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Op-Ed Contributor

## Mystery-Free Adoption

By BARBARA BISANTZ RAYMOND

LEGISLATORS in New York and six other states, including New Jersey and Connecticut, are weighing whether to give thousands of accurate birth certificates to their rightful owners, adult adoptees who now have access only to falsified certificates.

Most of Americas six million adoptees are members of what one calls a witness protection program we didnt ask to be in. When their adoptions were made final, the birth certificates bearing their names and those of their parents were sealed by the state, and they were issued amended certificates portraying their adoptive parents as having borne them. In some cases, adoptees dates and places of birth were also falsified.

As a result, many adoptees find it difficult to find their birth parents. These altered certificates and the withholding of originals even after the adoptees have reached adulthood also prevent them from knowing possibly life-saving information about their family health histories.

The consequences of falsifying birth certificates are so dire that you might assume theyre balanced by some important need and that the practice was instituted for good reasons. I used to believe this too. I was wrong.

It was begun by Georgia Tann, a conscienceless woman who from 1924 to 1950 operated out of Memphis arranging the illegal adoptions of poor children by middle-class and wealthy couples. She acquired many of these children through kidnapping, and at least 50 of the more than 5,000 children she dealt with died of neglect.

Tann began falsifying adoptees birth certificates in 1928. She did so to cover her crimes, but claimed that it spared them the shame of being known to have been adopted and, often, born outside wedlock.

This must have sounded good to well-meaning legislators and social workers, because by 1948 almost every state falsified adoptees birth certificates. Today all 50 states do, and the **United States has the sad distinction of being one of very few industrialized countries to deny adoptees their birth parents names.**

**We must eradicate a criminals legacy; every state should give adoptees access to their original birth certificates and adoption records.**

In 1999, Tennessee, Georgia Tanns base, became the first to enact open adoption records laws. Since then, Delaware, Oregon, Alabama, New Hampshire and Maine have followed suit. Nine other states allow adult adoptees born before or after certain dates access to their true certificates.

Have the predictions by open-adoption opponents come true? Has there been a decrease in adoption and an increase in abortion, caused by pregnant womens fear that the children they surrender to adoption might find them decades later? An increase in the divorce rate for women whod never told their husbands about the child they surrendered to adoption? Have adoptees stalked parents who dont want contact?

No. **If openness had any effect, it has been to increase adoptions and decrease abortions, according to Fred Greenman, a lawyer who has studied adoption and abortion rates in places that allow adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates.**

There have been no verified reports of divorces caused by adoptee reunions with birth mothers or fathers. And mothers whove made clear they dont want to meet their surrendered children have not been harassed. This isnt surprising: few adoptees wish to experience rejection firsthand.

**Its also true that the number of birth mothers who dont want to meet their children is tiny. Surveys show that the great majority of them welcome, even long for, contact.**

Even the few mothers who dont want contact with their children are better served by open adoption records. States that have granted adoptees access to their original birth certificates have built in vehicles enabling birth parents to let their children know whether and how they want to meet. No violations have been reported.

**In states with closed adoption records, on the other hand, parents who prefer not to have contact have no means to make their wishes known.** And though its hard for people whove been adopted in states with closed adoption records to find their families, its not impossible.

My daughter Beth was adopted in New York, a closed record state, but at her request I found her parents as well as her three brothers, four grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Ive been waiting for this day! Beths mother cried when I reached her.

Over the past 10 years, Beth has visited her family frequently. Shes been in her brothers weddings, and they, and the brother she was raised with, have been in hers. Shes filled the gap that had always pained her that feeling of a constant gnawing, as one adoptee described it.

Knowing who I am is my birthright, another told me. Its time to give adult adoptees the tool they need to help them find their families: access to honest birth certificates.

**Barbara Bisantz Raymond is the author of The Baby Thief: The Untold Story of Georgia Tann, the Baby Seller Who Corrupted Adoption.**