

More than 12,000 find birth parents after 2010 adoption law



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(Photo: MYKAL McELDOWNEY/Staff)

A law, sponsored by Illinois State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, allowing adoptees to obtain their original birth certificate was signed into law five years ago today. Since then, 12,011 people have been able to discover the names of their birth parents. Here's a story from a few years ago about two whose lives were changed because of Feigenholtz's work.

This story was originally published in *The Greenville News* in August 2013.

Rifling through his mother's dresser one afternoon while she was at work, Cletus Lynch found a picture of a girl with wavy hair, a broad smile, wearing a party dress spread out just so as she sat on a chair. She looked to be about 8.

This was about 1960 in Danville, Ill., a town of 40,000 then, before the factories of the nation's Rust Belt dwindled, leaving the economy to run almost exclusively on soybeans and corn. Lynch was 10 or 11.

He and his mother, Edythe, lived in a one-room apartment in a home owned by the woman who cared for him while his mother worked. It was a simple place, with a twin bed beside one wall and another beside the window.

Every Saturday after a dinner of hot dogs and chili, young Cletus and his mother listened to "Gunsmoke" on a Philco radio positioned high on the only shelf in the room.

On that summer day after finding the picture, he studied it, an 8-by-10 black and white, then slipped it back in its hiding place. When his mother got home from Kresge, where she worked as a supervisor in the dish department, he watched as she put down her purse and turned to start supper.

He burst out, "I found a picture in the drawer. Who is it?"

She hesitated, then whispered, "Your sister." Tears filled her eyes as she explained a pharmacist and his wife had adopted her. She had been born two years after Cletus.



After a 35-year search, Cletus Lynch finally got the chance to meet his biological sister Barbara Mapes at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport on Thursday, August 8, 2013. MYKAL McELDOWNEY/Staff, The Greenville News MYKAL McELDOWNEY/Staff

Stunned, he asked no more questions.

Thirty-five miles away in Paris, Ill., Barbara Ann Mapes lived in a stone ranch-style house beside a little pond outside town. Her parents had built the house the year before she was born.

Her father, Russell Mapes, was a co-owner of a furniture store in town. Her mother oversaw the operation of her family's farm. The property was leased to tenants but, nevertheless, Hermine Mapes liked to ride the combine and sold the grain. She was also active in the First Christian Church.

It was an idyllic childhood. Young Barbara always knew she had been adopted and it made her feel special. She was chosen. She wasn't curious about her biological parents.

Her mother was her best friend.

The family doctor delivered her to her parents when she was just four hours old. Hermine and Russell, they were her real parents.

She had a pony named Prince and then a horse named Dusty. On her 11th birthday, her parents gave her a rat terrier she named Sandy. Her first car was a maize Ford Futura Falcon. A special place for her was Twin Lakes Park in Paris. She liked to ride the miniature train and the carousel.

One of her favorite pictures from her childhood was taken by a professional photographer when she was about 8. She was wearing a party dress spread out just so as she sat on a chair. She was smiling.

When he was born, Cletus Lynch's mother was 34. His father, Clarence Griffin, was 61. Griffin was the town veterinarian, caring for the cows and horses on what was known as Ten Mile Prairie, land so flat a storm could be seen coming from that far away.

Lynch and Griffin were not married then and did not marry for many years after that. But Griffin came over every evening after work and at bedtime went to his house about three miles away.

On weekends they drove through the countryside in Griffin's Chevy. He was always the first one in town to have a new car and by the time he died he had owned 75 of them.

They'd travel to Terra Haute for a train ride. To Twin Lakes Park for a picnic that always included Edythe's roast beef salad. They went to Twin Lakes often.

By the time Lynch was 10, he had been to 38 states. And by the time he was 15, he had preached his first sermon. His parents started going with him to First Baptist Church of Danville about that time and wanted to be baptized. The preacher refused. They needed to get married first. One day they picked Cletus up from school and handed him a jewelry box. Inside was their marriage certificate.

A year later, Clarence Griffin died, hours before Cletus was due to leave for Bob Jones University in Greenville.

He was two weeks late, but Lynch made it to Bob Jones and ultimately graduated with a degree in Bible. His high school girlfriend, Marveena, graduated with him from Bob Jones in 1971. They married that summer.

No matter the distance, Marveena and her sister spoke on the phone every day. They were each other's best friend, the person who got the first call when something went wrong or something went right. They held family reunions, but Lynch refused to go. He had no extended family, just his mother who lived in Illinois while he pastored churches in South Carolina.

Lynch decided to start looking for his sister. And he didn't tell anyone.

As a child, Mapes asked her mother every now and then about her biological family. She didn't want to push the issue. Didn't want to hurt her mother. Didn't want her mother to think she wasn't enough or that her daughter was ungrateful.

Mapes went to the University of Illinois for two years, then transferred to Elmhurst College when her husband, her high school boyfriend, went to law school in Chicago. She earned a master's degree from Concordia Teachers College. Moving back to Paris when her husband graduated law school, she taught remedial reading.

When she was pregnant with her first child, the desire to know more about her biological family grew stronger. Asked about her medical history, she couldn't say. She wondered how someone could give up a child. This one inside her was already loved, deeply.

Her mother said her biological father had tried to set up a trust fund for her. Once he contacted them directly and they declined. Another time he contacted a mutual friend. And a third time, when she was in the sixth grade, he had gone to her school and obtained a photograph of a sixth-grade class. He took the photo to a mutual friend and said, "Which one is she?"

The woman responded, "She's not in this picture."

Mapes' mother gave her the name of the attorney who handled the adoption.

He had one bit of information. Her mother's name was Ethel Lynch. It seemed the perfect path to the past, but little did she know it was yet another roadblock.

Cletus Lynch had little to go on. He called the county seat looking for a birth record. Denied. He called the library looking for a birth announcement. Not available, contact the newspaper. Someone at the newspaper said they didn't have papers from 1951, contact the library. He called the Paris hospital where he believed his sister was born. Privacy law prevented them from giving any information.

He called every pharmacist in Paris. Nothing.

"It was a brick wall every place I turned," Lynch said.

Every so often he'd think of some other avenue. And every time he came up empty. For 35 years, he searched. Earlier this year, he felt defeated. It wasn't meant to be. He gave up.

For some reason, she's not sure why, Mapes always thought she had a brother. She just knew that one day she'd be walking down a street or in an airport and see this man who looked just like her.

She started traveling to county courthouses looking for Ethel Lynch. She knocked on people's doors and even made friends with a woman named Ethel Lynch. The search before the Internet was tedious.

"I never found anything," she said.

By then she had two daughters. Her mother had died. And she was going through a divorce.

"I could have used a big brother then," she said, and laughed. She had seen a counselor, trying to deal with the issue of abandonment. Why was she not wanted? Who was this person who gave her up? These people? She felt particularly interested in finding her dad because she knew he had tried so hard to do something nice for her.

Once the websites that enabled people to find lost relatives and friends became popular, she joined every one. She got a huge list of Ethel Lynches all across the country and one by one made phone calls.

"I gave up," she said.

In 2011, the Illinois Legislature changed state law on birth certificates for adoptees. Before then, the original birth certificate was sealed when a child was adopted and a new one issued listing the adoptive parents' names.

Under the new law, adoptees could fill out a form and get the original. Mapes, 61, printed out the form and let it sit on her desk for a year and a half.

She had been disappointed, hurt, baffled so many times before. She didn't know if she could go through that again.

She mailed the request in May, and in June, she had her original birth certificate. Mother: Ethel Edythe Lynch. No father listed. On the line for other children, the certificate listed the numeral one. She had a sibling.

She asked her daughters whether she should hire someone to find him.

They were united: Go for it.

Mapes paid OmniTrace, a company in Florida, \$1,300 to find her biological family. The investigator turned up nothing under Ethel Lynch so decided to use Edythe. Census records showed Edythe Lynch in Danville, Ill., and she had a son. A few mouse clicks later and he had Cletus Lynch's phone number.

Lynch, 63, was at work at Met Life Financial three weeks ago when his wife called.

She said a man had called to say he represented Barbara Mapes, who he believed was Lynch's sister. Mapes would call the next evening if he agreed.

Lynch told his wife he had been looking for his sister for 35 years.

"I had no idea," Marveena Lynch said.

Mapes learned the next morning that she had a brother and he was expecting her call. A resident of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Mapes paced. And fretted.

Three thousand miles away, Lynch was doing the same.

What if this was a disappointment? What if the sister, the brother, wasn't a good person? What if so many things.

Mapes said about dinnertime she sat down to call, then got up and washed her hands, then got a drink of water, looked out the window. Finally, her granddaughter and husband said CALL.

She punched in the numbers and waited.

A man answered.

"Is this Cletus?" she asked.

"Yes."

"This is Barbara Mapes. I believe I am your sister."

They both laughed. And they cried. They talked for a long time.

In the days since, they've chatted several times a day on Facebook and burned up Skype at night.

Similarities between them are many. They both have high blood pressure. They love to laugh. Marveena Lynch said Mapes' obvious joy in living and good will reminds her of Edythe Lynch.

"She was always on the go," Marveena Lynch said.

The brother and sister were both lifeguards as children and were active in Scouting.

Mapes' granddaughter looked at a picture of Cletus Lynch and said, "Same eyes, same nose, same ankles."

"Ankles?" Mapes responded.

They decided Mapes would come to Greenville on Aug. 8 to meet in person.

"She said she would stay in a hotel, and I said, if you're going to do that, stay in Edmonton," Lynch said.

They both feel as if the puzzle that represents their lives is made whole. The missing piece has been filled.

Mapes said, "Now I have the connection with somebody from the past. I didn't just drop out of the sky."

The biological connection fills in her medical history and explains her daughter's red hair.

Some questions will go unanswered because Edythe Lynch died in 1998. How did she get the picture? Were they at Twin Lakes Park at the same time? Why did she sign her name Ethel? Why did she say a pharmacist adopted Barbara, then named Julia?

In talking with Mapes recently, Lynch discovered that the furniture store her father owned was next door to a pharmacy.

The alley that separated the pharmacy and furniture store kept him from finding her all those years ago.

"But it worked out," he said. "It worked out."