

Woman finds family she never knew —online

■ **INTERNET:** A woman was reunited with her father and three half-sisters

By Meredith May
The Associated Press

BAY POINT, Calif. — America Online is in the doghouse with many of its customers, but for one woman the Internet provider made an online connection that changed her life forever.

Kathryn Virello was born 25 years ago after a love affair between her mother and a married man. When she went online, she found the father and three half-sisters she had never met. In minutes, the computer found the family Virello had been seeking for years.

Until she first started exploring the Internet in December, all Virello had to unlock the secret of her past was a dogeared photo of her dad, his name and a book titled, "You Too Can Find Anyone."

After a flurry of "are you my sis-

ter?" e-mail messages, not all of which got through the beleaguered AOL network, the family reunited electronically Jan. 19.

From her sisters, Virello got her dad's phone number in Las Vegas. It took her a day to summon the courage to call.

"I'm surprised it took 25 years for her call," said her father, John Lattimer. "I always expected this. I wasn't hiding, but I wasn't looking for her because I didn't know if she thought someone else was her father, and I didn't want to complicate things, so I waited."

Friday, Virello made friends with two of her three sisters, Shannon Evans of Palm Springs, and Carrie Craig of Washington. Evans and Craig flew to San Jose and drove to meet Virello at a Concord restaurant. Trisha Lattimer could not make the reunion from her home in Portland.

"Oh, my God, you're so beautiful," said Virello, when her sisters walked into the restaurant. Diners looked up from their onion rings

and ribs as the women cried and hugged.

"Every time we got together, we'd talk about our fourth sister," Evans said. "We wondered where she was, what she was like. There was always this missing link, and now we've found her."

Evans and Craig brought Virello a pearl and silver brooch that belonged to their great-grandmother and a book with photographs of the sisters. They spent dinner explaining to Virello her relation to the people in the pictures.

When Virello was a girl, she thought one of her mother's boyfriends was her father. Later, her mother said her father was dead. At 13, she learned the truth at a family gathering, but was told her father was a taboo subject.

Virello's search for her past began when she became pregnant three years ago. She had lived with only half a family, and wanted to give her child more than that, she said.

Though computers make

transcontinental connections in seconds, a few small miracles had to occur before Virello found her family.

For one, half-sister Carrie Craig just happened to join AOL two months before Virello, who had limited her search to AOL's membership.

Even then, Virello would never have made the connection to Craig, because Craig hadn't used her maiden name when she signed onto the service. Craig added Lattimer to her personal computer profile only one week before Virello began her search.

Virello typed in her father's surname, Lattimer, and 18 people with that last name appeared on her screen. She messaged only Carrie, because she was about the same age and Virello thought her dad had once worked in Washington.

In her e-mail, titled "NEED HELP," Virello mentioned her father was married to a woman named Loretta in the '70s and that

he had a tattoo of a fox "or something" on his right forearm. She sent the message at 1 a.m. Jan. 19.

Twelve hours later, a scream rang out in Washington.

"I was shaking so hard, I made my husband get out of the shower to type a message back to her," Craig said. "I knew from what she'd written that she was our sister. Finally we could put an end to this family secret we had to keep all these years."

For most of her life, Virello lived 10 minutes from her lost relatives.

Virello says she's sad she missed out on sisterhood — swapping clothes, talking over boy troubles and fighting for the telephone.

But she got the chance to start with a slumber party at her Bay Point home last week.

Now, Virello is preparing to meet her father.

Lattimer, who was a restaurant-lounge owner in Washington for several years, is astounded his daughter followed an electronic trail to his door.

Confession recording sealed for trial

■ **COURT:** The tape of an inmate's confession to a priest will not be used in his upcoming murder trial

The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — An Oregon jail violated the country's longstanding respect for religious confessions when it taped a talk between a priest and an inmate suspected of three slayings, a federal appeals court has ruled.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Monday that Oregon can no longer tape such conversations, saying that the practice violates federal law and the U.S. Constitution.

A priest has the right to rely on "the nation's history of respect for religion in general and respect for the sanctity of the secrets of confession in particular," Judge John Noonan wrote in the 3-0 decision.

The ruling was applauded by the lawyer who represented the priest and the Portland Archdiocese, which sued to have the tape destroyed.

"A victory for religious freedom of all members of religious faiths," Thomas Dulcich said in describing the decision.

The court, however, refused to order the destruction of the tape of the conversation between the Rev. Timothy Mockaitis and Conan Hale at a Eugene jail, last April.

That left open the possibility the tape could be used at Hale's upcoming trial for the 1995 shooting deaths of three teenagers.

Although the tape has been sealed, Hale stated in court documents that he confessed to some burglaries but denied the killings to Mockaitis.

Assistant Attorney General Timothy Sylwester contended the

taping was legal despite the ruling.

The priest "went to a jail, where a state law permits the interception (of conversations) between an inmate and anybody who is visiting there, regardless of whether it is a priest or anybody else," he said.

He also claimed the matter was moot because the prosecutor who ordered the taping promised never to do so again.

But the appeals court noted that Oregon, like all states, bars prosecutors from using confidential communications with a member of the clergy as evidence at a trial.

The court said the taping violated the priest's freedom of religion as well as the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which restricts a state's infringements on religious exercise.

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