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The Sinful Messiah: Part Three — Howell closely directs the grim daily lives of cult members

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK © 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald Mar 1, 1993



Robyn Bunds was one of the first women in the Branch Davidians to be sexually seduced by Vernon Howell.

She seemed out of place among the women in the cult. Many of them had a plain, unfinished look. Even without makeup, Bunds did not lack for polish, not with her luxurious black hair, angular face and piercing eyes. Beneath long, simple skirts, she wore stylish suede boots.

A California girl, Bunds' life at Mount Carmel, the cult's ramshackle base 10 miles east of Waco, was a stark change from her youth.

Her father, Don, was a design engineer. Her mother, Jeannine, a nurse. Both were longtime Branch Davidians. In and around Los Angeles, the Bunds lived a middle-class existence, which seemed pampered to Robyn Bunds after she stayed in a tent for a year after going to live with the cult.

She had been drawn slowly into the Branch Davidians, an off-shoot of the Seventh-day Adventists.

It definitely wasn't love at first sight between Bunds and Howell, the cult's young prophet and leader. Bunds hated Howell's periodic visits during the mid-'80s to her parents' home in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles. Howell thought Bunds was spoiled. He called her "princess" because she slept in a canopy bed. In turn, Bunds felt Howell was arrogant.

One morning, when she was 14 years old, Bunds walked out of her home expecting her brother, David, to drive her to school. David, though, was raptly listening to Howell, then 24.

When she returned home that afternoon, Howell was outside with his brother, Roger. When Howell tried to introduce Bunds, she snubbed both of them. She did have something to say to Roger Howell, though.

"Your brother's an a_____, " she said.

That remark earned Robyn a harsh spanking from her father.

Vernon Howell had changed what it meant to be a Branch Davidian. Before, Don and Jeannine Bunds sent money religiously to Ben and Lois Roden, the cult's prophets, but they only occasionally visited Mount Carmel. It was being farmed at the time and there were horses for the children to ride.

"Before, it was harmless," Robyn Bunds said. "You sent tithes, had services. When Vernon came along, he totally changed it. He said you had to give him all your money. You had to live on the property. You had to give up everything else. You had to give him your mind . . . your body."

The cost of being a Branch Davidian rose when Howell became prophet.

Don and Jeannine Bunds spent \$10,000 buying a van for the cult. Later, they bought a house in Pomona, valued at \$100,000, at Howell's request. The house had a rock facing, which reminded Howell of the Biblical parable to build your house upon a rock. Howell wanted a place for the men in the cult to stay while in California, Robyn Bunds said.

An attempt to escape

She made an attempt to escape Howell's growing influence over her family.

When she was 17 years old, Bunds went to live with relatives in New Bedford, Mass. A few months later, she asked to come home. Her parents said no. She could not rejoin them in California. Howell had left orders for her to report to the piney woods of Palestine, Texas, where the cult was headquartered at the time.

Bunds bowed to her parents' wishes.

Most of the cult members at Palestine lived in plywood boxes. Bunds shared a tent with Michelle Tom, an Australian.

Like the other Branch Davidians, Bunds fell under Howell's spell.

For one thing, she had seen a transformation in him. She remembered hearing him speak at Mount Carmel, before the Branch Davidians acknowledged him a prophet. Howell couldn't connect his thoughts. He tried to preach, but he didn't have anything to say. She had felt embarrassed for him.

Now, just a few years older, Howell seemed to her incredibly articulate, never at a loss for words. He seemed tapped into a never-ending source of Biblical knowledge.

But how?

Lurking behind the Branch Davidians' blind faith in Vernon Howell was the acknowledgment that a ninth-grade dropout was keeping them spellbound. To these intelligent and, in some cases, highly educated devotees there was only one possible explanation: Howell was inspired.

An inspiration meant power in the Branch Davidians. Raw power.

One of the first ways Howell began using that power was to seduce the women in the cult — the single women, at the start, according to former cult members.

The humble prophet

Bunds had been willing. She believed Howell to be inspired. But, more importantly to Bunds, Howell seemed different from the man she remembered in California. For a proclaimed prophet, he was surprisingly humble, polite and charming.

In fact, he was the only man she had ever seen cry.

When Howell and seven followers stood trial in 1988 for the attempted murder of self-proclaimed prophet George Roden, Howell had wept. He was holding his daughter, Star, in his arms. It had touched Bunds, for she just knew that Howell was thinking more of his followers than himself.

She was in love. Plain, but not simple.

Howell made her a "wife" when she was 17 by having sex with her, Bunds said.

But she had to share Howell. It wasn't easy for her.

When Waco attorney Gary Coker visited Mount Carmel, preparing for the shootout trial, Howell would make it a point to cling to Rachel Howell, his legal wife, like she was his one and only, Bunds said. Howell had married Rachel in 1984, when she was 14 and he was 24.

Bunds occasionally whined to Howell about not getting enough attention. It stung when he called her spoiled, although she believed him to be right.

Her problems soon multiplied, though.

A right to 60 wives

Howell began preaching that he was the antagonist of the Bible's Song of Solomon, according to Bunds and other former cult members. Howell read the Scripture aloud and said it foretold the number of wives he would have: "threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number."

Translated, Howell was supposedly entitled to 60 wives and 80 concubines, according to Marc Breault, a former Branch Davidian who became a confidant of Howell's.

The wives make up what Howell calls the House of David.

Howell teaches that children from the house will eventually rule the earth with him, Breault and other former cult members said.

In the same prophecy, Howell foretold of the Branch Davidians moving to Israel. There they would become a target for an invading U.S. Army. Howell taught that he would be crucified out of jealousy over his many wives, according to Karl Hennig, a Canadian who studied with Howell but never joined his cult.

It was obvious that Howell meant to make his prophecy come true, said Hennig, a teacher from Vancouver, British Columbia.

"He started sleeping with the girls in the group," Hennig said. "People started to notice. It's one thing to say polygamy is going to happen in Israel at some future point. It's another to say that's what is going on now. The reality of what he's teaching started to press in. I don't think anyone knew he'd be taking women in the group".

Howell went to great lengths to fulfill his prophecy.

Taking a bride

Former Branch Davidians Bruce and Lisa Gent said Howell visited their Melbourne, Australia, home in 1988. He told them that God had given Bruce Gent's daughter, Nicole, to him as a wife.

It seemed an unlikely union.

In earlier years, Nicole Gent, much like a young Robyn Bunds, thought Howell was someone to laugh at, what with the way "he strutted around like a peacock," Bruce Gent said.

Nicole Gent was at college, but in timing that Bruce Gent calls "uncanny," she arrived home shortly before Howell was to return to America. Howell wooed her with round-the-clock Scripture. Nicole Gent decided to go to Mount Carmel to study Howell's message.

"It's like he cooks women," Lisa Gent said. "He prepares them for the fire by the way he gives his studies. It's mind manipulation."

But Howell had control over Nicole Gent's father and stepmother, too.

One night, before she left, the teen-ager went to the Gents' bedroom.

"Vernon wants me to be his teddy bear for the night," she told them. "Will you give your permission?"

The Gents gave her their blessing, believing Nicole had been chosen for a holy purpose — to help build the House of David.

"At that point in time, yes, I was very influenced," Bruce Gent said. "Nicole had spent four days with him being convinced of the message. It wasn't for me to say yes or no . . . she was going to have children for the Lord. I shutter when I say that now."



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At Mount Carmel, Nicole Gent became Howell's "favorite" wife for a time, Robyn Bunds said.

"It's not like he says that you're his favorite," Bunds said. "It's just obvious. He isn't with anyone else. He's always with you. It's more like a flavor-of-the-month thing."

Nicole Gent's family said she returned to Australia to have her first baby, Dayland, born July 22, 1989.

Her family hid her, Bruce and Lisa Gent said, to keep the pregnancy a secret. Following Howell's instruction, Nicole Gent went out only at night for walks and then wore a wig and glasses.

Nicole Gent complained because Howell wasn't present for the birth of the baby, said her stepsister, Michelle Tom. A former cult member, Tom said Gent confided to her that Howell was the father.

But no father was listed on Dayland Gent's birth certificate, according to the family of Nicole Gent.

Howell didn't want anyone recording the babies born to unwed Branch Davidian women, Lisa Gent said. He was afraid it would attract unwanted attention from authorities.

No one was tracking the babies, however. Few outsiders knew of the hold Howell had on his followers. Those who did found it hard to fathom.

Skeptical outsider

Barbara Slawson has two granddaughters in the Branch Davidians and was herself a member in the days of Ben and Lois Roden. Slawson came to Mount Carmel in 1984 at the request of Lois Roden to hear out Vernon Howell, touted as the newest prophet.

Slawson couldn't understand what the others saw in Howell.

"At one time, I wondered if he put something in the water," Slawson said. "Why do they think God gave them brains if they're going to listen to someone and let him make all the decisions."

Slawson saw the tightness of Howell's grip on cult members through granddaughter Karen Doyle.

He had put the fear of Vernon Howell into her.

After much coaxing one day, Slawson persuaded Doyle and a few other Branch Davidians to go shopping. As they drove along, the car died. A frantic Doyle was sure Howell had intervened supernaturally, Slawson recalled.

"Vernon didn't want us to go," Doyle said.

"He can make the car stop-" an exasperated Slawson asked.

Howell liked to leave cult members guessing on that point.

Branch Davidians didn't depend on Howell just for spiritual guidance. They depended on him for everything. And he had an opinion on everything, from what they wore to what they ate, former cult members said. When Howell first became their prophet, Branch Davidians could buy extra food and juice drinks. Howell forbade any changes in the prescribed diet.

He regularly checked people's living quarters to confirm his followers' obedience, according to former cult members.

A family was thrown out of the Palestine camp after a search revealed they had bought french fries in town against Howell's wishes, Lisa Grant said. One Branch Davidian was banished from Mount Carmel for eating chocolate chip ice cream.

Howell's edicts were completely arbitrary.

Once, Howell ordered followers not to eat any fruit except bananas, Breault said. Then Howell would not let anyone eat oranges and grapes at the same meal. They could, however, eat oranges and raisins.

It was hard to keep up with the changes.

"First, he was the only one allowed to eat meat," Breault said. "Then he was the only one allowed to drink Coke. Then he was the only one allowed to drink beer. The thing I noticed about Vernon is that whatever he was tempted with, eventually God would get around to saying it was all right for him to do.

No need to think

Bruce Gent was sure Howell's involvement in every facet of the Branch Davidians' lives and their dependence on him must be tiring. He asked Howell about it once while driving him from Palestine to Waco.

"Isn't it great to get away-" Gent asked Howell.

Howell wanted to know what he meant. Well, Gent asked, wasn't it a relief to get some time to yourself, away from people wanting your opinion on everything, people who couldn't think for themselves.-

Gent asked the question good-naturedly, but it upset Howell.

"Why do you need to think your own thoughts-" Gent remembers Howell asking.

Why indeed- There were always plenty of orders from Howell to follow. Guard duty for all was one. The Branch Davidians had gotten their weapons back after the 1988 shootout trial, in which a Waco jury acquitted seven of Howell's followers of trying to kill rival prophet George Roden. Jurors couldn't reach a verdict on Howell, but the district attorney dropped the charges against him.

Soon after, attorney Gary Coker backed his Bronco up to the sheriff's department and deputies loaded it with shotguns and semi-automatic rifles. He returned the weapons to his clients.

Everyone at Mount Carmel did guard duty, even the women — who often brought their children along with them. If any follower had trouble seeing the need for eternal vigilance, Howell warned of the world would arise in jealousy over his many wives, Breault said.

The Branch Davidians took target practice, but they were far from Marines.

Brush with danger

A Tribune-Herald carrier learned that early one morning in 1988. An elderly Hawaiian couple at Mount Carmel subscribed to the newspaper. When the carrier backed his car into the entrance, sliding a paper into the slot next to the mailbox, the lights flashed on the dozing guard.

Startled, he jumped up and fired a shotgun into the air. The guard was apologetic, but the newspaper's circulation department asked the Branch Davidians to move the slot for the paper farther down the road, away from the entrance.

Breault, with his poor vision, was exempt from guard duty. He spent his time at Mount Carmel hacking at his computer and practicing his music.

He hated the place.

It was isolated, out in the boonies of McLennan County, near Tradinghouse Lake. Miles from anywhere. A far cry from Hawaii and California where Breault had spent his youth and college years. The Dallas Cowboys football team was about the only attraction Texas had for him.

Howell had taken a liking to Breault, who was easy-going and book smart, having gotten his master's degree in religion from Loma Linda University while in the cult.

He encouraged Breault's search to discover if he, too, was a prophet, telling him to write down his dreams. Breault shared them with other cult members and together they pondered their meaning.

Breault, like most of Howell's followers, was a former Seventh-day Adventist. He considered it a dying church. Howell had offered a chance to bring about its reformation through his teachings and his rock 'n roll band. At first, it was exciting. Howell had prophesied that the band would be a hit, luring converts to the Branch Davidian message.

The prophecy fizzled.

But what upset Breault more was the Branch Davidians' slavish worship of Howell. People acted like he was God or something. Also, Howell's relentless pursuit of the single women in the group was grating.

Afraid to walk out

More and more, Breault wanted to leave.

But Breault had to admit that he didn't have the courage to leave.

What if Howell was right- If he bucked Howell's authority and was wrong, hellfire awaited him. Of that, Breault was sure. Look at the people who doubted Moses. They didn't make it to the Promised Land. Like many Branch Davidians, Breault feared dying and going to hell. Hell wasn't abstract to him, as it is to many people raised in traditional churches.

Somehow, Howell seemed to recognize those fears — and the real source of his power.

"Sometimes, to illustrate what hell would be like, how the people would scream, he'd start screaming," Breault said. "He once said it would be worse than someone flaying off your skin with nail clippers. It was certainly graphic. It got your attention.

So Breault hung on. He didn't know what it would take to make him leave. But he was about to find out.

Cutline: Vernon Howell, beaming, began asserting his power after a McLennan County jury acquitted seven of his followers of attempted murder. Charges were later dropped against him. Howell eventually controlled everything from what people ate to how long they slept, according to former cult members.

Cutline: Robyn Bunds peers into the courtroom during the 1998 attempted murder trial of Vernon Howell and seven followers. Months later, she would have a son, Shaun, who she says was fathered by Howell.