

Cousins unite through DNA testing

Lisa Schroeder Hall

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Locating your birth parents and other relatives can be a life-long journey if you never knew anything about them or your birth family, but today, with the help of DNA testing, the chances of finding unknown relatives has become a reality. For Bob Bennett of Mesa, Arizona and Susan Schelp of Emma, Missouri, it became reality last weekend.

Bob Bennett lives in Mesa, Arizona with his wife, Diane. Bob was adopted when he was young, not ever knowing where he came from or who any of his birth family were. Bob began the search for his parents and family and says his first recollections are of being with lots of children in a play yard, all dressed the same in simple white cotton underwear. He recalls the swings and slides and white picket fences. He remembers visiting a man's office one day. "There were Cheez-its in a large glass jar on his desk, and I was offered some. He then introduced me to other adults in the room and told me that these were my parents and I was going home with them," recalls Bob. It was years later that Bob came to realize that he had been adopted out of an orphanage in Kansas City, Mo.

These recollections were crystal-clear in Bob's mind. "Neither my mother nor my father ever admitted to me that I was adopted, says Bob, "When I was older, I asked my aunt and uncle (his mother's brother) about my concerns. My uncle said that his sister had never born a child. He and my aunt knew about the adoption and showed me the orphanage in Kansas City, Mo. Where I came from. When my parents found out about this disclose, they were furious and cut off relations with them. I did not write down the name or address of the orphanage at the time and of course my aunt and uncle are now deceased."

Both of Bob's parents are also now deceased, but he would like to know if his real parents are still alive. "All I have to go on is my birth certificate," said Bob. His birth certificate says he was born on February 23, 1944 in Warrensburg, Mo. "But the fact that my father was a doctor and my mother a nurse makes



Bob Bennett holds a picture of himself taken when he was three years old.



Bob Bennett, about 3 years old, pictured holding the hand of Carolyn Linder, Susan Schelp's sister who was killed in a car wreck in 1973.

the document suspect,” commented Bob. “Also, the fact that my birth certificate was filed three years after I was born also bears suspicion.”

About a year and a half ago, Bob took the Ancestry DNA test with hopes of solving the mystery of who his birth parents were. The results came back with no DNA matches at first, no parents, no siblings, nor first cousins. Dealing with the disappointment, Bob and his family set the results aside not knowing if anything would ever become of it.

His daughter, Bridget Palitz, did her own DNA test and decided to check back in on her dad’s results. “I found a new match! Someone identified as a potential first cousin, or first cousin removed, matched my father,” said Bridget. She tried messaging the person but never received a response. Months went by and she went to her father’s next closet DNA match, someone identified as a second cousin. “I spent weeks communicating with this person and then built a family tree with hundreds of family members going back four-five generations, in hopes that one of the people in the tree were the ones we were looking for, but nothing quite



Pictured above with their new-found cousin, Bob Bennett, are Susan Schelp (left) and Peggv Applequist (right). The

tree to figure out where the connection could be.” But in the end, Bridget had yet another family tree with hundreds of names but no idea of how any of them connected to her father, but believed the answer was in the tree somewhere.

Then, several weeks ago, out of the blue, Bridget said she received an email back from Susan Schelp, her father’s first cousin DNA match. It turned out that Susan’s email address was one she used very seldom, only for her Ancestry DNA test and other items of interest. “I never check it because it’s one I set up for doctors and to keep my husband from finding out what I ordered online for Christmas!” explains Susan.

Susan found an email letter from someone who claimed she might be related to. “I sent her a list of family names and one popped up that was a match from another cousin, Heather

added up,” remarked Bridget. Bob believed he was born in Missouri, but the people in the tree were mostly in Nebraska and Colorado. “We felt like we hit a brick wall,” said Bridget. “So, this was set aside while I looked for another potential research path.”

She then reached out to the next closest DNA match, a third cousin named Heather Lake in Omaha, Neb. “She responded we’re related,” said Bridget. “We started communicating began putting together another family

Lake, who had already responded,” comments Susan. “Then the story about her father, Bob, came out.”

Susan said when she was a little girl she liked to look at an old family album. “There was one picture of a little boy and I asked my mother who he was,” says Susan. “She told me he was my cousin Beulah’s boy that had been adopted. That’s all I knew about the boy in the picture.”

Susan had a family genealogy which her cousin Gene had prepared. Susan retrieve the paperwork and found that Gene had included Beulah’s son with his birthdate and original name, James Gordon Pingree.

Bridget, one of Bob’s twin daughters, began working on the information and found more records including Bob’s original birth certificate and his father’s information.



Bob Bennett reminisces with his cousin Susan Schelp at a luncheon that was held last Saturday at Biltz Hall on the St. Paul campus in Concordia.

Last weekend, Bob came to Emma, where he met Susan and her sister, Peggy, for the first time. Unfortunately, Bob’s birth parents are deceased, his father Gordon in 1974 and mother Beulah in 2008, but he did meet an aunt who has suffered a stroke but knew who Bob was right away.

The highlight of the journey, says Bridget, was on Saturday afternoon. “Susan and Peggy surprised my dad with home movies taken at family reunions in the late 1980’s,” remarks Bridget. “In the final clip, Beulah talks straight into the camera, holds up a black and white photo and proudly says: “Here’s my baby.” Bridget said the photo is unmistakable as the camera zooms in. “It was my father at about three years old, not long before he was adopted.”

Bob finally has the answers and closure he waited for his entire life and the journey came to a happy ending.

Bridget says, “DNA is magic and a little spit can change someone’s entire world.”