



Part I: History

Knowing the History of Adoptions Can Aid Expectations for New Families

By Nancy Baker

The decision to adopt a child is made with such heart and soul and can have immeasurable effects on both the parents and child. Your overwhelming love and sincerity to parent an orphaned child is admirable. When you've accepted the challenge and responsibility to give a child a new life, you will begin a new journey, one full of promises, but also challenges. Where do you begin?

Filled with many thoughts from choosing a country from which to adopt a child to your actual family life, questions concerning adoptions are infinite. You and your spouse have probably talked for days and weeks about your decision. You may have ventured on the web, viewed *Adoption Today* magazine or identified local adoption agencies. If you are lucky enough to know a couple who has already gone through the process, this can also be enlightening, but not as one would think.

In this two-part series, we first want to share

a bit of history with you on how the adoption process began and why. This background knowledge will give you a better understanding and larger perspective. In kind, this information will propel you to stay grounded and flexible in your approach.

In our second article, we'll present resources, tips and communities that may help you navigate the trials, answer questions along the way and stand by you through the challenges you'll likely encounter.

So begins your journey of looking back in time to understand how adoption began and "who" might be adopting children. We'll show you reasons why some of us are compelled to adopt and provide reputable information and ethical resources to help to guide your path. Hopefully as you read both articles the information will set you in motion to experience a successful and meaningful connection with your adoption agency, the social workers and your next beautiful child.

When did adoptions begin and why?

Early in the 20th century many adoptions were haphazard due to lack of rules and regulations. In fact, many were done in "secret." Following World War I and a sharp decline in the birth rate, the increased demand for infant adoptions happened first in America where babies appeared on what was called the "black or underground market," somewhat like magic. As a result of this wrong way to help children and concern for their safety, legislation was passed requiring greater scrutiny of adoptive parents. These rules would protect children with the enforcement of them held mostly in the hands of social workers.

By the 1970s, the demand for healthy white infants increased with such vigor that agencies estimated the wait time for infants to be three to five years. This is a long time to ponder all the emotional yearnings to become a parent of a newborn adopted child. Hopes began to waver as desperation set into the hearts of many men and women.

International Adoptions

As this happened, interest in international adoptions grew as the onslaught of war was upon us. American GIs stationed in Europe, Korea and Vietnam fathered children. Mothers were left to raise the children and they struggled with the stigma of a mixed race child or that they were unwed mothers — a fate frowned upon by many cultures. Thus, abandoning children to state-run orphanages occurred.

Bertha and Harry Holt, farmers from Oregon saw a documentary about the mixed race Korean children who faced, at best, an uncertain future in Korea. They made a decision to do what they could to help these orphans and Bertha Holt began a lobbying effort of Congress that would allow them to adopt from Korea. While Harry went to Korea to begin the adoption of what ultimately ended up being the adoption of eight children, Bertha stayed behind to pursue the bill that would become law in just two months. In 1955, a special act of Congress passed the Holt bill which allowed the Holts to complete the adoption of the children. In October 1955, Harry Holt brought home the newly adopted children. Their story brought a great deal of attention to the dilemma of the Korean children. The Holts, receiving countless requests for assistance from other Americans also wanting to adopt Korean children formed an agency which is now called Holt International Children's Services and is one of the largest international adoption agencies today.

In 1975 an American initiative in Vietnam, spearheaded by the late President Gerald E. Ford, allocated \$2 million for a project called "Baby Airlift." This had the promise of bringing as many as 70,000 children out of South Vietnam to safety, however, in one of the final flights to leave Saigon, one the planes malfunctioned, killing 138 people, 78 of whom were children. More than 2,000 of the children came to the United States. They were eventually adopted by families who had already been approved for adoption.

Today, children from Operation Baby Airlift are now adults. They remain interested in their biological heritage and have formed support



groups and online communities. Some arrange homeland tours to visit their birth countries like Vietnam and Korea. They want to learn about the culture of their birth country and find information about their origins. Many who were adopted by Americans never knew that their biological fathers were American. This information was not provided by the birth mother, orphanage, social worker or agency. Information was and is scarce. What we recognize through our knowledge of history is that many people who commit to the adoption process also have strong ties to foreign lands and from long ago or they are adopted individuals. You may be one. Either way, finding information about a child's heritage or one's own self may be limited or none at all. These policies are still in existence today and it is up to a social worker, agency or foreign country to make the information known.

In 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the first crumbling of Communism, a new awareness came to the Western world about thousands of babies stacked in orphanage cribs needing loving parents; first in Romania and then across Eastern Europe. In 1991, the first adoptions came out of Eastern Europe and within a few short years thousands of adoptions occurred in Russia, Romania and Eastern Bloc countries. What was of primary importance was to have loving parents who could feed, protect, provide medical care and educate the child. Many children came to America with little or no history. Later we came to realize that the more we knew about a child's background and the history of adoption, the better we could deal with the process. We needed to broaden our knowledge and begin to communicate through digital ways with others about the adoption process. This connection

became priceless in terms of adoption support and progress.

Today, adoptive parents need to know their rights and understand that each country may be different. Therefore, meeting other "like-minded" individuals who share your dreams, hopes and challenges is imperative. You want to learn about similar circumstances with community networks which will listen, inform and offer support. This is where the information highways — Internet and e-mail, listservs and social media come into play. But again where do you begin?

In our second article, we will discuss resources to help you make connections, like adopt2Connect, a website, managed by adoptive caring parents; devoted people who can help you in the adoption process. We'll talk about what knowledge and information you'll need. We'll describe a unique community center approach and sophisticated algorithms that can connect you with people who have common interests. We'll help you dive into the digital age to make informed decisions.

The new digital age does hold much promise for new adoptive families and children around the world. As you or someone you know waits patiently for the next call, email or document to guide your steps, there are networks of people that can stay by your side and welcome you into a community. Adopt2connect is 350 families strong; who cherish the gift of a child, respect the unknowns of the adoption process and know how to stick it out. We'll help you walk the right path that leads to ultimate success from beginning to end. Together, we'll rewrite a new chapter in the history of adoption — this one all about community, safety, informed decisions and responsible practices for the love of a child.

Nancy Baker has been an Adoption Caseworker working with families for more than 15 years placing children for adoption from both Viet Nam and Russia. She and her husband are the adoptive parents of a daughter who is currently a high school junior and a son who is a college freshman. Both were adopted as infants from Russia in the early 90's and a total inspiration. They live in Falls Church, Va.