

Memories of a happy community before Warren Jeffs used children to lead religious sect astray

By NIGEL DUARA MAR 20, 2016 | 3:00 AM | COLORADO CITY, ARIZ.



Former FLDS member Jason Black passes the shuttered school he attended as a child in Colorado City, Ariz., before the sect's children were isolated from others. (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times)

Best anyone can remember, it began the day the children stopped saying "Dad."

Uncle Warren — every elder in this polygamist sect is addressed as "Uncle" — announced to his flock one day in the early 1990s that sons and daughters were no longer to call their parents "Mom" and "Dad." These were people to be respected, Warren Jeffs said, and would henceforth be referred to as "Mother" and "Father."

To Nolan Barlow, then a middle-schooler with a sharply shaped nose and an abiding faith in his prophet, Jeffs, that edict didn't sound too bad. Parents were accorded respect in the Holy Scriptures.

In the wake of a federal court verdict this month that found that the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints harassed nonbelievers in the twin towns of Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Ariz., former members of the sect are speaking up about how Jeffs was able to exert his influence over the communities and church members.

[Warren Jeffs] studied Hitler, Stalin.... If you see how the Soviets or the Nazis did it, they used the kids too. They use family against family.

— LAMONT BARLOW, A FORMER ALTA ACADEMY STUDENT WHO HAS LEFT THE FLDS

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They recall that a week after the Mom-and-Dad edict, Jeffs said that fathers would be called "father priesthood holders," a title that felt true to the faithful of the FLDS, who believe the men of their religion are capable of receiving revelations from God.

But then Jeffs commenced a series of banishments and excommunications of men. He reassigned their wives and children to other men, took their homes and ordered every sect member to shun them. Jeffs would take on multiple wives, some of them underage.

How did Jeffs, now serving a life sentence for child sexual abuse, come to so thoroughly control the families, careers and even the promised afterlife of the people who live under copper-colored cliffs in an area known as Short Creek?

By using the children.

In interviews after the verdict, former FLDS members detailed the degree to which children were used by Jeffs to secure and maintain control of the sect.

One current FLDS member who did not wish to be identified because of the potential for exile confirmed their account.



The striking landscape around Hildale, Utah. (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times)

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It was the children whom Jeffs turned to when he sought information on their parents. Elementary school students would be dispatched in fours to the homes of FLDS members on Jeffs' orders and ask the family to pray with them. They would later report what they saw and heard to Jeffs' trusted lieutenants, and sometimes Jeffs himself.

"If you prayed real hard, you were OK," said Nolan Barlow, now 35, who left the faith in 2013. "But if you just kind of said, 'Oh, protect the prophet,' but you weren't real serious about it? They'd come back to Jeffs and you would be [exiled] soon enough."

The unwitting children had no idea of the potential damage they were doing, he said.

"When someone was exiled," Barlow said, "it was worse than death."

"A living death," added Jason Black, who left the church the same year.

Black and Barlow sometimes watch themselves, or children once just like them, in old home videos on a projector in their small software development business in Hildale.

The videos show life before Jeffs' rule, and the difference is remarkable from present-day Short Creek, where sect members pull their children out of sight behind high fences when they catch a glimpse of outsiders.



Polygamist sect's control of Utah and Arizona towns seems certain to end after jury's verdict

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In 1986, a video recording of the Utah holiday called Pioneer Days shows a long parade down Mohave Avenue, the highway that forms the centers of the contiguous downtowns of Hildale and Colorado City. Mixed in among the rows of FLDS children and parents are non-FLDS visitors from neighboring towns who arrived in classic cars to give rides to kids.

Children can be seen wearing red, a color now forbidden, and women wear skirts. Young girls' hair has been cut and styled, another practice Jeffs ended, ordering all girls to keep their hair uncut and tied up

in elaborate braids.

"See him?" said Barlow, pausing the video and pointing to a man wearing a clown wig, walking down Mohave Avenue on stilts, FLDS children skittering out of his way before him. "He's FLDS. Couldn't do that now."

In the 1980s the FLDS prophet was a man named Leroy Johnson. Barlow remembers him as a generally benign ruler who permitted monthly children's performances organized by a bishop. Johnson's death in November 1986 sent the FLDS community into upheaval. Rulon Jeffs, Warren Jeffs' father, assumed the position of prophet.

Videos from 1994 show the tightening hand of the FLDS. Gone from the parade are skirts and the color red. By 1997, videos show women in uniform long-sleeved, ankle-length prairie dresses, their hair puffed and braided, preparing for a town show. Children on the roadside wave to the camera, but gone are the long floats and honking car horns from the 1986 parade.

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"There were fewer people from outside," Black said. "You could see it start to happen, Warren taking control."

Black, Barlow and a small group of nonbelievers have continued to live in Short Creek, a community of about 10,000 people, despite being shunned and occasionally harassed by FLDS church members. They remember the changes that befell the FLDS church when they were children schooled in Short Creek, and watched as the generation of church children that came after them were increasingly devoted to Jeffs.

In the 1980s and most of the 1990s, Jeffs was principal at the religion's Alta Academy in Salt Lake City, which most FLDS children attended. There, on property owned by his father, he led choir practice and formed the beginnings of the unforgiving lifestyle he would bring to Short Creek.

The school's motto was "perfect obedience produces perfect faith." Its students, who were ordered to revere Jeffs like their own parents and lived in the Salt Lake Valley during the school year, returned to Colorado City a chastened lot, obedient to Jeffs and accustomed to his restrictions on their dress, speech and relationships.

But such restrictions would have been foreign to the FLDS members who grew up in Short Creek a generation before Jeffs assumed the role of prophet after his father died in 2002.

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Barlow's father courted his mother in notes left under rocks. "Their version of texting," he said, and a practice that would have led to exile when Jeffs was in power.

The control exercised by Jeffs had a darker element. Last October, Becky and Roy Jeffs, both adults, told CNN that their father, Warren, abused them and one of their sisters as children.

As described to the jury that convicted him in Texas in 2011, Jeffs made the children his spies and his disciples. "Keep sweet," they were told, a gentle reminder to smile in the face of difficulty or wrongdoing.

In time, according to Barlow and Black, Jeffs added a more ominous admonition: "It's a matter of life and death."

The parents were impressed, and a little fearful, at their offspring's religious devotion.

"He studied Hitler, Stalin. We used to watch videos of speeches" of dictators and generals, said Lamont Barlow, one of Nolan's second cousins and a former Alta Academy student who has left the faith. "If you see how the Soviets or the Nazis did it, they used the kids too. They use family against family."

While watching the videos of life before Jeffs' ascent, Nolan Barlow noticed the soundtrack in the background, which sounded like '80s rock. It was courtesy of the local radio station, KCCA 107.1, which played mostly polka and country ballads.

"As kids, we used to sneak up there when my buddy was the DJ," Nolan Barlow said. "We'd play rock 'n' roll until the elders called us to stop."

Jeffs ordered it closed.

Children, Barlow said, now mostly listen to Jeffs' recorded speeches on church-issued iPods.

According to former FLDS members, and confirmed by a current member who requested anonymity, the faith has found a new prophet: Ben Johnson, a Jeffs follower who married into a prominent FLDS family.

Black and the Barlows expect to see a string of exilings to follow.

And they expect families, especially children, to follow along, without question.

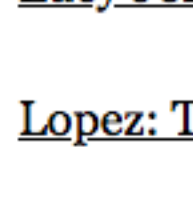
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