

Unique Carson group helps locate long-lost relatives

By KATE SANTICH

Greg Johnson's aunt was on her deathbed when she decided it was time to tell her nephew the truth: He had a brother he'd never met. The infant had been left by his mother on the steps of a church.

It had happened during the Great Depression. His mother was pregnant with her fifth child when the father died suddenly. The mother, pressured by bleak economic reality, was forced to make a painful decision. When the baby was born, the aunt helped the mother wrap it up and abandon it.

Until recently, there was no way for Johnson — not his real name — to find his brother. His mother has long been dead and there is no trail of evidence to follow, no sealed adoption file that a court could order opened, no social worker to help uncover the unpleasant facts.

But a non-profit agency in Carson City is giving the man at least a slim chance of finding his long-lost sibling.

It is the International Soundex Reunion Registry, an organization that is helping more than 17,000 people discover a heritage that has been obscured by adoption, divorce, abandonment and immigration.

"Illegitimacy has stained the whole picture of adoption in this country. For so many generations, it has been cloaked in secrecy — everything has been swept under the rug," says Emma May Vilardi, who founded the registry in 1975 after witnessing her mother finish a long career with the federal government only to have her pension held up because she was an adopted child and could produce no birth certificate.

So Vilardi, with a lengthy background

as a historian, researcher and legal tracer for the U.S. Government, developed a coded filing system that has matched up 125 relatives in the last year alone.

The registry, the only one of its magnitude in the world, works solely to reunite those who have filed requests; its organizers are not interested in tearing asunder families who would rather forget what happened decades ago. It also demands that applicants be at least 18 years old, and absolutely everything is confidential. Vilardi would not divulge the names of anyone in the registry, not even those who already had found a match. But she did tell some of their anonymous stories.

She believes the registry is a sign of the times — a symbol that adoption, with its sealed court records, is perhaps coming out of the closet. That supposition is backed up by social services specialist Rota Rosaschi, who heads the state's reunion registry for the Nevada Welfare Division.

"Children Have a tremendous amount of curiosity about their backgrounds. They especially want to know the reason for relinquishment," Rosaschi says. "It's something they have to live with every day."

She calls the move away from secrecy a "national trend" and adds, "You'd better believe it's positive." In other countries, such as England, adoption records are automatically opened to adoptees once they reach a legal age.

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PHOTO BY JEAN DIXON

HELPS LOST PERSONS: Emma May Vilardi's unique service works on reuniting more than 17,000 people who have lost relatives from adoption, divorce or for other reasons. Her Carson City agency helped bring 125 family members together last year.

Relatives

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Vilardi also points to the national proliferation of "triadoption" groups devoted to providing information and emotional support to the three sides of the adoption triangle: the country's 5 million adult adoptees, their adoptive parents and their birth parents.

These groups are her best advertisers; 330 of them refer their clients to the registry. Others have discovered her service through Abigail Van Buren, who in November of last year ran a column with the registry's address that in part read:

"Dear Abby, 19 years ago my parents forced me to give up a baby girl for adoption because I was 16, unmarried and pregnant. I was very bitter at the time because I wanted to keep my daughter, but I realize that my parents did what they thought was best for me.

"I am now a happily married mother of three, but my nightly prayer is to meet my first-born child. I have no desire to 'surprise' her with a telephone call or an unexpected visit. I want to meet her only if she wants to meet me."

Since the column was published, Vilardi has received 8,500 requests for registration forms. On one particular day, there were 3,000 letters.

"The postman told me, 'You people got more mail in a single day than all the businesses in Carson City put together,'" Vilardi says.

The registry is governed by 21 trustees who live throughout the United States and Canada, including adoption experts, psychiatrists, chaplains, adoptees, and both adoptive and birth parents. There are several affiliate offices in the country and one in the United Kingdom.

The registry works like this: After people write in requesting information, the organization returns a registration form that seeks as many of the details as possible about where and when the child was born, what was the name at birth, who was the attending physician, what is the birth certificate number, and vital statistics on the birth parents and adoptive parents.

It's not expected that someone will be able to answer all the questions, but the more information provided, the more chance there is of finding a match. The average age of the applicants is 36, but some were born near the turn of the century and have only a cloudy recollection of their early childhood.

The applicant must also sign a release allowing the registry to verify the information, a move that is intended to keep attorneys and private investigators from abusing the system by searching on behalf of someone else.

(Vilardi once had a woman try to register who was searching for the child her sister had relinquished more than 20 years ago. It seemed she wanted to give her sister a "surprise present.")

The organization takes the form and files the information using the "soundex code," a system of transcribing the alphabet into numerals. It is then checked against other registrants' forms in the small room of filing cabinets that serves as an office to see

if there is a match. If not, it goes into one of the scores of notebooks according to the year and state of birth.

If there is a match, Vilardi calls both parties collect to make certain they still want to see each other and provides them with the needed phone numbers and addresses. The service is free; the organization's annual budget — which topped \$2,000 in 1983 — was fed in its early years by Vilardi's husband, Tony, and only recently have contributions been enough to sustain it.

The news that there has been a match is invariably traumatic.

"You have to remember many of these mothers never even saw their babies — it was forbidden. One mother said she sneaked into the nursery and cut off a lock of her baby's hair because she knew she'd probably never see him again and she wanted something to remember him by," Vilardi says.

The reunion, then, brings together people who really are strangers to each other. Mothers imagine they will see their "babies" even though their son or daughter might be 40 years old. For these reasons, the registry has professionals who volunteer counseling services to those who want it.

As Rosaschi says, "I don't think it's necessarily a happy ending. But if they go through the registry — while it's still a scary prospect to meet a child you haven't seen in 30 years — there's a better chance that the end result will be happy because both sides wanted it. It's better than unsealing the court records and tracking down birth parents who may not want to see the children they gave up."

The Nevada State Reunion Registry, created by the Legislature in 1979, works much the same as the soundex registry, but the adoption has to have taken place within the state. It has produced no matches to date, a fact that the social worker blames on the practice being "a relatively new trend."

The international registry has had more success. Of the 12,000 people registered during the past year, 125 were linked with birth parents, children or siblings. In one case, a woman wrote to find her three brothers, who were separated from her as infants and scattered to foster homes. She remembered little of them except that when they were taken the youngest began sobbing, and to stop his tears she gave him her favorite doll. Years later another brother — who knew the whereabouts of his brothers but had been unsuccessful in finding his sister — entered the registry and he too recalled the episode. The four have since been reunited.

In addition to healing severed families such as these, the registry has set up a program for adoptees to discover something of their medical history. Through a "medic alert" system, birth parents can write in to warn of genetic health problems so that adoptive parents or adult adoptees can check on troubling symptoms that could indicate an inherited disease.

Its latest service is to help trace the offspring of surrogate mothers or children who are the products of artificial insemination.

"That is almost impossible," Vilardi admits, "but we can't refuse anybody. What human being doesn't want to know his roots?"