In search of natural parents

By VALERIE EDWARDS
Appeal Staff Writer

In the mid-1970s, adoptees in search of birth parents and other relatives began calling attention to themselves, trying to get help with their searches.

As the searches' cause became the center of a public right-to-know vs. invasion-of-privacy debate, many adoption agencies held their breaths, hoping the desire was a fad and would go away.

But any time any human being is denied his or her rights, the hurt will not go away, according to Emma May Vilardi, whose adoption reunion registry in Carson City is the largest in the world. The movement did not fade, and helping adoptees in search is now a whole new social service field, she said.

Most people who call Vilardi on her reunion hotline are full of fear, she said. She said they try to keep them at ease, find out their situation and answer any questions they have.

A genealogist, historian and researcher by trade, Vilardi is also an avid stamp collector and an amateur "rockhound," writes children's stories and designs and makes period costumes for girls.

The founder of the International Soundex Reunion Registry, one of her main objectives is to reassure searchers they are not alone.

Adoption support groups in every part of the country now offer assistance and emotional support, she said. There is also a national organization with which the groups can link and a variety of publications on the psychological dynamics of adoption and searching.

The Triadoption Library headquartered in California publishes and sells "The Adoption Searchbook" with sample documents, example request letters and other search guidelines. The library used Vilardi's study of state statutes to set up a state-by-state file of updated statutes, public and private adoption agencies, adoption groups and other information pertaining to adoption.

Another publication Vilardi recommended is the "Open Arms Quarterly" out of North Platte, Neb. The magazine searches advertisements in each issue reach individuals and adoption support groups internationally.

Support groups include "WARM," Washington Adoptees Rights Movement; Truth Seekers in Adoption, one of the first groups in the United States; Concerned United Birthparents, the largest birthparents' organization, with chapters nationwide.

The groups are kept abreast of developments by the American Adoption Congress, incorporated in 1981 to act as a national organization and to disseminate information to the public about the problems associated with adoption.

Vilardi also tells her callers how to check documents, about such common search tools as birth records, tax and voter registration records and city directories. She advises them
to take a common-sense approach to where their written records would be and to consider the informal "pal system," which many people use to trade search assistance.

Adoptees' original birth certificates are sealed by the court which has jurisdiction where an adoption takes place, Vilardi explained. An amended birth certificate, with a date and place of birth furnished by the adoptive parents, is filed in the state in which they reside, and all that adoptees have access to is the amended certificate.

The 62-year-old historian charges nothing for coding and checking applications for inclusion in her Soundex Reunion Registry, although the work usually occupies her eight to 14 hours a day.

She said that, with a few exceptions — such as the day her office received 3,000 pieces of mail after a "Dear Abby" column advised searchers to register in ISRR — she codes registrations into the registry within 24 hours after she receives them.

All registrations in ISRR are voluntary, so all applicants want a reunion and there is no invasion of anyone's privacy, she said. But registrants must have enough information with which to be matched, and searchers circumventing sealed records are bad types, she said.

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Searchers are often discouraged by the lack of information that they receive. Many adoptees have been denied the right to see their original birth certificates, and these records are often sealed by the court which has jurisdiction where an adoption takes place. Adoptees are often denied the opportunity to contact their biological relatives, and these records are often sealed by the court which has jurisdiction where an adoption takes place.

The lack of access to hereditary and biological information, a byproduct of the sealing of adoption records, denies adoptees treatment that could prevent their progressive deterioration and death from a variety of rare, hereditary diseases. Vilardi said.

One out of every 10 adoptees now entering her reunion registry is listing genetically linked medical problems, she said. But all adoptees who discover a health problem related to genetic heritage can and should write their placement agency directly, she said.

Vilardi is looking toward the day when the ISRR is computerized and registrants can be matched by disease as well as by other factors.

She said she can almost guarantee two ISRR registrants documenting the same rare disease are related.

Although she is close to having a central, computerized reunion registry, Vilardi is not
Adoptees helped through registry

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the only person who envisions one. Since 1979, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., has been advocating a national adoption identification center. He is currently sponsoring a Uniform Adoption Act as an amendment to the Child Abuse Prevention Act of 1973. It would establish a national informational center under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Like Vilardi's ISRR, all registrations would be voluntary, and all information would be confidential. Only 10 states have state registries, Levin pointed out in a letter to his fellow senators. The state registries are handicapped because birth parents are most likely to register in the state where their child was born. Adoptees, many of whom do not know where they were actually born, will probably register in the state where they were adopted, so the registrations are never linked. Vilardi said society's attitude toward adoption as a one-time process is responsible for the prohibitions in present laws and for much of the heartache experienced by those who try to claim their right to know.

An adoption decree is essentially a contract over another person for life, Vilardi pointed out.

Adoption was not known under English Common Law, she said, so each state passed its own statutes as the nation grew. But in all those statutes, she said, an adoptee remains a perpetual child.

In the 13 original colonies, if a father died, a mother was not considered her children's legal guardian. "Orphans Courts" appointed administrators, often indentured or apprenticed the children.

The holder of a bond of indenture could sell the paper without his servant's consent. Nor did children apprenticed fare much better. They could not work up to an apprenticeship for 12 or so years, so they started their careers in debt for room and board all those years.

The first child welfare laws were based on precedents set by laws against cruelty to animals, Vilardi said. In the late 1900s, the Welfare League for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was instituted. The records of their intervention in a case of cruelty to an orphan are the first documented legal protest of cruelty to children in this country, Vilardi said.

Laws enacted during the 1940s were based on the need to protect minor adoptees and adoptive families. Those precedents have been interpreted by the courts to mean that records are sealed for life, she said.

Some adoptees have gone through two adoptions, she said, and face two sets of sealed records. A two-record barrier is established if a couple who originally adopted divorces and a new marriage partner later adopts the child. Also, during the Great Depression some adoptions were "revoked" for financial or psychological reasons, Vilardi said.

To register in the International Soundex Reunion Registry, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for a registration form to the registry, P.O. Box 2012, Carson City 89702.