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Progressive Era Activism for Black Orphanage

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Progressive Era Activism for Black Orphanage

A group of American citizens that are historically overlooked and underserved are impoverished and homeless children. According to the United States Census Bureau as of 2017, when this group is divided by race, the number of African-American children that live in poverty is higher than others.¹ This kind of data has only been available since 1959. Previously, the federal government did not have any involvement in assisting with any services to impoverished children came in the form of community activism. The most prominent institutions to provide care to homeless children were in the form of orphanages.

Throughout the Progressive Era, Bexar County had one orphanage to care for African-American children. It was established in 1897 as “The Colored Orphanage” until shortly after its founder's death and it became known as the “Ella Austin Colored Orphans’ Home”.² This facility was a privately funded organization that took in homeless African-American children as well as invalid elderly citizens.³ As was often the case with public services at the time, orphanages were segregated due to the Jim Crow laws that dominated the social norms until the ratification of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Due to a lack of government funding because of systemic racism, it was up to local businesses, trade groups and individuals to support the occupants of this orphanage who were in their most desperate time of need.

The sudden change in the social norm after the Emancipation Proclamation and subsequent passing of the 13th amendment to the Constitution created discourse throughout the South for decades to come. This change gave rise to the implementation of Jim Crow laws; laws intended to circumvent the rights of newly freed slaves and use local governments as the tool for

¹ US Census Bureau, *Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families- 1959 to 2018*. census.gov, April 6, 2020, accessed April 10, 2020.

² Ancestry.com, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995*, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011, accessed March 18, 2020.

³ “Reached Ripe Old Age,” *The Daily Express*, May 10, 1909.

African-American's oppression. Kenneth Mason, the author of "African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867- 1937", describes a turbulent time for the African-Americans in a southern urban area during the Progressive Era.⁴ This is marked by an increase in the African-American population of San Antonio beginning by segregating the community into the East Side areas of the expanding city. From 1900 to 1920 the total population of African Americans rose from 53,321 to 161,379. This increase was mostly seen to move into houses in the 6th ward of the city with a steady quarter of the overall population moving here. This dramatic spike to the demographics in an urban setting creates an increase to impoverished children and invalid elderly people over time. With the inability to create a larger influence in local government because of the dual tactic of gerrymandering a population of citizens that were suffering through disenfranchisement, this need to care for the most desperate fell to orphanages that would take in this underserved portion of the African-American community.

Having opened their Westside home to serve children in need, by 1897 Ella and Edward Austin's home became overcrowded with orphans. They also placed the elderly in the orphanage when no other family members could be found to take care of them.⁵ In partnership with the Progressive Women's Club, the Austins purchased a larger two-story property that they opened as an official orphanage on the east side of Bexar county.⁶ The Progressive Women's Club was a Black philanthropic organization that orchestrated activism with black women to care for the orphanage. According to Kenneth Mason, "One of the great achievements of the Progressive Women's Club was the campaign to construct a new building for the Ella Austin Orphanage".⁷

⁴ Kenneth Mason, "African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867- 1937," 23-35.

⁵ "Humanitarians Would Stop Cock Fighting," *The Daily Express*, December 3, 1909.

⁶ Carmina Danini, "Grace of Giving: E. Side center a real godsend for young, old," *San Antonio Express- News*, November 30, 1997; "Thankful for Ella Austin Center," *San Antonio Light*, November 23, 1978.

⁷ Kenneth Mason, "African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867- 1937," 182.

It was known as the “The Colored Orphanage” until the death of Ella Austin whom it was renamed after in 1902. It was located on 1802 Burnet Street and held a steady number of children and elderly African-Americans throughout the Progressive Era. In the year 1900, it held thirteen children and one elderly African American woman.⁸ By 1910, the orphanage’s population increased dramatically to twenty-one children and two elderly blind people.⁹ Finally in 1920 the orphanage’s population decreased to housing only ten children and two elderly people.¹⁰ This fluctuation of individuals illustrates the amount of underrepresented citizens that needed help during the Progressive Era.

There were many ways to end up in an orphanage. The traditional method was to be dropped-off by a family member. This was showcased in a 1912 affidavit of Mary Smith transferring her parental rights of Lucine Smith over to the Ella Austin Orphan’s Home.¹¹ The reason that Mary Smith relinquished her parental rights to the orphanage was that she had no paternal support. The hardship of finding a job to support herself and her child was overwhelming because of the difficulty placed on African-Americans at the time due to Jim Crow laws. This can further be shown through various articles about children being abandoned with strangers.¹² Children did get placed in the orphanage by the courts as shown in an article published by the *San Antonio Daily Light*.¹³ Lillie Patty was turned over by the courts to the orphanage after being beaten by two women. The Humane Society of San Antonio also had a

⁸ 1900 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, San Antonio Precinct No. 14, p. 21, dwelling 411, family 474, Bertie Baker; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed May 2, 2020.

⁹ 1910 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, San Antonio Precinct. No. 6, p. 8b, dwelling 166, family 170, Delia Fry; digital image accessed May 7, 2020.

¹⁰ 1920 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, San Antonio Precinct. No. 6, p. 2b, dwelling 43, family 43, Sophia Townsend; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed May 6, 2020.

¹¹ Mary Smith, “Transfer of Parental Authority: Deed of Adoption”, affidavit, Bexar County Archives, April 19, 1912, San Antonio, Texas.

¹² “City News,” *The Daily Express*, December 13, 1900; “Whose Baby Are You,” *San Antonio Daily Light*, October 1, 1903.

¹³ “Beat up a Little Girl,” *San Antonio Daily Light*, October 12, 1903.

role in sending children to the orphanage. In a number of articles in both the *Daily Express* and the *San Antonio Express*, reports are made that detail the number of calls taken by agents of the Humane Society who could be called out to deal with an array of social situations; including investigations and calls to lecture unruly children as well as placing children in orphanages. While this organization did not have any direct support from the city of San Antonio, the “Agent’s Report” of the “Directors Hear Reports” in the *San Antonio Express* dated May 7, 1911 states that they are supported by the courts to exercise their authority of removing children from homes to place them in orphanages.¹⁴

Conditions the orphanage endured during that time were highlighted through various events in the early Progressive Era. In early 1904, an article in *The Daily Express* informed readers that an elderly person from the orphanage went missing and was not found until late into the evening.¹⁵ In this article the paper illustrated the logistical problem inherent in caring for both children and the elderly. Subsequently in 1906 and 1907, the orphanage suffered the deaths of two 3-month-old children due to exhaustion and diarrhea.¹⁶ This showed the ongoing strain the orphanage felt as the population of the orphanage grew. In contrast, the orphanage was able to celebrate the passing of a 100 year old resident in 1909.¹⁷ Outlining just one story that highlighted the hope that an orphanage can bring to those who could not care for themselves.

Once children and elderly were placed in the orphanage, it was up to those who were responsible for the facility to clothe, feed and shelter the new residents. One of the most charitable organizations to help with necessities was the San Antonio branch of the Needlework Guild of America. Since its creation in 1906, the organization made regular donations of

¹⁴ “Directors Hear Reports,” *San Antonio Express*, May 7, 1911.

¹⁵ “City News,” *The Daily Express*, January 29, 1904.

¹⁶ “Burial Permits,” *San Antonio Daily Light*, May 24, 1906; “Burial Permits,” *The Daily Express*, July 2, 1907.

¹⁷ “Reached Ripe Old Age,” *The Daily Express*, May 10, 1909.

garments to various hospitals and orphanages across the city.¹⁸ Acts of service like these were a relief on any financial hardships the orphanages would face due to lack of proper funding.

Another source of support that orphanages would receive was through donations of food. After a dinner and service at the St. John's Episcopal Church, "There was such an abundance remaining after all had eaten that the Colored Orphanage was telephoned to come to the parish house this morning and take charge of it."¹⁹ Another notable assistance came from Falfurrias Farmers, who gave over "thirteen hundred fine, ripe, twenty pound watermelons" to orphans across the city.²⁰ While these were only one-time donations, the demonstration of the community looking after those in need was a highlight of how the orphanage was able to keep the spirits of the residents up. This was also shown through a donation at a time that has become synonymous with a time for giving: Thanksgiving. An article was written in *The Daily Express* as a "thank you" to all those individuals that donated money to the Ella Austin Colored Orphans' Home so that the residents could have a good turkey dinner.²¹ These various acts of charity might have been helpful, but they did not solve the overall problem of making sure that the residents of these orphanages were fed decent meals on a day to day basis.

One of the most important charitable acts the orphanage could receive were cash donations. A way for these organizations to get the attention of the community was to hold fundraising events. On June 19, 1906 the Colored Orphans Home submitted a petition to use Market Hall on June 29th to have "musical entertainment for the benefit of the Orphan Asylum."²² Benefits like these drew in the public's attention and had a good chance of receiving

¹⁸ "Report of the Needle Work Guild," *The Daily Express*, December 22, 1906; "Distribution of Garments," *The Daily Express*, January 18, 1908; "Of Interest to Club Women," *The Daily Express*, January 9, 1910.

¹⁹ "Children Are Made Happy," *San Antonio Express*, December 28, 1912.

²⁰ "Orphans Feast On Watermelons," *San Antonio Express*, July 6, 1913.

²¹ "Colored Orphans Remembered," *The Daily Express*, November 28, 1908.

²² "Petition for a Watering Place," *The Daily Express*, June 19, 1906.

economic stability through this sort of fundraiser. Donations to orphanages were especially needed when the staff running them could not make ends meet. This was demonstrated through an article in the *San Antonio Express* stating that, “A mortgage of \$745.20, hanging over the colored orphans’ home for the last twelve or fourteen years, has been lifted. The Progressive Woman’s Club raised \$402.75 of this amount, receiving many donations from San Antonians”.²³ The desperate situation that orphanages were put under due to a lack of funding was a direct result of the lack of attention these organizations received from the government. This left the community and the orphanage staff to ensure that the underrepresented citizens could live decent lives.

As a whole, the state of Texas only had a handful of orphanages for African-American children. This led to a number of fundraisers being held in Bexar County that not only raised money for the facilities but also supported them throughout the state which included the Colored Baptist Orphans’ Home near Austin. The *San Antonio Daily Express* on November 10, 1908, included a short article about a rally being held, “for the purpose of promoting efforts being made over the State at large to finance the Colored Baptist Orphans’ Home near Austin.”²⁴ This gathering was held by San Antonio’s “Colored Baptist Church” and was attended by Reverend A. Moore, the general financial agent for the St. John Colored Orphanage Home. The article stated Moore was present to collect donations to continue funding the work that needed to be done for the orphanage. This call to action was sparked due to a fire that destroyed the original orphanage. In the article, it further explained that building the new home would cost fifty thousand dollars. An issue that was further exacerbated due to already being in debt about twelve thousand dollars for work previously completed. The need to collect funds throughout the state

²³ “Lift Mortgage On Home,” *San Antonio Express*, September 18, 1911.

²⁴ “Solicit Funds for Colored Orphanage,” *The Daily Express*, November 10, 1908.

to fund the building of a new orphanage showed that there was very little funding coming from the government. In turn, they called on the people to support a program for those most in need.

The story was followed up a year later in the *Daily Express* when the President of the Board of Trustees of the St. John Industrial Institute and Orphanage, L. L. Campbell gave an address at the cornerstone of the “Second Baptist Church (Colored)” whose foundation was laid the previous day. The article mentioned that, “Mr. Campbell is in the city to arrange for securing a loan to be used in completing the buildings of his institution, which are poorly equipped for the many applications that come in asking for admitt[an]ce from different parts of the State.”²⁵ Even after a year of fundraising, the orphanage still needed forty thousand dollars to finish the building. The article further added that the facilities would be “self-supporting when finished and in running order”. There seemed to be a need to reassure the readers that they would not have to worry about donating more money once the building was built, because it sat on three hundred acres of land. This meant that they could farm their own food. They also finished the article with an emotional appeal that the building would be capable of supporting “300 orphans and poor children, seeking an education”. The use of both a logical and emotional appeal to “solve the problem” seemed like a desperate cry for support that was not being met to give basic needs to children in need. The article showed the competition between local and state-wide efforts in a single city to give impoverished children the help, which could be solved if there were a unified front to provide for those in need.

The children and elderly of the African-American community were extremely underserved in Bexar County during the Progressive Era. They received no assistance from local government and heavily relied on the support of the community in the form of donations. This

²⁵ “Cornerstone of Church Laid,” *The Daily Express*, August 27, 1909.

did not change when social services became available with the creation of the Aid to Dependent Children founded with the establishment of the Social Security Act of 1935. Even through this program, African-Americans were discriminated from receiving benefits that would have helped the impoverished citizens that lived in orphanages. Due to a condition of the act that specifically stated that States had the freedom to implement the services that would exclude African-Americans, orphanages like Ella Austin's were unable to benefit from this aid.²⁶ Despite the sporadic donations the community provided throughout the Progressive Era, it would take more support from the government to care for these underserved citizens. In addition, through the means of silencing a portion of the population of Bexar County through disenfranchisement, the increase to specific voting districts guaranteed the dilution of the African-American population from having any chance of influencing the vote for politicians that could make changes to care for their constituency. This was the framework of Bexar County that led the African-American community and especially Black orphanages through difficult financial hardships in the Progressive Era.

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