A Newsletter for German-Born Adoptees



Geborener Deutscher®

Vol. XIV, No. 3 *(Issue #52)* *Autumn 2001*

A Long Search Ends

Sisters Separated in WWII Germany Reunite

by Carmen Duarte

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TUCSON, AZ (01/02/01)—After 61 years, Helga Dixon's search for her sister is over.

"She's alive" is scribbled on her kitchen calendar in the December 8th spot—the day she learned her sister's whereabouts.

Since then, Dixon, 64, and her sister, Chrysta Goetschel, 67, have spoken by telephone three times and written letters.

Dixon plans to hug her sister when she arrives in Aschersleben, Germany, on April 1. It will be the hug of a lifetime. The two last saw each other in 1939, when Dixon was 3.

"If it wasn't for the American Red Cross, I wouldn't be in this joyous mood right now," said Dixon, who came to the United States in 1958 with her adoptive family.

Dixon, the mother of three, has lived in Tucson's Midtown since 1979 and worked as a caregiver.

But she never forgot her sister, and longed to see her again. About two years ago, she learned that the Red Cross helps reunify families separated by wars.

Dixon began her inquiries and hit pay dirt recently with a telephone call after the Red Cross found her sister in Germany.

"When I first heard her voice, I couldn't say anything. I finally asked her who she was and she told me her name. There was quiet.

"I said, 'This is your sister, Helga.' We both cried and laughed. It's just so amazing. It's just awesome," Dixon said.

For 10 years, the American Red Cross has operated the Holocaust and War Victims Tracing and Information Center, based in Baltimore.

The center was created after the former Soviet Union announced that it would release thousands of documents captured at Auschwitz and other Nazi prison camps during World War II.

Since September 1990, thousands of people have turned to the center for help in finding out about family lost during the Holocaust and the war, said Rebecka Wendling, a spokeswoman for the American Red Cross Southern Arizona Chapter. The center has reunited nearly 1,000 survivors with their relatives.

Wendling said about a dozen cases are pending in southern Arizona. "Most of the cases deal with finding documentation about certain camps and helping families confirm facts and find closure."

For Dixon, she just wants to hug her sister and find out about her life.

"She speaks German and my German is starting to come back," Dixon said.

Dixon—who is battling cancer—knows that she and her sister are survivors.

"When my sister was born, my mother gave her to a family to raise in Breslau. When I was born, my mother put me in an orphanage. She was not married," Dixon said.

Her grandparents took her from the orphanage, and her grandmother brought her to meet her sister when she was about 3. It was the last time they saw each other.

By the winter of 1944, the town where Dixon was living was invaded by refugees fleeing Russian soldiers.

"I saw dead bodies and animals frozen to death on the roads. Families took in people and our house was full. Granny cooked and cooked and cooked hot, thick stews," Dixon said.

Dixon and her grandparents and mother fled eastern Germany in January 1945 and traveled to Waldenburg. They separated—Dixon and her grandmother arrived weak and hungry in Amberg after days of walking, trying to stay ahead of the Russians.

The family reunited a year later in the country-side village near Amberg.

She was adopted by a U.S. government employee and moved from Germany to the United States when she was in her 20s.

She is ready to go back, learn about her sister, and see her grandmother's grave.

"I have a lot to be thankful for this holiday season," Dixon said. "It's amazing."

Family Tree Comes Comes Out of Dormancy

Four Decades After Adoption, Man Meets Sister, Opens Search for Widowed Father

by Gary Massaro

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

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AURORA, CO (1/10/95)—Karl Eiler's family tree was a twig for 40 years.

He discovered some branches two years ago. This year, he has resolved to find his roots.

"I'm still trying to find my birth father," said Eiler, 44.

Eiler, an unemployed maintenance man, had a reunion with his sister, Rita Volkmann, and her children and grandchildren in Germany two years ago.

"I got rid of a lot of anguish when I met her," Eiler said. "Her family said, 'We will always love you, Karl.' They didn't judge me. They treated me with respect."

An American couple had adopted Eiler when he was 2, something he learned when he was 16. "That's about when I got into drugs and alcohol," he said. "What really bothered me was not knowing where I came from."

Eiler said he has cleaned up his life.

"I was committing slow suicide. I felt nobody cared anyway," he said.

Now, however, he wants to live to see his children grow, especially after he saw how close his sister is with her family.

Eiler discovered that his mother, Marie Rita Eiler, had spent time in a concentration camp during World War II and died on Dec. 31, 1951, at age 24.

He doesn't know who his father was. But his maternal grandmother left a letter for him that bears the name of an American serviceman.

Eiler said he recently decided to search for his birth father this year, to see whether the name in the letter is his father's or that of a friend who might have some answers.

"Part of me wanted to find out," he said. "And part of me said to forget about it."

He said he always had a hunch that he had relatives. He finally sought help from Hans W. von Barby, the German consulate in Golden three years ago.

Von Barby quickly learned that Eiler's sister had been looking for him for 30 years by writing letters to European newspapers.

The reunion in Bavaria followed.

Now, Eiler's wife, Lisa Eiler, is studying German.

"I have to, now that I have a German sister-in-law," she said.

Geborener Deutscher is published quarterly by William L. Gage, who is solely responsible for its content. Materials submitted for publication herein, as well as subscription requests, should be sent to **805 Alvarado Drive N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87108**. E-mail may be sent to **WmLGage@aol.com**. All material submitted for publication becomes the property of *Geborener Deutscher* and cannot be returned except by written request. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Subscriptions are $7 for one year; $12 for two years; and $15 for three years. Please make checks payable to William L. Gage. All opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the editor nor any other person.

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WILLIAM LEIS GAGE

Sleuthing in France Unites Siblings in U.S.

Mark Weaver, Staff Writer

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NORFOLK, VA (9/23/90)—Sherry Thompson stood outside the home of the sister she'd never really known and stared long and hard at the 29-year-old brother both were seeing for perhaps the first time.

"You know who he looks like?" said Thompson, 35. "He looks like Shane," her own middle child.

Then came the tears and the hugs that had been saved up for a long, long time.

On Saturday afternoon, in the yard of a duplex in Virginia Beach, the grown children of a French housekeeper, Pierrette Prevot, were reunited. But their coming together was more union than reunion. All three were adopted by different American families when they were young, and they never lived in the same home together.

"This is probably the best thing that's happened to her in her whole life," Thompson's husband, Mike, said of the emotional gathering. "She felt she was lost. Didn't have anybody. Now she has somebody that's hers."

The Thompsons drove 700 miles from their home in Jeffersonville, Ind., to the home of Sherry's new-found sister, Old Dominion University student Kathy Mutter, 28. And brother Mark Dally, a framing contractor, traveled with his wife about 750 miles from Ocoee, Fla.

But the person who had made it all possible —Mark Mariner, a Worcester, Mass., lawyer who has never met any of the family—was not on hand.

Using investigative skills to rival those of the fictional Hercule Poirot, Mariner, 38, traveled the French countryside last month in search of clues, retracing the separate odysseys of the three siblings across two continents and more than a quarter of a century.

Then he returned to the United States to continue the search, using the decades-old clues he had collected in France. Finally, he called them, one by one, to break the news—and set the stage for Saturday's meeting.

He said Friday by telephone from Massachusetts that it was best that he not be there for the family gathering, that his presence would be an intrusion.

"My work is done," he said. "My reward was when I called Sherry to tell her I had found her sister and brother, and she said, 'I've been waiting for this moment for a long time.' "

Mariner's role began simply enough when his sister, Margaret Lamb of Virginia Beach, asked him for a favor. But before long, it had become his quest to bring the family members together.

Kathy Mutter, who is deaf, had become friends with Lamb, an interpreter for the hearing-impaired. Mutter told Lamb this summer that she was adopted and might have a sister somewhere, and of her hopes of locating her.

When Lamb learned that Mariner was planning to attend a legal conference in France in August, she contacted him and asked him to try to learn of the missing sister—little suspecting that he would also discover a missing brother.

Mariner said he knew the obstacles would be great. But he also knew this would be the best chance Kathy would ever have to find her biological family. He was uniquely qualified for the job: he had legal skills, was a veteran researcher, had handled adoption cases, knew adoption law, spoke French and had recently written a research paper on the effects of the search and reunion process on adoptees.

"I knew that if I didn't do it, probably nobody ever would," he said.

Still, "I told Margaret to tell Kathy not to get her hopes too high. I said that if I had time during the conference, I would do some investigating."

In early August, when Mariner arrived in Poitiers, France, southwest of Paris, he had a few clues provided by Kathy Mutter: her mother's birth name; the name of town in which she had been born, Verdun; and the name of the attorney who handled her adoption, Francois Mangel.

The key questions of his search were clear: Who were the children of Pierrette Prevot? Where were they now? Would they want to know of their siblings after the passage of so many years? And why would a French mother have surrendered her young children, one by one, all to American parents, in the early 1960s?

During a three-day break in his conference, Mariner rented a car and drove about five hours east, to Verdun.

"I looked in the phone book and there was Mangel, still in practice" after 28 years, he said. "It was sort of serendipitous."

He went to the address, walked up three flights of stairs, and there the lawyer was.

"He greeted me as if he had known me for a long time," Mariner said. "He had once met another American lawyer who looked like me. There was an immediate warmth and empathy."

Mariner explained why he was there, and the French attorney agreed to let him examine his old files, tucked away in a basement.

"There was no assurance he would still have those files," Mariner said, "and he was certainly under no obligation to pull them out.

"I explained that he had handled Kathy's adoption and that he may have handled her sister's too."

Mangel's secretary located the 28-year-old Mutter file and helped Mariner search for any other files of American parents who had adopted French children.

There in a musty folder was evidence of Kathy's sister. Sherry Thompson's birth name had been Marie-Claude Prevot.

It was Mariner's first clue. And there were others: The girl's adoptive parents were named MacAdoo. A letter in the file bore the return address of Shepherdsville, Ky.

While he was reviewing the files, Mariner said, "there was a line that caught my eye. 'As you know,' it said, 'the mother had adopted (out) another child in 1961.' "

The child had been a boy, Marc Prevot. Now Mariner knew that Kathy also had a brother.

But the social worker had misspelled the last name of his adoptive American parents as "Dailly." Detective work by Mariner and the secretary led to the correct spelling and the right file: Dally. He jotted down the names of the adoptive parents, Ford and Maureen Dally.

He now had lots of news for Kathy. But much work lay ahead. He had no idea where her siblings were nearly 30 years after their adoptions. And he wanted to know more about their mother.

Mariner's search for the children's mother took him to Etain, a tiny village outside Verdun.

He began talking to residents, hoping someone would remember Pierrette Prevot. While visiting the mayor's office, he started talking with the mayor's assistant.

"She ... went through their records, and I learned through records that the birth mom had been born in Reims," he said. The woman in the office "got on the phone and called mayor of Reims and got information I never could have gotten. I found out name of the father and mother of the birth mother; I was getting back to the roots of the whole family now."

The search took him to a small village outside Reims, where he learned from records several things about Prevot: She had married an American soldier named David Levine a month after giving Kathy up for adoption. And they probably moved to the United States.

"It had become clear to me," Mariner said, "that there were four blood relatives—a mother and three children—all of whom had moved to the U.S. and were probably spread out around the country."

But Mariner wanted to know more about the woman.

He took his quest to Reims, where he began interviewing people named Prevot.

"Unfortunately," he said, "Prevot is as common there as Smith is here."

He persisted, however, and ultimately located Andre Prevot, Pierrette's cousin.

"He told me a story that was very moving," Mariner said. "Both of Pierrette's parents were dead. Pierrette had been the eighth or ninth child born in her family.

"She had been born during the early days of World War II. Her mother was in the hospital in Reims, about to give birth to Pierrette. While the father was making his way to the hospital, he was killed by Germans."

The American lawyer listened while Andre Prevot told how the mother was not able to care for her children, and they became wards of the state.

Mariner said when Pierrette Prevot's children ask about the circumstances under which they were adopted, he can give them at least a partial answer.

"Things started to fall into place after I talked to Andre," he said. "Here was a woman abandoned at birth during the war, thrown into the state system, who had been in a survival mode ever since. When her kids come along, she surrenders them."

Mariner later learned something else: when Pierrette was to give up Kathy (whose birth name was Sylvie) for adoption after her birth in 1962, she at first refused, disappearing for about two months with the child. She finally turned up at the apartment of the American family who would raise Kathy, the Mutters, and the adoption took place.

"But I really believe this was a mother going through a lot of anguish," he said. "I believe she wanted to keep them but simply didn't have the wherewithal."

After Mariner returned home in early September, he began the search for Kathy's siblings. It

did not take long to locate the brother, Mark Dally, the spelling of his first name now anglicized. He was living in Ocoee, Fla. Mariner traced him through records that showed the hometowns of his adoptive parents in New York State.

But finding Kathy's sister was more difficult.

His search was centered in Shepherdsville, Ky., where the MacAdoo family had moved with young Sherry in the mid 1960s. But there were no longer any MacAdoos in the Kentucky town.

The adoptive mother's maiden name had been Virginia Hibbs, Mariner's records showed. But no one could yield a clue.

"I called around to a couple of Hibbses, and looked for one who had married a MacAdoo. No one could help.

"I got this aging woman named Hibbs on the phone and told her what I was looking for. She said she didn't know, but would check around. I gave her my number and told her to call me if she heard anything. I was running out of leads."

A few days later, Mariner's phone rang. It was a collect call from Shepherdsville. "The woman said she had been chatting with a neighbor who knew a cousin of Virginia Hibbs. Sherry's parents are dead and she's living in Indiana, she told me. She's been married for 14 years and has three kids."

Before long, Mariner was calling Kathy in Virginia Beach, Sherry Robertson in Indiana and Mark Dally in Florida.

All were shocked by the news, he said. Mark had not known he had sisters. Sherry was the most emotional; she had been given up for adoption at 7 and vaguely remembered her infant sister and her French mother.

Mariner acknowledges that he pursued his mission with an uncommon zeal, saying he "just got swept up in it."

The issue of adopted children and their search for roots is one on which he can speak with some authority.

In addition to his handling of adoption cases in court, he recently wrote a college research paper on the effect of the search and reunion process on adoptees and adoptive parents. He is pursuing a master's degree in psychological counseling at Lesley College in Cambridge, Mass., and is planning a career move from law to counseling.

"What I've found in my research," he said, "is that the whole process of search and reunion is a powerful healing experience. It brings up a lot of grief and pain, but is a very healing, very helpful process in allowing adoptees to come to terms with who they are."

Now there is only one piece missing in the drama of Pierrette Prevot and her family: the reunion of mother and children.

The research that yielded Kathy's brother and sister has not yet led to the doorstep of Pierrette herself. But he said he would be willing to finish the job he started "if that's what the children want."

On Saturday afternoon, the children weren't ready for a decision like that. First there were stories to tell, history to catch up on. And other things: The texture of skin. The curve of a nose. Someone who shares your eyes.

And questions, yes. Do they share the same father? If so, what happened to him? What else do they have in common, what talents, what traits?

And now that they've found each other, what next?

"Try to make up 28 years in one week," said Thompson. "Just go on with our lives."

A Full Heart & Empty Arms

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Pregnant and unmarried at 15, Angela Dunne was afforded few choices in the ultraconservative society that was Ireland in the early 1950s. Her parents wanted no part of her once her morning sickness was recognized for what it was. Without discussion, she was escorted by her mother and the parish priest to a convent north of Dublin to spare the family public shame.

There, her pretty dress was replaced by a shapeless brown smock to hide her figure and she was made to scrub floors and dig potatoes. Alongside her were dozens of other girls and unwed mothers. When not working or sleeping, they were told to pray, "to do penance for our terrible sins."

Most, like Angela, simply prayed for a way out. In this new life, she possessed nothing save for the child growing in her womb. And even he, she would soon discover, was not hers to keep.

For nearly three years, she remained cloistered inside the convent walls while the nuns sought a "suitable" home for her son. Then, when the child was 2½, an American couple came looking to adopt. Angela remembers watching in secret as the Army captain and his wife led the small boy by the hand to the mother superior's office.

"I knew straight away he'd been picked," she says of that long-ago day. "It was breaking my heart. But the reverend mother said, 'Angela, they really fell in love with Christopher. They'd like to have him and live in America. It's time for him to go to a good home.'

"She told me it was God answering my prayers."

Christopher McCartin, a 50-year-old freelance photographer living a quiet middle-class life in Springfield, knew nothing of this before a perplexing letter from Ireland arrived in his mailbox last November. The writer, a social worker he had never met, was seeking details of his past.

Christopher and his younger sister, Margaret, had been told early on that they were adopted as toddlers from a convent-run home in Castlepollard, Ireland. What preceded that—what transpired before George and Marion McCartin became the center of Christopher's little-boy universe—was a black hole in his memory.

He had no recollection of the 30-minute daily visits he was allowed with his birth mother in the convent. Or their wrenching separations. Or that she had tried to escape with him.

The ultimate irony? He had always assumed he'd been abandoned at birth. Until that letter opened a window to his past, he had no inkling that his teenage mother had struggled to keep him, and, failing that, had vowed to find him one day.

That was just the first of many revelations to come tumbling forth in the weeks that followed—a period of difficult questions and sometimes painful answers that culminated in the sweetly emotional reunion of mother and son on Christmas Eve at an airport in England.

"I never let Christopher out of my mind or my prayers," Angela says in a phone interview days later, her Irish brogue wavering. She kept his photo by her bedside all these years, she says, having resolved on the day she bathed and dressed him to leave with his new parents never to give up hope of seeing him again.

Now, half a century later, God had indeed answered her prayers.

Their first night together at her home in Birmingham, Angela, now a 66-year-old grandmother, insisted on tucking her son into bed. "I said, 'Mom, you don't have to do this,' " recalls Christopher, wonder in his voice. "But she'd have nothing less."

While many women succumbed to the embarrassment of unwed pregnancy, erasing it from their minds, Angela stood firm. On only her second date with Patrick Levings, the steelworker who would become her husband, she told him about Christopher. She wanted him to know her past.

It was a past shared by thousands of pregnant but unmarried Catholic women in Ireland during that era, according to contemporary accounts. Having disgraced their families, they were shipped off to mother-and-baby homes where they settled into a routine of daily prayer and manual labor until—and after—their babies were born.

So severe was the stigma of illegitimacy that parents sometimes refused to answer letters home from their daughters, some of whom had been secreted away before siblings and neighbors realized what had happened. After giving birth, without jobs or relatives to care for them, the young women seemingly had no choice but to put their children up for adoption.

That is what happened to Angela. Yet in some respects, she was among the more fortunate.

Thousands of young Irish women—unwed mothers, prostitutes and others considered to be of doubtful virtue in those morally conservative times—wound up in the so-called Magdalene Laundries, where, historians say, they spent years in back-breaking servitude and confinement. The asylums were named for Mary Magdalene, for centuries known as the repentant prostitute in the gospel of Luke. The Roman Catholic Church abandoned that teaching 30 years ago, but the image of Mary Magdalene as a weeping sinner remains in many people's minds.

The laundries operated for more than a century in Ireland, their inhabitants kept behind closed doors—sometimes for decades and often with the tacit approval of their families.

"They were viewed as fallen women," says Maria Luddy, an Irish history professor at Warwick University in Coventry, England, who is writing a book on prostitution in Ireland in the 19th century. "They had sinned and they had to repent for their sins."

As attitudes shifted in recent decades, the laundries closed one by one. The last is believed to have shut down in 1996.

Through the prism of today's morality, it's easy to fault the nuns who operated the homes, but Luddy cautions against judging the situation outside its historical context. "We all look for someone to blame, but the nuns weren't going out onto the streets taking children in," she says. "The girls were sent in by parents and family members and the courts and police. If they hadn't been ... they would have been ostracized."

In late summer 1949, Angela Dunne went on a first date with a young suitor. She says she didn't know their "cuddle" would get her pregnant—"I was that green"—never mind land her

in the Sacred Heart home in Castlepollard.

Her parents demanded that her pregnancy be kept from her nine brothers and sisters, who couldn't understand why Angela was always weeping. She knew she'd be forced to leave home after Christmas; her siblings were told she'd been sent away to work. She never saw the father of her baby again.

They traveled to Castlepollard at night. The last civilized gesture Angela remembers was a cup of tea at the convent with the mother superior and her own mother before she was left there, on her own.

Frightened, she fell in to work alongside young women like herself. Their companionship might have been a comfort, but conversation was discouraged by the nuns, Angela says. The women marched to and from their work assignments, received no education and subsisted on meager meals such as bread and tea for lunch.

Leaving the home was not an option unless you had someone "to claim you" and your baby, she recalls.

On May 10, 1950, terrified and still largely ignorant of the dynamics of pregnancy and childbirth, Angela went into labor. The moment is crystallized in her mind: "I remember crying out for my mother, but no one came to my side. No one comforted me."

She was allowed to remain with her newborn son for several weeks, breast- and bottle-feeding him until he was old enough for her to resume her cleaning duties in the chapel. Then her daily contact with him was cut back to a single 30-minute visit, she says, as a way of weaning mother from baby in preparation for the all-but-inevitable adoption.

Angela wrote her parents about Christopher's arrival. No answer.

Abandoned by her family, she knew she would never be allowed to leave Castlepollard with her son. A mother could stay for up to three years, but if she couldn't arrange a home for herself and her baby by then, the nuns would find a job for her and a proper family for her child.

"Parents would say, 'We don't want you home. You've disgraced the family. Go away,' " says Sister Mary Sarto, a social worker in County Cork, where some of the nuns and priests from Castlepollard went when the motherand-baby home closed in 1969. The young mothers "didn't have a choice" about adoption, she says, "in the sense that they didn't know anyone who would take them and their child."

Today, the center where Sarto works is a visible product of social change in Ireland, its programs focused on keeping mothers and babies together.

With no one to take her and Christopher, Angela felt trapped at Castlepollard. "It was a prison without bars," she says of the sprawling 120-acre farm, which housed more than 100 single women and their children at one time. "I fail to believe how they were helping us. They said this was a way of God punishing you."

When Christopher was a year old, Angela was reprimanded by the nuns for "cheeky," obstinate behavior and was kept from seeing him for a week and a half. Frustrated and heartbroken, she decided to run. Bundling her son in a blanket, she darted toward the front gate with him—unsure where she was headed, knowing only that she couldn't be separated from her child.

She was caught minutes later by a gatekeeper. " 'I've got to get out of here! They're very cruel!' " she says she told him. Unmoved, he took her back.

This comes as news to Christopher, the loving son who stood by his adoptive parents until their deaths in the past 10 years and who now is attempting to fit Angela Levings into his life.

He has but one wisp of a memory of that earlier time and place: It's of George and Marion McCartin coming to the convent to take him on a pony ride in a park.

"How is a child supposed to remember anything if he's only allowed 20 minutes a day with his mother?" he says, seething.

An estimated 300 young women at Castlepollard had their babies adopted by American families, according to Mike Milotte, whose book *Banished Babies* details the church- and state-sanctioned export of Irish children to the United States from 1950 to the '70s. In all, Castlepollard placed about 2,500 children for adoption, most in Ireland.

Milotte, a senior reporter for the Irish television network RTE, says life was particularly hard for the mothers in these convents, which were largely self-sustaining thanks to the women's labor but also received public funding. In some cases, he says, the priests and nuns received money from the adoptive parents, who paid "confinement and medical costs" associated with their child's birth.

"Where did the money go?" he wonders. "It sustained the people who ran the institutions in a manner they wouldn't have otherwise enjoyed."

But money likely wasn't the primary motivator, he says. Rather, there was a demand for children, and many of the nuns believed they were doing God's work by sending some of Ireland's social outcasts to a better life in the land of opportunity.

"They thought they were doing good," says Milotte in a phone interview from Dublin. "The fact that people might have rights didn't enter into their thinking. They thought they knew best. If, in doing the best thing, there was an opportunity to make money, that was all the better."

In those postwar days, it was not uncommon for Irish children to be adopted by U.S. military and government employees living abroad, Milotte says.

Neither Christopher nor his sister knows how their parents learned of the mother-and-baby home at Castlepollard or what—if anything—they paid to build their family.

George McCartin, an Army lawyer who later retired as a colonel, was stationed in Stuttgart, West Germany, in the early 1950s when he and Marion, a schoolteacher, traveled to Castlepollard. Christopher was adopted in December 1952, Margaret a year later.

Shortly after her son was taken from her, Angela got a letter from her sister, then living in England. Enclosed was money and an invitation to come live with her, which Angela did, getting a job and starting a new life.

Two years later, she met Patrick Levings. The couple wed in 1956 and had four children. Even with this active and growing family, Angela says, she never forgot her firstborn.

Thought turned to earnest search 16 years ago. Their children now grown, Angela and Patrick traveled to Ireland to uncover the puzzle pieces of her past. Years of phone calls and letter-writing led nowhere until the Levingses were put in touch with a pair of social workers in County Louth.

"She wrote us a letter and it was heart-wrenching," says Pat Neville, of the Northeastern Health Board Adoption Service. "Three years was an awful long time to have a baby and care for it and then have it taken away. It's dreadful, absolutely dreadful."

Without making any promises, the social workers offered to help.

Their search eventually led to a Catholic par ish in New Jersey and a baptism certificate for a Christopher John McCartin. There were three Christopher J. McCartins living in the United States at the time. Neville wrote to each.

Only one responded. And he, it turned out, was Angela's son.

"I was speechless when they called me with the news," she says breathlessly, recalling the emotional release she felt. "I cried and cried."

Two days later, the phone rang again. It was Christopher, making plans to meet her at Christmas.

Christopher acknowledges that, growing up, he never really thought about his birth parents and certainly never entertained the notion of looking for his biological mother. The McCartins were his parents; they had filled any void he might have felt, providing all the love and security a child could want.

But when Neville called with news of his birth mother, Christopher didn't hesitate. "It was like being inside a dream. ... Could it really be true?" he asked himself.

On Christmas Eve he got his answer. Over the holidays in England, he was introduced to some of his half siblings and an extended family that stretches from San Francisco to New Zealand. He hopes to meet them all one day.

Now it's Christopher's sister, Margaret Watkins, who finds herself considering a search for her own birth mother—an idea that Marion McCartin, were she still alive, likely would find hurtful, Margaret believes.

An anecdote: In 1978 Margaret was about to marry and needed to show the priest her birth certificate. She asked her mother for it. A benign request, she thought, but Marion McCartin balked.

"My mother didn't want to show it to me," says Margaret, a social worker in Lexington, Va. "I think she was leery of my reaction because there was a blank spot for the father's name. She wanted to give it directly to the priest but I said, 'It's my birth certificate.' "

On the certificate, Margaret first learned her biological mother's name.

Four years later while traveling in Ireland, Margaret made a quick stop in Castlepollard to see the former mother-and-baby home. It was a visit, she insists, not a fact-finding mission, but it displeased her mother nonetheless.

Now, encouraged by her brother's experience, she says she may embark on her own search. But what if her birth mother has succeeded in putting Castlepollard behind her? What then? Maybe it's best not to stir those waters.

For Christopher, Angela's unfolding story has filled in some of the blanks in his own. Hearing it has given him a measure of comfort, but it has also left him unsettled and resentful.

Sitting in his Springfield living room, pictures of his newfound family flashing across his computer screen, he talks boldly of taking legal action against the church for coercing women into giving up their children and for depriving them of a chance to better themselves.

"Their lives were destroyed and ... they should be compensated," he says, anger rising within. "She should be able to have some happiness in her life."

Things are much simpler for Angela. With the void in her life now erased, she has her peace at last.

"I've cried many tears in the past," she says. "Now they're of joy."