

The SINFUL MESSIAH

Part One

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK
c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

If you are a Branch Davidian, Christ lives on a threadbare piece of land 10 miles east of Waco called Mount Carmel.

He has dimples, claims a ninth-grade education, married his legal wife when she was 14, enjoys a beer now and then, plays a mean guitar, reportedly packs a 9mm Glock and keeps an arsenal of military assault rifles, and willingly admits that he is a sinner without equal.

David Koresh is now his legal name. He changed it two years ago in California, supposedly to enhance his career as a musician, but to former cult members and law enforcement authorities, he is still Vernon Howell.

Many of his followers are former Seventh-day Adventists. The Seventh-day Adventist Church strongly denies any connection with Howell's group.

Howell's followers have come to 77 acres near the Elk community from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, Hawaii and throughout the continental United States. The end of the world is near, they believe.

Howell, 33, is their salvation.

They pay dearly for those beliefs, say

former Branch Davidians like Marc Breault, a one-time confidant of Howell's.

An eight-month *Tribune-Herald* investigation that involved numerous interviews with Breault and more than 20 other former cult members and a review of court records and statements to law enforcement officials revealed complaints that Howell:

- abused children physically and psychologically.
- boasted of having sex with underage girls in the cult.
- claimed the divine right to take every man's wife.
- and has had at least 15 so-called "wives."



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Vernon Howell, 33, is the leader of a Waco-based cult called the Branch Davidians. His followers consider him Christ.

Authorities have not acted on the complaints. For various reasons. Some officials said former cult members making the allegations have not appeared in person to swear out a complaint against Howell, though they have mailed sworn statements to local, state and federal authorities. Other officials said they needed evidence, not allegations.

Former cult members in Australia pooled their money and hired a private detective, Geoffrey Hossack, to lodge

their complaints with authorities.

Hossack said he believes authorities will act only if someone is killed.

Although many followers have fled, Howell remains with about 75 faithful in a compound they built to await the end of the world. Former cult members and authorities say it is heavily armed. Guards reportedly patrol the grounds at night. Perched above the com-

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THE LAW WATCHES, BUT HAS DONE LITTLE

By DARLENE McCORMICK
and MARK ENGLAND
c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

In 1990, the Australian break-away group of Branch Davidians succeeded in getting charges against cult leader Vernon Howell across an ocean.

But they failed to get them across to U.S. authorities.

More than two years have gone by, but authorities have done little. Howell still presides over a group of about 75 followers at Mount Carmel, the cult's base 10 miles east of Waco near the Elk community. At that compound, he is the unquestioned leader.

■ Editorial/12A

His leadership was questioned last year in a legal setting, however, for the first time — inside a Michigan courtroom.

Three former cult members flew from Australia last February to testify that Howell had sex with underage girls; abused children, whipping babies as young as 8 months old; turned Mount Carmel into an armed camp; and split apart the families of his followers, declaring himself the only perfect mate for the women in the cult.

Cult members allowed Howell's actions because they consider him Christ, testified Marc Breault, who is American; his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, an Australian; and Jean Smith, also an Australian.

The St. Joseph, Mich., case involved David Jewell's effort to get custody of his then 11-year-old daughter, Kiri. The girl, along with her mother, Sherri Jewell, was a cult member and lived at Mount Carmel. A joint custody agreement was signed by Sherri

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CULT

Ex-followers say leader abuses flock

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pound is a tower with lookout windows facing all directions.

One law enforcement officer calls the compound a "fort."

Howell rules Mount Carmel by virtue of the Branch Davidians' belief that he alone can open the so-called Seven Seals in the Bible book of Revelation, setting loose catastrophic events that the Branch Davidians believe will end mankind and propel Howell and his followers into heaven.

Former cult members, though, said Howell is headed in the opposite direction.

They said Howell abuses all his followers, from the very young to adults.

Forceful whippings

Howell taught that babies as young as 8 months old should be whipped forcefully, former cult members said. Two women said he hit their babies until their bottoms bled. Howell even banished his then 3-year-old son, Cyrus, to a garage in Pomona, Calif., for the night, said James Tom, a former Branch Davidian. Howell reportedly told the boy there were rats in the garage who liked to gnaw on children.

Breault, 29, and two other former cult members testified at a St. Joseph, Mich., child custody hearing last year that Howell fashioned a harem from the women in the cult and turned the men into virtual eunuchs sworn to guard the secret.

Women in the cult make up the so-called House of David, former cult members testified. The children they produce with Howell supposedly will rule the earth with him after he and his male followers slay the unbelievers.

Men in the cult are called Mighty Men, after a verse in the Song of Solomon which describes the guards who protected King Solomon's bed.

Mates in heaven

Former cult members said Howell tells the men that they will get their perfect mates in heaven. Each man's mate will come from his rib, as Eve came from Adam. On earth, though, all the women, even those married, are meant for Howell.

The 1992 child custody case in Michigan revolved around the struggle of one man to prevent his daughter, then 11 years old, from winding up in the harem.

David Jewell, a disc jockey who lives in Michigan and never belonged to the Branch Davidians, sued his ex-wife, Sherri Jewell, for custody of their daughter, Kiri.

Former cult members said Sherri Jewell is one of Howell's so-called wives.

Breault, his wife Elizabeth Baranyai, and Jean Smith, all former cult members, traveled from Australia to Michigan to testify that Howell had targeted Kiri Jewell for the House of David, as evidenced by a Star of David pendant the girl wore around her neck.

Although Kiri Jewell's parents worked out a joint custody agreement, Judge Ronald Taylor ordered Sherri Jewell never to take Kiri near Howell.

David Jewell said his ex-wife bade their daughter farewell after the trial and returned to the compound at Mount Carmel. Kiri Jewell remains in Niles, Mich., with her father.

Howell denies the tale of the harem, but two people unsuccessfully recruited by the Branch Davidians said Howell spelled out his theology to them.

Karl Hennig, a teacher from Vancouver, British Columbia, who studied with the cult for two months in 1987, said Howell taught that a jealous world would

A GUIDE TO THE NAMES

Vernon Howell — Cult leader. He joined the Branch Davidians in the early 1980s. In 1984, cult members acknowledged him a prophet. Followers believe he will lead them through an apocalyptic future to salvation.

Marc Breault — Former confidant of Howell's. Broke away in 1989, moving to Australia. He has devoted much of his time since to debunking Howell's message.

Robyn Bunds — One of the first women in the cult whom Howell took as a "wife." She has a son, Shaun. Bunds and other former cult members say Howell is the boy's father.

David Jewell — Non-cult member who sued his ex-wife in 1992 for custody of their daughter, Kiri. Former cult members told the disc jockey that Howell had targeted Kiri for his harem. A Michigan judge ordered his ex-wife to keep Kiri away from Howell.

Kiri Jewell — School girl whom former cult members testified had been targeted for Vernon Howell's harem. She now stays with her father in Michigan.

Sherri Jewell — School teacher who joined the cult. She shares custody of her daughter, Kiri, with her ex-husband, David. But a Michigan judge in 1992 barred her from bringing Kiri into contact with Howell.

House of David — The harem that former cult members said Vernon Howell fashioned out of women in the cult. Children from the unions are reportedly supposed to rule with Howell after the end of the world.

eventually crucify him over his numerous wives.

One woman whom Howell tried to recruit said he "blew me away."

"He was supposed to be the son of God," said the woman, who requested anonymity. "He said God was really lonesome, and he wanted grandchildren. It was like the Scriptures kind of said it, but they didn't really. It was like he was giving God grandchildren."

When many of his Australian followers fled home, Howell sent them an audio tape, which they dubbed The Foundation. The message justifies the New Light, Howell's 1989 declaration that all the women in the world belong to him.

In it, Howell asks the Australians: "Only the Lamb is to be given the job to raise up the seed of the House of David, isn't he?"

Later on, in the tape, Howell says to the women, "You have only one seed that can deliver you from death... There's only one hard-on in this whole universe that really loves you and wants to say good things about you. Remember Mary and God? Yeah? God couldn't make any advances because the world would misjudge."

The Seven Seals

Howell does acknowledge that he considers himself to be the Lamb spoken of in Revelation — whom many Christians believe will unloose the Seven Seals.

Many Bible scholars consider the Lamb to be a synonym for Jesus Christ. So does Howell.

"If the Bible is true, then I'm Christ," Howell said. "But so what? Look at 2,000 years ago. What's so great about being Christ? A man nailed to the cross. A man of sorrow acquainted with grief. You know, being Christ ain't nothing. Know what I mean? ... If the Bible is true, I'm Christ. If the Bible is true, but all I want out of this is for people to be honest this time."

This time, though, Christ is sinful — if you believe Howell.

He teaches that man is too sinful to live up to the perfect standard Christ set, as recorded in the New Testament. This time, Christ



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About 75 people from around the world live inside the compound at Mount Carmel, which one law enforcement official calls "a fort." Authorities say the tower in the middle of the building offers a view in all four directions.

Staff photo — Bobby Sanchez



Staff graphic — Brian Sipple

knows sin just like the rest of us and so offers a new way to salvation — following him through the Seven Seals.

"God allows men to be born into sin," Howell said. "It is natural for man to sin. If you're going to be fair, you've got to give man a way out."

Former cult members agree that Howell is sinful, but not that he is Christ.

Breault told the Michigan court — and nine former cult members confirmed in separate interviews — that Howell talked in Bible studies of having sex with a 12-year-old girl whose parents belong to the Branch Davidians.

'You got used to it'

Robyn Bunds, 23, a former cult member, said Howell told the story as if he found it amusing — saying the girl thought he was getting in bed with her to get warm.

"That's what he said. When he tried to pull down her panties, she tried to get him not to," Bunds said. "She was 12 years old. She trusted him... I remember being 12. She resisted, but he kept on going because he said God told him to. Psychologically, it's weird. But you got used to it. It was normal."

The girl in question gave birth in February 1989 to a daughter. By then, she was 14 years old. The space on the birth certificate for naming the father is blank. A dozen of Howell's former followers, including one of the girl's brothers, insist that's because Howell is the baby's father.

Howell denies the accusation. He claims to have only two children in the cult, Cyrus and Star, whose mother is Rachel Howell, who was 14 years old when a 24-year-old Howell married her in 1984.

Branch Davidian women, however, have left a trail of birth certificates listing no father. Former cult members — including Robyn Bunds, who says Howell is the father of her son, Shaun — said that's because Howell fathered the children.

In addition, McLennan County records show no birth certificates for many children whom former cult members said have been born to Branch Davidian women since the late 1980s. A former cult member once registered as a midwife in McLennan County said she delivered twin girls in 1991 to a young Branch Davidian

A long, troubled road led Branch Davidians to Waco

By DARLENE MCCORMICK and MARK ENGLAND

c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

Turmoil and eccentric religious beliefs were the bricks that built the Branch Davidians.

The roots of the religious sect date back to 1934, when Victor Houteff, a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, formed his own group in Los Angeles and later moved to Waco.

The late Houteff intended the location near Waco to be the worldwide headquarters for the General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, says Baylor University religion professor Bill Pitts, who has written several papers on the Branch Davidians.

In 1935, the group established the original Mount Carmel Center near the present Mount Carmel Water Treatment Plant. It sat on 189 acres of land, with its location being based on scripture interpretation, according to Pitts' research.

The road that led Houteff to Waco was a long and troubled one.

Houteff, born in 1886 in Bulgaria, grew up as a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church. He disassociated himself from the church after a disagreement with church leaders, according to Pitts' research.

He emigrated to the United States, eventually settling in Rockford, Ill., where he operated a small hotel.

His association with the Seventh-day Adventists began under a tent.

In 1918 he attended a tent meeting and joined the religious group. He later moved to Los Angeles, where he became the assistant superintendent of a Seventh-day Adventist Church Sabbath school with about 200 students, Pitts wrote.

Different view of Revelation

Houteff's theological views — especially his interpretation of the book of Revelation — did not fit the views of the Seventh-day Adventists, Pitts said.

Once again Houteff found himself at odds with a religious group. Conflict broke out between Houteff and church leaders, and he was charged with disrupting the Sabbath school.

Several who followed him saw him as an "inspired prophet," Pitts wrote.

Despite the conflict with the Seventh-day Adventist church, Houteff continued to embrace some of its teachings, such as keeping the Sabbath on Saturday and believing in the imminent return of Christ, according to Pitts' history.

In Waco, Houteff's following as well as his holdings grew. In 1940 the group had 64 residents and increased its holdings from 189 to 377 acres.

In 1942, Houteff changed the group's name to Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. Houteff's belief that the restoration of David's kingdom in Palestine was imminent prompted the change, according to Pitts' research.

Houteff expected the Second Coming of Christ, believing life at Mount Carmel would last less than one year. But the years passed, and the community continued to grow despite the group's limited association with the outside world.

Commune had its problems

Marrying a non-believer was strictly forbidden. Many spouses had divorced those who came to live in the commune, according to Pitts' research.

The commune had its share of problems.

The schoolmaster seduced many of the girls in the school, causing it to close, Pitts wrote. Thereafter, children went to public schools.

Then in 1955 Houteff died, though many members didn't think he would. Some thought he would be the king in the new kingdom or at least Elijah announcing the kingdom. His death resulted in a major crisis within the group.

His wife, Florence, assumed power. That same

year, she came out with her own religious predictions which would later fracture the group.

In 1955, Florence Houteff sent out a message that April 22, 1959, the Jewish Passover, would be the establishment of the kingdom. Hundreds of followers joined the group, disposing of their property and businesses.

With the expanding city of Waco encroaching on the Branch's property, the land was sold off in lots to individuals and groups in the mid-'50s and the Branch bought the present property, near Elk about 10 miles east of Waco.

Waiting for a sign

Meanwhile, the group waited for a sign. Leaders hinted that it might be the resurrection of Houteff, their Elijah, who was to return just before the Lord, Pitts wrote.

Members fasted and prayed. And believed. The deadline came and passed.

Total membership in the Branch Davidians was about 1,400 members during Florence Houteff's leadership.

But by May 5, 1959, only 450 of the 900 or so devotees who showed up at Mount Carmel remained, the Waco News-Tribune reported. Three weeks later, a month after the April 22 deadline, most of the people had left.

The Davidians splintered, the largest group going with a rival prophet, Ben Roden.

Roden's group was known as the Branch Davidians, according to the News-Tribune.

When Roden died in 1978, his wife, Lois, took over leadership. She led the Davidians until another split in 1984.

That year, the Davidians were torn between Lois Roden's son, George, and an up-and-coming leader, Vernon Howell, who later took most of the members with him.

Howell, who later changed his name to David Koresh, married 14-year-old Rachel Jones in 1984. He was 24. She was the daughter of Perry Jones, a high-ranking Branch Davidian member.

Houteff did much the same in his day. At 51, he married Florence Hermanson when she was 17. She was the daughter of the group's treasurer.

Moving into a new era

After 1984, the Branch Davidians, which Seventh-day Adventists emphasize are not a part of their church, found themselves moving into a new era. They became involved in a number of events, with some drawing media attention.

■ In 1985, a rivalry between Howell and George Roden for leadership of the group culminated in Howell's group being forced off the property near Elk at gunpoint.

■ Lois Roden died in 1986.

■ In 1987, Howell and seven men engaged in a gun battle at the property, now called Mount Carmel, with George Roden.

■ Howell and the others involved in the shootout were charged with attempted murder in November of 1987.

■ A jury in 1988 found the seven men with Howell innocent.

■ A mistrial was declared in the case of Howell. Charges against him were later dismissed.

■ In 1989, George Roden was charged with the murder of a 56-year-old Odessa man.

■ In December of 1990, Roden was found not guilty by reason of insanity and sent to Vernon State Hospital.

Things quieted down until April of 1992. At that time, rumors of a possible mass suicide at Mount Carmel began to circulate, apparently starting in Australia, a country Howell visited to gather new followers.

Relatives of cult members said Howell had interpreted the book of Revelation in the Bible to say a certain number of people must become martyrs before the Second Coming of Christ.

Howell, now going by the name of David Koresh, called the rumors "all lies."

WHAT TEXAS LAW SAYS

Indecency with a child — Occurs if a person has sexual contact with a child younger than 17 years of age. It is a second-degree felony punishable by a prison sentence of 2-20 years. It is considered a defense if the child is 14 years of age or older and has engaged promiscuously in sexual intercourse.

Aggravated sexual assault of a child — Occurs if a person has sexual intercourse with a child less than 14 years of age. It is a first-degree felony punishable by a prison sentence of 5-99 years.

Sexual assault of a child — Occurs if a person has sexual intercourse with a child 14 years of age or older. It is a second-degree felony punishable by a pris-

on sentence of 2-20 years.

Endangering a child — Occurs if a person who has custody of a child younger than 15 years of age places the child in danger of bodily injury or mental impairment. It is a Class A misdemeanor or punishable by up to a year in county jail.

Injury to a child — Occurs if a person causes either serious bodily injury or bodily injury to a child 14 years old or younger. If serious bodily injury occurs, the offense is considered a first-degree felony punishable by a prison sentence of 5-99 years. If bodily injury occurs, the offense is considered a third-degree felony punishable by a prison sentence of 2-10 years.

LAW

Australian group lobbies for action

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Jewell and David Jewell, who never belonged to the Branch Davidians.

But after hearing three days of testimony, Judge Ronald Taylor on Feb. 28, 1992, ordered Kiri Jewell kept away from Howell.

It was the first taste of success for the Australian group, which broke away from the Texas cult in 1989-90 and has since spent thousands of dollars and traveled thousands of miles lobbying authorities to take action against Howell.

The Australians, who still have relatives and friends in the cult, say they are concerned about the mental and physical well-being of members — especially the children.

Their worst fear, they said, is that someone will die in connection with the cult.

"Must we wait also for Vernon's followers to take lives?" asked former cult member James Tom.

In the summer of 1990, they began alerting authorities in the United States to what they believed was the danger presented by Howell's leadership of the cult.

Group hires detective

Pooling their money, the former cult members hired Australian private detective Geoffrey N. Hossack for \$6,000. His mission was to warn local, state and federal authorities in this country about Howell's activities in Texas and also California, where the Branch Davidians have satellite operations.

Hossack met with federal, state and local law enforcement officials in Waco on Sept. 18, 1990. He brought along nine signed affidavits notarized by a U.S. consul in Australia for authorities to read. The affidavits laid out the charges later made public in the Michigan courtroom.

Officials at the meeting, held in Waco's Federal Building, were Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill Johnston; then-McLennan County District Attorney Paul Gartner; his top aide, Ralph Strother; Sgt. Terry Lee, an investigator with the Texas Department of Public Safety; and Lt. Gene Barber of the McLennan County Sheriff's Department.

Their lack of response made Hossack's journey to America a frustrating one.

"To my knowledge, nothing further was done about it," he said.

Gartner said authorities weren't given enough hard evidence.

"The consensus was there was not enough information at that time to pursue a full-scale investigation," he said.

"In fact, the whole attitude I found there as an investigator was . . . it would be after the fact, that if a killing or shooting or something came to light, that's when they'd do something, which is generally what I guess police departments there are all about."

Private detective Geoffrey N. Hossack

Strother said officials, though, gave Hossack a sympathetic hearing.

"Oh, it got my attention," Strother said. "I could see this sort of thing happening. To tell you the truth, the thing that went through my mind is you've got a cult like Jonestown . . . I do not remember ever coming to a determination this is just a bunch of nonsense, and it's not worth my time."

But law enforcement officials needed evidence instead of allegations, Strother said.

"We did not have anything we could rely on to make an arrest," he said. "As I recall, none of these people on these affidavits ever came in or would come in to actually tell us these things."

Hossack, however, disputes that claim.

"I also indicated that these people were willing to come over to the United States and appear in any court and give any evidence that was necessary," he said. "And they were."

'Sour grapes'

Barber wondered why members of the breakaway group had not gone to authorities before they left America.

"I considered it sour grapes," he said. "It doesn't make any sense to me."

Hossack found the attitude of

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Ralph Strother, former assistant district attorney

authorities puzzling.

"In fact, the whole attitude I found there as an investigator was . . . it would be after the fact, that if a killing or shooting or something came to light, that's when they'd do something, which is generally what I guess police departments there are all about," Hossack said.

Local authorities are well aware of the Branch Davidians, whose history includes a shootout and the attempted resurrection of a dead woman.

They admit monitoring the cult, but only as a protective measure.

For one thing, authorities know cult members have weapons and plenty of them at the Mount Carmel compound.

'Hell-fire' switches

The Branch Davidians make no secret of having guns. After neighbors complained about weapons being fired, cult members visited the McLennan County Sheriff's Department. They voluntarily told deputies that they had put "hell-fire" switches on their semi-automatic weapons — keeping them legal but deadly. Law enforcement officials said it comes close to making them automatic weapons, which must be registered to be legal.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill Johnston said that people can own as many weapons as they want as long as they are legal.

"It's not against the law to have assault-type weapons," he said. "It is against the law to have assault-type weapons without having them properly registered."

A spokesman with the federal Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms in Washington, D.C., said "gangster-type" weapons such as machine guns, silencers and explosives must be registered with the bureau to be legal.

The bureau conducts a background investigation on the person attempting to register such a weapon, and the chief law enforcement officer in the area must approve ownership of the weapon before it can be registered, he said.

Records are not open to the

public.

But McLennan County Sheriff Jack Harwell said to his knowledge he has not approved an ATF registration form for Howell.

A former cult member, who said he is too afraid to be identified, said the group has .50-caliber weapons, AK-47s, AR-15s, Israeli assault rifles, 9mm handguns and at least one starlight filter for night patrol. Other sources confirm the group has military-type assault weapons.

Sources say Howell and his followers could be manufacturing "grease guns," a type of machine gun, and that the Davidians are building an underground firing range. Former members who left the cult as long as two years ago report that members practiced firing weapons, including M-16 rifles.

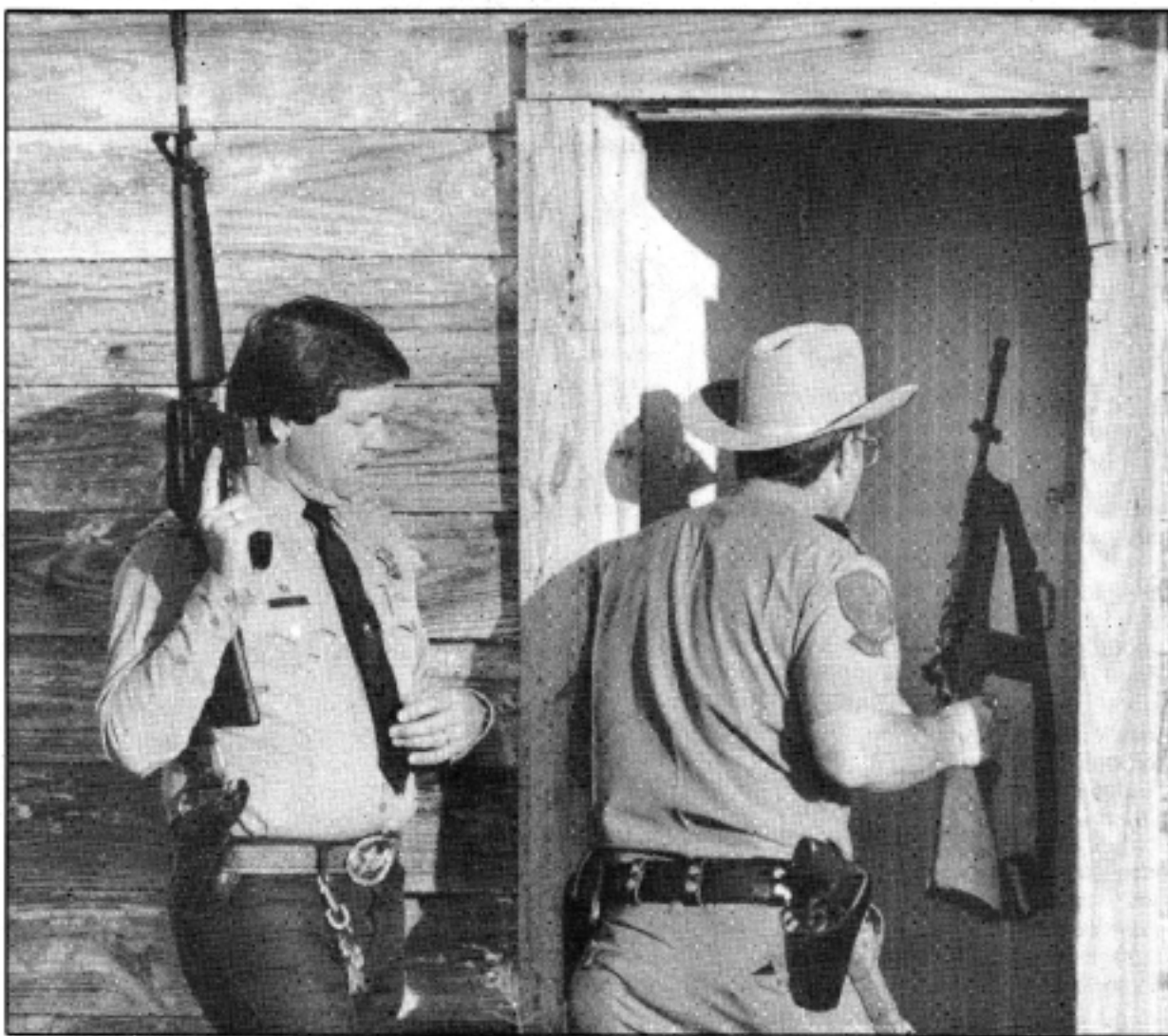
"We were thought of as God's marines," a former cult member said. "If you can't die for God, you can't live for God."

Building a 'fort'

Authorities have watched warily as the small houses that dotted Mount Carmel have been torn down and replaced by a central compound, which one local law enforcement officer calls a "fort."

The compound is a rambling L-shaped building.

Part of the building is higher



c. 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald

Local authorities enter Mount Carmel in 1987 after a shootout. Authorities fear they may yet again have to go onto the property. A cult member told relatives that authorities won't ever take the cult's children without a fight.

File photo

than the rest of the compound. Law enforcement officials believe part of its purpose is to serve as a lookout tower.

A cult member told relatives that Howell has vowed that authorities won't take the cult's children without a fight.

Welfare workers visit

Welfare workers from Children's Protective Services visited Mount Carmel at least twice last year to talk to the children there, according to a former cult member and authorities.

Howell also confirmed the child welfare workers' visits.

Sources said the children interviewed by the child welfare workers talked about a bus being buried next to the compound to serve as an underground shelter and gave workers some information on the cult's apocalyptic vision of the future.

Director Bob Boyd of Children's Protective Services said he could not discuss the specifics of any case.

Sources said the agency reported finding no evidence of child abuse and took no action.

The agency, however, may have undermined its own investigation.

Prior contact?

Lt. Gene Barber, of the sheriff's department, and a former cult member who fears harm if identified, said child welfare workers called Mount Carmel to announce their visits.

Boyd denied the accusation.

"The policy is we try to contact the child before seeing anybody," Boyd said. "But we do not call a family and let them know we have received a report and that we are coming out."

Howell also denies that he was tipped off to the visit.

Barber, however, said child welfare workers told deputies accompanying them to Mount Carmel that they called the Branch Davidians before both visits.

The former cult member said that after the call from child welfare workers, Howell hid some of the children at Mount Carmel as well as some of the underage girls that the Australians said he had sex with.

David Jewell, Kiri's father, said he found workers at Children's Protective Services sympathetic but unresponsive when he called from Michigan last summer to discuss filing a statutory rape charge against Howell.

'Big dog, no teeth'

Jewell said a child welfare worker told him that the agency did not think law enforcement officials would pursue the case. The worker said it would be difficult to find people to corroborate the allegation. Also, Kiri Jewell was no longer exposed to abuse.

"I was frustrated," Jewell said. "I came to the opinion on a personal level that they wanted to help. But within the framework in which the law was interpreted and carried out, they didn't feel a great deal could or would be done. Big dog, no teeth, basically."

Children's Protective Services did ask for the names of girls who might still be in danger of sexual



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Former McLennan County Assistant District Attorney Denise Wilkerson examines the ammunition seized during the Branch Davidians' 1987 shootout with George Roden.

File photo

molestation at Mount Carmel, Jewell said. He gave them two names after talking to his daughter.

"I was told at that point that it still seemed unlikely they'd be able to do much," Jewell said. "Even if they went in, it would be difficult to make the charges stick. They were of the feeling that the children would end up testifying for him rather than against him."

Boyd defended his agency.

"If a child tells us a story about how they were abused, and it's believable and they're consistent, we don't demand that there's got to be other evidence," he said.

Immediate danger

His agency deals only in civil matters, Boyd said. It can't remove children based on past reports of abuse. Before acting, child welfare must find evidence that a child's physical health or safety is in immediate danger, he said.

"We haven't shirked any duty or responsibility," he said. "Some of these affidavits and these letters that these people have done are listing things that occurred in 1986, 1987, 1988. Lots of them occurred in locations other than Texas."

Like La Verne, Calif.

The Branch Davidians have a house there at 2707 White Ave. La Verne police visited the house in the summer of 1990 after former cult member Robyn Bunds filed a charge of kidnapping against

Howell. He had sent her son, Shaun, who was less than 2 years old and whom Bunds says was fathered by Howell, to Mount Carmel.

La Verne police gave Howell 48 hours to return Shaun Bunds, which he did, but they didn't question Howell about Robyn Bunds' charge that he regularly had sex with a 14-year-old Australian girl at the house.

Chief Ron Ingels said the safe return of Shaun Bunds was the police department's priority. After the boy was returned safely, police went back to the La Verne house and asked to speak to the girl, Ingels said.

Both she and Howell had flown to Mount Carmel.

"If they had detained her that first night, this would be all over," Robyn Bunds said.

Hossack, the Australian private detective, said his clients are still ready to cooperate with any investigation of the cult by authorities.

"I still do believe it's got some very, very dangerous overtones," he said.

Despite Hossack's concern and former cult members' nightmarish allegations, Howell continues at Mount Carmel doing what he considers the work of the Lord.

His followers continue to consider him the Lord.

Ex-followers continue to worry.

And authorities continue to watch.

"My primary reason for trying to help is the children. They have no one else to help them. If people say we were stupid, well, that may be true. But the children aren't."

Marc Breault, former member

FAITH

Former members warn of cult tactics

From Page 10A

woman living at Mount Carmel. The midwife said Howell ordered her not to register the babies with local officials, a violation of state law.

Former cult members — in some cases, relatives of the women involved — say Howell restricted the filing of birth certificates out of fear that authorities would chart the number of babies born at Mount Carmel without a known father and focus unwanted attention on the Branch Davidians.

Why would anyone join such a group?

Many of Howell's followers are former Seventh-day Adventists. Their faith allows for end-time prophets. Breault said this means most feel obliged to hear out anyone who claims to be anointed. Even Howell's critics say he has a spellbinding ability to roam through the Bible, stringing verses together to support his beliefs.

Former cult members also said Howell uses traditional mind-control techniques to entrap listeners: putting Branch Davidians through rigorous daily Bible studies, some lasting more than 15 hours.

Followers end up awash in Scripture, feeling only Howell has a true understanding of the Bible.

Howell eventually became their faith, former cult members said.

Some broke away, summoning enough courage to overcome their doubts and fears. Many went into hiding. Former Branch

"We're doing what we're doing and nobody's going to stop us."

Cult leader Vernon Howell

Davidians such as Marc Breault and Robyn Bunds, though, speak out against Howell.

Breault, an almost-blind computer programmer in Melbourne, Australia, has acted as a Moses figure since 1990, criss-crossing the world to lead Branch Davidians away from the man he followed for three years.

He calls Howell a phony. Howell depicts Breault as a rival prophet, bent on ousting him — a charge that Breault, former cult members and mainline Australian Seventh-day Adventists deny.

"My primary reason for trying to help is the children," Breault said. "They have no one else to help them. If people say we were stupid, well, that may be true. But the children aren't."

Howell dismisses the charges from Breault, saying his former followers in Australia need "a good butt-whipping."

"We're doing what we're doing and nobody's going to stop us," Howell said.

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