

Gwen: Our first story investigates teenage pregnancy in the 1950s and '60s. It's 1961. A young unmarried woman somewhere near Kansas City, Missouri, discovers she is pregnant. It's an era when unwed mothers are stigmatized and shunned by society. She gives birth to a girl and puts her up for adoption. The baby's adoptive parents name her Dodie and never reveal her mother and father's names or where she was born. It's a mystery that has haunted her since she was a child. Now in her 40s, Dodie Jacobi has an object that she hopes will solve the mystery of her birth.

Dodie Jacobi: I was an infant adopted from a home for unwed mothers in 1961, and my only connection to that home is a dainty medal that was pinned to my diaper when I was adopted. I wore that medal for about 10 years until the gold plating wore off, and I've always wondered who gave me that medal and where was I adopted.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright, and I've come to Kansas City, Missouri, to look into Dodie's story.

Dodie: Come in, Gwen.

Gwen: Oh, is this the medal you told me about?

Dodie: This is it.

Gwen: "The miraculous medal. The medal of the immaculate conception."

Dodie: Ironic, yes?

Gwen: So what's the story?

Dodie: Well, my mother tells me this medal was pinned to my diaper when I was adopted. It came with this pamphlet that explained the concept of the medal of immaculate conception. And it has been my one connection to my birth family.

Gwen: Well, tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out.

Dodie: I have two things I'd like to know: I'd like to know in which home was I born, and what was it like there. And I'd also like to know who my birth family is.

Gwen: When did you find out you were adopted?

Dodie: I have always known that I'm adopted. What I remember is that we were hand-picked. There are four children in my family and all four children were adopted and hand-chosen. We all talked about this very openly. She explained that when I was adopted, I was born in a home for unwed mothers that was run by the catholic church, and that, at the time she and my father went to pick up their baby, that they were escorted into a chapel, and it was morning. And there was a backdrop of a stained-glass window that covered the back wall, and that the morning light was shining through, and that they were escorted to the altar where three nuns in blue velvet robes waited. And the center nun was holding an infant, and the baby was me, and that they presented this baby to my parents and said, "Here is your gift from God."

Gwen: How old were you when you began to wonder about birth parents?

Dodie: When I was in my late 20s, I decided I was interested in finding my birth family, and the first step is

to achieve permission from your adoptive parents. Ultimately I decided that I would wait till they were both deceased, because I never wanted them to wonder for a second that I honored them as my parents.

Gwen: And that you love them very much.

Dodie: Love very much, love very much.

Gwen: Dodie, you make me feel this process is quite wonderful and you have such a great attitude about it. I'm delighted and hope that I can find something for you.

Dodie: Thank you. Thank you.

Gwen: Can I take this with me?

Dodie: Yes, of course.

Gwen: Dodie believes that she was born in a home for unwed mothers. I was a teenager in 1961 and remember that many unmarried women felt that keeping a baby risked destroying their family's reputation. Abortion was illegal, and many women saw such homes for unwed mothers as their only choice, allowing them to spend their pregnancy out of the public eye and helping them secretly put the baby up for adoption. I want to take a closer look at Dodie's medal of immaculate conception. Ah, here is a figure who has a halo and who, I think, is female, and the letters say, "Mary conceived without sin. Pray for us who have recourse to thee." The image of Mary and the cleansing of sin implied in the Catholic idea of immaculate conception certainly fits with Dodie's story that she was handed to her adoptive parents by nuns. Let's see what the pamphlet says. "On the night of July 18, 1830, Sister Catherine Labouré, a novice of the Daughters of Charity at their mother house in Paris, was aroused from sleep by her guardian angel and summoned to the chapel, where she had a vision of the Virgin Mary." The pamphlet recounts the legend of how a trainee nun in the Daughters of Charity had a vision of Mary, who instructed her to create this medallion. I wonder if the Daughters of Charity had anything to do with Dodie's adoption. To answer that question and find out how adoption occurred in Missouri in the 1960s, I'm heading to the former Union Station in downtown Kansas City. Hi, I'm Gwen Wright. I'm meeting historian Wayne Carp. He tells me Union Station once saw tens of thousands of childless couples arrive from across the country, all coming to pick up babies.

Wayne Carp: They came to Kansas City because they knew these states had unregulated adoption laws. They knew they could come into the state and they could very shortly leave the state with a child.

Gwen: Wayne says that in the baby-boom years following World War II, Kansas City was an adoption Mecca for childless couples and unwed mothers. Big commercial adoption homes, such as The Willows, promised secrecy to fearful mothers, and they fed the myth of the natural birth family, matching childless couples with infants who looked as if they could have been their own.

Wayne: These were known as "baby mills." No red tape, come in, get your child, and leave.

Gwen: Were all the homes in Kansas City like that?

Wayne: no, there were also religious maternity homes. Catholic charities. The Catholics came late to adoption. They had a different mission. What they wanted to do was to redeem and -- and reform and try to bring these girls back to the right path.

Gwen: Wayne tells me there were catholic homes in Kansas City, but he has never heard of the Daughters of Charity home. And he also says finding Dodie's birth mother is going to be a challenge. To protect the privacy of adoptive families, states began closing birth records in the 1950s. First, they shut out birth parents, then adoptees, even as adults. In many states, birth certificates substituted the names of the adoptive parents, hiding the truth from adoptees. That is now standard practice around the country. Researching the Web site of the local Jackson County family court, I discover that access to Dodie's birth and adoption records is extremely limited. She is only entitled to so-called non-identifying information, general background about her birth parents, but nothing that might help her find them. Then I discover there is a way she might be able to track them down. It requires hiring a kind of private eye, a court-approved searcher. For a fee of about \$350, she can look at Dodie's file, since the court trusts her to keep the parents' identities secret. I contact Sandy Sperazza, one of the court's official searchers, and set up a meeting.

Sandy Sperazza: Hi, Dodie, good to meet you.

Gwen: Sandy tells us why she is drawn to this work. Like Dodie's mom, years ago she also gave up her baby in a home for unwed mothers.

Sandy: I was 15 when I was pregnant, I was 16 when I delivered. Back in the '60s, it was an awful thing to have found yourself pregnant without the benefit of marriage.

Gwen: So no one discussed with you your emotions or what choices you might have along the way.

Sandy: No, and in order to have a choice you have to have options... and there were no options. This is what you did. This is what everybody did.

Gwen: Sandy's memories of her home are crystal-clear. They were sequestered from the world, and medical exams were a top priority.

Sandy: Their doctor came in, and we would line up in the hall, and we called it cattle call. I mean, I was embarrassed to have the doctor examine me. We really were just naive kids.

Dodie: Do you think this might have been my birth mother's experience?

Sandy: I do. I think particularly, you know, being a young age, I think that it was universal.

Gwen: Sandy then explains how she can help. Once Dodie formally asks to contact her birth parents, the court reveals their identity to Sandy.

Sandy: I need to speak to them in a personal way. I can't write a letter. I can't leave messages on the phone. I would speak to them directly and ask -- and tell them the reason for the call.

Gwen: If the birth parents want contact with Dodie, a judge will issue a court order, giving Dodie her first access.

Sandy: Then it's up to you to make contact with them.

Dodie: Okay.

Sandy: And that's the process.

Gwen: So, Dodie, are you ready to proceed?

Dodie: Yes, yes.

Gwen: At this point, Dodie still has no guarantee she will ever find her birth parents, but the medal and pamphlet may help me find where she was adopted from. Her adoptive mother told her about nuns in blue robes, and the pamphlet that came with the medal mentions the Daughters of Charity. I head to the Kansas City library to search for a connection. I don't find anything at first, but then I come across a description of a religious order called the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. "Dedicated to work among the poor and sick... and went on to be involved in hospitals, prisons, and the care of abandoned children." That kind of charitable motivation is how Wayne Carp described catholic adoption work in Kansas City. Could these be Dodie's nuns in blue robes? Look at this. What a hat. And the habit is a dark navy blue robe. As I make this breakthrough, I get a call from Dodie. She's gotten an envelope from the court. Although it's just the non-identifying information, she's waited a lifetime to learn anything about her birth parents. This is it.

Dodie: This is it: "Name of mother," it's whited out. Description of my mother: "Age 15."

Gwen: That's so young.

Dodie: "5'6" tall, weighs 120 pounds. Has blond hair and oval-shaped face."

Gwen: And she's a very lovely girl. And "a cheerful disposition." So that did come to you genetically, Dodie.

Dodie: It did. Ah, her chief interest is in horseback riding.

Gwen: Do you?

Dodie: I do, but nobody else in my family has an interest. That's funny. Look at this. "She feels it is best all around to place this child for adoption. Her parents agree with her, but gave her the choice. They were willing for her to keep the child, even if she did not marry."

Gwen: That's a very loving family. It seems to me that you have two wonderful families in your past. We make a major discovery. Dodie believes her mom stayed in a home for unwed mothers, but the court papers report she was only seen twice by a doctor before delivery. That suggests she probably wasn't resident in a home, where such medical visits were frequent. It's even more of a mystery, and we still don't know where Dodie was born.

Dodie: Okay, baby girl was born, it doesn't say where. They've whited it out.

Gwen: But you do know it was in Kansas City.

Dodie: It does say Kansas City, so we know -- we know I was born here. Okay, good.

Gwen: Back in the library, I search for information about the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, the religious order with the blue robes. Dodie was born in 1961, so I search the 1961 Kansas City phone book for any listing of maternity homes run by the Daughters of Charity. Ah, here's the Willows Maternity Sanitarium, and a number of hospitals that could be catholic. "St. Anthony's infants home, Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Charge." Sisters of Charity, that's almost the name of the order mentioned in Dodie's pamphlet.

In a history of the diocese of Kansas City, St. Joseph, I find something that may solve one of our mysteries. Here we are: St. Anthony Home. Founded in 1899. In the first 24 years, they cared for more than a thousand children. Typically there were 25 girls in residence and another 30 receiving assistance and counseling on an outpatient basis." A majority of young women who placed their babies for adoption at St. Anthony's never stayed there. Dodie may have been handed over to her adoptive parents at St. Anthony's, but her birth mother was almost certainly never a resident. The book says the home was taken over by catholic charities in 1968. They arrange a meeting for me at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception with archivist and adoption researcher Laura Long. I'm trying to find out if Dodie's mother had been at St. Anthony's home. I tell Laura about the pin and pamphlet that Dodie has had her entire life.

Laura Long: and the priest that was there....

Gwen: What Laura told me next fit one piece of Dodie's puzzle.

Laura Long: We have records that show that...

Gwen: I've asked Dodie to meet me on the east side of Kansas City, at a location that has very special significance for her. Well, Dodie, I do have some answers for you. I explain to Dodie that her mother's pregnancy may have been spent at home, not at a home for unwed mothers. Her grandmother was with her daughter for the delivery, but the medal pinned to her diaper did help us discover where she had been adopted from.

Laura: Yes, this is the miraculous medal. The sisters would give it to the child the day that the adoptive parents would come to pick them up, and the priest that was there would say a blessing over the family and wish them well on their new life. So based on the medal and the picture, I think that Dodie was at St. Anthony's Home for Infants.

Gwen: And so, Dodie, this was the place, as your mother said, you were given this little medal and your parents were given you, and it was right here. It's now a drug rehab center, but it was St. Anthony's Home for Infants. This is where your adoption took place.

Dodie: Ah, it's amazing! I'm surprised I feel so connected to it.

Gwen: So I think this is St. Anthony with the little child.

Dodie: I do, too.

Gwen: Finally, both of Dodie's questions have been answered.

Dodie: And I have news for you. I heard from Sandy, and she found my birth mother.

Gwen: Oh, I'm so happy.

Dodie: And my birth mother has consented to a reunion.

Gwen: Oh, I'm so happy for you.



## Episode 11, 2005: Unwed Mothers' Home, Kansas City, Missouri

Dodie: Thank you.

Gwen: by the 1970s, most homes for unwed mothers had disappeared. Now the idea has been revived. President George w. Bush has asked congress for \$10 million to support maternity group homes for women in crisis. Yet for hundreds of thousands of adoptees and birth mothers, the legacy of maternity homes and their experience of adoption is mixed. They live with the repercussions of a system where birth records are still closed and often fictionalized to protect an ideal notion of family. That legacy too may be changing. In Oregon, adult adoptees recently won legal right to their original birth certificates. In Kansas City, Dodie's own search for family and a fuller sense of identity is almost over. She will finally have some answers.