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

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A panoramic photograph by Indianapolis photographer Charles Bretzman captures those who participated in the twenty-fifth annual outing for orphaned children, both black and white, at Indianapolis's Riverside Park, August 6, 1924. The event was sponsored by the Elks and included entertainment by the Indianapolis Newsboys Band.

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 pacesetter 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 9,000 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 at 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, largely in response to the influx of African American freedmen seeking "homes in our northern towns." Housed in a two-story brick structure on West Twenty-first Street near Senate Avenue, the asylum accommodated about one hundred children at any given time. Most of the children came from Indianapolis and the surrounding area, but approximately one-third came from outside the capital. County officials throughout the state sent young black children to the asylum and paid a per diem charge to cover their care. This practice was well-established by 1917, and the state agent declared that this single institution sheltered "most of the dependent colored children in the state."

The early history of the IAFFCC has been carefully told by Thomas Cowger, who noted that it cared for more than 2,000 infants and children from its founding in the wake of Emancipation until 1922, when management passed from the Quakers to the Marion County commissioners. The admission register of the asylum enables us to investigate, in great detail, conditions during the final two decades of its existence, which coincided with the second major movement of African American population, often called the Great Migration.

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



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Teenage girls model the clothes they made while living at the Indianapolis Asylum for Friendless Colored Children.

faced a difficult challenge in providing new homes for children whose families were in turmoil. There were two main reasons for this. First, most of the institution's funding was derived from legal commitment of children whose families were in temporary crisis. Second, even the low number of eligible youth outstripped the number of families that could or would accept them. Although about twenty-four children were placed in foster homes each year, among the 451 children admitted between 1904 and 1921, only 187 (41 percent) 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 unmarried, 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 two, 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 is 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 1918, she said she wanted

to distance herself from home without severing contact with her family. "Dont tell them Newalbany Folks nothing about me," Bertha wrote. "if they ask you about me tell them I aint gone no place. when I come Back to newalbany I am going to have all off them streaching There Eyes looking at me." After contacting the state office, asking for "some Clew as to where I might know something of my People," Bertha learned that her birth name was Hazel Mae Freeman. Although she did not return to Indiana, she wrote affectionately to her foster family, assuring her mother, "I love you Just the same."

Comparing overall conditions for black and white children during the years from 1910 to 1920 is difficult. Public records exist for the state's foster children in this period precisely because they were already under the supervision of the state board. We cannot know exactly what proportion of at-risk children remained in county poor asylums or in the care of the Board of Children's guardians. Because family placement resembled the traditional practice of apprenticing young paupers to local masters, the treatment of both black and white children as workers was a critical factor. Child-welfare advocates believed that dependent children might acquire the "advantages" of family life without being fully incorporated into the family. In the case of state wards, arrangements with the foster parents often straddled the line between permanent placement, with a view to possible adoption, and a contract of indenture as a domestic worker. Records suggest that some Indiana farmers offered room and board to a succession of young boys, training them in rural skills but returning them to the agency if they became indolent or rebellious.

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. On average, children came to the asylum at age four and waited 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 experts at the time were well aware that older children faced even greater challenges in adjusting to foster care.

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As the "orphan files" at the Indiana State Archives indicate, white children often carried high expectations as coworkers and even as "heirs" to property. Jonas Blakely was destined to be trained in the print shop until he decided to run away, his foster father recounted: "When he came for his trunk my Wife asked him if he was coming back and he said No it came near braking [*sic*] her heart, it is like a death in the family. We are now getting old and no Boy to make happy around the fire side. There is no use of forcing him to come back for he would do us no good. We have a small piece of land we intend for him to have, but its all off now." In the same letter, the husband asked about getting another boy. Yet within the week, Jonas came back "mutch [*sic*] older and wiser," and he stayed until this elderly couple died. After a second placement, he eventually left for Minnesota, but he remained in touch with the state board. Often teenage boys ran away when they thought themselves old enough to earn wages on their own. In several instances they wound up dissatisfied in their new homes. In the case of Chester Davis, one



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A 1927 view of Indianapolis Public School Number 37. The new county orphanage was built near the school in the 1920s.

of his foster parents took him back and even hired a lawyer to recover wages that a former employer had withheld. "He has turned out to be a first Class boy & I would like to see him treated right," the parent noted.

There are hints of less concern and greater instability for black foster children. Out of some 187 children who were placed from the Indianapolis Asylum, about 44 percent were above the age of ten when first sent out to a home. Among the thirty-eight boys in this group, well more than half (twenty-one) were returned to the asylum, some permanently, for a variety of causes, ranging from "untruthfulness" and "disobedience" to "too much talking." Two families decided to return their foster child because another boy, a runaway, had come back to them. Overall, about two-thirds of the teenage children placed from the asylum had more than one foster home, as compared with only one-third of state board children.

Interestingly, the return rate was somewhat lower among teenage girls—slightly under half—and this might be attributable to their perceived value as workers. The custom of employing adolescent females as house help accounts for more than half the fourteen black children placed directly by the state and several of those who came from the Indianapolis Asylum. For example, the story of Laura Buckner can be traced from age thirteen, when she arrived at the home of George Gordon, a white architect in Greenfield, Indiana. At the time, the state agent on the case observed, "They promised to send her to school and of course will have to." The following year 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 was "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 relationship was certainly complicated by racial prejudice. Mrs. Gordon believed that she was acting in the girl's best interest, but Laura insisted "she is as good as any body & has a right to do and go where she wants too [*sic*]." Eventually, Mrs. Gordon's tone became patronizing: "I felt sorry for and did to[o] much for her for her good." She recommended that Laura be sent to the Indiana Girls' School and requested another "colored girl." For her part, the new state agent agreed that Laura had not been disciplined effectively, saying, "she is just like hundreds of other negroes—impudent—and naturally so."

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.

We do not know what happened to Laura, but in general, children from the Indianapolis asylum seem to have quickly exhausted their options. If judged unsuitable for placement, they might face long-term institutionalization. After her father died, Blanche Bailey entered the asylum at age ten and was placed almost immediately with Mrs. Jinnie Rodes in Indianapolis. She was returned within a few weeks for "bad habits morals &c." Sent to a home in Bridgeport, Indiana, located a few miles outside the capital, she ran away and, as the asylum register noted, "returned to us." In 1918 she was committed to the county 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.

Unlike the relatives of white foster children who had been placed around the state, black relatives often lived in the city and were not cut off from the children. More than seventy (15 percent) of the youngsters admitted during these years were eventually reunited with their mothers, who were sometimes remarried or moving out of state, to Cleveland or other Ohio cities, Kansas City, Virginia, Kentucky, or Oklahoma. In a couple of examples, the care the child received upon returning home was inadequate; the mother "failed in her promises" or the grandmother was unable to cope. Of this group, one quarter were "illegitimate" children, who might be thought most at risk for neglect. Even in these cases, however, separation from the mother was not obviously preferable. One such child, Alletta Hays, was put in foster care in Madison, Indiana, as an infant. After two years, she was brought back because of "mistreatment" and placed with someone in Indianapolis.

For older children, foster care was even less ideal. Lucile Jones was fourteen when she first returned to live with her grandmother on West Fourteenth Street. A year later, she was sent to Orleans, Indiana, and then retrieved "for no very good or definite reason," except that she was dissatisfied. During two more placements, in Winamac and Greenfield, Lucile survived bouts of whooping cough and typhoid fever, only to be placed finally in Logansport. It is conceivable that she would have been better off remaining in the asylum, close to family.

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 counties. Established as a charitable enterprise of the Quaker meeting, the asylum increasingly came to play the roles of county orphan home, domestic crisis shelter, and detention center. In essence, it served as a clearinghouse for nearly all menacing situations for black youth, and it was hard-pressed to fulfill its stated mission of providing children with a new start in life. In particular, as judged by the standards of the wider foster care movement, Indiana's system failed to provide adequately and equally for black children. This outcome was not simply the result of deliberate discrimination, or of calculated indifference to the needs of the African American community. Even when those needs were acknowledged, however, generating the political will to seek improvement required several decades.

As early as 1907, 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



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Dependent infants faced greater dangers from illness than the older children in the institution, and so might end their lives there.

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 simply 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.



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Exterior view of the IAFFCC's building at 317 West Twenty-first Street in Indianapolis.

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, electrical, 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 orphan-



COURTESY JOYCELYN LANDRUM-BROWN

Emma Duvalle, administrator of the IAFFCC.

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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 orphans' 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 depths 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 1939, 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 "educational, vocational, and religious" programs targeting all the city's black children could be merged at one location.

An April 1925 group photograph of the young African American male orphans at the IAFFCC.



COURTESY JOYCELYN LANDRUM-BROWN

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 Department's promises. "Saving more money seems to be the chief object and the great slogan," he said. "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."

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The establishment of the new orphans' home in 1923 had been a belated response to the plight of "our colored wards," for which foster placement had proved an impractical solution. Yet, after only fifteen years in existence, an institution that in some respects was the pride of the Brightwood neighborhood was replaced by a citywide training school administered by a federal agency. Opinion in the community was divided. Crocker heard one "unthoughtful preacher say he did not believe in an Orphans Home," but he held a contrary view: "Now let us hope to use our Orphans Home for anything other than for what it was built will never come to pass and that other organizations and uncertain set-ups will find other quarters." Even then, the tide of child welfare thinking was against him. In Indianapolis, as across the country, large-scale orphanages have vanished, and other "organizations and set-ups" have taken their place, sometimes literally. The corner of Keystone Avenue and Twenty-fifth Street is now occupied by the Marion County Juvenile Detention Center.

John Ramsbottom graduated from Williams College and Yale University with degrees in British and European history. He is currently an instructor at Butler University, where he teaches in the Global and Historical Studies program. •

FOR FURTHER READING

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