

Leland Champion

Amistad Mission

How have Orphanages Changed?

Karen Boles

Since the early 20th century, resources for orphans or abandoned children have drastically changed. While many movies portray orphanages as a common place for orphaned children to go, the system of modern orphanages in the US is very different. While there are still many children in need of permanent adoptive homes, today's domestic adoptions no longer involve traditional orphanages. Instead, U.S. orphanages have been replaced with an improved foster care system and private adoption agencies ("Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?"). The systems in place for orphans across the globe are also very different from country to country. Many less-developed countries still have orphanages to serve as temporary homes for children who have parents who can't provide them with adequate care.

Before the 1960s orphanages were often the best option available for children with nowhere else to go ("Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?"). Before the establishment of orphanages in the 19th century, children who had families who couldn't take care of them were often placed with relatives or neighbors, and these processes were informal and had no involvement of the court. During this time there was also an increase in immigrants coming to the US, leading to an increase in children who needed places to live. Many children lost their parents to disease, while others were given up by families who were living in poverty or struggling with drug or alcohol problems ("Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?"). As this became a growing problem, foster homes, orphanages, and other similar institutions were

created to meet the need for places for these children to live. Even though many movies and pop-culture references portray orphanages as places for abandoned children to live until a rich family comes and adopts them, that is sadly not the case. For example, in the movie *Annie*, she lives in an orphanage then gets adopted by this rich couple and then gets to live an amazing life. For some children, orphanages were often the best place for them to be if they had nowhere else to go. However, these orphanages sometimes lacked the necessary staff, structures, and resources to adequately care for all of the children who were in need. Because of this, many orphanages were overcrowded, and the children were living in poor conditions.

In the mid-1800s, a reformer by the name of Charles Brace founded the Children's Aid Society to address the issues of overcrowded orphanages. The Children's Aid Society was founded on the belief that children would do better if placed in families rather than living on the streets or in crowded orphanages in America. A program that existed in the United States was called "Orphan Train." This was a program where homeless children were placed on the trains. These children were then sent out west. These children would then be chosen by families who were pre-approved by local communities, making adopting directly from an orphanage in a rural setting easier ("Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?"). Through this system, orphans were put up for adoption on these train platforms. On these platforms, adoptive families would choose their desired orphan child from a lineup of other orphans. During the turn of the century, reformers were influenced by the Progressive Movement. During this time, they began to question the orphanage system and started to lay the foundation for a more modern and moral child welfare system. By 1930 the orphan trains had stopped running due to the decreased need for farm labor in the Midwest ("Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?"). Also, the reformed thought that the government should provide more help for struggling families.

Following World War II in the United States, public social services became more common, meaning traditional orphanages became less common and began to close. At this time, adoption policies and procedures began to emerge in the United States. Along with this child protection laws were also being formed. This led to the downfall of traditional orphanages in the United States. These traditional orphanages started to be replaced with individual and group foster homes. The reformers who pushed for this change argued that children would do better if placed in homes. In these homes, they would be able to receive personalized care and individual attention. By the 1950s, more children were living in foster homes than in orphanages in the United States. Then by the 1960s, foster care had become a government-funded program (“Foster Care Statistics & Resources”).

Since 1960, orphanages in the United States have disappeared completely. Instead of these orphanages, many different programs have taken their place. Some of these programs include modern boarding schools, residential treatment centers, and group homes. The most common form of support for children waiting for adoption or reunification with their families remains in foster care. Foster care agencies are now the modern form of “orphan adoption agencies.” They work to preserve families when it is possible, and when it is not possible, they work to find the best homes for the children. Since orphanages are no longer involved in the adoption process in the United States, there are three primary forms of domestic adoption. The three primary forms include: a child can be adopted from the foster care system, or as an infant in a private adoption, or as a relative or stepchild of the adoptive parents. Adopting from the foster care system is the closest that modern domestic adoptions come to adopting from an orphanage in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, foster care is temporarily provided to children who cannot live with their parents or

guardians. When a child is removed from his or her home due to abuse or neglect, the state agency has the responsibility to care for them and provide them with a place to live. When a child is placed into foster care, sometimes his or her parent's rights have been legally terminated. If this is the case, that child may be legally adopted. However, most of the children in foster care do not fit the definition of an "orphan." So not every child in foster care is legally adoptable. Many of the children in foster care are waiting to be reunited with their parents, whose parental rights have not been fully terminated. Only about 100,000 of the 400,000 children currently in the system are waiting to be adopted. They are waiting to be adopted either by their foster parents or by adoptive parents who have not been fostered before. The second type of adoption in the United States is domestic infant adoption. A non-profit program that does this is American Adoptions. American Adoptions is a fully licensed, not-for-profit national domestic adoption agency that performs domestic infant adoptions across the nation. In this type of adoption, hopeful adoptive parents are matched with an expectant mother during her pregnancy and then the baby is adopted at birth. Relative and stepparent adoptions are the most common form of domestic adoption today. In these arrangements, a step-parent or relative becomes the legal parent for his or her spouse's or relative's child.

Although orphanages have completely disappeared from the United States, many other lower-income countries still have orphanages as their main source of adoption. Worldwide, there are an estimated 18 million orphans who are currently living in orphanages or on the streets. Families who are adopting from countries like China and Haiti are commonly adopting children from these orphanages. Although it is important to keep in mind that not all these children in the orphanages are adoptable, Many of these children will not qualify as an orphan under the U.S Immigration Law. According to the Immigration and Nationality Act, the definition of an orphan

is a child who has experienced “the death or disappearance of, abandonment or desertion by, or separation or loss from, both parents” (“Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?”). If a child does not fit this specific definition of an orphan, this would then limit his or her ability to be adopted and immigrate to the United States. In many countries without a foster care system, orphanages serve as temporary homes for children whose parents are working towards reunification. For example, parents who are experiencing financial hardship may place their children in an orphanage until they can care for their children again. In an article written by Victoria Olarte, she talks about how many children are still in orphanages around the world. In a partnership with the Government of Rwanda, a national survey found that 3,323 children were living in 33 institutions (Olarte). With this survey, they also researched how and why these children were sent to orphanages. Through this information and research, the Government of Rwanda discovered that they needed to steer away from the typical orphanages and rather towards family and community-based care for all of the orphaned children (Olarte). A place that does this in another country is Amistad Mission in Cochabamba, Bolivia. At Villa Amistad their vision is to “Provide nurturing Christian family environments for vulnerable Bolivian children to grow to independent adulthood and to strengthen families in crisis to establish loving and stable homes” (“Villa Amistad”). This is where I did my service scholar project, and I had the opportunity to see these family-style homes firsthand. Since 1990, Villa Amistad has provided a loving community for children who have been abused, abandoned, or orphaned. As mentioned in the article, children should be put in an environment with a family model. At Amistad, they utilize the family model. They house 60-65 children, and the children live in one of the seven houses. Within these houses, they have a mama as the primary caregiver and a tia as additional support. At Amistad, the children receive more than just a home; they receive regular spiritual

formation and also attend school based on their individual needs. Through all this programming, once the children become young adults, they have the opportunity to pursue technical school or university. After they have done that, they can pursue gainful employment in their fields of study. These achievements resonate especially in Bolivia, where less than 10 percent of the population has a professional degree (“Villa Amistad”).

In the time since the 1960s, the systems for adoption outside of the United States have also experienced dramatic change. The systems in place for orphans across the globe are also very different from country to country. Many less-developed countries still have orphanages to serve as temporary homes for children who have parents who can’t provide them with adequate care. Orphanages are common in pop-culture adoption stories — but the truth about modern orphanages in the U.S. is very different. While there are still many children in need of permanent adoptive homes, today’s domestic adoptions no longer involve traditional orphanages. Instead, U.S. orphanages have been replaced with an improved foster care system and private adoption agencies like American Adoptions (“Orphanages in America - Do They Still Exist?”). Even though the orphanages that didn’t have enough resources and were too crowded have gone extinct, there is still much improvement that needs to be done to the system. Twenty percent of children who age out of the system experience immediate homelessness, demonstrating a significant failure to provide adequate support for their transition into adulthood (Todd). An article by the American First Policy Institute, says that reforms should include increased support for faith-based organizations and partners, expanded tax credits for foster families, better support for parents, and stronger data on children in care to improve placement processes (Todd). As mentioned previously, this is what the Amistad Mission’s goal is. Their vision is: “To provide nurturing Christian family environments for vulnerable Bolivian children to grow to independent

adulthood and to strengthen families in crisis to establish loving and stable homes” (“Villa Amistad”). Amistad is one example of a place trying to improve the systems for orphaned children, and they also are providing an example of how other countries can improve.

Works Cited

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