



CHASING A DREAM

My parents landed turbulently into the heart of the American Dream at the close of World War II. Uprooted from their native home in Estonia, my mother, father, and brother became three of the millions of displaced persons that the historian Gilbert Muller has noted to be one of the “greatest population shifts in history constituting a watershed in the narrative of immigration.”

As my parents did, people have fled their homelands and continue doing so as we have seen starkly depicted in the past few years with the mass migration to Europe. People migrate within their countries, outside of their countries, and halfway around the world to seek better lives, safer living conditions, and healthier environments.

While I was chair of the Arizona Humanities Council, I had the privilege of learning of a lesser-known — though significant — migration that occurred over an eighty-year period in the U.S. and involved some 250,000 children. Various called “street rats” or urchins, some of these New York City children became orphaned when epidemics of the flu, typhoid, or yellow fever swept urban areas. Others were abandoned by parents who were living in squalid conditions and racked with disease or alcohol or drug addiction. Yet others were exposed to other diseases from living in crowded, unsanitary housing. It created an enormous public health issue.

Many of these children were rescued by a former aristocrat working as a minister. Charles Loring Brace organized the children, sending them off to the West and Midwest by train.

The story is chronicled and almost romanticized today by Riders on the Orphan Train, the outreach program of the National Orphan Train Complex. Alison Moore and Phil Lancaster, organizers of the program, note that these young people were “placed out between 1854 and 1929, boarding trains in New York City and literally given away at rail stations across the country.”

Moore and Lancaster have created performances and displays that have been presented to more than 300 museums and libraries in the U.S., funded by state humanities councils. They describe the “origin and demise of the largest child migration in history and the part it played in the formation of the American Dream. The human struggle to belong, to define one’s self in the place we call home is exemplified in the stories of these children that have shaped all of our lives.”

Trains stopped in designated cities, and children aboard were lined up on platforms where people could view them and decide if they would adopt them to be primarily farm workers. The children were prompted to dance or sing to enhance their chances

of being selected. Life was unsettling for them. If they did not work out for a family, they would be given to another family or placed back onto the train and sent off to the next city for another chance at grasping the American Dream. The last orphan train stopped in Sulphur Springs, Texas, in 1929.

Were the orphan train children better off than had they stayed in the cities? Scholars agree they were. They at least had a better chance for a more stable, safer, and healthier life.

Though migrations may occur in many ways, the common theme seems to be the same: finding a better life — and a dream that exists beyond the horizon.

For more information about Orphan Trains:

<http://www.ridersontheorphantrain.org/>

<http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/about/history/orphan-trains>

<http://orphantraindepot.org/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Z3djWoTGFU>

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