



Search in Adoption: Getting Started and Beyond

Adoption is a lifelong process that often raises questions from adoptees who may choose to engage in a search process. In Minnesota, court adoption records are confidential and original Birth Certificates at the time that an adoption is finalized are sealed and withheld from public inspection as well as inspection by the adoptee. Parties to an adoption may seek to obtain non-identifying and/or identifying information have the following options:

A search can be conducted in a number of ways including:

- Doing your own search
- Paying an adoption agency or county to search for you
- Hiring a professional searcher
- Petitioning the judge in the court in which the adoption occurred to open the record
- Signing up with a passive mutual adoption registry

Even as adults, adopted persons do NOT have a legal right to obtain their original birth certificate except in Kansas, Alaska, Delaware, Oregon, Tennessee and Alabama. Open records legislation is pending in Georgia, Nevada and Missouri.

Conduct Your Own Search

Start by turning back the clock, interviewing those who were connected to the adoption or relinquishment. Adoptive parents, relatives, friends and neighbors may recall details that might be missing from paperwork. Each fact obtained (a date, name, location, hospital) can later be traced through records or online sources. Adopted persons should apply for a clean copy of their amended birth certificate since the hospital and place of birth is usually accurate. Record every detail in one central source such as a three-ring notebook. Some experts suggest that the notebook be filled with as much information as possible before proceeding because sketchy information may lead to contacting the wrong people with the wrong questions. Since names are changed in adoption, the focal point of the first phase of the search is to determine missing names. Names can be traced through driver's license, birth, death, marriage, tax, child protection, divorce, criminal, war and death records.

The current genealogy craze has created numerous online searching resources. Computers allow users to examine public records (www.searchsystems.net); find birth dates with links to addresses and phone numbers (www.anybirthday.com); and locate phone numbers or addresses (www.switchboard.com, www.anywho.com). Searchers can also post a name on computer networks (www.adoption.org/searchreunion, www.news2mail.com/alt/adoption) and greatly enlarge the scope of their outreach.

Search consultants suggest that a simple explanation to use when seeking information is, "I'm looking for my family tree." The exception is with librarians who may already be bogged down with patrons doing genealogical searches. Librarians will need to be apprised that this is an adoption search in order to lend their skills and knowledge to the process.

Agency or County-Facilitated Search

In Minnesota, an adopted person who is 19 or over, or a birth parent of an adopted person 19 years or older, may request identifying information from the Minnesota Department of Health, the adoption agency or county that handled the adoption, or the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS). Hennepin County and Ramsey County do not do searches, but rather contract with Children's Home Society to provide this for-a-fee service to past clients. Those who do not know the name of the placing agency may write Sandy LeMire, DHS Adoption Unit, Children and Family Services, Human Services Building, 444 Lafayette, St. Paul, MN 55155.

Adoption agencies and counties typically charge a fee for searching and acting as an intermediary. The fee does not guarantee a reunion. When contacted by an intermediary, a birth mother may waive her right to privacy by signing a legal affidavit of disclosure or she may refuse contact. A birth father who is listed on the birth certificate has the same rights of privacy or disclosure. Since some birth parents initially refuse contact but later change their minds, counties and adoption agencies should make it a practice to re-contact them at a later date regarding the prospect of reunion. Adopted persons who wish to locate siblings and other genetic relatives are dependent upon a birth parent's degree of comfort with being contacted.

Hire a Professional Searcher

The popularity of adoption reunions on television has created a cottage industry of searchers-for-hire who can be found on the Web and in phonebooks. Search consultants use detective skills and Internet savvy to locate missing family members. Before hiring a searcher, check out credentials and ask for references from former clients. Some search consultants who have adoption connections charge minimal fees and will act as an intermediary throughout the process of searching.

Petition the Court to Release Records

Petitioning the court to open birth records is sometimes the least costly and easiest method of searching. While everyone has the right to represent themselves in legal proceedings, it may be helpful to consult with a lawyer about your legal rights and the process for petitioning the court for access to birth records. The necessary forms can be downloaded from www.courts.state.mn.us/ctforms. (Select "Confidential or Sealed File" from options.) First, locate the court that finalized the adoption since the petition must be filed in the court where the adoption was finalized. If possible, research the judge you wish to petition since some judges are more open to searchers than others. Reasons for requesting information must be stated including medical conditions or the known death of any family members.

Adopted persons of Native American heritage who are eighteen or over may be helped in the search process by the Indian Child Welfare Act. This federal law provides that the Minnesota Department of Human Services reveal information in order to facilitate tribal enrollment. To explore this option, contact Sandy LeMire at DHS.

Sign Up for an Adoption Registry

Mutual consent registries rely on birth and adopted persons registering independent of one another in hopes of being united. Such registries are typically ineffective with as few as 10 percent resulting in reunions. Online for-a-fee registries are increasing, but the system is dependent upon both parties registering and an administrator who determines a match and notifies parties. International Soundex Reunion Registry (ISRR) is the largest and the most widely used registry. (www.issr.net)

Searching: A Life Journey

For adopted persons, searching does not indicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's adoptive family. The reasons for seeking one's origins vary from curiosity to a strong need to explore one's identity. More women than men search, but like their male counterparts, they are often cued by life-changing events, a developmental need or a crisis. The greatest fear voiced by those who search is that they will be rejected by those they seek. Searching takes courage, and not all stay the course once they begin the journey. Support from others who share in the unique journey of searching can be invaluable. If possible, join or start a search support group that meets in person or online to compare methodology and resources.

Minnesota Resources

Minnesota Department of Health Minnesota Department of Human Services
Office of State Registrar/Records Management Adoption Services
717 Delaware Street SE 444 Lafayette Road North
PO Box 9441 St Paul MN 55155-3831
Minneapolis MN 55440-9441 651-206-2795 www.dhs.state.mn.us
612-676-5120 (*DHS Data Practices Manual* www.dhs.state.mn.us
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/osr/adoption.html us/fmo/legalmgt/dp/adoption.htm;))

Children's Home Society (CHS) Summary Guide to Minnesota Adoption
Post Adoption Services *Law and Procedure*
2230 Como Avenue by Amy Silberberg, Attorney at Law
St Paul MN 55108 Available through Minnesota Continuing
651-646-6393 Legal Education
www.chsm.com To order: 651-227-8266 or 800-759-8840

Minnesota Support Groups for Searching

Concerned United Birthparents (CUB)
First Wednesday, monthly, 7 p.m.
CUB welcomes birth parents, adopted persons, adoptive parents, and professionals
St. Louis Park Recreation Center
5005 West 36th St
St Louis Park, MN
952-930-9058
info@cubirthparents.org SearchQuest1@aol.com

Fergus Falls - Search & Reunion Discussion Group
Second Tuesday, monthly, 5 p.m.
Permanent Family Resource Center
1220 North Tower Road
Fergus Falls, MN 56537
218-998-3400
www.permanentfamily.org

National and Online Resources

International Soundex Reunion Registry (ISRR)
P.O. Box 2312
Carson City, Nevada 89702-2312
(775) 882-7755 Online registration form: www.isrr.net
Send Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope to receive registration forms.

National Indian Child Welfare Association American Adoption Congress
5100 SW Macadam Avenue, Suite 300 P.O. Box 42730
Portland, OR 97239 Washington DC 20015
503-222-4044, Fax: 503-222-4007 (202) 483-3399
info@nicwa.org www.americanadoptioncongress.org
Provides information about Indian Child Welfare Act. Provides search information.

National Adoption Registry
4049 Pennsylvania Avenue, Suite 303
Kansas City MO 64111
1-800-875-4347 FAX 816-960-1881
www.nationaladoptionregistry.com
info@nationaladoptionregistry.com

www.ancestry.com - includes vital records, military, records, court records and much more. Also contains link to social security death index that can determine if someone is still alive, as well as their last known address.

www.anybirthday.com - search by name for a birth date; links to address/phone.

www.bastards.org/search - offers excellent articles about search, websites, registries with many links and online resources.

www.birthquest.com - has an online searchable adoption database for a fee. Users can find phone numbers, email, cell phone numbers, background check resources and more.

www.classmates.com - connects high school alumni online. Useful in adoption searches if name and year of graduation of person sought is known.

www.familytreemaker.com - offers software and multiple resources in genealogy searching.

www.findme-registry.com - free reunion and search registry open to adopted persons, siblings, birth parents and all birth family members.

www.geocities.com/cribbswh.obit - search by obituary.

www.vitalrec.com/mn - gives vital records information including birth, marriage, census, death, immigration, naturalization, military records. Lists county offices, costs and requirements to get various documents.