



Bound Children

What was a "bound girl" or "bound boy"? For centuries, children have been legally "bound" as servants. In the 1700s in America, it was very common for parents to send a child to live with neighbors or relatives who could provide a good education and teach the child a skill or trade. Often, poor parents did not have a choice about this. Their children could be removed from their homes by local authorities and "bound out" as servants to "more respectable" families. This meant that they had to work for their master for a certain number of years (usually until they were twenty-one) in exchange for food, shelter, and some sort of education. Bound children were essentially indentured servants.

Both adults and children could be indentured servants. Many people came to America as indentured servants from England, Germany, Ireland, and other European countries. Some Africans were originally brought to America as indentured servants before they were enslaved.

A person could become an indentured servant in several ways. Some adults agreed to be indentured servants. In England during the 1700s, many farmers and tradesmen were out of work and seeking a new life for themselves and their families. If they did not have enough money to pay for their passage to America, they could agree to work for someone who would pay for their trip. Usually an indentured servant would work for three to eight years to pay their debt, and when they had earned their freedom, they would also receive some money, clothes, and possibly tools of their trade, livestock, or land.

But many people were forced into indentured servitude. If someone was convicted of a crime, they might be sentenced to work as an indentured servant for a number of years. Some people, including children, were kidnapped and brought to America against their will. Other people were tricked into accepting a trip to America, but once they landed, they were not allowed off the ship unless they could pay for their passage. They would then be sold as indentured servants to anyone who paid for their passage. Sometimes parents would sell their children as indentured servants so that they themselves could go free. Other children became indentured servants when their parents died during the ocean voyage. The children became the responsibility of the ship's captain. Because there was no child welfare system at that time, and the captain could not provide for the children, they were sold as indentured servants.

The people who became indentured servants voluntarily were simply referred to as "servants." Those who had been sold into indentured servitude against their will were called "bound servants."

After America gained its independence, immigrants from other countries flocked to big cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, hoping for a better life. Many of them found only poverty and disease. By the mid-1800s, the streets of Northeastern cities were filled with poor children who were orphaned or whose parents could not take care of them. When groups like the New York Foundling Hospital and the Children's Aid Society offered to send these children to new homes in rural America, many desperate parents surrendered their sons and daughters in the hope that they would have a better life.

The children were placed on trains (called "Orphan Trains") and sent to their new homes. When the trains reached their destinations, people came to choose from the children on the train. Many children were adopted into loving homes, but others were abused by their foster parents or used as cheap labor on farms. Teenaged boys often ran away. Sometimes children were shuttled from foster home to foster home, ending up in different towns or even different states. Siblings were often separated, and some never found each other again. Nearly all of the children lost contact with their biological parents.

As they grew up, many of the Orphan Train children had mixed feelings about their experience. They were often sad or angry about being taken away from their parents, brothers, and sisters, or about the way they were treated by their foster families. Many Orphan Train riders recalled that the other people in the towns where they were placed were unfriendly or suspicious of them. But many realized that they had been given a chance at a better life. A woman named Alice Ayler said, "I would have never stood a chance if they had left me in that environment. I would never have gotten to do anything I was capable of."

The last Orphan Train left New York for Sulphur Springs, Texas, on May 31, 1929. In seventy-five years, between 100,000 and 250,000 children had been relocated across America.

Sources:

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