Background for the Orphan Train Children
In the 1840s and 1850s there were large numbers of immigrant families coming to the new world to seek a better life. People were pouring in from Ireland, due to the famines in that country, from Scotland due to the clearances of the highlands, even though some stayed in Scotland’s cities for a time, and from England, Germany and other parts of Europe where there was too little land for everyone to become prosperous farmers. Most of the English immigrants were landless agricultural laborers or mill workers and the Germans in many cases were unable to marry in their homeland because they were not farmers or skilled craftsmen and therefore could become a burden on society. Many German immigrants came to the US with their fiancé to marry and raise their families. Most of the immigrants were nuclear families, parents and children who may have been born in Europe, but other children were born in the US. In the 19th century people had large families. What was missing for many families was the extended circle, the grandparents, aunts, and uncles who provided the safety net in Europe, and this often left the new immigrant families vulnerable. They typically lived in crowded tenements, and the men worked at jobs where injury resulting in death and/or disability were common. Some of the men even spent their hard-earned money on beer in the local pub! If one of the parents died, then the other parent had to work and there was nobody at home to care for the children. Many of the children took to the streets to try to eke out a living. Remember there was no social welfare to help these folks when they fell on hard times. Some single parents sent their children to orphanages, because they couldn’t care for their children and support their children financially at the same time.

The Orphan Trains
This was a welfare scheme that transported orphaned and impoverished children from the large East Coast cities to the mid-west farms who needed indoor and outdoor (farm) servants. The Orphan Trains, which operated between 1854 and 1929 resulted in over 200,000 young people going to a new life from a life of abuse, neglect or who had become orphans. The quality of life for these young people was often, but not always, a vast improvement over their former life. Many were fostered by loving families who treated them as their own children while others were less fortunate and were treated just as servants and, in some cases, were abused. The children were sponsored by wealthy donors and came from three charitable organizations:¹

- Children’s Village (founded in 1851 by philanthropists)
- The Children’s Aid Society (established 1853 by Charles Loring Brace.)
- The New York Foundling Hospital also helped these children

The Children’s Village
The Children’s Village founded in 1851 was originally a home for orphaned children, runaway children and children who were found begging on the streets of New York. The children’s village was started to help improve the lives of these poor children.

The Children’s Aid Society and the New York Foundling’s Hospital
Two organizations which originally tried to provide homes for New York street children. When these children were arrested by the police, as they often were for begging or for being a part of street gangs which frequently formed to protect the street children from the dangers of living on the streets. Unfortunately, when these children were arrested, they were usually locked in goals with adult criminals. The goal of these organizations was to get the poor city children off the streets, but they ended up in what were essentials orphanages, and orphanages were not the type of environment that provided children with a happy childhood. But Charles Loring Brace has what he thought was a better plan, to send these poor children to the Midwest to pioneering farm families where they could be useful, live with a family instead of in an institution and become productive members of society.² Many of the Midwestern pioneers were recent immigrants to the United States and, like so many immigrants, were

drawn to the United States because there was abundant farmland. Some of the “Orphan train” children ended up being adopted and living with loving “new” parents. Others were not so fortunate, and they lived with families who treated the children more like farm servants. You can find stories of the Orphan Train children, and some are online for everyone to see. The stories range from children who were treated as servants to children who found a loving home and were treated well, becoming a part of their adopted family. Irma Craig was an Orphan Train girl who wrote her own memoir and the story is available for reading online.3 Irma Craig was a true pioneer.

**Home Children**

Using children as a source of labor began in 1618 when 100 children were sent to the Virginia colony as a labor source. Shortage of labor in the Americas led to thousands of children migrating, primarily from Scotland, because the merchants of Aberdeen were involved in the scheme. But this was in the early days before the “Home Children” scheme was started. Who or what was the “Home Children Scheme?”

The Children’s Friend Society was founded in London in 1830 as "The Society for the Suppression of Juvenile Vagrancy through the reformation and emigration of children." In 1832, the first group of children was sent to the Cape Colony in South Africa and the Swan River Colony in Australia. In August 1833, 230 children were shipped to Toronto and New Brunswick in Canada.

The main pioneers of child migration in the nineteenth century were the Scottish Evangelical Christian Annie MacPherson, her sister Louisa Birt, and Londoner Maria Rye. Whilst working with poor children in London in the late 1860s, MacPherson was appalled by the child slavery in the matchbox industry and resolved to devote her life to these children. In 1870 she bought a large workshop and turned it into the “Home of Industry”, where poor children could work and be fed and educated. She later became convinced that the real solution for these children lay in emigration to a country of opportunity and started an emigration fund. In the first year of the fund's operation, 500 children, trained in the London homes, were shipped to Canada. MacPherson opened distribution homes in Canada in the towns of Belleville and Galt in Ontario and persuaded her sister, Louisa, to open a third home in the village of Knowlton, seventy miles from Montreal for needy children.

Maria Rye also worked amongst the poor in London and had arrived in Ontario with 68 children (50 of whom were from Liverpool) some months earlier than MacPherson, with the blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury and The Times newspaper. Rye, who had been placing women emigrants in Canada since 1867, opened her home at Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1869, and by the turn of the century had settled some 5,000 children, mostly girls, in Ontario.

**British Home Children's Registry**

From 1869 through to 1939 (1948 to British Columbia) it has been estimated over 100,000 children emigrated from the United Kingdom to Canada to be used as indentured farm workers and domestic servants. Believed by Canadians to be orphans, only two percent truly were. These children were sent to Canada by over 50 organizations including the well-known and still working charities such as Barnardo's and Quarrier's. In times of economic crisis [in Britain] many parents placed their children in the care of ‘charitable’ society homes as a temporary expedient until times improved. Unfortunately, these societies viewed child emigration as a solution to poverty and overcrowding in Britain’s cities. Parental consent to child emigration was often overlooked, and many parents were never informed of their children’s emigration. Others would receive written notification only after the ship carrying their children had left port.

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During these years there existed a shortage of agricultural labor in Canada. After arriving by ship, the children were sent to distributing and receiving homes, such as Fairknowe in Brockville, and then sent on to farmers in the area. Within days or weeks of the children’s arrival in Canada, they would be placed on farms to work for their keep, and many were indentured servants. Although some of the children were poorly treated and abused, other children ended up in loving homes where they were well treated, got a good education and had nothing but praise for the Home Children scheme. These children experienced a better life and job opportunities here than if they had remained in the urban slums of England. Many served with the Canadian and British Forces during both World Wars. Because of abuse and neglect, many of the surviving Home Children still carry the emotional scars resulting from forced emigration from homeland and separation from families at such a young age. Most Home Children would never return to their families. Today more than four million people are directly descended from the original 100,000 Home Children who landed on Canada’s shores.

**Records at Library and Archives Canada for Home Children**

Library and Archives Canada (LAC) holds unique and extensive records of the British Home Children, such as passenger lists, Immigration Branch correspondence files and inspection reports, non-government collections such as the Middlemore Home fonds, as well as indexes to some records held in the United Kingdom. The records also include names of older boys and girls who were recruited by immigration agents in the U.K. for farming and domestic work in Canada. Please note that most documents have been created in English. Members of the British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa (BIFHSGO) and other volunteers are indexing the names of juvenile migrants found in these records.

**Passenger Lists**

The names of the home children have been extracted from Canadian passenger records which start in 1865. Passenger lists from 1869 to 1921 and 1925 to 1932 are in (RG76): These records are indexed by date and port of arrival and Canadian passenger records are also available at Ancestry.com. These records have been searched to find the names of the Home Children. If you click on a name you receive more information about the party who came to Canada. If you find the group number for a party travelling together you can get the full list of the children in the party, the port of debarkation, the name of the ship, the port of arrival, the date the ship sailed and the date it arrived in Canada.

**Juvenile Inspection Reports (RG76 C4c):** These reports, which date mostly from the 1920s, recorded the inspection visits to individual children in the years after their arrival. Available on microfilm and online.

Names of Home Children were also indexed from non-Canadian immigration records such as:

**Outwards passenger lists:** Passenger lists for ships leaving ports in the United Kingdom. These lists are in the Board of Trade series at the National Archives in England. The British passenger list don’t start till 1890.

**U.S. passenger lists:** Some groups of children arrived at American ports and are recorded on American passenger lists held at the US National Archives. Department of Immigration: Juvenile inspection report cards [ca. 1913-1932.]

Here we have eight microfilm reels of report (T-15420 – T-13428.) These records are digitized at Library and Archives Canada and you can browse thru them on the website.

For both Orphan Train children and home children you might find them in census records. Most of the children were not adopted, so then they will continue to carry their birth names.

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6 “Library and Archives Canada,” Wikipedia, ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_and_Archives_Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_and_Archives_Canada)) ; accessed 11 June 2020) This article will give you background information on this important Canadian Institution