

Part 1: The (numerous) DNA test results are in...
By Mesa Foard

For two years, I've been on a journey to learn about my biological family. As an adoptee in South Carolina, antiquated laws prevent my access to any information regarding my adoption.

This didn't bother me because I wasn't curious about my adoption. Never had been. I believed I was truly a Foard.

But looks are everything and nothing.

Once, as a child, I was sitting on my father's lap cuddling with him in his giant recliner. His hand rested on the padded arm, and I placed mine atop his, splaying my fingers out like the ribs of a fan until I achieved the same spacing and our hands were in alignment. I was searching for evidence that we were blood-related.

While his eyes were on the TV, mine were carefully studying the shapes, colors and textures of a little girl's hand against its much larger male counterpart. Silent discoveries delighted me: Both hands were fair, topped with short, stubby nails. Reddish-brown freckles seemed to trail across my hand and continue onto his. Our fingertips were square-shaped, and our pinkies slightly curved. Yes! Proof-positive that somehow, some way he really *was* my father.

Add that "proof" to the other "evidence" I had.

Daddy, Mama, my little sister, Jackie (also an adoptee from a different family), and I went to the vegetable market and grocery store every Saturday.

While Jackie and I played (or fought), the grown-ups occasionally stopped and chatted with friends. If we heard our names, we'd quickly straighten up and pretend we'd been perfect angels. Those interruptions by adults usually involved polite questions as to our school or church or latest vacation. But I can't count the number of times I heard one comment in particular, one that I heard with guilty pleasure, despite the fact that it might have hurt both my little sister's and my mother's feelings.

Jackie was eight months and seventeen days younger than me (imagine trying to explain that to people!). We were so close in age that we were often dressed alike, as if we were twins. In studio pictures of us at around age 4, the first color portraits taken of us, we were wearing duplicate white chiffon dresses with polka dots, the only difference being that my dots were blue, and hers were green, to match our eyes.

But we looked nothing alike.

She was a beautiful child with wavy chestnut hair, olive skin and green eyes the color of the Atlantic Ocean on a bright, summer morning. She was frequently complimented on her pretty skin, and people would ask if she was of Greek or Italian descent. Much like a goddess.

I was the gangly one, with ghostly-pale skin that burned on those bright summer mornings at the beach and buck teeth from sucking my thumb. My older sisters would gently tease me, telling me I had “grand-daddy long-legs,” “too many freckles to count” and “dirty-blond” hair (that comment would make me cry and I’d insist that my hair was clean).

In other words, I was the “smart” one. The compliments given to me were usually about my grades in school.

One thing I often heard, though, made me feel like a rock star. That’s when people said, “You look just like your Daddy.”

While I was secretly thrilled to hear it, my mother would sometimes respond, “Doesn’t she look a little like me, too?” I didn’t know if she was teasing or if it bothered her.

The truth was I looked nothing like her, either. She was a former beauty queen reputed to have Seminole Indian ancestry, with raven-black hair and dark brown eyes.

So I was out-beautied. But looking like my father more than made up for it.

One day in my 40s, years after losing my parents way too early (my mother when I was 9 and my father when I was 26), I got an offer in my email for an autosomal DNA (atDNA) test from Ancestry.com. That’s where I was working on my Foard heritage.

The offer sat in my inbox for a few days and really made me start to think about my adoption. Could I really crack open this secret with just a little spit? Did I want to? What would I find? Did I want to know the story, even if it was a bad one? Was there a possibility that I really was a Foard, something I had always felt?

Other thoughts occurred to me. I realized that I needed my medical history (and my doctor was reminding me I wasn't getting any younger). I figured that if there was a terrible secret, it was not of my doing and I could accept it, whatever it might be. And I really did want to know if I was blood-related to the Foard family.

I also realized that the secrecy surrounding adoption has immense repercussions -- not just for me, but for my family.

Jackie and I were not only close in age but close as sisters. I lost my beautiful little sister unexpectedly when she was just 37. She had a heart condition no one knew about.

She left behind two awesome teenage boys. She also left behind and a daughter she lovingly gave to another family through adoption at age 17... a daughter who has no idea that she, too, could possibly have a heart condition.

Then I became determined to expose the secrets of adoption – so my daughter, my nephews and unknown niece – as well as their descendants -- will know who they are, where they come from and what they may face.

So I ponied up my \$99, spit into a tube and sent it off.

My closest match was a predicted second cousin, and I awkwardly contacted him. Adoptees are advised not to tell people they are searching because many doors will not open. However, I was a newbie and just blurted it all out. Bobby responded, incredibly, with ready assistance and kindness.

Second cousins share great-great grandparents (can you tell I had to study cousinship charts?). And Bobby had eight sets of them with dozens of descendants. It was a very daunting task to determine which set was a direct parental line. He believed from the outset that I was from his maternal line. I disagreed. I didn't think I looked like the photos I saw of them. So we made a bet.

I took two more tests through different companies to get more matches, learned about genetic genealogy from experts (which combines traditional genealogy and old-fashioned detective work with atDNA testing and analysis), and began building out Bobby's family tree to identify the descendants.

Several of Bobby's relatives generously tested on my behalf. The most recent test was taken by Suzanne. I thought we were most likely related as second cousins based on ethnicity results that indicated I didn't have much British in me, and Suzanne's grandfather was 100% British. So I went ahead and purchased the next test and lined up the next kind volunteer to take it.

One day, I logged into the 23andme.com web site to check for new matches. I think I said out loud, "Oh my GOD!" because my husband asked me who died.

Right there in front of me were the results: Suzanne and I are half-sisters.

Her (and my biological) father was Larry, who died in 2009. He was the grandson of British immigrants who came to the U.S. in the early 1900's and settled in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. His father, John, came to the South as an Airman 2-C and was stationed at Shaw Air Force base in Sumter, S.C. He met and married by paternal biological grandmother, Roetta (Bobby's great aunt).

Bobby was right. I'm from his maternal line. He wins the bet and now has bragging rights.

And those ethnicity estimates? A bunch of bunk for now.

Wondering who volunteered to take that extra test I bought? That would be Jackie's son, Zack. He's ready to go on this journey, too, to learn about his maternal roots.

Here are some pics of my paternal biological family. There are several of Larry, his mother, one of my paternal grandfather, one of Suzanne and some of me for comparison. Do you see a family resemblance?

My family, friends, members of the Piver family and the DNA Adoption community (www.dnaadoption.com) helped me discover the paternal side of my heritage. This is a journey no one can do alone. It takes the support of many kind and generous people.

Below is the chronological order of the people who helped me figure it all out and how they helped me:

Bobby has been on this journey with me every step of the way, taking another DNA test for me so I could analyze the data, asking relatives to test, providing family tree information, introductions to family members, knowledge, good advice (as you know, he intuitively knew I which line I was from) and unlimited support. When I wanted to quit or take a break, he'd gently nudge me forward. None of this would have been possible without him.

For those adoptees who want help, there are angels among us. They are known as "search angels," and that they truly are. This volunteer community is comprised of genetic genealogists, genealogists, IT professionals developing tools to work through the complexity of this data (Rob Warthen is our guru), birth family members sharing their knowledge and successes, and others who strongly believe that every adoptee has a right to their roots.

Two very special search angels, Diane Harman-Hoog and Karin Corbeil, spent untold hours patiently teaching, supporting and advising me. I am in awe of what they do and how many people they help. They have inspired me to give back to the community and have allowed me to contribute technical writing about these processes. It is a true honor and privilege to work with my mentors.

Sheila (Bobby's maternal first cousin and my paternal second cousin) and her mother, Margie (Bobby's maternal aunt and my paternal first cousin once removed), allowed a perfect stranger to ask for spit and then provided it. This awesome gesture narrowed my search by half! Sheila was the first person to officially welcome me to the family (thanks, cuz!). I look forward to meeting them in person!

Janet, my friend and co-worker, researched and obtained numerous obituaries for me from the library. That's how I learned the names of living descendants, including Suzanne's. Janet never complained no matter how many times I asked (and that was a lot). Within days, the piece of information I needed was right there in front of me courtesy of her work.

Marion, my second cousin once removed, spent much time on the phone with me, sharing her personal and family stories. She sent me extensive research she has conducted on the family and patiently answered questions. Marion is a genealogy expert and has contributed 1,850 memorials to Find-a-Grave, a web site where volunteers document cemeteries, provide dates and names from headstones, and photograph and post pictures for families, researchers, genealogists, etc. Impressive and very generous,

Crystal, my first cousin once removed, shared photos of the family (including those of my biological grandmother). These snapshots provided me my first close-up look at the Pivers and gave me a much better sense of them as people instead of names on a page.

The line closest to where I was born consists of Roetta's nieces through her sister, Maude. Pam and Gail were the first biological relatives I ever met in person (other than my daughter). They each took time out of their busy lives for a stranger and shared a dinner with me. They were so easy to be around that all of the nervousness I felt completely disappeared. That's because they were interested, interesting and genuinely kind women -- so much so that both of them offered to take the test. They ended up flipping a coin and Gail won. These ladies are my paternal first

cousins once removed and I'm glad they are. You know they wouldn't even let me pay for their dinner!?

Suzanne gave me the key that unlocked the door. How does one adequately thank someone for giving them half of their heritage? I called her up one day and without hesitation, she agreed to take a test. She was the first person I called with the results, and I wasn't sure what her reaction would be. I've heard sad stories about adoptees who are rejected by close biological family members. But not Suzanne. She invited me and my husband into her home, introduced me to her family, shared pictures and memories. She even cooked for us (and that's a big deal to me!). Without Suzanne, I wouldn't know my paternal heritage. She's been amazing.

Linda, Suzanne's mother and Larry's widow, spent hours with me, telling me about Larry. She searched for and shared many photos from his childhood. Her patience, kindness and honesty taught me a lot about Larry. He was very lucky to have her.

Jim, my first cousin once removed, is the son of Roetta's brother. He took me on a tour of the ancestral stomping grounds in North Carolina. He went out of his way to make me feel welcome and comfortable, even making sure I got home okay. He invited me to my first biological family reunion and I'm looking forward to seeing him again.

How do I feel about all of this? I am grateful for the knowledge I now have, the knowledge I am continuing to learn, and the new people I've met who I can call friends.

Most of all, I am grateful to the late John Wesley Jr. and Billie Marie Boltin Foard, who adopted me before I was even born. They loved me, raised me and gave me the tools I needed to be who I am. They are my parents and always will be.

You may be wondering where Part 2 is. It hasn't been written yet because I'm not done! I still have a maternal side to find.



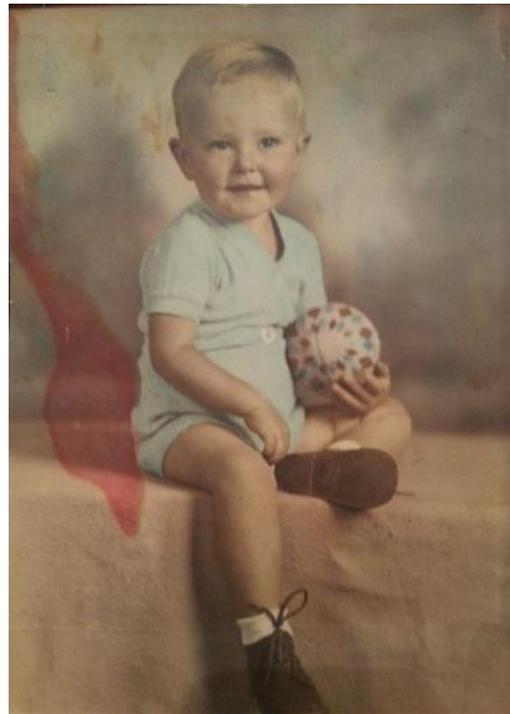
Mesa Foard



Paternal half sister, Suzanne



Mesa Foard age 2 or 3.



Biological father, Larry



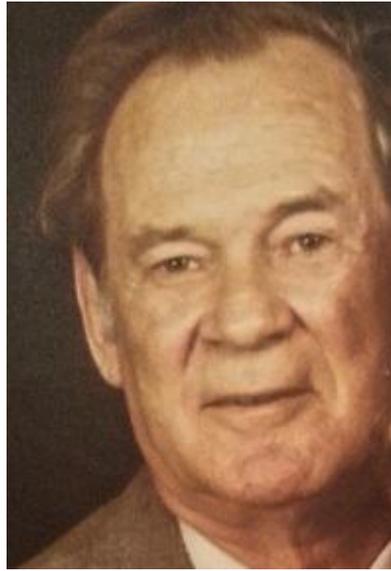
Biological father, Larry



Biological father, Larry



Biological father, Larry



Biological paternal grandfather, John



Biological paternal grandmother, Roetta



Biological paternal grandmother, Roetta