

The Waco Tribune-Herald Series, Fort Worth Star-Telegram/March 3, 1993

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*On Saturday, the Waco Tribune-Herald published the first story of an indepth series exposing the Branch Davidians and their leader, Vernon Howell. The series has become part of the unfolding story in Waco. Managing editor Barbara Elmore said federal authorities asked the newspaper "not to run anything." But the newspaper, which had been investigating the sect for eight months, decided that it had held the stories long enough. The head of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms task force, asked this week whether the series had triggered the agency's raid on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, said there was no connection. Here are the stories that made up what was to be a seven-part series. The articles have been edited to eliminate duplication and redundancy.*

## **Part 1**

Waco - If you are a Branch Davidian, Christ lives on a threadbare piece of land 10 miles east of here 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, supposed to enhance his career as a musician. To former cult members and law enforcement authorities, though, he is still Vernon Howell.

Many of Howell's follower's 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 *Waco 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;
- and has had at least 15 so-called "wives."

Authorities have not acted on the complaints. 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 official 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 walked the grounds at night. Perched above the compound is a tower with lookout windows facing all directions.

Howell rules Mount Carmel by virtue of the Branch Davidian's belief that he alone can open the so-called Seven Seals in the Bible Book of Revelation, setting loose catastrophic events that the Branch Davidians believe 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.

**Howell has taught that babies as young as 8month should be whipped forcefully, former cult members said.** Two women said he hit their babies until their bottoms bled. Howell 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 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 nonbelievers.

Former cult members said Howell tells the men that 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, an Indiana disc jockey who 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.

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 justified 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 seen of the House of David, isn't he?"

Later in the tape, Howell says to the women, "You have only one seen that can deliver you from death... There's only one hard-on in this whole universe that really loves you and wants to say good things about you. Remember May and God? Yeah? God couldn't make any advances because the world would misjudge."

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, thought, Christ is sinful - if you believe 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 his wife's 12-year old sister.

Robyn Bunds, 23, a former cult member, said Howell told the story as if he found it amusing - saying that 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. He's her sister's husband. She was 12. I remember being 12. She resisted, but he kept on going because he said Gold told him to."

The girl gave birth in February 1989 to a daughter. By then, she was fourteen 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 because Howell is the baby's father.

Howell denies the accusation.

He claims to have only two children in the cult, Cyrus and Star, whose mother is Rachel Howell. She 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 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 1980's. 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 with a known father and focus unwanted attention on 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 obligated to hear out anyone who claims to be anointed. Even Howell's critics say he has 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 Bible studies 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 Breault and Bunds, though, speak out against Howell.

Breault, an almost-blind computer programmer in Melbourne, Australia, has acted as a Moses figure since 1990, crisscrossing 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 members and mainline Australian Seventh-day Adventists deny.

"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 dismissed 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.

## **Part 2**

### **The prophet and prophetess, the Lamb of Revelation, the Seven Seals**

Marc Breault found what he once thought was salvation in a grocery store off the campus of Loma Linda University in Southern California.

Breault was stockpiling groceries for his first week of graduate school in January 1986. His Dallas Cowboys T-shirt caught the attention of an intense, frail-looking man named Perry Jones.

Jones asked if Breault was from Texas.

No, he was just a fan, Breault told Jones. He had grown up in Hawaii, but he had followed the Cowboys ever since a Roger Staubach-led Super Bowl win over the Miami Dolphins in 1972.

Jones struck up a conversation. He told Breault that he was a journalist for a religious publication in Waco.

Actually, Jones sold perfume for a living. He was a longtime member of the Branch Davidians, a spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists with deep roots in the Waco area. Jones had written for Davidian publications, but he was no journalist. He was a believer - a believer in Vernon Howell, his son-in-law and the Branch Davidians' acknowledged prophet and leader.

Jones was in California to recruit followers for Howell.

Loma Linda was fertile ground since the university is run by the Seventh-day Adventists, a denomination whose members believe prophecy will flourish in the earth's last day. Their willingness to hear out would-be prophets would provide a bountiful harvest of followers for Howell.

During that first conversation with Breault, Jones talked about trying to introduce Adventist doctrine to TV evangelist Jerry Falwell and Jim Swaggart.

That interested Breault, who at age 22 was seeking a master's degree in religion. He wanted to be a pastor. Breault had been raised a Catholic but became a Seventh-day Adventist at age 15 after attending a church-sponsored camp for the blind, although he had some vision in his left eye.

Breault gave Jones his telephone number.

Jones kept in contact. He soon told Breault that he believed his son-in-law, Howell, was inspired. Breault, influenced by his religious upbringing, agreed to hear him out. They met in Loma Linda's graduate student lounge.

Howell's literal interpretation of the Bible, which entailed such beliefs as taking the phrase "bridge of Christ" to mean an actual woman, intrigued Breault. So did Howell's proclamation that he had the Seventh Angel's message, that last message to be delivered to the church. The message, Breault later learned, was that Howell claim to be Cyrus, a latter-day king who would lead God's people until the Second Coming of Christ.

Genial, the lanky Breault enjoyed the company of the Branch Davidians. Also, it was a chance for Breault to play the keyboards in Howell's rock 'n' roll band.

Breault met with the Branch Davidians regularly and later that year attended their Passover services in Palestine, Texas.

He got a crash course in the cult's unorthodox teachings.

**Howell told the gathering that God had commanded him to have sex with a 14-year old girl in the cult, according** to Breault and other former cult members,

The girl was hardly a vamp. Former cult member Lisa Gent said that the girl was not physically developed. Her grandmother described the teenager as a "simple" person who speaks "in a frail, little-girl voice."

Howell said he approached the girl and told her of God's command, Breault said. They were to unite and have a child called Shoshonna, who would marry Cyrus, Howell's son by Rachel, his legal wife.

The two offspring would rule in God's kingdom.

At first, Howell thought God was testing him by telling him to "give seed" to the girl. He reported crying out, "Mr Rachel, my Cyrus."

But when he heard God repeat his command, Howell said he obeyed, according to Breault and other former cult members.

It wasn't the first time Howell claimed God had given him a woman.

Jean Berlin Chilson said Howell told her late husband, L. Hartley Berlin, in about 1980 that God had given their daughter, Sandy, to him. Berlin was pastor of the Tyler Seventh-day Adventist Church.

"He felt that God wanted him to marry her," Chilson said.

The couple barred Howell from seeing their daughter.

Chilson, who has since remarried and no longer lives in Tyler, said Howell was always supremely confident while at the Tyler church that he knew God's will.

"He would act like he knew every sentence of the Bible...to uphold anything he wanted."

If the revelation about "giving seed" wasn't enough to send a newcomer packing, Howell, then 26, confirmed that two years earlier he had a sexual relationship with the cult's then-prophetess, Lois Roden, Breault, said. She was 67.

Howell reported that God had commanded him to fulfill Isaiah 8:3 with Roden, said Breault and other former cult members.

"And I went unto the prophets; and she conceived, and bare a son. Then said the Lord to me, Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz."

Roden had indeed become pregnant, Howell told the gathering. But Howell claimed that God caused Roden to miscarry as punishment for giving tithe money to her adult children, Breault said.

While Roden also thought she had been pregnant, she blamed the miscarriage on Howell's refusal to share power with her, Breault said.

Breault found the claims by Roden and Howell about the purportedly baby hard to believe, but Howell's "guts" in standing before his followers and admitting sexual relationships with a 14-year old girl and a 67-year old woman persuaded him of Howell's sincerity.

"The way I was look at it then," Breault said, "was that your TV evangelist pretend to be average, normal people. They keep the bad things in the closet. When they come out, they fall. But this guy was saying it straight out.

Breault eventually joined the Branch Davidians in Palestine, the small town in East Texas where Howell took his followers in 1984 after splitting with Lois Roden.

Roden died in 1986. In a will later invalidated, she left Mount Carmel, the Branch Davidians' longtime home 10 miles east of Waco, near the Elk community, to her son, George. But she left him little else.

Almost all the Branch Davidians lived with Howell.

George Roden was dumbfounded. To him, Howell was just a hippie.

Howell did seem a throwback to the 1960s, with flowing brown hair that curved gracefully to below the shoulders, wire-rim glasses, a beatific smile and easy talk of peace and love. Younger Branch Davidians gravitated to Howell's persona and his passion for rock music. Howell's almost celestial knowledge of the Bible mystified the older cult members.

For the Branch Davidians, living with their prophet in 8-foot by 12-foot plywood boxes in Palestine was better than living with George Roden at Mount Carmel.

Roden had always assumed he would carry on his family tradition of leadership. But in contrast to Howell, Roden, a large man with a barrel chest, thick black hair and a menacing presence, came across as rude, clumsy and confused.

Roden and Howell had lived uneasily at Mount Carmel in the early '90s while Lois Roden led the Branch Davidians. But when Howell moved in with Lois Roden, things turned nasty. George Roden accused Howell of raping his mother. He threatened Howell, a threat Howell took seriously; Roden sometimes carried a semiautomatic Uzi while making rounds.

Even with his mother dead and her former followers devoted to Howell, Roden yearned to lead the Branch Davidians. In 1987, he devised a plan to settle who would be the cult's prophet.

**Roden dug up the body of Anna Hughes from the cemetery at Mount Carmel, storing the casket inside a shed. Roden** then issued a challenge to Howell; The man who raised Hughes from the dead would be the Branch Davidians' true prophet.

Howell and his followers asked the McLennan County Sheriff's Department to arrest Roden for corpse abuse.

Officials demanded proof, such as a photograph of Hughes' body.

Howell and seven men, all dressed in camouflage fatigues, sneaked into Mount Carmel on Nov. 3, 1987, supposedly to take such a photograph. They carried assault rifles. When daylight came, a shootout ensued. Deputies, notified by neighbors, broke up the skirmish.

They filed charges of attempted murder against Howell and his followers.

Although the Branch Davidians claimed to be carrying weapons for protection, they had put 18 bullet holes into the small tree Roden hid behind.

Howell's followers clogged the third floor of the McLennan County Courthouse for the trial. Most of the women wore dresses to their ankles and blouses buttoned up to their necks. They clamored around their men during breaks. Children clung tightly to their mothers.

Roden, the prosecution's chief witness, came to the courtroom straight from the county jail, where he was serving a six-month sentence for filing legal motions asking God to inflict AIDS and herpes on Texas Supreme Court judges.



Before the trial started, visiting Judge Herman Fitts asked if there were any witnesses in the courtroom who needed to be sworn in. No one arose. Howell's attorney Gary Coker intervened. He turned to Branch Davidians in the gallery, urging potential witnesses to stand. Again no one got up.

Howell, smiling slightly, then stood.

"It's all right," he said, raising a hand. "You've done nothing wrong. Stand."

The doubt parted and the witnesses stood.

In his testimony, Roden told of trying to raise Hughes from the dead and with not a hint of chagrin, admitted ending a prayer, "In the name of George B. Roden, amen."

The jury acquitted Howell's followers. It could not reach a verdict on Howell. Charges against him were later dropped.

With Roden in jail, the Branch Davidians settled back into Mount Carmel. Roden had let it slide. The tiny houses lining the dirt road into the property had fallen into disrepair. While they ate breakfast, the women exercised and ran.

Days were devoted to shaping up Mount Carmel.

Nights were devoted to Bible study - and to Howell.

And the nights were long. Howell usually slept until about 2 p.m. There was no set time for the Bible studies to begin. To Breault, who had become Howell's confidant, it seemed the studies began when everyone else was exhausted and Howell was ready to go.

Bible studies sometimes lasted more than 15 hours.

**"You don't have time to think," said a former cult member, who fears Howell and asked not to be named. "He doesn't give you time to think about what you're doing. It's just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang."**

Sometimes, Howell would practice his guitar, at full volume until 2 or 3 in the morning, then call a Bible study, Lisa Gent remembered.

"On the night of Atonement, we managed to get to bed at 11 p.m.," she said. "At 1 a.m., Vernon ran through the camp ringing the food bell, making an awful racket. We had to come and eat, as he himself had not had food that night. We then were compelled to study with him until 5 a.m."

Howell's influence over the Branch Davidians was eerie. It wasn't as if they were all idiots. Wayne Martin was an attorney. Don Bunds was an electrical engineer; his wife, Jeannine, a nurse. Breault would earn a master's degree in religion in 1988. All, though, pledged allegiance to a man far less educated than themselves.

Henning, the Vancouver teacher who stayed with the cult for two months in 1987, found Howell quick-witted and the holder of "truly amazing accumulation of knowledge."

In the daily Bible studies, Howell spoke rapid-fire, and Hennig found his message hard to pin down. Often, Howell asked a barrage of rhetorical questions, leaving his followers baffled as to how to answer.

He roamed back and forth across the chapters of the Bible, arcane Biblical references rolling off his tongue. Before the listener could gasp what had just been said, he was on to something else. It was like a roller coaster ride thrilling, but it was almost impossible afterward to say what you had seen or heard.

But Howell's followers got hooked on the feeling - that sense of glimpsing truth, even if it was awful and apocalyptic. Some compared it to a drug.

You felt like you were in the know, said a former cult member. Others in the world might consider you average. Let them. They were unbelievers. But you knew something they didn't - something that put you into the ultimate In Crowd, the ones who wouldn't be taking a dip in the Lake of Fire.

And that was the importance of the seven seals.

The Seven Seals, found in Revelation and written in apocalyptic language, herald the catastrophic events - famine, pestilence, a great war against Israel, the martyrdom awaiting God's followers - that many Christians believe will mark mankind's doom.

Howell told cult members that he, as Cyrus, was the Lamb that Revelation says will reveal the Seven Seals.

If they followed him, he would lead them through the coming tribulations. They would supposedly be martyred, but ascend to heaven, former cult members said. Then they would return and slay the unbelievers - or the Babylonians, as Howell called them.

Eternity awaited, if you could just grasp Howell's message.

What struck Hennig most about cult members was their numbing fear of never understanding Howell. They couldn't just turn to the Bible and read for themselves. As Howell had shown time after time in studies, the Bible's language was much too dense for them to interpret. They were lost without Howell. He was the fulcrum of their belief.

"I don't think anyone ever knew what his understanding was, honestly," Hennig said. "If you had given them pencil and paper, I don't think they could have written down his message. They might have a piece of it here."

The Branch Davidians, though, had become convinced that they would not get to heaven unless Howell showed them the way.

They came to believe Howell and not the Bible, said Gent.

He had almost become their God.

Hennig would later write, for a psychology paper at the University of British Columbia, "Generally in the quiet evenings, an introspective, self-absorbed malaise seemed to

overshadow the place as individuals perhaps contemplated their grim future. The only consolation was that the world would get it even worse."

### **Part 3**

#### **'Threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number'**

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 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 Bundses 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.

It definitely wasn't love at first sight between Bunds and Howell. Bunds hated Howell's periodic visits during the mid-1980's to her parents' home in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles. Bunds thought he was arrogant. Howell thought she was spoiled. He called her "princess" because she slept in a canopy bed.

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.

Her pleas that she was late for school fell on deaf ears. Both men told her to take a walk.

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 ----," she said.

That remark earned Robyn a harsh spanking from her father.

Before Howell took over, Don and Jeannine Bunds had sent money religiously to Ben and Lois Roden, but they only occasionally had 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.

Don and Jeannine Bunds spent \$10,000.00 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.

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, 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, she 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 spell bound. To these intelligent and, in some cases, highly educated devotees there was only one possible explanation: Howell was inspired.

And 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 - single women, at the start, according to former cult members.

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, 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.

Occasionally, she 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.

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 Breault.

In the same prophecy, Howell foretold of the Branch Davidians moving to Israel. There they would become a target of an invading U.S. Army. Howell taught that he would be crucified out of jealousy over his many wives, according to Hennig.

**"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 had been taking women in the group."

Howell went to great lengths to fulfill his prophecy.

Former Branch Davidian 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, 19, 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 girl had gone to her parents' bedroom. "Vernon wants me to be his teddy bear for the night," she told them. "Will you give your permission?"

The Gents gave 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 shudder when I say that now."

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 instructions, Nicole Gent went out only at night for walks and then wore a wig and glasses.

Few outsiders knew of the hold Howell had on his followers. Those who did found it hard to fathom.

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 their 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.

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. Then 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 fried potatoes against Howell's wishes, Lisa Gent said. One Branch Davidian was banished from Mount Carmel for eating chocolate-chip ice cream.

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.

"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 alright for him to do."

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.**

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 day the world would arise in jealousy over his many wives, Breault said.

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.

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.

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.

Somehow, Howell seemed to recognize those fears.

"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.

#### **Part 4**

##### **Sex with young girls and Bible study tales**

Breault played a computer game - a simulation of the TV show *Star Trek* - while he waited outside Howell's bedroom one night in 1989.

Breault wanted to know if Howell was having sex with a 13-year old Australian girl. He had watched quietly while Howell proclaimed the right to have sex with the single women in the cult, but the Australian girl was different.

It wasn't just her age.

Breault had objected when Howell talked of bringing the girl to America. She had not been raised as a Branch Davidian, and he had told Howell it wasn't right to bring over such an innocent girl just to have sex with her, Breault told a Michigan court during the 1992 custody case.

After their argument, Breault testified, Howell said he would not take the Australian girl as a wife. But when she and her family came to live at Mount Carmel, Breault began to suspect Howell had lied to him.

So Breault had set a trap.

Late one night, he entered an office on the first floor of what had been the cult's old church. Upstairs was Howell's bedroom. Breault wrote a few unimportant letters on his computer, in case anyone asked what he was doing there.

Mostly, he played his computer game - and waited.



The next morning, the Australian girl emerged from Howell's bedroom, Breault said. He called out a greeting. Surprised, the girl asked why Breault was there. Just getting an early start, he said. She shrugged and left.

**"I realized it wasn't a matter of Biblical anything," Breault testified in Michigan. "He just wanted to have sex with her."**

Because she really didn't know what he was teaching."

Once during a 1988 conversation, Breault said, Howell had asked him to guess his favorite wife.

Breault named Howell's legal wife, Rachel. No, Howell told him. Not her. Breault said he rattled off more names, but not the name of Howell's favorite wife.

Finally, Breault gave up.

Howell said his favorite wife was Rachel's younger sister, Breault told the Michigan court. He said he never forgot Howell's next words.

"Can you believe it, Marc? She's been with me since she was 12 years old."

Howell's secret eventually became the talk of the Branch Davidians. And Howell did the talking, 10 former cult members said.

Bruce Gent, the Australian, said he was in a Bible study when Howell related the first time he had sex with his wife's sister.

"When he got into bed with her, she was only about 12," Gent said. "He talked about taking her pants off. There was a big fight. She was trying to look after her own, to protect herself. He made a big joke of it. A warped bloody mind he's got."

Robyn Bunds remembers not questioning Howell's account at the time.

"Psychologically, it's weird. But you got used to it. It was normal...But now that I'm out here, living a normal life, I realized it was rape," Bunds said.

According to state records, Howell's wife's sister gave birth to a baby girl Feb. 3, 1989. She was 14. The space on the birth certificate for the father's name was left blank.

Howell denies fathering any children in the cult besides the two, Cyrus and Star, born to his legal wife, Rachel, whom he married when she was 14 years old.

Birth certificates show that at least two single women and one girl identified by former cult members as Howell's so-called wives had babies. None of them listed their babies' father on the birth certificate.

A copy of the California birth certificate for Wisdom Bunds records his birth in Pomona on Nov. 14, 1988. Robyn Bunds is listed as the mother, but there is not recorded father.

Bunds has since changed her son's first name to Shaun.

She said Howell is the boy's father. Howell ordered her not to list his name on the birth certificate, Bunds said.

"Why do you have to put unknown for the father?" Bunds asked. "Think about it. He was afraid someone was keeping track of the babies he was having."

Dana Okimoto, then 22, gave birth to a son, Sky Borne, on Sept. 10, 1988 in Torrance, Calif.

No father is listed. The birth certificate says "Declined to state."

Okimoto refused to identify the father of her son, but former cult members - including Bunds, who traveled with Okimoto from Mount Carmel to the Los Angeles area in 1988 for the birth of their babies - said Howell is the father.

A former cult member listed until 1991 as a midwife in McLennan County said Howell eventually quit registering many of the babies born at Mount Carmel.

Jeannine Bunds, Robyn's mother, said she delivered twin girls to Howell's younger sister-in-law at Mount Carmel in 1991. A nurse, Jeannine Bunds said she also delivered Okimoto's second baby. According to Bunds, Howell directed her not to register the births.

Howell was not as discreet within the Branch Davidians.

During another Bible study, Howell talked about the first time he had sex with the 13-year-old Australian girl, two former cult members said. Howell said the girl's heart beat so hard that he could actually hear it.

**"You know when an animal's scared, how its heart just pounds?" Robyn Bunds asked. "That's how Vernon said her heart sounded.** Like when you're hunting something is how he put it. That's how he said the heart of all the girls sound when he's with them for the first time.

Howell dismissed the charge that he had sex with underage girls. He argues that former cult members who make the allegations are followers of Breault.

Robyn Bunds heatedly denies Howell's contention, calling it "part of his paranoia."

Breault left the Branch Davidians in September 1989. Peter Roenfeldt, pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Melbourne, said Breault now attends his church regularly.

"He certainly has not held himself out as a prophet in any sense, certainly not in the 3, 3½ years that I've known him," Roenfeldt said.

It was Breault who precipitated the Michigan custody hearing, David Jewell sued for custody of his daughter, Kiri, after an October 1991 telephone call from Breault.

Breault asked Jewell if his daughter wore a pendant. She did.

"He said Kiri was targeted," Jewell said.

All Howell's wives or wives-to-be wore a six-sided Star of David, Breault testified in St. Joseph, Mich., court in February 1992.

In a sworn affidavit, Breault described how he and Kiri, along with Sherri Jewell, her mother, encountered Howell while walking at Mount Carmel during the summer of 1989.

"Howell walked up and said hello," Breault wrote. "He asked Kiri whether she had been behaving lately. Kiri responded that she had been behaving. Howell said this was good, because if she wanted to be in the House of David, she would have to be a good girl."

Robyn Bunds also said she heard Howell discuss the House of David with Kiri.

"If Kiri and her friends acted up, Vernon would say, 'You have to act like ladies if you want to be in the House of David,'" Bunds said.

Discipline started early at Mount Carmel, according to former cult members, who said that Howell at one time taught that parents should spank their children at 8 months of age.

**It was full-contact whipping, enough to leave its mark on a baby's buttocks, according to former cult members.** They said Howell often used a large wooden spoon with a straight handles and almost spatula-like bottom.

Howell denies the allegation. He teaches that babies be "constrained" for discipline, Howell said. Starting at age 4, discipline should include spanking, he said.

But former cult member Michelle Tom told the Michigan court differently, in a sworn affidavit. She wrote that Howell hit Tarah Tom, her daughter by husband James Tom, on her buttocks with the wooden spoon for more than 30 minutes in 1988.

Tarah had cried when put on Howell's lap, the affidavit said.

"My baby was 8 months old at the time and when he finished, her bottom was badly bruised and bleeding," Tom wrote.

A former cult member, who does not wish to be identified, saw Tarah shortly after the whipping and said "her bottom was completely black and blue."

Tom did not protest the whipping.

"It's like you're in shock," she said in an interview.

"He always played on your emotions. If I had shown emotion, he might have taken her away from me or something."

Howell was particularly harsh to his son, Cyrus, former cult members say.

Once, Cyrus refused to call Nicole Gent "mommy," Breault told the Michigan court. Howell ordered Cyrus to sit next to Gent, who had been baby-sitting the boy. When Cyrus, then about 3 years old, refused, Howell made him sleep on the kitchen floor and go without food.

After a couple days, Howell told Nicole Gent to feed Cyrus, who was so weak he could not eat by himself, Breault testified.

That night, Howell made Cyrus sleep in the garage of the cult's house in Pomona, Calif., according to former Branch Davidian James Tom.

Tom said Howell ordered him to take Cyrus to the garage.

"I told Vernon that it wasn't a good idea, because there were rats there," Tom wrote in an affidavit. "Vernon made me take him anyway and told me to make sure I told Cyrus that there were rats. The child was terrified. Cyrus was made to sleep on a hard bench taken out of the shuttle bus and was beside himself with fear."

During a 1986 Bible study in Palestine, Cyrus, then about 1, began crying after being left alone inside a bus, Bruce Gent said.

Howell, irritated at the disruption, made several trips to the bus to strike his son, Gent said. Each whipping lasted several minutes.

The boy's screams from the bus haunted the church, Gent said.

"After 5 to 10 minutes, the cries became whimpers and Vernon would return," said Breault, who was also at Palestine. "Then Cyrus would start crying again. Vernon would go back to the bus. You could hear the spanks from where we were."

Neither Rachel Howell nor any other member of the cult left to comfort the baby, Breault and Gent said.

"It's hard to understand if you've never been there," Breault said. "But we're talking about a man who was supposed to be a prophet. He was giving the words of life. You were not supposed to miss out."

Robyn Bunds said Howell hit 10-month-old Shaun with a paddle at Mount Carmel after the baby wouldn't come to him.

"I was shocked," Bunds said. "But I realize he wanted him to love his father. In a normal family, the child knows who his father is. But Vernon was never around to know as a daddy. He shows up and thinks it's time to discipline Shaun because he's spoiled. He's not spoiled. He was scared of Vernon."

Bunds said Shaun's bottom bled after the whipping.

At the recommendation of her day-care center, Bunds had scheduled an appointment for her son to meet with a therapist. Day-care teachers report that Shaun is emotionally underdeveloped, Bunds said. They told her he is easily frustrated and cries often, she said.

Bunds blames her son's problems on Howell's inattention and harsh discipline.

Howell contends Bunds whipped Shaun.

"Yeah, I spanked him," Bunds said. "I'm not proud of it. I want to throw up, to know I let him get to me in that way. I'm sorry I did that. There's no way to take it back. But I was told to. The hardest thing for me of all this is to know I did it, too. All I can say is I was in a certain frame of mind.

"Vernon said even if a child died from a spanking they would go to heaven. You don't think like that in a cult. You can't think that way or you won't survive for one day."

## **Part 5**

### **For the Lamb, all women; For you, Adam's rib**

Howell picked California to reveal the "New Light," a teaching which led to a major rift in the Branch Davidian.

About four hours into a sermon at the cult's Pomona house on Aug. 5, 1989, Breault saw Howell cock his head and melodramatically look up, or so it seemed to be Breault. It was as if Howell was listening to someone. It was like, "Yeah, now I see the light," Breault recalled.

Howell told his followers that he was the Lamb mentioned in the book of Revelation, the one who would open the seven Seals and lead them all to salvation. That they had heard before and believed.

Then Howell annulled all marriages.

All women in the cult - in fact, *all* women - belonged to the Lamb, Howell said. He was their perfect mate. Then men's perfect mate was already part of them. Howell recounted the story of Adam and Eve and how Eve came for Adam's rib, Breault said. The men, if they henceforth remained celibate, would get their perfect mates in heaven in the same manner as Adam. But the married men must give up their earthly wives - to Howell.

"Who could understand you better than someone who had lived inside you?" asked Bruce Gent, a former Branch Davidian who heard the New Light during Howell's subsequent visit to Australia. "That's the way he presented it."

### **Marriage was really just glorified adultery, Howell said, according to Breault and other former cult members.**

Men and women were only seeking a moral sanction for their raging hormones, while Howell wanted the cult's women in order to have babies who would usher in Paradise.

The message left the men numb.

Howell's New Light wasn't spontaneous, a whimsy. It was the logical progression of what he had been teaching for years, his utter devotion to building the House of David - having sex

with numerous women and girls in the cult to produce children that Howell claimed would one day rule the hereafter with him.

It was just the next step, so much so that some Branch Davidians staying at Mount Carmel guessed what was up when they heard rumors that Howell had delivered a new message.

"Everyone was speculating that it was," said Robyn Bunds. "It was like, 'The only thing left is he's going to take our wives.' What the hell else was left? There wasn't anything else surprising to do."

As Breault left the room in Pomona after the 13-hour Bible study, Howell wrapped his arm around his neck.

"So Marc, how does it feel now that I'm stuck with Elizabeth?" Howell asked.

Elizabeth was Elizabeth Baranyai, Breault's wife of three months.

"Over my dead body," Breault thought.

Life with Vernon Howell had been more than Breault could stomach for some time. He hoarded what he had, and he always wanted more.

Now Howell was turning the Branch Davidians into a harem and the men into virtual eunuchs sworn to guard its secret.

Most married men stayed after Howell took their wives. To those who left the cult, and to outsiders, they were saps, but they couldn't bear the thought of leaving. It threw them into despair. For if they left, what was all the suffering for? Why had they spent all those years in the cult? For nothing, that's what. And that was too painful for most Branch Davidians to face.

Breault knew. He has experienced all those feelings. But Breault had finally had enough.

He had applied to Australian officials in May for an immigration visa. The New Light made him even more anxious to leave and thankful his wife had gone on ahead to Melbourne to earn money to pay his way over.

Howell clearly had broken the standard to which the Bible holds prophets, Breault decided, for his teaching contradicted the Bible - which teaches that marriage is an honored institution.

A month after the New Light, Australian authorities granted Breault a visa.

Breault telephoned an aunt who lived in Mission Hills, Calif. While most Branch Davidians were away working, she picked him up at the Pomona house. He took all he could carry in a suitcase, leaving behind thousands of dollars in computer equipment,

The men and women who remained were quickly separated by Howell, who told cult members that it was for their own good.

**To show why, Howell asked one woman to hike her skirt during a Bible study, two former cult members said. The woman** obeyed, exposing her panties. Howell asked the men if they were sexually aroused. Almost all of the man raised their hands. After thanking the woman for her obedience, Howell told his followers that it's impossible for men and women to be friends. Sooner or later, men will want to have sex with women. They can't help themselves, Howell said.

Eventually, the men and women came together only for Bible studies. Howell harshly rebuked husbands who tried to maintain contact with their wives, former cult members said.

One cult member who lost his wife to Howell said he gave her up because of "what they were going to accomplish in the kingdom," Bruce Gent said. Life on Earth, though, became hell for the married men in the cult.

"When I was there... I mean guys were in tears about it, that God wanted them to give up their wives," said a former cult member, who fears harm if identified. They were heartbroken."

The men and women who had their lives torn apart by the New Light may have thought their lot was hard, but it was Howell who constantly sought sympathy, former cult members said,

"He would say it's not easy being in his position," Breault said. "All women have things about them you don't like. Rachel has big feet. She was not perfect. Dana was too short. She was not perfect. He was looking forward to the kingdom of God when they're perfect."

Howell talked woefully of his struggle to build the House of David in an audio tape delivered to the cult's Australian members.

"In my body has been desire, but it deceived me," Howell said on tape. "I looked upon the desire and said, 'This is love, 'but once that love came through my testicles and left out the head of my mind and wen into their body, my body turned into hatred, my body found no more desire and my body ached, my stomach grabbed ahold of me and says, 'You don't love these girls.'

"I said, 'God, what is love?' God said, 'No man knoweth love, nor hate, by all the things that he sees under the sun."

"And I persevered. I continued my work, feeling very lonely, feeling like a dirty dog, cause God said they that bear the vessels of the Lord shall triumph."

Such lamentation won Howell support from the most Branch Davidians, who felt he was suffering for them.

But Robyn Bunds had seen enough.

She had joined the House of David when she was 17, at first beguiled by Howell and an early prophecy that one of his wives would become the bride of Christ.

**"It was like a beauty contest," Bunds said. "All of us battling against each other to be this woman that God thinks is the greatest. It was like a fairy tale.**

"When I was young, I went to Disneyland and watched all these Disney movies, like *Cinderella*. In the light he teaches, a man on a white horse comes and takes you away. Back then, I was still dreamy-eyes. I wasn't really into reality."

She was now. Part of it was just growing up. Part of it was having a son, Shaun. But the biggest part of it was the New Light.

Bunds had never liked sharing Howell, but she did, until the New Light made her realize how preposterous it was to be one of Howell's "wives."

One of the first married women whom Howell took was Bunds' mother. Jeannine Bunds was in her early 50's, an attractive woman who looked younger than her age. She was married to Don Bunds, a design engineer who was 10 years older than his wife.

Jeannine Bunds admittedly found Howell's attention flattering.

For Robyn Bunds, though, learning that Howell was having sex with her mother was too "weird."

She wasn't angry at her mother. For Jeannine Bunds, it was a chance to feel young again, to contribute to building the House of David and, perhaps, to making more of "those beautiful children" that were all over Mount Carmel. Jeannine Bunds said Howell prophesied that she would become pregnant if they had sex. She would have a child for the Lord.

Her daughter, who had one such child, no longer believed in the House of David. She believed Howell was just a plain, ordinary Bible-thumping lecher. "I've had his child. He's slept with my mother," Robyn Bunds said. "I can't think of anything weirder. He doesn't even try to justify it. It's against Levitical law in the Bible. Did you know that? It's against Levitical law to have a woman and her mother or a woman and her sister. He uses that law when it backs up something he has to say. But when it doesn't he throws it away."

Jeannine Bunds said she now thinks Howell had another reason in mind when he took all the wives in the cult than just building the House of David. It came to her when Howell separated the married men and women.

"It gave him more control," she said, "He's big on control. If you're married, you talk, you discuss things. But if you're with your mate at night, you can't talk, you can't put Vernon down. You don't have anybody. You're isolated."

The New Light sickened Robyn Bunds. She vowed to leave the cult. But she would learn that her remark after hearing of the New Light was wrong.

Howell hadn't run out of surprising things to do.

## **Part 6**

### **The taking of Wisdom, a Leaving of the House of David**

Detective Ron Ingels though he was back in the '60's when he entered the house at 2707 White Ave., in La Verne, Calif.



Ingels accompanied Robyn Bunds to the two-story white stucco in the summer of 1990. Police had a warrant to search for her young son, Shawn. Once inside, police found the house set up like a dormitory. One room had a single bed, but all the other rooms had bunk beds.

It reminded Ingels of a commune.

Arriving on a Saturday, police had interrupted a Sabbath service. There were men downstairs who had come over from the cult's Pomona house. When police went upstairs, they found about 20 women and one man.

Vernon Howell.

"He was there by himself with all the women," said Ingels, now the police chief. "And the women indicated that they were dedicated and loyal to Howell and would do anything he said. It was a strange situation. All the men stayed in Pomona. All the women stayed with Howell."

La Verne looks and feels like a village, with large old houses, a town square and a small campus, the University of La Verne, that's straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration, with the addition of a few palm trees.

La Verne police were aware of the Branch Davidians, who didn't quite fit in, but considered them harmless.

Until they met Bunds. She had quite a story to tell.

"I didn't leave out one dirty detail, she said.

Bunds told police that Howell had upward of 15 so-called wives, or the women in the cult with whom he had sex. And some of the wives were underage, she reported to police, including a 14-year old Australian girl who had become a "wife" a year earlier. Bunds also had been one of Howell's wives, she said.

She believed Howell had kidnapped her son, Shaun, who was then less than 2, and sent him to Mount Carmel.

She had been one of Howell's wives, she told police. Howell was the boy's father.

The apparent kidnapping came after she had seemingly gotten Howell's blessings to leave the cult, Bunds said.

Howell had pulled her aside a few weeks before at the La Verne House and kissed her. To his surprise, she started crying. He asked what was wrong. She wanted to leave and try to live a normal life, Bunds told him. Mockingly, Howell asked where she would go. Bunds, then 21, threw out the name of a former boyfriend, one she had not seen or heard from in years. It was the only person she could think of.

An angry Howell stormed away, Bunds said.

The next day, after Bunds got off work as a receptionist for a videotape-duplication company, she returned to the La Verne house to find all her belongings gone. This was her chance, she reasoned. Howell was saying, in effect, "See if you can make it on your own."

But Howell meant Bunds to start a new life missing more than her belongings.

Shaun, or Wisdom, as he was called at the time, was also gone. Howell had sent the boy to Texas in the care of Branch Davidian Novelette Sinclair, according to Robyn Bunds and police. Sinclair was one of the women who kept Shaun while his mother worked.

Incensed, Robyn Bunds had gone to the La Verne Police Department.

At the house on White Avenue, she identified the women she believed to be Howell's wives, including her own mother, Jeannine.

Howell told police what they suspected: Shaun was not there. He was in Texas.

Sgt. John Hackworth and the other police officers noticed that Howell's voice was trembling. He hardly seemed a foreboding figure, a prophet with the might of Go behind him. There was a hint of anger, too. Hackworth thought he knew why. Howell was no longer in control; the police were. His followers saw him reduced to a mere mortal.

Wanting to put a scare into Howell, La Verne police gave him 48 hours to return Shaun Bunds to California or face kidnapping charges. The media would also be alerted, police said.

Before police left, Howell asked to speak to Robyn Bunds.

"Robyn, you know more than these people," Howell implored.

"Shut up," an officer snapped at Howell. "She's being deprogrammed."

"Am I that far gone?" a stunned Bunds asked herself.

Howell walked around "like a zombie," after police left, Jeannine Bunds said. He couldn't believe that Robyn Bunds had gone to the authorities.

**"She stuck a knife in my heart and twisted it," Howell said aloud.**

**Two days later, Shaun was back home.**

Police returned to the La Verne house and asked to see the 14-year-old Australian girl. But she had gone to Texas along with Howell.

"If they had detained her that first night, this would be all over," Robyn Bunds said.

Ingels said the first priority for La Verne police was getting Shaun back to his mother, not questioning the Australian girl.

"Before we could really investigate, she disappeared," Ingels said. "He left, too. And he didn't come back...I don't think he liked our attention."

Jeannine Bunds left the Branch Davidians a few months after her daughter.

"I wanted to be in the House of David," said Jeannine Bunds. "He made it sound so wonderful. I did. I did believe. I couldn't tell you why now."

Howell had prophesied that she would become pregnant, but she didn't. She became more depressed when Robyn left the cult. Howell exacerbated things by forbidding her to talk to her daughter.

Heartbroken, Jeannine Bunds quit her job as a nurse at Providence Health Center and left Waco, leaving Howell a goodbye note.

**"Even now, I don't hate him," Jeannine Bunds said. "Even after all he's done to my family. It's hard for me. I've seen both sides** of him. He can be nice. He cares about people, or at least he seems to...I do have feelings for Vernon. Sometimes, they overwhelm me. But all my life, this has been my daughter, my baby, my doll."

One member of the Bunds family remains at Mount Carmel. Don Bunds chose Howell over his family. His greatest fear is burning in hell, his wife and daughter said. His family rarely hears from him.

Jeannie Bunds sees a cruel irony in losing her husband to religion. Reared a Catholic, she changed faiths to keep her husband.

"Because of this, I really lost my husband," she said. "So what did I accomplish? I just sit back sometimes and it feels like I've been hit by a bomb. I think I should have done this; I should have done that. But it's too late for me. It's too late for my family. It's been blown to smithereens."

She blames herself for Robyn becoming involved with the Branch Davidians. "I feel like we did her a dirty deal, even though he was very deceptive about what he did," she said.

For herself, Jeannine Bunds offers no excuse.

"I'm over 21, intelligent," she said. "I could have walked at any time. I chose to stay. He doesn't keep you. You can leave."

"What you have to understand, though, is he keeps you by emotion. When you're down there, it's all so exciting. You don't know what he'll come up with next. I guess everyone is looking for Utopia, Shangri-La. You don't want any problems."

"It wasn't all bad times, you know. The people in this are great. They'll give you the shirt off their back. They're nice, like everyone else in the world. Except they believe this."

Jeannine Bunds works two jobs so her daughter can attend Mount San Antonio College, where she is a pre-law major. They live in the Pomona house, which Don and Jeannine Bunds bought on Howell's order. The cult abandoned the house last spring.

Every day, Shaun Bunds, now 4 reminds both Jeannine and Robyn Bunds that they once loved the same man.

## Part 7

### Dueling prophets, the Sinful Messiah, a fallen rock

Marc Breault didn't set out to lead anyone away from anything. He went to Australia to forget.

He wanted to start anew with his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, a native Australian, and forget the last four years of his life, which he considered wasted.

Eventually, Breault, 29, started his own computer programming company.

But Breault couldn't forget that he had recruited many of Howell's followers. It ate at him. He felt guilty. But he knew that if he went to the Australian cult members, most of whom lived near Melbourne, and said, "Hey, guys, I've been studying my Bible and I can show you where Vernon is wrong," they would not listen. He was one of them.

Then he had a moment of inspiration.

The Australian remembered Breault's dreams, his musing on whether he, too, might be anointed. Howell had encouraged those musings.

So Breault told the Australian that he, too, was a prophet. And that God had given him a revelation.

They agreed to hear Breault out.

Howell claimed to be the Lamb of Revelation who would reveal the Seven Seals, didn't he? Only, didn't Howell also say he was Cyrus, the man who would destroy the Babylonians, or unbelievers?

Well, Breault said, God had told him that the Lamb was really Jesus Christ. Not Cyrus. And not Vernon Howell. It was easy to prove, Breault said. He read to them from the New Testament. [John 1:20](#).

*"The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and said Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."*

Breault's plan worked. One by one, over about a year, many of the Australians concluded that Howell was a false prophet.

Then Breault disclosed that he wasn't a prophet, either.

Howell fought back, issuing a revelation of his own. And it was breathtaking.

If the Bible said only the Christ could reveal the Seven Seals, that led to an inescapable conclusion, Howell argued. Had he not shown repeatedly that only he could unveil the baffling language guarding the Seven Seals? What other explanation was there?

**Vernon Howell was Jesus Christ, come again. But this time with a dramatic difference, according to Howell. He was the Sinful Messiah.** The first Jesus was pure and sinless. How could he fairly judge anyone, Howell asked.

The Sinful Messiah explained much about Howell to his followers. This Jesus Christ cursed like a sailor and, by his own tongue, admitted lusting after women. It made a certain kind of sense.

Breault, however, pointed out a flaw in Howell's claim to be a Christ prone to sin. [Hebrews 9:28](#):

*"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation."*

The battle for the souls of the Australian cult members would climax in a showdown between Howell and Breault.

Howell traveled to Melbourne early in 1990, staying at the home of Bruce and Lisa Gent, who like the other Australians had wavered in the face of Howell's claim to be Christ.

The Australian had heard rumors of the New Light, but Howell had denied it in an audio tape mailed to each of them.

Now, in Bible studies in the Gents' living room, where he could work on them for hours, Howell confirmed that the married men had to find their perfect mates in heaven, Bruce Gent said. Their wives must cleave to Howell.

During the studies, Howell complained that some women who understood the truth of what he was preaching still dared to go to bed with their husbands.

He pointed to the Gents' bedroom.

After several days of round-the-clock Bible studies, Lisa Gent checked into a motel. She studied her Bible and concluded that Howell was not the Lamb. He was not Christ. She called her husband and together, they asked Howell to leave their home.

Howell moved in with James and Michelle Tom.

Through an intermediary, he called Breault and challenged him to a showdown at the Toms' house. Breault came, but asked his brother-in-law to call police if he and his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, were not home by 10 p.m.

Breault tried to explain why he didn't believe Howell was inspired, but Howell bounded him on one point. Who had taught him the Seven Seals? Didn't that prove Howell was the Lamb or Jesus Christ?

"Who taught you, Marc?" Howell asked repeatedly.

**Howell said he was the man on the white horse mentioned in Revelation, the lion of the tribe of Judah, because he was a Leo.**

Breault made light of that. Since Howell also claimed to be the man on the black horse with a pair of scales in his hand, did that also mean he was a Libra?

Irate, Howell began talking as if he were Jesus - not the supposed Jesus of today, the Sinful Messiah, but the Jesus of the New Testament, remembering what it was like when Judas betrayed him. It was something Breault had never heard Howell do. He and Elizabeth left.

Shortly afterward, there was a knock at the door. It was past 10 p.m. A voice said the police were coming. Actually, it was only John Baranyai, worried about his sister and brother-in-law.

Howell ran out the back door, grabbed a bicycle and pedaled away, leaving his followers on their own.

He left Australia empty-handed.

Breault pursued. He called some of the Branch Davidians living at Mount Carmel, but they refused to accept Breault's argument that Howell was fraud. It was probably a waste of time to try to reach them, Breault decided. They were too close to Howell.

But in talking and corresponding with other former cult members, Breault came to believe there was one Branch Davidian he could rescue.

She was 10 years old. Her name was Kiri Jewell.

Her mother, Sherri Jewell, was a school teacher who spent much of her free time at the cult's house in La Verne, Calif. Breault had already failed to persuade her that Howell was not Jesus Christ, even though he and his wife had once been close to her. Sherri Jewell had been maid of honor at their wedding.

But Kiri Jewell's father was not a Branch Davidian. David Jewell was a disc jockey in South Bend, Ind. He and Sherri Jewell were divorced, but he had retained joint custody of his daughter.

In October 1991, Breault called David Jewell. He asked Jewell if he knew whether his daughter ever wore a pendant. Yes, she wore six-sided star - the Star of David, Jewell said.

Howell had targeted Kiri for the House of David, Breault told Jewell.

Jewell sued for emergency custody of his daughter when she visited him in Niles, Mich., after Christmas. The hearing was Feb. 25-28, 1992, in St. Joseph, Mich.

In the mellow tones of this profession, Jewell told Judge Ronald Taylor that he had a bad feeling about the Branch Davidians long before Breault's phone call.

In 1987, Sherri Jewell had told him that she wanted to take Kiri to Palestine, Texas, David Jewell testified.

**"Sherri told me unless I cooperated with the move, I'd be forever damned to hell," Jewell said. "And if I did cooperate, I would be given more light. The kind of thinking set off alarm bells as to my daughter's well-being."**

Breault, Elizabeth Baranyai and Jean Smith all paid their way over from Australia to testify on David Jewell's behalf.

Breault testified he had parted with Howell when he had to "face the reality of his taking young girls."

"Vernon would really emphasize to girls anywhere from 6, 7 on up, 'You should want to be with me,'" Breault said. "'This is the ultimate thing. Your whole lives should be directed to this. You should know the Scriptures. You should know what I teach, so when you are ready, you can become one of the people in the House of David.'"

Smith, 72, testified that she stayed at the La Verne house during a Passover. Men in the cult were not allowed there, except with Howell's permission, she said.

"The women in any of those rooms could be called on by Vernon at that stage," Smith said. She called Howell a "straight-out bully."

Sherri Jewell did not testify.

On the third day, the two sides announced that a shared-custody agreement had been worked out. One of its conditions was that Kiri be kept away from Howell.

Having gotten one more cult member away from Howell, Breault returned to Melbourne.

A programmer, he uses his home computer to keep in touch with ex-cult members and the families of present cult members. They've fashioned an intelligence network of sorts that attempt to track the Branch Davidians' doings.

The former Australian cult member said they last heard as a group from Howell almost three years ago after an earthquake had struck Pomona, damaging the house where the men had stayed.

Howell had picked out the house because its rock facing reminded him of the Biblical parable to build our house on a rock.

The earthquake had crumbled the rock, which fell to the ground.

By telephone, Howell warned the Australian that the earthquake was a sign of God's anger at the for abandoning him.

To Breault and the Australian, if it signaled anything, the falling rock signaled the collapse of the Branch Davidians.

And, they hoped, Vernon Howell.

<https://soundfaith.com/sermons/108239-the-sinful-messiah>

The Waco Tribune-Herald begins what it calls the “Sinful Messiah” series of articles on Branch Davidian leader David Koresh, formerly Vernon Howell (see [November 3, 1987 and After](#)). Based on interviews with former members of the sect, the series accuses Koresh of being a “cult leader” who physically abuses children and takes underage brides, even raping one of them. [[Waco Tribune-Herald, 3/3/1993](#); [XTimeline, 7/2010](#)] Two weeks into the standoff, Newsweek will publish an article on Koresh and the Davidians that draws heavily on the Waco Tribune-Herald series. [[Newsweek, 3/15/1993](#)] An August 1992 investigation by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (DPRS) found no evidence of such claims (see [April 1992](#)).

Koresh, according to the articles, claims to be the Lamb of Heaven whose mystical task it is to open the Seven Seals of the Biblical Apocalypse, thus bringing about the end of the world. The Davidians, according to the articles, intend to slay all non-believers (whom Koresh calls “the Babylonians”) once the Apocalypse begins, and Koresh’s male children will rule at his side thereafter. Koresh says: “If the Bible is true, then I’m Christ. 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.” The sources say Koresh uses “mind control” techniques to indoctrinate his followers, including marathon sermons and Bible study sessions lasting up to 15 hours at a stretch. One former member who refuses to be named says of the sessions: “You don’t have time to think. He doesn’t give you time to think about what you’re doing. It’s just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.” Other methods employed by Koresh include confusing, rapid-fire discourses about abstruse Biblical topics, and a propensity to force community members to listen to sermons at odd hours of the night. Another former member, also refusing to be named, says: “You felt like you were in the know. Others in the world might consider you average. Let them. They were unbelievers. But you knew something they didn’t—something that put you into the ultimate In Crowd, the ones who wouldn’t be taking a dip in the Lake of Fire.”

**Sources** - The sources for the article include Australians Marc Breault, described as a former “confidant” of Koresh’s who has spoken against Koresh since 1990; Breault’s wife Elizabeth Baranyi; and Jean Smith. Breault, an aspiring musician, admits to feeling resentment towards Koresh—he joined the group in hopes that he and Koresh, himself an accomplished musician, would form a successful rock band, an aspiration that would not be fulfilled. They are joined by former Indiana disk jockey David Jewell, who was never a member of the sect but who sued his ex-wife, Davidian Sherri Jewell, for custody of their daughter Kiri. Breault and other former members say Sherri Jewell was one of Koresh’s wives. Kiri lives in Michigan with her father, while Sherri remains with Koresh. (In 1995, Kiri Jewell will testify that she was raped by Koresh between the ages of 10 and 14—see [July 21, 1995](#)). Other sources include Robyn Bunds, one of Koresh’s first “wives” among the community (married to him at age 17, she says, when Koresh and his small group of followers lived in Pomona and La Verne, California). Bunds claims that Koresh told her he raped the 12-year-old sister of his wife



Rachel Howell, who, Bunds says, crawled into bed with him to “get warm” and was forced to have sex with him. Koresh has denied the story, and claims to have had only two children, Cyrus and Star, both with his wife Rachel. However, birth certificates for many Davidian children are incomplete; the sources say that Koresh is the father of many of the children, and routinely has the mothers leave his name off the certificates. Bunds tells reporters: “When Vernon came along, 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.” She claims her parents gave well over \$10,000 to Koresh’s sect and bought a house in Pomona for \$100,000 in Koresh’s name (then Howell). She admits to having been jealous over having to share Koresh with his other wives, and says Koresh is the father of her son Shaun, whose birth name was Wisdom Bunds; she says Shaun is terrified of Koresh because he beat him. (Koresh says Bunds, not him, beat her son, an allegation which she admits, though she says Koresh also beat the child.) She says she left Koresh in Pomona after he began having sex with her mother Jeannine, and when he attempted to kidnap Shaun and raise him among the Waco Davidians. Jeannine Bunds is also a source, having left the Waco community shortly after her daughter left Koresh. (Don Bunds, Jeannine’s husband and Robyn’s father, remains in Waco with the Davidians.) Another source is Karl Henning or Hennig (the article uses both spellings), a Vancouver teacher who lived with the sect for two months. He says Koresh holds a “truly amazing accumulation of knowledge.” Also, the article relies on the recollections of Bruce Gent, a former Davidian who says he allowed Koresh to sleep with his teenaged daughter Nicole. Yet another source is Barbara Slawson, a member during the time of Koresh’s predecessors Lois and George Roden, who says she was never impressed with Koresh and left during the time he was solidifying his grasp on the leadership of the group. Slawson says she has two grandchildren in the group. “My primary reason for trying to help is the children,” Breault says. “They have no one else to help them. If people say we were stupid, well, that may be true. But the children aren’t.” Breault says he finally left the group after Koresh had sex with a 13-year-old Australian girl he had brought to Waco merely for sexual purposes. “I realized it wasn’t a matter of Biblical anything,” Breault later testifies during the Jewell custody case. “He just wanted to have sex with her.” Koresh says that Breault sees himself as a rival prophet attempting to convince his followers to join with him against Koresh, and says that Breault is the source of the stories of his alleged sexual relations with underage girls. Breault admits telling Australian Davidians that he, too, is a prophet, though he says he eventually confessed that he had lied to get the Davidians away from Koresh, and that for a time he attempted to create a breakaway, rival sect of the Davidians.

Emotional Control - Jeannine Bunds says Koresh does not physically restrain his members. “I’m over 21, intelligent,” she says. “I could have walked at any time. I chose to stay. He doesn’t keep you. You can leave. What you have to understand, though, is he keeps you by emotion. When you’re down there, it’s all so exciting. You don’t know what he’ll come up with next. I guess everyone is looking for Utopia, Shangri-La. You don’t want any problems. It wasn’t all bad times, you know. The people in this are great. They’ll give you the shirt off their back. They’re nice, like everyone else in the world. Except they believe this.”

Newspaper Asked to Hold Off Publishing Stories - Tribune-Herald managing editor Barbara Elmore says the newspaper put eight months of research into the stories, and held off printing

them after federal authorities asked her “not to run anything.” The head of the BATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) task force investigating Koresh (see [June-July 1992](#)) says the stories did not influence the agency’s decision to raid the Davidian compound near Waco (see [5:00 A.M. - 9:30 A.M. February 28, 1993](#)). [*Waco Tribune-Herald*, 3/3/1993] After the BATF raid, Tribune-Herald editor Bob Lott defends his newspaper’s decision to publish the story, saying: “We’d been working on this story for eight months. It contained a lot of information the public ought to know. We decided it was time to let the public know about this menace in our backyard.... I’m under siege. There has been the suggestion that somehow we are responsible for this tragedy.” BATF spokeswoman Sharon Wheeler says the bureau has no complaints about Lott or the Tribune-Herald, but an unidentified BATF agent has allegedly said part of the responsibility for the deaths of four BATF agents during the raid rests on the local press. The bureau asked Lott to hold off publishing the series a month before the raid; the newspaper gave the bureau a day’s warning before running the first installment. [*New York Times*, 3/1/1993; *Newsweek*, 3/15/1993]

[http://www.historycommons.org/entity.jsp?entity=waco\\_tribune\\_herald\\_1](http://www.historycommons.org/entity.jsp?entity=waco_tribune_herald_1)

## The Sinful Messiah and the Seven Seals

On April 19th, 1993, David Koresh’s story ended. An offshoot of the 7th Day Adventist church, the Davidians have a long, complex, and spellbinding history that never really got into the public’s consciousness.



The tragic end. April 19th, 1993.

Far more than a cult, the Branch Davidian sect had existed and thrived in and around Waco, Texas for 50 years before a young man named Vernon Howell became a member.



David Koresh, 1992.



“The Sinful Messiah” ca. 1991