

MONDAY BUSINESS

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A Special Section by The Associated Press

The ITEM 5B

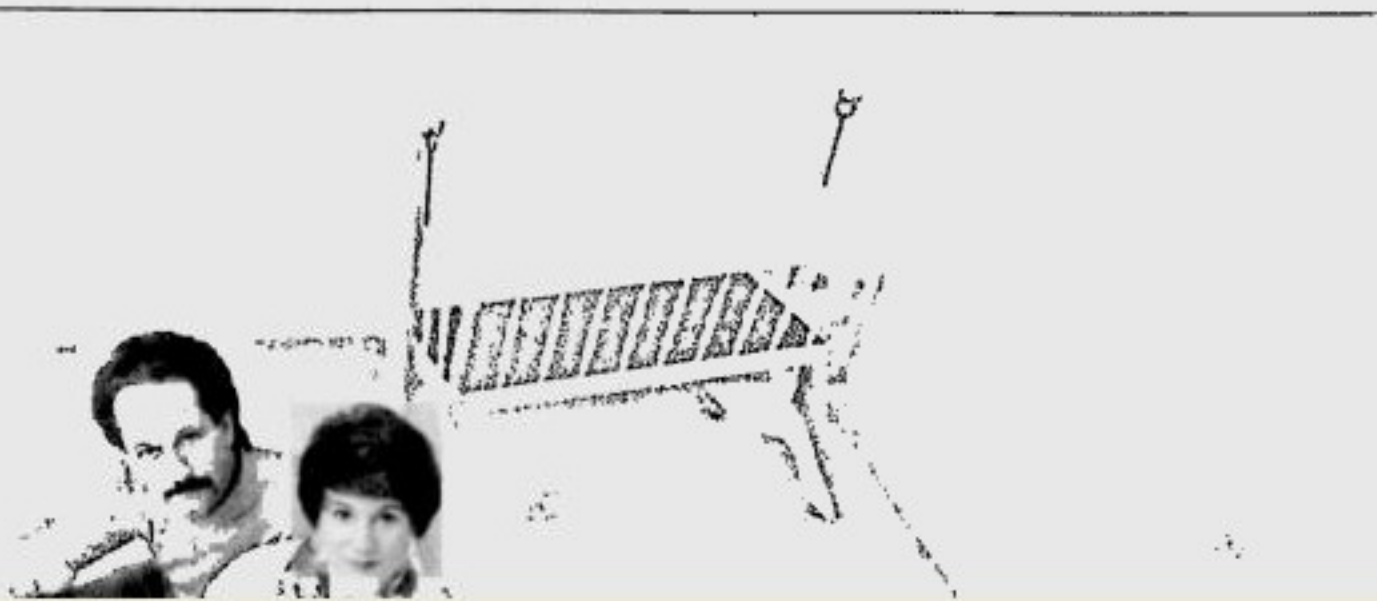
Children For Sale: The Business Of Adoption

Children turn into commodities as profits motivate birth mothers, lawyers and consultants

By MAGGIE JACKSON
AP Business Writer

Promising love, Jim and Mary Ann Cacacle left behind pain. The couple took thousands of dollars from eager parents-to-be, vowing to deliver babies to them in months. But cribs stood empty as the Cacacles retreated into silence.

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Adoption is a business, a rough and sometimes risky business. Stiff competition for babies, the lure of profits and the desperation of the childless have turned a once relatively staid process into a roller-coaster ride.

Where church or public agencies once ruled, independent adoptions via lawyers or consultants dominate. Couples who once waited for agencies to approve them now run ads for children. Young women

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AP Photos /Dan Hulshof

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Where church or public agencies once ruled, independent adoptions via lawyers or consultants dominate. Couples who once waited for agencies to approve them now run ads for children. Young women who once anonymously gave up newborns now choose their babies' future homes.

For many would-be parents, such methods pay off: They get a baby. Others question the emotional and financial costs.

"People go into this thinking it's a benevolent process

nearly 9 percent in the 1950s and '60s. Abortions also may have made fewer babies available.

Thousands of disabled, minority or older children are available. But adoptive parents, usually white and well-off, want healthy, white babies. By one estimate, 40 couples vie for each baby.

In 1991, Doreen Vitale contacted the Cacacies after

Cacacies moved to Florida after New Jersey authorities froze their client list.

"Complaints began in December 1991 and came so regularly and were so severe that we suspended their in-take," said Linda Mattoon, New Jersey adoption agency licensing coordinator. "We told them they couldn't take on new clients until they cleaned up their



Donna and Anthony Greco, disappointed after a birth mother changed her mind, are still waiting for a baby they can adopt.

AP Photos /Dan Hulshof



But that's not the case anymore," said Susan Freivalds, executive director of Adoptive Families of America, a support group.

"There are certain people who recognize that they are dealing with vulnerable consumers, and take advantage of that," she said.

The gurgling, wiggling commodity called baby is of course at the heart of adoption. Too many people want them, too few are available.

As parents get older, infertility problems rise. Out-of-wedlock births are no longer scandalous, so only 2 percent of unmarried women place babies for adoption, compared with

10 years of trying to have a baby and discouragement from agencies. Some said her husband Jim was too old because he was over 40; others spoke of years on wait lists or fees up to \$25,000.

"I went with Mrs. C. because she assured us that for \$7,000 we would get two healthy children from Honduras within four to five months," Mrs. Vitale said.

Three years, \$15,000 and a trip to Honduras later, they had only an empty nursery.

The Vitales and three other couples were each awarded \$7,500 in a civil court last year. But the

act."

The Vitales, who have since adopted a baby, can't afford to pursue their claim.

Palm Beach, Fla. police are investigating complaints that the Cacacies, working as unlicensed adoption consultants, took thousands in fees from Michigan families.

"It's a real muddled issue right now ..." said Det. Chris Calloway. "People feel that she's taken their money. ... I would have to prove she's pocketed the money and I can't prove that right now."

The Cacacies, who did not return telephone calls, told police they gave the money to foreign lawyers.

Meanwhile, many think the quality of service at agencies is slipping.

"A lot of these guys are cutting corners," said Clyde Tolley, a Baltimore adoption consultant. For example, the time social workers spend studying prospective parents is decreasing, he said.

But cries of alarm are particularly sounding about independent adoption, legal in 44 states.

Studies show independent adoptions rose from 21 percent of adoptions in 1971 to about 31 percent in 1986, while private agency adoptions fell from 40 percent to about 30 percent.

Many adoptions are problem-free. Colleen Alexander-Roberts found a baby privately after spreading the word among her friends.

"It was simple," said Ms.



Doreen and Jim Vitale finally adopted a baby after years of letdown and thousands of lost dollars.

The cost of adoption

Domestic

Private agencies: From a few hundred dollars for older or special needs children to \$20,000 for healthy, white babies.

Independent: From a few thousand dollars to \$40,000.

Public agencies, which almost exclusively handle older or special needs children: From nothing to hundreds of dollars.



International

Private agencies: From \$4,500 to more than \$15,000.

Independent: From \$12,000 to \$25,000.

AP/C. Sanderson

Source: AP research

Alexander-Roberts, a Toledo, Ohio mother who had such positive experiences adopting privately and via an agency that she wrote "The Essential Adoption Handbook."

Still, social workers and private agencies say many lawyers and matchmakers are motivated by profits. "We hear attorneys routinely charging \$15,000 to \$20,000, although ... there's not much legal work involved," said Ritch Hemstreet, California chief of adoption policy.

Ballooning private fees, up to \$40,000, eliminate prospective parents who don't earn high salaries. Worse, there is little or no monitoring of independent adoptive services or recourse if the

process goes awry.

Adoptive parents can lose money they've paid in expenses and fees if birth parents change their minds within a set time that varies by state. But some insurance companies offer adoption termination policies.

The Grecos, of Freehold, N.J., had adoption insurance. Still, Mrs. Greco said she felt that when the process began to go wrong there was "no one on our side."

Those desperate to adopt are often vulnerable. "When you're looking for a baby, your emotions tend to override your logic," said Ruthanne Okun, a Huntington Woods, Mich. attorney who said she lost \$4,300 to the Cacacies.

Some states are changing adoption laws. Alabama has tightened supervision on fees and expenses.

Critics call attention to gray areas of adoption that don't usually break laws but foster a profit-oriented split. Advertising for a baby, a practice legal in 32 states, "creates a marketplace mentality," said Mary Beth Styk of the National Council.

But it may get you a baby, argues Cynthia Martin, author of "Beating the Adoption Game."

For now, couples trying to adopt mostly are left this advice:

"Be an expert. Be prepared," said Ms. Alexander-Roberts. "Everything fell together for me ... But it wasn't luck."

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By MICHAEL J. GORMAN
of The Associated Press

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MAN AND WOMAN WHO, UNIDENTIFIED, WITH A BOY, WERE SHOWN TO THE PUBLIC BY THE ADOPTION AGENCY THAT THEY SAID

BY AP/WIDE WORLD

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The cost of adoption

Comments

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