

Search Tips from Ann

Mention adoption and brick walls sometimes spring up. If anyone asks, you are doing genealogy research! You will often find genealogists are totally sympathetic to adoptee genealogy but don't be too quick to confide!

Start with what you know; write down everything you can about the circumstances of your adoption:

- **Where were you born?** (*hospital, city, state*)
- **Who was the attending physician?**
- **Name the agency/lawyer who handled your placement?**
- **When were you placed with your adoptive family?** (*date*)
- **When and where did your adoption become final?** (*date and which court finalized your adoption?*)
- **What was your name at birth?** (*few of us have our full name*)

What do you know about your birth-parents? Modern practice is for adoptive parents to get some non-identifying information; older adoptees will have to go back to the agency to obtain this information and there will almost certainly be a fee. Pay it! Your non-ID may hold some clues about the number and ages of family members including the birth parents and other relatives, deaths in the family and religious affiliation (topic for a future column). More recent adoptions include medical information. You may get non-specific information about where your birth parents lived at the time or your birth, their occupations or military service, etc. Answers to any and all of these questions are worth writing down.

Gather any existing documentation, starting with the long form amended birth certificate ABC, to get every scrap of information. If you know your birth name, request your OBC; you probably won't get it but it's worth a try. Ask your parents if the attorney gave them a copy of the petition to adopt; or try to

get this from the court. Ask your parents if they have the final adoption decree. Since the HIPPA laws came into effect, **your own** hospital birth records are difficult to obtain, but you can try.

Now, what's missing?

Most likely you still lack your birth parents' names, addresses (at birth), birth dates, and social security numbers as well as names and ages of pertinent relatives. The older the adoptee, the less information the file is likely to contain about the birth father; they didn't get a vote re: adoption in the past. If you know where your parents lived and their occupations at the time of your birth, you may be able to discover their names. Once you have a name, you can find just about anyone. Getting that name is tough. Sometimes older adoptees will find old city directories useful.

File a waiver of confidentiality with the adoption agency, hospital of your birth and state adoption bureau. Some states can/will release information to one party with a signed waiver from the other. It is most important for birth parents to file a waiver.

Some agencies will search for the birth parent to effect contact/reunion (for a fee). It may be worth it, if you cannot get a name. However, some agencies have a track record of accepting fees but postponing search indefinitely, so ask around first. Get any fee arrangement in writing **and** ask for written documentation about the procedures they use to search. If they cannot provide that, think twice about giving them your money. Keep your contact information with the agency up to date.

Some searchers recommend that you go to the adoption agency in person. If you hire them to search for you, this will probably be required. Whether or not you meet the agency-appointed searcher, become acquainted by tele-

Volunteers wanted to write a column sharing their search expertise with our readers.

phone and keep in touch via email. Chat frequently. This serves two important purposes: (1) It keeps your search on the front burner—squeaky wheel gets the grease—since most agency searchers have other responsibilities. (2) It enables you to establish a rapport that may lead to something useful being dropped—if you learn something this way, NEVER admit it.

Invest in a good search manual. I found Jayne Askin's *Search: A Handbook for Adoptees and Birthparents, 3rd edition* in my local library but decided it was worth \$30 to have my own copy.

Join a search and support group if you can find one that meets near you; you can often join such a group on-line. The most important element of a successful search is perseverance; you will appreciate the support of other triad members who will encourage you when you need it.

Register your search with the International Soundex Reunion Registry (ISRR) in Nevada. In PA, you can join PARR's registry. If your state has a mutual consent registry, sign up just in case. It's a long shot but you can place an ad in the newspaper, if you know where to advertise. And check ads near your birthday to see if someone is looking for you.



Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Adoption Reunion Registry

Breakthrough Study Calls For Open Adoption Records Adoptees should have access, research concludes

by Triona Guidry

A groundbreaking new study by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute concludes that states should open adoption records to adult adoptees.

For The Records: Restoring A Legal Right For Adult Adoptees is a comprehensive analysis of the policy of sealed adoption records. Closing such records to participants began shortly after World War II. Two states, Alaska and Kansas, never closed records. Since 1996, six others—Alabama, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Tennessee—have re-established access for adult adoptees. Through examination of state laws, the researchers learned that none of the negative consequences predicted by naysayers have come to pass.

In particular, opening records did not result in increased abortions, a frequent rallying cry among opponents. The researchers found that opening records may actually result in decreased abortions and increased adoptions. They pointed out that open records supports an expectant mother's decision to proceed with adoption, knowing it will not cause her child to lose permanent contact.

A review of court documents also found that "confidentiality" was never explicitly

promised to surrendering parents (*see column at right*). While researchers concur verbal agreements may have been made by adoption facilitators, such agreements have no basis in law. The statistics show that most birth mothers welcome contact with their now-adult offspring, and that fears of "stalker" adoptees are unfounded. Opening records has positive effects on the "triad" of birth relatives, adoptive relatives, and adoptees.

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"After decades of discussion, debate and heated argument, we decided to see what's real and what's based on anecdotes and stereotypes," said Adam Pertman, executive director of the institute. "Now we can reshape public policy in a way that genuinely helps the millions of people involved."

The study concludes that states should restore the right of adult adoptees to access their original birth certificates and other records, a right researchers say has been unfairly denied.

For more information, see the study on the Donaldson Institute's web site: http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2007_11_for_records.php.

WANTED

Legal scholar seeks copies of "surrender documents" signed between 1940 and 1989 from any state, any adoption agency for a research project to advance understanding, and correct misunderstandings, about the nature of the legal agreements into which birth mothers entered. For more information or to share documents, with the mothers' names blacked out, write to:

Prof. Elizabeth Samuels
Univ. of Baltimore School of Law
1420 N. Charles St.
Baltimore, MD 21201-5779

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Editor's Notebook

Are you ready to search?

“Be careful what you wish for because you may get it.” Search, even when it is successful, is no guarantee that you or the relatives you find will live happily ever after.

The outcome depends heavily on what you *and* they want out of the experience. Over the course of 19 years searching for my birth relatives, my primary goal was information. But some searchers may be looking for a parent and some parents may try to pick up where they left off. Neither works. I hoped a relationship might be possible but was fully prepared to accept the fact that one might not be.

You have no control over other members of your triad but you can, and should, determine what *you* want. If you harbor a deep resentment against one or both sets of parents because of your adoption, deal with that first. If you're just angry with the system—as I was—realize that even when you see **RED** you must make nice until you get every scrap of information you can. There were times when I really wanted to punch out a “secret keeper!”

I often run across search notices that say the searcher wants a medical history and I often wonder how “I just want medical information” might sound to a

relinquishing parent who's been waiting and hoping that someday they would be found!

Most of us, whether we know it or not, are searching for the missing pieces of our identity. Knowing the circumstances surrounding your birth may give you clues about who you might meet but won't do much to tell you who you are. But we can better appreciate the person we have become when we have some sense of who we might have been if we had remained with our biological family.

I understood my decision to search had the potential to alter my own life and someone else's but I don't think I was really prepared to countenance failure as I kept at it for 19 years! But failure to find is a *very* real possibility. I have triad friends who have given up and others for whom success is a diminishing possibility.

Most adoptees wonder how their adoptive family will feel about their wish to find their family of origin. Sadly, some adoptive parents feel threatened. If so, do you search in secret? I know an adoptee who did just that but I don't recommend it because secrets have a way of coming out. I guess it depends on how much tolerance you have for subterfuge. My approach would have been to try to assuage their fears, but luckily I didn't have to—my mother aided and abetted my search.

Suppose your relative is not happy to be found? How will you handle that? My birth mother, in her mid seventies when I found her, wouldn't even refuse contact, just hung up on the social worker. When I actually located her myself and sent her a card, I am told she ripped that up. I was disappointed but 19 years of running into brick walls had hardened my shell. I accepted it and



Ann Wilmer with nephew, Gene, and grandnieces, Kareana and Brittany.

moved on. It helped that my cousins had welcomed me with open arms. I had already located my only sibling but I waited another couple of months before contacting my sister to give our mother time to tell her about me.

Search is time-consuming, often expensive, and requires patience. A successful search might open a can of worms. Be prepared that you will probably not find a family that mirrors your own. Can you live with finding unhappy or damaged individuals who may think that you can fix them? Can you remove yourself from situations that could suck you down?

Everyone I knew was fully aware that I was searching, so the only explanation ever required was “I found my birth family!” And I cannot think of a single relative, friend or even acquaintance who did not rejoice with me. But, not everyone is so lucky. There are some folks who think secrets are better left unexplored. You may have to deal with people who want to throw cold water on your joy!

I have not found my life was disrupted. Instead, I feel that my life has been enriched tremendously. I just wish I had found my sister and cousins years ago. If you are searching, I wish you the same good fortune.

Ann Wilmer

Reunite

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Reunite is the official newsletter of the Pennsylvania Adoption Reunion Registry. PARR was founded in 1995 by Karen DeLuca Sterner.

For more information about PARR: see www.paadoptionreunionregistry.org.

To contact PARR or contribute to this newsletter email: editor@dmv.com.

Adoption in the News...

ANN WILMER

is an adoptee and founder of the Green Ribbon Campaign for Open Records. Subscribe to GRC_Update@yahoo.com for adoption news as it occurs.



Birth records sealed, aren't they?

Apparently birth records are not sealed in Ohio for children adopted from foster care. Once adopted, the original birth certificate is sealed and a fraudulent one issued. Even the child can't learn what information it contains if they don't already know. But Ohio cannot keep its own secrets.

The child welfare agency's computer system, SACWIS, is divulging information contained in sealed adoption records of former foster children. In one instance, the system revealed the child's pre-adoptive name and the child's birth mother's name to medical personnel. This problem came to light when it was recently reported in the *Columbia Post Dispatch* that a child adopted from foster care eight years ago was summoned for her appointment by her original name.

Hague Convention Ratified

The United States ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoptions in December 2007, joining over 60 other countries that will begin to operate under the treaty in April. Under the treaty, the state department will be the centralized government entity monitoring all international adoptions in the United States. The treaty also regulates who can adopt and who can give a child up for adoption, placing stricter standards on both sides of the process.

Birth fathers win two

Birth father rights got a boost when the Court of Appeals of Tennessee reversed and remanded the trial court's order terminating the appellant/unknown father's parental rights through service by publication. The appeals court held that the trial court erred in granting a protective order that prohibited the appellant's attorney from gathering pertinent information to determine his whereabouts and/or identity. The appeals court also ruled the appellee, The Adoption Place, Inc. did not make a “diligent inquiry” of the birth mother to ascertain the identity of appellant before serving appellant by publication. Since the requirements of service were not met, all proceedings were void.

Ref: *The Adoption Place, Inc. v. John Doe*.

The Nebraska Court of Appeals reversed and remanded the juvenile court's denial of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska's motion to transfer, and overruled the order terminating parental rights. The appeals court held that the juvenile court abused its discretion by failing to rule on the motion to transfer before terminating parental rights. The court remanded the case with directions to transfer the matter to a tribal court.

Adoption reform law proposed in Ohio

Hearings will have begun by the time this is published on a bill to reform adoption in Ohio. Ohio House Bill 7 provides for access to records for adult adoptees, post-adoption contact

agreements, child centered recruitment and other issues.

This bill may have important ramifications for adoptees born in western PA and adopted in Ohio or the reverse. The bill, and the summary are posted on the Adoption Network's website: <http://www.adoptionnetwork.org/content.asp?pageid=273>.

If your adoption is connected to Ohio, and you would like to testify, please contact Betsie Norris, betsie.norris@adoptionnetwork.org. For more information, write to her at Adoption Network, 4614 Prospect Ave., Suite 550, Cleveland, Ohio 44103.

Abstinence programs face rejection

More states are turning down federal money attached to "abstinence-only" sex education programs as evidence mounts that the approach is ineffective. Fourteen states have notified the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that they will not request funds. The number of states spurning funds has grown even as Congress considers boosting overall funding for abstinence-only education to \$204 million. The trend has triggered intense lobbying of state legislators and governors. Supporters are scrambling to reverse the decisions, while opponents pressure more states to join the trend. If enough states drop out, Congress may redirect the funding to comprehensive sex education programs that include teaching the use of contraceptives.

ISO: Pennsylvania Triad Members are searching for birth relatives



Barbara Lynn Bissirri

Female Adoptee:
Baby Girl
ISO any birthfamily
DoB: 10/3/1964
PoB: Philadelphia

Born at Einstein Southern Division Hospital in Philadelphia, this adoptee doesn't know her birth name or the names of either birth parent. She grew up in the Holmesburg section of Northeast Philadelphia as Barbara Lynn Bisirri (maiden).

Hers was a private adoption handled by Attorney IOLA STRIEIGEL DOLIN through the Philadelphia courts and was finalized in November of 1965 before Judge Clark. She was told her birth mother was from Vincentown, N.J. and was 28 years old with two sons but doesn't know how accurate that is because Dolin employed questionable practices to procure babies and secure consent from mothers. Non-identifying

information supplied by the court lists both her birth parents as married and Protestant. Any information would be sincerely appreciated.

Reply to barbmarquart@yahoo.com.

Male Adoptee:
John Peters
ISO Birth Father
DoB: 19 June 1945
PoB: Edinburgh, Scotland

John Wastle, now 62 years old, was adopted by his maternal grandparents at birth and had little contact with his birth mother until recent years. He was the product of a wartime romance between an American GI and a Scots woman whose husband had been at sea for two years.

Reunited now with his birth mother, who is well into her eighties, he would like to find his father. Jessie Peters, "Mum," recalls that he was a Marine staff sergeant based in the UK during World War II. She met him at a dance when he visited Edinburgh Scotland on furlough where he stayed at the American Red Cross Service Club on Princes Street.

The last time he visited Edinburgh was September 1944. His name was Gayle/Gale Robinson or Robertson or something very similar. He had a number of long service stripes, so he enlisted long before the outbreak of WWII; he also had lots of medals. He was raised in an orphanage somewhere in Pennsylvania, became a miner then enlisted. John believes his father never knew his parents, his date of birth is circa 1914-1918.

Reply to: wastle1-gayle@yahoo.co.uk



John Peters (Wastle) 6 months.
Inset: Wastle today.



Back row, far Left: John's mom, Jessie. Front row, center: John.

**Have you found?
Pay it forward!
Help another searcher!**

Female Adoptee:
Mary Ellen Shoemaker
ISO birth mother and sister
DoB: 28 December 1950
PoB: Philadelphia, PA

Mary Helt, believes her mother was in a state hospital and that she has a sister about four years her junior. Her birth mother was Margaret Shoemaker born in 1930. She was adopted by Richard and Gertrude Lippold through the Catholic adoption agency there. If you have information, contact Mary E. Lippold Helt

Reply to littlemmm@hotmail.com



Mary Ellen Shoemaker

Female Adoptee:
Baby Girl M.
ISO: Any natural family
DoB: October 12, 1963
PoB: Philadelphia, PA

Theresa Dupree has been searching for maternal and paternal birth relatives, for over two decades. She was born October 12, 1963 and placed with adoptive parents in Southampton,



Theresa Dupree today.
Inset & below: childhood photos

PA (Bucks County) at five days old. Hers was a private adoption, arranged by a mutual friend of her adoptive parents and her maternal natural grandparents.

In 2007, Theresa located her mother, who did not wish contact; she hopes someday her mother will change her mind. She is searching for her natural father, and any natural family members. There is no non-identifying information about her father as this was not an agency adoption.

Her mother was 18 at the time of her birth and lived in Northeast Philadelphia, either the Torresdale or Mayfair section. She was the eldest of four girls in the family. Theresa knows her name but wishes not to publish it for privacy and verification purposes.

Reply to: BabyGirlM1963@yahoo.com, or voicemail: (Phila) 267-234-7925

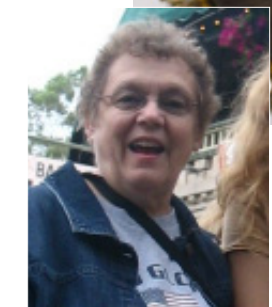
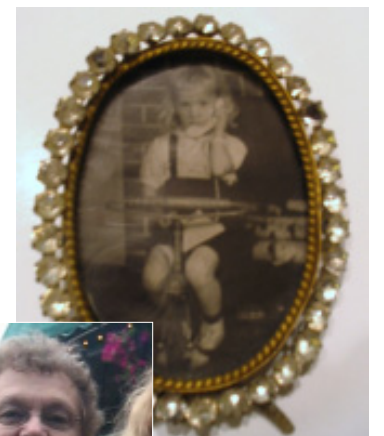


Female Adoptee
Nora Ann
ISO: Birth family
DoB: 17 December 1940
PoB: Keating Summit, PA

Nora Ann's birth family is said to have placed her for adoption because they were unable to care for another child (she has siblings). Kenneth and Vivian March of Portville, NY adopted her at age 3. She has memories of being in a crib with another child.

Noral Peasley (her name now) thinks her parents traveled to Harrisburg to finalize the adoption. Her adoptive mother is elderly and says she does not remember anything about who the birthparents were. When she recently moved into a nursing home her family found no adoption records in her house.

Reply to: tcastelow@yahoo.com



Nora soon after her adoption (above) and Nora today (left).

ISO: Pennsylvania Triad Members are searching for birth relatives

Female Adoptees
ISO: Birth Siblings
DoB: 1949, Philadelphia
DoB: 1951, Philadelphia

Joan Panofsky began searching for biological relatives in 1998. Four years ago she reunited with a sister. They contacted Joy O'Neill (court-appointed searcher in Philadelphia) and found there were two older siblings. During the search for their birthmother they found a younger sister who was reared by their mother, who passed away about two months before they found her.

Their mother was Frances Reibstein; she was raised in a very strict Jewish family in Philadelphia PA.

They are now trying to find two older siblings. The boy was born in in the Philadelphia area but placed in the Baltimore area. The girl was born in adopted in the Philadelphia area.

Reply to: joan010957@yahoo.com

Birthmother
ISO: Son
Neil Marion
DoB: 31 August 1973
PoB: Pittsburgh, PA

Lucille Marion (now Luci Young) gave birth to a baby boy at West Penn Hospital in Pittsburgh after staying at the Zoar Home in Glenshaw PA. Her son was placed through the Shadyside Adoption Agency.

Reply to: lyoung@thechurchatcovington.org



Christian Scott

Birthmother
ISO: Son
Christian Scott
DoB: March 24, 1963
PoB: Williamsport PA

Christian Scott's birth mother stayed at the Florence Crittenton Home in Williamsport during her pregnancy. She was 20 when she gave birth to her son at Williamsport hospital.

Birthmother was told that the adoptive parents were unable to have children. He would have been their first child but they wanted to adopt at least one more. They were Protestant and one was a teacher. They probably used Children & Youth Services of Lycoming County.

Chris has has family members who are eager to meet him.

Reply to: flipper@atlanticbb.net

Female Adoptee
Baby Girl Fahringer
(Fahringer)
ISO: birth relatives
DoB: 24 February 1954
PoB: Berwick. PA

Baby Girl Fahringer ws born at Berwick Hospital and went to her adoptive parents as a newborn. She was delivered By Dr. James Youngkin, who arranged the private adoption handled by attorney, Robert Bull Sr. in Berwick, Pa. Her adoption was finalized in either Luzerne or Columbia County.

Her mother, Wanda (Mrs. David) Fahringer, lived in Shickshinny in 1954 and was estranged from her husband. There may be several siblings, one older and several younger.

She was adopted by Eugene and Lorraine McAfee (both deceased) of Berwickand grew up there. Kathleen Ann McAfee Powell Johnson now resides in Georgia.

Reply to: katejohnson1954@yahoo.com



If your search involves a triad member with Pennsylvania connections and you would like to be featured in a future issue of Reunite, write to editor@dmv.com.

Book Review

Adoption for Dollars

Nearly everyone knows someone who has considered adoption, is adopted, or has given up a child for adoption. "Law and society have evolved, so that adoption is no longer a shameful secret, but celebrated. Few, however, are aware of the less-savory side of adoption, and its ongoing impact on our country.

The Stork Market:
America's Multi-Billion Dollar
Unregulated Industry
By Mirah Riben

In her book, *The Stork Market: America's Multi-Billion Dollar Unregulated Adoption Industry*, author Mirah Riben tackles the truth behind the myths.

"Infant adoption is a multi-billion dollar unregulated industry... Run by those with little or no training or education in the field of child welfare or social services. It has become a total distortion of the intended purpose of finding homes for orphaned children, and instead exploits mothers and commodifies their children," Riben says.

According to the author's research, adoption hasn't progressed much since the days of the orphan trains. Anyone can be an "adoption professional," for there are no requirements or standards. Baby brokers use the Internet to ply their trade and agencies push children into unmonitored homes to claim subsidies. Celebrity adoptions demonstrate the widespread disregard for the rules.

Adoptive parents are among the victims of the trade. Vulnerable in the

face of infertility, they are presented with an idealized picture that neglects detail. "The fact is that adoption is a business; babies are priced based on age, race, ethnicity, health, and physical ability."

Corruption is rampant, and a failed outcome can be devastating. Riben offers guidelines to avoid being victimized, and recommends a thorough background check of any adoption agent.

Although most adoptions today are considered "open," these words have little legal meaning for a birth relative. Riben quotes the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC): "Unless sanctioned by law, agreements for post-adoption contact are purely voluntary and cannot be enforced in court." The promise of open adoption lures expectant mothers to ensure a steady supply of adoptable infants.

"The reality is that there is no guarantee that adoption will provide a better life, only a different one." The author also addresses the plight of those adoptees, now adults, whose records are sealed and who now face considerable obstacles in obtaining background data.

"Adoption records were never sealed to protect mothers who surrender—or those adopted—and do not exist now for their protection." Those who lobby against open records do so on behalf of the brokers, to secure their bottom line. "Maintaining sealed adoption records does not "protect" mothers—or adoptees—from shame; it legitimizes it."

In the book's foreword, Evelyn Robinson, one of Australia's leading

adoption experts, says, "What is wrong with adoption in the United States... Greed and consumerism masquerade as altruism, as parents and children are drawn into a quicksand of legal and illegal adoption." She continues, "[Adoption] should be about finding homes for children who are unable to live with their families, after all efforts have been made to keep the family together."

Through comparison with Australian methods, Riben offers a future for American adoption. Payments of all kinds should be eliminated, and objective counseling provided to expectant mothers. Contact between expectant mothers and prospective adopters should be curtailed, and certification of adoption practitioners made mandatory. Penalties for human trafficking would further discourage the brokering of babies."

The Stork Market is a compelling and often disturbing look at the "state of adoption in America. Describing the progress that has already been made, Riben says, "The profit motive and corruption in adoption cannot be mended; it must be ended."

Triona Guidry

The Stork Market:
America's Multi-Billion Dollar
Unregulated Adoption Industry
by Mirah Riben
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