Pain of adoptions can last a lifetime

By Anita Creamer, Sacramento Bee

Just before Christmas 1962, when she was 20 and unmarried, Freddie Stewart gave birth to a baby girl. At the hospital, she refused to hold her firstborn; she remembers thinking that if she saw her daughter, she couldn't handle giving her up for adoption.

"I went away from this experience and tried not to look back," said Freddie Stewart Lussier, now 70. "I thought I'd dealt with it. I just put it out of my head."

She lives today on a 10-acre property in the El Dorado County foothills, where she has goats, chickens and dogs. Kelly Camber, a daughter she raised after a brief marriage in the mid-1960s, visits often, and Freddie's grown twin granddaughters and their children spend time with her.

But as with many other mothers of her generation, the loss of her birth child was deep and lasting, a permanent wound. Over the next five decades, Freddie carried a burden of guilt and grief. She couldn't even talk about her firstborn.

Not when her brother, Wendell Alderson, 60, tried to raise the subject.

"You could see the look on her face," he said. "Her face would fall. It was hidden. It was a deep, dark secret in our family."

And not when the family friend who helped arrange the birth daughter's private adoption asked Freddie if she wanted to see photos.

"I'd say no," said Freddie. "It was painful, but I was able to

put it behind me. Dwelling on it, what was that going to do?”

And then, through happenstance and what Freddie Lussier calls God’s will, she and her birth daughter, Lori Fox, finally met.

During adoption’s age of shame — roughly the three decades beginning in 1945 — the practice was shrouded in secrecy. And young women from middle-class families paid a steep emotional price for pregnancy before marriage.

Often, they were sent to maternity homes where they gave birth to babies they immediately relinquished.

In many ways, Linda Orozco’s story is typical. Today, she’s a volunteer for support groups that help people touched by that era of adoption, but in 1967, she was pregnant and unmarried. She fled to Sacramento, Calif.’s maternity home, Fairhaven Home for Girls, where she gave birth to the son she gave up.

“Society looked down on an unwed mother,” said Orozco, now 67 and a retired state worker. “Your own family looked down on you. You felt like damaged goods.

“I didn’t start talking about it until 31 years later. I had so much shame and pain and sorrow and loss. I had grief I didn’t know was in me all those years, because it was locked up.”

And no one talked about the pregnant girls who vanished, except in whispers.

“The stigma was huge,” said Ellen Herman, a University of Oregon history professor who created “The Adoption History Project,” an online archive of adoption history.

“It’s difficult to convey that today to anyone under 30 or even 40. We don’t remember the degree of shame associated with nonmarital childbearing.”

Although statistics on legal adoption were gathered

haphazardly on the state and federal levels in the 1950s and 1960s — and informal adoptions were never recorded — experts suggest that about 120,000 children were adopted each year during those decades, peaking at about 175,000 in 1970.

Research shows that today about 5 million Americans are adoptees, and only 3 percent of them are younger than 18.

For most of them, birth records remain sealed. Even today, adoptees in most states, including California, need a notarized request to receive basic information about their birth parents: age, height, weight and limited medical records. Their identities are not revealed as part of that request.

But in California and 30 other states, adult adoptees and birth parents can find each other through mutual-consent registries, which allow both parties to express their interest in getting in touch. Alternatively, online adoption search sites can also provide help.

On a practical level, what this involved process often means is that the past remains hidden, cloaked in silence.

“Closed adoption was done to protect the birth mother’s reputation and to protect the adoptee,” said Leslie Mackinnon, a spokeswoman for an Atlanta-based advocacy group, Concerned United Birthparents. “And it was done to protect adoptive parents from anyone coming back to claim their child.

“It really messed a lot of people up. Secrets and lies never do anyone any good.”

Freddie Lussier grew up in Roseville, Calif., when it was still a small railroad town, a place where everyone knew everyone else and neighborhood gossip flowed freely.

She worked in a local beauty shop, and she could hear the other women talk after she got pregnant. So she left town,

going to live with an older sister in Sacramento until the baby's birth.

"The man I'd been seeing was older than me, but there was no great love there," she said. "I didn't know what to do. I was probably four months along when I told my mother.

"She was mad and disappointed. You know."

A family friend mentioned that she knew a local couple who wanted children but couldn't have them. Freddie and her mother visited a Sacramento attorney, where Freddie signed the papers.

"I don't remember having a choice," she said. "My mother wanted to meet the people, but the attorney advised us not to.

"Everyone told me that (the birth child) would never know she was adopted. I never pursued a reunion, because I'd never disrupt her life that way. Really, I put that birth so far in the back of my head that it was almost like it hadn't happened."

The secrecy surrounding adoption created complicated parallel fictions: Not only was the birth mother expected to compartmentalize her past, but adoptive parents also sometimes felt the need to hide the reality of their circumstances.

Perhaps some of them worried that the stigma of unwed motherhood would tarnish the child they had adopted. Perhaps they feared that their families would be singled out as different.

"Secrecy of all kinds came into the open starting in the 1960s," said Herman, the University of Oregon historian. "Secrets lose toxicity when that happens.

"Families now aren't expected to keep up the pretense that adoptive families are exactly the same, because they're not. Adoptive children have more than one mother and father. People

in the 1950s and ’60s tried to pretend otherwise for very well-intentioned reasons.”

For some, the power of secrecy remains.

The woman who adopted Lori Fox, who raised her and loved her, is 81 now and a widow. She does not like the idea of a newspaper story and does not want her name used. Like many of her generation, she prefers that private matters remain private.

It was only by chance that she met Wendell Alderson at the funeral several months ago of the mutual friend who had helped arrange the adoption of his sister’s birth child.

The two began talking – and, he said, she helped put him in touch with Lori, her only child.

“She told me, ‘I’d like for Lori to know some of her family,'” he said.

Lori Fox is today a 50-year-old mother of three who lives in Manteca. She was 8 when her parents told her she was adopted.

“My parents sat me down and told me,” she said. “They cried. I felt bad for them. And I felt bewildered.

“I never wanted to ask questions. My mother didn’t want me to feel different, and I didn’t want her to cry.”

But she was intensely aware of the secrecy surrounding her adoption, which stemmed in part, she said, from her adoptive parents’ fear that the biological mother might want her back.

“It was hush-hush,” Lori said. “I was never encouraged to tell anybody I was adopted. If anybody asked questions, my mother was uncomfortable. It was really sad.”

Once she grew up and had children of her own, Lori wanted to know basic health information. She petitioned the state for a

non-identifying report, but she didn’t want to pursue a full-fledged search.

“I didn’t want to disrupt her life,” she said, echoing her birth mother’s words. “But I always envisioned meeting her one day. I thought, ‘When it’s supposed to happen, it will happen.'”

After Wendell Alderson and her adoptive mother met at the funeral, he wrote a note, sending his email address in case Lori wanted to get in touch. Within days, she responded.

“I was excited,” she said. “I couldn’t wait.”

The adoption landscape changed with the times, altered by the sexual revolution, the women’s movement and widespread access to birth control and abortion. Sacramento’s Fairhaven maternity home, located near Tahoe Park, closed in 1979 and is now the site of a seniors’ community.

Today almost 27 percent of America’s children – 22 million kids – are raised by single parents, according to Census Bureau statistics. Almost 85 percent of custodial parents are women, and 35 percent of them have never been married.

Federal Centers for Disease Control figures show that less than 1 percent of children born outside marriage today are placed for adoption.

If unmarried motherhood has become routine, so has open adoption, the practice of birth and adoptive parents staying in touch through the exchange of photographs, cards and, in some cases, visits.

It developed for a simple reason: Baby boomer adoptees started asking questions.

“By the late 1970s, they started showing up at adoption agencies, wanting information,” said Mackinnon, the Concerned United Birthparents spokeswoman. “And birth mothers started

coming back wanting to know that the child they'd given up was OK.

"We're finally educating the public that with open adoption, it's better for the child and everybody else. The kid does not feel abandoned. They feel loved."

Over time, the secrecy and stigma faded. Even so, the reunions bringing together adoptees and their birth parents — these intimate strangers — can remain difficult.

"The public seems to think that people find each other and live happily ever after," said Mackinnon.

"The reunion is just the beginning of another incredibly emotionally wrought chapter. People are not prepared."

In the middle of the week, Lori Fox made chicken and pasta for Wendell Alderson and his spouse, Ken Nather, in their comfortable east Sacramento home. She works as a college English instructor in Sacramento, and as a break from her long commute home to Manteca, she spends the occasional weeknight in her newfound birth uncle's home.

She has met Freddie only once. They text occasionally. But the two women are cautious and respectful of one another and their families.

"I texted Lori, 'You have to reassure your mother that no one wants to take her place, and no one could,'" said Freddie.

Their reunion took place at Wendell's home in late January, several months after he and Lori met. It was delayed because Freddie had been ill for much of the fall. She has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and in November was hospitalized with pneumonia.

"I don't know if this is a new chapter opening or an old chapter closing," said Lori. "Freddie and her daughter, Kelly, walked in, and we all hugged. Freddie and I didn't cry, but

Kelly did.”

Then they stood looking at one another, trying to figure out family resemblances, as the secrets that froze their family in silence for 50 years began dissolving.

“We’re both looking forward to getting to know each other better,” said Freddie. “This is something I never thought would happen. It was kind of God’s will, you know.”