

Parsons Sun

A large family surprise

COLLEEN SURRIDGE

THAYER — Cathy (Fisher) Rowe, 62, swayed between tears and laughter for days after locating and being reunited with her biological family Monday. The reunion took place because of her adoptive sister, Margie (Fisher) Brown of Thayer. Christmas 2008 was the first time Brown, two of her three brothers, Bill and Tom Fisher and their adopted sister, Rowe, had seen each other in 34 years. As conversations jumped from subject to subject, Brown finally broached the topic of if Rowe had ever thought of looking for her biological family. Rowe, who had been in an orphanage since age 3, was adopted by the Fisher family at age 7. She told Brown she hadn't thought too much about it. "She said, 'I guess if they wanted to find me they would have,'" Brown said. The topic was dropped, but this spring was hit upon again when Brown called to talk to her sister in California. "I told her if she would like to find her family I would help her," Brown said. With the help of a friend who lives in Missouri and is deep into genealogical research, Brown went to work researching by starting with the most current information and working her way back. Progress was limited until she returned to Albuquerque in June and searched through papers the family had secured in a safe deposit box after her mother's death.

There she found Rowe's original birth certificate with her parents' names. The small lead was just what Brown needed. She found out her sister's family descended from German immigrants who located in Nebraska, and it was Nebraska where the St. James Orphanage was, Rowe's home for seven years. Brown also found her sister's first communion record and the death certificate for her sister's biological father. She contacted the orphanage, the church where her sister had her first communion, and she even wrote a letter to the editor of the Blair, Neb., newspaper, but got no response. "I just kept hitting dead ends," she said. As she continued her nightly search for information in Nebraska, one thing kept nagging Brown — the death certificate for Rowe's father stating he died in Socorro, N.M. "Albuquerque is where we lived when Cathy came to live with us in 1954. Socorro was only an hour away. I kept wondering what her father, Lee Leseberg, was doing there in 2004 when he died," Brown said. Finally, about two weeks ago, she decided to plug the man's name into a search engine, looking in the Socorro area. An ad popped up for Leseberg's Auto and Towing in Socorro. The fact that Rowe's father had been a garage mechanic before retiring was just too much of a coincidence. Also, up popped an obituary for a woman who died last October, who was preceded in death by a father who held the same name as Rowe's.

Brown's excitement grew. She thought of calling, but wondered what kind of reaction she would get and how she would explain what she was doing. It took her a couple of days to muster the courage to call, but she finally called Leseberg's Auto Aug. 15. "I figured either he was going to think I was crazy and hang up on me or he would be able to help me. Once Brown explained what she was doing to the young man, there was dead silence for a few moments. "Then he said, 'I think she is my half sister,'" Brown said. "Then he started talking to me about my sister's siblings. When Rowe's mother died at an early age, her father, unable to take care of her, the baby of the family, and her one older sister and five older brothers, put the children in an orphanage. He later remarried a woman who had seven children and the two of them had five more children together. In all, Brown discovered Rowe had 21 full, half-, step- and adopted brothers and sisters.

What was the most exciting thing Brown said is that the family had been searching for her for years. All of Rowe's full-blooded siblings had been located except her. They were all shocked to learn that for many years of their lives growing up, they had lived just a short distance from one another. "The next two hours was chaos," Brown said, as phone call after phone call was received by she and her sister from the siblings. "This was all so exciting. These were just the nicest people. I just couldn't believe it. My sister was weeping and I was weeping," Brown said. "I

did something I didn't think I could really do. I was afraid after I told her I would do this for her that I wouldn't be able to." And Brown, who had her three brothers and her adopted sister, was now told she was part of the family, too. "Basket-case," Rowe described herself the day she heard the news and the phone calls came swarming in. "I was completely flabbergasted. It was a whirlwind."

Within days, Rowe's sister, Donna Mae, who lives in Wyoming, and her brother, Jerry, also from California, made arrangements to travel to see Rowe Aug. 17. During the visit, plans were made to bring all of the family together in Socorro in September for a family reunion, Brown included. Rowe's 62nd birthday was Aug. 19 and Brown said she was thrilled to be able to give her sister such a present. "Happy birthday, Cathy," Brown said. "It was the best birthday I've had in my life. I got a slug of birthday cards from my family," Rowe said from her California home Tuesday. "It was an Oprah moment."

Courtesy photo



Cathy Rowe (center) stands with her biological sister, Donna May Warby, and her biological brother, Jerry Leseberg, when they were reunited Aug. 15. The two are among 17 siblings Rowe found she has, other than the four in her adoptive family.



Cathy Rowe (second from left) stands with three of her four siblings from her adopted family: Bill Fisher, Margie Fisher Brown and Tom Fisher at Tom Fisher's wedding Dec. 27, 2008.