

## Origins of the Home Children Sent to Canada

Britain had a long history of child migration to its former colonies. Some children certainly arrived in Canada before Confederation in 1867, but it is the estimated 100,000 or more who came to our country between 1869 and 1948 whom Canadians call "home children".

Canada's home children were inevitably poor and primarily between a few months and 18 years of age when they arrived here from Great Britain. They came from every part of the country. They were not generally orphans, but, for various reasons mainly related to abject poverty, they had been institutionalized, perhaps in a workhouse, a residential school run by one or more workhouse unions, a residential farm, a reformatory, or a home run by one of various philanthropic societies. (See below for an explanation of each.)

A child would be in such circumstances usually because he or she was too poor to survive without public support - either because the parents could not support their child, or the local church and government authorities considered the child's moral upbringing was at risk, or one or both parents were dead or in some way incapacitated. In some cases, the children were taken off the streets - seen as trouble-making delinquents by the courts - and ordered to a workhouse or home. Often the choice was the workhouse, or emigration and the opportunity of a better life.

Both the Canadian and British governments supported this emigration program - it reduced the costs on the public purse in Britain and, for Canada, provided workers-in-training (usually aged 12 to 14 and older) or young children (usually aged 10 and under) for adoption by interested and suitable families. The requests by Canadians for children almost always far outnumbered the number of children available. At least at the beginning of the program, the Canadian government subsidized the cost of transporting children from Britain but, over the years, regulations on both sides of the Atlantic changed. Consequently, by 1925, only children who had completed their education in Britain and had reached the age of 14 years could be brought for settlement in Canada.

**Workhouse Unions:** The workhouse was an old institution set up by a local parish to care for the poor. After the British Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, many of the communities with workhouses found they could no longer afford the support costs, so they came together to build and administer a single large workhouse - or union - for the care of their indigent poor, supported by the group of communities involved. After 1872, each workhouse or workhouse union was obliged by law to provide an education for its child residents (until they reached 14 years). Children from this background were usually brought to Canada and settled by one of the philanthropic agencies. After 1880, it was the responsibility of the Canadian government to inspect annually all children from workhouses.

**Reformatories and industrial schools:** These were training institutions for children who had been in trouble with the authorities - reformatories for children who had been in gaol, industrial schools for children who had not been in gaol. These children usually received training in trades such as agriculture, woodworking, shoe repair, metal working, so that, on release, they would have some way of making a living. By today's standards, their transgressions were very minor. These children were generally aged 14 to 19 years, arriving in Canada in small groups of two to five, and were usually sent directly into farm work by

government agents, although some were settled and monitored by the philanthropic society that brought them to Canada.

**Philanthropic Homes:** The majority of home children were initially taken in by a registered philanthropic society (usually with a religious affiliation), or were brought to a home by a desperate relative or guardian who could no longer care for them. Some children were ordered into a home by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the magistrates' court who believed the children were in danger physically and morally. While in the home, the children were prepared for their emigration and the life they were likely to live. Their basic training was mostly social (often with the idea of developing self-respect) - how to look after themselves, manners, some idea of service and the importance of obedience, education and churchgoing, and perhaps, in some areas, the basics of farming and domestic service. Most homes were in urban areas however and did not have access to farms, so any agricultural training would have been minimal; that was left mainly to the farmer with whom a child was settled. Then, usually within a year, the children were brought to Canada by representatives of the British home to its distributing home in Canada and settled with the receiving families. After the First World War, the Canadian government assumed responsibility for inspecting non-pauper children brought over by the philanthropic agencies.