

# American-born adoptees are curious, too

Older adoptees seek a missing part of themselves

BY JANE GLENN HAAS  
KNIGHT-RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

As a child, Maxine Bednarski was lavished with advantages. The dancing lessons, the singing lessons, the music lessons.

But everyone in Broken Bow, Neb., knew the truth. Bednarski was a disadvantaged child.

"Go home. You're nothing but an adopted kid," a youngster yelled at her when she was 6.

That's how Bednarski found out she was adopted and that being adopted was not necessarily a good thing.

That afternoon, her adoptive grandmother made up a story about her biological mother being a wealthy woman who married a poor

man and died in childbirth, forcing her brokenhearted father to give Bednarski up for adoption.

"That story never settled with me properly," says Bednarski, 72. "I knew it wasn't true."

Being adopted, she discovered, often means feeling separated.

"As I grew up, I never felt a part of my family. I never had anything in common with my, quote-unquote, relatives. I never felt complete until a year ago."

After less than a month of searching for her birth family, a letter arrived at her home in Orange, Calif., on Jan. 7, 1996.

"Are you my daughter?" Bonnie Thomas, 93, wrote. "I have been looking for you for 72 years."

Thirty, 40 or 50 years ago, adoption was a "done deal." The birth mother never expected to see her

**"There comes a time in people's lives when they have time to reflect, to think about who brought them into this world."**

**Tony Vilardi**  
International Soundex  
Reunion Registry

baby again. The adoption was kept secret from the child, or he was counseled to be grateful.

Modern, open adoptions and stories of joyful reunions, however, have inspired grandmothers and grandfathers who grew up as adopted children to start searching for birth families.

For someone given up for adoption 60 or 70 years ago, the search can be daunting. Sometimes illness

triggers the search. Often, it is the long-dormant need to connect with blood relatives.

"There comes a time in people's lives when they have time to reflect, to think about who brought them into this world," says Tony Vilardi, director of International Soundex Reunion Registry, a nonprofit search agency in Carson City, Nev.

"They want to know if they have brothers and sisters. They wonder why they were given up in the first place. If the adoptive parents pass away, they may feel alone and without any family."

Among the most desperate searchers are people who don't find out they are adopted children until the adoptive mother dies.

"Suddenly they discover the person who loved and nurtured them all those years didn't bring them into the world. They wonder, 'Who am

I?" Vilardi says.

Older adoptees are products of the old system, says Reuben Panor, author of "The Adoption Triangle" and an expert on adoptive reunions.

"The birth parents were told to put it all behind them. The adoptive parents raised their children without much knowledge about birth families," said Panor, who now is a consultant on adoption issues and lives in Pacific Palisades, Calif.

Panor, who began his work in child welfare in the 1970s, realized little was truly known about adoption when his research discovered that every third child in a residential treatment program came from an adoptive home. And figures were higher in some correctional and mental health facilities.

"The questions remained for

ADOPTees, PAGE F2 ▶

3-15-98  
OSHKOSH NORTHWESTERN  
Over - A daily paper

3-15-98

# ◀ Adoptees

FROM PAGE F1

these children: Who are the birth parents? Why did they give me away? I guess I was no good."

Since he wrote his first groundbreaking research study in the 1970s, Panor says the number of adoptees searching for families has increased significantly.

He says more than 80 percent of the birth parents are delighted and welcome connection with their children.

"But you don't measure reunions on whether they are good or bad in terms of outcome," he says. "You meet a need and get questions answered for an individual."



Birth mothers also often yearn for reunion, says Cindy Schacklett, 51.

Schacklett, who gave up her first child for adoption because she was an unwed mother, has devoted 12 years to helping with searches and leading support groups. Her group, Full Circle, draws adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents twice a month to discuss common problems.

Having family information is a good thing, Schacklett believes, even if all reunions are not perfect.

"By searching and finding out," she says, "you learn more about yourself."

She spent two years searching for her daughter. They have reunited and visit each other, but her daughter never has told her adoptive parents about the reunion.

"What did it mean for me? I felt as if I didn't have to look in every face. I know she is alive. I have a sense of peace. She is a functioning person, and that validates me as a mother."



Searching for family takes a certain amount of guts and, usually, a deep motivation. When Maxine Bednarski developed breast cancer at 72, she started to evaluate her life. One element was missing: She had never found her mother.

Bednarski had seen her real birth

certificate once. As a sophomore at the University of Nebraska, she talked her adoptive mother into accompanying her to the state's office of vital statistics. A clerk broke the seal and let her read the document. While she read the paper, her adoptive mother stood beside her, crying.

Bednarski left the office with only one clear piece of information: Her birth mother was from Oklahoma.

She married, had her own family, became head of the English department at Washington Middle School in La Habra and forgot her search.

After her adoptive mother died, Bednarski found her adoption papers and her birth name, Loranna Lokey. A friend of her son's went to the Internet to find addresses for Lokeys.

Around Christmas 1996, she started her search. "I sent out more than 150 letters to Lokeys in the Western, middle and Southern states," she says. She received 25 replies, including a letter from her birth mother, Bonnie Thomas, now living in Edmund, Okla.

"Finding my daughter is the most marvelous miracle that happened in my life," Thomas says. "I thought about her every day for 72 years."

Why did she give up her daughter? She was young and inexperienced. She accepted an automobile ride from a man, and he seduced her. Three days after her baby was born, a nun came to her in the hospital and told her she never would see her child again.

Two weeks before Bednarski's 50th wedding anniversary in August, she brought her mother to California for a visit. Half-sisters came from Oklahoma and a half-brother came from San Jose for the family party. The next day, more than 37 relatives showed up for a Lokey reunion.

"They opened their hearts and their arms. I found a whole new family," Bednarski says. "Everything just fell into place."