



S.C.'s sealed adoptions a roadblock in quest for truth

Lyn Riddle, *The Greenville (S.C.) News* 6:47 p.m. EDT April 13, 2014

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GREENVILLE, S.C. — Tonya Couick knows but the barest details.

She was born Sept. 7, 1977, in Greenville, S.C.

And she has a photograph. [It shows her with her twin sister, Sonya](#), sitting on a woman's lap. The children are wearing matching blue and white rompers. Couick thinks they're 2, but they look younger. One is crying. The other sucks her fist.

The woman with bushy brown hair and large brown eyes looks so very young. Her name is Mary. She is Couick's birth mother.

Couick is one of thousands of people in South Carolina looking to learn their past, a search stymied by state law, those who work to match birth mothers and adoptees say.

The biggest obstacle stems from the fact that in South Carolina and 40 other states, an adopted child cannot get an original birth certificate without the consent of the birth mother.

Increasingly, states are revamping their laws to do away with that condition. In those states, adoptees can walk into a state office and obtain the birth certificate issued on the day they were born, which lists the names of the birth parents. South Carolina has sealed those records since 1964.

In all, 12 states have unsealed the records. No legislation is pending in South Carolina to do so.



"A lot of South Carolina adoption laws need to be changed," said Linda Cecil, a private investigator who maintains an online registry for people in South Carolina who are searching for birth families. She said 7,500 people are registered.

The state Department of Social Services also maintains a registry for people adopted through the agency.

Cecil said the process is cumbersome and difficult, and for private adoptions the search is even harder.

Illinois State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, who worked to get Illinois law changed to open birth records, said the most repeated message by those who oppose such legislation is that the birth mother's privacy should be protected.

"There was a presumption that women were embarrassed about having an out-of-wedlock birth, that protection from society was needed," she said. "But the law overreached by saying that my mother needed protection from me."

A woman's search

Couick, 36, and her sister were adopted by a family in Clover, S.C., when they were 4. She doesn't remember her first years, doesn't know how she came to live with Shirley and Robert Davis. She remembers an adoption party and being told "this is your new family now."

Couick has two daughters, both of whom live with others. She keeps in touch with both.

She works for a dry cleaner in Morganton, N.C. She feels that her life has taken a positive turn after many years of disruption.

But there's a blank space. She wants to know her birth mother. She began her search a couple of years ago after her adoptive mother gave her the name of a social worker at the Department of Social Services who handled the adoption. Her adoptive mother told her she thought her birth mother had written a letter to her and her sister.

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Excited, Couick called. The social worker said Couick would have to go to Columbia, S.C., for four hours of counseling before she could release any information.

"I can't do that," Couick said. "I have a job."

Her birth mother would have to do the same.

Donna Cooper, who works with the state's adoption registry, said the counseling involves helping both parties know what to expect.

Cecil said she believes the amount of time required is excessive. There also is a 30-day waiting period before the parties can contact each other.

Couick said she wants to meet her birth mother, largely because she wants to know her medical history.

"I don't expect anything," she said. "I just want to know her."

Past unknown

Cecil said searches can end in joy, sorrow and somewhere in between.

"The first search I ever did was my own," Cecil said.

She eventually learned that she worked in a building adjacent to her birth mother's office.

"She could look out her window and watch me park my car," Cecil said.

The mother had been told Cecil died of a childhood illness. She told Cecil how hard it was to pretend her second pregnancy was her first.

"It was a honeymoon," Cecil said. "But I didn't belong there. That was not my family."

The meeting brought her closer to the family that raised her, she said.

"We are not looking for parents. We're looking for answers," she said.

Sondi Hill, the South regional director for the [American Adoption Congress](#), said the birth family to adoptees is a huge blank spot.

"At the American Adoption Congress annual meeting, a lot of people get their first understanding of what the secrets in their lives do," she said. "A lot of information is misunderstood. It's better with the truth."

Feigenholtz said Illinois has 350,000 files of people older than 21 who were adopted. Multiply that by two and that represents the universe of birth parents, she said. In the two years since the law passed, more than 10,000 people have found their birth parents.

"Children flourish with the truth," she said. "Children spend a lot of time fantasizing. I thought I was an Armenian princess."

After meeting her birth mother, she found out her grandparents were from Poland.

Feigenholtz said when she read the story in *The Greenville News* last year of a Greenville man who found his sister who had been adopted after searching for 30 years, she wondered how much time Barbara Mapes, the sister, spent thinking about her birth family rather than studying in graduate school.

"We are a closed record generation," she said.

A happy reunion

Karen Smith was 16 when she found out she was pregnant. She was living in Dalton, Ga., with her mother and stepfather, in a time when race relations meant whites stayed with whites and blacks with blacks. Smith is white; the father of Smith's baby is black.

Her mother sent her to Love Life Ministries in Florence, S.C., to have the baby and give her up for adoption.

"The only thing I had was breast milk and love," Smith said. She felt that God was telling her to find a loving home for the baby, that she could not bring her home.

She gave birth on Oct. 12, 1990, and signed the papers the same day. Then she returned home to Dalton.

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"I felt horrible," she said, but she also knew it would have been wrong to take the baby away from parents who wanted her.

Smith knew the child's name was Beth and that the couple who adopted her was older, but Smith did not know their names.

When Beth turned 18, Smith started looking for her in earnest. She searched MySpace accounts and contacted South Carolina authorities. She ran into dead ends.

She stumbled upon the registry Cecil runs. She entered the birth date, and in moments there was a match.

"That's my daughter," she said. "I know."

She contacted Cecil, who confirmed the young woman was her birth daughter. Cecil made the contact.

A few days later, Smith received an email from Beth Miller, the child, now a woman, she gave up for adoption. "Dear Karen," it began. Miller said she was surprised Smith still remembered her and that she, too, wanted to meet.

"How could I ever forget you?" Smith responded. "I've been looking for you for 23 years."

They wrote four emails back and forth and then started texting. Then Miller told Smith she was a grandmother.

"I searched for one and got two," Smith said.

They met on a Friday, the 13th of December, last year.

"The greatest Friday the 13th of my life," Smith said.