

January 31, 2025

Dear Representative Hartman and Members of the Committee:

I am in strong support of HB 2901. My late father was an abandoned baby in 1925. He was wrapped in a blanket and left in the unheated vestibule of an apartment building in Madison, Wisconsin on the night before Christmas Eve. The temperature that night got down to four degrees, and if one of the residents of the apartment building had not heard his cries he might have frozen to death and I would not be writing this!

There was apparently not a safe way for babies to be anonymously abandoned in 1925 in Wisconsin, and I am surprised to learn that that is not the case in our state today. We need to change that with the passage of HB 2901.

I have authored a small self-published book about my father's abandonment, his unsuccessful quest to discover his birth parents, and how, after his passing, my sisters and I were able to discover his birth parents with the help of DNA testing. In my research for the book I learned about the history of "foundlings," as abandoned babies were called beginning in the Middle Ages. Here is a synopsis of that history, excerpted from my book, to provide you with context for HB 29.

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My father, Jack Schepcke, was a foundling. That's the term that is used for abandoned babies that are found. He was part of a long and distinguished line of foundlings in history, myth, and literature. These include Moses, Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel. There was *The Kid* in the Charlie Chaplin film. In the comics there was Skee-zix and Superman. And let's not forget Baby Bamm-Bamm in *The Flintstones*.

In the history of many cultures, infanticide was as common as abandonment. Babies were left on hillsides or in the wilderness to die. This was common in Ancient Rome where it is estimated that 20% to 40% of all urban children were sold or left to die. In Europe, from the Middle Ages to the 19th century there was a substantial history of infanticide and abandonment and the same was true in colonial America.

In the Middle Ages it was common for parents who did not want their children to give them to monasteries along with a small fee known as an oblation. Laws in the Middle Ages often stated that persons taking in foundlings were entitled to their services as a slave. Foundlings could also be conscripted to serve in the military.

By the 18th and 19th century foundling homes became common in parts of Europe and in America. The English Poor Laws required local parishes to be responsible for the care of abandoned children. In France in the 19th century a mother could take a baby to a foundling home where there might be a door in the wall with a "turning cradle" where the mother could

deposit the child and ring a bell and leave, sight unseen. Thousands of infants were abandoned in France every year and data was collected, such that we know, for example, that in 1833 4,803 children were abandoned in Paris and 164,319 nationally.

In Italy, foundling homes were first established in the 13th century, and by the early 19th century there were 1,200 homes that used turning cradles, as in France. Astoundingly, it has been estimated that as many as 40% of newborns were deposited in turning cradles. One researcher accounts for this high percentage as being due to the Catholic Church's strong ban on sexual relations outside of marriage which caused unwed mothers to abandon their babies.

The mortality rate for children in foundling homes was high. In France in the 19th century it is estimated to have been as high as 65%.

In the American colonies some foundlings were brought over as children to become indentured servants along with immigrant adults. The first private orphanage was established in Georgia in 1738 and the first public orphanage in South Carolina in 1790, followed by orphanages in New York City, Philadelphia and Baltimore. After the Revolution attitudes toward women began to change and new laws softened the consequences for children born out of wedlock. Infanticide became less common as more foundling homes were established. With the death of more than 600,000 men in the Civil War, more single women were unable to care for their children and the number of abandoned children spiked. This resulted in the famous "orphan trains" that sent children by rail to families in the West. This practice continued until the 1930s.

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That's where the research in my book leaves off. All turned out well for my father who was adopted into a prosperous family who provided him with good upbringing and education.

I hope you will find this history of interest and that you will support HB 2901 – the 21st century version (much improved) of the turning cradle.

Jim Scheppke
Salem