WHEN ADOPTEES WANT TO DIG UP THEIR ROOTS

Knowing where we come from is something most of us take for granted. But for the 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 illegitimacy and adoptees the stigma of illegitimacy. But in today’s more tolerant society, these 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 Pareq, 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-
OLDIE BUT GOODIE STEREO EQUIPMENT

Thinking about a new stereo system but put off by the price tag? You can buy high-quality used gear for about half what you’d pay for it brand-new.

That’s what a lot of audiophiles are doing in these times of fiscal austerity. And they’re not just saving money. “Some of the older stuff is better made,” says Josh Samuel at Recycled Audio in Boulder, Colo. That’s especially true of U.S.-made vacuum tube amps from the 1960s and 1970s, such as Marantz and Citation. Still, the savings are big. A Marantz 19 tuner, which sold for about $1,200 new, goes for $350 used. New Kef 102 speakers cost $800; you can find a used pair for about $500.

Audiophiles, pre-amplifiers, radio tuners, and speakers are the best bets. They contain few moving parts and so are less likely to break. Except for some exotic designs, speakers, too, haven’t changed that much over the years: Many older ones sound just as good as the new ones.

Stay away from turntables and early-generation compact-disc players. Their lasers are often misaligned. Also, dodge old cassette-tape players, whose motors and tape heads wear out.

If you don’t know a Krell tuner from a Krell amp, you probably should begin your search at a store that specializes in used gear, such as Hi Fi Classics and Stereo Exchange in New York, or The Stereo Trading Outlet in Jenkintown, Pa.

They have large inventories at all price levels, and they guarantee what they sell. Stereo Exchange owner David Wasserman offers a seven-day, money-back guarantee and up to a 90-day warranty on higher-priced pieces.

Bring your favorite records or cts to the sound rooms, just as you would when checking out new equipment. Most stores let you exchange components if you’re not satisfied once you get them home. Some even allow you to trade up or sideways for as long as a year.

For those familiar with stereo equipment or looking for a specific item, there are newsletters such as Audio Trading Times (six biweekly issues for $15; 715 470-0100), which lists about 1,000 items per issue. You can also find good equipment through classified ads in newspapers. One way to check prices: the Audio Blue Book, published annually by Orion Research ($149; 303 247-8855) and available in some public libraries. The book lists gear by manufacturer and type and provides wholesale and average retail prices.