

Finding the birth Mother – A DNA Case Study

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Solving unknown parent cases has some basic steps. These steps may differ from case to case, but these basic steps are used in most cases.

1. Gather a list of close DNA matches – Create a list of close DNA matches along with match strength and potential relationship to the person you are researching. The number of “top” matches needed will vary. More will be required if there are no 2nd cousins or closer. If a close family member is found, one match could be enough.
2. Gather other known facts (non-identifying information, birth date/place, etc.) – What information that is available will vary greatly depending on state laws. In some cases, the adoption agency may still be in existence and may provide some information about the adoption.
3. Research DNA matches to identify common ancestors – Look at each of the top DNA matches. Do they have public trees that provide information about ancestors? Look at shared matches to try and group the matches to different ancestral lines.
4. Look for places where different families come together – Do you see common surnames or people in the public trees of matches? You may need to build out some match’s trees to find the common ancestors.
5. Research forward to find potential parent(s) in the right place, time, and age – look for potential parents in the right place and time. Was the potential mother in the place of birth at the time of the birth? Where the potential mother and potential father in the same place about nine months before the birth. This step may help focus on the potential parents by eliminating people that were not in the right area at the right time.
6. Confirmation – This may require targeted DNA testing or further documentary research. Revise hypothesis as needed and look for details that are needed to confirm the information. Do you need to test someone else? Do you need to research a potential parent to confirm information?

The same techniques used in this case study may help identify unknown parents of an ancestor and advance your genealogy research. In the case of living adoptees, you may have living people that can help by confirming facts or take a DNA test. When we are working on ancestors back farther, we may have to depend on documentary evidence or DNA tests of descendants to establish the connections.

THE CASE

This is a case study about using DNA in conjunction with family tree information to identify close relatives and ultimately the birth mother of a woman that was adopted at birth.

The person showed up as a close match (119 cM) potentially a 3rd cousin.

Looking at shared matches, this person matches multiple people that descend from a common couple that married in 1879 and had nine daughters before 1900 in Iowa.

Working with the adoptee, we looked at her top 15 matches. Researching these 15 matches, looking at their public trees and shared matches we found that eight of her top 15 matches had some relationship with this same family.

The adoptee was born in California in 1953. The nine daughters were likely too old to have a child in 1953.

Looking at the eight DNA matches that appeared to be related to the same family, they had DNA matches between 329 cM and 117.5 cM.

Using the “Shared CM tool” at DNAPainter.com the potential relationships of each of these matches were reviewed and relationships to common couple were plotted. (Note: Now Ancestry provides a similar tool to identify the potential relationships between DNA matches.)

Matches included grandchildren and great grandchildren of three of the nine daughters. Another match was a grandchild of the brother-in-law of a fourth daughter.

The only known people that would be closely related to the brother-in-law’s grandchild and grandchildren or great grandchildren of three other sisters would be the three children of this sister and her husband.

This couple had three children. Researching each of these children identified all three children had served in the military.

The oldest son was married and living in Iowa by 1950.

The second child, a daughter, was married with two children living in Los Angeles by 1952.

The youngest child was a daughter in the Navy 1 Jan 1951-1 Jan 1953. She was stationed in Los Angeles when she was discharged from the Navy.

This youngest daughter appeared to be the most likely birth mother. Further research showed she stayed in California and later was married there and had a second daughter. Her family moved back to Iowa in the late 1950s, where she passed away in 2001.

Working with a "Search Angel" in California she was able to access the original birth certificate for the adoptee (using the known birth date and place along with adoption parents). The original birth certificate confirmed the birth mother's name on the original birth certificate matched the person identified through DNA matches and genealogical research.

Contact information for her half-sister was provided, but as far as I know they have not established contact.

On the father's side some targeted testing may be required to confirm the connection.

Warnings:

Many people have family secrets. DNA testing has exposed some of these secrets and in some cases the people that know about these secrets may not be happy about their secrets being exposed. Dealing with living people is a little different than researching long deceased ancestors. If we learn about an affair 150 years ago it will have little impact on living people. If we find out about a secret in adoption research, it could directly involve living people. We need to be sensitive to this difference and not disclose family secrets that could have negative impact on living people.

DNA testing can identify unknown close relatives. This adoptee turned out to be my 2nd cousin once removed. Without my DNA test I may never have known about this cousin. She has a right to know about her birth family. It is not my place to force contact. Relationships between family members are up to them. There are no guarantees.

People working with unknown parentage of living people must respect the wishes of the people involved. These relationships can result in happy reunions or disasters. If the discovery brings up unhappy memories people may deny the events or the conclusions that have been proven. You can be supportive, but you should not try to force communication or contact between the people involved.

Tools used:

1. AncestryDNA
2. DNAPainter.com “Shared CM Tool”
3. Tree plotted with pen and ink

Resources:

Dnaadoption.org – this non-profit provides many resources, advice, and training to help adoptees and people with unknown parents use DNA and genealogy techniques to learn about their birth families. They also operate a message board where people can share questions and get help to do local research in other areas.

“The DNA Guide for Adoptees”, by Brianne Kirkpatrick and Shannon Combs-Bennett, 2019

“The Adoptee’s guide to DNA testing: How to Use Genetic Genealogy to Discover Your Long-Lost Family”, by Tamar Weinberg, 2017

“The Lost Family: How DNA Testing is Upending Who We Are”, by Libby Copeland, 2020

<https://www.searchangels.org/> website for non-profit organization that helps adoptees with search and advice.