

APRIL 28, 2008

# People

TEXAS POLYGAMY SECT: BEHIND THE GATES

## INSIDE THE CULT

- EX-MEMBERS SPEAK OUT
- THE WIVES: WHY THEY STAY
- WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE 416 CHILDREN?



Unidentified woman and children at Fort Concho in San Angelo, Texas, after authorities raided the FLDS sect's compound in Eldorado.

ROB LOWE  
SEX SCANDAL



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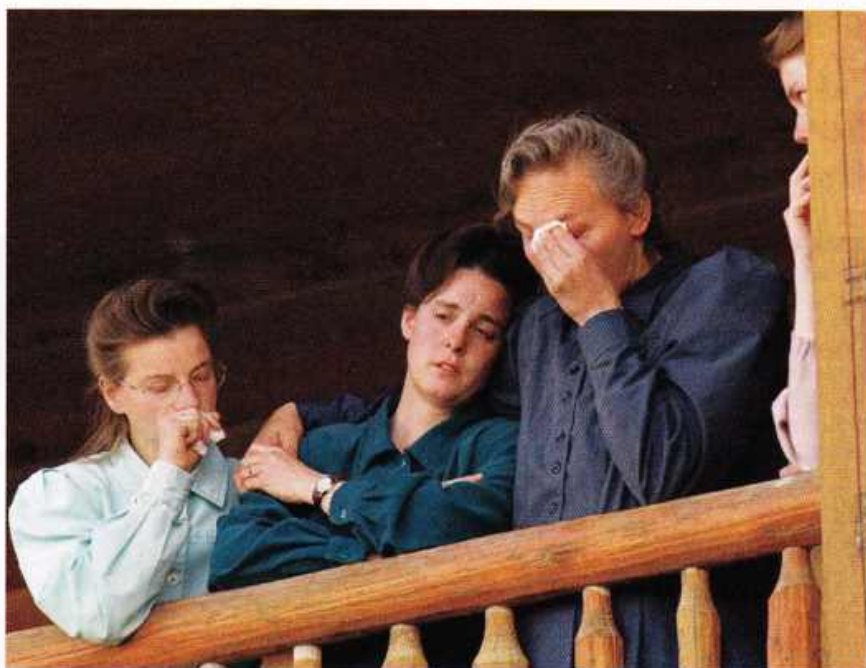


# LIFE IN THE CULT

**A week after authorities in Texas removed 416 children from a polygamist compound, the women of FLDS anguish over their kids while ex-sect members allege midnight disappearances, laws against laughter and nonstop labor**

**T**o hear the mothers of the sect tell it, life on the Yearning for Zion Ranch was close to idyllic. On a typical day at the polygamist compound in Eldorado, Texas, the kids couldn't wait to hop out of bed at 4 a.m.—“or at 3:30 if I let them,” chuckles Rebecca, one of the mothers gathered out on the front porch of a dorm, who, like the others, declined to give her last name. Another mother, Sarah, says there was almost a daily competition among the kids to see who could get going earliest in the morning. “They don’t like to be the last ones up,” she says. Older girls were charged with getting two or three younger ones ready for the day, getting them dressed and making sure their hair was combed.

Just as the making of their *Little House on the Prairie* clothing—the high-neck dresses and sturdy blue shirts—was a labor of love, so too was meal preparation. Forget convenience foods. “It’s not just ‘Open this can,’



## **HOPING FOR A QUICK RETURN**

The women at the YFZ Ranch often broke down crying (above) as they recounted the ordeal of being separated from their children. “We have nothing to come back to,” says Esther, one of the moms. “We raised our children. They are everything.” But given the scale and complexity of the case, it does not seem likely that a resolution will be found any time soon.



Children held at a San Angelo shelter were not allowed to leave the grounds.



it's 'Get out the wheat to grind,'" says Esther, who appeared to be in her 40s. "It's as precious as can be to make a meal that's nutritious and healthy for them." After the morning meal, the day was filled with school (the kids attend a sect school, but moms boast that first-graders can read on the fourth grade level), singing, piano lessons, gardening and chores. And virtually no one is exempt from chores. Little ones would help dry dishes from the morning meal and boys would cart the "bit bucket" of leftover food out to the compost pile or begin working the garden. Esther couldn't be more proud of the children. "They love to work," she says. "This is a regular, everyday thing: We love to learn." And by 7:30 p.m. the children are ready for bed. "I love it here," sums up Gloria. "And so do the children."

It is an unabashedly rosy view of life on the FLDS compound—and, according to the state of Texas, a grotesque

“  
**We are not  
abused. You can  
put an exclamation  
by it!”**  
—SECT MOTHER KATE

distortion. Two weeks after authorities staged a massive raid on the YFZ Ranch that netted 416 children and 138 women, a far more disturbing image of what cult members don't reveal is coming into view. Combing through vaults, safes and computers at the Eldorado compound, a headquarters of the Mormon-offshoot Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, investigators apparently found evidence of abuse, including young teen-

age girls who had been sexually abused and were pregnant or had given birth. According to one report, authorities discovered a bed in the limestone temple of the cultlike organization where underage brides are believed to have been forced to consummate their marriages. So compelling is the evidence that state officials have said they will recommend to a judge scheduled to preside over a hearing April 17 that all 416 children be put into foster care to “prevent further abuse.”

Officials looking into possible criminal charges have said that as the investigation continues, some church members seem to be purposefully misleading them. During questioning, some of the women have changed the names they have given social workers. Some children seemed unwilling to identify their mothers and fathers to child welfare workers—even pointing out multiple women. “It's going to



take time to break those barriers and have them speak to us more honestly," says Darrell Azar of the Dept. of Family and Protective Services. "They're very polite, but they're not giving us a great deal of solid information."

Beyond the logistical challenges of a legal case of such size and complexity, the state must also find the resources to care for the children. Azar says all standards of care are being met and the kids "are doing reasonably well." Church members, who shunned the press for the first week of their captivity, suddenly opened up on April 14 and see it quite differently. The mothers (57 of whom, with children older than 5, were forced to leave their children's sides and return to the Ranch or move to a local safe house) insist the state has caused unnecessary hardship by crowding kids and grown-ups into inadequate facilities—they say that in one shelter there are only two bathrooms for 100 people—and failing to provide even a change of clothes. Though the children are said to be in generally fine health, some have come

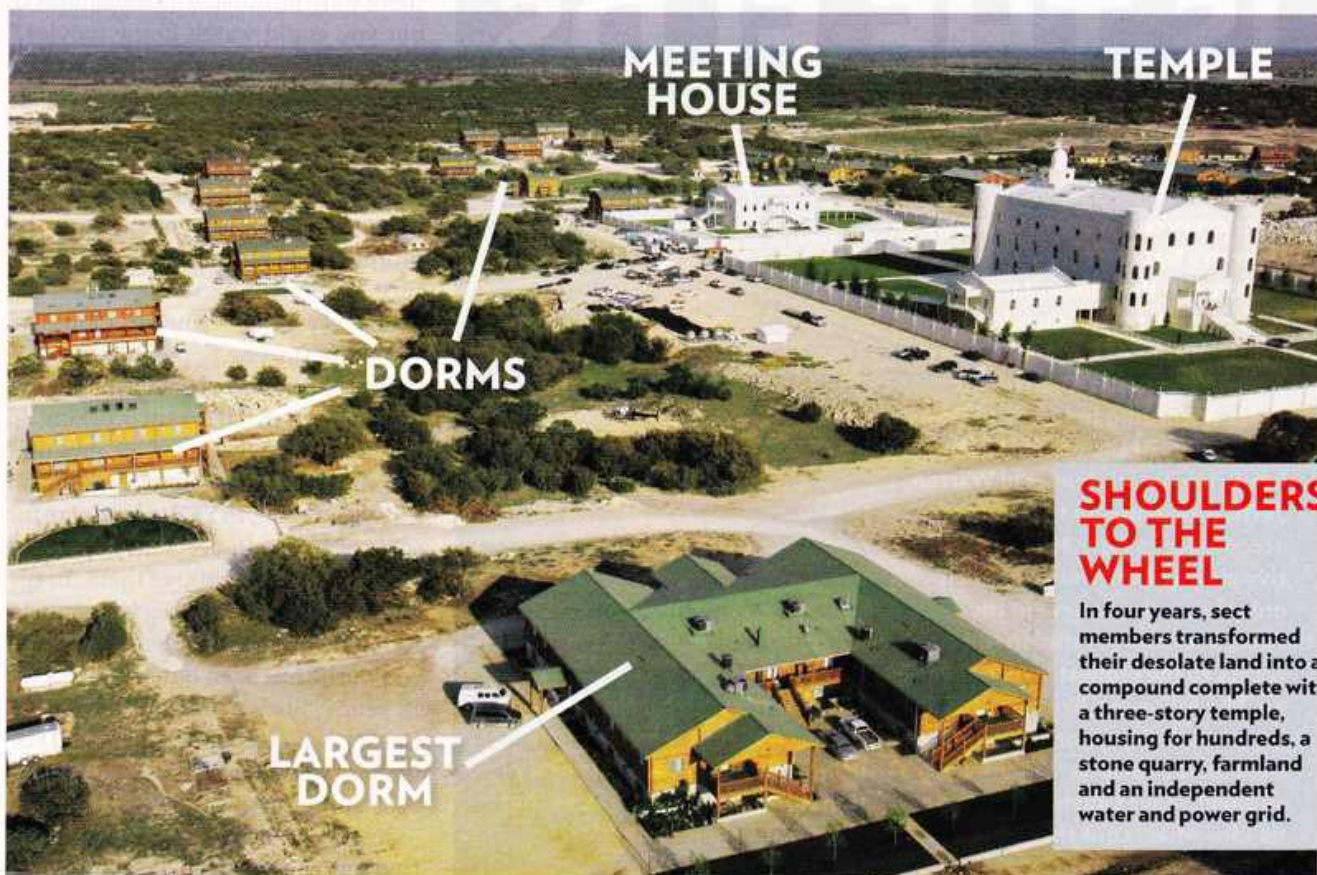
down with chicken pox. Meanwhile, one mother named Rebecca says she saw a young girl walk up to a sign in a shelter reading "Guests." She crossed it out and wrote "Prisoners." Another caregiver, Kate, recalls one boy, distraught and missing his mother, waking up one night at a shelter crying. "He grabbed on to me," says Kate, "and I could feel his heart beating so hard."

Marleigh Meisner, a spokesperson for the state welfare agency, feels some sympathy but insists that the state had no choice, given the suspected abuses. "We believe families should be together as much as possible, but it's not always possible."

Not so long ago, say some former sect members, when the FLDS was based mostly in Utah and Arizona, there was



**SOLIDARITY**  
"All the media know about us are lies," one of the women at YFZ says.



## SHOULDERS TO THE WHEEL

In four years, sect members transformed their desolate land into a compound complete with a three-story temple, housing for hundreds, a stone quarry, farmland and an independent water and power grid.



**“We believe we have acted in the best interest of the children. No one’s saying this was easy”**

**—STATE SPOKESPERSON MARLEIGH MEISNER**

a more benign spirit to the group. Then the accent was on fostering a sense of family and community. “I had a happy childhood,” says Rita Jessop, 27, who left the sect three years ago, after being married at 18 to her father’s friend, who was 50 and had four other wives. Like the women at the YFZ Ranch, she describes a busy, regimented life. “We’d get up around 5:45,” she says.

“One mother would make breakfast, while another would help everyone get ready. There was a job chart.” If a child misbehaved or failed to do the chores, there was punishment, to be sure, but, Jessop says, it was reasonable punishment. “My mother would swat you on the behind with a little wooden spoon,” she recalls. “My father would sit down and talk to you, which hurt

even worse.” Even given the somewhat rigid structure, says Jessop, “it was a lot of fun. It seemed to me people were so happy.”

That began to change when Rulon Jeffs took over the leadership of the FLDS. “They stopped having dances and socials and then they said everyone was supposed to wear the long underwear,” says Jessop. “Then you couldn’t laugh out loud—you could chuckle but no boisterous laughing. For a while there were no outside movies allowed, but you could watch home movies.” After Jeffs’s son Warren took over in 2002, says Jessop, “then it was no TV at all, and no Internet.”

Under Warren Jeffs, who was convicted last year of being an accomplice in the rape of a 14-year-old girl, the mores of the cult also took a darker turn. Four years ago he launched the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado. From the start he populated the YFZ with only the most obedient, hard-core members, even if it meant breaking up families. Kristyn Decker, 55, says that Jeffs transferred her sister Lucille, who is 13 years older, to YFZ to help care for some of Jeffs’s children—he is believed to have more than 100 of them. In the aftermath of the raid Decker came to Eldorado to search for her sister, with whom she has been out of contact for 10 years. “She’s a precious lady,” says Decker, who has 22 brothers and sisters and who left a related sect six years ago, “subservient and sweet.”

Jessop says the FLDS leaders carried out the transfer of members to



The women wait at the YFZ Ranch while a judge decides whether their kids should be in foster care for their safety.

## IS THE FLDS REALLY A CULT?

“Not every cult is going to be like Heaven’s Gate and take a suicide potion. But that doesn’t mean they are not a cult,” says Janja Lalich, author of *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults*. According to Lalich, FLDS bears many of the earmarks: It has a charismatic leader in Warren Jeffs, now in prison for being an accomplice to rape. It has a restrictive vision of the world in which only those who believe in the FLDS’s version of religion will gain access to the highest level of heaven. The followers’ lives are strictly controlled, as is information from the outside society. “Their world is so small,” says Lalich. “They have no idea what is out there, much



“Perfect obedience produces perfect faith,” Jeffs has said.

less how to survive if they got out there.” And if they leave, they believe that they have lost everything: “their future salvation, not to mention their family.”





“  
It’s just  
unacceptable  
for any  
child to live  
this way”

—CAROLYN JESSOP

**ANTI-SECT  
ACTIVIST** Carolyn  
Jessop (at home  
in Utah) escaped  
from the church five  
years ago with her  
eight children.

**HER PRIOR LIFE**  
Jessop’s former  
husband Merrill  
(center, with his wives;  
Carolyn is at far right)  
is one of the  
most powerful  
men in the church.



was convicted in Utah last year as an accomplice in the rape of a 14-year-old girl and is now jailed in Arizona. But much of the attention was on the welfare of the women and children, many of whom appeared dazed by their new surroundings—and on

unraveling the mystery of what has been going on behind the walls of the compound. As Pfluger recounts this at the church, where the women and children were temporarily housed, it was impossible to tell which children belonged to which women. “It was all

very communal,” says Pfluger, “with all of the women taking care of all the children.” Barbara Arendt, the secretary at the church, says it was disturbing to overhear girls just entering their teens tell officials that they were already married, with all the conjugal duties that implies. “They looked so fresh-faced,” says Arendt.

The isolated 1,700-acre compound, located on a bleak stretch of scrub land outside Eldorado, had been a source of unease in the community for years. When it was purchased in 2003, the word around town was that the new owners wanted to use it for a corporate hunting park. But thanks to a tip, Kathy Mankin, the office manager of the local paper, the *Eldorado Success*, discovered that was only a cover. The real purpose for the property was to serve as a new base of operations for the FLDS, which had been centered around Colorado City, on the Arizona-Utah border. Mankin and husband Randy drove to the sheriff’s house to voice their alarm over the new neighbors. “We said, ‘We’ve got polygamists!’” she says.

The ranch, which is now worth roughly \$20 million, quickly became a hive of activity. Members set up their own rock-cutting quarry to har-

vest the limestone for the imposing temple they built. They also constructed wood-working and cement-making facilities, not to mention a water-treatment plant and their own electrical grid. There are two dozen buildings that have been split up into apartments. But while the men, some of whom worked other construction jobs in the area, could be

seen in town shopping and engaging in small talk with locals, the women and children almost never left the compound. “The only time I’ve ever seen the women is from the air,” says Mankin, who has flown many times over the compound to photograph



the buildings. Visitors were kept at bay by a fence around the property and a gated entry; deliveries went only as far as the entrance. Former members spoke of children forced to work long hours and forbidden to play games or with toys; iPods programmed with religious music were one of the few concessions to modernity.

There was little secret that the FLDS, whose doctrine stipulates that only men who have multiple wives can excel in heaven, had made polygamy the centerpiece of their religion. (As a practical matter, authorities often wait for abuse allegations to move against polygamists.) Back in Utah the sect sparked intense controversy because of the "Lost Boys," hundreds of teenage boys who were unceremoniously cast out from the group—and their families—often to prevent them from becoming

romantic rivals of the older men. Former members believe Jeffs ordered the move to Eldorado because it was even more remote than Colorado City and thus would discourage disgruntled

girls from fleeing. "They're just like sheep," says Benjamin Bistline, who left the sect 20 years ago. "They only do what they're told to."

In the case of Eldorado, however, at least one member refused to stay in the fold. The trigger

for the raid was a call to a domestic-violence shelter from a 16-year-old girl at the compound, who told a sketchy but explosive story. Spiritually married and a mother at 15, she was already pregnant again by an older man—and suddenly she wanted out. In a hushed conversation, according to a court affidavit, the girl said that her husband would force himself sexually on her and that

when he got angry, he would "beat and hurt" her, once even breaking her ribs. (Authorities have yet to locate her.)

The police action—based on this single, so-far-unsubstantiated report—was not without controversy. Lawyers for the sect argued that there was no way the state could demonstrate in a matter of days that all 419 children were at "imminent risk of harm," the standard for removal. But state officials insisted the drastic measures were justified, while pledging to show the utmost sensitivity. "We're having to move very carefully," said CPS spokesman Patrick Crimmins. "This is a whole new world for [the children]. We don't want to make things more stressful than they already are." The agency dispatched nearly 100 specially trained interviewers to Fort Concho, in San Angelo, where the sect members have been taken, to meet with the children individually and gather evidence.

The raid and its aftermath threatened to overwhelm the tiny town of Eldorado (pop. 2,000). But for critics of the FLDS, the removal of the children was long overdue. "It's tragic to think of taking a child away from

“  
These kids have  
been raised in a cave,  
basically. They have  
little or no education,  
have never seen TV  
or listened to radio”

—SAM BROWER

## WHO IS WARREN JEFFS?

Not too long ago, Jeffs, 52, considered himself a prophet to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Since succeeding his father, Rulon, in 2002, Jeffs' word was law, and those followers who didn't adhere to his perpetually growing list of Don'ts—reportedly no fishing, no TV, no dancing, no reading Biblical storybooks—risked expulsion. But his hold on his flock, said to number 10,000, became more tenuous last September, when Jeffs—the former principal at the FLDS private school—was convicted as an accomplice to rape by forcing a 14-year-old girl to marry and have sex with an adult man. Sentenced to 10 years to life, Jeffs, who has perhaps several dozen wives and an unknown number of children, faces even more trouble. In February he pleaded not guilty to similar charges in Arizona.

Now awaiting trial in Arizona, where he is incarcerated, Jeffs has had a sober awakening. "He's admitted he's not a prophet and that he had immoral relations with his sister and daughters," says an investigator familiar with the case. "He's pretty much out of commission."





the Eldorado Ranch under a cloak of secrecy. "There would be people who would just disappear from the community, and the leaders would say, 'They were called on a mission. They went to Zion,'" she says. "Sometimes they would come in a van and take one from a family or two from a family. They would just be gone." Many times the families did not even have time to say goodbye. Jessop recalls one man she knew who was dispatched to YFZ without his wife and two young children. "It was really hard for his wife to go through that," she says, "not knowing where he was."

It appears that those brought to YFZ were expected to have a near-supernatural work ethic. Sam Brower, a private investigator in Utah who spent three years investigating the FLDS, says he has heard a tape of a sermon in which Jeffs exhorts the faithful to spare no effort in their labors. "To be called to Zion," Brower quotes Jeffs as saying, "you need to work 20 hours a day and pray for the strength to do more." And that was evidently not just rhetoric. Randy Mankin, the editor of the local newspaper *Eldorado Success*, and his wife, Kathy, say they learned from the sheriff that deputies often pulled over male cult members for driving erratically, only to discover that the bleary-eyed men were not drunk but merely



### STILL SEARCHING

**Kristyn Decker, whose sister was a member of the group at Eldorado, has tried in vain to contact her.**

sleep-deprived. Says Kathy: "The men would work like dogs."

By and large, the women and children did not venture off the compound and would even flee indoors to avoid scrutiny if a plane passed low overhead. In contrast to the large FLDS community in Colorado City, Ariz., where families have sandboxes, trampolines and bicycles for play, the Mankins, who often flew over the compound, say they never saw any toys at Eldorado.

"There's nothing," says Kathy. "There's not a sign of a child out there."

The separated mothers at the YFZ Ranch acknowledge that ordinary recreation was not a big part of the kids' lives and that they favored "very guided play," as one delicately put it. But they argued that the children took plenty of delight in doing chores anyway, even at the shelter. "One of them asked [a shelter worker], 'Can we rebuild your fence for you?'" says Kate. "'Can we mow your lawn? Can we set the table?'"

Though she is critical of the FLDS, Rita Jessop cautions that no one should assume that the women of the YFZ have been brainwashed into defending the sect—that, bizarre as their practices may be to the outside world, many of them are content with their lives. "There are some women who might want to get out," she says, "but for the most part I think they're happy." Of course that is not true at the moment. At this point it appears that the women will be separated from their kids while the legal case runs its course, which could take months. "We have very heavy hearts," says Esther. "The children are our lives."

**Darla Atlas, Johnny Dodd and Anne Lang** in Eldorado, **Vickie Bane** in Denver and **Daniel S. Levy** in New York City

**State welfare official Marleigh Meisner insists the children are "happy, smiling, playing and interacting with our staff."**

