Summer 2015

Searching for Their Real Home: Dependent Black Children in Indianapolis, 1910-1940

John D. Ramsbottom
Butler University, jramsbot@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

Part of the Public History Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/716

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.
SEARCHING FOR THEIR REAL HOME

DEPENDENT BLACK CHILDREN IN INDIANAPOLIS, 1910-40

JOHN D. RAMSBOTTOM

Concerns about the future for young people, reflected in contemporary headlines, were equally prominent in Indianapolis a hundred years ago. Then, as now, children whose parents neglected or abandoned them posed a special problem. In the midst of rapid social change that seemed to threaten traditional family stability, a small corps of professionals and volunteers worked to provide a nurturing environment.

The solution pursued by various agencies, both public and private, was to find substitute homes and foster families for young people at risk. Like every other aspect of life in early-twentieth-century Indianapolis, this process was deeply tinged with racial discrimination. White society generally feared integration, and the treatment of black youth provides a classic instance of separate institutions being unequal. But the story is more complicated than that. Care for dependent African American children was also shaped by shifting philosophies of welfare provision and, ultimately, by the decisions of local government in a period of national reform.

The evolution of policy regarding the city's "colored orphans" reminds us that a community without independent resources can be at the mercy of its benefactors. At the height of the Progressive Era, Indiana was arguably a paragon in social-welfare thinking. In 1897 the legislature had established the Board of State Charities to oversee the work of institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and poorhouses. When it came to care for abandoned and neglected children, the Board's secretary, Amos W. Butler, administered the children's division with an aim to extend the benefits of "normal" family life to all. According to this approach, instead of building or funding orphanages and poorhouses, the state would focus on education, ending truancy, and using the law to remove children from the bad influence of irresponsible parents. In 1907 the recently created juvenile courts were given authority to declare children wards of the state, and thereafter they assumed full responsibility for black, as well as white, youth. As one observer wrote three years later in the Indianapolis Star, "Indiana is now watching all the avenues that have through many years led the children to dependency. The object is to prevent them ever entering an institution of any kind. . . . For such as become public charges there should be such a home and a school, . . . as will fit them for the real work of life in a real home."

The discussion that follows begs the question of whether foster care was the best policy to begin with—a debate that continues today. In the opinion of the dominant voices at the time, it was far preferable to institutional care. From 1900 through 1920, the state of Indiana supervised the placement of some 5,000 children, aged from infancy to eighteen. A sample of the state board's records indicates that only about 6 percent of these cases led to legal adoption, but many ended with the child "aging out," at which time he or she received two sets of clothes and a "final payment" of twenty-five dollars. Some of these youth were adopted in all but name, with their foster parents guaranteeing employment and shelter even after their contract with the state had expired. In line with the overall population of the time, most of the state's wards were white and from rural backgrounds; only about 5 percent of the total were African American, and almost all of them came from cities.

In Indianapolis, the Asylum for Friendless Colored Children was founded at the initiative of Quakers in 1869. Housed in a two-story brick structure at 21st and Senate Avenues, the asylum accommodated about one hundred children at any given time. The Asylum for Friendless Colored Children was founded at the initiative of Quakers in 1869. On paper the Indianapolis asylum espoused the same policy for black children as the state followed for its charges. According to a promotional leaflet for the asylum in 1915, the two agencies collaborated: "children are taught to work and are placed in homes approved by the Board of State Charities." In contrast with the state's program, however, the asylum
fewer children were placed out, even once.

As the admission register shows, only a minority of the children cared for by the asylum were likely candidates for placement or adoption. By its own annual accounting, "half-orphans" and those with both parents living made up nearly 90 percent of the total. Only a few were identified as "foundlings" or "waifs," literally abandoned at police stations or churches. Nearly a quarter of those in the register were also described as "illegitimate." Because their parents were unknown, these children were usually entered under the mother's surname, even if the father's identity was known. A majority of the children labeled as illegitimate were also "abandoned," but in some cases only by the father, which meant a single mother might still be in the background. Nevertheless, a number of children spent virtually their entire childhood in the institution. Sadly, seventy-seven (17 percent) died while there, most often within the first few months from illnesses such as tuberculosis and pneumonia. This level of mortality, which confirmed the fears of those who opposed institutional care, no doubt contributed to the building's closure during the 1930s. Although relatively few of the asylum's charges were placed out as wards of the Board of State Charities, the experience of one black youngster shows that this system was crucial in achieving an independent adulthood. Bertha Metz, placed in the home of a colored laborer when she was ten, was described as "bright, happy, and well cared for" when the state agent visited her family in New Albany, Indiana, a year later. "Neighbors speak well of these people," the agent reported, and as late as age ten, Bertha had "never found out she was not an own [sic] child." But keeping the child's origins secret was no guarantee of permanent attachment. When she was fourteen, Bertha ran away, found a job in Kentucky, and married a soldier from Camp Taylor near Louisville. Writing to her foster mother in 1912, she said she was tired of state wards overall. On average, children came to the asylum at age four and waived four more years before being placed, with some waiting as long as twelve years. Children as young as five or six were returned to the asylum for "no good reason" or "because of unclean habits," and we intend for him to have, but it's all off now." In the same letter, the husband asked about getting another boy. Yet within the week, Jonas came back "mucht [sic] older and wider," and he stayed until this elderly couple died. After a second placement, he eventually left for Minnesota, but he

Prospects for black children placed from the asylum were generally less hopeful. Only one child, among more than 180 sent out from 1906 to 1922, was noted as "adopted," as compared with 6 percent of state wards overall.
Laura was in fifth grade, evidently behind but enjoying her school work. A couple of years later, the reports from the housewife, Mrs. Gordon, were less favorable. Laura was no longer attending school, and instead "learning to be a model housekeeper." Frustrated by her lack of independence, Laura began talking back. The fact that Laura was already a teenager when she arrived did not bode well, but the detention home for running away, then to the Girls' Industrial School. She was briefly considered "to be a better girl" as a result, but a few months later, still only thirteen years old, she was deemed "incorrigible."

For white boys in the state's system, running away often meant the chance to hire on with a neighboring farmer for better wages. For black girls, it was more likely to result in incarceration.

In 1918 she was committed to the county asylum for running away, then to the Girls' Industrial School. She was briefly considered "to be a better girl" as a result, but a few months later, still only thirteen years old, she was deemed "incorrigible."

In retrospect, the shortcomings of home placement for black youth in Indiana might appear almost inevitable. The vast majority of children in the Indianapolis asylum were not true orphans, and many had been sent there to alleviate the inconvenience they posed for outlying situations for black youth, and it was acknowledged, however, generating the political will to seek improvement required several decades.

As early as 1937, Judge Lawson M. Harvey, a white board member of the IAFFCC, had come before the Marion County Council, seeking a $10,000 appropriation to help move the asylum to a new site. At the time, there were seventy children in the building, which was "old, poorly ventilated, not fire proof, and . . . situated on such a small plot that it is..."
not possible to teach the children of the institution to do gardening or other useful outside work." Although council members indicated that they would consider the request if the budget permitted, nothing was done. In the waning months of 1918, the asylum was included in a report on city charities that were supported by the so-called War Chest. While commending the staff for its dedication, the study by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research stated that the current per diem of forty cents per child was utterly inadequate. Moreover, the care and training of the children would never be satisfactory so long as the asylum remained in its present facilities. It recommended moving to a new, larger location. Three years later, little had changed, except that the state agent had taken note:

The present situation concerning colored children is becoming a grave one. The Home for Friendless Colored Children in this city cannot properly house and care for its inmates. The building is old and poorly arranged. The grounds are small and there is very limited space for work and play. The management has expressed a willingness to turn the property over to the county, but as far as is known no definite steps have been taken. The home at Evansville is small and as a rule only cares for children of Vanderburgh County. White's Institute at Wabash is not taking any girls and objects to receiving boys. The Juvenile court of Marion County has been forced to take several girls to the Convent of Good Shepherd in Louisville.

This situation was hardly new, as we have seen, but it was surely becoming more urgent. During the decade of World War I, the black population of Indianapolis grew nearly twice as fast as the overall population, reaching 11 percent of the total in 1920. Against this background of rising need, annual admissions to the asylum during the decade 1910–20 still averaged only thirty-four children; the total number in the home was roughly the same as forty years earlier, probably because there was no room for more. To produce a dramatic change in the asylum required an initiative to reduce county expenditures, combined with a new vision for welfare services. Beginning in 1921, Leo Fesler, the Marion County auditor, promoted a plan to consolidate several institutions in a single location, which he said would save the county $50,000 a year. The scheme entailed selling the site of the abandoned workhouse at Twenty-first Street and Northwestern Avenue, estimated to be worth $100,000, together with other property, worth $200,000, in order to construct a "farm colony" on land in the county. Fesler noted that the colored orphans were "herded together in cramped quarters." A new, shared facility, he argued, could "take better care of the 200 white orphans, more than eighty colored orphans," and hundreds of inmates of the insane hospital and poor farm. By adopting this approach, which had proved effective in Cleveland, Ohio, "the county would solve its institutional problem for all time to come." To explore this idea, the Marion County Court commissioned a grand jury of citizens, which issued a report at the end of 1921. Once again, conditions at the "Colored orphans' home" were highlighted. The children were receiving the best possible care, but the management was "coping with influences that are demoralizing and beyond their control." The Indianapolis Star quoted the grand jury's conclusions: "Something must be done without delay to care for our colored wards."

Delays continued until fall 1923, when the county purchased a seven-acre tract at the southeast corner of Keystone Avenue and Twenty-fifth Street. Remarkably, the idea of a centralized "farm colony" on this site was abandoned. After the Quakers handed over control of the asylum to the county, the council decided that the original building should be closed and a new one, costing $125,000, constructed to accommodate more than 200 "colored orphans" in a neighborhood conveniently supplied with gas, electricity, and streetcar lines, together with "colored churches and schools." This plan overcame one final barrier: an alternative supported by some on the council, which envisioned a new orphanage, costing only $75,000, on the site of the former workhouse. After 1922 nothing further was heard of this proposal, which encountered opposition from citizens who had sat on the grand jury inquiry. By contrast, the recently created Family Welfare Society, formed through the consolidation of five social service organizations, disapproved of a single large building, instead suggesting cottages housing twenty-five children each, which "would enable each child to have more personal attention."

What emerged was apparently a compromise. The new county orphanage, costing $75,000, was planned by architect William G. Penrose, who also designed the nearby Family Service Building. The Indianapolis Star quoted the grand jury's conclusions: "Something must be done without delay to care for our colored wards."
age was erected in a campus-like setting alongside a public school, Number 37. The capacity of the orphanage was doubled, and a print shop was added to provide vocational training. All these institutions were racially segregated, but they represented a significant local investment in the welfare of African American children. As a black clergyman later described them, the facilities had "modern equipment superior to two-thirds and possibly three-quarters of the homes we are now living in." The expanded institution was operated and funded by the county commissioners, and within a few years had its first black head, Emma Duvalle.

In a period when the Ku Klux Klan was a prevailing force in city politics, her administration was "bitterly assailed" by one councilman, who declared that the orphan's home was unsanitary and mismanaged. As the Indianapolis Recorder described the scene in February 1928, when asked, "Do you mean to say that Negroes cannot control Negroes?" Mr. Montgomery had replied, "They never have," and added that he was Scotch-Irish and the Orphans' Home needed an Irishman to run it.

More significant in the long run was the reconfiguration of public welfare that occurred as communities across the country reacted to the national economic emergency that culminated in the Great Depression. In the early 1930s, the city's Family Welfare Society arranged with the Indianapolis Orphan Asylum, which had served only the white population since its founding in 1851, to assume the cases of black children in need of foster homes. It was only at this point that black children received equal access to the purported benefits of family placement, ironically, in the depth of the Depression. Fewer homes were financially able to take in a foster child of any race. Children already in orphanages tended to stay there longer. Thus the Colored Orphans' Home did not close its doors until 1935, when the County Welfare Department successfully stepped up efforts to find other homes for the children. According to the account in the Recorder, the department assured black leaders that, although all current residents had been moved out, space would be kept open to "meet any needs for the care of colored orphans." With this exception, however, the three buildings on the site would be turned over to the National Youth Administration so that "education- al, vocational, and religious" programs targeting all the city's black children could be merged at one location.

In this way, the training of African American children became the particular responsibility of a federal government program. The emphasis shifted away from both institutional care and foster home placement toward instruction in landscaping, woodworking, and printing for boys and cooking, sewing, and homemaking for girls. The state director of Negro activities for the NYA stated the classes were "given with the idea of preparing youth for future employment and better citizenship, and that they may be self-supporting." These were the same goals embraced by the Progressive reformers three decades earlier, but now they were to be pursued in a completely different, and from the standpoint of municipal funding, less expensive manner. This final transformation of the Indianapolis Asylum was catalyzed by the New Deal, which brought undeniable benefits to African Americans in Indiana as well as nationally. On the other hand, the potential loss was summed up in the words of George C. Crocker, a local clergyman who was not reassured by the Welfare set- ups: "Saving more money seems to be the chief object and the great slogan.... The Orphans home, I repeat, is a wonderful place under the proper or correct discipline. In just a few moments time you can mobilize a group of youngsters suitable for most any grand occasion."

what it was built will never come to pass but what it was built will never come to pass...