

National Children's Home

Our Work in Canada

1873 – 1934

By

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THE CANADIAN CONNECTION

The Children's Home in Hamilton, Ontario

It was 15th May, 1873. Aboard the ocean-going steamer 'Polynesian' Francis Horner, co-founder of the Children's Home in Church Street, London some four years before, looked around him at some of his forty-nine charges that were going with him to Canada to start a new life in and around Hamilton in Ontario.

Setting out from, Liverpool, the ship carried two thousand emigrants from almost every European country, all thrown together on this exciting, nerve racking experience.

Among the seething mass of humanity was Harry, from the Edgworth Branch of the Children's Home. Harry, who had given so much trouble in the past, but was now full of laughter, interested in every aspect of his new surroundings.

Another wild, rough lad was Jack, also from the Branch in Lancashire. He too had been transformed there, and was now ready for a life of tree felling and ploughing in Canada.

Then there was Bill, a mild-mannered boy from the Church Street days. His business ambitions were to be fulfilled when he was placed in a large commercial house in a Canadian city, eventually becoming a manager. Fifteen girls were included in Horner's party, among them Molly, who became a trained missionary nurse in the Far East. With her was her close friend Marian, the daughter of a drunken London crossing sweeper. She later married one of the boys who went over in that first contingent - a boy who had been one of the original lads found in the City by Dr Stephenson, whose inspiration the Home had been, a mere four years earlier.

Much of the liner's cargo space had been turned into living quarters, and the absence of dead weight made for a great deal of discomfort as the ship rode sometimes heavy seas, with the bows dipping into the waves, causing flooding on the forward decks.

One day, in calmer weather, 350 miles were travelled in twenty-four hours; on one day, another ship of the same line was overtaken at a speed of seven knots, and after this, they thought of themselves as '*greyhounds of the Atlantic.*'

Horner and the children tried to attend a Sunday service on board, but this proved a singularly unsuccessful event, much disruption resulting from the rolling motion of the ship.

Over thirty mountainous icebergs were passed as they approached their destination, something that concerned the crew not a little. To the passengers, who had time to stand and admire them however, they were the highlight of the journey. Everyone agreed "*that it was worth coming across the Atlantic to see much a glorious sight.*" With the sun shining on them, some looked like castles, and one like the ruins of a great amphitheatre.

The heads and tails of whales were visible, plunging and diving amongst the ice, water from them spouting high above the waves. Porpoises too, chased around the ship as if engaged in some fantastic game.

By this time, most of the children were enjoying themselves, having recovered from sea-sickness that had particularly affected their morale during the early part of the voyage. This had led to a feeling of boredom, but as time went on, the boatswain frequently gave the boys something to do, whenever the sails had to be set or furled, and many of them learnt to haul a rope as if they had been at sea all their lives.

On 23rd May, the coast of Newfoundland was sighted, and as the signal station was passed, the letters P.L.N.S., the consonants in the name of their ship, were run up with flags. Thus a message was also passed to Quebec by telegraph that all were safe and well so far. From Quebec, a telegram was sent to London telling of this good progress.

The party left the boat with mixed feelings. The officers had done everything possible to make them comfortable, and the chief steward, Mr Melville, had supplied plenty of suitable food for any who were feeling too ill for the normal fare.

Quebec was reached at 2 o'clock on the Sunday, where Francis Horner and the children were met by the Wesleyan Minister at Port Levy, Rev J A Allan and a Mr Haigh, an agent representing the province of Ontario.

Confusion reigned for some time, as all the passengers from the boat tried to retrieve their luggage, but wisely, the contingent from the Children's Home were kept on board and the Chief Steward supplied tea.

At about 11:00 p.m. the children were marched up to the emigrant sheds where Mr Haigh provided free tea and biscuits, in the comfort of a separate room. Then, with all the traps stowed in one of the luggage wagons, they boarded their car attached to the emigrant train. Horner described it as '*a first class car of second rate quality*' but there was room for all of them, and also the bread, meat and milk which Mr Allan had supplied. To take up Horner's account again then began a most wearisome journey over the most horrible railroad in existence; from that time until Tuesday night, after midnight, when we reached Toronto, we were in that wretched train, and I earnestly trust that our next party may be saved the experience by our car being attached to a quick train.

However, a good dinner was provided at the expense of the Ontario Government, and tea and coffee were obtained at the stations where the train stopped.

The public appear to have taken an interest in the party, though perhaps the novelty aspect helped in this respect. The milk became churned during the journey, and the train was halted to enable Horner and two of the boys to get fresh milk from a farm. The train also stopped to let the children wash at wayside pumps and streams.

Fortunately the train stayed on the rails, which on the Grand Trunk line, was said to be a matter for congratulation.

Very tired and weary, they reached Toronto to be met by Mr Hunter, a Director of our work in Canada, and, having missed the last train to Hamilton, bedded down wrapped in rugs on the bare boards of the emigrant sheds.

In the Morning, after a breakfast again provided at the expense of the Government, the children washed and dressed in their best clothes for the journey to Hamilton. This time, the Great Western Railway gave them a very good, first class car.

More delays occurred when they reached Hamilton, a question having arisen about the title to the property, but after an hour or so, this was resolved, and the children marched off to their new Home, the luggage being sent on by wagon.

On the way, they called in at the Female College, where Dr Rice stocked them up with oranges. Then, finally they arrived in Main Street East, and obtained their first sight of home. The children could hardly believe it, and with much cheering, they charged up the drive to the house. This drive was curved and several hundred yards long, bordered with grass and trees, with plenty of arable land on either side. A large lawn stretched out in front of the house, with attractive flowerbeds to the side. As the house was approached, an orchard could be seen on the left, with fruit and vegetable gardens in plenty. At the rear, and suitable for the residence of a gardener, was a substantial brick cottage. Besides all this, were wooden out-houses and stables, which Horner saw as capable of adaptation to accommodate hundreds of children during the summer.

The house itself was two storeys high, with a large veranda and balcony running the whole width. The hall door in the centre led in to reveal three large rooms on either side. There was also another large room on the ground floor, and a kitchen, wash-house and scullery. Below were ample cellars, and upstairs, they found three large, airy rooms and two smaller ones, and after the long journey, no-one really minded the bare boards, as a little furniture and provisions were soon organised.

Thursday was no less hectic, a number of visitors arriving at the house to see them. The Hamilton newspapers were well represented, and applicants for the children began pouring in; indeed Francis Horner estimated that he could have disposed of half of them to interested parties before they even reached Hamilton.

Francis Horner promptly organised a committee to deal with all the applications. This comprised of himself, the local treasurer, Mr Sanford, and another Hamilton supporter Mr Roach.

On the Sunday morning, they all walked to the Centenary Church, and were given seats to the communion rail. That afternoon, Mr Sanford went to the Home with some friends and gave an address about the Indians. Horner secured, without pressure, the signatures of all to the teetotal pledge.

Monday saw the beginning of the anxious time of distribution. There were a large number of applications, but it was immediately realised that the farm boys could command the best places and that the farm needed to be developed.

Rather surprisingly the boys with other trades to offer were the most difficult to place. It was easy to place them in the town but not to find a safe comfortable home. So boys with trades were better placed in England.

The work was receiving very good reports, and the reputation acquired put the Home's name at the forefront with officials from the Canadian government; One of whom told Francis Horner that those children were the finest to go out to Canada, and that he considered the work very superior in character. Care was certainly exercised in the work of distribution. By August, only nine of the original forty nine children remained, most having been taken on by employers, not only living in the fairly near proximity of Hamilton, but having been personally known to the Committee. None were placed in homes other than those of regular Church-going families.

Twenty six boys had gone into farming situations, many of these having come from the farm in England. In addition to board and lodging, some received as much as six dollars (twenty-five shillings) a month, with the prospect of double that amount in a year. Two boys went to learn carpentry, two more into the Blacksmiths and Wheelwrights trades. Two were placed in a wholesale warehouse in Hamilton, and the other two went to the Methodist Book Room in Toronto to learn the Printing trade, and were under the special charge of Rev. S Rose.

Of the fifteen girls found places during the first three months, six girls became servants in houses where it was said they would receive good care and training - and three dollars a month for the first year! Five girls were adopted into Christian families and the other four went into farming.

Horner reported a strong prejudice throughout the Dominion against the import of children from the streets of England, but the Home's policy of training the children first brought widespread approval to the extent that a promise was made by Mr Pope, Minister for Agriculture (and Immigration) in Ottawa of increased aid for the next party.

Administratively, a Savings Bank Account was opened in Hamilton for the wage-earners, into which savings were remitted quarterly by the employers to be held until the money could most profitably be used. Also quarterly, reports were to be submitted to the Committee in Hamilton on the health and conduct of the children and these would be forwarded to England. The above mentioned Ministry had also given a free railway pass for the whole of Canada to the Home's agent. The Home reserved the right to remove any children who were considered to be unsuitably placed.

As might be expected, there were a few children who did not succeed as well as had been hoped. A few eventually returned to England. One boy was said to be careless and indifferent, always complaining of overwork. Today, perhaps such a complaint might have been considered justified.

One unfortunate girl was sent back to England in disgrace. She had been dishonest, and it was felt she was injuring the good name of the Home. She is reported to have died in September 1875 having been regarded as something of a failure.

However, all was not so depressing, and one of the boys went on to keep an hotel in British Columbia, had a son who went to University, and after his death in 1930, was found to have left \$1000 to the Home.

A letter from Mr Riley, the Secretary for the work in Canada, written in September 1873 indicated that the children could hardly wait for a visit from Dr Stephenson, although he reported on the excellent homes in which the boys and girls found themselves.

One boy who worked on a farm near the Indian reservations, in the middle of wild, picturesque country had made himself a great favourite in the neighbourhood, riding everywhere he could on horseback and generally looking after the needs of the horses for the grateful farmer.

Two girls living in Dorchester were vying with each other in the matter of claiming the best home and here too a visit from Dr Stephenson was eagerly anticipated. One of the girls was overjoyed to see Mr Riley and took him round to see her calf, pigs, fowl and other livestock, saying she was 'very, very happy' in her new home with her new mother and father.

At this point of the story, it might be appropriate to consider more of the attitude, thoughts and feelings of one or two of those children who were among the first to take part in what must have seemed a daunting venture.

The first letter is reproduced in full from the 'Quarterly Budget' May 1876 - a real cry from the heart.

Dear Dr Stephenson.

I am so very much disappointed at not hearing from you. I can hardly write again. You don't know how I feel when week after week passes and no letter comes for me. But I have been having my likeness taken, and I thought if I sent you one that would perhaps set you to write. But I know you are so busy, it is hard to find time. You will be very pleased to hear that I have joined Class, and am trying to love God and do right.

I am going to stay here until the Spring; I like it better than the farm I was at. I get to Church much oftener.

Your loving child.

Another letter, written about the same time, begins on a much more formal note:

Dear Sir,

I think the time has arrived once more for me to send a few items of intelligence.

This correspondent goes on to tell of a move to a more convenient house and then goes on:

"G. had something over twenty dollars in Christmas boxes though delivering a newspaper through the city. That gave us a most desirable lift: it bought a new set of china, a new tray, large dish to put our goose in - though we had smaller, it was too small for the eleven pounder which T's master gave him for his Christmas box... Had tea at Mr G's house in the evening...very well received. Before tea was ready we had some riddles, chatting of different kinds, and, of course, not forgetting the olden times. We are not far behind old London, as far as illuminated clocks go... Methodism is spreading marvellously in this city (Toronto) of late and indeed, over the whole Dominion."

This second letter is a mixture of personal news, and comments on national trends, world-wide weather, and anything else the writer can think of which seems important.

Thirdly, to finish this section, a few extracts from a letter from someone signed 'your true friend.'

"It is with pleasure that I take my pen in hand to address these few lines to you.

I am now living with a farmer. I am learning to be quite a little cook. I bake bread, pies, cakes, milk cows and make butter. When you come to Canada you must come and see me and taste some of my bread and butter and other...send the butler away and let me reign in his stead..."

Overall, the picture that emerges is one of success, and the 'Children's Advocate' of May 1874 reveals that 6,000 dollars had already been subscribed in Canada, and it was hoped to raise the remaining 4,000 dollars by the end of that year.

A four point plan was drawn up in 1874, to develop the work from that which had begun the previous year:

1. A party of 39 boys were sent on 'The Samaritan' in April.
2. Mr and Mrs Riley were to become resident, taking charge of the Home, keeping about six boys there to maintain the grounds and accommodation.
3. Existing barns and out-buildings were to be altered and improved to provide accommodation for 50 or 60 boys.
4. The Principal would visit Hamilton, taking with him a large party of girls and younger boys, who would be actually trained in Canada.

The effects of a commercial depression prevented any children going to Canada in 1876, but the situation there had improved by the following Spring, when a further party set off.

At this time, there was still apprehension felt in England about the whole policy of emigration for children, this being at a time when such trained labour was considered very valuable at home. Time and time again, it was stressed by the officers of the Children's Home that theirs was a sound scheme whereby every case was considered on its merits, with constant supervision being maintained throughout.

Canada was considered ideal on several counts:

- It was the thoroughly loyal British Dominion with a great future
- It was a new, prosperous (generally) country, opened out with roads and railways
- A Christian country with many churches
- The people were known for their sobriety and industry
- Very few public houses existed
- Agricultural employment was easily obtained and well paid
- A 'caste' system was unknown
- The Home's children were accepted as members of the family into which they were placed.

Mr Alfred Mager visited, partly to consider the establishment of our Home there as a Training Centre as opposed to a mere Distribution Home. He saw many of the children, and just before leaving, the Queen's birthday was observed by a national holiday throughout the Dominion, and many of the children from as far away as fifty or sixty miles came to a gathering at Hamilton on that day. He reported a general gratitude for all that had been, and was being done for those who attended.

The winter of 1875-76 was apparently a hard one, but Mr Riley kept up his visitation programme which was both arduous and expensive, but he knew, of vital importance to the children.

In the 1880's the restrictions imposed on passes between Quebec and Ontario led to an even greater demand for farm-workers and domestic servants. However, the Home resisted pressure from farmers and others to set up a steady supply of labour, and great care continued to be exercised in the placement of boys and girls.

About 1882, it appears that Dr Barnardo was also trying to set up work in Canada, and in her biography 'Barnardo' (1979), Gillian Wagner says that the Children's Home lent their property in Hamilton to Barnardo's for a short while until they acquired their own.

The work appears to have become well established over the first few years and subsequent reports pinpoint the successes that individual children achieved. Many of the Home's officials visited whenever possible, including Dr Stephenson himself. He comes across as very much the father figure to these children scattered far away the other side of the Atlantic. Although most of them appear to have settled not too many miles from Hamilton, a few found their way to the North-Western territory.

Stephenson himself went over to Canada each year from 1874 to 1877 taking with him a party of children on most visits. The first time, on the way to Hamilton by train, friendly farmers and their wives, business and Methodist supporters pleaded with him at every stop to leave a boy or girl with them. It is reported that as Dr Stephenson left these children to start his return journey, many were in tears, fearful of this new country, with its strange vehicles, and accents of the people.

That year three-quarters of the party were girls, and many of these had never been away from their native cockney London. However they all remained part of the family, and were well looked after in their new surroundings.

Mr Sanford, the Treasurer became a Senator which helped the cause to an even greater extent, having this representation in high places.

Mr Riley left for family reasons, and was succeeded by Rev. and Mrs Evans. Everyone was very shocked to learn that Mrs Evans had been injured in a serious railway accident at St. George's in 1889.

The tradition of celebrating the Queen's birthday, always a public holiday in Canada, by having a reunion, flourished for many years, and invariably the young people that travelled to Hamilton for this event would enquire about Dr Stephenson and get all the latest news of events in England.

During the 1890's the work began to suffer a number of setbacks. The whole of North America was industrially depressed. This automatically resulted in disenchantment with the concept of employing immigrant labour and prejudice and bad feeling were rife. Any slight misdemeanours by the Home's children led to harsh punishments if these became public concern. Several other organisations were by then increasing their involvement in schemes of emigration to Canada, particularly Barnardos, Fagan, Shaw and Kirlew and the demand for children from the Children's Home of Dr Stephenson declined rapidly. However, the work still continued as well as any others, perhaps by reason of the original goodwill that had been engendered.

Mr Frank Hills was appointed Governor in 1894 in succession to Mr Samford Evans and his sister, who had taken over the work temporarily on the death of their mother some twelve months after her railway accident.

Whenever possible, children sent to Canada (a comparatively small proportion of the total cared for by the Home) were given an average of three years training before emigration. Mr Hills reported that the Children's Home was considered to hold first place amongst the various institutions which had sent children to the Dominion. This came out of a Government Report. Despite this, by the turn of the century, the situation was so bad that consideration was given to moving the emigration destination elsewhere.

Sister Ella Curnock, a lady who gave much splendid service to the Children's Home, returned to England in 1901 after a few years as Sister to the Canadian Branch.

By 1902 the picture was looking much brighter, with prosperity having returned to Canada, and a record number of applications was received.

The Senior Treasurer, Mr J R Barlow visited Hamilton in October 1901 and noted particularly that the Savings Bank Account enabled Mr Hills to keep in touch with the young people well after the time they had left the Home's care.

Barlow travelled forty miles out on one day to see some of the boys in the country around Hamilton, which was noted for fruit cultivation. The farmers were prosperous and gave good homes to the children.

Not everyone went into farming: some preferred the town life, and one became a street car conductor in Hamilton. One young man went out as a joiner. In less than three years he was working with a leading firm of architects having submitted plans to them for a house he was building.

The constant danger from submarine action led to the decision to suspend emigration during the 1914 -1918 war and afterwards there were many who hoped to go to Canada as before. Costs had risen tremendously and an appeal was made to the public to support the Emigration Fund.

The Principal of the Home, Mr W Hodson-Smith, went to Canada in September 1918 as a representative of the British Methodist Conference in the Quadrennial Conference of the Canadian Churches. As the war was still in progress they had an escorting convoy, and life-jackets were worn at all times. While at the Conference he stayed at the home of the Governor of the Hamilton Branch, Mr Frank Hills.

Every year, the annual report contained an appeal to the generosity of the public to help with the costs of the emigration work - £10 was the figure per child quoted.

The Governorship passed to Mr Ben Johnson in 1921, after many years of service by Mr Hills and Harry T Gooding took the reins in 1930.

The early thirties are perhaps best remembered for periods of great depression, and in the Home's news magazine, Mr Gooding was exhorting all concerned to '*count their blessings*' in the face of periods of wage – cuts and financial difficulties.

Some four thousand children had passed through the Canadian Branch by that time, and on one occasion the Governor had a visit from a boy who had been there months, closely followed by another visitor, this time someone who had been in Canada fifty-seven years.

In 1934, the sad news came that sixty-one years faithful service at 1078 Main Street East, Hamilton, had come to an end.

Writing in 'Our News', the Principal of the National Children's Home, Rev. John Litten, reported that, as for the last five or six years, the restrictions placed on emigration to Canada had prevented children being sent there from England, and that the surroundings of the Branch were no longer suitable as a useful centre, the General Committee had closed the work there and disposed of the property at Hamilton.

This was indeed the end of an era.



*text transcribed and reset by John K Hughes - Heritage Manager 19th Feb 2010