

# Lyman P. Alden

## Setting an Institutional Example

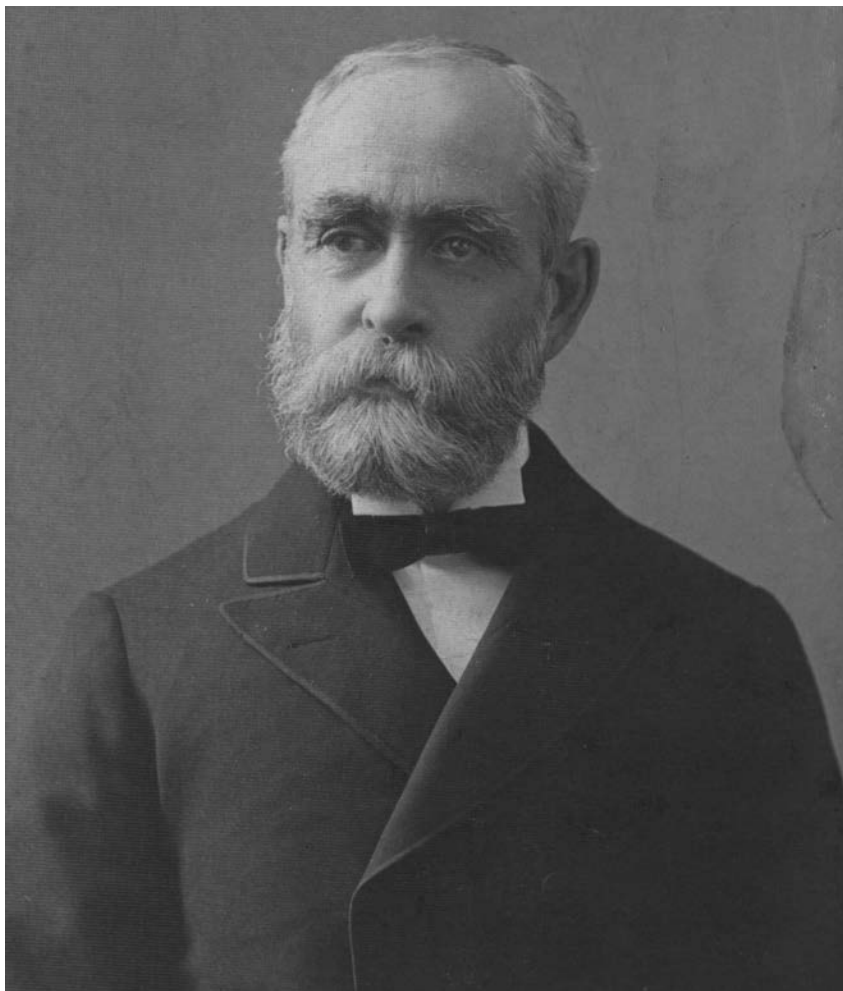
MEGAN BIRK

Lyman Alden believed that an institution could provide appropriate, balanced care for children considered dependent by their communities. During his thirty-year career as a superintendent of children's institutions, Alden practiced some of the most modern techniques for institutional care found in the United States. In 1883, after honing his management style and ideas about institutional life in Michigan, he moved his family to Terre Haute, Indiana, where he helped launch the Rose Orphan Home (ROH). The ROH refuted many contemporary stereotypes of institutional care; it operated with small, cottage-style buildings instead of a large, congregate-style dormitory; it tried to provide its residents with a family-like atmosphere; its superintendent possessed years of institutional management experience; and, perhaps most importantly, children left the institution only after having received good care and education.

Although Indiana became known for other efforts to modernize welfare services using Progressive ideas, the state's children's institutions garnered little attention. However, the ROH stood out from other state facilities because of the recognition it received for quality care. Additionally, while working in Terre Haute, Alden gained national prominence for objecting to the growing popularity of placing out, a system in which

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Lyman P. Alden led Terre Haute's Rose Orphan Home from 1884 until his death in 1904. Alden's innovative style of institutional management led him to national prominence in the child welfare movement.

Courtesy, Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library

children left institutional care and lived with willing families. In its place, Alden used the resources in Terre Haute to shape an institution that he believed closely approached the ideal mode of dependent child welfare. Yet while his management style made the ROH one of the nation's best

children's institutions, it did not ultimately influence other Indiana children's homes to practice better institutional management or duplicate his methods for placing out dependent children.

Alden began working in child welfare at an opportune time. During the 1870s, governments and charities initiated a multi-decade campaign to remove children from the negative influences of the streets as well as adult institutions. Children institutionalized in the latter half of the nineteenth century did not need to be parentless orphans; most were children who could no longer be properly cared for by family members. The Michigan State Public School (MSPS), opened in 1874 in Coldwater, was one of the best-known institutions built after the Civil War. The MSPS, a state school, was the first of its kind to receive legislative funding to provide care for dependent children from across the state. Only Massachusetts had operated a similar institution before this time, and other state-run institutions focused on children with specific disabilities or those whose fathers were veterans.<sup>1</sup>

With few states investing in child welfare, privately founded institutions—already more common—increased in number. Religious groups opened facilities to serve the needs of their own children, and well-meaning citizens' groups sought out donations to help children from their communities. As the only state institution providing exclusively for dependent children, the MSPS rapidly filled with orphans, children living in county poor farms and jails, and those recommended by township trustees of the poor. Lyman Alden became the superintendent of the State School in 1875, the year after it opened its doors.<sup>2</sup>

In 1977, scholars Patricia Rooke and R. S. Patterson remarked that "Coldwater administrators were not exceptional." However, Alden broke the tradition of politically appointed, corporal punishment-minded superintendents who had dominated early public institutions.<sup>3</sup> Alden, whose

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<sup>1</sup>The Massachusetts institution, built in the 1850s, also provided care for juvenile offenders and paid families to care for certain classes of children. Michigan's institution did neither of these.

<sup>2</sup>The establishment of the school was amended by the state legislature in 1873 and again in 1875, so that children between four and sixteen years of age and in sound physical conditions could be admitted. Section 13 of the law specifies: "It is declared to be the object of this act to provide for such children until homes can be procured for them in families." *Third Annual Report of the Board of Control of the State Public School for Dependent Children, for the year ending Sept. 30, 1876* (Lansing, Mich., 1876), 68.

<sup>3</sup>R. S. Patterson and Patricia Rooke, "The Delicate Duty of Child Saving: Coldwater, Michigan, 1871-1896," *Michigan History* 61 (Fall 1977), 217. This article is the only published study of the MSPS. The archival records for that institution are now closed, pending funding from the state of Michigan.

management qualifications included work as a principal and a short tenure at LaGrange Collegiate School in Ontario, Indiana, was among the few people in the United States with experience managing a children's institution.<sup>4</sup> As superintendent of a large, state-run facility, Alden performed multiple jobs and oversaw hundreds of children annually; the legislature charged the MSPS staff to accept children, improve them through education, and find them new homes as quickly as possible.

At the State School, Alden developed revolutionary methods for managing residents. The MSPS differed from other large institutions in its approach to punishments, personal attention, individual responsibility, and education. While other homes, for example, often corporally punished children, Alden rewarded children for good behavior and resorted to physical punishment as a last resort. In such cases, MSPS employees had to provide him with a report of any punishment. The bottom of each punishment report included the following phrase: "Cases requiring unusually severe punishment must be referred to the Superintendent. Abuse of a child will not be tolerated."<sup>5</sup> The MSPS under Alden emphasized education and rigorous training in morals and manners. Believing that when "a love for higher and better things had been awakened in their souls, they shall pass into good homes all over the land, where the same good influences shall continue," Alden injected a middle-class sensibility about childhood almost totally missing from institutional care.<sup>6</sup> While the MSPS received no funding for toys, he boasted that children in the home managed to "extract considerable fun out of pretty scanty" supplies. Children also received individual study by employees so that their needs and aspirations could be determined before placement.

Running one of the nation's best-known children's institutions at a time when institutional care dominated child welfare discourse placed Alden on a national stage. As the number of such institutions increased during the 1870s and beyond, the opinions and experiences of those already in the field provided needed expertise. Alden used his profile to promote the methods he believed worked best for dependent children, and to justify the State School's expense to doubters in Michigan and nationwide.<sup>7</sup> The legislature, which funded the MSPS, expected to spend

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<sup>4</sup>"Lyman Alden, November 16, 1891," Marietta College Alumni File, Biographical Items, Alumni, Marietta College, Marietta College Special Collections, Marietta, Ohio.

<sup>5</sup>Patterson and Rooke, "The Delicate Duty of Child Saving," 213.

<sup>6</sup>*Second Annual Report of the Board of Control of the State Public School for Dependent Children* (Lansing, Mich., 1875), 22-23.

<sup>7</sup>Patterson and Rooke, "The Delicate Duty of Child Saving," 215.

as little as possible for long-term care—children, in other words, needed to be placed out. In a period characterized by privately funded institutions and an emphasis on placing out, the State School became an alternative model. Wisconsin and Minnesota, for example, both eventually built institutions very similar to the MSPS.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1870s, the State School housed around two hundred children; another group of approximately two hundred children lived in placement homes where people kept them for free but often expected them to work. Alden quickly developed reasons to keep children inside the MSPS for longer than the state legislature intended: “The fact is that there is only now and then a family possessing the tact and patience to get along with many of these children, till after they have gone through with a long course of training and discipline, and some of their *physical* as well as moral ailments have been corrected.”<sup>9</sup> If the MSPS needed to keep children until Alden deemed them ready for placement, they would be a more expensive burden to the state. To justify the potential increase in costs Alden reminded taxpayers that “the cost of [Michigan’s] jails, prisons and poor houses would build and fully equip twelve institutions, each with ample capacity for 300 neglected children.” In Alden’s mind, the time and resources needed to improve children would yield more successful placements and ultimately lessen the state’s burden.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his tenure, Alden constantly balanced state demands for financial accountability with the growing number of children in his institution and the need for constant vigilance in their care. Alden’s early ideas about the role of the MSPS are clear from his reports: “The institution may be regarded, in one sense, as a great intelligence office,” he wrote, “where the little neglected and dependent waifs are gathered...to be washed, clothed, fed, warmed, and, for a time, placed under wholesome discipline and the best mental and moral training.”<sup>11</sup> Yet despite his seeming successes, a problem emerged at the State School which eventually made Alden question the methods prescribed by the state.

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<sup>8</sup>Matthew Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage: A Prehistory of the American Welfare System* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 37-60. The Michigan plan placed it among the first institutions in the nation to construct cottages for dependent children. Each cottage housed approximately twenty-five children and had a matron. Alden, his wife, and their three children all lived on site and would continue to do so for his entire career as an institutional manager.

<sup>9</sup>Emphasis in original. *Third Annual Report of the Board of Control of the State Public School for Dependent Children to the Legislature of the State* (Lansing, Mich., 1876), 49.

<sup>10</sup>Lyman Alden, “Dependent and Neglected Children: Should the State Assume Their Care?” (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1878), 8.

<sup>11</sup>Michigan Department of Public Instruction, *Thirty Ninth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction with accompanying documents for the year 1875* (Lansing, Mich., 1876), 246.

One of the State School's foundational principles involved placement—the practice of finding new, free homes to take in dependent children and provide them the skills needed for a self-sufficient life. A hybrid of apprenticeships and indentures, the placement system helped alleviate institutional crowding and was thought to help children from becoming “institutionalized.” Concerns about “institutionalization” had grown alongside the number of institutions themselves; reformers worried that children living on charity and spending each day under the regimented management of an institution would not function as good citizens. “Children massed in large institutions are singularly backward and stupid,” wrote the New York reformer Sophie Minton, although she continued by cautioning that those interested in placing children only caused further delay by their efforts to improve the child's station in society. In Minton's mind, for children placed in homes, “rough conditions are nothing, if the influence is good, morally and physically.”<sup>12</sup> Placements could potentially provide work skills, family companionship, moral guidance, and religious training. As institutional populations grew, placement became an increasingly popular option for dependent children. As the superintendent of the State School, Alden bore the responsibility of finding free placement homes for the children and ensuring that those homes provided proper care.

For his own part, Alden doubted that people could be expected to treat a child correctly: “Many people are not qualified to care for and train their own, to say nothing of other children.”<sup>13</sup> Alden had watched the well-known example of large-scale child placement in eastern cities, where groups such as the Children's Aid Society of New York (CASNY) infamously placed children on “orphan trains” and sent them to rural areas of the Midwest, where farmers in need of help provided a ready supply of homes. Ironically, before handling their own dependent children issues, residents of Michigan and Indiana accepted thousands of orphan-train children.<sup>14</sup> Because CASNY lacked any comprehensive method for supervising the children they sent west, criticisms of their practices became commonplace. Alden critiqued various placement models, including those that modeled

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<sup>12</sup>Sophie Minton, “Family Life Versus Institution Life,” in Twentieth National Conference of Charities and Corrections (hereafter referred to as NCCC), *Report of the Committee on the History of Child-Saving Work* (1893; Montclair, N.J., 1971), 46-47.

<sup>13</sup>Michigan State Public School, *Biennial Report of the Board of Control of the Michigan State Public School* (Lansing, Mich., 1882), 43-44.

<sup>14</sup>Charles Loring Brace, “The Children's Aid Society of New York, Its History, Plan, and Results,” in NCCC, *Report of the Committee on the History of Child-Saving Work*, 30.

themselves after CASNY. When the Children's Industrial School and Home of Cleveland claimed that 95 percent of its placed-out children were "doing well," for example, he dismissed that statistic as "a remarkable showing... better than farmers can claim for their own children."<sup>15</sup>

Alden sought to improve upon the placement errors of other groups by providing continued supervision for children once they left the institution. Writing letters to the children would be a lifelong effort. By 1877 he wrote hundreds of letters to children annually, not just checking up on them but maintaining correspondence with those who wanted his attention. Some of the correspondence helped Alden learn about the conditions of more than one child at a time: "I go to school....I like my home very well....Sarah L. [another former state school resident living nearby] has not went to school one day this term." Each indenture contract required that guardians provide at least four months of school, so this information, while seemingly incidental, told Alden how Sarah L. and the letter's author fared in their new homes. The girl went on to express her attachments to those she had left behind at the State School: "I would like to hear from the children and from my cottage manager and my teacher and all the skolars that was in my school when I left."<sup>16</sup> The homelike atmosphere built under Alden's management left a positive impression on some of the children once they left.

To help Alden in the time-consuming endeavor of supervising placed-out children, Michigan authorized local volunteers to find free homes, screen them, and occasionally check in on children. While this spirit of volunteerism in some ways mirrors the "Friendly Visiting" practiced by groups such as Indianapolis's Charity Organization Society, it failed to satisfy Alden's desire to secure the safety and education of the State School children. He lobbied the state of Michigan to authorize a paid visiting position, which would allow a full-time staff member to assist him and the volunteers in this important task. In recommending a paid visitor, the board of control, which directly oversaw the State School, noted that while the volunteers in the counties did a decent job, the overall work of managing the institution and the placements was too much for one person; as wards of the state, all children placed outside the MSPS deserved the continuing guardianship of the state.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Lyman P. Alden, "Non-Sectarian Endowed Child-Saving Institutions," in *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>16</sup>*Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Control of the State Public School for Dependent Children* (Lansing, Mich., 1878), 53.

<sup>17</sup>In this regard they cited the example of Massachusetts, who employed a State Visiting Agent working with a Board of Charities. *Ibid.*, 13.

Alden had good reason to remind the state of its responsibility to the children. In an 1877 report, he complained that he received no information for more than one hundred of the children placed out in homes:

It remains a serious fact that there are quite a number of children scattered around the State for whom nothing has been heard for quite a long time....I have no regular means for ascertaining how they are succeeding and how they are treated....Great mistakes will, doubtless, be occasionally made in placing children, and it is a matter of great importance that they should be regularly and systematically looked after.<sup>18</sup>

Although his funding requests for building expansions and improvements often met with success, the request for a visitors' position did not. Michigan would not hire a full-time visitor until after Alden's departure. Alden became increasingly frustrated and concerned about the emphasis on placements and the lack of resources to secure good homes for children.<sup>19</sup> In Michigan, with pressure to place children quickly but with no assistance from a visitor or from trustworthy volunteers, Alden either decided to leave or, perhaps, was encouraged to do so—he resigned from the State School in 1883.

Few Americans of the time possessed as much institutional management experience as Lyman Alden. Dr. James Walk of Pennsylvania complimented Alden—without extending those compliments to the State School—when he remarked, “I heartily believe in that school but I believe it to be an exception. I believe that school is splendidly managed; but it does not follow that...under another management, [it] would prove equally successful.”<sup>20</sup> Because few state institutions existed during the 1870s, and many of those managing them were political appointees, a lack of experienced workers meant that as more than four hundred new institutions opened in the years between 1880 and 1900, they often hired well-intentioned but inexperienced people to supervise the children.<sup>21</sup>

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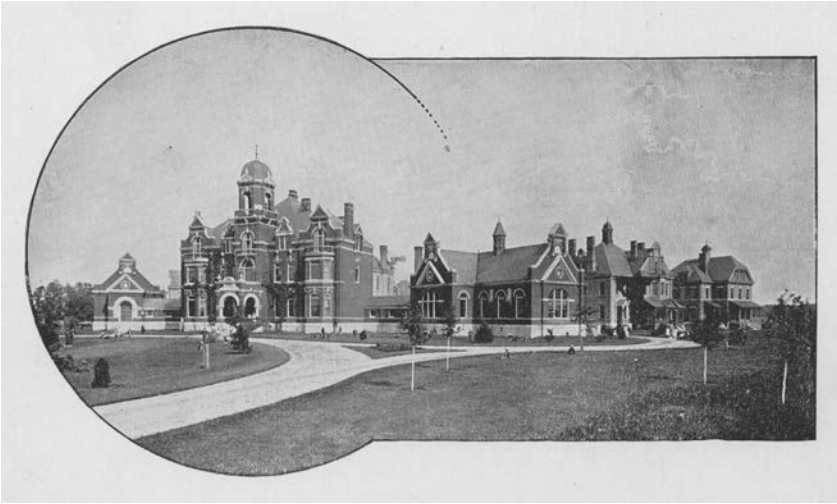
<sup>18</sup>*Fourth Annual Report* (Lansing, Mich., 1877), 23.

<sup>19</sup>*Sixth Annual Report* (Lansing, Mich., 1879), 43.

<sup>20</sup>NCCC, *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (Boston, Mass., 1882), 148-49.

<sup>21</sup>Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 42.





Originally planned as the Vigo County Children's Home, the Rose Orphan Home received funding from railroad tycoon Chauncey Rose and opened its doors in 1884.

Courtesy, Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library

When he left Michigan, Alden probably already had a new job. In earlier correspondence with a Terre Haute citizen's group, Alden had helped plan and design a children's institution founded in response to the increasing state pressure to remove children from institutions where they lived alongside pauper or criminal adults. With financing donated in 1877 from railroad tycoon Chauncey Rose, the plans for what was to be the Vigo County Children's Home transformed into plans for the Rose Orphan Home. Committed to quality care and secured with generous funding, the board of directors in Terre Haute wanted the best.<sup>22</sup>

When the ROH opened its doors to serve the dependent children of Vigo County in 1884, it possessed better financing and more experienced management than almost any institution in the nation. The ROH board of directors already knew about some of the modern ideas regarding institutional child care; they sent out requests for information and traveled to investigate designs and methods, and they likely visited the Michigan State

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<sup>22</sup>Alden, "Non-Sectarian Endowed Child-Saving Institutions," in NCCC, *Report of the Committee on the History of Child-Saving Work*, 84.

Public School during their research.<sup>23</sup> The board claimed that “our institution has a noble opportunity of taking this advance step and leading the whole state to a better method.”<sup>24</sup> They clearly intended to make their institution the flagship of the state. To assist in this goal they hired Alden, one of the nation’s most experienced superintendents. He recommended using smaller, separate cottage-style homes to provide children with a more homelike atmosphere and to encourage personal responsibility and good health.<sup>25</sup> Alden also wanted to prioritize education over work skills and sought to manage most of the decisions about the institution and its residents himself.

Historian David Hammack has noted that private charities took on unofficial governing roles for many late nineteenth-century cities. In many ways, the ROH reflects this trend: it privatized what would otherwise have been a facility reliant on county payments. While private charity may, as Hammack suggests, have helped to delay the emergence of a government-sponsored welfare system in cities, in counties such as Vigo, it served more than urban needs—the ROH served the entire county.<sup>26</sup> After charity groups and local governments weighed the benefits of opening an institution, a patchwork of public and private institutions began to take shape in Indiana during the 1880s and 1890s. The 1884 opening of the ROH marks it as one of the first privately funded institutions to open after the 1881 call by the Indiana legislature to remove children from county poor farms. Other institutions opening around the same time included the Northern Indiana Orphans Home (NIOH) and

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<sup>23</sup>*Rose Orphan Home Ledger* 1, p. 61, folder 8, box 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection, Vigo County Public Library, Terre Haute, Indiana. The Rose Home started with \$269,000 in assets, an astonishing amount for an orphans’ home. These assets convert to approximately \$5.75 million, with the original endowment representing over \$3 million in contemporary value.

<sup>24</sup>*Rose Orphan Home Ledger* 1, pp. 12-13, 79, folder 8, box 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection. A small group of board members toured a variety of eastern institutions in their quest to find the best type of care situation. They agreed with Alden that a large congregate institution robbed children of an individual identity, made it more difficult to expand the size of the institution, and did not provide adequately healthful conditions.

<sup>25</sup>The Michigan State Public School, which entertained visitors from Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as Canada—all seeking to understand and duplicate the system—promoted similar methods. Those same visitors went to the Rose Orphan Home as well: *Rose Orphan Home Ledger* 1, p. 266, folder 8, box 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection.

<sup>26</sup>Homer Folks, *The Care of Destitute, Neglected, and Delinquent Children* (New York City, 1907), 43-64; David Hammack, “Community Foundations: The Delicate Question of Purpose,” in *Making the Nonprofit Sector in the United States*, ed. David Hammack (Bloomington, Ind., 2000); Timothy A. Hacsí, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 26. Between 1875 and 1900 approximately 150 societies to aid children formed in the United States, helping to usher in a new era of dependent child care. Megan Birk, “Alone in the Country: Rural Social Welfare for Dependent Children, 1865-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 2008), ch. 4.

the Spiceland Home, which joined the few existing institutions such as the Indianapolis Asylum for Friendless Colored Children (IAFFCC).<sup>27</sup>

From the beginning, Alden set into motion his unique style of institutional care. Funding from the Chauncey Rose endowment and a supportive board of directors gave Alden the freedom to implement the features that would set the ROH apart: a cottage-style housing arrangement, an absence of uniforms, an emphasis on education, hands-on management, high-quality employees, and the interaction between children and the larger community of Terre Haute. Unlike other institutions whose walls kept children isolated, ROH children attended local events. Some even attended high schools on scholarships from local benefactors, making the ROH a point of pride for the city. Meticulous record keeping ensured that no child became lost and that staff members' knowledge about the cause of their dependency could be used to help with their care.<sup>28</sup>

By not accepting infants, the ROH escaped the high mortality rates of many other institutions, and by utilizing the growing number of specialized state institutions for feeble-minded, epileptic, blind, or delinquent children, Alden diminished the number of special cases inside the institution. As he noted about one set of troublemakers, "[there are] a few boys here now that I wish I could get rid of, they are thoroughly bad and I am well satisfied that they will turn out badly."<sup>29</sup> As he did at the MSPS, Alden reserved harsh discipline for repeated rule breakers.<sup>30</sup> The ROH set itself apart by providing children a healthy, balanced diet and the opportunity—not requirement—for vocational training. The home maintained a school, gardens, workshops, and playgrounds.<sup>31</sup> The cottage-housing units required approximately thirty

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<sup>27</sup>Thomas Cowger, "Custodians of Social Justice: The Indianapolis Asylum for Friendless Colored Children, 1870-1922," *Indiana Magazine of History* 88 (June 1992), 93-110. Indiana later referred to its poor farms as poor asylums.

<sup>28</sup>*Rose Orphan Home Ledger* 1, p. 283, folder 8, box 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection.

<sup>29</sup>"1885 report from Alden," p. 166, *Rose Orphan Home Ledger* 1, folder 8, box 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection; letter dated February 4, 1892, p. 118, oversized volume 22, Rose Orphan Home Collection. See also *Annual Report of the Board of State Charities of Indiana for the year 1903* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1903), 127.

<sup>30</sup>Lyman P. Alden, "Institutions for Children," in *Proceedings of the Twenty-Third Annual National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (Boston, Mass., 1896), 323. The MSPS also utilized the cottage system for housing dependents, as opposed to the congregate system which kept children in one central building with large group sleeping quarters. Congregate-style institutions tended to keep strict schedules for eating, bathing, sleeping, and other activities, in part because the centralized building required children to move together from one area to the next to keep order.

<sup>31</sup>Alden, "Institutions for Children," in *ibid.*, 321. See also, James A. Collins, "The Juvenile Court Movement in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 28 (March 1932); Elizabeth J. Clapp, *Mothers of All Children: Women Reformers and the Rise of Juvenile Courts in Progressive Era America* (University Park, Pa., 1998), 16.



The ROH maintained a school, gardens, workshops, chapel, and playgrounds. Alden stressed the institution's duty to provide good care and education to its residents before placing them with families.

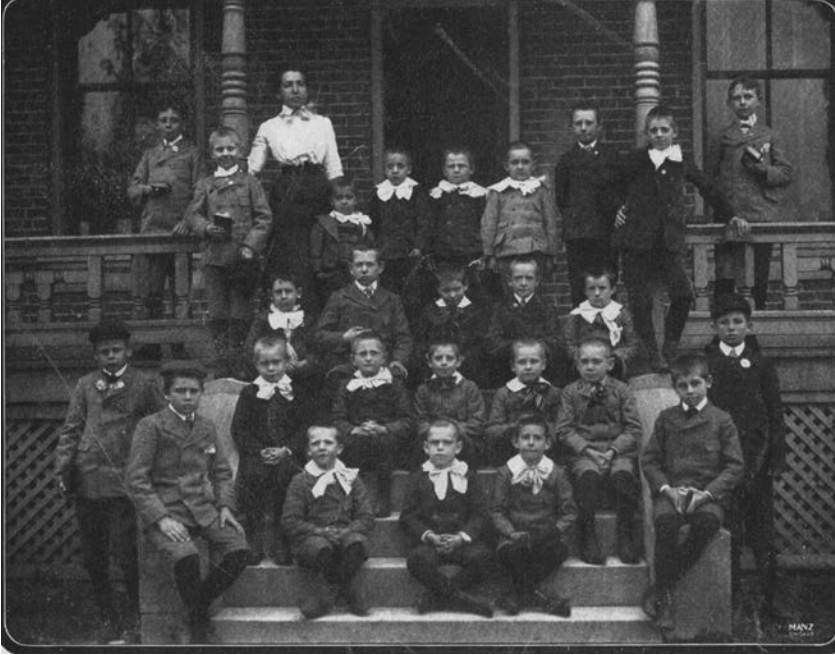
Courtesy, Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library

children of all ages to live together with a cottage matron. The dwellings mimicked a large family, with older children helping care for younger ones, and all children helping with chores.<sup>32</sup> Those who earned small amounts of money by doing extra jobs around the institution, or brought small amounts with them into the institution, were encouraged to learn how to manage their spending and saving. This care cost between \$120 and \$150 per child per year.<sup>33</sup> These methods represented all that Alden had wanted to do in Michigan but could not quite complete because of finances, the large number of children, and pressure to place children quickly.

Alden dismissed critics who charged that his model for institutional life pampered children: "Do parents fear to treat their own children with kindness, and make their homes as barren and unattractive as possible

<sup>32</sup>"Committee Notes, 1882," p. 16, *Rose Orphan Home Ledger* 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection. It appears that Alden became involved in the planning for the ROH at least six months before he resigned as the superintendent of the State School. Aside from a small measles outbreak and a more serious scarlet fever outbreak in 1903, the cottages kept serious illnesses from plaguing the ROH.

<sup>33</sup>The annual cost of this care was higher than a normal state per diem would allow. At around twenty-five cents per day, institutions relying exclusively on state funds could only expect around ninety-six dollars a year per child.



Number 3 Cottage at ROH. Alden established cottage-housing units, intended to resemble large family homes, where about thirty children of all ages lived together with a cottage matron.

Courtesy, Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library

lest they should become *familyized*, and unfitted to go out into the world and take care of themselves?”<sup>34</sup> Institutional children, Alden argued, still understood that they had little family support or connection to help them in the world. They knew that hard work lay ahead of them if they were to advance their station in life; no amount of good institutional care could make children believe that they had the advantages of parents, connections, and a home.

Although he no longer worked at a large, well-known state institution, Alden’s most famous moment happened shortly after leaving Michigan. In 1885, Alden presented “The Shady Side of the ‘Placing-Out System’” at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections. Before an audience of

<sup>34</sup>Lyman P. Alden, “The Shady Side of the ‘Placing-Out System,’” in *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (Boston, Mass., 1885), 208.

social reformers, he harshly criticized the enthusiasm of those who believed placements were the only reliable way to provide for dependent children. Coupling his own experiences in Michigan with testimonials from some of the most experienced institutional managers in the nation, Alden skewered the foundational principles of placement and blasted the techniques being used. Accounts of the problems with placement came from the New York Juvenile Asylum, the Iowa and Illinois Soldier's Orphans' Homes, and the Girard College for Orphan Boys. At a time of institutional expansion, Alden charged that "the humblest country home has been glorified into a child-saving instrument of wonderful efficiency....If these postulates are true, the logical sequence would be that no more institutions should be established." Encouraging children to work in order to earn their place in a family created "a much larger number of applicants...[who] expect to make a handsome profit on the child's services, and, if allowed one, will evade, as far as possible, every clause in the contract."<sup>35</sup>

To launch this offensive at a meeting where CASNY and other famous advocates and practitioners of placement—Homer Folks among them—pleaded with their peers about the absolute necessity of placing made Alden a lightning rod. At the time of his paper, American child welfare reformers stood divided on the role of institutions for dependent children. Increasingly, while some acknowledged that institutions provided the best means for removing children from bad influences, many decried their poor conditions and focused attention on the cold, unfeeling, and expensive care being provided by inexperienced management. Some who supported placement expressed a modest hope that families could be found for most children, while others ardently and aggressively argued that placement would drastically reduce the need for institutionalizing.

Alden, leading the dissenters, argued that the lack of thought and expertise that went into placements amounted to child cruelty.<sup>36</sup> He did not just blow the whistle on a system in need of improvement—he accused placement supporters of naïveté. Without proper inspection and supervision, children who went into placements as an expedient alternative to the institution lost the chance for improvement, education, and structured learning. For

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 202-203.

<sup>36</sup>Marilyn Irvin Holt, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America* (Lincoln, Neb., 1992); Stephen O'Conner, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children he Saved and Failed* (Chicago, Ill., 2004); Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Megan Birk, "Supply and Demand: The Mutual Dependency of Children's Institutions and the American Farmer," *Agricultural History* 86 (Winter 2012), 78-103.

those who believed only a family could provide a good living environment, his criticism amounted to heresy.<sup>37</sup> Historians have recognized the role that Alden's vociferous objections to placing out played in the debate about the institutionalization of children. Few who mention his paper, however, realized that he put his recommendations into practice in Terre Haute.<sup>38</sup> At ROH, staff taught faith, compassion, and responsibility, and gave children an education. For children deemed suitable for placement, Alden found a home in the most careful manner possible, with screenings of that home and regular contact maintained for as long as it took to ensure the child was safe and satisfied. During the next twenty years, the practice of placing children out of institutions into families became the recommended method for care nationwide, and the practice advanced ahead of supervision methods; providing family-like institutional care came to be viewed as too expensive and too difficult—an institution could never do the job of a family.<sup>39</sup>

Alden's public denigration of placement implicitly criticized the lauded work of the MSPS and the direction of the child welfare movement. Predictably, one of the first responses came from John Foster, the State School's new superintendent. Foster tried to disarm Alden's criticisms by discussing his own perceived improvements to Alden's methods: "It is the aim of the management of this school to regard the law... as rapidly as possible find family homes in which to place the children." In Foster's first year as superintendent, the number of placements increased 72 percent, resulting in 216 children being placed for the first time and an additional 89 re-placed in a different home.<sup>40</sup> Foster implemented much that Alden argued against: rapid placement, strict discipline and scheduling, little post-placement institutional support, and quick re-placement if the first home did not work. In "Preventative Work in Michigan," Foster charged that no institution could do better than a family home: "At best an institution cannot give each child that personal, individual attention he needs.... In the institution everything is done so mechanically as to train the child

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<sup>37</sup>Folks, *The Care of Destitute, Neglected, and Delinquent Children*; Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*. See also, Anthony M. Platt, *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (1969; Chicago, Ill., 1977).

<sup>38</sup>Crenson, *Building the Invisible Orphanage*, 211-12; Claudia Nelson, *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850-1929* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003), 60.

<sup>39</sup>Alden, "The Shady Side of the 'Placing-Out' System," 209-10; Alden, *Report of the Committee on the History of Child-Saving Work*, 88.

<sup>40</sup>Biennial Report of the Board of Control of the State Public School for Dependent Children for the years ending Sept. 30, 1883 and Sept. 30, 1884 (Lansing, Mich., 1884), 52-53.



into mechanical action without developing thought.” He went on to level a veiled criticism of Alden: “Our experience has demonstrated that very few who have remained for many years as inmates of the school have so perfectly met the responsibilities of citizenship as those who have early gone into homes....The average time of detention is now less than eleven months and is being reduced.”<sup>41</sup> Foster may have gained the support of the state, but at least a few interested parties missed their old superintendent. In the children’s letters from 1884, one asked a question probably shared by others: “Will you please tell me where Mr. A is living now?”<sup>42</sup>

Others joined Foster in voicing objections to Alden; these critics lived closer to home. As the debate over the role of institutions wore on, attorney and eventual state senator T. E. Ellison of Fort Wayne lambasted the notion that any institution could be better than a placement home: “To think that the people of an institution should be found in America to take the children of our poor...and claim to make better citizens of them than can be made in our homes is a thing no person can imagine.” Shortly after Alden gave a paper about good institutional practices, Ellison went on to say:

There is no superintendent of any institution that can take a child and give it the treatment it ought to have. You take it into a home and give it to some good woman who will be a mother to it, and some good man who will be a father to it, and they will raise that child in a manner so superior to the best superintendent of an institution that it cannot be compared.<sup>43</sup>

Not rigidly opposed to placement, Alden and the ROH staff worked to make Ellison’s imagined scenario a reality. Alden did not believe that a “rough” family was suitable for children, and he did not agree that institutional stays should be as short as possible. As articulated in “Shady Side,” Alden did not think that good quality families clamored to take dependent children—people only wanted the best children, and it took time to bring

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<sup>41</sup>John Foster, “Preventative Work in Michigan,” (Coldwater, Mich., 1885), 4-5. Foster’s title may have referred to the session—titled “Preventative Work”—in which Alden presented “The Shady Side” at the Conference for Charities and Corrections. The program and proceedings listed Alden as “Superintendent Rose Orphans Home (*Late Superintendent Michigan State Public School*).”

<sup>42</sup>*Biennial Report of 1883 and 1884*, 81.

<sup>43</sup>“Reports of the Child Saving Section,” *The Charities Review* 5 (June 1895), 438.



the best out in many dependent children. Without appropriate supervision of placement homes, the system was doomed to fail.

As more institutions opened during his tenure at the ROH, evidence of the danger of hasty placements mounted. In Indiana, workers and trustees at institutions in Lafayette (Tippecanoe County Children's Home), Mishawaka (NIOH), and Indianapolis (IAFFCC) haphazardly performed placements, showing little intention of supervising the children and using homes about which they knew almost nothing. These facilities used the single-building congregate style of care that Alden blamed for perpetuating poor conditions and bad health. Alden rightly asserted that finding good homes for children was not as simple as locating a farmer and extracting the promise of good care. Thomas Cowger illustrated just one example of an abusive placement from the IAFFCC, noting that "records show pathetic examples of irresponsibility and cruelty."<sup>44</sup> Both the NIOH and the Tippecanoe County Children's Home (TCCH) tried to manage placements before turning to the state or a private agency to help with the work. The NIOH moved children across the country in an effort to find homes quickly, but admitted, after receiving 153 applications for children in a single year, that it was "easy to find a home, but hard to find a good home."<sup>45</sup>

Joan Marshall's examination of the TCCH offers ample evidence that properly managing dependent children proved more challenging than local organizers expected. Managers at the TCCH and other Indiana institutions utilized practices condemned by experts critical of institutions: strict and homogeneous discipline and a routine that gave children little personal attention or opportunity for learning. In theory, if not in practice, these institutions served as way stations until permanent families could be found—children stayed at the NIOH an average of five months, compared to an average of three years at the ROH.<sup>46</sup> A reliance on donations, county per diems, and the volunteer time of board members produced low salaries, difficult conditions, and persistent difficulties retaining good staff and management.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Cowger, "Custodians of Social Justice," 104.

<sup>45</sup>*Ninth Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society and Orphan Home of Indiana* (Mishawaka, Ind., 1892).

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Joan E. Marshall, "Parents and Foster Parents, Shapers of Progressive Era Child Saving Practices: A Case Study, Tippecanoe County, Indiana, 1887-1916," *Indiana Magazine of History* 90 (June 1994), 153.

The absence of trained professional staff from most children's institutions did not mark their operators as uncaring, but instead illustrates the pervasive problems faced by such institutions, and helps to explain Alden's resulting uphill battle in convincing child welfare experts that institutions could provide an appropriate environment for children. Many reformers believed their goal should be to save children "from a life of misery and vice" and adulthoods spent dependent on relief. Saving children from misery, however, did not equate to removing them from a bad situation. Shortly after the NIOH's opening, for example, health problems inside became apparent. In 1885, the home's doctor reported that although he lacked expertise in institutional design, he believed the building to be unhealthy for children and the food to be of a poor quality because it was stored improperly.<sup>48</sup> Other problems plagued the NIOH because of overcrowding. During the mid-1880s, the home placed ads in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* seeking western homes for children; these ads apparently worked, because approximately a dozen children left the NIOH for homes in distant parts of the country. To supervise these long-distance placements, the NIOH administrators wrote letters once a year to the children but did not hear back from them all.<sup>49</sup>

A sickly facility, the NIOH embodied the institutional model that Alden abhorred. It lacked a school room, sick room, indoor bathrooms, and bathtubs, which were instead brought in from outside for weekly baths. Because the NIOH accepted infants, a number of them died each year the home operated.<sup>50</sup> In 1897, four infants died from pneumonia. Illness, infant mortality, and failed placements tainted the work of this and similar institutions across the state. These institutions not only lacked the homelike atmosphere of the Terre Haute institution, they also reinforced arguments for placing out at all costs.<sup>51</sup>

After the firestorm of "Shady Side," Alden worked on making the ROH the institutional pride of Indiana, and in some ways the entire region. In daily operations, Alden and the ROH staff tried to mimic a home environment. Trained staff members anticipated behavior issues and strove to

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<sup>48</sup>*Second Annual Report of the Northern Indiana Orphan's Home* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1885). Initially started in 1882, the NIOH was incorporated under that name in 1884; in 1890 it was reorganized as the Children's Aid Society of Indiana and relocated to property in Mishawaka with newer facilities. Currently, part of that property is still in use as the Family and Children's Center.

<sup>49</sup>*Second Annual Report of the Northern Indiana Orphan's Home*, 7. See also, Bernice Orchard, "Early History of Welfare in Indiana," n.d., Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>50</sup>*Tenth Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society of Indiana*, 1893.

<sup>51</sup>*Fourteenth Annual Report of the Children's Aid Society of Indiana*, 1897; Marshall, "Parents and Foster Parents, Shapers of Progressive Era Child Saving Practices," 153.

handle them with patience. They also emphasized personal responsibility and continued to nurture the family-like relationships encouraged in the cottages. Alden was not alone in his aspirations. Judith Dulberger has profiled Albert Fuller, who served as Albany Orphan Asylum's superintendent from 1879 until 1893. Like Alden, Fuller worked during the early decades of institution building to operate a high-quality institution. He, too, corresponded with hundreds of children during his career. Although peers in many respects, Fuller never used his position in Albany to advance the cause of institutional care nationally. Still, Alden and Fuller were among a very small number of institutional superintendents during the late 1800s whose long careers provided good examples of institutional positivism.<sup>52</sup>

Alden became perhaps the only superintendent in Indiana to handle all of his institution's placing and to do so through personal visits, not just correspondence. To make this supervision possible, Alden tended to place children within sixty miles of Terre Haute, including Illinois.<sup>53</sup> Hoping to encourage children to attend school regularly, Alden sought out well-to-do farmers and middle-class townspeople to take in the children. He and his board viewed the issue of schooling as particularly important; at the ROH, children attended 11.5 months of school annually at a time when the average farm child did well to attend school for five or six months.<sup>54</sup> He did not want the children staying home from school in favor of constant work—a regularity in many farm homes. Remarkably, some older children went in to placement homes with a contract to earn regular pay for their work, an almost unheard-of arrangement at a time when free placement homes dominated.

Alden's strict expectations meant that approximately twenty children left the ROH under an indenture or placement each year—a marked contrast to the dozens who left the State School annually.<sup>55</sup> Despite his rigorous oversight of the ROH placements, Alden experienced his share of problems with fitting the right child to the right home, and around 25 percent of placed children returned to the ROH.<sup>56</sup> The many letters that he received

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<sup>52</sup>Judith Dulberger, *"Mother Donit fore the Best": Correspondence of a Nineteenth-Century Orphan Asylum* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1996).

<sup>53</sup>"Records, 1874-1889," *Rose Orphan Home Ledger*, v. 1, oversized volume 19, Rose Orphan Home Collection.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>*Fourth Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home for the Three Years Ending September 30, 1895.* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1898), Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>56</sup>"Records, 1874-1889," *Rose Orphan Home Ledger*, v. 2, 4, 5, oversized volume 19, Rose Orphan Home Collection.



Designated spaces and times for play celebrated good behavior during an era when other children's homes tended to focus more on punishments than rewards.

Courtesy, Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library

from former residents and their placement parents over the years lend evidence to the conclusion that regardless of careful methods, placements rarely catered exactly to the needs of all the involved parties. One young boy who wrote to Alden explained, "My father came to take me away from my home. I don't intend to go with him, for I have a good home and I intend to stay."<sup>57</sup> Children in placement homes often wrote requesting visits so they could show Alden their new homes or new skills. The maintenance of a relationship between superintendent and child was something that other children's institutions could not afford or simply did not believe necessary. A letter from a twelve-year-old girl explained, "I thought I would write you a few lines to let you know that I am getting along nicely. I am well satisfied with my home....We have a nice orchard and a big garden."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup>"Letter from a fourteen year old boy, September 17, 1892," in *Third Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home for the Three Years Ending Sept. 30, 1892* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1892), 21, Indiana State Library.

<sup>58</sup>*Sixth Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan for the Three Years Ending September 30, 1901* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1901), 19.

As Alden managed relationships with the children, he also kept up a steady stream of correspondence with the placement families and any biological family members seeking information about their child. As one placement parent explained, "L. did very well until along in the fall when she began to lie....Along with this she would steal little things. I have scolded her and punished her....If she doesn't soon do better it will be impossible for me to keep her."<sup>59</sup> Alden often referenced these complaints when he wrote to children, encouraging them to try to do better. Other letters illustrated the fleeting attachment some placement parents felt for the children. In 1892, a distressed woman wrote that "I feel it is my duty to inform you of my husband's death, as Frank G. was placed under his care. I am sorry to say I cannot keep Frank, as he has left me and hired out to a man by the name of M....I will resign all claim on him and you can do what you think best."<sup>60</sup>

Even after many years of placement living, some children still went back to the ROH and Alden for important life decisions. One young man who entered the army after he became too old to live at the institution sent Alden money from his check every month for safekeeping. Another young girl who wished to get married and leave her placement home at the age of seventeen wrote to Alden expressing the bond she felt for him, but also the fundamental problems of trying to make placement homes stand in for real homes:

Mr. F has been trying to coax me to stay until I am 18 years old. He has always treated me very good in every way. But this is not my home. It does not seem like home to me, and I would rather have a home of my own. I know how to cook. I do most of the cooking all the time for five, and am sure I could cook for two and I knew we could agree all right. Probably if I should wait till I was 18 no telling where I would be. I am quite sure Mr. F. will consent if you will. So please don't interfere. I will wait until you answer this letter. I would much rather have your consent than to be disgraced by running away.<sup>61</sup>

Despite Alden's convincing arguments about the benefits of a well-run institution, his national profile diminished after he went to the ROH. The eclipse of his renown reflects not only the negative associations that the Na-

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>"Letter from M.E.S.," July 57 [sic], 1892, in *Third Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home*, 22.

<sup>61</sup>*Sixth Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home*, 20.

tional Conference of Charities assigned to institutions that kept children in long-term care, but also the resistance to long-term institutional care within the state of Indiana. During the 1890s, the state pioneered a number of successful social welfare reforms for which it received national attention. The County Board of Guardians, the Juvenile Courts, the Charity Organization Society, and prominent social gospel leaders all highlighted these reform efforts. Despite the high quality of relatively affordable care provided at the ROH, few institutions could or would be designed in its likeness, and little was done to publicize it as part of Indiana's progressivism.

New children's institutions often shied away from the expense of cottages and trained workers. Indiana and Ohio counties that decided to build children's institutions often used a poor-farm model with a congregate-style home (which was often an actual single-family home) and land with which to operate a farm to offset expenses. During the 1880s and 1890s, county institutions like the TCCH received a per diem of between twenty-three and thirty cents per child. Unless overcrowding became a problem, operators had little incentive to place children at all, as each child who left reduced the overall income of the institution and gave that manager or matron less money with which to operate. Private institutions fared little better. Without an endowment, charity groups that opened their own homes either needed money from donations, revenue from a fraternal group such as the Odd Fellows, or per diem rates from counties that chose to send their children to a private institution instead of opening their own facility (such as the NIOH). These institutions that struggled to meet the needs of children provided neither institutional care nor placement services well.

After a decade of serving the needs of Vigo County, Alden could point to a number of reasons to recommend the ROH model. In 1892, he claimed that 97 percent of the ROH children had managed to stay out of jail or reform school; his standards for success may seem low, but the purpose of aiding dependent children was always to keep them off public support, and in that light, his classification makes sense. By 1901, the statistics reflected a slight change in the degree of success. Alden reported that based on his extensive correspondence with former residents, 465 ranked themselves as doing "fairly well," 105 were "rather poorly," 26 lived in correctional institutes, and many provided him with their personal stories.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>*Sixth Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home*. The honest, self-reflecting reporting about the progress of ROH residents contrasts to reports from other superintendents who refused to publish negative feedback, or institutions that ranked children based on their own standards instead of the impressions of the former residents themselves. Alden did not need to worry about how this information would affect donations or payments to the ROH.

Most of these children became functioning members of the community and often reflected on the ROH warmly. Many also thought fondly of their old superintendent, despite the fact that Alden separated siblings during placements and limited the visitation rights of biological parents.<sup>63</sup> Some sibling separations worked out well in the end, as happened in the case of four children who arrived at the ROH in 1885 when their father died and their mother proved incapable of caring for the four younger children. These children eventually went to placement homes and did not reunite until 1898, when they also met an older sibling contacted by Alden. The children appeared to hold no ill will toward Alden for their separation, and they held their reunion at the ROH.<sup>64</sup>

Alden also supported the notion that the most qualified, committed care providers should manage dependent child welfare and recognized that with the right circumstances, both public and private institutions had a place in that system. Child welfare workers and reformers would eventually embrace these ideas when states began to increase their involvement in the child welfare system during the 1890s. Years of working with hundreds of children also caused Alden to enter into the discussions about the roles of heredity and environment that proved so important during the late 1800s. He believed that it was necessary to diagnose some children with “congenital and hereditary evil propensities so powerful that all human agencies are too weak to cope with and arrest them.” Such children could not be placed out because of their unsuitability for regular family life; they could not be maintained in a normal institution because they would “endanger the morals of the other children.”<sup>65</sup>

As he told a meeting of county superintendents of the poor, however, “heredity is not the controlling element in determining a child’s career. If the environment be changed at a sufficiently early period the career may be arrested.”<sup>66</sup> This concept fueled his desire to continually improve and control the environment for children. At the ROH, his close attention to the influences and habits of children led him to the conclusion that

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<sup>63</sup>In those areas, Alden followed a national trend emphasizing the hazards of biological family contacting dependent children. “Letter from Mrs. C,” in *Second Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home for the Three Years Ending September, 1888*, 19.

<sup>64</sup>Lyman P. Alden to board, December 9, 1898, folder 7, box 1, Rose Orphan Home Collection; “Letter from Mrs. W,” in *Second Triennial Report of the Rose Orphan Home*, 25.

<sup>65</sup>Harold Kynett, ed., *The Medical and Surgical Reporter* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1893), 983.

<sup>66</sup>Lyman Alden, “The State Public School at Coldwater, Its Purposes and Aims,” (Coldwater, Mich., 1876).

often many years were required to provide the right type of environment to change habits of dependent children.<sup>67</sup> Alden directed his experience working with children toward the scientific and eugenics communities, but before he could make substantial contributions, he died suddenly in 1904 at the age of seventy-three.

Alden's unexpected death left the board of directors scrambling to replace the pillar of their institution. Although he possessed almost no experience, apart from having lived his entire childhood at an institution, the board hired Alden's son Ernest. An engineer by trade, Ernest picked up where his father left off, making dependent children his life's work and managing the ROH until his retirement in 1947. Ernest Alden maintained his father's conscientious, hands-on management style while steering the ROH through modernization and greater cooperation with the state.

Ernest Alden continued to improve the ROH and to provide high-quality institutional care for dependent children in the Vigo County area. In accordance with the wishes of the board of directors and in line with larger national trends, Ernest Alden increased the number of children placed out from the home and helped integrate the institution into the fabric of Indiana welfare services. Even with the increased number of children placed out, he handled all these placements personally until supervisors, visitors, and social workers became state policy in the 1910s and 1920s. Despite ROH's ongoing refusal to place children in homes rapidly, the Russell Sage Foundation listed it as one of the nation's best children's institutions in 1909 and the best in 1929. Ernest Alden made room for advancements in dependent child care without sacrificing the personal connections with the children that made his father so successful.<sup>68</sup>

Institutional care elicited controversy during Lyman Alden's career. Increasingly, however, during his son's tenure, maintaining a child with his or her parent(s) or paying to provide foster care with a family emerged as an alternative to placements. The ROH assisted with neither of these goals; it provided a type of long-term care and training that increasingly fell out of favor. During the 1930s and 1940s the ROH, renamed the Rose Home School, housed delinquent children; shortly before the last children left, Ernest Alden retired. The facility, converted into a home for the elderly,

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<sup>67</sup>David F. Lincoln, *Sanity of Mind: A Study of its Conditions, and of the Means to its Development and Preservation* (New York, 1900), 169.

<sup>68</sup>"Rose Orphan Home," *Wabash Valley Profiles*, <http://cougar.indstate.edu/cgi-bin/showfile.exe?CISOROOT=/vchs&CISOPTR=353&filename=152.pdf>.



closed permanently in 1964; two years later the institution that had provided arguably the best dependent child care in Indiana was demolished to make room for a shopping plaza. The Glen Home, which opened in the early 1900s to provide additional dependent child care in Vigo County, remained open through the late 1970s until the financial benefits of foster care finally outweighed the benefits of maintaining the facility. Today those buildings serve as fraternity housing on the campus of the Rose Hulman Institute.<sup>69</sup>

Using his experiences in Michigan, where he managed one of the only state-run children's institutions in the nation, Lyman Alden brought expertise and conscientious care to children in Vigo County. While shaping the ROH to match his ideas about education, moral guidance, and training, Alden also advocated on behalf of children who frequently suffered under a system of rapid placements. By objecting to the popular idea that a family existed for every child in need, Alden in many ways ostracized himself from the national child welfare movement, but not before leaving a lasting legacy for his prescience in perceiving the hazards of placing out. At the ROH, Alden used Chauncey Rose's money and the support of the board of directors to shape a system of dependent child care that proffered realistic expectations of children and sought to raise self-supporting, educated citizens. His successful methods and connections with the residents of the ROH outlived him through his successor and son and ultimately brought accolades to the institution and the state of Indiana. After Alden's death, former residents and community members raised funds to construct a fountain on the grounds in his honor. They intended it to serve as a touchstone for the children whose lives he had positively affected.



<sup>69</sup>The Glen Home buildings are now on the National Register of Historic Places. "Glenn Home History," <http://glennhomehistory.homestead.com/1949toPresent.html>.