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SISTERS FROM THE SOCIETY OF SECRETS AND LIES

Why Women Chose Adoption between 1950 and 1979

by

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the “Sisters” from the Society of Secrets and Lies—and especially to those who took the time to share what was probably the most painful, traumatic period of their lives. Without their contributions, this work would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT

SISTERS FROM THE SOCIETY OF SECRETS AND LIES

Why Women Chose Adoption between 1950 and 1979

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This study explores the era when an estimated 1.5 million unmarried, pregnant women relinquished their newborn babies to adoption. My research focuses on the experience of women who surrendered their babies between the years 1950 and 1979 in closed adoptions. For decades, a cloak of secrecy surrounded the white, middle-class unwed mother, making research difficult for the scholar as first person narratives were silenced by shame. Social workers and adoption professionals offered their own explanations of the reasons unwed mothers chose adoption, and how they felt about their decision. As search and reunion stories, books and television shows gained popularity in recent years, and on-line support groups formed on the internet, growing numbers of women moved forward to not only search for their relinquished son or

daughter, but also to share their stories and answer questions. This study of understanding their experiences, and in particular who chose the adoption process and why, demanded a systematic approach. To study their attitudes and experience, an online survey was created and opened to women who relinquished a baby to adoption between the years 1950 and 1979. Over 290 women responded to the survey, answering ninety-nine questions covering their pregnancy, family reactions, societal views, relinquishment, and post-relinquishment. This study will focus on the central findings of this research. From a more generalized historical view, this study helps us see how a woman's subordinated place was constructed and maintained during this era.

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Between the years 1950 and 1979, a special group of women gave birth to healthy, white infants. Unlike millions of their peers, these women were not allowed to name their babies—in fact, they never knew the child’s name. No family or friends peered through the windows of the hospital nursery window for a glimpse of the baby. Visitors did not deliver flowers, cards, or gifts, and few mothers saw friends or family during their hospital stays. They went through labor and delivery alone—most far from anyone they knew. Moreover, after delivery few had the opportunity to feed, change, or even hold their babies. In fact, one hour was the most time most mothers had—only 60 minutes to say goodbye forever.

Although these women gave up their babies to adoption, most of the time, the decision was not their real choice. They had violated society’s norms against premarital sex and conception, and their families believed that the only way for the erring daughter to gain redemption for her sin was by giving the baby to more worthy individuals, namely, a married couple. In order to preserve their reputations and protect their families from disgrace, the young woman were required to keep this experience secret. These young mothers left the hospital with empty arms and hearts full of guilt, shame, and unresolved grief, thus entering into the Society of Secrets and Lies.

Who were these women? Why did they give away their babies? For decades, a cloak of secrecy has surrounded the white, middle-class unwed mother of the postwar period. First person narratives, silenced by shame, made scholarly research difficult due to the lack of primary sources. This study represents a new effort to study this subject using an Internet survey instrument.

1.2 Historical Background

Understanding the unique elements of post-World War II society and American attitudes toward women and illegitimacy that created the world of “secrets and lies” requires examining the historical development of adoption.

Since ancient times, all human cultures have had a method in place to transfer children whose parents could no longer care for them; some to relatives and others to almshouses. Other children lived on the streets as waifs or beggars. In the 18th century, the number of orphans was relatively small and few orphanages existed in North America. This would change by the middle of the century because of the industrial revolution and immigration. .

Between 1841 and 1860, a total of 4,311,465 people immigrated to America, many escaping poor harvests, famines, political unrest, and revolutions. Port cities, such as New York City and Boston, quickly filled to overflowing, and even temporary housing was difficult to find. Jobs were scarce and wages were low. Survival often required that every member of the family find work—even young children. The immigrant family without extended family members to rely upon during difficult times often fell apart. When unsafe working conditions led to injury or death of husbands and

fathers, women and children had to make their own way, living as best they could. Unsanitary living conditions caused diseases that often led to early deaths of overworked fathers and mothers. Some women found themselves unable to provide even the basic needs for their children when loss of employment or illness occurred. By 1850, New York State had opened twenty-seven orphanages, funded by both public and private funds. These orphanages soon filled with not only orphaned children, but also with children from destitute families. The orphanages required payment from the parents for the care of the children on a weekly or monthly basis. If they were unable to pay, the child became a ward of the court and was "disposed" of as the social workers saw fit. Some children simply lived on the streets as waifs and beggars. There was an estimated 10,000 street kids without a home or guardian. By 1870, society was looking for additional solutions to clean up the number of street kids. (Johnson) Although adoption was not a popular concept, state legislatures began passing adoption laws in the nineteenth century. In 1841, Massachusetts passed the first modern adoption law, recognizing adoption as a social and legal operation based on the child's welfare, rather than adult interests

In 1853, Charles Loring Brace, a 26-year-old minister, formed an organization to help care for neglected children. Concerned with the large numbers of children wandering the streets of New York, Brace envisioned a method to give them food and a warm, safe place to live with new families. This was not the first time that children from eastern cities relocated to new homes in other parts of the country. In 1853, orphans from Boston traveled by train to western states and were taken into families as

indentured servants. This was not acceptable to Brace. His plan required the children be accepted as family members—not servants.

Between 1854 and 1920, more than 300,000 children, described as orphans, foundlings, waifs, half-orphans and street urchins from New York, Boston and other northeastern coastal cities traveled by train to cities and towns in the South, West, and Midwest and placed in new homes. Brace’s Family Plan required that a child be taken into a home and treated “as one of the family”—like the adoptive parents’ biological children. One reason for Brace relocating these children was his belief that the wide-open spaces were healthier than the crowded tenements of New York and other Eastern cities. The Orphan Trains stopped in prearranged towns. At each train stop, the children lined up on the train platform and local families (selected by the local committee) came out to meet them and adopt them on the spot. If the local committee and placing agents approved of the match, the child would go to his or her new home. From Brace’s perspective, placing poor Catholic and Jewish immigrant children with upstanding Anglo-Protestant farming families would not only rescue them from depraved urban surroundings, but also be a means to Americanize them. (Herman, 2005)

During this same period, Sister Irene Fitzgibbon and Sister Teresa Vincent of Sisters of Charity began a parallel program. They founded the New York Foundling Asylum to save newborns, infants, and small children from death. Created in 1869, Catholic Charities of New York took babies abandoned by their mothers. A small white cradle stood in the foyer of the building. Mothers, unable or willing to care for a baby, could anonymously leave it in the cradle for the Sisters. As word of the cradle spread,

there were soon more children than the Sisters could care for. Between 1872 and 1914, “mercy trains” or “baby trains” carried children throughout the Midwest and South for placement with pre-selected Catholic families. (Johnson)

The largest difference between the Foundling Hospital’s Mercy Trains and the Children’s Aid Society Orphan Trains was how the adoptive parents chose their new children. Children from the Mercy Trains went matched by the Sisters with Catholic adoptive parents prior to leaving by train. This was not the case for children on the Orphan Trains. Children lined up at each train stop, like slaves on an auction block, for examination by interested families. Those children not chosen by a family would re-board the train and repeat the line-up at the next stop. (DiPasquale)

Adoption would soon take a major turn. Rather than focusing on orphans or children whose parents were penniless and unable to support them, another sector of society became the major target for providing children to childless couples—the unwed mother. Because of this, society’s view of the unwed mother would change dramatically.

In the late nineteenth century, evangelical reformers founded rescue or rehabilitative homes in an effort to “redeem” or “reclaim” socially unacceptable women (such as prostitutes and drug addicts). The reformers soon discovered another group of women that eventually became the focus of the homes—unwed mothers. Many of these women, thrown out by their families, had no place to go. (Kunzel, 1993, pp. 9-13) At the rescue homes, they met evangelical women who incorporated the illicit sexuality of single women into an ideology of female benevolence that emphasized sisterly

sympathy and solidarity. Street literature, the Penny Press, and sensationalist journalism used tales of seduction and abandonment to explain how villainous men could ruin virtuous women. Female victims were portrayed as “fallen sisters” from poor, but respectable families. The “powerful and influential men” that robbed the innocent maidens of their virtue were viewed as villains. (Isenberg, 1993, p.29) This ideology stressed sexual victimization of women and criticized the double standard and the role men played in the plight of the poor fallen sisters. (Kunzel, 1993, p. 20) Male authority came under attack as organizers fought to eliminate prostitution and the sexual double standard. Efforts included calling for the public humiliation of seducers of “innocent” female victims.

Rescue homes, founded by men, were largely under the direction of evangelical reformers of women’s societies. Two of the best-known men establishing rescue homes were Charles Crittenton and William Booth. (Morton, 1993) Mr. Crittenton made his fortune in pharmaceuticals. In 1882, following the death of his beloved daughter, Florence, Crittenton received a “divine call” to rescue work. He built his first rescue home in the red-light district of New York City. Thereafter, Crittenton held revival tours throughout the country. By 1909, he had opened seventy-eight Florence Crittenton Homes nationwide. (Kunzel, 1993, pp. 14-17) At the time, the Salvation Army, started by William Booth, was the second largest network of homes in the United States. In 1865, Booth broke from the Methodist church and founded the Salvation Army in England. In February 1880, George Rastton and seven “Army lasses” formed the first contingent of missionary bands in the United States. Just before, in 1887, the first

American rescue home for pregnant girls opened in Brooklyn, New York. Within seven years, the Salvation Army opened fifteen more homes in the United States. By 1890, the Army had grown to 410 corps in thirty-five states.

In addition to the Crittenton and Salvation Army homes, other rescue homes sprang up around the country, many by different religious dominations. Typically, all inmates of rescue homes signed a contract agreeing to stay at least one year. Rescue workers believed that giving an unwed mother a year with her infant would increase the likelihood of bonding with her child. All rescue homes required inmates to work as well as take part in religious activities. Schedules included praying, working, and training in domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and laundering. Some homes offered additional ways for the women to earn extra money. Some took in sewing from the outside, while others raised cows and worked in gardens. (Kunzel, 1993, pp. 27-28) At the Berachah Home, located in Arlington, Texas, each inmate was required to take courses in cooking, laundry work, sewing, housework, first-aid nursing, and care of children in the day nursery. (Crowell, 2005, "Go and Sin No More")

In the early years, most rescue homes encouraged an unwed mother to keep her baby, believing that the proof of her "redemption" would include making a family for her child. Many reformers believed the responsibility of caring and providing for her child would change her erring ways. It was "professionalism" of the social work field that changed society's views of illegitimacy and the unwed mother. It also transformed rescue homes into homes for unwed mothers. More importantly, no longer were orphaned children, or those whose parents were destitute, the focus of adoption by

strangers. The criteria for taking a child from its biological family shifted to one major factor—the marital status of the mother.

Unmarried mothers attracted the attention of social workers in the early 1900s. At this point, the unmarried mother moved to the vortex of larger social problems revolving around morality and family life. Most social workers did not view an unmarried mother as a victim, but as an agent of larger social problems. No longer considered as endangered—the unwed mother became a dangerous influence. Because of this social shift, few social workers viewed unmarried mothers as “unfortunate sisters.” Fewer still harbored any missionary impulse to “save” these women. Illegitimacy had captured the attention of notable social workers, and they formed a united front against rescue homes, especially against the volunteers who were responsible not only for managing the homes, but also in placing the babies for adoption. Social workers believed illegitimacy was so great a difficulty that it demanded skilled and experienced caseworkers to perform adoption services. Appointing themselves as experts in the field, they proclaimed adoption as their proper domain. (Kunzel, 1993, pp. 50-51)

During the early twentieth century, child welfare professionals and reformers began to view adoption as extremely risky. They were concerned that the evangelical women in the rescue homes were not qualified to facilitate adoptions. Development of social work, along with Progressive Reform, helped displace the moralism of nineteenth century evangelical reformers. Psychological accounts of sexual behavior provided an alternative to the stern moralism of Victorian culture. While evangelical reformers

believed that a fallen woman made retribution for her sin by the sentence of single motherhood, the new generation of secular reformers was less concerned with punishing the sinner than with the effects of such redemption on the child.

The general secretary of the Michigan Children's Aid Society expressed the view that the practice of adoption needed safeguarding and a set of minimum standards in law and social practice required development. The only safe approach to adoption included "thorough fact-gathering, keen observation, close supervision, and careful attention to the individual factors at play." This sharply contrasted with the personal whims or religious bias used by those whom the Society described as "commercial baby farmers, sentimental child-placers and other amateurs who 'disposed' of babies." Science offered the only safe approach to adoption. This scientific method included learning the truth about the birth family, including physical and mental caliber, their attitude toward the child and its future, what resources might be available for care of the child, and any information regarding the personal condition and capacities of the child. Rather than using a favorite or customary method of dealing with the futures of these illegitimate children, each case needed individual attention, since "no two cases were quite alike." (Stoneman, 1926)

In some case reviews, social workers focused on the potential capabilities of the child up for adoption. Henry Herbert Goddard, Director of the Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in Vineland, New Jersey, was considered a national authority on intelligence testing, mental deficiency and special education. One of Goddard's measurements for intelligence was directly related to the financial position

and footing in the community of the individual or family. In Goddard's opinion, if a family was unable to provide for the necessities of life or make a living for themselves, a risk of inheriting mental deficiency existed in their offspring. Risks not only included passing that mental deficiency to future generations, but also disease and a criminal nature. He equated moral deficiency with mental deficiency, urging any organization or agency involved in adoption to spare no expense in researching the family history of every homeless or neglected child, rather than “run the risk of contaminating the race by the perpetuation of mental and moral deficiency.” According to Goddard, although the feeble-minded might strongly resemble a normal person, even training would not enable them to function as one. Those falling under his definition would include the criminal, pauper, intemperate person, one badly trained, with little or no education, one from a bad home environment, or one that otherwise displayed immoral habits or outlooks. (Melosh, 2002, p. 19)

Social workers initially viewed the unwed mother as feeble-minded, but soon characterized the women as “sex delinquents.” Although a feeble-minded woman might be a victim of limited intelligence or upbringing, the unmarried feeble-minded woman was no longer blameless. Although this woman was believed to be a victim of a defective genetics, sympathy was not forthcoming—rather fear and punishment. Social workers generally concurred that the solution to prevent women of this class from continuing to bear children out of wedlock included very close supervision, permanent institutionalization for some of the more delinquent, and as a last resort, sterilization. Much of American society endorsed policies of institutionalization and sterilization to

control reproductive behavior, believing unmarried mothers were either morally delinquent or mentally deficient. The intelligence, age, occupation, education, family background, and leisure activities of unmarried mothers were measured in studies not only linked to nature-nurture research, but also to the question of illegitimacy. One recommendation was that women found to be feeble-minded be prevented from having any more children by methods of either “segregation, close supervision or sterilization.” One U.S. Children's Bureau case study in 1927 focused on an unwed mother, Alice R. (“Child Welfare in New Jersey”) The Bureau faulted the girl's family for failing to recognize her mental defects following the birth of her first illegitimate child. It was the Bureau's opinion that Alice belonged in an institution for the feeble-minded. After discovery of her fifth pregnancy, the authorities arrested her, charged her with adultery, sent her to a reformatory, and finally transferred Alice to an institution for the feeble-minded.

One social worker denied that single parenthood was, or at least had to be, pathological. Amy Watson's controversial article, “The Illegitimate Family,” caused a stir in 1918. Watson observed that rather than confining all attention on the illegitimate child and its mother, the entire birth family merited consideration. Although in the eyes of the state, no family was formed, biologically the child had both a father and mother, and both parents had definite responsibilities and privileges. Watson believed that rather than condemning or scorning the unmarried mother, it was more important to seek the underlying causes that heredity and environment might have had in causing the illicit conduct. She believed that illegitimacy resulted from “biological, psychological, and

social causes,” and the community as well as the individual was responsible. She saw a need for improving standards of casework established to remove the “evil effects of the stigma of illegitimacy,” with an emphasis in reeducating individuals. Watson was opposed to punishment or placing a stigma on the mother and child. She believed that in a majority of cases, it was important that the mother and child be kept together for at least the first six months of the child's life, and an attempt made to reinstate the mother in a normal life with her baby. “The relation of parent and child when it really exists is basic and is one which should never be broken until every effort has been made to strengthen it and test out its reality.” The importance of family life and ties was not only a vital need for the child, but also the mother. Social workers should only consider adoption when it was certain that neither the mother nor father or other relatives were capable of adequately caring for the child. (Watson. 1918)

In contrast to this attempt to preserve biological ties, most other social workers of the early twentieth century wanted to sever those ties in an effort to engineer better families. As social workers gained more recognition and public acceptance, they forced themselves into rescue homes, claiming expertise regarding adoption, counseling, and casework. (Kunzel, 1993, pp. 128-129) The evangelical women supported nursing laws, which prohibited separating a mother from her child prior to six months. Social workers had a different view. They believed that an out-of-wedlock pregnancy disqualified a woman from proper motherhood and endorsed adoption as a better solution for an illegitimate child. They based their views on what they deemed “in the best interests of the child” and began singing the praises of adoption. Although they professed a belief in

the fundamental rights of a woman to make her own decision of whether to keep her baby or relinquish it through adoption, in reality, a woman was pressured to give the baby away. By the 1940s, fallen women became problem girls in the narrative of social work and were susceptible to interventions by “experts.”

The Berachah Home, founded by Rev. J. T. Upchurch in 1907 in Arlington, Texas, was one rescue home that took an entirely different view of not only the unwed mother, but also of the practice of giving her baby to another family. Like the early Crittenton and Salvation Army Homes, Berachah was founded on Christian principles and in addition to offering the woman a place to live throughout her pregnancy, it judged its success by religious conversions. However, unlike the other homes catering to the unwed mother, its founder never changed his belief that the mother and child should stay together. Adoption was not an option. Upchurch maintained this ideology until financial problems forced him to close the Berachah Home in 1935. Until that time, the home offered training in many areas, such as printing, teaching, and nursing to equip the inmates with marketable skills. Although women were free to leave Berachah after the required one-year stay, many opted to stay at the complex with their children. (Crowell, 2005)

By the 1940s, both adoption and its relationship with the unwed mother had seen great changes. Adoption was no longer the humanitarian act of giving an orphaned child a new family. The rescue home, that had offered not only a safe place for an unmarried girl during her confinement but also helped in keeping the new family together after giving birth, became mainly a place that facilitated stranger adoption. The

adoption of illegitimate babies became the central focus of the homes. (Kunzel, 1993, pp. 1-2) Homes were maintained financially through generous gifts from male philanthropists and religious organizations, including the Catholic Church. (Morton, 1993, p. 13) By 1937, an estimated sixty percent of adoptions were for children born out of wedlock. (Hanna, 1937) Accurate statistics are difficult to find relating to the number of children of illegitimate birth actually adopted. Comparing illegitimate births with petitions for adoption did offer estimation that nearly a fifth of white children born to unmarried mothers were adopted. This number would climb in the years that followed.

During the twentieth century, non-familial adoptions increased dramatically in the United States. Prior to World War II, there were “no hordes of childless white couples vying for selection as adoptive parents of bastard babies.” (“Adoption History in Brief”) Although the unwed mothers were considered “fallen women” and forced to live on the fringes of society, they were still the mothers of their children “and rarely did anyone question their status as mothers.” Thereafter, policymakers, implementers, and large segments of the public at large came to believe that for whites “motherhood was not determined by biology, by giving birth. Rather, it was determined by marriage.” (Solinger, 1992, p. 69) The most damaging shift occurred in society’s view and treatment of the unwed mother. Regardless of the relationship the mother may have had with the father of her baby prior to her pregnancy, she was a wanton slut. Not only could the unwed mother expect shunning and ostracizing by her community, her entire family suffered the same treatment. The stigma associated with illegitimacy and an unwed pregnancy was cruel to everyone associated with the mother.

At the end of World War II, many of the couples were ready to start a family. Unfortunately, many discovered problems with infertility and looked for other ways to create a family. As the number of infertile couples increased, social workers in the rescue homes found a “market” for the babies born to the unwed mothers filling the homes. The only viable option now given to the expectant mother to avoid the complete loss of reputation and society’s brutal lash was to give up the illegitimate child to the more “deserving” infertile couples wanting to adopt.

In this new form, the customs and laws pertaining to adoption shifted dramatically. Now adoption centered on newborns or infants, rather than older children living in orphanages. Adoption professionals began the practice of “matching” a child with an adoptive family. The child might share physical characteristics, religion, and other factors that would result in the child appearing to look like his or her adoptive parents. By substituting one family for another with systematic matching, the “natal kinship” became invisible and irrelevant. Almost all adoptions were closed adoptions. Neither the biological family nor the adoptive family was to know anything other than non-identifying information about each other. Adoption professionals assured adoptive parents that the biological family would not return to interfere or want contact with the adoptee. All records relating to both families were sealed, including the original birth certificate of the child. An amended birth certificate was issued, listing the adoptive parents as the “biological” parents. Adoption professionals instructed the adoptive parents to raise this child “as if” they were the biological family. The new definition for

adoption changed from finding a home for child in need of a family to finding a child for a couple.

It was from this cultural and societal view of single parenting by unwed mothers that the women of this study came to relinquish their children to adoption between the years 1950 and 1979. Although there are many types of adoption today, including familial adoption and step-parent adoption, this study only relates to closed, non-familial (or stranger) adoption. Conservative estimates (which do not include informal adoptions) suggest that five million Americans alive today are adoptees, two to four percent of all families have adopted, and two and one-half percent of all children under 18 are adopted. Accurate historical statistics relating to twentieth century adoption are, unfortunately, almost impossible to locate. A national reporting system existed for only thirty years (from 1945 to 1975) and even during this period, states and territories on a purely voluntary basis supplied data. (Hanna, 1937)

Even without such statistics, the importance of stranger adoption to both infertile couples and unwed mothers in the postwar period is indisputable. Nevertheless, in the absence of those statistics, and because of the profound silence in much of the historical record, a new methodology is needed to begin the process of providing an historical context for the presence of the women who now see themselves as the victims of the “society of secrets and lies.”

1.3 Methodology

Finding a means to reach women who gave up children between 1950 and 1979 is difficult. Not only has a good bit of time elapsed, but also the pressure to hide their

experiences has meant little paperwork is open for inspection by scholars. The best remedy at this time is to provide an anonymous venue for these women to tell their own stories. As a means of reaching these women, an online survey was created in September 2006 and opened to women who relinquished a baby to adoption between the years 1950 and 1970. ("Crowell Online Survey") The survey contained 99 questions covering the pregnancy, family reactions, societal views, relinquishment, and post-relinquishment. [See Appendix A] Due to the sensitive nature of this study, efforts were made to preserve confidentiality of the respondents by collecting only non-identifying information. Rather than supplying a given name, each respondent entered an alias for reference purposes only. In the analysis that follows any references to or quotations by respondents will use these aliases.

Finding participants for this study required several methods. First, I attended a conference in New York City, September 14 – 15, 2006, hosted by OptionsUSA entitled, "Shedding Light on the Adoption Experience V: An Education Conference about Realities: The Lifelong Effects of Adoption and the Need for Family Preservation." Major speakers were well-known authors of adoption-related issues, including Rickie Solinger, historian and author of Wake Up Little Susie and Beggars and Choosers, Ann Fessler, artist, creator of "Everlasting" and the author of The Girls Who Went Away; Karen Wilson Buterbaugh and Joe Soll, co-authors of Adoption Healing: a path to recovery; and Carol Schaefer, author of The Other Mother and The Ancient Tear. Attendees included not only adult adoptees and adoption professionals, but also women who had relinquished children to adoption. Therefore, publicity at the

conference about this research helped to reach a number of potential subjects. Next, the presidents of two national adoption support groups, American Adoption Congress and Concerned United Birthparents, were contacted, who in turn announced the study in their newsletters and to their online support groups. I contacted Texas Coalition for Adoption Resources & Education (TxCARE), a Texas grassroots group that works toward legislative reform relating to open records for adult adoptees, and the Manhattan Birthparents Support Network. Moderators of several online support groups announced the study to their members. Support groups included Adoptees, Sunflower First Moms, Angry Grandmas (which has a membership of 3,500 members), Adoption Triangle, and others. Lastly, O. K. Carter of the Fort Worth Star Telegram featured an interview with me relating to the study in his October 15, 2006 column.

Three hundred and ninety women logged onto the survey website, and out of this number, 297 completed the survey. The demographics of respondents included not only women from across the United States, but also England, Canada, Ireland, and Scotland. The respondents' age at the time of their child's birth ranged from a 13-year-old child to a 30-year-old divorced woman. The majority of the respondents were the between 18 and 19 years of age.

The following chapters contain an analysis of the online survey and show that the experience of relinquishment was wrapped up in the unique world of post-war America, which placed enormous constraints not only on the behavior of women, but also affected how their families responded to the situation. This study focuses on the central findings of this research. From a more generalized historical view, this study

helps us see how a woman's subordinated place was constructed and maintained during this era.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIETAL VIEWS

To understand the compelling reasons that led an estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million mothers to give up their children to adoption during the years 1950 to 1979 requires examining societal views during that era. (Fessler, 2006) Since the nineteenth century, as historian Barbara Welter has explained, women met strong messages regarding their conformity to a strict code of proper behavior attached to their biological roles in reproduction. Welter identified a “cult of true womanhood,” or a “nineteenth-century paradigm of feminine virtues” which dictated that women were to be “pure and virtuous.” (Peril. 2002, p. 10) On into the twentieth century, educators programmed little girls to aim for the ultimate feminine role of life—that of a wife and mother. Even the toys given to little girls prepared them for the role. Play kitchens, Easy-Bake Ovens, Tiny Tears and miniature mops and brooms allowed a little girl to pretend she was a good little housekeeper and mommy. To prepare girls further for this all-important future, many took Home Economics courses in high school. During the 1960s, many school districts allowed a young woman to substitute two years of Home Economics for a year of high school science.

Dating, especially “going steady” was an important part of the high school experience during the era of this study, and considered the “pathway toward marriage.” (May, 1988, pp. 119-120). As early as the 1920s, peer-enforced codes of dating were in place for high school students. By the 1950s and 1960s, young women were inundated with advice relating to “how to catch a husband,” “how to snare a male,” and a plethora

of advice regarding how to dress, and dating etiquette from magazine articles, books and newspaper columnists. Young women were expected to be sexually alluring in order to attract the opposite sex, while maintaining the code of sexual containment and refraining for sexual intercourse before marriage. (May, 1988, pp. 114-116) An indisputable double standard existed between males and females, especially relating to sexual behavior. Although it was accepted and expected that men would engage in sexual intercourse, his female partner received a far different judgment. The man was consumed by biological urges, and it was totally up to the female to draw the line. Not only did she walk the “tightrope between sexual allure and the emphasis on virginity,” but she would also be the one to suffer the stigma of violating the taboo of premarital sex, especially if a pregnancy occurred. Finding the right mate and entering into a “good” marriage required the young woman maintain at least a façade of innocence. (May, 1988, p. 123)

Because a young woman’s primary role in life was to bear children, it was vital that she find a husband, and society had a prescribed timetable of when this must take place in the young woman’s life. A woman that failed to find a suitable mate by the age of 25 was in great danger of earning the dreaded title of “spinster,” or worse—an “old maid.” In 1949, experts warned young women that living a life alone was “an abnormal state for a woman.” They further wrote, “That except in unusual cases women who live alone will become neurotic and frustrated.” (Peril, 2002, p. 105) By the time many young women were ready to graduate from high school, marriage was on the immediate horizon.

By the 1950s, many young women traded a high school graduation cap and gown for a wedding dress and veil. The two biggest events of a young woman's life in this era could occur only days apart. In 1959, almost half (47%) of all brides were under the age of nineteen. (Peril, 2002, p. 67). Many young brides bore a first child at the age of 18 or 19. Society did not believe the mother was too young or unfit to care for her baby. Even those that "had to get married" were not considered too young or unfit. Although many young women pursued a college degree during the 50s and 60s, Society believed their ultimate goal was to meet and marry a suitable husband. Regardless of whether the official college degree plan was a BA or BS, the "MRS" degree was most highly prized.

In this world of certain marriage and entrenched cultural expectations of a woman's purity and virtue, many in American society placed a premium on maintaining a "good reputation." Wearing a white wedding gown was more than a custom. The blushing bride, floating down the aisle in white garments, proclaimed to the world that she was entering marriage bed pure and untouched by any man. However, in a society that also stressed women's sexual allure and the emotional intimacy couples could expect in marriage, distinguishing between a "bad" girl and a "good" girl was sometimes difficult. Although a "good" girl was supposed to remain pure, many were actually involved in sexual relationships. One defining difference was the "good" girl was "going steady" or engaged, while the "bad" girl was not in what her partner considered a committed relationship. "A girl's virginal reputation was inextricably bound up with ideas of worthiness and commodity." Earning the label of "fast" or even

looked upon as a “bad” girl was not the ultimate guarantee for losing a “good name.” One event had the power to transform a “good girl,” even in a committed relationship, into a “slut” or “whore” and ruin not only the girl, but deeply affect her entire family. Having sex would not bring her down, but “getting caught” was an entirely different story. A pregnancy destroyed the illusion of purity and plunged the reputation and good name of even the most popular young woman into a downward spiral. The hint of pregnancy would tarnish any woman’s name. Rumors might harm, but the damage was not always permanent. Bringing a baby home as an unmarried mother was the guarantee of total ruin. The only means to avoid ruin was a quick marriage. Americans of this era often heard of a seven- or eight-pound “premature” baby. A humorous antidote was, “Although the first baby can come at any time—the rest will take nine months.” Although “shotgun” weddings and the first baby appearing less than nine months later caused gossip and raised eyebrows, the shame was not permanent, nor was the mother automatically deemed unworthy of keeping or raising her child--as long as she was married the father of her baby. The qualification to be considered worthy of mothering a child was not based on a woman’s age, maturity, education, or ability to love and parent her child, but on one factor—her marital status. Woe to the unwed mother with to an illegitimate child.

The term “illegitimate,” derived from the Latin word, “illegitimus,” means “not in accordance with law,” or in simpler terms, “born out of lawful wedlock.” Only in the past two decades has the stigma of illegitimacy decreased. Until then, society viewed the woman who bore a child out of wedlock as a “source of moral contamination in the

environment in which she lives.” This view was especially prevalent after World War II. In 1975, illegitimacy was viewed as “a welfare program or as a psychological problem of parents...studied as a societal phenomenon.” Unwed mothers were consistently classified as “overanxious, neurotic (at least following pregnancy), or even psychotic.” (Hartley, 1975, pp. 1, 9)

The unwed white mother was to take responsibility for violating norms against premarital sex and conception. As a condition of changing herself, she was to acknowledge that her pregnancy was a “neurotic symptom.” Some experts—social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, clergy and others—believed the women willfully and spitefully became pregnant, even if it was unconsciously. Professionals stressed that the young woman was determined, through her pregnancy, to get back at her domineering mother. The blame was out there, authoritative and easily internalized. (Solinger, 1992, p. 6)

The woman keeping her baby violated consumerist principles and robbed society of the payment her deviance required. Unlike the mother who relinquished her baby, she failed to pay for her sin by providing a child to more deserving couples and lost the opportunity “to complete her rehabilitation in preparation for the second chance.” Historian Rickie Solinger recounted the following story from an unmarried mother who kept her child.

I am an unwed mother who kept her child. And I fear no hell after death, for I've had mine here on earth. Let no man or girl deceive herself—hell hath no punishment like the treatment people give a “fallen woman.” The heartache, tortured thoughts, recriminations, fear, and loneliness could not be put on paper. Neither can the scorn, insult and actual hate of self-righteous and ignorant people. (Solinger, 1992, p. 33)

Respondents in the present study answered the question, “What do you believe was society’s view of unwed mothers?” In an overwhelming majority of the questionnaires, the label “slut” was used repeatedly. Other answers included, “They were psychologically defective, sinners to be redeemed, incapable of giving a child a good life.” “Looked down on.” “Sluts, tramps and would sleep with anyone.” “Was not fit to care for a child of your own even though in many cases we cared for sisters and brothers everyday.” “We were the scum of the earth—unfit to mother our own babies, loose, whores, prostitutes, shameless, a blight on society.”

Barbara, 22 years old in 1960, described her viewpoint of the stigma suffered by the unwed mother and its effect.

Slut, cheap woman, bad, dumb, stupid, crazy, good-for-nothing person, used, not good-enough, prostitute, bitch, undeserving of anyone or anything—esp. a good life again, a date, or friends. No one approached me. No one talked to me. No one loved me. I did not deserve love, and it was quite clear that no one would EVER love me again.

Jo whose baby was born in 1960 wrote that having a child out of wedlock was an unforgivable offense—one-step below murder.

Unwed mothers were not seen as mothers at all, but as transgressors who must be punished by being removed from decent society for the duration of their pregnancies, separated from their infants, and branded as 'tarnished goods' forever after.

Survey respondent, Wu, was a college sophomore in 1967. She wrote that sex outside of marriage was forbidden. During that period, only married women could purchase a prescription for birth control pills. The only option for the single woman

who became pregnant was to either marry or surrender the child. “The shame that you or your family experienced was intense. You were marginalized.”

Respondent Alice was 18 years old in 1965 when her baby was born. She wrote she was led to believe that she had shamed everyone that knew her. “We were pariahs and society’s only means for us to redeem ourselves was to relieve us of our bastard children and to pretend it never happened.”

Society was condemning and unforgiving of the woman who destroyed the illusion of purity. Unwed mothers were sinners and deserved punishment. It was not enough merely to shun the guilty individual. The character of her entire family reflected her sin.

Survey respondent, Spring, who was 19 years old in 1971, believed society viewed an unwed pregnancy as “vile.”

Girls were considered sluts, whores, or of loose moral values. They were shamed and blamed; often scorned by their own families, in addition to being considered outcasts by society and their communities. Girls were totally ostracized. This treatment was not only acceptable but expected and demanded. It was the norm.

Respondent, Paradise, 21 years old in 1964 wrote that girls were expected to stay “pure” until they married.

Unwed mothers were tramps—plain and simple. No one shared information that they were having sex with anyone—not even girlfriends. Friends disappeared because they did not want to get a 'reputation' by hanging around with you so you were really shunned.

The divorced woman pregnant outside of marriage faced other challenges and problems. Carolyn, a 24-year-old divorced mother, became pregnant in 1964 by another man. She wrote,

Wanton, shameful. I had left a physically abusive marriage with three young children. Yet I would have been considered an unfit mother by society and could have had my children taken from me. When I was pregnant and applied for welfare, the case worker asked me why I couldn't hold onto my husband—regardless of the fact that he beat me until I was black and blue.

A second divorcee, Frances, had already experienced society's prejudice toward the divorced mother.

I was discriminated against so many times in trying to rent an apartment and in finding a job because I had a young child (by a previous marriage) that I was raising. Therefore, I knew I could not raise a child from the pregnancy whose father would not accept that it was his child. I was working as a bookkeeper in a bank at the time of pregnancy. Don't know what their policy was, but I am sure I would have been dismissed had I not quit before I began to show.

In addition to dealing with the double standard about her sexual behavior, a divorced mother faced an additional challenge. She feared losing custody of the children she was already raising. Courts could view her as immoral and award custody of her children to their father.

Not only did the unwed mother suffer from the stigma, the rest of her family feared society's lash. Unwed mothers were viewed as “bad girls” and usually sent away to have the baby and give it up so no one would know anything about it so as not to disgrace the family name. As respondent, Sarah, put it,

Unwed mothers were shameful and possibly promiscuous sluts. They would bring down the whole family and were to be hidden out of sight.

They were stained but if successfully hidden they could return to society and never speak of IT again. Shame, Shame, Shame.

The fear of the birthmother's family was not merely being embarrassed or being the subject of idle gossip. Two respondents wrote that their fathers lost a church position because of a daughter's pregnancy outside marriage. Michelle was 18 years old in 1977. Her parents were heartbroken when they learned of the pregnancy. She wrote, "My dad had to resign his position from the church as head deacon. My mother took me to the main office of our church to talk to a counselor because I wanted to keep my child."

The difficulty also spread to the child of an unwed mother. Illegitimate children were sometimes viewed as "handicapped in life even before birth." In 1969, experts believed that for an illegitimate child, "chances of normal development was minimized and opportunity for physical well-being lessened." (Kammerer 1969, p. 3) Not only did the mother have good reason to fear social stigma toward her own name and reputation, the threat to her unborn child's future within society was equally daunting. Even if she attempted to ride out the slurs and shunning in the early years of her child's life and attempt to prove her respectability over the years or perhaps relocate to a place where no one knew her history, the truth of her child's birth would forever be imprinted on its birth certificate. "BASTARD" or "ILLEGITIMATE" would be imprinted in red across the birth certificate of a child born to an unmarried woman and would follow the child the rest of his or her life.

Survey respondents confirmed that the stigma to children born outside of marriage went beyond a stamp on a birth certificate. As Merci, who was 21 years old in 1953, was told,

Even if we tried to raise them ourselves, they would be called 'bastards' and that would remain with them all their lives. They would, also, be referred to as illegitimate. Both names would have a lifelong negative effect on them.

In 1961, Rayne, a 22-year-old, believed that people in decent society judged the illegitimate child as has done something wrong and would not want their children to play with him or her. Even in 1966, some respondents did not see a change in societal stigma. Paradise believed society ostracized an illegitimate child. “If you were being brought up by your mother or her family, it was assumed your mother was a tramp,” she asserted.

I recall some Catholic schools that would refuse admission to children who had no known father at the time. Mostly, it was hidden information with all kinds of ruses used. Example: a child might be kept by a family member and his/her b[ir]thmother might be his/her aunt or cousin. It would not be spoken of and mostly ignored in the hopes the child would never find out.

Although illegitimate children had historically been labeled and often treated as second-class citizens, the stigma did lessen to a degree as the 60s ended. With the beginning of the second sexual revolution in the late 60s, a new sexual freedom and rejection of middle-class values emerged with the increase of “free love,” flower children, and communes. However, middle-class Americans did not embrace these values. Respondents indicate their families were unaware of this important change, and the decision to relinquish was based on what women and their families believed to be

the status quo. Lis was 16 years old in 1968 when her baby was born. She wrote, “While we were told that one of the reasons to relinquish our children was to save them the stigma of being illegitimate, in reality, illegitimate children weren't treated any differently.” Jayne was 18 years old in 1970. She wrote that she believed society had advanced and pregnancy was accepted. “But I was in for a complete shock. I think society in general was more accepting, but older people still had many reservations and old belief patterns concerning the stigma with illegitimate children.”

Even in these times of growing acceptance of sex apart from procreation, there remained a vast difference between how society viewed the unwed father and the unwed mother. Although girls were expected to remain pure and protect their virginity, boys, on the other hand, could “sow their wild oats.” Respondent Denise was 17 years old in 1969. She wrote:

The fathers were normal; boys will be boys. They didn't have any control over themselves. They had raging hormones and couldn't help wanting sex. They were not looked down upon; no one pointed a finger at them or thought they were easy, cheap or whores. They didn't do anything wrong. The girls were wrong because we should have controlled ourselves. We didn't have raging hormones like the boys; it was up to us to say no. We carried all the burden and they carried none. We were seen as whores and they were seen as men; they gotten sex—we had gotten pregnant.

Merci was 22 years old in 1953 and had completed two years of college. Although she and her boyfriend were not officially “pinned or engaged,” they had talked of marriage and looked for wedding bands and her diamond. Merci wrote of society's view of both the unwed mothers, fathers, and of their children:

We were treated as criminals—sent away until we could come home 'pure' once again after we had 'gotten rid of' our blight. It was O.K. for

the fathers to put another notch in their belt—look at me, I'm a real 'stud.' They were not expected to take any responsibility whatsoever. It must have been our fault that we 'let ourselves get pregnant'—we must have 'asked for it.'

When a pregnancy occurred, although both the male and female were responsible, the female was the one who was 'caught.' Sometimes people knew the name of the father, but not often. Unless the couple remained together, there was really no way of knowing who the father of the baby might be.

Most respondents saw no comparison between how society viewed the unwed mother and the unwed father. When asked her opinion of society's view of the unwed father, one respondent replied:

No comparison! All societal punishment was aimed at the mother. No punishment at all for father. He was seen as merely "sowing his wild oats." He could walk away without censure. The woman was the bad girl.

A second respondent wrote she was a disgrace to her family—a whore. "The father was a man—a stud. He was trapped, tricked, and I was the bitch trying to trick him into marrying me." An unwed pregnancy was considered entirely the girl's fault. It was up to her to prevent the pregnancy. It was considered normal for guys to try to get as much sex as they could, but women who did the same were considered tramps. If sex resulted in a pregnancy, it was the result of the girl's reprehensible behavior. The mother, now considered a fallen woman, was responsible for the situation and deserved to be punished. The father was the poor guy whose life would be ruined if he took responsibility and married the mother. "Men had to go forth with their education, get

the American dream job, and nothing should stop that. It was up to the girl to control all situations.”

Antoinette, whose baby was born in 1967, wrote that boys were permitted to have sex—almost expected to.

It was O.K. to go out with girls with known reputations for being "fast." There were two sets of women/girls, those that would, and those that would not put out. But in reality, we were probably all having sex. Men were expected to come into a marriage with great sexual prowess, and the women were expected to be blushing virgins...ready and willing to do a man's bidding...in bed and out of bed.

Gretchen, pregnant by her steady boyfriend in 1968, wrote that society considered it the fault of the woman.

It was the woman's fault because she was so depraved as to let the man have sex with her when she knew it was wrong to do so. It was accepted that we should expect the boy to try to have sex, and it was our job to say no. Therefore, it was our fault if we got pregnant. The boy couldn't help being sexual; we could. The birthfather was not to sign any papers and was not to be involved. The social worker told me absolutely not; his name would not be on anything.

The double standard was not only common for boys still in school, it extended to the military. In 1966, Linda was 19 years old and in the US Army when she became pregnant. She wrote:

The father was never mentioned. When they were filling out my daughter's birth certificate, they wrote UNKNOWN for the father's name. All of the fathers were unknown if you were not married. He left the Army with a pension; I left with an honorable discharge. They didn't want to give me an honorable discharge because I was pregnant, but they said later the baby might see that she was born in dishonor. So, they gave me an honorable discharge. I lost my job, my home (as the Army was my entire life), and all I had. He was married (which he had hidden) and he left with his family, and they happily left with a big monthly check for the rest of their lives.

Although society did not place great stigma upon the father of the baby, some of the males did fear the wrath of their parents. Carol wrote that she was unsure of society's view in 1966. However, she wrote, "I was very naive and the father of my baby was running scared—afraid he'd be disowned if his own parents found out."

What the respondents make clear is that attitudes involving premarital sex and unwed motherhood were exceptionally repressive and conservative in the post-war period. They emerged out of a long-term double standard, which permitted a suspicion of a woman's sexuality and an acceptance of men's sexuality. However, while these attitudes had apparently become entrenched since the Victorian era, what made them particularly damaging for young women in the 50s, 60s and early 70s was their combination with evolving perceptions of relationships.

CHAPTER 3

RELATIONSHIPS

According to *Joyce Jackson's Guide to Dating* (1958), dating was important and one of the biggest decisions of a girl's life—the choice of a mate. (Peril. 2002, p. 91) Books, magazine articles and columnists bombarded the teenage girl with advice on how to attract a man, proper dating etiquette, and how to snare a mate. Dating, although important, was not as important as developing an exclusive relationship with one boy. During the 50s and 60s, “going steady” was an important facet of the dating experience of high school students. This committed relationship not only validated the worthiness and desirability of the girl, it often led to marriage, sometimes shortly after graduation from high school.

Although girls were theoretically expected to remain virgins until marriage, society sometimes turned a blind eye to the “steady” or engaged couple who engaged in sexual relations. It was the illusion of purity that was important to maintain and would allow the bride to right to wear white on her wedding day.

Given that sex within a serious dating relationship was tacitly accepted, one might assume that girls in such relationships would escape social censure. Thus, the logic follows, the unwed mother labeled as a “promiscuous slut” was not in a serious relationship with the father of her baby, but rather a loose woman that “slept around.” To test this hypothesis, each respondent was questioned about her relationship with the father of her baby.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents either rated their relationship as a close relationship, steady relationship, or engaged to be married.

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
RESPONDENT AND FATHER OF HER BABY**

• Steady/Committed	171	58%
• Casual	75	26%
• No Relationship	19	6%
• Engaged	16	5%
• Affair with Married Man	7	2%
• Rape	6	2%

Figure 1

Although 26% called their relationship “casual,” many of this number wrote that they believed their partners were in love with them, and they would eventually marry. When they first learned they were pregnant, they initially believed they would marry their partner. Much to their surprise, other factors intervened, and marriage was not possible.

Murphy’s steady boyfriend wanted nothing more to do with her after he learned of the pregnancy; he left town. Pat wrote that her steady boyfriend of five years "flew like the wind," claiming it was not his. Many men claimed the child was not theirs when told of the pregnancy.

Not all of the birth fathers wanted to avoid responsibility for the pregnancy. In several cases, they wanted to “do the right thing” and marry the mother of their baby. However, parents often intervened, and in cases where their daughter was under age

refused to give permission. Still other parents threatened to disown their daughter if she went through with the marriage. In still other cases, the respondent herself decided not to go through with the wedding.

Pam was a senior in high school in 1969. Both she and the father of her baby were expelled because of her pregnancy. She wrote that he was very happy about the pregnancy. "We both were. I still have the letters of his hand-drawn stick figure jumping for joy." His parents were supportive of the couple getting married. Pam's mother had died the year before.

I was too naive to fear anything. My boyfriend and I were living in a fantasy world and very happy. We ran away. My Dad had us tracked down. That is when he found out I was pregnant, and he was furious. He asked me if my boyfriend had ever bought me a Coke. When I innocently replied yes, he disgustingly said, "A hooker gets paid more than that." Then I was put in hell with the exception of the "Home." At first I was scared, alone, and ashamed. When I became comfortable at the "Home," I had a great time. I enjoyed the other girls, my teachers, and counselors. I was the altar girl at Mass--something unheard of at the time. The priest was great, not judgmental and very kind. I organized the menu at the cafeteria to have healthier food so our babies would be healthy. The head mistress had a friendly chat with me. She repeated what I had told her. In the previous year, I had found my Mom dead. I took care of my siblings. My Dad remarried a woman that was not kind. I was taken from my younger sisters (they did not know where I was and did not know for another five years). I missed my senior year, and I was pregnant. She concluded with saying I had had a very difficult year. For the first time I felt a big burden being lifted from my shoulders. I had been unaware of how tense my body had been.

One respondent, who was 16 years old when her baby was born, wrote that although her boyfriend wanted to marry her, "There was no way. He was 16 also." One woman wrote that the father of her child wanted to get married. When she informed him she did not want to get married, he wanted to keep the baby to be raised by his parents.

She chose adoption because, "I didn't know anything about his family, and they lived on the West coast."

Sherry, 17 years old in 1954, wrote that she and her boyfriend were happy and planned to marry. "He was so happy. He wanted to get married and had a good job." His family was supportive. "They loved me." Making plans to elope, she shared the news with one of her sisters, who in turn, told her parents. They sent Sherry to live at her sister's home, letting her know the only acceptable solution was to give up the baby to adoption.

When I decided to give up the child, I called my boyfriend, and he asked to come out to see me. He showed up with his parents, brought me roses, and begged me to marry him. His parents felt I was being hijacked; they could not believe my decision. In retrospect, I realize that the doctor who delivered the baby wanted the baby for a childless doctor friend of his.

Donnie's baby was born between her junior and senior year in 1969. Her steady boyfriend (and father of her baby) wanted to marry her, but their parents would not allow it.

My mother handled it well, but my father went ballistic as he wanted to kill my boyfriend. My father did calm down later on. Neither would allow me to marry my boyfriend though, and it probably was the best decision as I know I could not have lived with his parents around. My family could not afford for me to keep the baby as my mother was very ill and had accumulated a lot of hospital and doctor bills herself. I babysat for one of the nurses at the doctor's office in return for room and board. She had four boys: the oldest was seven, the youngest was one. They included me in their family as if I were a nanny. It worked well, although I missed my family. I was able to go to the local junior college and finish up high school as well as take some secretarial classes.

Some respondents themselves made the decision to refuse marriage with the father of their baby.

Lydia was 21 years old. She wrote that they were talking about marriage and looking for land to buy. His relatives gave them domestic items for their future home. Then she discovered he was seeing another woman whose husband was in Vietnam. Lydia was not the only respondent who discovered her boyfriend was seeing someone else and refused to continue the relationship.

Susan believed she was engaged to be married. When she became pregnant, she discovered her fiancé was not only already married—he had five children. Joyce was also engaged to be married. She trusted her fiancé to make sure she would not get pregnant. “I had no knowledge of birth control myself, nor access to information about it. It was only available for married women.” She further wrote that initially, they planned to get married. “Later, he wasn't ready. To his family, he wasn't sure it was his, which was relayed to my father.”

Not all respondents were involved in a relationship with the father of their baby. Marie's pregnancy was the result of a one-night stand with her boss. She wrote, “He did not know I was pregnant, and my parents did not want to even tell him. He was married.” Another respondent, Claire, wrote the only relationship between her and the father of her baby was “we got together for sex.”

Six women wrote that their pregnancy was the result of either date rape or a violent rape. Irmgard wrote, “I had only gone out with him once since he lived in another state. He was a gentleman. However, the next day he asked me to meet him, and then forced himself on me. Nowadays they call it "date rape.” Carol H, another college senior, wrote that a man (other than her date) drugged and raped her at a party. He

called her the next morning, asking if she was going to sue him. His father found out through her father, and agreed his son should pay half of foster care expenses. Remarkably, she was responsible for paying six months' expenses.

One of the most unusual examples was Nan, 20 years old in 1966, who wrote that the father of her baby ("Richard") was a Catholic priest.

We were very much in love. He was a priest in the Catholic Church whom I met when I was 16. He was 10 years older than me, but because of the sheltering of seminarians, emotionally he was not much older. We both wanted to have a child and lived in a fantasy world, secretly.

He assured her everything would be all right when learning she was pregnant. When her parents learned of the situation, they immediately went to the bishop, who in turn ordered the priest to "never see or speak to me again." Nan's greatest fear was that people would find out about "Richard", and they would not be able to see each other.

We had always planned to live a secret life with our baby. I could have kept my baby and gone on AFDC, but I didn't know about any options. The social worker at the home never discussed any "options" with me. I had planned to keep my baby, but she kept impressing on me that I wouldn't be able to take proper care of him. My parents told me I couldn't come home if I had the baby with me. I kept hoping that "Richard" would come and save me from all this, and we would live happily ever after because of the pressures being put on me by my social worker and my parents. Also, because my social worker lied to me and told me I could call anytime and find out how my baby was doing. Also, when I asked Richard what to do, he said that all he knew was that if I kept our baby, he would never be able to come home again. The church had sent him away to Wisconsin to prevent a scandal! No one ever talked with him about anything, and within two years, he was killed in an auto accident.

The relationships between the respondents and the fathers of their babies ranged from being in a committed, steady relationship (many engaged to be married), to casual relationships, one-night stands, and several who were raped. The explanations of why a

marriage failed to take place varied between different groups. Some boyfriends were willing to do the “honorable” thing and marry the girlfriends. Other claimed they were not the father of the child. Some parents threatened to disown their daughter while others refused to give permission for underage teens to marry. One thing was very clear—no matter how close or distant the relationship between the mother and father might have been—unwed mothers, by definition, were painted as wanton, promiscuous sluts—period.

CHAPTER 4

SCHOOL AND PREGNANCY

Prior to the mid 1970s, pregnant students dropped out of school. In her book, Illegitimacy, Shirley Foster Hartley wrote that in contemporary society (prior to 1975), the majority of unwed mothers were very young, and many had dropped out of school or lacked an interest in school. (1975, pp. 1, 9) Findings of this research do not bear out Hartley's assessment. Although many did drop out of school, it was not due to a lack of interest.

Sixty-three percent (63%) of all respondents were enrolled in school at the time of their pregnancy. The remaining thirty-seven (37%) had already graduated from either high school or college.

GRADE CLASSIFICATION	
Middle/High School	110
College	68
Graduate School	1
Nursing School	3
Cosmetology School	3

Figure 2

The grade classifications of those that reported they were in school when they discovered they were pregnant ranged from seventh through 12th grade, college undergraduates, graduate students, and nursing and cosmetology school students. Prior to 1971, most schools would not allow a pregnant student to continue. In many cases, as soon as a school became aware that a student was pregnant, the school officials asked the girl to leave. Carol recalled being 15 years old and in the 9th grade when school

officials learned she was pregnant. “I was immediately kicked out of school. Told I could never return. Living in a rural area, it was impossible for me to attend another school.” Carol was not the only respondent who was asked to leave. Julia was 14 years old and in the 9th grade. She was told she would not be allowed to attend, “for safety of you and the child.” Although Alice wrote she was not in school when she was pregnant, a disturbing incident occurred involving a friend.

This did not happen to me but to a school chum. She wore her dad’s white shirt to school to conceal her growing belly. When the school principal discovered she was pregnant, he kicked her out of school. That was the policy in my high school in 1963-64.

Vee was 18 years old in 1965 and a senior in high school when she became pregnant. She wrote that she was immediately asked to leave.

The school board decided, in my case, that I could be tutored at the home for unwed mothers and graduate (in absentia). They sent my books to the home and homework was mailed back and forth. The only really awful thing was that they insisted I come to the school in person to take my finals in the guidance counselor's office. It was done a few days after school was officially out, but it was still quite traumatic, since I was seven months pregnant at the time.

Sixty respondents were attending college when they became pregnant. College rules regarding pregnant students were generally more lax than high schools. Although most did not know of college policies expressly forbidding pregnant students in classes, the respondents of this study did not choose to attend after they began showing.

Minnie, a 22 years old student in 1968 wrote, “In my four years at that college, I never saw a pregnant student, but I don't know if there was a policy against attending classes.” Kathleen, an honor student in 1970, wrote that she did not know her university’s policy regarding pregnant students.

I withdrew from school and got a job, hoping to be able to keep my child. When I told the Dean of the Honors program, he shook his head sadly, disappointed that one of his brightest should have been so foolish. He offered no help, let me go, and never spoke of "my problem" again. I did not know of any options. I went to all the university offices I knew of looking for help. No one offered any. I did not know, and no one ever told me about welfare. I had no idea how I might be able to support this baby that was coming. My boyfriend did not offer me any help of any kind. I did not know what I was going to do.

A few respondents did write of their college policies regarding pregnant students. Four respondents were in nursing school. Three wrote that they were asked to leave school. Dorothy's story was an exception to the other three. She wrote:

I don't know what the policy was but they told me I could stay in school because there also was a pregnant married student and they let her stay in school. I did, however, have to move out of the dormitory because I was pregnant and not married.

Only one respondent wrote that both she and the father of her baby received the same "punishment." Both were students in a Catholic high school when her pregnancy was discovered, and both she and her boyfriend were expelled.

Overall, colleges and universities were a little more lenient towards allowing a single pregnant student to remain in school than middle or high schools. However, in 1967 and 1971, two women were expelled when their college learned of their pregnancy. Barbara, a college freshman in 1967, recalled, "Unmarried students had to drop out and could not return until the class was one year ahead. Although my child was born in time for me to return in the fall, I was told I had to wait out one semester."

Many, who were attending college, said they did not know of a school policy. Although two in particular stated they knew of no policy of their university regarding an unmarried pregnant student continuing their studies, their sororities were a different

matter. “Not aware of any [school policy], but I was in a sorority. It would have meant an expulsion from the sorority, giving back our pins, and not being able to live there, etc.,” wrote one respondent. Another who was a college senior wrote, “The University did not care if you attended classes pregnant. However, my sorority would have kicked me out of the 'house' and I would have forfeited my membership. The shame would have been unbearable. I could not face my friends—even close ones—especially my close ones, because in college, you trust no one in a sorority.” Two women wrote that although the university did not have a policy, they were not allowed to continue to live in the dormitories once their pregnancies were apparent.

In 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court found in *Ordway vs. Hargraves* that schools could not expel a girl who was pregnant. By 1975, Title IX legislation denied federal funds to schools that failed to comply. As a result, hundreds of programs sprang up to accommodate the “educational needs of girls who only a few years before would have been summarily tossed out of school.” (Solinger, 2001, p. 96) A review of results from the survey relating to school policy, and specifically respondents pregnant after 1971 bears out a change in policies. Several wrote that although girls might be required to leave the general campus, “alternative” schools were available to accommodate pregnant students. Five respondents attended alternative schools during their pregnancy.

Respondent Laura was 16 years old. She recalls:

This was the first year that pregnant girls were allowed to attend public high schools. My parents had me transfer to an 'alternative' high school where other unwed mothers attended. I was the only 'white' unwed mother, all others were black.

Because of the stigma of being unmarried and pregnant, few girls during the 50s, 60s and even most from the 70s continued to attend classes after their pregnancy was apparent. Even after the 1975 ruling forced schools to create alternative schools for pregnant students, few respondents of this study wrote that they attended. Regardless of what school policy might have been in place at the time of their pregnancy, almost all were sent away as soon as they began to show. For many, their internalized shame was enough to fear exposing their secret.

CHAPTER 5

GIRLS WHO WENT AWAY

Once the pregnancy became known and it was clear that the expectant mother would not follow the traditional course and marry, she could no longer remain in her old life. When school policy dictated she could no longer attend, or her own internalized shame prevented her from attending, few options remained. Most were sent away from home to hide their condition from neighbors, friends, and even relatives. In this study, respondents sent away to hide during the last months of their pregnancy totaled 211.

Seventy-four percent of these women went to a maternity home (commonly known as “unwed mothers” homes). Although some of the women willingly chose this option, parents forced many others as soon as their pregnancy was discovered. Typically, the “home” was located away from the girl’s community, often in another state. This was the first time many of these girls had ever been away from home. Some wrote of being scared, lonely, ashamed, and abandoned. One wrote she constantly hoped to be rescued by the baby's father and fantasized about keeping her baby, against everyone's advice Toby was sent to a Catholic home for the last six weeks of her pregnancy in 1964.

I lived in a dorm. Shared a room with other girls. We were seen regularly by the doctor. I was treated well but was lied to, or should I say things were omitted. so that I would think I had no choice. I was lonely there. As my baby began to grow and move, I fell in love with it. I began begging to get out and was told ‘No’ by the home and my family. I didn't know that it was my baby, and it was my choice and not anyone else’s. I cried. I tried everything I could to get someone to get me out of there. I felt empty and alone mentally. I could talk to only certain members of my family at night time and not every night.

Marci wrote that the feeling of abandonment, loneliness, and helplessness was overwhelming:

I was surprised to meet some lovely young women who were in the same predicament as I was. I was just sure I was going to be in a home with prostitutes. I was led by society to believe that was the only kind of girl who became pregnant outside of marriage. But to have no one from your family, or friends, come to visit you, or even call, was very discouraging.

Debbie was 19 years old in 1969 when she was sent away to a maternity home.

She found it upsetting to be away from family and friends for the first time.

I was one of the older girls at the home. There were a lot of restrictions and rules that had to be followed. You got up at a certain time, all meals were at a set time, and lights out at a certain time. There were three floors of girls, and you had to stay on your floor. We went to a clinic for medical care. Because the home was connected to a hospital, we didn't even get to go out to go to the clinic. We all had chores and our laundry to do. The days we were allowed to go out, we would often be searched when returning to make sure we didn't bring in food that we were not allowed to have such as candy, ice cream, soda. Kind of felt like a prisoner.

She further wrote of the “counseling” she received while in the maternity home.

My counselor was from the adoption agency, and her goal was to get my baby. No other options were given to me. I was repeatedly told that my baby needed a "mother and father;" that I couldn't provide that. I was drilled on what I could provide; who would watch my baby when I went to work; how would I pay for formula and diapers and all the other things a baby needed. I was told over and over that my baby would be better off with a family—a mother and father that I couldn't offer. Her goal was to GET MY BABY. I believe I was "brainwashed."

Sixteen-year-old Michelle was a junior in high school in 1975. Although she and her 17-year-old steady boyfriend believed they could marry, his parents refused to give their permission. “There was NO way they were letting him get married to me and ruin his life. They thought of me as a lower class individual.” At first Michelle’s mother

thought they should get married, but after the boyfriend's parents put a stop to that, she sent Michelle to an adoption agency, and then to a home for unwed mothers.

Well, to start I was literally dragged out of my bedroom by my mom and stepfather to the home. My mom's reason for putting me in the home was that I could finish school. I do not believe that was her reason. I think the agency told my mom that I would be better off in the home. Ironically, I was so depressed in the home that I refused to attend school. The feeling of being alone tripled in the home. I just wanted my life back. I was very unhappy in that home; not only because of the pregnancy, but also because I was away from my family and friends at a very critical time in my life when I needed their love and support. I believe that I would have kept my baby if adoption literally had not been shoved down my throat. Keeping the baby was never an option. My mother never told me that I could not bring my baby home, but then again, there was no way she was going to help me financially or emotionally. I would have to raise the baby solely on my own. I was led to believe that I was not capable of raising a child on my own. The social worker (who by the way was one of the only people that came to visit me in the home) told me repeatedly that I could not even drive. She would tell me that the baby needed two parents. I had to finish school and learn how to drive. My baby deserved much more than I could ever give her. I truly believed her.

The experiences described by respondents varied between horrible to nice. Although most described themselves as scared, lonely, and ashamed and (for many) abandoned, being in the maternity home brought a sense of "safety." After being sequestered and hidden in their homes from prying eyes after they started to show, they were now around other girls in the same situation and could move around freely within the campus of the maternity home. If for no other reason, some of this relief was the result of feeling that they were no longer the only girl in the world who was "in trouble." Susan M wrote,

Considering its purpose, St. Mary's Home for Unwed Mothers in Dorchester, MA, was a nice place to be. More importantly, it was a place where I was finally able to be at peace with my pregnant self. The nuns treated us with kindness—no more, no less. At best, the counseling was limited and, in a word, brainwashing. They continually told us that if we

loved our babies, we would do the right thing by giving them up for adoption. They told us we had NO options.

Jeannette was a college freshman in 1967. When she discovered she was pregnant, she decided to move to another state and start a life for herself and her baby.

Her parents learned of the plans and stopped her.

They were very hurt. They had me intercepted on my way to another state to start a life for myself and my baby. My father could barely speak and held the boy responsible. He was concerned about me not using birth control (even though it had never been a topic of conversation). My mom was heartbroken. Although there was mention of me keeping the baby, it was brief and never encouraged. My mom took me to a doctor to "make sure," and the doctor gave her the name of a "good maternity home." I was scared, lonely, ashamed, and felt abandoned. I constantly hoped to be rescued by the baby's father and fantasized about keeping her against everyone's advice. I was anonymous to the other girls there. The house mother was nice. The maternity home was a dorm within a hospital. We were required to work four hours per day. The women in the laundry where I worked were very sympathetic, but the nuns who ran the program were cold and often lectured us about learning to be "good girls." They also fully expected us to give up our babies.

Linda, who was 19 years old in 1972, wrote she was afraid she would not be accepted in her community when she returned; that people would look down on her and talk about her (which they did).

Unwed mothers were not acceptable to be a part of society at this time. We were sent away to a home, aunts, grandmothers, etc., to supposedly work. We were not mentioned unless absolutely necessary. We had our babies and came home and were told that part of our lives were over. Forget it and move on; never mention the baby again. We were just passed by, having our foreheads marked with a red X. I was scared to death—taken to a home where I didn't know anyone. I was scared and shy, which was perceived by others as being stuck-up, so I found it hard to make friends. The counselors were nice enough. Everyone had their job and then we had activities. I was able to work at the Children's Home Society, helping take care of the kids. This helped a lot. There were also many rich ladies who supported the home, and they would pick us up and take us to their homes to spend the day around the pool

some days. Once I got used to it, it really wasn't bad. The home I was in wasn't one of the nightmare homes I read about.

Morgan, a 16-year-old teenager in 1950, describes her stay in the maternity home:

A very scary place for a young 16-year-old that had never been away from home. Accommodations were in a tower room by myself in the beginning. Very strange, but I worked daily in a orphanage connected to the hospital with young babies as part of my room and board. Delivered completely alone. Later other girls joined me in my room. Terribly scary.

Anne, who was 21 years old in 1961, went to both a workhouse and maternity home during her pregnancy.

I went to a city 300 miles from my home. I went to a "foster home" through Catholic Charities. I was to be a "mother's helper." The first home had seven kids. They gave me room and board and \$10 per week wages. Then they couldn't keep me anymore, as they were financially strapped, and I went to another foster home. The second home had four kids, one who was born while I lived there. That family gave me room and board and \$7 per week wages. I saved some money from my wages to pay the \$150 fee at the maternity home. I went to the maternity home six weeks before my due date. It was run by the Salvation Army. We all had jobs there. I worked in the kitchen three or four hours each morning. It was not unpleasant.

Anne was not the only woman that was required to pay for going to a maternity home. Many homes required payment from either the girl or her family. The Edna Gladney Home charged the birthmother (or her family) \$850 a month for her stay in 1966. However, this amount was adjusted according to the family's income. Ann M wrote that, based on her family income, the \$850 monthly rate was adjusted to \$50 a month for her stay. The amounts given by Ann M were in keeping with other women's answers. Jenny wrote that her parents paid \$1600 for her two-month stay at the maternity home. "I have the actual bill." Although the majority of respondents wrote

that the home required their family to pay for their stay, they did not know the amount or they had forgotten. Two women wrote that they gave their entire life savings (both around \$300) to the home. One handed over her severance pay from her former employer.

Because secrecy was of utmost importance, many were given an alias to use during their stay. Ingenious methods were used to allow a girl to keep her actual location a secret to friends and family members. Reasons given for leaving might include going away to school or going to help an ailing relative in another location. The maternity home would set up a receiving area in the city and state the girl actually claimed to be living in, and her outgoing mail would be sent to the receiving location where it would be postmarked from that location.

The girls were cautioned not to reveal their identities to other girls, lest later their cover story be compromised. Marie describes not only her experience at the maternity home, but her mother's reaction to a letter received from a fellow resident.

It was very frightening. It was quite far from home. We only went by our first names. It was against the rules to use addresses or last names. We all had duties: cleaning toilets, kitchen duty. I was the oldest person there. I was 19 years old—the youngest was 12 years old. At first, I had to share a room with another girl. I asked for a room by myself. After one became available, I got one. I hated everyone. I hated the girls, the staff, and everyone at first. Volunteers from some group would take us to the doctor in mass once a month. I never had any information about what to expect. I was depressed and sad all the time. I cried a lot. I had thought I had made some friends though. One of those girls wrote me a letter when I got out. When I came home one day, my Mom met me at the door holding up this letter. She said, "Whom is this from?" I said a girl from the home. She tore it into shreds in front of me and said, "Don't you ever give out our address to any of these people again."

Although most maternity homes offered some form of counseling, the focus of counseling was narrow. The only option discussed was adoption. The girls were told, “If you really love your baby, you will do the unselfish thing—relinquish.” Solinger wrote that social workers and adoption professionals unanimously agreed, “Only the most profoundly disturbed unwed mothers kept their babies, instead of turning them over to a nice, middle-class man and woman who could provide the baby with a proper family.” She further wrote that Leontine Young, a prominent authority on social casework theory in area of unwed mothers, cautioned in 1954, “The caseworker has to clarify for herself the differences between the feeling of the normal [married] woman for her baby and the fantasy use of the case by the neurotic unmarried mother.” (Solinger, 1992, p. 6)

Some girls were sent to “work houses” (also called “foster homes”), that offered room and board in exchange for domestic services or caring for the children in the home. In addition to having a place to live, the girls received a small salary.

Ann B had just graduated from high school in 1972, when she became pregnant. Her mother, who was also a foster mother, was very angry with Ann and did not want shame brought on her family. Ann was sent to a workhouse for five and one-half months.

I was isolated away from my friends, I actually only saw them twice. I lived with a rich family with three children. I babysat and helped with the children (ironic for being told I couldn't raise my child). I also did some cleaning and spent a lot of time feeling very alone. The husband was nice to me, but I didn't see him very often. The wife liked to talk, and I would be quiet; I was shy. I liked the three kids, ages 7, 8 and 10. The only time I was "counseled" was when an old lady social worker put an article in my hand as to why teenagers should not raise their children.

Some respondents were sent to stay with relatives during the last part of their pregnancy. Rosie was 13 years old. The father of her baby was the older brother of a friend. She wrote that her dad's initial response was that she had "done this on purpose to get back at him (he had kicked out his second wife, and had brought in another woman with her kids)." When her father learned of the pregnancy, she was told her only option as to "give the baby away and be grateful that I will be allowed to come back home." A cover story of going away to a private school was used for her absence, and she was required to write to her grandparents of this "fantasy life," including making up friends and activities. Her letters were previewed before she was allowed to mail them.

Once he was done ranting, he sent me away, ostensibly to a private school. Thankfully, I had an aunt and uncle who conveniently lived far enough away from the family that my dad asked them if I could go there. Because they are probably the most 'real' people in my family, they accepted the responsibility, and I went to live there. They were wonderful and for the first time in my life, I was treated like a person, not an inconvenience. I realized later that they made what could have been a time of horror, the best year of my early life. I think it is because of their love and care that I have been able to go on with life successfully.

Lucy, 17 years old in 1976, was a junior in high school when she gave birth. Her parents were angry, upset and felt betrayed. Her greatest fear was, "What would friends and neighbors think of the family?" It was all about standing in the community. Lucy was given no say in what happened. It was "adoption or live on the streets and never contact anyone in the family ever again." She was to live with her brother and his wife and was away from home for one year.

I went to school and came home. No one would allow their children to be friends with the pregnant girl. I just remember going to the doctor, and he would do the exams but never ever communicated anything with

me. I had no idea what was happening or what to expect. The social wrecker was a mean, evil, uncaring woman who only wanted my baby. She counseled me that I had no choice but to give my baby up and forget it.

Years later after reuniting with her son, she read the non-identifying information that had been given to the adoptive parents by the social worker. She was described as “an angry obstinate brat not able to raise a child.”

Murphy was 20 years old in 1967. She wrote that her father was her sole support. When he learned of her pregnancy, he told her if she brought the “bastard” into his home, he would disown her. She moved out of state to stay with friends and made plans to give up her son for adoption when he was born. “I got a job and worked as long as I could. I was raped repeatedly by my best friend’s husband, and I knew if I told her she would make me leave, and I would have no where to go so I never told her.”

Paradise was 21 years old in 1966 when her baby was born. She wrote she was making minimum wage, sharing an apartment, had no savings, and it was too early in her working career to have marked up any kind of special consideration. She believed that social services were minimal to non-existent in those days. She was terrified her mother would find out about the pregnancy and was unable to afford an illegal abortion. Believing her only option was to keep her pregnancy hidden and give it up for adoption after its birth, Paradise moved to another town and stayed with her best friend and new husband. She found it impossible to find employment as an unmarried pregnant woman and went on welfare. She found help through the Children’s Aid Society. She described her social worker as very kind and sympathetic. Her social worker, in addition to seeing her every week or ten days, also arranged places for Paradise to work and live.

I got a placement as a nanny for a couple with three kids in the country. I couldn't bear it. No TV, no radio, and taking care of kids and cleaning house. I was so lonely—I didn't last two weeks. Then I got a room with a Slovakian woman and her two kids: an 11-year-old and an infant. I was to take care of them when she worked nights. She would come home drunk with male friends many times and wake me up with her drunken parties. I had no money. I had no food for days sometimes. There was another girl in another room in the house, and she used to buy me fries and a Coke sometimes as she had a factory job. I used to steal Cream of Wheat from the baby's box when the woman was at work in the daytime sometimes. One night she came home drunk, and we started to argue about something. She got violent and threw me down a flight of stairs and hit me. I called the police and was out the next day. Then, I was placed with two ladies—mother and daughter. The daughter had Parkinson's Disease and took care of her mother, who was quite old. They were kind to me and often fed me dinner and would leave fruit or a sandwich for me in my room. I got a job at a nursery school helping out as an assistant and cleaning up. There wasn't much money to pay me so I got \$5.00, two bus tickets every day and lunch along with a pocket full of cookies to take home. I was in the hospital about three days or so and then went to my girlfriend's home for a couple of days. We had to get home for Christmas, and my brother picked us all up on the way back to our hometown. I got home and moved back in with my parents as I had no place to live or a job. Right after Christmas, I got a job and then moved out after my brother tried to rape me one night. He said that I gave it to everyone else, why not him. I never lived at home again.

Anne was 19 years old in 1966. She and the father of her baby had dated in college. Before the pregnancy, she had taken him home to meet her parents. She wrote that they thought he was not good enough, and she would have stopped seeing him after she graduated, but found out she was pregnant. He wanted to marry her and take responsibility for the baby. Her parents were very upset at the news. She reports that her father wanted to kill the boyfriend. Anne feared the rejection of her family. Believing her family would not help her, she believed she had to go away and save face for them.

I was scared to death that my family would find out and reject me for doing a bad thing. I even asked the doctor to please not tell my parents. I knew I had to get myself out of my own mess so I arranged to stay with

my girlfriend's parents who lived out of state. My girlfriend's parents, family, and friends were very kind to me and never made me feel ashamed. They supported me in my decisions, and I only found out years later that they would have helped me raise my baby, but were afraid to go against my parents' wishes.

Not all women went away. A few stayed at home with their family. Most that stayed home were virtual prisoners in their own homes, having to hide in their bedroom if visitors arrived. One wrote of being forced to lie down in the floorboard of the car until it was safe to sit up. Helen was 20 years old and a college sophomore in 1970. She hid her pregnancy from her family until time to go to the hospital to give birth.

This is somewhat complicated—your mind can do real funny things. I totally escaped from reality. Deep inside I knew, but I would not consciously acknowledge the fact that I was pregnant. If I didn't believe it, it was not true! Of course, at that time I was very stupid, very uninformed about sexual relations, pregnancy, etc. It was the age old “it won't happen to me.”

Kathy, a 20-year-old nursing student in 1972, went to stay with relatives when she was forced to leave nursing school. She and the father of her baby had dated in high school (non-sexual) and ended their relationship in 1970. Meeting again by accident, they only had sex once. He was married to someone else and unable to help. Her mother insisted that she give up the baby to adoption. Her father told her not to come home with “that baby.” Her grandfather was the mayor of the small town she lived in, and her father was an alcoholic. Her mother did not want to risk the gossip. Kathy lived with relatives for five months, and then went to the Booth Home for the last of her pregnancy. To pay for her stay at the maternity home, she worked in the nursery.

Because I was a nursing student and had worked as a nurse's aide, I worked 7-3 in the hospital floor nursery every day to pay for my stay. My parents did not pay anything. On my off hours, I read books and

learned to crochet. I also learned some ceramics. It was boring most of the time. Every week the social worker came to continue the brainwashing that I was not good enough to raise my child and should relinquish her. The priest also came once a week to tell me I'd go to hell if I didn't repent my sin of unwed sex and give up my baby. Daily, the Booth home staff reinforced these notions. I was only allowed phone calls once a week and only to my parents. My mail was censored (blacked out) incoming and outgoing. I was not allowed to leave except with my parents or in a group. We had to sign in and out. We were not allowed to nap during the day nor were we allowed to have snacks between meals. The food was starchy and institutional. We were not allowed to become friends with the other girls. We were to use first names only. Some girls used alias names, but I did not. The staff was cordial but stern. They continually reinforced the ideas that we did not have the resources to keep our babies and it was best to give them to somebody who did. The nursing staff in labor was cold. Girls were left alone, for the most part, with little interaction from the nurses. Even though I worked with these women during my pregnancy, I was treated no different. My mother was not allowed to be with me in labor (my father didn't want to be there). They made awful remarks to us like "you made your bed, now lie in it" and other disparaging things. There was no counseling after the birth. I remember crying incessantly, even though I did hold my baby. When I got my records, there was no mention of my crying, but just that I was medicated for a headache.

CHAPTER 6

WHY ADOPTION?

Why did mothers relinquish their newborn babies to adoption? One hypothesis is the mother did not want her baby and wanted to relinquish it to adoption. Relinquishment was a means to cover her mistake and go on with her life. Even today, many people believe that her main reason for relinquishment was to secure a better life for her child than she believed she could give it as an unmarried mother.

In her book, Beggars and Choosers, Rickie Solinger wrote about the responses she received relating to an earlier book, Wake Up Little Susie. After letters and calls from women telling of how the experience of being defined as “not mothers of children they had born” eventually catalyzed them to embrace energetic feminist politics in the mid-70s. After reading the letters and listening to stories of these women, Solinger wrote that the “generation-long social experiment involving transferring white babies from their unwed mothers to white, mostly middle-class couples” was not a phenomenon bound by the period of 1945 to 1965. Solinger suggested “the conventional understanding of adoption should be turned on its head.”

Almost everyone believes that on some level, birthmothers made a choice to give their babies away. Here, I argue that adoption is rarely about mothers’ choices; it is, instead, about the abject choicelessness of some resourceless women. (Solinger, 2001, pp. 55-56)

In order to test Sollinger’s thesis that adoption in this period involved choicelessness, this survey asked why the decision for adoption was made and who made it. Although earlier chapters have revealed that many women had decisions for adoption foisted upon them, this chapter further reveals what choices or solutions these women

believed were available to them during this era. It also answers a question that many adult adoptees might have relating to whether they were wanted or rejected by their first mother.

Very few surveyed respondents wrote that they either did not want to raise their child themselves or did not want the baby. A closer analysis of additional responses to the survey gives us a better understanding of the answers. One respondent, who answered she did not want to raise her child, was 17 years old in 1969, when she relinquished. Her father arranged for an illegal back-alley abortion—that she declined. She claimed that her parents did not tell her she could NOT bring the baby home, and they did offer to support her. However, she felt she was too young to parent and did not want to sacrifice the next years to childcare. She admitted having issues with intimacy in the years following the relinquishment of her baby, which she attributes to her father's clinical depression. When asked how she felt losing her child to adoption affected her life she wrote she did not “lose” her child, but gave him to a family who loved and cared for him in ways she could not. Rather than living hand to mouth, dropping out of school, her life had been good. “I’m still happy with my choice.”:

Most of the respondents wanted to keep the children to raise themselves, but for different reasons, either willingly or forcibly relinquished their babies to adoption.

Reasons for relinquishment were:

REASONS FOR RELINQUISHMENT
Forced or Coerced to Relinquish by Parents or Adult Authority
No Other Option./Solution
Abortion Was Illegal/Dangerous
Societal Views (Including Maintaining Reputations)
Lack of Financial Resources

Lack of Family Support
Best Solution for Child
Too Young to Parent
Selfish to Keep the Child
Abusive Boyfriend or Father
Not Wanting Parents to Raise Baby.

Figure 3

“HSP” was 20 years old in 1970. She wrote that she and the father of her baby, who was from South America, were very much in love and wanted to get married. Her parents refused to allow her to go to South America. Although her mother did want her to keep her baby, her father wanted nothing to do with it. She decided to keep her baby and placed it in what she thought was temporary foster care. The agency pressured her to give the baby up for adoption.

I was pressured, but after I surrendered only two weeks later my parents said I could bring my daughter home. However, the agency told me she was already adopted. I retained an attorney and he said there would be years of litigation, and they would not return my daughter.

Unfortunately, this is not an unusual experience. Legally, each state has a specified waiting period in place wherein a mother can change her mind after relinquishment. During her pregnancy, a young woman may believe that adoption will be the best solution. However, after her child’s birth, she decides she cannot surrender her own flesh and blood to strangers.

Shirley, who gave birth in 1966, stayed in a maternity home during her pregnancy. After the birth of her baby, she decided that she could not give it up for adoption. Her mother agreed that she could bring the baby home. When she advised her counselor that she was going to keep her baby, she was told that her mother must first pay all of the expenses that Shirley had incurred while at the home, plus medical

expenses for labor and delivery expenses. Knowing her mother did not have the immediate funds, she signed the relinquishment documents. Shirley was not the only respondent told that she would be required to reimburse the maternity home before taking her baby home. Twenty-eight percent of the survey respondents were told the same.

Of special interest was whether the age of the mother was a determining factor in opting for adoption of her baby. Respondents were asked who made the decision of adoption and their parent's reaction to their pregnancy. Not surprisingly, a great number of the women who were under the age of 18 and still in school answered that their parents made the decision. Those still in school were already under the care and control of parents or guardians, unable to support a child, and dependent upon others for their own support. Fifty-one respondents felt they had been forced to relinquish their children to adoption

Maya, 16 years old in 1959, and pregnant with a bi-racial baby, described her circle of friends and peers as "artistic and liberal." The parents of her boyfriend were anxious to support the young couple and wanted to assist in raising their grandchild. However, Maya's parents were furious about the pregnancy. She believed her options were "an illegal arranged abortion, to surrender the child, or to try to keep the child. The latter, as it turned out, was not really an option." When she refused to give up her baby, her parents had the courts charge her as a delinquent. The court awarded the baby to the adoption agency (which placed it in foster care), and spent the next year and a half coercing her signature on the surrender documents. Maya was sent to the Lakeview

Home, which included not only mentally ill women, but also women from the NYC House of Detention that were pregnant. Young high school girls were a minority of the inmates. She recalls:

A horrifying experience. Their job was to convince women to surrender their children. As I disagreed, I was treated coldly. It did appear that almost all the women were treated with contempt. I was perhaps the most obvious dissident, as apart from disagreeing, my boyfriend was black. I was kept at a special table at mealtimes, apart from most of the other women. The maternity home and adoption agency had a decade long relationship with the hospital. Doubtless many unwed mothers, such as me, wanted to keep their children, but we were treated as if we were non-mothers, criminals, in fact, as mental patients. They considered all unwed mothers to be mentally ill. Adoption agency staff had unannounced and unrestricted access to us in our rooms. I was visited by a stranger while I was stark naked, changing a pad, three days after birth. The woman said she was from the adoption agency and that I was going to be in court to be charged in a week and needed to sign a "temporary" release to allow them to remove my son from the hospital. She said they would take the baby anyway, and if I didn't sign it would go worse for me in court. The paper gave the agency seven days custody. This was amended and a social worker signature added at a later date, without my knowledge.

She further recalls that the hospital stay was extremely traumatic, "and it was meant to be." Maya's parents never mentioned the child after she returned home. Convicted of delinquency, she was released to her parents' custody with the provision of receiving court-ordered psychiatric treatment.

This was because I refused surrender my baby. The psychiatrist was working with the various agencies in hopes of a "voluntary" surrender. My parents insisted that I socialize while I was grieving for my child. The court's off-the-record order was that I socialize with my "own kind."

The two largest groups feeling forced to surrender were 18 and 19 years old. The surprising results were the responses of women who were over the age of 18 years of age, but still believed they were forced by parents. Fifty-four percent of the women

in this group were over the age of 18, the oldest 26 years of age. Why would a woman in her twenties feel forced to relinquish her child? They were certainly old enough, mature enough, and many had some college education. Many of their peers were already married and having babies. The biggest reason given was the threat of being cutoff from family. Some wrote that one of their parents was involved in a leadership position at their church, and one's father stepped down as a deacon because of her pregnancy. In this era, young women were typically more dependent and under the control of their parents. It was common for young women in their 20s to live with their parents until they married. The fear of being shunned by family was a powerful determinant. Several wrote that as soon as their parents learned of the pregnancy, they were immediately whisked off to a home for unwed mothers. During this era, a father's word was "law" and followed without question. Several wrote that their fathers made the decision and "that was that."

Debra Baker produced a video in 1999, entitled "Broken Ties." Debra, her mother, and older sister spoke about the relinquishment of Debra's son in 1969. Mrs. Baker admitted that she was the "controlling" parent in the family, and she was the one who forced Debra into a maternity home and insisted that the baby be given up for adoption. Reflecting back on the era and her part in the decision, she wondered, "Why did we care more about what our friends and neighbors thought than about what our own flesh and blood was going through?" She further relayed that it broke her heart to think about her own daughter, going through labor and delivery alone. "I should have been there for her," she lamented.

Most parents' reasons for either insisting or forcing their daughters to relinquish were not that they were cold and unfeeling. During this era, it was not just the case of suffering embarrassment or enduring idle gossip. It was more than just being disappointed in their daughters. Parents knew the brutality that society meted out not only to the unwed mother, but also to the entire family. A family's status in the community could be ruined. Most of these families were financially able to have helped their daughters, especially in the early months of the babies' lives. However, the stigma and shame were simply too frightening for the middle-class family to face.

A common problem expressed by respondents was their perception that they did not have another option or workable solution to keep their baby. One could argue that there were certainly two obvious options available (keeping their baby or relinquishing it for adoption). The key factor in considering these two options was whether the mother believed the option of raising her child was workable.

A major concern was whether she believed she could financially take on the responsibility of supporting not only herself but also a child. Although a federal program, Aid to Dependent Children (AFDC) has been in place since the 1930s, most of the respondents of this study were unaware of its existence. Out of 288 respondents that answered the question, "Were you aware of the availability of government assistance?", only 37 noted that they did know of its existence while 251 did not.

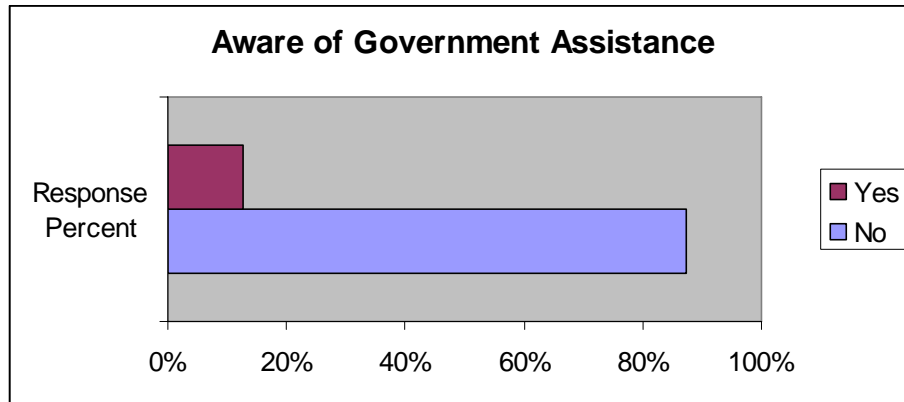


Figure 4

Solinger writes that many women were embittered because they were “denied information about resources that could have saved them and their motherhood, or allowed them to make their own decisions about being mothers.” (2001, pp. 77-78) Nancy, a respondent who was pregnant in 1977, asked her caseworker if such a program existed. The counselor told her none was available. When she returned to school to begin her senior year in high school, she learned from an African American classmate that welfare benefits were actually available. Misrepresentation by adoption professionals and the women’s own class-based ignorance of welfare benefits rendered many of these women powerless, defenseless, and dependent.

Race and class played a part not only of women’s knowledge of government benefits, but also in their ability to take advantage of them. When one Caucasian respondent applied for federal aid, she was informed it would take six to eight weeks to receive a check. Sitting next to her was a black woman applying at the same time who received a check immediately. Asking why the woman beside her was issued a check that day, rather than being required to wait weeks, the woman was told, “You are white

and have family and friends that can help you.” There were those who did know of welfare benefits and discovered that the assistance was so little that they would be reduced to the poverty level. One respondent reported that she believed attempting to raise a child with New York welfare would be inadequate and could not subject herself or a child to such a life.

An obvious solution would have involved the family of the mothers who had completed high school to offer support, at least until she could get on her feet. Of 54 women claiming that they believed they had no other option available, only one said her family offered support. The ages of this group ranged from 16 to 22. One woman answered, “Yes” to the question “Did your family offer you support should you decide to keep your baby?” However, her explanation noted her confusion in interpreting the offer. She wrote, “I don't really know—they said to do whatever I wanted without helping me to know my options. I could bring the baby home, but my father did not want 'the bastard' in his home. What was I supposed to do? Supposed to believe?”

Not only were the opinions of society a factor in making the decision to give up a baby for adoption, the attitude of parents played a major part in the decision for many girls. More than one wrote their parents told them, “you are not bringing that illegitimate bastard into this house.”

Sherry's family threatened to have nothing to do with her if she kept her baby. They tried more than one method to terminate her pregnancy. She reports that:

If I gave the baby up for adoption—all would be worked out. My mother put me in a bath full of scalding water and a concoction that should have brought termination but did not. My sister took me to a Fifth Avenue doctor for advice. I was told to go to Mexico for an abortion; it was not

legal in New York. I went to live at my sister's home in Long Island. (I was living at home with my mom).

Banff was 19 years old and a college sophomore in 1970 when her baby was born:

I met my son's father while he was stationed at a nearby Air Force base in the summer of 1969. I knew he would be leaving for Thailand during the Vietnam War, and we did not plan on starting a family soon, but he did want me to "keep the faith" and not send him a Dear John letter while he was in Thailand. I did send him a letter, letting him know that I was pregnant when I finally admitted it to myself that I was—at about five months pregnant. He wanted me to live with his mom. He was going to get me an old car. I was to have our baby on the Air Force base and live in the city. He said he did not mind packaged deals. He was too late in getting back stateside. My parents made me give my baby up for adoption before he could get back stateside. He got back about one month after our son was born and called me, but it was too late; I only told him to go away because I could not bring myself to tell him I had signed over our son to adoption.

Banff's mother was not willing for her to keep her baby, and she writes that the rest of her family "just went along with what my mother planned. I was turned over to the Lutheran Social Services Adoption Placement Agency. I was made to hide in my room in the farm home in which I grew up. "

It does not come as a surprise that girls still in high school or younger were forced to relinquish, but what about the women in their 20s? They were certainly old enough—many of their friends were already married, having children. Most were educated—either in college or college graduates. Why did these women relinquish? The shame and shunning were the same—regardless of the mother's age. A divorced mother who was already raising one child wrote of problems in finding an apartment as a single, divorced mother. Another was fired from job when her pregnancy was

discovered. In addition, many parents either refused to allow them to come home with the baby or threatened to disown them. With no familial support and threats of disownment, these women gave into the demands that they relinquish.

One woman wrote that every friend she had turned her back on her. Another wrote that her little sister's friends were forbidden from playing with her. Melody was 22 years old when her child was born. She had planned on carrying and keeping her baby.

I found out over the course of the nine months that society's view was cold, even uncaring, towards me. Society (all the people I encountered) seemed to view the situation as a shameful one that could be "fixed" by adoption. There was no encouragement or support for parenting. I told my mother the same night I heard her talking to her priest (that she knew for many years by then) on the phone. She set up an appt. for me to see him. When I did, he insisted that "I should not think to keep this baby. No father. Look at what happened to your family without a father." My father knew, but he was not 'emotionally present' (a Korean War veteran, a Marine, who saw hell face-to-face, and later turned to drink for many years). He just wasn't 'there' although we would be in touch by phone on occasion. I really didn't expect anything from him. My mother went without child support for many years when his drinking was at its worst. I really wasn't fearful of others knowing—just trying to find a positive solution (a way we could stay together).

Melody went on to make a very interesting observation relating to the difference between the 50's and 60's, and the 70's.

Not that the result was different (for those who ended up losing their child to adoption), but that we (from the 70's) began with hope, but lost it along the way because it really wasn't so different for many of us. I had been working a clerical job in automotive (parts & service) for two years and had recently found a nicer job as a receptionist, which also paid more. When I made the phone call to the doctor's office and was told the test was positive, I told the person training me, "I'm ready to settle down," meaning to be a mother to my child.

She had to take a train (a commuter train, the Long Island RR) and a subway to get to this job. Between nausea, tiredness, and almost fainting on a subway platform one morning, she realized she would not be able to continue working and quit. Because her mother would not allow her to bring a baby home, she moved out of state and found a clerical job for a small printing firm owned by an older married couple.

Everything went fine there until I started to show—until they knew I was pregnant. They fired me the day they realized this—without an explanation, just cold hard stares. After that I went to welfare, but was not helped or informed of possible resources. I also went to churches and other family members, but no one helped me. An aunt remembers me calling her up in desperation in my ninth month. She said she couldn't help me as she knew how adamantly opposed my mother was to my going on welfare and bringing the baby home. I lost the ability to support myself, especially after being fired for being pregnant out of wedlock. I felt it [relinquishment] was the only choice I had. I also believed them when they all said my child would be so much better off with a financially stable, loving, married couple. Really what it came down to was my mother. If she would have supported me either emotionally or supportively 'til I could get on my feet, I would have raised my child. The only person who brought it up over the years was my grandmother. She would tell me that she was thinking of (him), (mentioning his name). I later found out that she appealed to my mother while I was pregnant to allow me to bring the baby home. My aunt told me that, when she recalled my phone call to her asking for help.

Carol was a 21-year-old widow in 1964, when she learned of her pregnancy. Her mother was furious. The man she was pregnant by wanted nothing to do with either her or the baby. He wanted her to get an abortion. Afraid people would think she was a slut, she decided to move far away from family and friends.

I was devastated. I was a widow with two children to support and knew I couldn't afford this child. I moved into an apartment 120 miles from my family. My friend (male) helped me through the experience. He helped us get through the whole thing, along with another friend from the area where I was living. My caseworker at social services did her best to make me give up my child. I was told it would be selfish to keep my

baby, and if I really loved it, I would give it up for adoption. She never offered to help me with assistance and only told me that it would be better for child. I found out she brought my daughter to a very close friend right from hospital.

This illustrates the impact of the role of the “pull” that came from the agency demand by infertile couples late in this era.

Merci wrote of the shame and guilt she experienced, her parent’s reaction, and why adoption was chosen:

My mother had a friend take her to a town 20 miles away to call me the one and only time she did—like someone was going to hear our conversation through the walls. My father said he was too old to raise another child. There was never any offer of support, and when I returned from my exile, they didn't even ask how I was. nor was it EVER spoken of. Shame, guilt. If society felt the way they did about unwed mothers, I assumed all of my friends and family would feel the same way. I had had sex outside of marriage—an unthinkable sin. Also, since my college girlfriend and my second mother never talked to me about it, I was truly convinced I was a disgrace to all who knew me. I'm not sure there was government assistance in 1953. If so, getting that would have been a really black eye for my family in their eyes. There was no other choice if I couldn't keep my baby. I relinquished since I had no other options. The father was long gone, and I was told if I 'really loved my baby' I would do right by him/her by providing a family with BOTH a mother and father. I had no way of providing a father, no potential job or money, had not finalized my college education, and no support. As an adult now, in different times, I keep thinking of all the could've's, should've's, but when I stop to think them all the way through, I'm only kidding myself, because there really was no other way, without support from my parents or boyfriend. Not many married women with children worked in those days. It would have been impossible to get a job as a single unwed woman with a child. And, if you had a job, you would be paid one-third what the men were paid even though you were doing the exact same job. This came to light when I got my first full-time job in a bank. I was trained to work all departments: bookkeeping, loan department, and teller window. The man I worked next to at the teller window was trained to work only as a teller, yet, his salary was three times mine. I knew because sometimes I worked in the bookkeeping department.

In 1968, nineteen-year-old Gretchen returned to college for her junior year, knowing her baby was due in November. After moving into the dormitory, she hid under a large coat most of the time. Her father had left when she was 11 years old. “My mom sat me down in about my sixth month and asked when my baby was due.” Gretchen had five younger brothers and sisters and did not want to be a bad influence on them. She denied being pregnant and returned to college. “I think my mom was so exhausted by her circumstances at that point that she was glad to let me take care of things by myself.”

Her mother contacted the counseling center at the university. Gretchen told both her mother and the counselor “she had taken care of the problem.” Unfortunately, her pregnancy was discovered a month before she was to give birth, and she was asked to leave, due to another policy that did not allow a pregnant student to live in the dormitory. A 19-year old pregnant girl was not an adult so she was not allowed to live on her own and remain enrolled in school. Gretchen went back to the counselor at the university to ask for help.

She put me in touch with the appropriate state agency, and I was placed in a foster home in a town near the university. I went to a foster home where the father was a pastor and the mother a nurse. They had two children: three years old and five years old. I did some babysitting for them, but didn't have many obligations. These individuals were a huge influence on me. They were and are the kindest people one could ever meet. We are still in contact. They complimented me on my appearance and other things. They were so supportive in every way imaginable. Because the mother led me through the birth and afterward even though I was a zombie going through the motions, I believe I was able to grieve and heal. She told me to hold my baby and to take pictures of her, which I did rather mechanically, but I did it. She said I should undress the baby and know that she was perfect and that I could make a perfect baby. She was excited when I went into labor—the first person who was excited

about my "situation." I had never met people like this who didn't judge others. They were kind to the birth father afterward and invited him to Thanksgiving dinner. When he asked them if they were afraid of the influence on their daughters of having pregnant girls living there, they responded with incredulity, "We'd be afraid of what they would think if we didn't help others in need." Truly this was one of the best things that has ever happened to me—living with them for a few short weeks. I was the first pregnant girl they fostered, but they subsequently had others.

Gretchen was led to believe that unwed mothers came from low-class families and a situation that occurred when she was between nine and ten years old had a big effect on the decision to relinquish her child.

My parents let me know when a neighbor girl got pregnant that someone stupid enough to get pregnant should not compound the problem by keeping the baby. It should be adopted by two acceptable parents. I was maybe nine or ten years old when I heard that. This neighbor kept her baby and was thrown out of her church and thought to be low class. I believed there was no other option but adoption at that time. I thought I was making a decision. I could have married the father (which I did three years later anyway). I was afraid that if our child learned that we weren't married when we conceived her that she would never respect us and might make the choice to be sexually active too young and throw it in our faces. I realize now I could probably have finished school at some point, but I didn't think that then.

Joannie was 22 years old in 1965 and still living at home. Her boyfriend had assured her that he had had a vasectomy so she had not worried about getting pregnant. Her mother was horrified when she learned of Joannie's pregnancy. "She said I would have to leave. She never told my father and charged me to never tell anyone, as long as I lived." Joannie's greatest fear was that others would treat her just as her mother had. She told her mom she would go out of town, stay with friends, and keep the child, but her mother said "absolutely not."

Since I was living at home, I followed her directions. I really had a great experience. I stayed with the doctor's brother and wife, 325 miles from

home. I took care of their two children and did housekeeping and ironing. They were very good to me, and the wife and I became good friends. The best part is, she would talk to me about the PG and the birth father and give me a chance to openly talk to someone about what I was going through. I was very grateful for their support. The doctor and his staff treated me well since they knew my decision was adoption. One of the doctor's nurses had kept her child, and he told me how unselfish I was to make the decision to adopt. The idea was "you are making a good decision; she made a bad one."

As the stigma of illegitimacy lessened, the argument to relinquish focused on the "best interests of the child." Pam wrote that the stigma was lifting in the late 1960's. "I had several friends who kept their babies out of wedlock, and people were wonderful to their children." Marianne was 18 years old in 1976, when her baby was born. "Although it was the mid 70's, not much had changed. These children deserved a better life and agencies did what they could to coerce the mothers into putting their children up for adoption." Children would be better off with two parents.

Rose gave birth in 1970. She writes that society looked down on girls pregnant outside of marriage:

They were considered sluts, the children were bastards, and you brought shame on your family as a whole. The parents felt that they somehow failed their duties, and my mom felt ashamed as well. The biological dad got off "scotfree." He had no responsibility and never asked about the child. His parents "kicked" him out for a month, which meant that he spent a month at a buddy's house, while I was sent to a strange place, run by strangers who I felt were judging me daily. The baby was a "bastard" and if kept was often treated as low life. As an adopted child, they had a "special status". They were wanted and loved, not just by the adoptive parents, but the birth mom was told that the most loving thing I could do for this baby was to give it to a family that could provide a mom and dad, a good home life, and education.

Alice, who was 18 years old in 1965, wrote that she suffered from the sense that she had shamed everyone who knew her.

We were pariahs and society's only means for us to redeem ourselves was to relieve us of our bastard children and to pretend it never happened. Both my parents, the social worker, doctor, and public health nurse all drummed into my head that I would do nothing but harm to my own baby if I were to try to raise him on my own. Their battering left me believing I was unfit to mother my own son and not worthy of him—that he needed two parents (he already had two parents) and that people with means were more worthy of him than I was. I was a shameful young girl, and I could redeem myself by doing the right thing. The right thing being to place him where he could have all the 'things' I could not provide for him. They never considered the fact that I was and always will be his mother. I was not unworthy, unfit or incapable. I am a worthy person and a very capable and fit mother. I was in 1965, too.

Ironically, many women pregnant after the mid-60s were unaware that society's views of premarital sex and illegitimacy were changing. In 1969, Markie believed illegitimate children did not fare well at all. "My strata of society was the one who sent their daughters away to 'help Aunt ___' and had the baby adopted. Only low-class girls kept their children without benefit of marriage." By the mid 70s, some respondents did realize that the stigma was lessening. Liz reflects that she believed society's views were changing toward the unwed mother and her child by 1975. "It was becoming more acceptable to keep you child. People of my generation were more accepting, but my parent's generation was still in shame and denial."

Jacqueline, 19 years old and a college sophomore in a Catholic women's university in 1976, noticed changes in society. "Even though it was the mid-1970s and free love and sexual exploration were commonplace, my adoption agency counselors assured me my child would have a better life and less social stigma if she were raised in a home with a solidly married couple. At the time, I agreed."

Jammy believed society was a little more accepting in the late 70s when her baby was born.

However, unwed pregnancies were still negative and folks talked about the mothers behind their backs, calling them names, feeling shame for these young ladies, etc. As mentioned above, society was a little more accepting to illegitimate children in the late 70s, but definitely still far away from completely accepting. I did hear many folks say things like, “She's pregnant and she giving it up for adoption.” On the other hand I did hear folks always whisper about kids who were adopted.

Didda was an unwed mother to two children. She kept and raised the first child, born in 1976, while relinquishing the second child born in 1978.

Society was just beginning to accept single motherhood. When I gave birth to my first child in 1976, it was in a private hospital. I was not offered the option of having my baby photographed in the hospital like all the married mothers were. When I left the hospital, I was not given the little gift pack with diaper bag, diapers, formula, bibs, etc., as all the married mothers were. nor were either of my children's births listed in the local paper. I surrendered my second child. I can only remember one time that my first child was 'shunned' for her illegitimacy. She was unaware of it, but I understood exactly what was going on.

Although most women wrote they signed surrender papers, it was often due to urging of parents, social workers, or their pastors or priests. Ultimately, the reason for the decision was due to society's determination that white middle-class women—if they valued their reputations and social standing—would automatically give up their babies to adoption. In the United States, relinquishment was presented as “the act of mothers who have altruistic reasons for making the choice to give up their babies.” Society has two views of these women. The “good mother” gives up her baby because she knows she is too young, or too poor, or all alone, to be a good mother. On the other hand, the “bad” woman exhibits “heartless, selfish reasons for giving up her baby (not wanting to

be tied down, or feels no love for the infant). Solinger believes it has been very rare in this country to think about relinquishment as a coerced act, forced on a mother who wanted to keep her child. The fact remains, however, that is just how many respondents felt. Many of the pregnant girls and young women in the postwar decades responded deeply and positively to the idea of being a mother. (Solinger, 2001, p. 74) Even those that felt they made the decision themselves and believed adoption was best for their babies felt forced by, at the very least, society.

Carol Demuth, an adoptee and a social worker with Buckner Adoption Agency and Maternity Services in Dallas, Texas, has counseled women who relinquished a child for over twenty years. (Crowell, 2002) Demuth believes a big problem the mothers faced was feeling they had no control—that they did not make the decision.

Counseling back then was not about options—it was more about how to “get through this now that you have found yourself in this position of having to do this.” The entire experience, from the moment she realized that she was pregnant until only recently, was shrouded in shame and forced into silence.

The majority of the women of this study wrote that no one ever spoke of what they had gone through, never mentioned the baby, or the painful loss. Demuth believed that relinquishment affected not only the woman’s relationships with others, problems with intimacy and trust issues, but it also affected the woman’s self-image, gender roles, marriage partners, and family formations. She further said,

Every aspect of sexuality is affected by all members of the triad [birthmother, adoptee, adoptive parents]. Birthmothers especially feel like I got into that with somebody and look where that got me. You add the whole shame thing and you can’t feel confident in yourself—you are not going to reveal that to anybody else.

Demuth chaired a workshop called “Birthmothers—Public Image, Private Reality in 2002.” Mothers from closed, semi-open and open adoptions made up the panel. Demuth explained that the reasons for placement were different for the different types of adoptions. Closed adoptions, especially those from the 50s, 60s, and 70s were shame-based. The semi-open adoption was making movement toward more openness, but still shame-based and somewhat economic-based. The reasons for today’s placements are probably economic reasons and wanting more for the baby. DeMuth believes that for some people, it is still shame-based, but many of the mothers choosing adoption today have pictures of their kids in their dormitory—it is more open. She felt one of the biggest reasons that came out in the workshop is that in closed adoptions, the mothers were really counseled to put the relinquishment behind them and were never told what value they could be to their children. In semi-open adoptions, because there was some back-and-forth correspondence, the mothers felt they could be a source of information—they could answer their children’s questions and they were lucky enough to get information about the child, so there was openness. In open adoptions, it is truly the first time the relinquishing mother has come to understand that she has a place in her child’s life. When she signed on the dotted line, she did not give up all responsibility. In fact, Demuth feels the mothers have a responsibility to be there, not only with information for their children, but emotionally.

CHAPTER 7

LIFE AFTER RELINQUISHMENT

Most of the women of the survey wrote of promises by adoption professionals that they would go home (after surrendering their babies), get on with their lives, probably marry and have more children, and forget about the experience. In fact, even today, adult adoptees are cautioned about searching for the mothers that gave them life, with the warning they might be digging up a painful past that has been forgotten. Did the mothers, in fact, get on with their lives and forget? How did this experience affect their lives? The survey questioned respondents about problems or issues experienced by them in the years since the relinquishment of their children.

EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS OR ISSUES

Check any of the following problems or issues you have experienced:

		Response Percent	Response Total
Intimacy		55.30%	147
Anger		67.70%	180
Depression		82.70%	220
Feelings of Inadequacy		80.80%	215
Sexual Dysfunction		33.80%	90
Promiscuity		42.90%	114
Relationships		55.60%	148
Trust Issues		68.40%	182
Rebellion		36.10%	96
Substance Abuse		28.20%	75

Figure 5

Over eighty-seven respondents suffer from depression. Some expressed continued feelings of guilt and emptiness. Debbie V wrote:

I feel a real emptiness and at times frustration and sadness, especially on his birthday and holidays and having no one to talk to because it was a 'secret'. I was always fearful of losing those I love. I also feel that because I had to keep this secret for 21 years, I have not been the person I was meant to be—not as outgoing and friendly as I was meant to be. I also have had a really hard time making decisions because this important decision was made for me. I felt I couldn't make any decision—actually I still have trouble making decisions and need my husband to confirm I'm making the right one.

Eighty-seven percent of respondents experience depression every year on the birthday of their relinquished son or daughter. Cal wrote, "Around his birthday, I would get depressed, some years were better and some years were worse. This was my biggest most consistent problem." Frances wrote that even after forty-five years, she gets depressed if she talks about adoption—until she can get her mind on something else. She described herself as a well-adjusted and happy person. Snoop wrote, "Depression comes easily—especially on Mother's Day and birthdays, and holidays. However, I finally told all of my family and a few very close friends, and they are there for me if I call. I am very grateful for that."

Some described their feelings as "sadness," rather than "depression." Sarah said, "I think about her all the time, and I do cry when I see or read stories of adoption." Lauren writes, "Profoundly sad. Always searching mentally. Physically cried when a new baby (anyone's) was in my arms, friends always commented and laughed—they did not know why."

The Gladney Center informed Suzie's family that she would be fine and would go back to normal when she returned home after relinquishing her daughter to adoption.

They (Gladney) were surprised when I cried all of the time. My Mom said they told her I would not react that way. She said if I had changed

my mind to call Gladney and tell them. I did and they told me something was terribly wrong with me; that I was reacting abnormally and I needed to seek counseling somewhere to get over it. They told me I could not have my child back.

Most relinquishing mothers were promised they would go back to their homes, get on with their lives, and forget. They returned to their homes, forced to pretend nothing had happened. Certainly, it was vital that no one know where they had been and that they had given up children. Not only was no post-adoption counseling available, seventy-six percent wrote that their families never spoke of the experience with them. Forced to pretend nothing had changed in their lives, they grieved in silence.

Some described their parents as cold and unresponsive. Rose described her parents' demeanor as "standoffish. They would not talk about my experience or the impact of not having my baby and having to give him to strangers." Maggie's parents never spoke of the baby or her experience. She did write, "When I told my mother in later years that that upset me, she said they waited for me to bring it up. They were the adults—they should have spent time talking with me about my feelings."

The relinquishment affected other families differently. Other parents showed compassion. Harriett wrote:

They were walking on egg shells around me; they were so saddened just as I was. We were all lost because our lives had changed. Every time we saw a baby on the street we all knew what each others' thoughts were. Unfortunately, my parents and my sister are deceased so I can't even share the news with them that I have found my daughter. My parents were heartbroken. My sister didn't know. When she found out, she said she would have taken the baby. Everything was a secret back then.

Linda wrote that although her family greeted her back with love, they never discussed it; not even in 1995 when her mother was dying of cancer. “I had hoped she would ask me about it and I still could not bring it up.”

In many families, the respondent’s younger siblings were not aware of the pregnancy or relinquishment.

Ann M was the oldest of four children. After dropping out of college, she stayed home until she was able to enter the maternity home. She wore loose clothing or a housecoat while her younger brothers were home. Her siblings understood she was going away to secretarial school. It would be twenty years before they ever knew she had actually gone to an unwed mother’s home and given up her daughter to adoption.

Peggy wrote that her mother never brought up the fact that she had given up her baby:

My brothers never asked how I was or asked about my son until many years later after I searched and found him. For many years after relinquishment I had no one to talk with about my feelings and no way to understand the depression I went into each year near the anniversary of my son's birth. I kept this a secret part of my life until I began therapy seven years later... .just around the time I met my husband. In therapy for the first time I began to explore my experience and begin the long road to healing from the loss of my son.

Lisa wrote that for the first week or so, she was preparing to bring her son home with her:

Once I went back to the agency to sign the papers all I could do was lay in bed with my son’s picture and sob. I could not shower, dress, nor eat. I did not know how the pain would ever go away. My mother, after about three days, came in my room, took away his picture and screamed at me to get out of bed, immediately shower and get over it.

Relinquishing a baby to adoption is generally believed to affect only the birth mother. In reality, her parents also lost a grandchild. Some respondents' parents expressed this loss. Jan, who was 24 years old at the birth of her baby, had lived away from home prior to her pregnancy.

I did go home for a short time after the birth even though I had been living by myself for years before. I was afraid to go home and so asked a friend to go with me. She drove me and stayed for a day. The only time it was ever mentioned was when my mother asked me why I was crying. It told her because I missed my baby. She told me to stop, start living my life, that he was their grandson, and they missed him, too. I felt that it was my fault they had to go through missing him.

Jane B was 19 years old in 1969. Although her father did not know about her pregnancy, her mother did. At first, she wanted Jane to give up the baby, but later changed her mind and wanted her to keep the baby. Jane wrote that although she wanted to keep her baby, she did not know how she could support him and felt adoption was "the unselfish thing to do." She wrote that her mother never forgave her for giving up her first grandchild.

Ashley was 25 years old in 1967, when her daughter was born. She believed unwed mothers were looked on as "the dregs of the earth and they should just go away somewhere away from polite society to protect the standing of their families." She continued:

They, regardless of age, would not be able to ever take care of a baby and should not really think of doing so—they MUST do the right thing of giving this child to a worthy married couple (who was supposedly well screened) who deserved to have children. The real mother was to never divulge this breakdown of her morals to anyone and just get on with life once she had done the right thing which may or may not have purged her sin against society. It really mattered where you lived and where your family thought they were on the pecking order. Basically,

hide the slut away and take the baby that she had no right to have in the first place since there were married couples who couldn't. However, girls who gave birth to "three months premature" babies after waddling down the aisle regaled in white fluffy princess dresses were just fine—they were good girls—they didn't get caught; they never had sex before marriage. I guess this was the beginning of "don't ask, don't tell." The unwed mother being responsible for her virgin conception (which for some did happen) because the non-viable pull out contraception method was the only contraception used. She was fully responsible for being a fallen woman (actually a child in too many cases) and it was her shame and her sin and her becoming socially unacceptable. The father, oh well, maybe he would marry her, doing the right thing, but there was no necessity for him to do anything at all. His standing never diminished—after all he was a man, he would continue school, go to college, and marry one of the "virginal girls."

Ashley had reconnected with a former lover, who was married at the time. He wanted her to have the child, which he and his wife would then adopt. Ashley describes him as supportive and admits he did try to help “with a pittance” while she moved across the country for the birth. She had left her parents’ home, telling no one that she was pregnant, moving to the opposite side of the country to ensure that no one would know. After relinquishing her baby to adoption, she returned home.

Funny, since they didn't know, they just kept saying how wonderful it was to have me back; how good I was, etc. Of course once I got around to telling them (the physical results from the delivery made it clear that something had happened to me) there was the furor I had expected and the "how could you go and give away our granddaughter without asking us." Couldn't win for losing in that mixed signal family.

Respondents wrote about other issues they believe they encountered following relinquishment; especially relating to guilt, shame, secret life, and unresolved guilt (see Figure 6).

RELINQUISHMENT ISSUES

Check the issues you believe you encountered in the years after relinquishment of your baby:

	Response Percent	Response Total
Guilt	61.70%	169
Shame	55.50%	152
Secret Life	47.80%	131
Unresolved Grief	61.30%	168
All of the above	65%	178
Total Respondents		274

Figure 6

Almost half or more of the total respondents have had problems with guilt, shame, unresolved grief, and living a secret life. Sixty-five percent of all respondents encountered all of the issues.

Many wrote that they had suffered from guilt over the years. Many of these wrote that the guilt was not from having the child, but rather from giving it up for adoption. Anne wrote:

I was always looking at boys who would be my son's age and try to think of what he would be like at the time. I really didn't feel guilty for having him, only for giving him up. I felt at times that if I worked hard enough and was really good, my life would be better and I would feel worthy of myself. I felt a lot of resentment towards my parents, but was taught to respect them, so I lived all my life trying to please them. My father told me different times I was to prove myself as a fit daughter and was able to let go of my resentment toward him only after he died. My current husband help me through my guilt, shame, and bitterness.

Snoops wrote she did not feel shame. "I wanted her, but received no help and could not raise her and work by myself. If anyone should feel shame, it should be my mother for her role in this. I will not feel shame. I did nothing wrong." Xoticat wrote, "I

suppose the worst thing was the shame. I tried my very best to forget—to escape the shame—but it was always there.”

When a family member dies, most survivors go through the rituals of mourning and grief, surrounded by friends, and loved ones. Cards expressing love and sympathy fill the mailbox, plants and floral tributes arrive at homes or memorial services, friends and neighbors deliver food to the grieving family, and rooms are filled with people just wanting to pay their respect to the one that has “gone on” or show their support and love for the ones left behind. Often, just having someone to offer a hug or cry with helps the grieving individual. Surely, if a baby died in childbirth or as a newborn, friends and family offering comfort and support following the loss would surround the grieving mother. She is encouraged to talk about not only her feelings, but also her baby. This was not the case for mothers who “lost” their baby through adoption.

Because of the secrecy that surrounded this experience and the fact that no one would ever speak of the loss or the baby, most of these women suffered years with unresolved grief. Susan wrote:

It is like no other experience. When there is a death in a family, there is an event to help the survivors deal with the loss. There is no support for a birthmother who HAS to relinquish her baby. No one even helps by talking or sharing!! Shunned.

Whisper, who lost a five and a half year old son in an accident, wrote that the grief for a baby lost to adoption has been far more devastating. By signing relinquishment or surrender documents, the mother gave up the legal right to “parent” the child. This relinquishment caused the “death” of the parent/child relationship, especially during the closed adoption era. These mothers were told they would never

see their children again. Many suffered anguish, knowing that not only would they never see their babies or know their names, but also would never know if they had really made the best decision—could never be assured that the adoptive parents would give their children better lives. The added injury was the silence that followed—no one to talk, to or share their pain or fears.

Lynn wrote that the unresolved grief issues were huge:

I didn't realize that was a problem for me, except any loss felt overwhelming to me. And seeing a dead little animal made me think of its mother, what she is feeling about where her baby is, and how she must be looking everywhere for her baby. There is also guilt that I did not try harder to keep my baby, even though I know realistically that was not going to happen.

The burden of keeping the birth and relinquishment of a child a secret affected the rest of many of the women's lives. Susan wrote:

Keeping society's "secret" was for me was most cruel and damaging. Baby showers, births, and christenings were never joyous occasions for me and intensified my feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing. I think giving my baby up was a life-changing event and even as I tried to go on with my life and forget, I failed miserably. I tried to convince myself that it was the best thing I could do, but I never believed that deep down. I have always felt on the fringe of society.

Frances Ann wrote that she was only now beginning to recover from the damage of keeping all those secrets.

I'll probably go to my grave having guilt and shame about giving my son up for adoption. I have so many regrets about the adoption. While I know he was loved very much, I doubt that anyone would ever love him as much as me. Living a secret life, not admitting he was my son, has been a cruel punishment, and still is.

The experience was much more difficult for the mothers who did not want to give up their babies. Others, such as Carol, appeared to have an easier time with issues.

She wrote:

I have known many others who have had real emotional trauma from the experience. I think they are the ones who actually wanted to raise their babies. I knew that was impossible for me, which I believe led me to accept the situation without anguish. I know that I made the best decision I could under those circumstances.

The mothers forced or coerced to relinquish, and especially the few whose babies were taken without their signature, appear to have an added dimension of anger and rage that is missing from the mothers who believed they made the decision themselves. Although many wrote that they deeply regret their decisions, based on what they believed at the time, they did what they thought was best for their babies. In spite of many feeling there were no other options available, just making the decision themselves gave them a semblance of control over their lives. Much of the anger and rage of the first group stems from feeling totally helpless and at the mercy of parents, social workers, or other people in authority.

When Jeannine's baby was born, she did not want to see it or even know its gender. She believed it would make it easier to forget. She believed that if she did not know, then she would never be able to attach any humanness to her baby. Unfortunately, she found that not only did she not forget, it affected her in many ways. She got pregnant two times after relinquishing her first child. Both of the pregnancies resulted in abortions.

I suffered depression and suicidal thoughts. I felt I was bad and that if anyone knew that I'd given away my baby and aborted two others that

they would never like and would not want to be my friend or to know me. I was/am fairly successful in my business life and in the aspects of my personal life which the public sees—home, car, clothes, and other outward trappings of a good income. I have not been successful in my personal life regarding relationships with the opposite sex. I had a steady relationship a few years after the relinquishment, but when I became pregnant, he refused to marry me and sent me, along with \$1000 cash, to a Mafia abortionist. After I "recovered" from that, my boss of few years wanted to help me, to be my friend! I fell for it. He was 15 years older (23, 38), married with five children. We had a five-year affair which eventually cost me my job, my third pregnancy, and the last vestiges of self-esteem that I might have had. At 29, I met the man who has been my husband for the last 19 years, since 1987. He is and was a depressed alcoholic. I guess we were/are just the right—two dysfunctional people for each other. In addition to the above, I suffered for years with severe (undiagnosed) migraine headaches and with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), to the extent that it felt like a repeat of labor pains everytime I had a severe episode. I don't ever remember feelings of guilt. To me, guilt implies that I had guilty feelings about relinquishing my baby for adoption. I didn't. I always believed that my baby would be okay and better off without me and would never miss me. I thought I was the only one who would be hurt. I guess I could be guilty of stupidity or self-involvement.

The emotional toil of suppressing not only the guilt and shame, but unresolved grief does not surface in some women for decades. For some, the eruption of these emotions surface in reunion with the son or daughter given up for adoption. Although search and reunion is a study that bears attention, this present study will limit this topic to three examples of the long-lasting and continuing effect that relinquishment has on a woman. In 2001, Jeannine's daughter found her, and she describes how this reunion affected her:

How has it affected me? In several ways, First, it has brought me more joy than I could have ever possibly known or believed I was entitled to. Secondly, it has helped me to accept myself, to like myself, and to believe that I'm really a pretty nice person, a worthwhile person. On the downside, it has caused me extreme grief, overwhelming sadness, some anger, and uncontrollable obsession with my daughter. Some of these

things have relaxed a bit, with the exception of sadness. I have always been very sad for the loss of my child and many of the unfortunate choices in my subsequent life. While knowing my beautiful daughter and granddaughter brings me to the pinnacle of joy, I also have the constant reminder of not only the loss of my daughter's first 35 years, but also the loss of myself and the person that I was supposed to be, the happy person I had the potential to be. Even though, I take medication, I cry frequently over these losses and this sadness.

Antoinette, another one of the many respondents that wrote of their experience in reunion, describes how her reunion has affected her emotionally:

Since my reunion, (unsuccessful as it was), I have experienced some very emotionally upsetting episodes. I have awakened crying for my baby...actually sobbing that I want my baby back. I see her as she would have looked as a toddler in my home. I picture her interacting with her cousins. All of this has surfaced recently. I am working through it, but I do believe it is some sort of post traumatic stress syndrome. I am shocked that I could have given up my flesh and blood. I, the very same woman who cries at the thought of homeless animals, GAVE MY OWN BABY TO COMPLETE STRANGERS. It's truly astounding to me that I could have done that. But that was 40 years ago. I have to stop imposing today's reality on the person and society of 40 years ago. It is a pain that will never go away. I will be buried with it. The most frustrating thing of all is to not be able to continue the relationship with my daughter. She has issues. I can only guess what they are. I do know that I am grateful for having met her and held her and my grandson, and I also know it will never be enough. I wish I could take a pill to make these memories go away. I want to find peace in my life before I die.

Ann M found her daughter on the 32nd anniversary of the day she signed relinquishment papers. Her reunion is very successful. Her daughter's adoptive family is every open and loving toward her and supportive of the reunion and relationship. Ann not only attended her daughter's wedding, the adoptive parents insisted she sit with them on the front row. Her daughter had both Ann and the adoptive mother light her unity candle together—as a symbol of the two mothers in her life. Ann writes,

Although I cannot imagine better parents for my daughter [the adoptive parents], there will always remain an ache in my heart for what might have been. The sense of loss will be with me until my dying day. Through the years a small voice would whisper in my ear, “What kind of a mother gives away her own baby?” I would have to remind myself that I made that decision based on what I believed was best at the time. In spite of the ache and loss of the first 32 years of my daughter’s life, I will be eternally thankful for only having the opportunity of sharing both love and a relationship with this beautiful, wonderful daughter, but also with her parents. I have to make a choice of whether to dwell on the loss and the pain, the what-might-have-been or on the blessings of what I have today. I choose to be thankful for what I have today.

CHAPTER 8

MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Why would a woman today want to share the story of an experience that brought such shame and guilt, and hidden for decades? Every year, adoption reform groups work tirelessly presenting bills to their state legislature to allow adult adoptees the right to their original birth certificates. The opponents to these bills, often attorneys representing adoption agencies, will testify that opening records will nullify the promises of confidentiality made to the mothers who relinquished decades ago. There is no question of the shame experienced by these during the era. Families went to great lengths to keep any hint of the pregnancy or baby from nosy neighbors or even other family members. However, today's culture accepts the single, unwed mother and her offspring, and the view of morality that the 50s, 60s, and even the 70s shared, does not exist in 2007. The women in this study that made the decision themselves often cited their reason was wanting their child raised in a two-parent family, rather than by a single parent. Ironically, in the years following relinquishment, divorce rates spiked and many discovered later that the married couple who adopted their child had divorced—and their children were ultimately raised in a single-parent household. As search and reunion articles, books, and television shows became popular, more and more of these women came forward. Online support groups appeared on the Internet. Thousands joined and for the first time since the relinquishment of their children, these women realized they were no longer alone. They began to understand that the society that had forced them into prisons of secrets and lies no longer exists.

One of the last questions of the survey was “What Motivated You to Participation in the Study?” Repeatedly, respondents wrote that they finally wanted to share their story. Many wrote of how healing it was to share, of having a voice for the first time in their lives. One wrote, “Society needs to know our story as it is a part of women's history that is not talked about.” Another wrote, “To let people know that most birth mothers do love their babies that they gave up and did want them.”

Linda F. felt it was very important for people to hear the voices of these mothers at last. It was after finding her son that she was able to deal with her grief and came out of hiding.

Birth mothers have been silent too long. I hope this research project will help to educate others, especially social workers and others in the field. They still remain largely unaware of the suffering we endured and indeed many of them are as ignorant as society at large, thinking adoption is a "happy" thing and ignoring the pain that surrounds it. I have ended up doing pretty well in my life, after taking many wrong turns, but it's been a lot harder because of this tragedy.

Many spoke of the healing that results from finally opening up and sharing their stories. Patricia wrote, “The more I talk about it, the more I heal. I feel this is an underreported group, and society still doesn't understand how devastating the experience is to women and their children, nor how many people it has affected over the years.”

Pam M wrote she wanted people to know the hell mothers like her went through. She reflected hearing other women talk about relinquishment.

Over the years I heard, in silence, women saying they did not understand how any one who loved their children would ever give them up. I feel we are considered to be nothing more than a body a baby passed through. It was our fault we got pregnant and didn't deserve to be mothers. My

friends that adopted children expressed anger that the little "sluts" got pregnant so easily when they had spent years trying to become pregnant. I want people to know the experience was very painful, never forgotten about, and a huge sacrifice. We should be praised that we gave joy to another woman. I saw a picture of my son's mom beaming at him as an infant. It made it all worthwhile.

Kathy wrote of why she believes it is important that other women speak up and tell their stories:

When someone finally does ask about it, the urge to speak up is very strong, for me at least. Mothers are not meant to give their children away; and mothers who were forced to do this suffered dearly for it. Society needs to know the damage caused by forcibly separating mothers from the children.

Because of the painful experience suffered by many of the respondents, several are understandably bitter toward adoption that separates a young mother from her newborn child. Their responses reflect the effect of the experience they endured. Helen wrote:

I believe that the more that is known about the effects of this experience on the women who endured it, then society's views about adoption might shift a bit. It's not a "win-win-win" situation; far from it. It might be a win for the adoption families, but it seems to be quite the opposite for the relinquishing mothers.

Kathleen expressed a more extreme position, arguing for a negative opinion of adoption altogether.

Because of the prevalence of celebrity adoption and the strong presence of the adoption mythology, it is vitally important that the voices of those who have lost children be heard. Losing a child to adoption is no different than losing one to kidnapping. The child is alive, but missing from you. The child has lost its parents. This is pain, pain, pain, not gooey love, and this aspect of it needs desperately to be expressed so that people do not make life-changing decisions without full information. I hope that this survey and this research project will help to change attitudes and beliefs.

Antoinette wanted to give a voice to her experience to have the world know about the way she and other women were treated:

I have a voice now. I'm not just a loose woman with no morals. I was a sweet girl with normal feelings, goals and desires. I wasn't a slut or a prostitute. Now I'm a 60-year-old lady, alone and with regrets and periods of sadness and a longing for what might have been. But I am using this experience to help fight the adoption laws and to enlighten the ignorant of how unfair it was, and can be, to mothers alone and frightened.

Not all respondents have remained bitter or angry. Paradise wrote she was interested in helping anyone she could—one way or another:

There are many, many angry, bitter, sad, depressed mothers out there who have not moved beyond what happened to them. I wanted to share that things were not great and I would certainly not have chosen what happened almost 40 years ago, but I am content with my choices and feel I made the right decisions. My daughter is a normal woman with a family of her own, parents she adores and seems fine with being adopted. What more could I have asked for? I know had she been with me, her life would not have been so full of love and acceptance, and I was in no position to take care of a child on my own, nor did I want to. Mostly, I was afraid even back then, that I would treat her as my mother treated me, and I had vowed at 12 years old that I would never have children and do that to them. I am not angry; I am not bitter. I blame no one for my situation and how things turned out. I made my own decisions based on what was best for me at the time. Also, I was absolutely convinced it would be better for my daughter to have a family who loved her and I was right. I regret looking for love in all the wrong places and getting pregnant and having to make the choices I made, but I do not regret giving birth and do not regret how my life turned out, all in all. It is what it is and I am content and at rest.

Birdie wrote, “There are so many negative stories out there, I wanted to share mine in order to give balance to the data. I still lost my son, but I did not have him stolen (although I did not have all the options presented to me). He has the most

wonderful wife and a great education he might not have had if I had not chosen this path.”

Susan wrote she was eager to share her story. With “over six million babies given up for adoption,” she felt it is important that even those not involved in the adoption triangle have some information from an historical standpoint.

We must understand the past so as not to repeat it in the future. Adoption is really not an option. Separating a baby and mother needlessly at birth is a crime against nature. And to think that someone else can raise our child better than we can—that is what we were told! My daughter's adoptive father was an alcoholic. The family was extremely dysfunctional. As a child, part of her grew up hating the mother she never knew for giving her to such "horrible parents."

Many mothers are advocates for opening records to adult adoptees. One wrote, “Birth mothers need to have their voices heard. We are the ones who should be speaking about our experiences, not the people who have no knowledge of what it is like to be us.”

Lin wrote she needed to find a way to forgive herself and feel that she did the best she could at the time. She also hoped she might help anyone else who had suffered the torment of birth mother “purgatory.”

I have often said that there are murderers and pedophiles that serve less of a sentence in jail than what a birthmother serves for her sin. I want my pain and my sadness to go away, and I want to feel at peace with my decision of 35 years ago. When you suppress everything for so long, it is difficult to even articulate your feelings.

Linda felt people needed to know how others like her had no real choice and how it affected lives.

I hurt for 28 years and it was a hurt that no one could help me with. We were made to feel like whores when we were just young girls who made mistakes.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

There is a movement to use positive, politically correct terminology when referring to adoption. Dr. Phil’s website lists the “positive” and “negative” terms to use today when referencing adoptions. (Dr. Phil Show) “Give up” is negative, whereas “terminate parental rights” is positive. “Real parent” is negative, but “birth mother” is positive.

Adoption Language	
Positive	Negative
Birthparent Terminate parental rights Make an adoption plan To parent Parent	Real Parent Give up Give away To keep Adoptive parent

Figure 7

Although the term “birth mother” has been a popular term to use when referring to the mother who gave birth and then relinquished—many of these women today are highly offended by the term, feeling viewed as merely “breeding machines.” These women view themselves as “real” mothers. Just because a woman is either unable or denied the opportunity to “parent” a child through its childhood does not negate the fact that she will always be a mother to the child. The fact is the adopted child has two mothers. Out of respect for the women of this study that find the term “birth mother” offensive, I have intentionally avoided using the term throughout this study where possible.

Young women today who decide adoption is the best choice for their baby use the terms “making an adoption plan” or “placement.” The difference between the experiences of the women of this study and the women of today is vast. The women of this study did not have the opportunity to “make a plan.” They were not given the opportunity to choose the adoptive family for their babies, much less meet them. The choice of an open adoption or a semi-open adoption was not available when they were pregnant. There would not be letters and pictures exchanged between these mothers and the children no longer a part of their lives. In fact, they were told they would never see or know anything about their babies. There were no post-adoption support groups to help them through their decision and grief. No one wanted to talk about the pain experienced. In fact, when some continued to grieve over the loss of their babies, the adoption professionals labeled them as “abnormal.” The women of this study wrote repeatedly how they had no “choice” in the relinquishment of their babies, especially the women who gave birth in the 50s and 60s. Not only did many of their families refused to allow them to come home with a baby, but schools, employers and landlords also turned them away. Social workers, priests and clergymen, doctors, and society told them that the “option” to keep their children would bring nothing but disaster not only to them, but also to their children. They were caught between very different ideologies. The early progressive movement not only encouraged mothers to keep their children, but also provided training and help in finding a means of supporting themselves. The pregnant women in 1950 had no idea that only 15 years before, a home for unwed mothers existed in Arlington, Texas, that required she keep her baby. By the end of the

30-year period, the focus of this study, unwed mothers not only had the option of an open or semi-open adoption, they could continue their educations, find employment and housing as a single mother.

Adoption is portrayed as a “win-win” situation for all involved. Well-meaning individuals will tell the relinquishing mother that she did the “unselfish” thing and proved her great love of her child by offering it to an adoptive family. Respondents of this study who wanted to keep their babies were given the mirror image of that message. They were told they were selfish for wanting to keep their child, and did not really love it. To the women of this study, adoption was not a “win-win” situation. Rather, they described adoption as a “no-win” situation.

Few respondents wrote that their families were supportive and offered comfort after the relinquishment. Some parents ordered their daughter never to mention the incident again. The remainder stated that neither they nor their parents ever spoke of the experience again. Ironically, the entire family had lost this child, but no one knew how to mourn or express grief. In a moving keynote address before the 1996 National Maternity and Adoption Conference of Catholic Charities, Rev. Thomas F. Brosnan, a Jesuit priest and adoptee, spoke of the loss in adoption. (“Strengthening Families”) Father Brosnan, who is also an adoptee, believes the closed adoption system “exerts an extraordinarily powerful hold on all members of the triad is a cruel task master that demands untold sacrifices.” He asserts that adoption is an experience of loss. However, we neither care to face the pain of loss in our own life, nor want to be reminded of it in

others. Our immediate reaction is to try to make it disappear, or degrade the obvious import to the person. This equates to placing a Band-aid on a gushing wound.

As I was making the final preparations to start this project, Ann Fessler's book, The Girls Who Went Away was published. Fessler, a photography professor and reunited adoptee, was granted a Fellowship by Radcliff University to write the oral histories of women who had given up a baby for adoption between the years of 1950 – 1973 (pre Roe vs. Wade). Fessler contacted one hundred women across the United States for video interviews relating to their experiences. One might assert that since Fessler's book already tells the story of the mother that relinquished a child, further study is not necessary. I would argue that the stories of only one hundred women out of an estimated 1.5 million are not nearly enough to explore this topic.

Many respondents related that they read the Fessler book before participating in this study. It was reading the stories of the women in the Fessler study that gave them the desire to tell their own stories of how the culture of the society they lived in had shaped their decisions. Their desire was to bring this part of woman's history out into the open. In spite of the fact that their experience was proclaimed shameful and best hidden forever, for most the most traumatic experience of their lives—one that left life-long scars, it is still a story that is their right to tell.

Their stories vary between believing they made the right choice in adoption to those who had their baby taken without their permission. Respondents' attitudes toward adoption today range from acceptance to those violently opposed to all adoptions. Wayne Carp reviewed narratives of women who relinquished in his 2002 book,

Adoption in America, and found that they sharply criticized adoption practices. Carp charges that the women's accounts "serve as rhetorical performances that challenge and rewrite the post-war narrative through public disclosure of hidden pasts." Describing the women as "prime beneficiaries of the secrecy of confidential adoption," he believes that by breaking their silence and verbalizing their adoption decisions, they challenge the tenets of the best solution. All recent studies argue that relinquishment of a child not only inflicts lasting wounds and unresolved issues, but in an overwhelming majority of the time, the mother also suffers an intense longing for the child surrendered. Carp shared a comment by one mother:

A birth mother gives the most precious of gifts—her child—and society expects her to forget and go on with her life as though nothing had happened. That's just not the way it works. They powerfully challenge the 'best solution' by breaking the silence that was supposed to serve them; they name themselves publicly in defiance of the stigma of unwed motherhood. (2002, pp. 231-232)

Some respondents were able to find a degree of peace over their decision, noting that they did what they felt was best—based on the society they lived in at the time. Others have never found peace and continue to experience rage and anger over the loss. The common thread that unites almost all women of this study comes down to the powerful stigma that the society of that period placed on unwed mothers and their babies. Shame was the powerful engine that fueled the "adoption train" of that era. Shame had the power to cripple and cause loving parents to turn against their own flesh and blood; it had the power to blind intelligent people to the fact that separating a baby from its mother is not something that she will merely forget. It is not the purpose of the study to judge whether adoption was ultimately in the best interest of the mother or

child, or whether she made the “right” decision, nor is it intended as a platform for or against present day adoption practices. One goal is to give adult adoptees born during of this era a greater understanding of the reasons they were adopted. Almost none of the adoptees whose first mother participated in this study were relinquished because they were unwanted or unloved. It was not due to rejection. Understanding the strength of the stigma of that era, the lack of resources and workable choices available gives us a better perspective of why so many adoptions took place. The ultimate purpose of this study is to give the sisters forced into a society that demanded secrets and lies a voice, a chance to bring openness and truth into woman’s history.

APPENDIX A
ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Consent to Participate in Research Project

If you surrendered a child to adoption as an unwed mother between the years 1950-1979, you are invited to take part in a research project that will examine how the experience affected your life. No identifying information or demographics will be collected, and every effort will be taken to keep your identity confidential.

The results of this survey will result in a Senior Honors Thesis at the University of Texas at Arlington.

If you agree to participate in this research project, click the "YES" button below.

Otherwise, click "NO" and EXIT SURVEY

1. I agree to participate in this Survey.

- Yes
- No

2. Pre-Surrender

2. Name (Alias) to use for this survey

3. Your age at the birth of your child

4. Marital status at time of birth of your baby

- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed

5. Year of your baby's birth

6. Were you enrolled in school when you discovered you were pregnant?

- Yes
- No

7. If your answer to 5 was YES, what was your grade/classification?

8. What was your school's policy relating pregnant students attending classes? (Please describe)

9. What did you believe was society's view of unwed mothers during this period of time?
10. How did society differ between how it viewed an unwed mother and the father of her baby?
11. How did society view illegitimate children during this period of time?
12. Describe your relationship with the father of your baby (prior to your pregnancy)
- No relationship
 - Casual relationship
 - Steady boyfriend/Pinned
 - Engaged
 - Other (please specify)
13. Was any form of birth control used?
- Yes (explain below)
 - No
 - Other (please specify)
14. Did you inform the father of your baby of your pregnancy?
- Yes
 - No
15. What was his reaction?
16. Did his parents know of the pregnancy?
- Yes
 - No
17. If "Yes", what were their reactions?
18. Did your parents know of the pregnancy?
- Yes
 - No
19. If "Yes", what was their reaction?
20. Who else in your life knew of your pregnancy?
21. What was the greatest fear of others knowing of your pregnancy?
22. What were your initial reactions when you discovered you were pregnant?

23. Did your parents inform you that you would not be allowed to bring your baby home if you decided against adoption?

- Yes
- No

24. Did your family offer you any support should you decide to keep your baby?

- Yes
- No

25. What options were available to you?

26. Were you able to support yourself at this time?

- Yes
- No

27. Were you aware of the availability of government assistance?

- Yes
- No

28. Why was adoption chosen?

29. Who made the decision to relinquish your child to adoption?

30. Did you leave your home in order to hide your pregnancy?

- Yes
- No

31. Where did you go?

- Maternity Home
- Work House
- Relatives

32. How long were you away from home?

33. Were you or your parents required to pay the facility for your upkeep?

- Yes
- No

34. If "Yes", how much was paid each month?

35. Please describe your experience while away from home.

36. Describe the treatment by the staff.
37. Were you required to use an alias in order to preserve confidentiality among the other girls and the staff?
- Yes
 - No
38. Was any kind of counseling offered during your stay?
- Yes
 - No
39. If “Yes”, Select all that apply:
- Individual Counseling
 - Group Therapy
 - Other (please specify)
40. Did any counseling include options other than adoption?
- Yes
 - No
41. Addition comments relating to counseling
42. Were you told that keeping your baby would be selfish?
- Yes
 - No
43. Were you told that if you really loved your baby, you would relinquish it to adoption?
- Yes
 - No
44. Was any option other than adoption offered by the staff?
- Yes
 - No
45. Comments regarding question
46. Were you ever informed that should you change your mind about relinquishment, you or your family would be financially responsible for all the expenses incurred by you during your stay?
- Yes
 - No

47. Were you allowed visitors during your stay?
- Yes
 - No
48. If "Yes", who was allowed to visit?
49. Were you allowed to contact the father of your baby?
- Yes
 - No
50. Were you allowed to go home for a visit?
- Yes
 - No
51. If "Yes", add any comments relating to your visit(s)
52. Where did you go for delivery of your baby?
- Public Hospital
 - Private Hospital
 - Other (please specify)
53. Describe your experience in the Labor Room
54. Were you awake during the delivery of your baby?
- Yes
 - No
55. Were you allowed to see your baby immediately after delivery?
- Yes
 - No
56. Were you allowed to touch or hold your baby immediately after delivery?
- Yes
 - No
57. Would the hospital staff answer questions regarding your baby?
- Yes
 - No
58. Describe the hospital staff's reactions to your questions or requests relating to your baby.
59. How long were you hospitalized after delivery of your baby?

60. Were you allowed contact with your baby during your hospitalization?

- Yes
- No

61. If "Yes" please describe the contact you were allowed.

62. Who brought the relinquishment documents to you to sign?

63. Were you provided legal counsel?

- Yes
- No

64. Were you advised of a waiting period in which you could legally change your decision to relinquish your baby?

- Yes
- No

65. Were you given copies of the documents you signed relinquishing your parental rights?

- Yes
- No

66. Were you taking any medication at the time you signed the relinquishment documents?

- Yes
- No

67. How old was your baby when you signed relinquishment documents?

68. Were you ever promised contact with your child when he/she became a legal adult?

- Yes
- No

69. Were you ever told that you would go back home and "forget"?

- Yes
- No

70. Additional comments relating to your hospital stay that were not covered but you wish to share.

3. POST-SURRENDER

71. Was any form of counseling offered by the adoption agency after you lost your child to adoption?

- Yes
- No

72. Were you given non-identifying information about the adoptive family?

- Yes
- No

73. Describe your family's reaction when you returned home.

74. Did you or your family ever speak about the experience?

- Yes
- No

75. Did you eventually marry?

- Yes
- No

76. If "Yes" how long after relinquishment did you marry?

77. Did that marriage survive?

- Yes
- No

78. How many times have you married?

79. How many divorces?

80. Did you inform your husband(s) about the relinquishment?

- Yes
- No

81. If "Yes", what was his reaction?

82. Did you have other children?

- Yes
- No

83. Comments to above question.

84. If you raised other children, how do you feel your experience affected your relationship with them?

85. Did you tell your children about the relinquishment?

- Yes
- No

86. What was their reaction?

87. Check any of the following problems or issues you have experienced:

- Intimacy
- Anger
- Depression
- Feelings of Inadequacy
- Sexual Dysfunction
- Promiscuity
- Relationships
- Trust Issues
- Rebellion
- Substance Abuse

88. Comments or additional problems not listed above

89. Describe how you believe losing your baby to adoption affected your life.

90. Have you experienced depression around the anniversary of your baby's birth and relinquishment?

- Yes
- No

91. Check the issues you believe you encountered in the years after relinquishment of your baby:

- Guilt
- Shame
- Secret Life
- Unresolved Grief
- All of the above

92. Additional Comments relating to above question

93. Have you searched for your son or daughter?

- Yes
- No

94. Please describe how you feel regarding searching for your son or daughter.

95. What are/were you hoping to achieve by searching for your son or daughter?

96. Have you had any contact with your son/daughter after they became an adult?

- Yes
- No

97. If Yes please describe the experience and the how you believe it has affected you.

98. What motivated you to participate in this research project?

99. Additional comments you wish to share that were not specifically addressed in this survey:

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Gwinnetta Malone Crowell, who graduated in May of 2007 with an Honors Bachelor of Arts Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies—Women’s Cultural History, returned to school in 2001, merely seeking a degree to enable her to advance in the legal field in which she had worked for over 25 years. Much to her surprise, college would dramatically change her plans for life. Her first attempt at college in the 1960s ended abruptly as the result of an unplanned pregnancy and, ultimately, the relinquishment of her baby. The most painful experience of her life served to be a springboard not only to writing two award-winning papers relating to unwed mothers, but an award-winning research presentation. A Freshman English personal essay, “*Looking for Ann,*” won the 2002 Richland College Literary Essay Competition and has been published in three different publications. Her history research paper, "Go and Sin No More: The Berachah Industrial Home for the Redemption and Protection of Erring Girls," won the Phi Alpha Theta E.C. Barksdale Historical Essay Award from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2005, and earned Crowell the distinction from O. K. Carter, columnist of the Fort Worth Star Telegram, as having written what is most likely the definitive study to-date on the home. Gwinnetta hopes to continue her study of adoption issues, particularly relating to women’s history. She has been accepted into the University of Texas at Arlington Graduate School to pursue a Master’s Degree in American History, and hopes eventually to earn a PhD.