

Quest to Find Missing Brothers

My quest began in mid-June 2009. My brother John had died earlier that month having suffered from COPD for several years. My daughter Jennica was going through boxes of documents we had rescued from my brother's apartment, and she came upon a poem written by my mother. This poem was different that my mother's usual poems as it described a lost son. As far as my siblings and I knew, our mother only had us three children. Mom never told us about any other children. Was this a poem about a personal experience or about someone Mom had known who suffered a tragedy like this?



My sister Jane had received a letter from our cousin shortly after our mother died in 2005 saying that Mom did have another child before us that she had to give away. Our brother John insisted that it could not be true so we brushed it off. John was sick and we did not want to upset him nor did we think our mother would NOT tell us about another brother. Looking back on that now, I should have contacted my cousin and got more information from her. She has since, in my eyes, become the cornerstone of honesty in the family.

Back to the poem: finding that poem made my daughter and me curious so I wrote my cousin a letter telling her about the poem and asking for more details about my "other brother". Carol, my cousin, wrote back and gave us some details. Carol remembered playing with 'Butch' when she was very little. Since Carol was born in February 1942, she assumed that Butch was probably born in mid- to late-1941. She sent us pictures of Mom (Natalie Bernhardt) with Albert in a cute soldier outfit, with my cousin Carol, and with other family members.

I needed more convincing so started to call family members. I had left Wisconsin in 1976 and did not have much contact with any family except my immediate family members and the occasional Christmas card to/from others. Except for talking to some of these people briefly at my mother's funeral in 2005, I had not talked to most of them since my wedding in 1973. I called my mother's last surviving brother, Uncle John, my mother's sisters-in-law: Aunt Gertie and Aunt Joyce, Mom's brother-in-law, Uncle Rick, Mom's very good friends Virginia and Joyce, my cousin Karlen in Colorado, my cousin Roberta in Illinois, and Mom and Dad's good friend LeRoy who had worked on their farm as a teenager. EVERYONE knew who Butch was! Everyone remembered him as the little boy that Mother had to give away.



Through bits and pieces of information from many people, we found that his name was Albert "Butch" James Bernhardt and that he spent time with my grandmother and her younger children when he was about 7 months old (sometime in 1942). Sometime between then and the time my mother met my father, Webster, Albert's father "may have" asked Mom to marry him and Mom refused. Later Albert's

father “may have” came and asked to raise Albert with his new fiancé/wife and Mom refused. No one remembered the name of Albert’s father.

There are no details of what happened next other than Mom met my father, Webster, and they spent much time at his family farm with Albert. The story goes that Webster did not get along with Albert and that he was abusive. According to several family members, Webster made my mother give up Albert. Sometime around or after August 1946, Mom took Albert to Milwaukee and did not return with him. She may have given him to his father, to a family she had worked for or to an adoption agency. We don’t know and anyone who she may have shared that secret with is now gone.



Next I went searching for a birth record for my older brother. I contacted the Kenosha Register of Deeds and found a birth record for a brother but it was not Albert. This brother was born in Kenosha 1944 and was named Dennis David Bernhardt. No one in the family knew about him.

After that I contacted the Register of Deeds in Milwaukee searching for Albert and they sent me to Madison Vital Records office. The Madison office searched for Albert Bernhardt between the years 1938 and 1941 and found nothing.

Being an internet addict, I of course turned to the web to find information as well as from friends who I knew were experienced or interested in genealogy searches. Most websites provide little information unless you pay a fee. One friend who had been searching for her parents for several years recommended the ALMA Society. I contacted them, paid their tax deductible fee and registered my two brothers. They have been extremely helpful but as yet have found nothing definite. They suggested I write a story about this and get it into newspapers in Wisconsin. They also suggested I write letters to some of the “potential” brothers that we had found. I was skeptical about writing letters as I want to avoid “scammers” but could not think of another way to contact these people so I did send a few letters out. Those letters resulted in no responses. The two people I found on FaceBook were very polite and said they were not the ones I was looking for and wished me luck as well as promising to check with their families for more information. The ALMA Society provided me with a list of websites that I can register my brothers at so I am currently working on that project.

Getting family members and friends to remember facts from 60 years ago is not easy. Thanks to my daughter, who is scanning any and all old family photos from Mom’s photo albums, we are working on that angle too. We are trying to get family members to remember “something” by emailing or sending them photos with Mom and Albert and potential boyfriends (e.g. potential Albert fathers). Perhaps one of those pictures will spark a memory?

Searching for a lost family member is a consuming project. It is very difficult to focus on life as it used to be when you know time is running out and you may never meet this missing person(s) if you don’t act now. However reality does step in so you have to return to your normal work schedule and family duties and try to catch a few minutes here or there to continue the search. I think my mother would have wanted my sister and me to meet our other brother(s) so the pursuit will continue and perhaps if someone reads our story it will help others to remember too.