

MEMBERS CORNER

BY LARRY NOEDEL



My adoptive parents loved me and provided me with every advantage. Perhaps they loved me so much that they tried to shield me from any unpleasant experiences. As a result, I grew up loved, but in a household of secrets.

The big secret that involved me directly was that I was adopted. I had worked out the truth of that situation on my own by the time I was an adolescent. However, my adoptive parents never admitted that was the case until I was an adult with my own family. Growing up they only told me the barest information about their own lives before I came along, and very little about their own ancestors.

I discovered that they really couldn't have told me anything whatsoever about my birth family because they didn't know the truth about who my birth parents were. Nonetheless, as many BIGS members know, I discovered my biological family late in my life through DNA and traditional genealogy. This story isn't about how that came about, but how genealogy has revealed to me the many secrets about my adoptive parents' lives that they hid from me.

My adoptive mother was born in 1896 and died in 1970. Here are some things that I learned only from family history research. She grew up as one of five children in a poor family in St. Louis, MO. Around 1912 she was raped by a policeman, dropped out of high school and had the baby, which her own father and mother took in and reported as their child. At about this time, she married her first husband and in 1917 they had a baby girl who lived only one day. Her mother died in 1926 and her father died in 1930 of suicide by affixation in his apartment. She was the informant on his death certificate and was probably the one who found him. I was born in 1937, shortly after she had divorced her first husband and married my adoptive father.

My adoptive father was born in 1894 and died in 1985. I knew that he grew up one of four children in a farm family in a German immigrant community. My family history informed me that when he was about 17 years of age, in 1912, he left the farm for a life in St. Louis. His father died a year later. In 1917 his mother was found having hanged herself in the basement of their home by his other siblings. He married a year later. In 1931 he married a second time to a woman with an 11-year-old daughter from her first marriage. This woman died two years later, and historic newspapers explained that on her deathbed he had promised her that he would raise her daughter whom he loved. However, the girl's father re-entered the picture, a well-publicized custody case proceeded, and despite my adopted father's tearful plea and the girl's testimony that she wanted to live with my adopted father, the court awarded custody to her biological father.

What difference does it make to uncover these tragic events? It allows me to understand my mom and dad better than I was able to while they were alive. It makes me love and appreciate them more knowing the difficulties they overcame. It makes me see more of the "real" them, not just the part of them they chose to show to me. And, as a result, it makes me better understand my own identity.

Successfully researching your family history is not just about dusty old records and identifying long dead ancestors. It can tell you more than you ever knew about more recent events, some of which may have been intentionally hidden from you. Like me, you can learn important things about the people who conceived you and the people who raised you. And, in the process you can learn more about who you really are.