

National Indian Child Welfare Association

Guidance for Adopted or Fostered Persons Searching for Information Regarding Native American Heritage

Adoptees Tracing Native Ancestry

Many Native children were taken from their communities and placed in non-Native homes where their lack of identity haunted them. When the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed in 1978, research indicated that one in every four Native children were removed from their homes. Often these removals led to adoption by non-Native people who lacked the relationships or resources to keep their adopted children connected to their extended families, tribes, and cultures. Given these numbers, it is no surprise that thousands of Native adults search for their roots today. While the placement rates have been diminished by ICWA, Native children continue to be placed outside of their cultures in high numbers. Native people placed outside their culture and away from the birth and extended families that lost them can use the information below to help them trace their heritage and support a positive identity.

Until recently, what information existed about tribal relations was seldom shared with adoptees. It's also significant that during the military era and assimilationist period of federal Indian policy, claiming to be an Indian could literally be a matter of life and death. The distancing from Native roots that occurred as a result, although originally intended to ensure survival, created a strong current of shame in successive generations. Severing ties was common and, for many, birth records were not written down and adoption records were sealed. For these reasons, there are many people today who have only a vague notion of where their Indian heritage originates.

Native children who have been in foster care or adopted out have experienced a disruption in the development of their identity as Indigenous persons. The disruption caused by separation from their families, communities and tribes, can lead to extreme isolation, fear, anger, resentment, and low self-esteem. They may feel shame or guilt because they don't know their heritage or because they have been teased or bullied for being Native. Most will not be able to express where the anger, fear, guilt, or shame is coming from and can sometimes lead to destructive behaviors and unhealthy coping mechanisms. This form of isolation is exceptionally difficult to express and is best addressed within traditional cultural teachings and in the support of other adoptees/fostered individuals, spiritual leaders, and tribal community members.

The Indian Child Welfare Act states that a child who has been adopted can (once she or he is 18) apply to the court that issued the final adoption decree to get information on tribal affiliation and any other information the court has on file relating to the child's tribal relationship (25 U.S.C. § 1917). Additionally, since courts are supposed to provide documentation to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) whenever a child who is covered by ICWA is adopted outside their tribe, the child can also apply to the Division of Human Services at the BIA to get information.

Individuals should determine to the best of their ability from which area of the country they were adopted. A rudimentary example would be if an adoptee was living on the East Coast, but knew they were adopted in South Dakota, research could focus on the Lakota, the Dakota, or the Nakota people.

Then, tribal enrollment offices can be contacted to enlist their help. For those seeking advice on how to establish a relationship with their tribal community, tribal enrollment, cultural preservation, or family services departments may have suggestions. It may be appropriate to attend and participate in cultural or community events and respectfully inquire about known familial ties.

The BIA suggests consulting an adoption attorney for assistance in opening sealed adoption papers to identify Indian relatives. An attorney can help make sure that courts and adoption agencies know an individual's rights and how to respond in compliance with federal law.

However, organizations like the First Nations Repatriation Institute can provide support to adoptees and connect adoptees with others who have gone through the same process. Furthermore, there are ways to be self-sufficient in this process of reaching out to broad communities, despite the obstacles, with tools like genealogical resources and social media.

Tribal Lineage vs. Tribal Identity

Genealogical research is time consuming and tedious but is ultimately rewarding. What motivates a person's desire to connect with a Native community is as diverse and complex as the tribes themselves. Hopefully, researching and confirming genealogical ties to a tribal community is one step in establishing a tribal identity rooted in culture, history, tradition, reciprocity, and community. As any Native person could assert, being Indian entails much more than just getting one's paperwork in order.

People searching for their tribal identity might be wondering if they can be recognized as a citizen of their tribe. Only the government of the tribe can determine citizenship. Here are a few terms and concepts that may be helpful:

Tribal lineage (or heritage) means that a person is descended by blood from members or citizens of a Native tribe or tribes. That is, a biological parent, grandparent, etc. were descended of that heritage.

Native identity is the degree to which a person with tribal lineage/heritage identifies with one or more tribes. If the person searching knows their lineage and they feel connected or feel they belong, their identity is at least as a descendent. They may not know much about the tribe, but they feel an emotional connection as sense of belonging.

If lineage and circumstances qualify a person for citizenship in a tribe then they are "**enrollable.**" **To enroll** is the common term for gaining formal recognition of citizenship. It is not automatic. Each tribe has its own criteria and process. The person searching, or a parent, must apply to the tribal government for citizenship/enrollment in that tribe. If eligible in more than one tribe, they can only become a citizen of one tribe.

Citizenship, also known as enrollment, is a political status. A tribal citizen may vote in tribal elections, run for election, own land, and is eligible for all the rights and benefits afforded the citizens of the tribe. Requirements vary widely, and degree of blood may or may not be an issue depending on the tribe's enrollment criteria.

Race, cultural identity, and citizenship/enrollment are each independent but related concepts. All of them depend on lineage. That is why genealogical research is often the place to start. Following are further resources that may be of help.

Further Resources

Ancestry.com

www.ancestry.com

Includes easy access to Indian Census Rolls and automatic links to possible matches among its large collection of records.

Bureau of Indian Affairs

www.bia.gov/cs/groups/public/documents/text/idc002656.pdf

Publishes a downloadable *Guide to Tracing Your Indian Ancestry*. The guide includes a section specifically for those seeking information on Cherokee ancestry.

Bureau of Indian Affairs Division of Human Services (www.bia.gov/bia/ois/dhs)

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

<https://familysearch.org/>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has the world's largest collection of genealogical and historical records in the world. Much of this collection has been put online, including a page that has a comprehensive list of links to Indian-specific genealogical resources:

(https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/American_Indian_Online_Genealogy_Records)

National Indian Child Welfare Association

www.nicwa.org

Provides information on the Indian Child Welfare Act and provides resources for adopted or fostered individuals to help them connect with their tribal identity.

First Nations Repatriation Institute

<http://www.wearecominghome.com>

Provides technical assistance, education; research and advocacy on the process of Truth, Healing and Reconciliation for the healing and return home of First Nations people impacted by foster care and adoption.

Native American Rights Fund

www.narf.org/nill/resources/roots.htm

NARF has a vast, online library that provides helpful and valuable resources and tips. The site is user friendly and walks a person through the dense labyrinth of websites. They even offer lessons on how to conduct a genealogical search.

National Congress of American Indian

www.ncai.org/tribal-directory

Provides the online tribal directory where contact information for specific tribes can be found.

To Enlist the Help of a Professional Researcher

The BIA suggests writing to the Board of Certification of Genealogists or the Association of Professional Genealogists and request their listings of genealogical researchers for hire.

Board of Certification of Genealogists

<https://bcgcertification.org/>

P.O. Box 14291
Washington, D.C. 20044

Board for Certification of Genealogists

Association of Professional Genealogists

<https://www.apgen.org/>

P.O. Box 40393
Denver, Colorado 80204
Association of Professional Genealogists

Legal Aid resources for accessing adoption records

<https://www.lsc.gov/what-legal-aid/find-legal-aid>

Conclusion

Federal policies of forced assimilation through adoption and state level policies that caused the break up of American Indian and Alaska Native families have affected thousands of individuals for generations. The National Indian Child Welfare Association provides this guidance and the additional resources in hopes that those affected find support in their journey of discovering Native ancestry and perhaps citizenship in a tribal nation.