

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Warren Jeffs: A wanted man

Author(s): Brooke Adams The Salt Lake Tribune **Date:** May 10, 2006 **Page:** **Section:** Polygamy

News

Local

At Alta Academy, the private school once run by Warren S. Jeffs, each day began with an hourlong devotional that included hymns, scripture reading and sermons. But never the Pledge of Allegiance.

That puzzled Jaleena Fischer Jessop, who attended Alta Academy through 12th grade. When she confronted Jeffs in a world history class he taught, he gave her a stern look and answered in a steely voice. "It's because we answer to a higher power," Jaleena Jessop recalls him saying. "He didn't want us to get confused about who our allegiance was to."

Loyalty was owed to God and Jeffs as His representative on Earth, a stance that hardened as Jeffs moved from school master to president and prophet of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Unyielding on the faith's tenet of plural marriage, even with underage brides, Jeffs now finds himself battling a growing number of former FLDS members and authorities in Utah and Arizona.

Jeffs has been a fugitive since June 2005, when he was indicted on sex crimes in Arizona for allegedly marrying a 16-year-old girl to an older man. In April, Utah prosecutors charged him with two counts of rape as an accomplice for allegedly forcing another underage girl into marriage.

On Saturday, the FBI placed Jeffs on its Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list.

"He is a religious tyrant, a demagogue, " said Utah Attorney General Mark

Shurtleff. "He has this absolute disregard for the laws of the nation, of the state, to the point that no matter what we do . . . it's an aggressively in-your-face, you-can't-touch me attitude."

'Rule in all areas': Jeffs' arrival could be considered a bit of a miracle.

He was born — 2 1/2 months premature and so small he fit in a shoebox — on Dec. 3, 1955, in San Francisco to accountant Rulon T. Jeffs and Marilyn Steed, the fourth and favored plural wife. Jeffs was among the first 10 of Rulon Jeffs' approximately 30 sons; he has about 35 full and half sisters.

Jeffs excelled at Jordan High School, graduating in 1973 in the top 3 percent of his class. That same year, then-prophet LeRoy S. Johnson and other leaders of "The Work" - as the FLDS church was then known - launched Alta Academy.

The new school was housed at Rulon Jeffs' compound near Little Cottonwood Canyon. After a brief stint in his father's accounting office, Jeffs joined its staff. Despite not having a college education, he taught classes such as world and priesthood history, algebra, computer programming and choir. In 1976, Jeffs became school principal.

Yearbooks show the talented singer cutting up in school plays, sledding with students and playing softball. But as school master, Jeffs also realized his power to shape belief and allegiance. He canceled an annual snow sculpture contest, equating it with idolatry. It was here also that he delivered — and taped — a series of lectures that today are a primary text in the FLDS canon.

Some followers play the tapes all day long, listening as a droning Jeffs describes a woman's duty to be submissive, "Negro" devilishness and the right of God's anointed leader to "rule in all areas of life." Jeffs drove home the first point during a home economics class taught by his first wife, Annette. Jeffs ordered male students to join female classmates in the meeting hall. Jeffs grabbed his wife's long braid and twisted it, sending her to her knees. A man has a duty, he said, to be a leader. And a wife needs to be submissive, no questions asked.

"He left. The boys left. She got up, fixed her hair and went on talking," said Jessop, 31, who witnessed the display. "She was a fun person. I think that is why he did it to her."

Jeffs also would grill students about their home life, then caution them to not tell their parents. Students who misbehaved could expect a swatting with a yardstick. Those Jeffs found more severely wanting were suspended or expelled. Jessop said her oldest sister was suspended for a year for writing a note to a boy.

Targeting family: One man, who had children at the school but asked to not be identified for fear of losing his family, said Jeffs learned patterns of power early. "By [using] guilt and dividing people, he was able to inject fear into people," he said. "He did it initially with his own family at Alta Academy."

Among Jeffs' targets: children of his half brother, Ward. Jeffs apparently considered one of Ward's two wives too free-spirited and her children, who lived in the compound, a bad influence. As an experiment, Jeffs suspended her four children from school for two to three months to see if their absence improved the "spirit" in their classrooms.

"There was nothing extreme to them that would justify keeping them out," said Dan Fischer, Jaleena's father. Fischer met with Rulon Jeffs, who had succeeded Johnson as prophet, and argued the expulsion would psychologically harm the children.

Fischer said Rulon Jeffs turned to Jeffs, asked how long the suspensions would last, and then gave his approval.

One of the suspended children, Brent Jeffs, alleged in a lawsuit filed in July 2004 that when he was 5 or 6, Jeffs and two other uncles repeatedly sodomized him in a bathroom at the school. Brent Jeffs, backed by his father, also alleges the men abused two of his brothers; one brother committed suicide in 2001.

Jeffs has refused to answer the charge, a chess move that has had a cascading effect for him, the FLDS church and its members.

The circle tightens: Alta Academy provided a pathway to power — particularly when Jeffs' father succeeded Johnson as prophet in 1986. Other men jockeyed for position, but Jeffs, urged on by his mother Marilyn, seemed bent on making himself indispensable.

"All of us [sons] wanted to support both our father and the church, but none of us pushed ourselves to the front," said Ward Jeffs. "For Warren, that became his first priority.

"He dared to, he wanted to, he needed to satisfy his image of being as perfect as a man can be in mortality," he said.

Rod Parker, an attorney who then represented the FLDS Church, said Jeffs was "strongly faithful."

At his father's elbow, Jeffs honed his leadership style - if not his doomsday worldview. Rulon Jeffs devoured magazines specializing in cataclysmic predictions of errant comets and monetary market collapses.

By 1998, Rulon Jeffs feared the imminent destruction of the Salt Lake Valley and relocated his family to a massive, walled compound in the supposed safety of Hildale.

The move marked the end of Alta Academy. But Jeffs now had a bigger audience: the 8,000 or so FLDS in Hildale and adjacent Colorado City, Ariz., historically the group's stronghold.

He began to speak for his father, who was enfeebled by age-related strokes, tightening the circle. Children were moved to private FLDS schools in 2000; in 2001, Salt Lake Valley followers were told to move south, too.

Rulon Jeffs, largely through Jeffs, told followers to get rid of television, the Internet, children's videos and books, music - anything that might taint the

people's purity.

The transfer of power occurred seamlessly in September 2002 when, despite predictions he would live to be 350 and no other prophets would be called, Rulon Jeffs passed away.

At the funeral, his photograph was propped up on the seat and a program noted Rulon Jeffs would be presiding. The photo remained for a Sunday morning church service; by that afternoon, ex-member Jethro Barlow said, the photograph was gone.

And Jeffs had slipped into his father's seat.

A battle begins: As Jeffs came to power, the state of Utah began to flex a little muscle of its own.

Prosecutors charged Hildale police officer Rodney Holm with bigamy and unlawful sex with a minor for his "spiritual" marriage four years earlier, in 1998, to a 16-year-old girl.

Months earlier, FLDS church attorneys had advised that a showdown with Utah and Arizona authorities could be avoided by ending marriages between adult men and minor girls. Jeffs refused, making the practice a test of faith for the FLDS.

Other prophets, Rulon Jeffs among them, had sanctioned such "placement" marriages, though with input from girls and parents. Past prophets also kicked out unworthy men and reassigned their wives and children.

But former members say the pace and scale of both has intensified under Jeffs. The ranks of banished and heartbroken men, driven from their wives and children, may now be close to 100. Some women have asked Jeffs for a reassignment because they fear being saddled with an unworthy man who can't get them to heaven. In another pivotal moment, Jeffs was infuriated when, without his approval, followers in July 2003 dedicated a Colorado City museum and monument to the community's survival of a 1953 crackdown on

polygamy. Jeffs had been lying low to avoid being served a subpoena.

A month later, Holm was convicted. And by October, it is now known, Jeffs began preparing to leave the towns behind and winnow the flock to the most faithful.

Trusted followers began buying property in such locales as Eldorado, Texas; Mancos, Colo.; and Pringle, S.D. Of these outposts — it is suspected other enclaves have yet to be discovered — Eldorado, pop. 1,838, stands out.

The FLDS have poured millions into a 1,691-acre property, creating a small city with a dairy, cheese factory, orchard, barracks, homes, meeting hall and a massive limestone temple. The estimated population ranges from 150 to 600.

"It's terrible that our little town is known as the polygamous capital of the Southwest," said J.D. Doyle, a local pilot who offers free rides over the compound to police and media from as far away as Australia.

A "persecuted" prophet: But if Jeffs — and God, as he told his people — was done with the twin towns, his critics were just getting started.

A barrage of criminal charges and lawsuits have been piled on Jeffs since 2004. The property trust that holds virtually all land and buildings in the twin cities is under court supervision.

But motivated by what Driggs describes as a "visceral" distrust of the judicial system, Jeffs has let the court attacks go unanswered. He has disappeared from view, and is believed to rely on tithes from followers and FLDS businesses.

Jeffs, now 50, is left to manage his flock from some as yet unknown place. Top church members deliver pronouncements, such as recently exiling members Edward Chatwin and Patrick Pipkin. Chatwin said the community also receives taped "pep talks" from Jeffs.

Faithful followers proclaim that Jeffs is like God to them. Also, "there is

great respect in the community for the office he holds," Driggs said.

Parker believes some of Jeffs' power is due to an FLDS perception he is being persecuted. "In the view of the faithful people, that makes him stronger in that he bears up to it," Parker said.

Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard said that bringing a "rule of law" to the FLDS requires, for now, a focus on Jeffs and the "messianic" power he exerts.

"He has almost unlimited ability to control those lives, but also to ruin them through ordering marriages, splitting families apart," Goddard said. "From the personal to the institutional, he has control that I think is intolerable in today's United States." brooke@sltrib.com

Charges

Arizona: One count of sexual conduct with a minor; one count of conspiracy to commit that crime. He allegedly "married" a 16-year-old girl to a 28-year-old married man. The Class 6 felonies, one step above a misdemeanor, are each punishable by up to a year in jail.

Utah: Two first-degree felony counts of rape, under the rarely-used theory that he acted as an accomplice in the sexual assault of a teenage girl he allegedly "married" to an older man. Each charge is punishable by up to life in prison. Federal Charges of flight to avoid prosecution have been filed in Utah and Arizona federal courts.

(c) 2006 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.