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The Sinful Messiah: Part One

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK © 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald Feb 27, 1993

The SINFUL MESSIAH

Part One

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK
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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 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
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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.

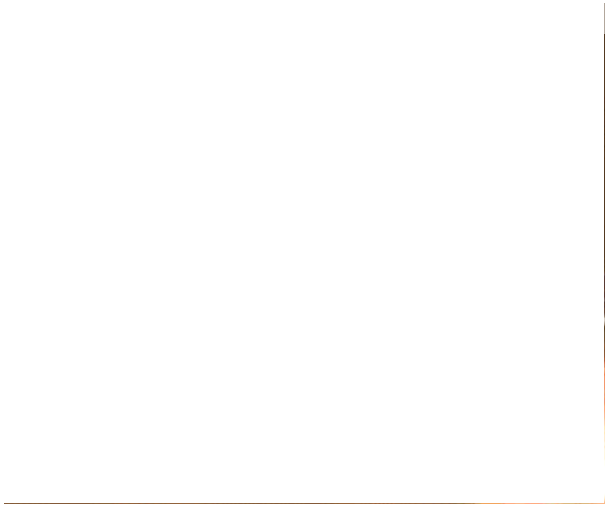
The St. Joseph, Mich., case involved David Jewell's effort to get custody of his then 11-year-old daughter, Kiri. The girl, along with her mother, Sherri Jewell, was a cult member and lived at Mount Carmel. A joint custody agreement was signed by Sherri

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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 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 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.

"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

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 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 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.

"We're doing what we're doing and nobody's going to stop us." — Cult leader Vernon 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 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.

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 second-degree felony punishable by a prison 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 or mental impairment. It is a Class A misdemeanor 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.

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 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 on unwanted attention to 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 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, crisis-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 member and mainline Australian Seventh-day Adventist, denies.

"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."

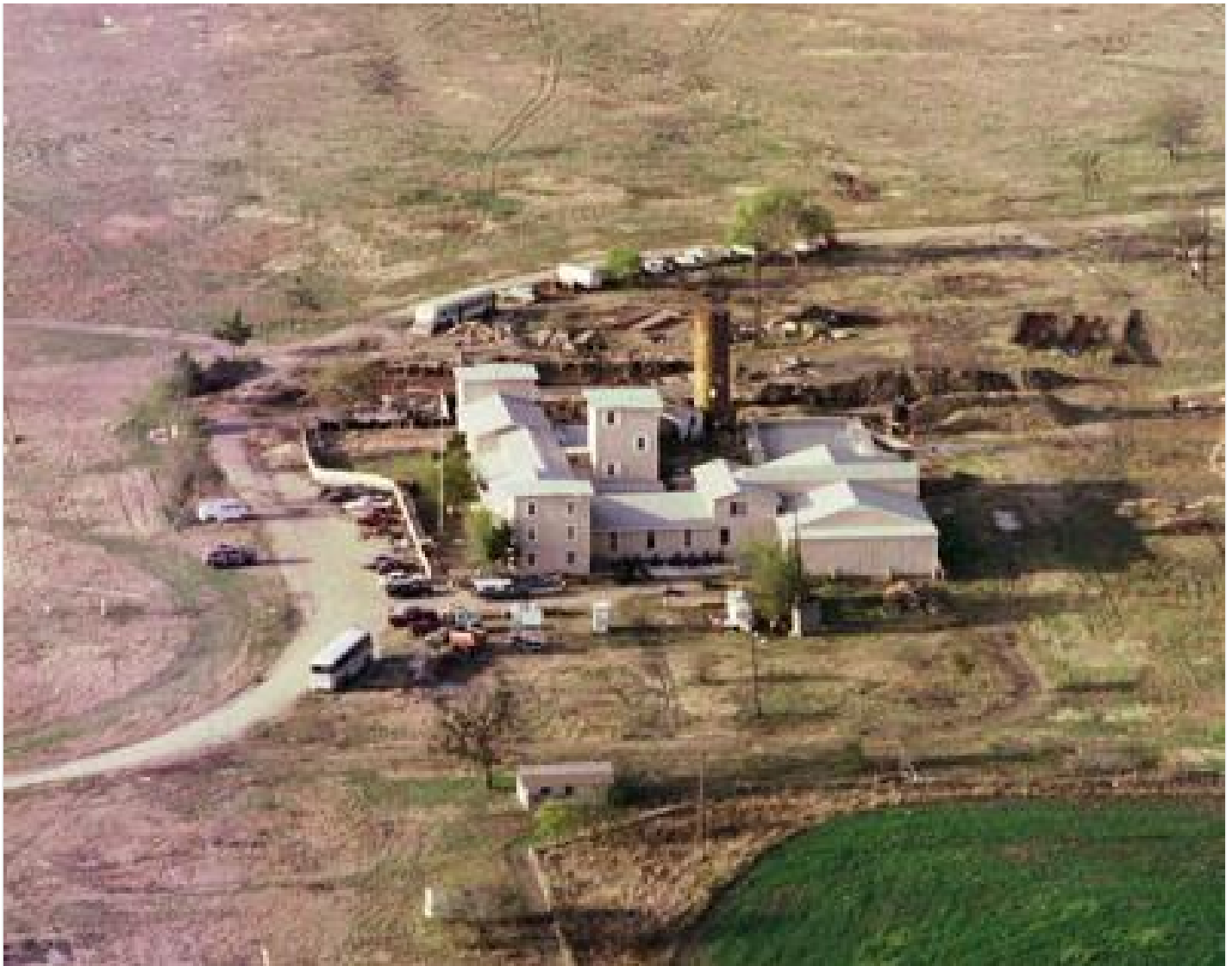
Howell dismisses the charges from Breault, saying his former followers in Australia need "a good butt-whipping."

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

Read more from Part One —



The Sinful Messiah: The law watches, but has done little



The Sinful Messiah: A long, troubled road led Branch Davidians to Waco

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 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.

Tags

Vernon Howell	David Koresh	Marc Breault	Robyn Bunds	Kiri Jewell	Seven Seals	Karl Hennig	Elizabeth Baranyai
Sherri Jewell	James Tom	Rachel Howell	Shaun Bunds	David Jewell	Sinful Messiah	Cyrus Howell	Star Howell
9mm	Australia	New Light	Star Of David	House Of David			