

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Phyliss Trufant and her daughter, Darlene Odom, leave the Anchorage International Airport. The two had not seen each other since Odom was 11 months old.

# Taken from mom as infant, daughter returns 'home'

By Bill Hess  
Tundra Times

Phyliss Trufant carries a yellow rose, and paces nervously as she looks out the airport window, waiting for United Flight 65. Most of the people waiting here are a little anxious; their friends, loved ones and business associates are on that plane from Chicago and they are looking forward to seeing them.

Any tension, nervousness or excitement or anticipation felt by any others is magnified many times over in Trufant,

and it shows. The middle-aged, attractive Inupiat woman paces excitedly, smokes a cigaret half way, grabs her 11-year-old daughter Valerie, laughs, and then cries. A part of her that was taken away 20 years ago is on that plane.

Finally, the big jet can be seen taxiing down the runway, then it pulls up to the gate. Trufant scurries over to the far left side of the window to get a better view as the passenger loading ramp is placed over the door of the plane. Then she rushes back to where the tun-

nel made by that ramp empties into the room, and watches eagerly for the first passengers to debark.

"I'll bet she'll be the first one off!" an interested onlooker remarks. She is not. A few passengers stroll leisurely out, and then there is a gap. Soon others follow. No daughter. More come. Still no daughter. Phyliss clasps her hands together, squeals nervously, then grabs Valerie as tears squeeze their way out of her eyes.

The passengers keep coming  
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# She regains a lost part of her life

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but that which she seeks is not there. There is no young Inupiat woman among them. After what seems an unbearable time, Trufant can take it no longer. She runs out of the gate, and into the tunnel. The passengers who are still leaving the plane at broken intervals

seem slightly bemused as Trufant, Valerie and a relative, Chris Johnson, stand almost blocking their way, anxiously waiting.

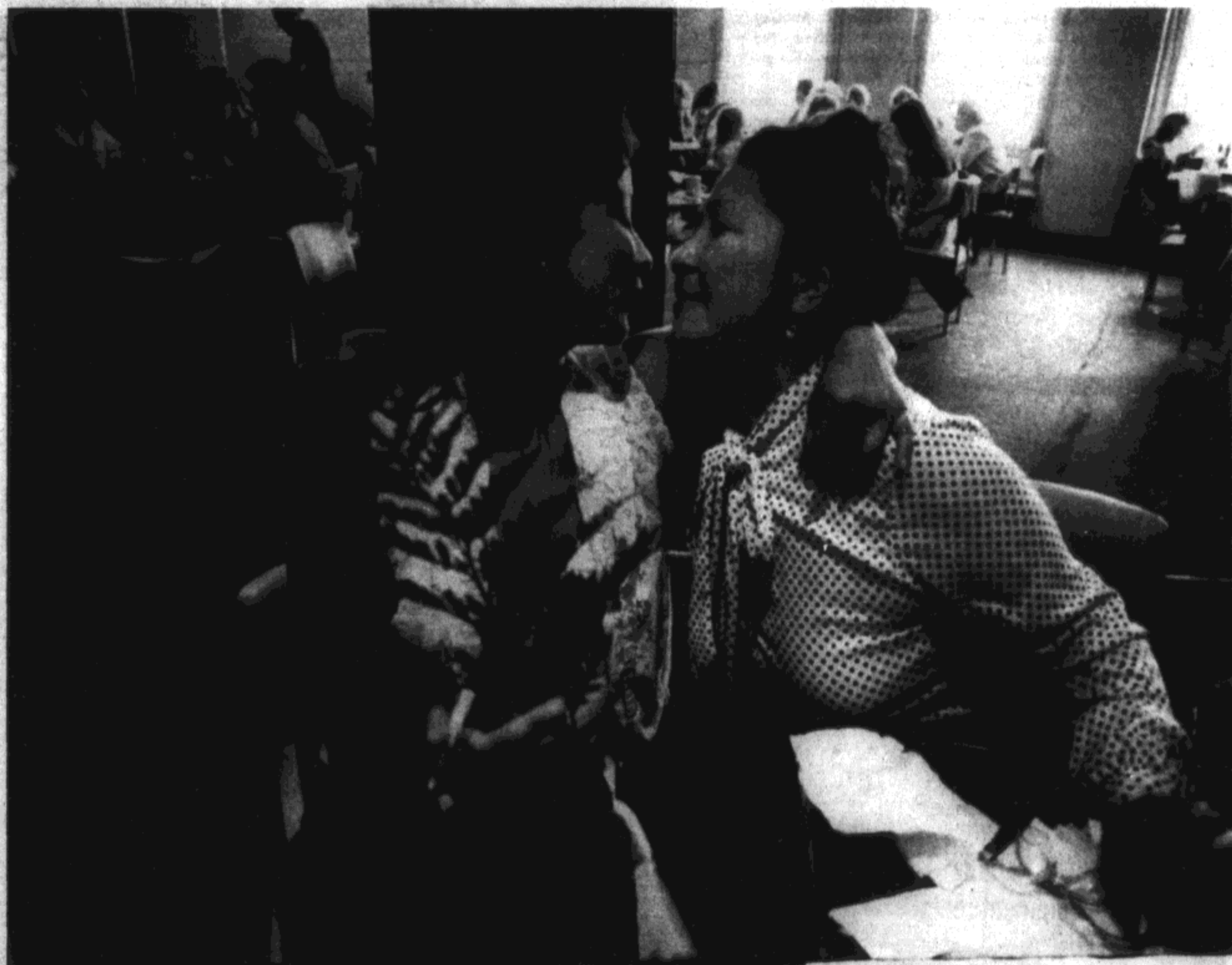
After another seeming eternity, Trufant squeals, stretches out her arms, and begins to run. A young woman followed closely by a skinny cowboy

does the same, and they meet in a tearful embrace.

This is Darlene Odom. She was taken from her 20-year-old mother at the age of 11 months and put up for adoption. Trufant had been serving a 30-day sentence for a minor offense when the incident happened. Later, three



Phyllis Trufant, above, peers anxiously out the airport window as the flight carrying her daughter pulls up to the gate. After spotting her (top right) they are finally reunited after 20 years.



Mother and daughter enjoy each other's company in the airport coffee shop. When she tried, Trufant could learn nothing of her daughter's whereabouts. "I didn't know if she was adopted, I didn't know if she was dead," Trufant says.

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# Now the search begins for other children

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younger children would also be taken out and adopted.

This is the first time that the mother and her Texas-raised daughter have seen each other since, and once their eyes meet, they can not separate them for very long. Nor do they seem capable of speech. They just hug each other, then look tearfully into each others' eyes, then hug again, look again. No words.

The hugging and looking continue in the airport coffee shop, but now words are added. "I am so happy, so glad!" says Odom. "There are no words to explain how I feel!"

"I didn't find her when I looked," says Trufant. "I looked for seven years! She's the only one that can find me!" Trufant is deaf, but her hearing did not go until she was in her teens, and she can speak, and read lips if the words are spoken slowly and carefully enough.

Odom, who was adopted by a Caucasian couple who had five biological and three adop-

ted children, spent five months searching for her mother. Although she stresses that she had a happy life and that she looks at her adoptive family as her family and irreplaceable, she says she was curious about her background.

"I looked so different than my adoptive family," she explains. "I wanted to know where I came from, my cultural background, and my medical history." Her family gave her little hint of her ancestral past. "I did not know I was Eskimo," she notes, explaining that she was told she came from California.

Still, she suspected she could be Eskimo or some Alaska Native, as she knew her family had been in Alaska during her infancy. Her adoptive father was an Air Force man, and they had pictures of the great earthquake of 1964.

"I thought maybe my real family had been killed in the earthquake," Odom says. The office of vital statistics in Juneau was one of the first places she checked in her

search for her blood-background. She had been given a number for ALMA, an organization which helps put natural family members in contact with one another, but hesitated to contact them.

"If I had have, I could have found my mom in two weeks!" says Odom. Instead it took five months. She knew she was getting close when she received a letter from the Alaska Department of Public Safety telling her that they believed they knew who her mother was, and they had forwarded the information on to her.

Although Trufant believed that provisions of the Indian Child Welfare Act which state that Native children who have been adopted must be given information they seek concerning tribal and family affiliation, state officials informed her the next step was up to her mother. They could not tell her how to get in touch with her. Her mother could respond or not, as she pleased.

"I was frightened she might

reject me," Trufant recalls ALMA classes where searching children were told to prepare for the worst. Then the telegram came, which was read to Odom over the phone by a friend.

"I am your natural mother and I have been looking for you and your sisters for several years," it read. "I couldn't speak, or talk, for five minutes! Odom recalls. "I was in a state of shock!"

Now that they have been reunited, Odom plans to stay in Alaska for two months, work, and get to know her mother. Although she came to Alaska without telling her adoptive mother of her search, and feels there was some hurt in her father's eyes even though she believes he understood, Odom says her life is in Austin, Texas, where she lives not far from her adoptive family.

"No one could replace them," she stresses.

In Texas, home-cooked Mexican food was a favorite staple of Odom's. In Alaska, she had

her first, somewhat queasy encounter with a recently caught salmon. Still, she intends to feast on it, enjoy it, and try out whatever Eskimo food comes her way, be it blubber, muktuk, seal, walrus or Eskimo ice cream.

She hopes to learn something of her language and ways. "My culture will come to me when it is supposed to," Odom says. "It's in my background, my ancestors."

The most important thing she hopes to find, however, is her two sisters whose whereabouts are still unknown. Elizabeth and Edwina. She has the name of the man she believes is her father, a Caucasian, but says he is "in a state of rejection towards me."

Already she and her mother have begun searching Alaska Native Health Service and state records for information on the other sisters, and feel things look positive.

"I hope and I pray," says Odom, "that while I am here in Alaska, maybe they will catch this news, and we can all get together!"