**Together Again : After 44 Tortured Years, a Mother Finds Her Stolen Child Via 'Unsolved Mysteries'**

AUG 20, 1990

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It had been 44 years since Alma Sipple had seen the woman, and then only briefly, yet she could not forget her--the no-nonsense brown hair, the rimless glasses, the air of authority. Everything about her said “authority"--and that’s why Sipple had handed over her infant daughter. This nice woman was going to take the child to a hospital for a checkup.

Alma Sipple never saw her baby again.

All these years, she has lived with the pain of her loss, with her guilt, with a gnawing need to know if her daughter was alive.

Then, last Dec. 13, scanning the TV dial, Sipple happened on NBC’s “Unsolved Mysteries,” a program she wasn’t in the habit of watching. She sat forward on her chair, transfixed, as Robert Stack told the story of the late Georgia Tann, an infamous Tennessee social worker who’d made a fortune running a black-market baby adoption ring in the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s.

Sipple recognized Tann immediately--that face, that air of authority. “When they showed her picture,” she says, “I let out a scream. I said, ‘That’s the woman that took Irma!’ My husband said I turned white. I felt like going through the television.”

Viewers searching for their birth parents, or parents looking for their children, were advised during the show to contact Tennessee’s Right to Know, a volunteer agency that reunites families separated by adoption, in Memphis. On Jan. 3, Sipple wrote to the address. Seven months later, with the help of that group and Marilyn Miller, an independent search consultant in Harbor City, Calif., Sipple found her daughter.

In Tennessee, Denny Glad, president of Right to Know, located the adoption records, which gave the names of Irma’s adoptive parents. It was a first step. But then she was stymied. The records did not indicate the state in which the parents lived.

That’s why, on July 27, Sipple contacted Miller. On Aug. 3, Miller called back with good news. She had the name and address of Sipple’s daughter. She was able to tell her that she was a registered nurse, married and living in Cincinnati. But the phone number was unlisted.

That day, Sipple sent a basket of daisies and carnations to her daughter, with a guardedly written message that read, “Please call regarding family matters.” Irma--now Sandra Kimbrell--was puzzled; she knew no one in California.

Kimbrell called the California number the next day. She didn’t know it, of course, but she was calling a mobile home park in Carson where Alma Sipple and her husband, Steve, live. Returning home, the Sipples picked up the message on the answering machine. “I could feel my blood pressure shoot up,” Alma Sipple says.

So now she had a number--but what was she going to say to this woman, a stranger whose life she was about to turn upside down?

She was scared. Would she be rejected?

“Hello, Sandra?” she said. “You know you’re adopted?” Yes, she knew. “Well, this is your birth mother . . . “

Her daughter let out such a scream, Sipple says, that she had to hold the telephone at arm’s length.

They talked for an hour. Sipple says, “She wanted to know what happened, how, what I looked like, how many brothers and sisters she had.”

She also wanted to know, “Mom, where did you get that accent?” (Sipple is a self-described Kentucky “hillbilly,” who gives both Elvis Presley and Jesus Christ wall space in her mobile home).

Kimbrell reflects, “At first, it was more than I really could take in. It’s one thing when you find your birth mother. It’s something else when you hear the circumstances that go with it.”

This is the story she heard unfold over the next few days, Alma Sipple’s story.

In the spring of 1946, Sipple, then in her early 20s, moved with her infant daughter to Memphis, where her 2-year-old son, Robert, a child of a previous marriage, was staying with friends. Sipple’s boyfriend, Julius John Tallos--"Johnny"--had just shipped out to Panama. They planned to be married, by proxy, as soon as possible.

They’d met in Biloxi, where Tallos was stationed with the Air Force and Sipple was working as a bartender. By the time Irma was born--on Aug. 27, 1945--they’d been together about two years.

“We were so crazy about each other, it didn’t matter if we were married or not,” she recalls. Besides, there had been two marriages that ended in divorce, the first when she was only 14 and had married to get away from her Kentucky home, where there were 17 children and a razor strop was the preferred form of discipline.

In Memphis, Sipple and her two children settled into a an oil-heated one-room apartment, where she shared a pullout sofa with her toddler son and the baby girl--a dimpled child with reddish-blonde hair--slept nearby in her crib.

About six weeks after they’d moved in, a woman from the Tennessee Children’s Home Society, an organization with an impeccable reputation for finding homes for orphans, came to the apartment building, saying she was investigating an alleged child-abuse case involving a neighbor.

The following day, the woman returned in her big black limousine, this time striking up a conversation with Sipple, asking her questions about the whereabouts of the baby’s father. Then the woman looked at Irma, who had a runny nose, and said, “Your baby’s sick, isn’t she? You should get her a checkup.” Sipple explained that she had no money for a doctor, so the woman, who identified herself as Georgia Tann, generously offered to take the child to Memphis General Hospital.

Looking back, Sipple wonders at her own naivete. “How did I mess up so bad? I guess she knew the dumb ones.” Still, she had been worried about her baby’s health. And she’d assumed she would go with them to the hospital. So she had signed a piece of paper. When Tann told her it would be impossible for her to go along, Sipple remembers, “I had a weird feeling, but I thought, ‘Well, you’ve gotta trust somebody.’ ”

The next day, Sipple went to the children’s ward at the hospital, where she found Irma “jumping up and down in her bed.” But when she told a nurse she wanted to see her baby, the nurse said, “You don’t have a baby in there. Those children belong to the Children’s Home Society.”

Over the next few days, Sipple’s calls to Tann went unanswered. Finally, Sipple says, Tann called back. “She told me Irma had died.” Pneumonia. “Of course, I went into hysterics.”

When Sipple said she wanted to make arrangements for the burial, she was rebuffed by Tann, who told her, “I took it on myself and had the state put her away.”

At that point, Sipple says, “I guess I went crazy.” She took Robert to Ohio to stay with her mother. And she returned to Memphis. “I wanted to find the grave. I was half out of my mind.”

Even now, she says, “It still hurts when I think about it.”

She found no grave. Her calls to the Children’s Home Society yielded only the information that “the case is closed.” She was told that Tann “has nothing to say to you.”

With her son, Sipple returned to Kentucky. Her roots were there, and there she had two small daughters, the children of her first marriage, who were living with their father. She got a job at a uniform company in Cincinnati tried to put behind her the tragedy of Irma.

The letters from the child’s father in Panama were fewer and fewer. “He’d worshipped Irma,” she says, and couldn’t deal with the death.

“That,” she says, “and my going crazy. I drank, I admit it. I thought it would make it easy. All it did was keep me crying all the time.”

The last she knew, Tallos was living in Flint, Mich. She says, “I hope he does show up, if he’s living. He loved her so much . . . “

Soon afterwards, Sipple married James Smith, a steel mill worker, a union that lasted 12 years and produced three sons and a daughter. She never stopped thinking about Irma, but her husband did not encourage her to think those thoughts.

After her divorce from Smith, she married Steve Sipple, a welder. They had a daughter and lived in Kentucky until 1969, when they moved to California.

Steve Sipple understood her need to trace Irma and, in the last few years, she had resumed her search. In 1982, she sent a query to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Nashville. The answer came back: There was no death certificate for Irma Tallos. After that, she ran into brick walls. The district attorney in Memphis couldn’t help. The Tennessee Department of Human Services couldn’t help.

Then, by chance, Sipple happened to tune into “Unsolved Mysteries.”

Meanwhile, Irma--named Sandra by her parents--was growing up in a comfortable home in Cincinnati, where she and her adoptive mother had gone to live after her parents divorced. At one time, Alma Sipple had lived only a few miles across the river in Kentucky.

She was an only child with doting parents--now deceased--with whom she had a “wonderful” relationship even after the split. She always knew she was adopted but she was too content, she says, to search for her biological parents.

“I probably was very spoiled,” she says. “I was a very wanted child. They always told me because I was adopted I was special, I was chosen. I had a very, very comfortable upbringing. I don’t think I could have asked for much more.”

Her parents were in their 30s when they adopted her, and were thrilled to have a child. “I went through the whole bit,” she says, “the piano lessons, the dancing lessons. We traveled. They were very much for education, very supportive of a working woman.”

In short, she says, “it’s been a good life.”

A graduate of University of Cincinnati and an R.N. who is head operating room nurse at Jewish Hospital of Cincinnati, Sandra has been married for 24 years to Bill, a stockbroker, and has a daughter, Kara, 22, a teacher and a recent bride, and a son, Bill Jr., 20, who is in college.

Home is a four-bedroom French country-style house on a golf course in an upper-middle-class planned community in Westchester, a suburb north of Cincinnati.

She thinks about the events of the last few weeks and tries to absorb the fact that she, an only child married to an only child, suddenly has eight siblings--Alma’s four sons and three daughters and Steve Sipple’s daughter from another marriage. “It’s like, whoa! My kids always complained they never had aunts or cousins.”

She is also trying to absorb the “unbelievable” story of how she was taken from her birth mother. All she knew until now, she says, is that she had been born in Denver and adopted out of Memphis. She had never asked many questions of her adoptive parents--"I really thought it would hurt them.”

When she thought about looking for her birth parents, it was mostly because of her interest in her medical history. Recently, she’d thought about it more often, realizing that her birth parents would be getting older.

The truth has been hard to swallow, that she was a black market baby.

“I figured I was illegitimate,” she says, but “whoa! This is bizarre.” She admits it’s been “hard for me to understand letting someone come in and take your child away, that’s the hardest thing.” She wonders how much she was sold for.

She calls her birth mother “Juanita,” her middle name, which is what other family members call her. There have been long phone calls, letters and videotapes. Now, the families are trying to figure out how to get together.

Reflecting on what has happened, Kimbrell says of her new-found family, “The love they have poured out in this last week has been unbelievable. One of them said it was like having a new baby in the family. It’s kind of neat to feel love from somebody who doesn’t even know you.”

Her husband, she says, has been “real supportive . . . he’s here for me.” Then she laughs and says, “He keeps asking, *‘How*many kids are there?’ ”

Alma still calls her daughter “Irma,” and is constantly correcting herself. Sandra says, “That’s really hard to deal with, another name. I’ve been Sandra for almost 45 years.”

For mother and daughter--both of whom have reddish hair and resemble one another physically--it’s been a process of getting-to-know-you. “We have very definitely lived two different lives,” Sandra says. “There’s some working through for both of us to do. I have had a very, very nice life and I had a set of parents.”

Each must figure out where the other fits in her life. “I don’t think it’s something that’s not workable,” Sandra says. “If nothing else, we can all come out of this feeling like we’re friends. Where it goes from there, I don’t know.”

Alma Sipple is but one of thousands of victims of Georgia Tann and her black market baby scam.

Denny Glad, president of Tennesee’s Right to Know, says, “We have been overwhelmed” by callers who saw “Unsolved Mysteries.” “We got over 600 calls,” most from apparent victims of Tann. Sipple’s case is one of about 50 that Right to Know has solved or is close to solving.

Glad, who has researched the Tann case extensively, says she “continues to be amazed at the enormous volume of children” who were placed in adoptive homes by Tann, using the respected Tennessee Children’s Home Society, of which she was Shelby County director, as cover.

Some children, like Irma, were simply stolen. Others, usually older youngsters, were abducted and taken to Juvenile Court as the first step toward being placed for adoption. Other parents were coerced into giving up their children. The judge, Camille Kelley, apparently was on Tann’s payroll, and parents’ protests fell on deaf ears.

All together, it is estimated, Tann illegally placed more than 5,000 children.

Many of the wronged parents did go to the police, Glad says, but most were poor and not well-educated--Tann’s primary target group--and frustrated in their efforts to fight the powerful and charismatic Tann. There were complaints and lawsuits filed. But, Glad says, all of these “would just be dismissed by these local judges. The political machine was so entrenched, and so powerful.”

She adds, “I understand why people find it incredible. It’s taken me all these years to reconcile myself to the fact it really could have happened.”

Robert L. Taylor, the attorney appointed by the Tennessee governor in the late 1940s to investigate Tann and Kelley, estimated that Tann made well over a million dollars selling babies. Typically, the children were whisked out of state by dark and delivered to waiting adoptive parents out of state. The majority went to California and New York.

Glad believes the adoptive parents were unaware of the chicanery. “For whatever reason,” she says, “most of them had not been able to qualify to adopt in the state in which they lived. Primarily, age was the reason. Most were in their 40s and 50s.” Through word-of-mouth, they would learn that they could get a child out of Tennessee.

And, she says, “they didn’t raise too many questions.” In California, the average cost to adopt one of Tann’s babies was $750.

Often, Denny Glad has wondered whether Tann had motives besides money. She says, “In most cases, (the victims) were poor people, or unwed mothers. Miss Tann thought that affluency meant good and I believe that’s how she justified what she was doing. She was taking children who never would have had a chance and placing them in homes where they were going to get good educations and all the material things.

“She just thought that she knew better than God.”

Georgia Tann died of cancer in 1950, three days before the state investigators delivered their damning report. After the state’s investigation, Judge Kelly was permitted to resign; she died in 1954. The Children’s Home Society was closed.

Sipple’s little boy, Robert Anderson, is now 46 and living in Northern California. Finding Irma was a real thrill. For years after his baby sister disappeared, he thought he’d killed her, having just bopped her in the head with his toy Jeep in a sibling dispute.

And Alma Sipple? For the first time in 44 years, she says, “I feel whole. Ever since Irma was taken from me, I felt something was missing.

She adds, “The Bible says you’re not supposed to hate anybody, but I’ll tell you, if that woman was still living . . . all those people she did this to, all the suffering she caused for money. And she couldn’t take a dime of it with her.”