

Adoption registry helps thousands

By VALERIE EDWARDS
Appeal Staff Writer

As the codes contained in DNA molecules set our genetic potential, Emma May Vilardi's Soundex codes determine the emotional future of the people in her registry.

For the past nine years, the 62-year-old housewife has maintained, single-handedly and free of charge, an adoption reunion registry.

Adapting a filing system widely used by federal and state governments for statistical recordkeeping, Vilardi has built her International Soundex Reunion Registry into the world's largest. It now has 16,129 active registrants and last year made 60 matches involving

125 adoptees, foster children and birth parents.

The daughter of an adoptee, Vilardi experienced first-hand the bewilderment of the secrecy surrounding adoption when her mother's retirement pension was withheld because she could not produce a birth certificate. Indiana, where her mother had been orphaned and put up for adoption in 1904, refused access to the records, and Vilardi began a letter-writing and legal battle that eventually freed her mother's records. Her son married an adoptee, and Vilardi's experience as a historian and genealogist was called upon again to find her daughter-in-law's birth parents, which she did.

In the mid-'70s, when more and more adoptees began to search, Vilardi, as head of the ISRR, was inundated with requests for help. In 1979, she wrote the first how-to-search handbook for adoptees. She also gives search workshops at national seminars and explains how to give and get genetic data.

One out of every 10 registrants in the ISRR have medical problems directly traceable to genetic causes, Vilardi said. If that 10 percent ratio holds true for all adoptees, 500,000 of the 5 million adoptees in the United States have medical problems related to heredity which they do not have and cannot get information on.

Basically, the Soundex Code

received more mail than all the businesses in Carson City combined — about 3,000 letters.

To date, the "Dear Abby" column has generated more than 9,000 requests for assistance. At least one person involved in the last eight matches registered as a result of reading the column, she said, and more and more men are registering.

Vilardi refuses no one, charges no one and assures everyone confidentiality.

"I wanted one place where any human being could reach, and a hand wasn't being held out for money," she said.

Each party in the adoption triangle — adoptees, natural parents and adoptive parents — is

'The adoption experience cannot be free of dislocated human arrangements. For the most part, society handles the dislocation by offering a substitute family, but at a price. That price is the suppression of the adoptee's 'life story' — the psychological and practical extension of his or her personal history and biological connectedness.'

Psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton

converts the alphabet into six numerals, Vilardi explained. Coded information may be matched at seven points and is computer ready because of its numerical base. When three or more of the seven points match, she pulls the cards, further compares the information and phones the parties, either to request more information or to tell them of the match.

Once a match is made, it is up to the people concerned to decide if they will make contact with each other, Vilardi said.

The corporation which administers the registry was granted tax-exempt status in 1982, and donations are being accepted to purchase a computer system. Until then, Vilardi continues to manually process applications, a labor of love which consumes an average of eight to 14 hours a day six days a week, she estimated.

The researcher said the registry's first match was in 1977, two years after it was begun. It really began to function effectively in 1981, however, she said, and in 1982, she began finding matches on a weekly basis. After a "Dear Abby" column about the registry in November 1983, Vilardi said she began receiving thousands of letters a day. One day, she said, her postal carrier told her she re-

usually faced with many research fees, she explained. Most people are assisted in their searches by "triad" or adoption triangle groups, and about 300 of those groups participate in the ISRR, Vilardi said. With names like "Concerned United Birthparents," "Orphan Voyage," (the original group), and "Parents and Adoptees Uplifted" — the groups offer emotional support and advice on how to conduct a proper search in a legal manner, she said.

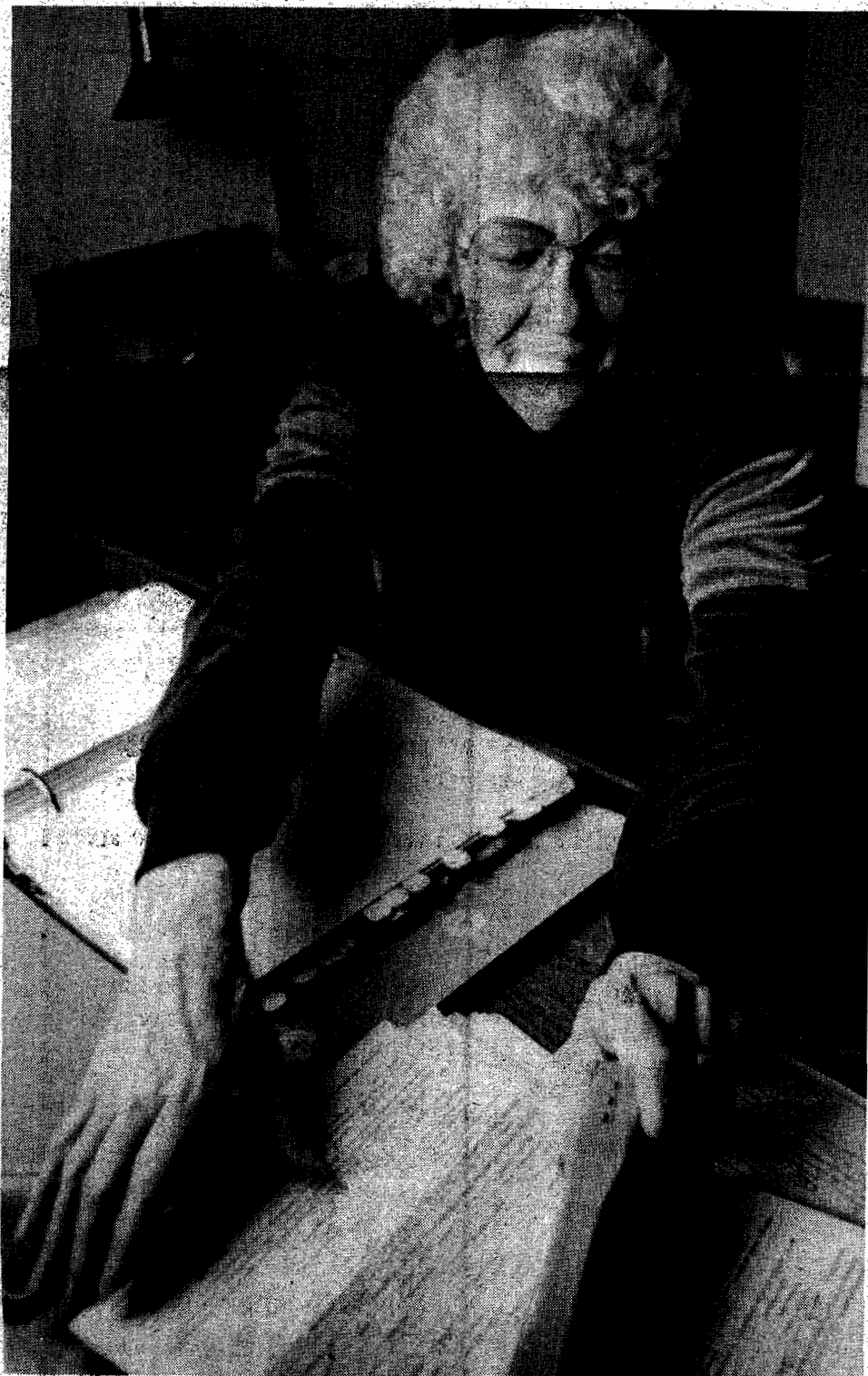
Vilardi gives no direct assistance with searches, but she will advise people on who to contact.

At first, adoption agencies felt jeopardized by adoptees searching, Vilardi said, but they have since realized it opens up a whole new field of counseling. Many mental health workers have switched from worrying about the mental health of searchers to worrying about those whose fears prevent them from searching, she said.

By structuring the registry to contain only voluntary registrations, Vilardi has bypassed a stumbling block to adoption-related searches than important than cost.

Because everyone who registers wants a reunion, she never

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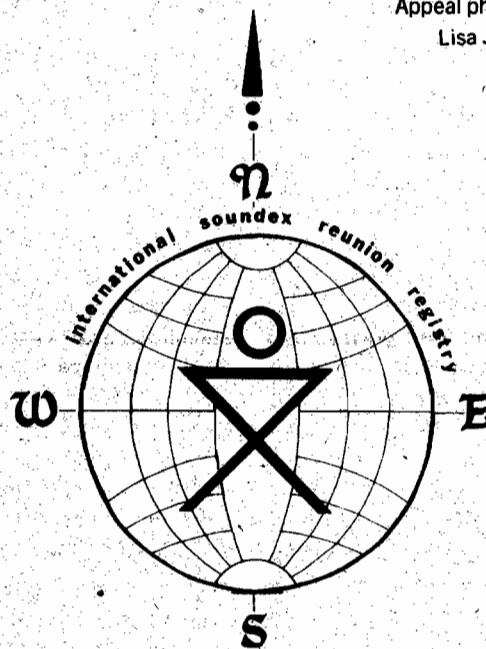
Appeal photo by Lisa J. Smith

GENEALOGIST Emma May Vilardi starts processing another stack of registration forms into her International Soundex Reunion Registry.



Emma May Vilardi and the logo of the ISRR, built around the earliest cipher known to man of a child in a crib.

Appeal photos by:
Lisa J. Smith



Many in search to find selves

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runs into the problem of someone looking for someone who doesn't want to be found.

"There's no invasion of privacy on anyone's part," she said. "Everyone fills out his own forms and, in doing so, gives his consent to be found."

The secrecy deemed necessary to protect all parties at the point of adoption so everyone could "get on with their lives" has resulted in 5 million people in the United States today who have been deprived of birthrights taken for granted by all other citizens, she said. In the spring of 1983, adoption groups participating in the registry received a "Declaration of Emancipation" which their members can file to declare their legal independence from parental and agency control.

Adoption is not tied to a point in time, as envisioned by the law and society, Vilardi said. It's a lifelong condition of being: A mother never forgets she gave up a child. The adoptive parents always know they are rearing the child of a stranger. And the adoptee always wonders about his or her roots.

Another Vilardi innovation is also designed to prevent the "stranger at the door" scene and to allay the fear of someone coming out of the past to haunt another person.

A birth parent often fears some kind of blackmail when a child they gave for adoption contacts them, then they feel guilty that they have "rejected" that child a second time, the researcher explained.

Foundlings can know the date

and place where they were found, she said, because no one's privacy is being invaded. However, a 55-year-old adoptee asked for some non-identifying information from an adoption agency a few years ago and was told he would have to get a note of permission from his adoptive parents.

For the eight years she has been lecturing at adoption seminars throughout the nation, Vilardi has also been handing out her "Waiver Of Confidentiality" forms.

The waiver allows any of the three segments of the adoption triangle to legally waive rights of confidentiality. At the same time, it limits the waiver according to the wishes of the person. For instance, release of information may be limited to adoptive parents ... only to adoptee at age of majority ... only to adoptee's issue ... medical information only to physicians, etc.

The form has been submitted to so many courts, the legal community made provisions to accept it and some states now require it, she said.

So basic and practical as to seem self-evident, such a tool did not exist before Vilardi developed it.

The lives of those involved in the adoptive triad are interwoven in pain, anger, hurt and love. Driven apart by adoption laws, they are nevertheless emotionally interdependent, she said.

Most people who call her to ask about the registry are not just curious, Vilardi said. They are fearful and driven to fight their fear by a tremendous need for self-identity.

Persons who decide to initiate a search basically want the the answers to their identity, their heritage, Vilardi said, and all grow when they undertake the positive action of a search. No truth is so ugly that the adoptee has not already conceived it in fantasy, she said. When a person begins a search, it's his or her first step toward facing the reality of his own being.

"Who am I? Where did I come from? I feel that I'm on the outside looking in. I see a stranger in the mirror," are consistent themes, she said.

Most adoptees searching are 36 to 56 years old, Vilardi said; but the oldest she has registered is 98. Some adoptees will not go into a search until they are sure their birth parents are dead because they do not want to hurt them. "But the need is always there; society just has not recognized it," she said.

Even when a search ends in rejection, Vilardi said adoptees tell her they are glad they searched. Adoptees expect rejection, she said. However, at the conclusion of a successful search, they have some knowledge of their roots, they have answers to some of their questions and they have, in effect, given birth to their own being.

Society needs not so much to condemn the fantasies of the adoptee about their birth parents but to deal with the fear fantasies of the adoptive parents, the group for whom secrecy is enforced so rigidly through privacy laws, she said.

Vilardi said she has known adoptive parents to disown a child who decides to search for his or

her birth parents, but a higher percent develop a more wholesome relationship with their adopted child.

Adoptive parents initially have a strong subconscious motivation to "kill off" the birth parents which often goes beyond their need to simply replace them in a child's eyes, Vilardi said. Especially if a woman cannot have a child, an adoptee can be a constant reminder of her barrenness and the feeling that she has stolen the fruit of another's womb. Such basic fears are evidenced by birth parents' fear of a natural parent kidnapping a child, and, finally, by "chosen-child" and "spare-the-child" stories that carry over into a child's adult life.

If a mother can love two children, why can't an adoptee love two mothers, she asked.

Vilardi advised that instead of some of the above coping mechanisms, adoptive parents pray for the birth parents.

Vilardi will accept registrations for persons younger than 18 but holds them for activation on their 18th birthday. She asks only that persons writing the registry to request a form enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Organizations wishing to participate on behalf of their memberships are encouraged to photocopy or print copies of the forms themselves as long as no changes are made because of copyright and other legal implications.

Anyone wishing to register may send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for a form to: International Soundex Reunion Registry, P.O. Box 2312, Carson City 89702.