

The Messiah of Waco

He loves God and he loves women. He has total control over the lives of his followers who believe his message: the Apocalypse is nigh.



WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD—SYGMA

He failed as a musician, but as a leader Koresh could get his adherents marching to his beat

Young girls and old women, innocent and worldly, virginal and fecund. Within the walls of the kingdom on the flat plains of Texas, David Koresh knew them all—in the Biblical sense, former followers say. He began a decade ago with Lois Roden. She was 67 and the widowed leader of the Branch Davidians when the 23-year-old Koresh, still called by his birth name of Vernon Howell, arrived at the Mount Carmel compound. He confessed to the group that he worried about his excessive masturbation. Ex-members say Roden felt sorry for him and they became lovers, even tried to have a child. Koresh now disavows the union, saying she was as ugly as Medusa.

His next lover was at least a little bit closer to his own age. In 1984, he married Rachel Jones, the 14-year-old daughter of

two followers; she bore him a son, Cyrus, and a daughter, Star. Koresh claimed to be monogamous for two entire years. But then, followers say, God told him to build a new House of David, one with many wives, just as King David had. Many wives, like Robyn Bunds, then 17, and later, her mother, Jeannine, 50. Robyn Bunds says Koresh fathered her 4-year-old son, Shaun. According to the Waco Tribune-Herald, she fled when Koresh took up with her mother. Both women now live in California.

As the years passed, the "wives" got younger and younger. Michelle Jones, 12, was his wife Rachel's little sister and, an ex-follower says, Koresh's special favorite. At least a dozen other nubile members of the flock succumbed; they wore Star of David pendants, a sign that they had been chosen. When the ex-husband of one Branch David-

ian heard that his 10-year-old daughter was wearing the star, he sued for custody and, after winning, whisked her away to his home in Michigan, according to the Waco paper. Former followers say Koresh claimed to pick his wives for their spirituality; it was probably just a coincidence that they were all good-looking. Some are now young mothers whose children's birth certificates show no father's name—a way of hiding the divine plan from civil authorities, according to the Waco paper.

Many of the girls' parents were Koresh's followers; they gave their blessings because "they believed in his message," says Robyn Bunds's brother David. All in the name of God, of course. Koresh often preached from the 45th Psalm, where it is written that the king's head is anointed with the "oil of gladness." Koresh's unique analysis: the oil refers to vaginal secretions. During intercourse, his "wives" anoint the head of their king's penis.

It sounds like crazy talk now.

Who could have believed it? But there they were, dozens of devotees, lured to a lonesome place on the Texas prairie by the promise of salvation. They had traveled from all over the country and beyond—Hawaii, Britain, Australia. Koresh had recruited many on his forays around the globe in search of new blood. Some turned all their worldly goods over to him. In several cases, that amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars. They were holed up in the fortress with the man who claimed to be both a prophet king and a warrior angel with the keys to heaven. Maybe even the Messiah.

He was a ninth-grade dropout, but his knowledge of the Scriptures was so formidable it truly seemed superhuman. And he could talk for hours and hours and hours, from early morning to well past midnight, while they listened until they could hear no more, not moving, not eating, not sleeping. "They lived in constant fear," says Rick Ross, a deprogrammer who counseled a former Branch Davidian. "He developed a crisis mentality, constantly talking about the end of the world, telling them they always had to be ready for the aggressors who would come from without the walls to destroy them." They

THE
KING OF THE
CULT

were ready for Armageddon, and when federal agents stormed their fortress, it must have seemed as though the Last Days had begun.

This wasn't what the Creator had in mind. The Branch Davidians are an offshoot of a schism of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Their ancestors are the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, founded in the 1930s by Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian émigré and prominent Los Angeles area Adventist, who bolted to Texas when a book he had written upset church officials. Houteff believed that the Adventists had become lax. "He believed that the return of Christ was imminent but that it could not happen until there was a purer church that could receive Christ," says Bill Pitts, a Baylor University religion professor who has studied the sect.

Houteff attracted scores of members to his semicomunal farm in Waco, but the organization began to fall apart a few years after his death in 1955. His widow, Florence, took over the helm and moved the group to the current site. In 1959, Pitts says, she proclaimed that the Kingdom of God would arrive on Easter Day. Hundreds of followers across the country sold everything, quit their jobs and made the trip to Waco for the big event. They were looking for some sign that the kingdom would be coming—a war in the Mideast or some other signal of cataclysm. Alas, the Lord didn't come and the failed prophecy shook the Davidians to the core. "After two or three weeks," says Pitts, "they experienced what is called 'The Great Disappointment'."

Although a core group of about 50 stayed in Waco after this sad episode, most of the Davidians moved on. A power struggle ensued. The group splintered and eventually a man named Ben Roden rose up and declared himself the leader of a new group, the Branch Davidians. Roden ruled until he died in 1978 and was succeeded by his wife, Lois.

Enter Vernon Wayne Howell. A would-be rock musician, he was the illegitimate son of Bonnie Haldeman. Born in Houston, he grew up in Dallas where he was raised as an Adventist. "He was a very bright little boy in lots of ways," says his maternal grandmother, Earline Clark of Chandler, Texas, "but when he started

school, he was dyslexic." He went to a special school for a year or so, but never did well. By the ninth grade, he had dropped out. Despite these difficulties, he studied the Bible and played the guitar, Clark says. At 18 he moved to Tyler, Texas, not far from Chandler, where he joined the Adventist Church. But his grandmother says local church leaders didn't care for his long hair and casual dress. Clark says Howell became disillusioned with the Ty-

power vacuum. Over the next few years, he bedded Lois Roden and married Rachel Jones, according to ex-adherents. After his marriage, he shunned the old woman, declaring that his beliefs were now the true revealed word. He had a charismatic manner and a scriptural answer for everything. "He knew the Bible awful well," says Doug Mitchell, a former member of the group who now lives in California. "He was always teaching that Sister Roden

had lost her inspiration." Howell also pestered Roden to get rid of her son. Howell and George Roden got into a few fights (Howell's relationship with his mother couldn't have helped), and George began wearing a gun around the compound. It was the first weapon ever seen at Mount Carmel, Mitchell says. Around this time, Mitchell recalls going to consult with Lois Roden about some minor issue. "Ask Vernon," she said with a sigh. "He seems to be in charge."



Koresh arrived at Mount Carmel in the 1980s, became intimate with Lois Roden (above), then the cult's leader, and later wrested control from her son, George (left)

What put Vernon in charge was his new revelation. He was the seventh and final angel destined to be the agent of God who brought about the end of the world. This was truly an apocalyptic vision, but it was also the logical conclusion of Howell's earlier prophecies. He had originally preached that the end would come when he moved to Israel and began converting the Jews. The conversion, he claimed, would cause worldwide upheaval, start a war and would cause American armed forces to invade the Holy Land. That would signal the beginning of Armageddon. Then Howell would be transformed into a warrior angel who would cleanse the earth in preparation for the New Jerusalem.

Howell actually went to Israel in the 1980s, but things didn't work out as he had predicted.

So he switched to Plan B. In 1990, he legally changed his name to David Koresh (Koresh is Hebrew for Cyrus, the Babylonian king who allowed the Jews to return to Israel). Abandoning the notion of an Apocalypse starting in Israel, he began predicting that the great battle would be in Texas, says David Bunds. The group would stay at Mount Carmel and await the moment when the American army attacked and brought about the end of the world.

In the meantime, they managed to keep

ler church and shortly thereafter moved to Waco to be with the Branch Davidians.

When Howell arrived, Lois Roden's control over the Branch was already waning. Her son, George, thought he should be his father's true successor, and some Branch Davidians were more than a little perturbed by Lois Roden's recent proclamation that the Holy Spirit was feminine. Former followers say they didn't like George Roden much, either. Thought he was nuts. Howell walked right into this

fairly busy with the mundane details of pre-apocalyptic earthly life. Howell and a core group of about 25 members left the compound after Lois Roden's death in 1986 and wandered through Waco, other parts of Texas and California. In 1987, they were living in the aptly named town of Palestine, Texas, when they decided to wrest back Mount Carmel from George Roden, who at that point claimed to be the true prophet of the Branch. Roden heard about their intentions and challenged his rival to a grisly contest. He dug up a coffin containing the corpse of an 85-year-old woman and announced that whoever of them could resurrect the woman was the true leader. Howell wisely declined to participate.

On Halloween of that year, Denise Wilkerson, then a prosecutor in Waco, received an unusual request from sheriff's deputies. Howell wanted to prosecute Roden for corpse abuse. "Given that it was Halloween, we thought it was a joke," Wilkerson says. Nevertheless, she told the sheriff's department that without evidence of a crime, say a photograph showing that there was actually a corpse in the coffin, she could not file charges. A few days later, in the early morning hours of Nov. 3, Howell and seven heavily armed comrades dressed in camouflage fatigues made their way from Palestine onto the grounds of Mount Carmel. Their alleged goal: to get a picture of the corpse. The invaders waited until many of the adults and children at Mount Carmel had left for work and school, then went from building to building warning members to leave because there might be trouble. One member notified Roden instead. Wilkerson says Roden grabbed his Uzi and a 20-minute fire fight followed. The sheriff was called and the shooting stopped. No one was killed, but Roden was slightly wounded in the hand and chest.

Howell and his men were charged with attempted murder and released on bond. Then Roden was jailed for contempt of court in an unrelated case after he filed "some of the most obscene and profane motions that probably have ever been filed in a federal courthouse," says Wilkerson. Howell seized the moment, moving his followers into Mount Carmel and fortifying the place.

In early 1988, Howell and the seven members of his team went on trial for attempted murder. Claiming that he was

aiming at a tree, Howell admitted shooting in Roden's direction, and that his colleagues had merely fired their guns into the air to scare Roden into giving up. Howell's accomplices were acquitted, and Howell's trial ended in a hung jury. "After the verdict was announced," Wilkerson recalls, "a couple of jurors came over and hugged Vernon because they found him to be a very sympathetic character." Then, as the spectators were filing out of the courtroom, Howell invited everyone, including the jury, out to Mount Carmel for an ice-cream social.

A few months later George Roden got out of jail on the contempt charges and moved to Odessa. Not long afterward he was sent

the only man allowed to have wives. E. other marriage was annulled. Many happily married couples in the group were shocked and quite a few left. Marc Breault was one of them. After moving to Australia, he organized other former Branch Davidians and hired an investigator to go to Waco to get local authorities to bust Koresh, according to the Waco paper.

In addition to the weird sex, there were charges of child abuse. Followers claimed that Koresh beat even very young children until they were bruised and bleeding. Koresh has denied these claims, and child-welfare workers who visited Mount Carmel said they found nothing wrong—although some followers say Ko-



ELIZABETH BARANYAI—SYGMA

Koresh with wife Rachel and their children in 1987, Robyn Bunds with her son, Shaun, in Los Angeles



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to a state mental hospital after killing a man. (Still there last week, he said, "I've been trying to warn people about Vernon for years.")

Since the trial, Mount Carmel has presented a quiet front to the outside world. Neighbors reported that Howell/Koresh was a regular guy, who often turned up at local clubs to listen to live music. Brent Moore, manager of the Chelsea Street Pub, says he last saw Koresh about a month ago, when he came to the pub with a man and a woman in their early 20s. They were happily chowing down bean and cheese nachos with iced tea.

But within the cult, former followers say life grew more and more bizarre. At the compound, there was an armed guard at all times and Koresh was in total control. In August 1989, former followers say, he announced that not only was he allowed to have as many wives as he wanted; he was

resh was tipped off before their arrival.

But just as Koresh had predicted, the end of the world—at least his world—was near. A few years ago a bus was buried to serve as a bunker; in recent months stores of food and ammunition have been brought in. None of the children Koresh released after the shoot-out were his, the heirs to the House of David, ex-members believe. So all is still in place for the grand finale. The adults, says Bunds, are probably happy to stay. "They are waiting to get zapped up to heaven where they'll be transformed and fight a war where they get to kill all their enemies . . . The only people that may be sorry are the parents who had to let their children be released." With the youngsters gone, they had but one life to lose for their prophet.

BARBARA KANTROWITZ with ANDREW MURR in Los Angeles, PETER ANNIN and GINNY CARROLL in Waco and TONY CLIFTON in Australia