

Under his command

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ONE MORNING IN JANUARY, Warren Jeffs stood and spoke with the voice of an angry God.

Twenty-one men had sinned, Jeffs said the Lord had told him, and now they would be made to repent.

The prophet of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints spoke for an hour that day in Colorado City, Ariz. Some 1,500 men and boys sat in stoic silence as Jeffs read off the sinners' names. There were Barlows, Jeffs, Johnsons, Wylers, Jessops. One by one, Warren Jeffs cast out men who had built the community and the faith.

Jeffs told the men to stand. He asked if they accepted his judgment. After each answered yes, Jeffs told them to leave their homes and families. Confess your sins, he said. Repent from a distance.

By dusk, they were gone.

What happened that January morning has cracked the calm that normally lies over Colorado City and its twin, Hildale, Utah. Some young women fled from their homes. Law enforcement officials in Utah and Arizona vowed a closer look. And, once more, national attention came to the polygamous communities that quietly flourish in the Mountain West.

Jeffs, 48, became president of the LDS church after his father's death 18 months ago, and moved swiftly to take command of the

10,000 people who live in the twin border towns of Colorado City and Hildale, Utah. The church adheres to a 19th-century version of Mormonism that includes plural marriage and is made up of mostly good, earnest people trying to live up to a difficult holy ideal.

He oversees a multimillion-dollar church trust that controls property, companies and assesses up to \$1,000 monthly tithes on families. He doles out land, homes, jobs and wives according to spiritual promptings.

Jeffs also has now ousted scores of men he views as spiritually flawed, troublesome or as rivals, and taken away their homes, wife or wives and children. Even the beloved bishop Fred Jessop, 93, was whisked away in mid-winter and hasn't been seen since.

Some families have been "reassigned" to other men -- a brother, a disliked neighbor, a church leader -- whose selection seems designed to sharpen the pain of loss.

"Holy prostitution," is how one woman characterizes what is happening in the twin cities. "Overwhelming devastation," offer others.

Yet thousands continue to revere Jeffs as their prophet and to instantly follow his direction.

Where is he headed? No one is sure.

JEFFS DOES NOT GIVE INTERVIEWS . Followers and foes alike are reluctant to speak, too, out of fear of being cut off from relatives still under Jeffs' sway.

So speculation spreads in whispers outside the dusty, red-rock towns on the Arizona Strip, which became a fundamentalist enclave nearly 80 years ago.

Is Jeffs merely delivering a faith-refining lesson? Or is he a paranoid leader resorting to mean-spirited tactics to consolidate power?

"This man is a dingbat," said Richard Holm, a former Colorado City town councilman and construction consultant whom Jeffs ousted in November. "He's had some dark revelations from some place, and he's jealous as can be."

Some believe Jeffs is preparing to flee to Mexico.

And then there are those who believe he is cutting out people he sees as spiritually flawed in preparation for the long-predicted return of Joseph Smith as the "One Mighty and Strong" who will set Zion in order as the righteous are lifted up to heaven.

Those to be "lifted up" are, of course, the FLDS. Predicted dates for this glorious event have come and gone, explained away as due to believers' shortcomings.

Jeffs' tightening grip also comes as Utah and Arizona are under public and political pressure to stop crimes said to be occurring here under the aegis of polygamy -- underage marriages of teen girls, welfare abuse, sexual molestation.

Such allegations have long tainted the community, and even triggered its most infamous moment: when Arizona Gov. Howard Pyle, bent on cracking down on polygamy, ordered a predawn sweep on the twin towns — known then as Short Creek — in 1953. Men were imprisoned and families torn apart. The photos of stricken-faced women and children being rounded up outraged people across the nation.

Ultimately, the community regrouped, strengthened by their calamity. The Short Creek raid, dubbed Operation Seagull, proved

a disaster.

And so, it turns out, was last summer's 50th anniversary commemoration of the event — approved by Fred Jessop and organized largely by Barlow men, who are sons, grandsons and foster sons of the community's great forefathers, John Y. Barlow and Leroy S. Johnson.

On July 26, the Barlows unveiled a monument inscribed with Johnson's words calling the polygamists' survival the "greatest miracle of all time." Long lines threaded through the newly renovated Short Creek Schoolhouse Museum's collection of artifacts, news stories and photographs of the raid.

The one person notably missing that day: Warren Jeffs. His absence should have been troubling.

Two weeks after the dedication, Jeffs began wielding his ecclesiastical authority like a wrecking ball, inadvertently providing a peek inside this deliberately insular community.

On Aug. 10, Jeffs told his people he had had a divine revelation. The people had sinned, he said, by erecting "monuments to man." The Lord wanted them to "repent of their idolatry" lest he unleash a scourge "to purge the ungodly from among you," according to Benjamin Bistline, who reprinted the revelation in his new book *The Polygamists: A History of Colorado City, Arizona*.

Jeffs ordered the monument destroyed — it was rubble 30 minutes later, some say — and the museum shuttered.

He suspended all baptisms, marriages, priesthood and church meetings indefinitely while the people repented of their wicked ways. And he told them to keep silent about it all.

Months later, the expulsions began.

"You look at what Warren has done to this people and this community in the past six months and it is more devastating to the people than what [Pyle] was going to do to the people," Holm said. The count of men exiled now exceeds those arrested in 1953; Jeffs has not only tampered with earthly relations, but, according to FLDS belief, heavenly salvation.

Earlier leaders also have made "corrections" but none so draconian as Warren Jeffs' moves to break up families.

To date, just one man — Jeffs' brother Brian — has been allowed to return to the community. The four ousted Barlow brothers showed up briefly at a funeral last weekend in Colorado City.

With a single exception, Jeffs' expulsions remain legally unchallenged. While some men might dispute being kicked out of their homes, they have little recourse for dissolution of their plural marriages.

"There are really, really good, clean people in this community but also simple-minded people who are being taken advantage of," said Ezra Draper, who moved his family to Bonners Ferry, Idaho, last June after becoming disillusioned with Jeffs. "We have had a lot of visitors up here, a lot of men with broken hearts."

JEFFS' ASCENSION TO THE FLDS PRESIDENCY is disputed by some who believe other leaders — the ousted Louis Barlow or Winston Blackmore of the Canadian FLDS branch — were more legitimate successors.

"No one has produced any evidence that Warren Jeffs was ordained [president] ever," said one community member, who fears use of his name will harm his family.

Of the 800 FLDS members in northern Idaho and just over the

border in British Columbia, about half are now following Blackmore while the rest remain with Jeffs' appointee, Jimmie Oler.

Many leadership transitions in the history of what is now the FLDS church have led to schisms over contested authority or doctrine. The Intermountain West's two other prominent fundamentalist groups, the Apostolic United Brethren and the Kingston clan, both emerged from these disputes. (See leadership graphic).

The FLDS church is the most restrictive of the three, particularly since Rulon and Warren Jeffs declared that total authority rests in one man who is to be followed with "perfect obedience" in all matters. Members belong to a united order, to which they dedicate property, income and labor.

Faith and family are the primary focus, and the twin cities boast the largest family sizes in the country. But living "The Principle," as it is called, is a financial challenge and residents have no qualms about "bleeding the beast" — their term for using government aid such as food stamps, Medicaid and cash.

For example, in 2002, an estimated 66 percent of Hildale residents received Medicaid, compared to 6.5 percent overall in Utah, according to the Utah Department of Health.

But the nearly \$8 million in public aid to residents of the twin cities annually is perfectly legitimate, according to state officials in Utah and Arizona.

"We've investigated it and there is no abuse," said Vince Wood, assistant director of the Arizona Department of Economic Security's benefits division. "They abide by all the regulations."

Meanwhile, property battles and rumors of rampant sexual abuse

and forced marriages of underage girls keep the church in the public spotlight.

Through its United Effort Plan Trust, the FLDS church owns all property and allows residents to build and occupy homes as "tenants at will" — which means they can be evicted at a moment's notice.

Such evictions have produced decades of legal battles; the most recent began Jan. 14, when Jeffs ordered Ross Chatwin to vacate his home and leave his wife and six children. Chatwin, backed by his wife, refused and has taken the church to court.

The other allegations — of sexual molestation and forced marriages — have stymied government officials.

"We need people willing to come forward to testify so we can prosecute people for crimes," said Paul Murphy, spokesman for Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff. "We are dealing with a people who don't trust government, who don't trust outsiders. So how do you bring help to them when they are fearful of the people who are offering the help?"

The hard truth is that, within the context of the FLDS culture, many young girls see marriage as inevitable and desirable, even when the groom is old enough to be her father.

"We've had younger cousins, 10 or 11, and all they want to do is be married," said Amber Louie, 18, whose family has broken away from the FLDS branch in Canada. "I have one who wants to be married at 15. As soon as they know sewing and cooking."

Most young women and their parents acquiesce to these pairings, even those they have no say in, that involve no courting and take place on a moment's notice. One person told the Tribune about a couple, ages 17 and 25, who were called at 3 a.m., told to report to

Jeffs and were then married immediately.

Occasionally, girls rebel.

Two teens who fled the community in January allege they were on a bride-to-be track, despite their desire for additional schooling; their parents dispute that and characterize the girls as merely acting out.

Boys have broken away or been encouraged to leave for similar reasons, but also because they are seen as competition for marriageable girls.

But most residents embrace the life, viewing themselves as engaged in a noble endeavor even though it is often misunderstood or ridiculed by outsiders.

There has been no mass exodus because of Jeffs' directives, no showdown between community factions. The people have complied, even the men who were exiled.

Jeffs has told them to submit their sins in writing and see if they matched up with wrongs he said God revealed to him.

DAN BARLOW, THEN COLORADO CITY MAYOR , and his brothers got crosswise with Jeffs over the Short Creek monument, which celebrated a "miracle" that the Jeffs, newcomers to the Strip, had missed.

For other men, there are myriad possibilities: Some admit minor infractions of Jeffs' rules, others to human failings or more serious moral indiscretions confessed to and forgiven decades ago. Now they are being made to repent again.

Whatever the reasons, most men have remained silent, some telling relatives they welcome this "correction" and the chance to

get their lives in order as directed by Jeffs. They are, as long counseled by their prophets, doing their best to "keep sweet."

"It's a beautiful thing," one man told Draper. "He said, 'If this is what I need to go through to earn my salvation, I'll do it.' "

Alvin Barlow said this of his brother, Dan: "All is well. His love of the gospel guides him. He said this experience has only strengthened and verified that love."

Of course, "Warren has taught that talking about the adjustments was sympathy against authority and grounds to lose your family," said one community member. "So everybody is real careful talking about it."

Some wives and their children remain in their homes, dangling the prospect of redemption.

That may be, in part, why these men have quietly accepted their punishment so far.

It could be a vain hope. Consider Richard Holm, who calls what Jeffs did to him an "execution."

On Nov. 11, Jeffs ordered Holm to leave his home, two wives and seven children. At the time, Holm said, Jeffs led him to believe the problem would be resolved quickly. Holm did as he was told.

In the days that followed, he sent letters and placed dozens of calls to Jeffs. All went unanswered.

"I went for weeks thinking today is the day," said Holm, who stayed away from other ousted men to avoid jeopardizing his and their standing with Jeffs.

Six weeks passed. And then Holm got a call from a brother who

reported he had just been married to Holm's wives as directed by the prophet.

Holm is devastated, and he said such actions have killed other men. Among them: his brother, Con, who died at age 52 on Jan. 14 of a "broken heart," as his obituary put it, after being "abandoned and rejected by his community."

OUTSIDERS MAY WONDER AT WOMEN who compliantly leave their husbands, at fathers who dutifully accept banishment, at parents who disavow troublesome children, at siblings who abandon one another.

"Their minds are absolutely taken over," said Marvin Wyler, one of the winter exiles, whose son, Ross Chatwin, also was ousted. "They won't realize [Jeffs] has crossed boundaries that aren't compassed by the words of Jesus Christ."

Stephen Kent, a University of Alberta sociology professor who specializes in alternative religion, said such behavior is comparable to that seen in controlling and abusive relationships.

"They have such intense commitments to their group that they cannot leave it, even when the group's activities are very harmful," Kent said. "For people who believe their salvation lies within this group and with this leader, it is unthinkable to them [to consider] living out the rest of their lives separate from it."

Yet, Draper is among those who believe a growing number of people will come to see Jeffs as they do: a destructive, misguided leader and that his way is not the only way to live their faith.

"He does need to stop destroying these families," he said. "And people need to know they have options. How that happens is still a mystery."

And the fact is, despite any hardships, the vast majority of those who live in their desert redoubt don't care to leave.

Their history is there, innumerable family ties, and with Jeffs, they believe, their deliverance.

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