

Meet Kathy...

A Story of Two Sisters

"I grew up in a family of four children — all adopted. We always knew we were adopted; it was never a shameful secret, as it sometimes is for other families. To us, there were simply two ways to get a baby, and this was how our family did it!

Our oldest brother was a private adoption in Des Moines in 1956. The rest of us — my sister Laurie, born in 1958; me, born in 1960; and my brother Paul, born in 1964 — all came from what was then called the Crittenton Home.

We had a normal, happy life with our fair share of ordinary family problems. We grew up, went to college, got married, and had children. I was always fascinated by biological siblings — how much they looked alike and, in many cases, acted alike. We, on the other hand, looked like a group of people randomly thrown together! My sister and I, in particular, were polar opposites, and we both knew it.

For as long as I can remember, I'd had some curiosity about finding my birth parents — mostly because I wanted to know who I looked like and what the circumstances were around my mother's decision to give me up. But adoption records were sealed, and all I had was the non-identifying information provided to my adoptive parents by the Crittenton Home.

One day in 1998, my sister and I were visiting Mom and Dad when Mom asked to speak with us privately. She began to cry — though she said she didn't know why, since it was good news — and told us something she had kept for decades: we were actually 100% biological sisters.

Mom explained that when they adopted my sister in 1958, it was because of the similarities between our parents and the birth parents, particularly my birth mother and my adoptive mother. Then, in 1960, the Crittenton Center called to say that our birth mother had returned and given birth again. Because the first match had gone so well, they wanted my parents to have the opportunity to adopt me too. The only condition was that they not tell us we were biologically related, since we were an "adopted family." They were advised to tell one or two trusted people, just in case something happened to them — though who knows why. Times were different then.

After learning that, my curiosity became a mission. I had to find our birth mother. Using the limited information Crittenton had given — that she played the harp and violin, worked as a drafts person for the Iowa Highway Commission, and attended the United Church of Christ — I began searching. The harp seemed the best clue, since it's such an uncommon instrument.

My first stop was the Iowa State Library, where I pored over college yearbooks from the years my birth mother would have been in school. I found a photo of a harpist — and instantly felt, deep down, that she was the one. My mom and sister didn't see the resemblance, but I kept that photo anyway.

Years later, in 2016, I resumed my search with new determination. I created a spreadsheet and gathered every harpist and violinist listed in Iowa symphonies and college orchestras that era. I combed through the State Historical Museum's records of state employees, noting every female drafts person between 1955 and 1961.

Eventually, I went back to that old photo. Something told me she might have come from Ames — I'm not sure why, but I followed the hunch. On a website with digitized high school yearbooks, I pulled up Ames High School's class of 1955. There she was: the same woman from the Iowa State photo, now with a name. Within minutes, I matched her to my records. I had found our birth mother — using only the clues Crittenton had given my parents in 1958.

DNA tests later confirmed that my sister and I were half-sisters, sharing the same mother but different fathers. We also obtained our original birth certificates, which verified what we already knew.

What I gained from this journey was more than information — it was connection. As someone without children of my own, discovering my biological family filled a space I hadn't realized was so deep. Now I have nephews, grandnieces, and grandnephews related to me by blood. I've met half-siblings I never knew existed.

The Crittenton Home gave me two families — my adoptive one and my birth one — and I am forever grateful for both." - Kathy Salsbury, Adoptive Child through Crittenton Center