



EDITED BY JOAN WARNER

Family

WHEN ADOPTEES WANT TO DIG UP THEIR ROOTS

Knowing where we come from is something most of us take for granted. But for this country's approximately 3 million adoptees, tracing roots is an emotional and painstaking business. Nevertheless, interest in searching is definitely on the rise, and the process is easier now than it has ever been. In the past decade, some 450 search-and-support groups have sprung up.

Discovering the name of the person you're seeking can be the most frustrating part of a search. Only three states—Alaska, Hawaii, and Kansas—automatically let adoptees see their original birth certificates. In the rest, the birth certificate, along with the adoption agency's study, the birth mother's surrender of custody, and other court documents, are sealed. States began closing records in the 1930s to spare adoptive parents the stigma of infertility and adoptees the stigma of

illegitimacy. But in today's more tolerant society, those concerns pale in favor of a sense of self-identity. Says Andrew Axelrod, a New York pianist who recently found his mother: "Feeling like a floating piece of matter with no roots is indescribable."

You can petition the appropriate county court to open your records. Technically, they are always available "for good cause," says John Goldberg, legislation director of

the American Adoption Congress. "The trouble is, definition of good cause is completely at the judge's discretion." A local support group can offer tips as to which judges might be sympathetic, says Mary Anna de Parcq, vice-president of the Adoptees' Liberty Movement Assn. (ALMA).

If a judge doesn't release the records, he or she might name a court-appointed intermediary to do the search for

you. Such intermediaries use court records to try to track people down. However, they release information only if the person being sought agrees. Whatever the outcome, the searcher pays a fee, generally from \$150 to \$300. Some 13 states have established official "search and consent" agencies.

LONG WAIT. While the states are reluctant to change their laws, 25 of them have established name registries that can help searchers. You tell the department of social or human services your adopted name, birth date, and adoption agency. If the person you're seeking does the same thing, you two will be matched. But registries, which charge \$25-to-\$150 fees, are limited. They don't actively search, and some—such as New York's—require both sets of parents' and the adoptees' signatures before they release names.

Less restrictive is the Inter-

RESOURCES FOR SEARCHING

Here are some national organizations that either help adoptees and birth parents directly or refer them to local chapters

SUPPORT GROUPS

AMERICAN ADOPTION CONGRESS 800 274-6736

ADOPTEES' LIBERTY MOVEMENT ASSN. 212 581-1568

REGISTRY

INT'L SOUNDEX REUNION REGISTRY 702 882-7755

SEARCH GROUPS

INDEPENDENT SEARCH CONSULTANTS 714 754-7927

THE NATIONAL LOCATOR 800 368-FIND

DATA: BW



national Soundex Reunion Registry, a private, free service in Carson City, Nev., that processes 1,000 queries a month. ALMA offers members an international registry with over 800,000 entries.

Registries can work, but they often take years to make a match. That's the reason more adoptees and birth parents are searching on their own. The first step is asking your adoptive parents and other relatives for as much information about your adoption as they can remember and for any documents they might have kept. Especially crucial: the agency that handled the adoption.

Next, approach that agency for your "nonidentifying information." This includes your birth parents' ethnic origin, age, appearance, medical condition, even profession and hobbies. Most agencies will release this information to you, though how detailed it is depends on state law and their own policies. Some agencies may even release a name or offer to search for you. In any case, be prepared to pay \$50 to \$100 for the data and to wait, often a year, for records to arrive.

That, along with your birth date and birthplace (listed on your amended birth certificate), is enough to begin a search. Many nonprofit sup-

port groups offer search assistance, charging only expenses or the price of group membership (\$30 to \$50). There are also independent search consultants, who charge around \$500 and take three or four months. Unlike state intermediaries, they let you make the initial contact when your relative is found.

CATHARSIS. It will probably take longer if you look on your own. You can learn a great deal from public documents: city directories, old phone books, voters' registration records. You can also write the appropriate state bureau for death certificates, marriage and drivers' licenses, and divorce decrees. "Very few people don't leave any sort of paper trail," says Kathy Singer of Reunite, a search outfit in Reynoldsburg, Ohio.

Although searches may take you far and wide, start by assuming the relative is within the state. It's surprising, searchers say, how often people stay in the same part of the country. Victoria Camp, a computer-systems manager at a Manhattan school, spent seven years searching for her son. When she found him, she learned that he had grown up just 30 miles away. He had even worked a year in her brother's store.

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