



THE WASHINGTON CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

# A HOME *for* EVERY CHILD

Patricia Susan Hart

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# **A HOME FOR EVERY CHILD**

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*The Washington Children's Home Society  
in the Progressive Era*

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**PATRICIA SUSAN HART**

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Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest  
*in association with*  
University of Washington Press | Seattle and London

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Designed by Pamela Canell  
Typeset in Minion and ITC Benguiat  
Printed in the United States of America  
16 15 14 13 12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1

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Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest  
PO Box 353587  
Seattle, WA 98195, USA  
[www.cspn.washington.edu](http://www.cspn.washington.edu)

University of Washington Press  
PO Box 50096  
Seattle, WA 98145-5096, USA  
[www.washington.edu/uwpress](http://www.washington.edu/uwpress)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Hart, Patricia Susan.

A home for every child : the Washington Children's Home Society  
in the Progressive Era / Patricia Susan Hart.

p. cm. — (Emil and Kathleen Sick Lecture-book series  
in Western history and Biography)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-295-99064-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Washington Children's Home Society.
2. Adoption—Washington (State)—History.
3. Adoption—United States—History.

I. Title.

HV875.56.W2H37 2010

262.73409797—dc22

2010018411

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The paper used in this publication is acid-free and recycled from at least 30 percent post-consumer waste. It meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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*This book is dedicated to Ivar and Katrina*  
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## PREFACE

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**ADOPTION TOUCHES THE LIVES OF AT LEAST ONE IN FIVE PEOPLE** living in the United States today. Like most, my experience with adoption came secondhand, when friends and relatives chose it to create or complete their families. I have not been through the personal decision making or transition that relinquishing or adoptive parents face; neither was I adopted. For those of us who have not been through the arduous processes of relinquishment, foster care, or creating an adoptive family, adoption can appear to be fully integrated into the American social fabric. Law and social welfare policy, school curriculum and health care, community and family life have all been influenced in some way by adoption. Yet, to the degree that adoption is commonplace today, it has not always been so in the past.

I first became interested in the historical causes of child dependency and the origins of modern adoption in the United States while working as an editor of two books that helped parents raise their adopted children.<sup>1</sup> I was surprised by the differences and challenges those parents and children experienced along with their joy, and by how exposed adoptive families felt in a society where family is still largely defined by biological



relationships. That led me to the historical period at the end of the nineteenth century when adoption emerged as a way to save wholly dependent children. I thought that by understanding how adoption became a legitimate way to create families, I would learn more about how it influenced contemporary child welfare policy.

Adoption evolved as part of a broader reform movement to remove children from orphanages, almshouses, and poor farms and place them in family homes. Adoption was also intended to remedy the problems caused by poorly supervised placements of children, particularly those made from orphan trains sponsored by East Coast benevolent institutions. Protestant ministers and amateur child savers pioneered the practice of adoption, with considerable resistance from a broad spectrum of established charities, religious organizations, and newly minted professional social workers schooled in family preservation.

Fortunately, a research opportunity made it possible for me to begin an investigation of how adoption became integrated into child welfare reform. The Washington Children's Home Society (WCHS), founded in Seattle in 1896, was a young but exemplary representative of a growing network of private home-finding societies across the nation at the end of the nineteenth century. Its successor, the Children's Home Society of Washington (CHSW), had remarkably preserved an unbroken record of case histories, now covering more than one hundred years. Historian E. Wayne Carp of Pacific Lutheran University carefully evaluated the archive in the 1990s, and volunteers painstakingly microfilmed the individual files of thousands of children.

My primary research began when CHSW allowed me to sample these case histories and read other rare archived material related to child saving. I sampled every tenth case history of children under WCHS's care between the society's founding in 1896 and 1915—in all 289 histories sampled from almost 3,000 cases.

This book makes extensive use of these case histories in order to tell the story of child relinquishment and adoption from the perspectives of the participants. From these case histories we can see what led parents to relinquish children for adoption. We get a glimpse of what those children experienced while under the care of WCHS and in their placement homes. And, we see from the perspective of the receiving parents how they went about building families through legal adoption. At a time when adoption of non-relatives was new and uncharted territory, participants

shaped adoption discourse and practice with their insistence that it serve their needs, not just a larger moral or civic cause. The case numbers cited in this book have been coded to protect privacy. I have deleted the names of children when information comes from a case history, but I have not attempted to conceal the identity of individuals whose names were used in stories published in the *Washington Children's Home Finder* (WCHF) or in newspaper articles because their identities became part of public record at the time of publication.

In addition to the adoption case records, this study incorporates insight gained from an unusually full run of the WCHF from the CHSW archives. These archival sources together provide an unbroken record of child saving at a successful western home-placement society from its founding in 1896 forward. Using these sources as a starting point, I began a broader investigation into the growth of the national home-placement and adoption movement, as well as an inquiry into whether child dependency in the West differed from child dependency in the East. *A Home for Every Child* provides fresh insights into these areas as it situates the home-placement movement and adoption within a national context of evolving child welfare practice during the Progressive Era.

The Protestant ministers who founded the private home-placing agencies under the umbrella of the National Children's Home Society (NCHS) were imbued with the Social Gospel mission that called them to apply Christian values to solving problems of their day. They attacked every obstacle to their mission with evangelical zeal—taking on critics, arguing for stronger child protection legislation, and finding permanent homes for destitute, neglected, and abused children.

During the Progressive Era, adoption—as distinct from temporary free or paid foster care—gradually emerged as a method of child saving in its own right, largely due to NCHS's nationwide scope. Social attitudes toward legal adoption were beginning to take shape as well. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, western expansion and settlement, the second great wave of immigration, and progressive political reform all played a role in the formulation of attitudes toward adoption. Adoption gained social meaning as a response to general alarm that the influx of immigrants and “degenerates” threatened the state of the family and the state of the nation. Progressive Era child savers who championed adoption as a solution to the problems of wholly dependent children embraced a larger mission of saving the society from misfits and of molding citizens for the

nation. The adage for the era, “It is better to save a child than restrain a criminal,” positioned adoption as a solution to a perceived threat of unasimilated foreigners and a criminally inclined underclass.

Evidence in case histories, however, contradicts the charge that children were relinquished by foreigners, “degenerates,” or criminals. Instead, the causes for relinquishment can be located in the economic conditions existing in the boom-and-bust economy of the Pacific Northwest and the gendered nature of wage work. Poverty in the Northwest, like in the rest of the nation, was the primary factor contributing to child relinquishment.

Access to WCHS’s adoption files provided an opportunity to learn from lives transformed in varying degrees by discontinuity and reorganization. The American West was particularly imbued with an ideal of self-made success, a standard that was out of reach for many of the thousands who migrated to the Pacific Northwest looking for a new beginning.<sup>2</sup> Those who did not succeed are among the historically silent because the poor, the transient, and the unfortunate left few records of their own. Those who had transgressed social mores by conceiving illegitimate children or abandoning families did not write memoirs. Those who experienced the financial hardship, family violence, chronic illness, alcoholism, or death that burned holes through the fabric of familial relationships had energy for precious little but survival. Yet, their stories contribute to a true history of the West and provide a necessary corrective to the heroic and colorful portrayal of the western myth. Their experience adds another dimension to the picture of expansion and industrialization of the American West and the nation as a whole.

While adoption entered child welfare practice with social and cultural expectations molded around idealized notions of motherhood, childhood, and middle-class family life, the children and adoptive parents who experienced it gave it their own meaning, forcing case workers to take into consideration the needs and desires of individuals. At the heart of this study of adoption are the accounts of those immediately affected by it—birth parents, adopted children, and adoptive families. The participants in adoption dealt then, as they do now, with issues of difference, legitimacy, and identity within both their adoptive families and society. Although their stories were mediated by the case workers who recorded them, the records nevertheless provide a rich source of evidence that often disputes the assumptions and even motivations of child savers during the period. Ultimately, early adoption practitioners had to modify their prac-

tices and policies to respond to the realities of those directly involved as well as to an evolving national consensus about saving families, not just saving children. Access to the invaluable resources of CHSW makes possible this crucial understanding of the historical legacy of child dependency, child relinquishment, and adoption.

Some working definitions for terms used in child saving during the Progressive Era are provided here. Although terms were not used consistently then, I have tried to use them consistently throughout the book. The definitions are based on those provided by W. H. Slingerland in *Child-Placing in Families: A Manual for Students and Social Workers*, published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1919. “Child-placing” referred to placement of destitute and neglected children, temporarily or permanently, in families other than their own and did not refer to placement with near relatives. “Congregate care” referred to facilities that sheltered fifty or more children with little effort to individualize care. In contrast, the “cottage model” housed children in smaller “family” groups in order to provide individualized care. “Foster care” referred to free or paid home placement in families who were not near relatives, usually on a temporary basis, until a permanent arrangement could be made or the child returned to relatives. A variation of foster care is the “wage home” or “working home,” where older children worked for wages and were given an opportunity to attend school until they were ready to go out on their own. “Relinquishment” was the permanent legal transfer of parental rights and responsibility to the state or to an assigned society which then served as the custodian of the child until the child was grown. Relinquishment, which was done by court order, was required for children to be free for legal adoption. “Adoption” referred to the legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities to a family other than the biological parents. Adoption was carried out in probate courts. Adoption can refer to adoption by near relatives, but the term is used here to refer to adoption of strangers, not kin.

I owe tremendous thanks to CHSW for making time and space available to me for primary research in its archives. Particular thanks is due to Sharon Osborne, who has dedicated three decades to leading CHSW to its prominent and highly respected position in child welfare and advocacy today. My original research at CHSW was done under the generous and helpful oversight of Bev Parks. The final hurdles of publication could not have been managed without the help of Danny Howe, Dan Spence, and Randy Perin. I am also greatly indebted to Susan Armitage and LeRoy



Ashby, emeritus professors of history, who directed the original work at Washington State University and continue to inspire their many former students. Both deeply influenced the direction of the early research and the questions I hoped to answer with this book. The early research was made possible by a Pettyjohn Fellowship granted to me through the Washington State University Department of History. E. Wayne Carp broke historical ground for this work. Some preliminary findings from this study were included as a chapter in his edited collection, *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*.<sup>3</sup> Among those who helped immeasurably to improve the manuscript, I particularly wish to thank Barbara Melosh, an eloquent historian of adoption, whose suggestions through early revisions were generous, unerring, and deeply appreciated. The anonymous readers at the University of Washington Press helped bring clearer focus to many important points during the final revision of the manuscript.

Family members, friends, and colleagues have all lent their encouragement over the years while this book was in development and deserve many thanks. My brother Jack and my sister-in-law Laura generously housed me on lovely Queen Anne Hill in Seattle during the early stage of intensive archival research. No one, however, deserves more credit than my husband, Ivar Nelson, who found time to improve this book even as he directed innumerable other book projects as a university press director. Our daughter Katrina Nelson, who grew up while this book was being written, returned from Argentina just in time to bring her fresh and now adult eyes to the final draft of the manuscript. It would not be a book without them.

PATRICIA SUSAN HART

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## **A HOME FOR EVERY CHILD**

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# WASHINGTON CHILDREN'S HOME FINDER



SEATTLE, WASHINGTON  
February 1911  
Vol. 14 No. 9



A home is waiting for me, but there are other girls just like me  
waiting for homes

*In spite of the recent terrible disaster in the Black Diamond mine, in which fifteen men lost their lives and many were thrown out of employment . . . yet the public school of this place sent a substantial collection to the work of this Society to be used for the benefit of the children from there in our care. — “Black Diamond’s Grit,”*

Washington Children’s Home Finder, December 1910

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*Introduction*

**TAKING A CHANCE ON THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST**

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**IN 1910 ALONE, SEVENTEEN CHILDREN WERE RELINQUISHED FOR PERMANENT** care to the Washington Children’s Home Society from the Black Diamond and Roslyn coal mining districts. Four groups of children had been on community relief from homes described as “exceedingly unfortunate.” Three malnourished infants, an overworked “little sister mother,” and several youngsters “on their way to perdition” were among the lot. Fifteen of the children were placed in adoptive homes, so many that the families shared a circular letter about their children’s progress. Photographs published in the *Washington Children’s Home Finder* (WCHF) show robust, well-dressed children, notably changed from the condition they had arrived in.<sup>1</sup> While we celebrate their turn of fortune, as modern readers we must ask: Were these children relinquished just because they were exceedingly unlucky, or were they representatives of a larger national phenomenon?

In the early 1890s, Jacob Riis, the Danish-born *New York Tribune* reporter and photographer, seared into public awareness the plight of New York’s immigrant poor. In two illustrated books, *How the Other Half Lives*, a national bestseller, and its sequel, *Children of the Poor*, Riis

portrayed the desperate conditions caused by poverty, overcrowding, and overwork in tenement slums.<sup>2</sup> His images of newsboys and homeless “Street Arabs”—undernourished, uneducated, ragtag children—were taken in gritty Manhattan tenement neighborhoods and side streets where recently arrived poor Irish, Italian, and Eastern European Jewish immigrants lived and toiled in the sweated trades. Himself an immigrant, Riis became a tireless lecturer and crusader on behalf of urban reform and child welfare. In hundreds of articles and glass slide presentations Riis strove to arouse the political will of the powerful and of the ordinary citizen to join campaigns to clean up the slums, provide decent housing and schools, and otherwise remedy the life-threatening conditions breeding misery among the newly arrived.

Riis was the most prolific and well-published Progressive Era social welfare reformer to challenge America to live up to its promise to the nation’s newcomers and to warn the American public that the poor comprised a potential menace to the nation if not assimilated into society. An adage from the period, “Save a child or restrain a criminal,” epitomizes the fears and hopes placed on children in an expanding, industrializing nation during the Progressive Era, between the 1890s and World War I.

A different version of this story of endangered children was taking place in the American West, far from tenements, entrenched political machines, and long-established charity institutions of the eastern seaboard cities. Riis’ portrait of urban poverty affecting immigrant families slaving in urban tenements ten to a room requires revision in the Pacific Northwest. Children relinquished for adoption under western skies were mostly born in the United States and at least one of their parents was born in the United States. Poverty was the primary contributing factor in child relinquishment in the West, although contemporary reformers stridently proclaimed that poverty was not a legitimate reason for relinquishment.

What are the connections between economic conditions in the Pacific Northwest and child dependency? In the relatively unindustrialized, resource-rich rural areas and boom towns of the newly settled Northwest, sweatshops were rare. Male wage work that characterized the job market was erratic, however, and female employment, where it could be found, could not support a woman with dependent children. Economic forces driving industrialization and urbanization are blamed for the deplorable conditions endemic to the eastern seaboard cities where child dependency grew dramatically at the turn of the century. Meanwhile, different

economic forces in the Northwest produced similar results. In temporary logging and railroad camps, mill and mining towns, migrant labor camps, Indian reservations, canneries, and failed homesteads, human relationships suffered when economic hardship struck as severely as in the East.

Representatives of established charity institutions in the East dominated the discussion of what was best for dependent children during the late nineteenth century. But beginning in the 1880s a new movement was afoot, rising from the Midwest, where a growing number of private, Protestant home-placement societies affiliated under the National Children's Home Society started placing children for permanent adoption. By the 1890s, Children's Home Societies were stretched across the nation, emerging surrounded by thorny debates and competing claims about when it is best to take a child from parental custody and when it is best to preserve a family, debates that continue to this day. Tried and tested in dozens of statewide affiliated societies like WCHS, home-placement methods took hold, responding to the needs of families and the realities of the western experience.

Unlike the impoverished street children of New York, Boston, or Baltimore, dependent children relinquished into the care of WCHS were not mainly Catholic or Jewish immigrants from eastern or southern Europe. Rather they arrived from northern European countries, Canada, and the upper Midwest. Like their eastern urban counterparts, they were rarely orphans but were children of single mothers or of families in crisis who had recently relocated. Newcomers to Washington State at the turn of the century were a diverse lot whose reasons for coming ranged from fortune-seeking during the Klondike Gold Rush to more modest goals of prospering through the hard work of homesteading, logging, fishing, or small business. While they came from all directions, they often arrived by train after the completion of the transcontinental railroads. Many arrived from points east by one of three northern transcontinental routes that passed through the railroad hub at Spokane on the eastern edge of the Columbia River Plateau.

New arrivals hoped Washington would be a good place to get a fresh start, although survival, much less prosperity, depended on fluctuating economic conditions. If they traversed the state from east to west, some of these factors would have been apparent. Starting from Spokane they would travel through some of the most productive dry land wheat farming in

the world. On the vast rolling hills of the Palouse, rainfall and moderate climate produced outstanding yields of grain. These areas were already settled. The fertile conditions thinned out as travelers continued west into the Channeled Scablands, the barren desert beds scrubbed clean by the ancient Missoula flood and covered by dust and ash blown from eruptions of Cascade mountain volcanoes. Beyond the Scablands, the sage-covered basalt plateau was split by green river valleys cut by Columbia River tributaries. Here homesteaders with small farms struggled to compete with larger commercial farms that could better absorb high freight rates that drastically cut profit margins. At the turn of the century, large-scale irrigation that would eventually transform this central area into fields and fruit orchards still lay in the future. Because of arid conditions, many of the original homesteaders had already lost both farm and home and were joining the swelling ranks of tenants and agricultural wage workers, the largest occupational category in the state. Travelers might also see Indian families picking hops in fields recovering from a devastating statewide aphid infestation in the mid-1890s.<sup>3</sup>

In grass-covered river valleys, migrants could gaze upon immense flocks of sheep competing with cattle, wild horses, and deer for forage on the ever-more-crowded open range or wintering on lands leased from the Northern Pacific Railway Company. Sheep herding, like cattle ranching, offered few and lonely jobs for those searching for steady work.<sup>4</sup>

Moving down the west slope of the Cascades, travelers would see evidence of logging and lumber milling, the industries that dwarfed all others in the Puget Sound area. More than three hundred mills and far more temporary logging camps covered the lower elevations of the Cascade Mountains near Puget Sound, together employing almost ten thousand men. Loggers, many from Scandinavia, cut down old-growth fir, cedar, and spruce, then milled them into lumber, shingles, and sashes. By the time migration to the area started to boom, the best timber near water had already been harvested, and logging camps moved ever deeper into forests. Already in 1899 the Washington State Commissioner of Labor warned that the wasteful methods and relentless pace of logging operations would exterminate the finest area of standing timber in the nation. Although Washington was known as the world's largest supplier of shingles at the time, the demand for timber products was volatile. The industry had already suffered serious setbacks in the mid-1880s and again in

the mid-1890s. Logging and milling were by far the most dangerous outdoor jobs, and the turnover rate among workers was 600 percent per year in some camps.<sup>5</sup>

Newcomers might also see evidence of silver and gold mining and milling along streams on land taken from Indian tribes. Underground, Russians, Austrians, Italians, and a small number of African Americans mined the coal reserves in the state's second most profitable and dangerous industry. Coal and timber shipped to San Francisco had provided the economic foundation of Seattle, and coal continued to be in demand to fuel steamships until it was replaced by oil after World War I.<sup>6</sup>

Railroad workers for the several transcontinental lines and rail spurs, a low-paid transient group even during periods of high seasonal demand, camped wherever repairs and new tracks were needed. A few Japanese had replaced Chinese laborers run out of Washington by the Knights of Labor and other avidly anti-Asian labor interests in the mid-1880s. They worked in separate enclaves on the outskirts of the natural resource industries.<sup>7</sup>

Streams and rivers along the route west teamed with both natural fish populations and with seventeen million salmon fingerlings released from four state hatcheries in the late 1890s to supply the canneries on Puget Sound and the Columbia River. In the Far West, even Sockeye salmon followed cycles of boom and bust: 1897 was the largest run of salmon since the canneries were built, and 1898 one of the smallest runs ever recorded. At the subsistence end of the fishing industry were Indians and Chinese, who supplied clams and crabs direct to market and cleaned salmon in canneries before the invention of automated cleaners in 1903.<sup>8</sup>

On the wet western side of the Cascades, the traveler crossed low marshes and rolling wooded hills, past scattered stump and dairy farms, to arrive at the Seattle waterfront set among railroad tracks, piers, warehouses, large commercial enterprises, coal bunkers, and street and cable cars. In 1889 fire gutted fifty blocks of Seattle's commercial district, and the waterfront shingle mills moved to the nearby communities of Ballard, Lake Union, and Salmon Bay. In 1891 new arrivals found a downtown commercial district rebuilt in massive, multistoried brick buildings that had been constructed with astonishing speed and enthusiasm, with an egalitarian, positivist attitude that came to be known locally as Seattle Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Travelers arriving later, in 1897–98, were greeted by a booming city of sixty-five thousand that had shed much of its ramshackle frontier log-



ging town inconveniences. Having survived the depression of the 1890s with increased population and a diversified business economy, Seattle flourished in the Alaska gold rush frenzy of 1897–98.

During the Klondike Gold Rush, great numbers of speculators headed to Seattle lured by the phenomenally successful, high-profile national advertising campaign waged by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce to make the city the premier supplier to adventurers. These single men usually arrived without resources or job prospects and joined ten thousand other single men in the same jobless situation. Considered by permanent residents to be a vagrant, undesirable lot prone to drinking, whoring, and fighting along the Seattle waterfront, the men nevertheless supplied a convenient source of cheap, unskilled labor to the railroads in the summer months during the peak years of the Alaska gold rush.<sup>10</sup>

Seattle had emerged as the Pacific Northwest's preeminent port city with cable and streetcar service to growing suburban communities and ready to embark on an ambitious civic engineering plan to use hydraulics to level hills standing in the way of further city expansion. Seattle was becoming the dominant, proud, and progressive western port city that it promoted itself to be.<sup>11</sup>

Engorged by migration west, connected at last to the world by several transcontinental railroad lines, and buoyed by the discovery of gold in Alaska, Seattle suffered from a serious labor glut. Seattle grew from 80,671 in 1900 to 237,194 in 1910, an increase of almost 300 percent in ten years. In the eastern part of the state, Spokane's population also tripled during this decade to 104,402. New arrivals coming in great numbers from the Midwest, other parts of the Northwest, and Canada accounted for much of the migration to Washington State in these years. About 70 percent of the recently arrived were U.S.-born; the other 30 percent were immigrants, mostly from western and northern Europe. Seeking a better market for their labor, they arrived in the West as part of the vast national wave of migration between 1898 and 1914. Seattle was also a port of entry for the nation, and the Canadian-U.S. border was porous.<sup>12</sup>

Seattle's expanding and complex economy was built on broad resource-based occupations in logging, milling, coal mining, railroad-ing, agriculture, fishing, shipping, ship building, and manufacturing that relied almost exclusively on male wage workers. In 1900, 63.87 percent of the population of Seattle was male, the highest percentage in the nation of men in cities of at least 25,000 population. While newcomers often

brought resources to invest and many settled with families in farming, the professions, or trades, a great number were either skilled or unskilled single men. Few women worked in nonagricultural occupations during these years, and those who did worked in domestic service or laundries or as cooks. Single working women preferred employment in towns, where demand for domestic workers was high and wages somewhat better than the wages paid to women willing to do household work in rural areas.<sup>13</sup> Poverty was prevalent wherever marginalized racial ethnic groups were confined, such as on remote and dispersed Indian reservations and in Asian and African American areas of cities.

The nature of wage work caused Washington's labor force to be dispersed in relatively small mine, mill, or railroad towns or in lumber camps and agricultural crews across the state—timber camps in the Cascades; coal mines in Newcastle, Franklin, Roslyn, and Cle Elum; shingle mills in Everett, Issaquah, and Ballard; and a railroad town in North Yakima. Dislocation and layoffs accompanied wage work in railroading, the timber industries, and itinerant agriculture, when workers, and sometimes their families, moved from job to job.

Even when jobs were well paid—as in the skilled work in the natural resource and extractive industries—they provided some of the most dangerous wage work in the United States. Workers' deaths and permanent disabilities impoverished survivors and dependents. These industries were also notoriously susceptible to periodic recessions, busts, gluts, plagues, and just bad luck, from which workers had little or no protection. Many wage jobs were seasonal, and some took men far away from home. Any distinction between absences of men seeking work and men deserting families was often too minute to make a material difference in dependents' living conditions. "Gone to the mines . . . never been heard from since" is the entry on one child relinquishment form. It offers a classic statement of how unemployment and family desertion overlapped. It is not surprising, then, that general laborers were heavily represented in the population of nonsupporting fathers of children who were relinquished for adoption.

This chronic state of dislocation was related to the economic upheavals that characterized the commodification of the Pacific Northwest's natural and agricultural resources during this period. In 1896, the year the WCHS began its child-saving work in Seattle, the city was recovering from a severe nationwide depression with widespread unemployment

in the building trades. Seattle was also affected by the national depression of 1908–1909, when the value of construction dropped precipitously. The boom-and-bust economy caused tens of thousands of men, but also women and children, to relocate frequently. Failed homesteaders moved to cities and towns to seek wage work, becoming part of a more general nationwide move from farm to city that stimulated urban population growth along the Northwest Coast. The result was that Seattle's population continued to increase dramatically with single men and families seeking a start in the West.

Homelessness and desertion accompanied the western boom-and-bust economy. During the short-lived Alaska-Yukon gold rush, Seattle provided a convenient escape route for those who wished to elude unwanted family responsibilities. As historian Linda Gordon has pointed out, migration to the West made it easier to slip the traces of community controls that would otherwise have kept men and women in unhappy marriages.<sup>14</sup> Women abandoned in the West could not rely on distant family to look after a child during crises of illness, death, or unemployment.

For many new arrivals to Washington State between the late 1800s and World War I, the benefits of starting up or starting over outweighed the risks of misfortune; for them it was a land of fresh opportunity. Yet, most opportunity in the region came with risks that contributed to child relinquishment. Predominant among these risks was the nature of male wage work in resource based industries—including seasonal unemployment, dangerous working conditions, labor gluts, distant work sites, and industry booms and busts. Along with the risks associated with male wage work were the scarcity and low pay for jobs available to single women with dependent children, absent or distant extended kin, frequent relocations, farm failures, and the relative ease of abandoning family obligations. These regionally specific factors were driven by national social and economic trends: capitalistic expansion, commoditization of resources, the rise of corporate agriculture, expansion of manufacturing, dramatic influx of new populations, urbanization, and gendered labor conditions. In its causes and effects, child dependency in the Pacific Northwest reflected the stresses and strains affecting the nation.

If Jacob Riis had documented the plight of homeless children in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the century, what would he have found? As in the East, many of the parents placing children in temporary care in orphanages or relinquishing children permanently for adoption were

newcomers. While some were immigrants from northern Europe or Canada, most of the children's parents were members of a mobile population sweeping in from other areas of the West or from the Midwest. Nearly all of the children were born in the United States, and most had at least one U.S.-born parent. Their status as the "recently arrived" put them among the majority in Washington State, where 80 percent of the population were newcomers to the state or area.<sup>15</sup> Mostly white and native English speakers, these children could be found starving in a tent along a railroad line, shivering in a raft moored at a coastal logging camp, or destitute in a shack on a failing homestead.

The evidence from case histories in the Pacific Northwest helps us understand that child dependency and homelessness were endemic to the conditions that characterized economic expansion in the American West, while continuous with driving national trends characteristic of the Progressive Era.<sup>16</sup>

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*Chapter 1*

**SEEKING ALTERNATIVES  
TO INSTITUTIONAL CARE**

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**"THE GREATEST EVENT IN MODERN TIMES" IS HOW W. D. WOOD, PRESIDENT** of the Washington Children's Home Society, described "the discovery of the child" to an audience of Progressive Era reformers in 1906, ten years after the society's founding in Seattle. Wood was speaking particularly of the plight of the abandoned child, because "even mother-love looks with small sympathy upon the homeless chick of another brood."

Wood played upon the rhetorical themes that had shaped the practice of amateur Protestant child saving for decades. He placed "the child" within the "economy of God" as the "key to the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, the greatest factor, the greatest possibility, the greatest opportunity, in all of our human affairs." He echoed President Theodore Roosevelt by demanding a "square deal" for the homeless child. He valorized the child as educator, "Americanizer," and "key to the foreign family."<sup>1</sup>

Wood pointed out that despite a middle-class American cultural climate that beatified childhood, the sentimental appeal often fell upon deaf ears when the child in question was not a blood relative. Indeed, the adoption of homeless, neglected, or abused children by non-relatives stirred up powerful fears fueled by eugenicists, nativists, medical experts, and

even well-meaning reformers of the poor. Against this grain, a handful of Protestant ministers and their supporters, deeply committed to the deinstitutionalization of “normal” children, staunchly maintained that Christian faith and a family environment would prevail over heredity and adversity.<sup>2</sup> Advocates like Wood believed matching homeless children to childless Christian homes was the road to salvation for both child and adoptive parents that would “normalize” the “unnatural” condition of childlessness. Adoption was also a way to exercise the principles of the Protestant Social Gospel movement, particularly in its faith that within every child lay a perfect soul, not a bad seed.

The case for the adoption of wholly dependent children was brought to the Northwest by the Reverend Harrison D. Brown and his wife, Libbie Beach Brown, when they founded the WCHS in 1896. The couple was carrying forward the vision and mission of the Reverend Martin Van Buren Van Arsdale, founder of the National Children’s Home Society (NCHS).<sup>3</sup> H. D. Brown, a Methodist minister, had been inspired by Van Arsdale’s work in the Midwest. A recent widower with ties to the Pacific Northwest, he was directed to found a Children’s Home Society there. Knowing that his mission would be difficult because he had little actual experience with children and no wife to help, he appealed directly to God, who, he believed, answered his prayers for assistance by “preparing the helpmate in the person of Mrs. Libbie Beach Hoel,” a widow and superintendent of the Home for the Friendless in Lincoln, Nebraska.<sup>4</sup>

“Christian work should be practical work for the unfortunate, for those who need assistance—a helping hand,” Brown told his colleagues at a meeting of Methodist preachers. “The work of Christianity is to help the world.”<sup>5</sup> Among those to be helped were homeless and dependent children, who left to their own devices, he believed, were destined to become criminals. “A child appeals to our sympathy. You may refuse a beggar, despise the tramp, and prod the lazy, but who can refuse help to a homeless child?” asked Brown. He believed that the state had a moral responsibility to intervene in cases of neglect, abuse, and abandonment, but that the care of children in state institutions was corrupted by politics and could remain pure only when guided by religious, and thus “disinterested,” charities that did not rely on taxpayers’ money.

Brown and his fellow founders of societies affiliated with the NCHS understood permanent home placement and adoption as the most modern and scientific products of evolutionary progress in charity work.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike contracted, indentured, or temporary free or paid foster care, these home placements were intended to be permanent after a successful ninety-day trial. Even when contracts were made for children in their teens, who were rarely adopted, it was with the intention that families would provide good Christian homes until their maturity.<sup>7</sup>

Reformers such as Van Arsdale and Brown were critics of both orphanages and the practice of some child-saving institutions in the East that placed children in the rural Midwest without investigating families or following up after placement. The remedy was to investigate prospective homes and provide long-term supervision after placements until children reached maturity.<sup>8</sup> It “saves the children from the disastrous results of simply scattering them,” Brown insisted, referring specifically to orphan trains. “Car loads of childrens [*sic*] have been brought out from the East and simply scattered to any who would take them and thus they were left with no investigation of the home, and no supervision after placing.”<sup>9</sup> To Brown, the children’s home societies were the natural and obvious next step in the ladder of progressive child-saving methods.<sup>10</sup>

H. D. Brown later reflected that when the couple began their mission in the Pacific Northwest they were treated as “intruders” and “disturbers” because the idea of placing children in homes for permanent adoption was “entirely new” to the people of the Northwest. Institutions already established in child saving in the Northwest had no intention of changing their methods. Institutional resistance was not the only problem they encountered. Libbie Brown lamented that among Northwesterners “a decided prejudice against homeless and dependent children, especially those of illegitimate birth, led them to feel that such little ones should not be admitted to the circle of their families and firesides.”<sup>11</sup>

Like many of the NCH societies’ founders, the Browns first worked out of their home. During a short tenure as acting state superintendent of WCHS, when her husband took on ministerial responsibilities at a Seattle church to help support them and their work, Libbie Brown redoubled the effort to build a statewide constituency.<sup>12</sup> She was particularly effective in organizing support from city leaders for the cause and delivering passionate pleas for homeless children in churches open to them through her husband’s participation in the Puget Sound conference of the Methodist Church. She attracted influential friends, including one-time Seattle mayor W. D. Wood, who served as president of the society for many years.<sup>13</sup> She also organized local advisory boards throughout the state.