

## **Some secretive sects suffer tragedy**

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**By James A. Haught**

**Fringe Mormon polygamous wives, wearing antique clothing and hairdos from the 1800s, appear in news photos daily. Americans are puzzled by the mysterious Yearning For Zion Ranch, a commune of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, where Texas authorities seized 416 children.**

**The secretive sect's leader, Warren Jeffs, is serving 10 years in prison for abetting rape of underage girls. But otherwise, the west Texas compound has a tranquil record, compared to some other half-hidden religious enclaves that have wrought havoc in America.**

**YFZ Ranch is about 200 miles west of Waco, site of the tragic 1993 clash between federal agents and armed Branch Davidian cultists. After nearly two months of a gory siege, a federal push turned the sect's wooden compound into an inferno. Leader David Koresh and 78 followers died, including 18 children.**

**Through the years, various other horrors have engulfed offbeat U.S. religious colonies. The most infamous was the People's Temple of the Rev. Jim Jones. After the paranoid leader moved his California followers to a Guyana tropical retreat, Jonestown, reports of warped abuses spread. When a congressman flew officials and news reporters to investigate in 1978, a murderous attack on the delegation killed five and wounded 11. Then 914 cultists -- including nearly 300 children -- drank cyanide in a mass suicide that stunned the world.**

**The Waco and Jonestown disasters are notorious examples of peril that can arise from fringe sects isolated from society. But several lesser American tragedies are mostly forgotten. Some examples:**

**| The Church of the First Born of the Lamb of God was a Mormon polygamous offshoot, somewhat like the YFZ Ranch -- but horribly violent. It was ruled by two brothers, Ervil and Joel LeBaron. When they split, Ervil allegedly ordered his brother's murder. He was convicted of the killing, but freed on a technicality. The surviving brother had 13 wives and 54 children. He sent various wives to assassinate rival polygamist patriarchs such as Dr. Rulon Allred, leader of the Apostolic United Brethren, and polygamist Bob Simons, who ministered to Native Americans, plus some dissidents within the cult. Altogether, two dozen murders occurred. LeBaron and one wife were sentenced to life in prison. He died in a cell in 1981. His son, Richard LeBaron, and other relatives were sentenced in 1993 for more cult murders.**

**| The Temple of Love was a Florida sect claiming 10,000 African American members. The leader, Yahweh ben Yahweh, trained top lieutenants as "death**

angels" to kill church defectors and white slum dwellers. In 1992, Yahweh and six aides were convicted of 14 murders. The leader drew 18 years in prison, and his aides got from 15 to 16 years.

| Heaven's Gate was a space-age cult in San Diego. Some male members had themselves castrated to achieve purity. When the Hale-Bopp Comet appeared in 1997, members became convinced that they must "shed their containers" (commit suicide) so they could be transported to a UFO hiding behind the comet. In their communal house, 39 believers took their own lives with painkillers and plastic bags over their heads. Two others later died in follow-up suicides.

| Mormon minister Jeffrey Lundgren was defrocked by the Reorganized Church of Latter-Day Saints, so he moved his followers to Kirtland, Ohio, and formed a private commune. The leader decided that a human sacrifice was needed - so he and aides systematically killed a member family: father, mother and three children. Lundgren was convicted of murder and executed in 2006.

| At a Hare Krishna "Palace of Gold" near Moundsville, West Virginia, Swami Bhaktipada ordered murders of dissident members. The swami was released from prison in 2004 after serving eight years. His top lieutenant remains in cell. Some members of the commune confessed to sexual abuse and merchandise fraud.

| Guru Bhagwan Rajneesh led a 1980s Oregon commune, where he kept a collection of Rolls-Royces. After conflict with area residents, the guru's followers planted salmonella bacteria in restaurant salad bars in a nearby town, sickening 750 people. Various criminal charges were filed. Rajneesh left America, and died in 1990. Two of his women aides went to prison.

Unlike these violent groups, YFZ Ranch has been peaceful. But it's easy to see why authorities proceed cautiously in dealing with fringe believers who isolate themselves in strange communes.

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