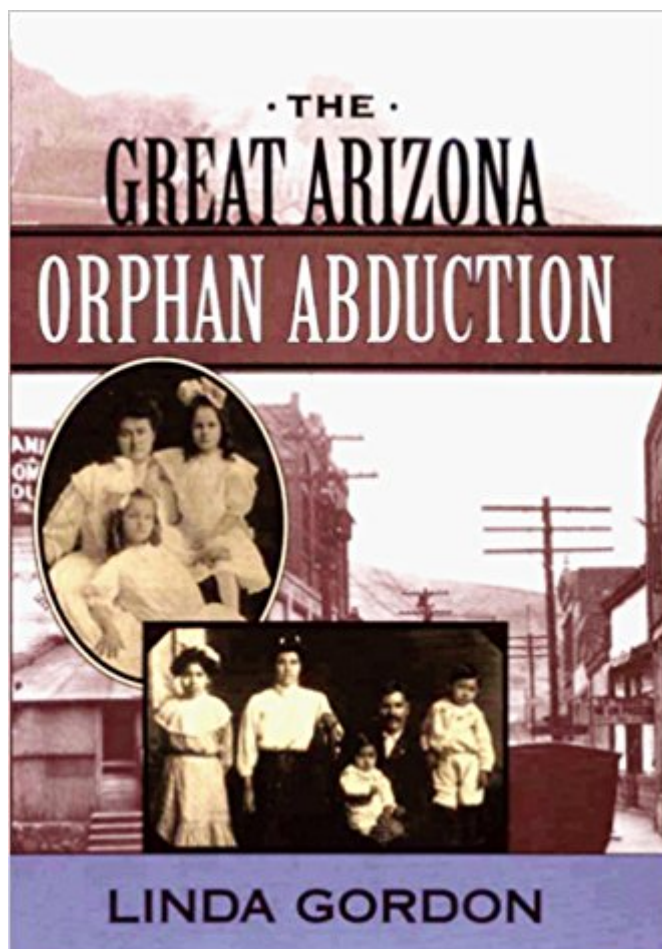


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The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction



Synopsis

In 1904, New York nuns brought forty Irish orphans to a remote Arizona mining camp, to be placed with Catholic families. The Catholic families were Mexican, as was the majority of the population. Soon the town's Anglos, furious at this "interracial" transgression, formed a vigilante squad that kidnapped the children and nearly lynched the nuns and the local priest. The Catholic Church sued to get its wards back, but all the courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, ruled in favor of the vigilantes. The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction tells this disturbing and dramatic tale to illuminate the creation of racial boundaries along the Mexican border. Clifton/Morenci, Arizona, was a "wild West" boomtown, where the mines and smelters pulled in thousands of Mexican immigrant workers. Racial walls hardened as the mines became big business and whiteness became a marker of superiority. These already volatile race and class relations produced passions that erupted in the "orphan incident." To the Anglos of Clifton/Morenci, placing a white child with a Mexican family was tantamount to child abuse, and they saw their kidnapping as a rescue. Women initiated both sides of this confrontation. Mexican women agreed to take in these orphans, both serving their church and asserting a maternal prerogative; Anglo women believed they had to "save" the orphans, and they organized a vigilante squad to do it. In retelling this nearly forgotten piece of American history, Linda Gordon brilliantly recreates and dissects the tangled intersection of family and racial values, in a gripping story that resonates with today's conflicts over the "best interests of the child."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Linda Gordon's "The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction" tells one small story in order to examine a far larger one. In 1904 the Catholic sisters in the employ of the New York Foundling Hospital attempted to place several white, Catholic orphans with Mexican families in the mining towns of Clifton-Morenci, Arizona. The white Protestant residents in the towns objected strenuously to the placements, and joined together to steal the children away from the prospective Mexican parents. Appalled by the scenes of mob activity and the threats made on their lives, as well as the idea of Protestants adopting Catholic children, the Foundling Hospital sued in court to retrieve the orphans. The case first went to the Arizona Territorial Supreme Court before moving on to the United States Supreme Court, which ultimately gave permanent custody of the children to the Arizona whites. This story as told by the author--an excellent example of microhistorical research--provides the impetus to pursue a host of larger subjects involving labor issues, gender, class, mob violence, and child welfare. The overarching theme is race relations. To understand the orphan imbroglio, Gordon contends, one must understand the racial attitudes whites held about Mexicans. In the late nineteenth century, when Anglos were a weak minority trying to establish themselves in the Southwest, Mexicans could more or less stand on an equal footing with many of the white laborers and settlers. What changed? The arrival of more white settlers increased the power of Anglos. Too, the implementation of large-scale industry--here, the consolidation of individual copper mines--as the sole means of employment in the region brought about an unspoken agreement between Anglo laborers and mine owners to keep Mexican wages low.

Linda Gordon takes a small story out of the old southwest using court records, oral histories, interviews, and hospital records to create a highly readable and provocative work of American history. She recounts the half-legend of the Arizona orphan abduction to reveal what it meant to be human a hundred years ago. It was a time and place of nation-building and evolving standards of citizenship. During that colonizing period, dominated by self appointed "civilizers," racial attitudes allowed a mob to kidnap infants at gunpoint only to have the Supreme Court grant the perpetrators custody. The Euro-Americans did not want Mexican-looking people to gain any whiteness in the form of the foundlings and thereby diminish their status. Today it seems like an outrage akin to *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Against a backdrop of the smoldering mountains of oozing slag, Gordon describes how the eastern nuns fought the western WASPY-neighbors-from-hell in an effort place their charges in good catholic homes. This story heightens the contrast of the blurred lines of identity: gender, religion, politics, nationality, class, regional identity, group and subgroup, and most of all, race. These lines, like the borderlands themselves, are never clear and fixed. They shift in

and out of focus, but they nevertheless affect the concrete balance of power between labor and capital, men and women, the genteel and the half-breed, the wicked and the good, the white and the non-white other. Gordon's thesis is that fickle notions of race dictate status, from the Irish Catholic birth mothers to mine workers. Race was a badge of rank for courtroom and lynch mob alike. In an age of imperialism and social Darwinism race determined one's place, trumping class, religion, education and merit.

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