brooklyn identified children, gave them a new suit of clothes and escorted them to locations in the Midwest where they were given to rural families to raise and to work. Some of these children were orphans but some had identified parents.

Over 200,000 children are thought to have been removed from the City, with upstate New York taking approximately 33,000 children, and the Midwest taking a similar number. Only a few states received none.

The program had as its genesis the industrial revolution which encouraged child labor, and provided no social safety net for families. Children were abandoned by parents who could not afford to feed and clothe them or were too sick to care. Unwed mothers formed another group of parents who placed their children in the orphanages of the religious organizations of the city. The children either took to the streets or were placed by surviving parents in the orphanages of their religious affiliation.

The program itself was a comforting answer to a systemic problem. Published sources describe the desire to move the “lowest classes” out of NYC, educate the children elsewhere and relieve future elections of the votes of the lower classes when the children grew up.

While the program at the time was considered innovative, it actually was a continuation of an answer that had been used for centuries in the United States-- forced indenture, slave family separations, Native American schooling of children off the reservation, and most recently, the separation of 545 Hispanic children from their families at the Mexican border—with and without parental approval or forced approval.

SELECTION PROCESS

The charitable organization informed the community they were coming with children at some undesignated date. The town created a committee to accept requests for the out-placed children and the program was announced in the local newspaper. The candidate families were to submit an application of interest and the committee handled the allocation process. Foster parents could request a child with a particular ethnic background, color of hair and complexion. The charitable organization would identify a candidate child and assign that child to the family in advance.

In 1890, the successful foster parents were to provide clothes, room and board, and education until the child reached the age of 15, and clothes, and room and board until age 18.¹

¹ “Boys Wanting Homes,” *Webster City [IA] Freeman*, 20 August 1890, p. 1, col. 5.

Usually applications exceeded the number of children. For example, in the August 1890 “delivery” to Hamilton County, Iowa, by the Children’s Aid Society of New York City, 50 applications were received and only 18 children arrived. Attesting to the popularity of the program only six weeks later with another delivery of children over 60 applications had been received, but only 13 children arrived. Because there were so many individuals who did not receive a child, Superintendent Trott of the Children’s Aid Society promised a quick return with more children, which he did in November.

Generally, the children ranged in age from 5 to 13. Boys were more desirable than girls, as they could work on the farm. Girls were often placed in homes with older couples or a single older individual.

o e r t t	One of the boys from the Children's Aid Society, of New York, about five years old, can be secured by a good family if called for at once. Enquire of N. H. Hellen.	b e h t	The charitable organization was to visit the families once a year, but rarely did. Children were sometimes assigned to one family and then moved to another. The latter occurred when the foster parent died, or the relationship didn't work out.
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In 1890, Mr. N.H. Hellen advertised for someone to take his selected child just weeks after his selection.²

Some observations:

- The program removed over 220,000 children from the responsibility of the aid agencies in New York to rural Midwest where farming families were facing a labor shortage.
- By the time the child was 17 or 18, they usually worked outside their foster home.
- Few were formally adopted.
- The women tended to marry, have children and fill traditional roles. With few exceptions, they stayed in the geographic area where initially placed.
- All children attended school; some even went to college. The men became farmers or were day laborers. The men seemed to move around the country more frequently.
- Some children struggled as children and as adults.

An Orphan Train Rider and their foster family might exhibit the following characteristics:

- Usually the foster child was:
 - Between the ages of 3 and 13 at the time of the trip;
 - Born in New York (City);
 - Enumerated in the census with a birth location different than the rest of the family;
 - Recorded as boarder (an older child), adopted or a foster child;
 - Identified with their birth name, if older. Younger children usually accepted the name of their foster family;
 - Reported in newspaper articles as adopted or part of the program;
 - Encouraged by the charitable organization to forget their past, resulting his difficulty in identifying the birth parents, especially of the younger children.
- Usually the family was:
 - An older couple with few or no children;
 - A farm family needing a farm hand;
 - Enumerated as being born in a location different than that of the child.
 - Without children or with only a few.
 - Identified as an acceptor of a child in newspaper articles;

² “One of the boys...” *Webster City (Iowa) Tribune*, 28 November 1890, p. 5, col. 2.

Using the profile above, the children can be identified as Orphan Train Riders.

For an Orphan Train Rider coming into Hamilton County, Iowa, prior to 1900, six online record sets provide evidence:

1. 1895 Iowa state census (<https://familysearch.org>)
2. 1900 U. S. census (<https://www.ancestry.com>)
3. 1925 Iowa state census (<https://familysearch.org> or <https://ancestry.com>)
4. County newspapers, e.g. (<http://hamiltoncounty.advantage-preservation.com/search>)
5. IAGenWeb (<http://iagenweb.org/hamilton/>)
6. FindAGrave (<https://findagrave.com>)

In addition any document that would usually record the parents' names is a candidate for identifying the birth parents—marriage and death records, church membership records, 1925 Iowa state census, etc.

CHILDREN'S VIGNETTES

Thirty-four children came to Hamilton County, Iowa in 1890. Here are five of their stories.

HARRY BITTNER:

"Harry was one of the New York boys brought here ...about ten years ago." Harry Bittner was born 13 November 1885 in New York, probably in the City of New York. He was initially selected by or assigned to Hiram S. Olmsted, but after 18 months moved to the Charles Young family, also of Hamilton County.³ Charles H. and Harriet Young were born in New York, but had migrated to Iowa prior to 1875.⁴

Harry died 25 February 1900, at age 14 in Freedom Township, Hamilton County, Iowa of an unknown illness.⁵ To learn more about Harry see my blog.⁶

AUGUST ZAHN

August was born 11 April 1880 in New York City, the son of "Mr. and Mrs. William Zahn." He was placed with the John Essig family upon his arrival in Hamilton County, Iowa, in the fall of 1890.⁷

There are two candidates for the father of August, both of whom were single on 31 May 1880:

- William Zahn, carpenter, born 1859 in New York, son of Philip, a widower.⁸
- William Zahn, at home, born 1857 in New York, son of Frederick and Christiana.⁹

On 4 September 1907, August married Lizzie Lyon in Eagle Grove, Iowa.¹⁰ The couple farmed in Minnesota for four years before returning to Hamilton County. August died 24 August 1951, in Webster City, Hamilton County, Iowa.¹¹

³ "Obituary," *Daily Freeman Tribune*, 28 February 1900, p. 8, col. 3.

⁴ 1880 U.S. census, Hamilton County, Iowa, population schedule, Webster Township, ED 104, p. 2, household 19, dwelling 20, Charles Young; NARA T9. Year identified based on birth locations of children.

⁵ "Harry Bittner,..." *Daily Freeman Tribune*, 26 February 1900, p. 8, col. 2.

⁶ Jill Morelli, blog, *Genealogy Certification: A Personal Journey*, "Harry Bittner, b. 1886, d. 1900," 20 December 2020.

⁷ "A.H. Zahn, 71, dies in City," *Daily Freeman Journal*, 25 August 1951, p. 1, col. 4.

⁸ 1880 U. S. census, New York City, New York, population schedule, 15th election district of the 24th Assembly, Enumeration District (ED) 136, p. 26 (handwritten), 382 (stamped), household 50, dwelling 321, Philip Zahn; National Archives (NARA) T9, roll 899.

⁹ 1880 U. S. census, New York City, New York, population schedule, ED 669, p. 39 (handwritten), 382 (stamped), household 289, dwelling 382, Frederick Zahn; NARA T9, roll 899.

¹⁰ "Miss Lizzie Lyon, daughter of..." *Webster City Journal*, 12 September 1907, p. 6, col. 3.

¹¹ "A.H. Zahn, 71, dies in City," *Daily Freeman Journal*, 25 August 1951, p. 1, col. 4.

CHARLES & WILLIAM (TARRANT), BROTHERS

Charles (Tarrant) was born 10 December 1885. His mother's birth name was identified as Blake.¹² It is not known if that was the birth or married name of his natural mother or the birth name of his foster mother.

In 1895, Charles and William Tarrant, age 9 and 7, resided in the Tarrant household of Richard, age 65, and Ellen, age 52. Residing in the family was Elmer Tarrant, age 20, also born NY (relationship unknown) and John Tarrant, age 60, a brother to Richard.¹³ In June 1900, Charles fell from a horse causing an injury to his head and face. "[The gash] begins at the crown of his head, and extends over his left eye, then turning upward terminates at his left ear."¹⁴

On 15 September 1909, Charles Tarrant married Pearl Rouse.¹⁵ The family moved to Minnesota c. 1928. By 1930, Charles, now age 45, and Pearl, age 46, farmed in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, with their six children. Charles rented his farm.¹⁶ Charles died 6 December 1961 in Minnesota.¹⁷

William Anthony Tarrant was born 16 January 1888 in New York City.¹⁸ William died 14 April 1964 in Webster City, Iowa.¹⁹ He never married.

LILLIAN LENGREN ROOP

Lillian Lengren was born February 1886 in New York.²⁰ In November 1890, Henry & Sophronia Roop formally adopted Lillian shortly after her arrival from New York.²¹ Lillian married John Bennett Gray of Eagle Grove, Iowa, on 26 November 1903. Lillian stated her parents were C.H. Roop and Sophronia Stone, her adopted parents.²²

In 1908, the couple lived in Ames Iowa;²³ in 1910 they reside in Cowley, Kansas.²⁴ In 1920, the couple resided in Craig, Colorado. The family owned their mortgaged farm home.²⁵ In 1930, the couple

¹² *FamilySearch*, "Minnesota Death Index, 1908-2002," (<https://familysearch.org>), certificate 001097, Charles J. Tarrant death entry (30 July 1961).

¹³ 1895 Iowa state census, Hamilton County, Iowa, population schedule, p. 371 [stamped], household 51, Richard Tarrant;

¹⁴ "A Serious Accident," *Daily Freeman Tribune*, 11 June 1900, p. 8, col. 3.

¹⁵ "Well known Young People are Wed," *Daily Freeman-Tribune*, 15 September 1909, p. 2, col. 4.

¹⁶ 1930 U.S. census, Blue Earth County, Minnesota, population schedule, Lincoln Township, ED 7-16, p. 1A, dwelling 8, household 8, Charles J. Tarrant; NARA T626.

¹⁷ *FamilySearch*, "Minnesota Death Index, 1908-2002," (<https://familysearch.org>), certificate 001097, Charles J. Tarrant death entry (30 July 1961).

¹⁸ "U.S., WWI Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," Kossuth County (Iowa) Draft Registration Board, William Anthony Tarrant; digital image, *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 10 January 2021).

¹⁹ "Iowa, Armed Forces Grave Registration, 1835-1998," William Anthony Tarrant death entry (14 April 1964); index, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org> : 10 January 2021).

²⁰ 1900 U.S. census, Hamilton County, Iowa, population schedule, Webster City, ED 102, p. 8B, household 181, dwelling 182, Henry Roop; NARA T623.

²¹ "Mr. and Mrs. H.C. Roop...", *Webster City Tribune (IA)*, 28 November 1890, p. 5, col. 4.

²² Iowa, U.S., Marriage Records, 1880-1951, record no. 11-21, John Bennett Gray-Lillian Roop marriage entry (26 November 1903); digital image, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 10 January 2021).

²³ "Mrs. H.C. Roop Passes Away at Ames," *Daily Freeman Tribune (Webster City, Iowa)*, 28 February 1908, p. 8, col 1.

²⁴ 1910 U.S. census, Cowley County, Kansas, population schedule, Arkansas City, ED 45, p. 1B, household 25, dwelling 28, John B. Grey; NARA T624, roll 435.

²⁵ 1920 U.S. census, Moffat County, Colorado, population schedule, Craig, ED 170, p. 1B, household 19, dwelling 19, John B. Gray; NARA T625, roll 167.

resided in Ceres Township, Stanislaus County, California, where John was a farm laborer and the family rented their home.²⁶

Lillian died after 1930.

RESOURCES

Some of these articles can only be accessed through your academic library. Popular fiction books are not listed. Links checked December 2020 and January 2021.

- Birk, Megan. *Fostering on the Farm: Child Placement in the Rural Midwest*. Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2015. Research conducted on child placement at the turn of the century in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Illinois. I have not read this book.
- Brace, Charles Loring; ed. Brace, Emma. *The Life of Charles Loring Brace: Chiefly Told in his Own Letters* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, & Company, 1894), <http://books.google.com/books.com>
- Children's Aid Society, "The Orphan Train Movement," (Protestant) <https://www.childrensaidnyc.org/about/orphan-train-movement>
- The City Museum of New York City, "Jacob Riis Collection," photographs of New York City, <https://collections.mcny.org/Explore/Highlights/Jacob%20A.%20Riis/>.
- Coble, Janet. "Partial List of Institutions that Orphan Train Riders Came from," USGenweb/Brooklyn, <http://bklyn-genealogy-info.stevemorse.org/Orphan/Inst.Orphan.Train.html>
- Dervin, Dan. "Children's Lives as History's Pawns." *Journal of Psychohistory* 46, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 310–22. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/login.aspx>
- Google Scholar, numerous articles, <https://scholar.google.com>
- Grossman, Ron, "The Orphan Train: A Noble Idea that Went Off the Rails." *Chicago Tribune*, 19 July 2018. Academic login link: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-flashback-orphan-train-children-separated-immigrants-0722-20180718-story.html>
- IAGenWeb, "Orphan Train Riders to Iowa," <http://iagenweb.org/history/orphans/index.htm>. Check other states; they may have their own program.
- Ingle, Cyndi, *Cyndi's List*, "Railroads" > "Orphan Trains", <https://www.cyndislist.com/railroads/orphan-trains/>
- Kidder, Clark. "America's Orphan Trains." *History Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 6, Aug. 2015, pp. 22–26. EBSCOhost, academic library login required: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?>
- "West by Orphan Train." *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 87, no. 2 (Winter 2003/2004 2003): 30–38. Academic library link: <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/login.aspx>.
- National Orphan Train complex, Concordia, Kansas. <https://orphantraindepot.org>
- New York Historical & Museum, finding aid "Guide to the Records of the New York Foundling Hospital, 1869-2009." <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyhs/foundling/> (Catholic)
- Public Broadcasting System (PBS)*. Documentary, "Orphan Trains." 2006.
- Schlott-Gibeaux, Rikki. "Orphan Trains: A Brief History and Research How to." NYG&B. blog, <https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/blog/orphan-trains-brief-history-and-research-how>.
- Spellen, Suzanne. "Past & Present: The Home for Destitute Children." *Brownstoner*. 31 May 2013. <https://www.brownstoner.com/history/past-and-present-the-home-for-destitute-children/>

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²⁶ 1930 U.S. census, Stanislaus County, California, population schedule, Ceres Township, ED 50-3, p. 17A, household 388, dwelling 396, John B. Gray; NARA