

A Mormon Cult's Last Stand

By Jesse Hyde

ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN MCCABE

The largest polygamist town in America is run by a madman in jail. Now he's started a civil war

On a January morning in Phoenix, Willie Jessop enters the courtroom through a side door, nods at the lawyers and saunters up to the witness stand. He's a big man - six feet three, well over 200 pounds - and, as usual, is dressed in black. He glances at the jury, a faint smile crossing his lips. In the past, Jessop has been the staunchest defender of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a polygamist offshoot of Mormonism. When he used to take the stand to explain their way of life, a few sister wives in pastel prairie dresses would always be on hand to show support. But today, they're gone. That's because Jessop, the former spokesman for the FLDS and one-time bodyguard to its jailed prophet, Warren Jeffs, has turned against his church. He's not here to defend the FLDS; he's here to take it down.

The prosecutor asks why Jessop would turn on FLDS leadership to become a key witness for the Department of Justice. Jessop's face reddens as he leans forward. "Because those sons of bitches were raping girls in Texas, and they knew it and I knew it," he says, "and that battle is still raging today."

It's Week Two in a federal trial currently underway against the adjoining towns of Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah, and increasingly disturbing and bizarre revelations are coming to light. Known collectively as Short Creek, the two towns have a total population of about 8,000, the majority FLDS, making the community the largest polygamist enclave in America. For generations, the FLDS leadership has had total control over this desert outpost on the



The Prophet

Warren Jeffs with some of his 80 or so wives. He is now serving a life sentence in Texas.

edge of the Grand Canyon, selecting the mayors, the city council and even the town marshals without any problem. But in recent years, the DOJ has been investigating allegations that the two towns have been violating residents' civil rights, allowing the church to use public officials to run members who left the faith – “apostates” in FLDS parlance – out of town, denying utility hookups and even spying on citizens. The trial is slated to end in late February or early March and, if the feds are successful, criminal charges could follow, helping to end FLDS control over Short Creek.

But the FLDS isn't expected to go without a fight. Once a fringe religious community seemingly stuck in time, Short Creek has fallen into a spell under its prophet, Warren Jeffs – a spindly, hollow-eyed man who allegedly runs the town despite serving a life sentence in Texas for multiple convictions of child rape. Jeffs has banned all TV and the Internet in Short Creek. His private security force roams the streets in SUVs with blacked-out windows, enforcing church discipline and tailing anyone who passes through town. FLDS members who disobey his word are banished.

But not everyone is following Jeffs' orders anymore. Jessop is part of a growing band of outcasts numbering in the hundreds who have refused to leave town, and the rising tension between the faithful and these exiles has pushed Short Creek to the brink of civil war. Former church members claim they have been driven off the road, seen FLDS children peeing on their lawns and found dead animals with their throats slit left on their porches. In September, the office window of a victim's advocate was shot out. A week later, someone blew up an apostate's truck. There are even rumors that Jeffs is trying to create a master race, loyal only to him, through a secret breeding program known as the “seed bearers.” “This is a community that has been controlled by a madman now sitting in a jail in Texas,” says Sam Brower, a private investigator who worked on the Jeffs case and is the author of *Prophet's Prey*, a penetrating look inside the FLDS. “That's the really scary thing about this. This guy is crazy. The more power Warren Jeffs loses, the more desperate he becomes.”

As Jeffs' former bodyguard, Jessop is one of the DOJ's most important witnesses, a key to taking down the FLDS. And today, he's spilling the church's secrets.

During a break in the trial in Phoenix, Jessop sighs – he may have helped light a fuse no one can control. “How far is this going to go?” he says. “That's what's got everyone on pins and needles. Could it end in a Waco or in a Jonestown? I hope not, but I don't think we've seen the climax of this thing.”

JESSE HYDE wrote about marijuana kingpin Clay Roueche in 2013.

FOR MOST OF ITS HISTORY, few outsiders even knew of Short Creek's existence. A remote polygamist town off a two-lane desert highway, it was the sort of place where no one locked their doors or even built fences. Boys rode their horses bareback down dusty unmarked streets, and girls in lavender prairie dresses walked arm in arm to church, humming Mormon hymns.

And then Warren Jeffs came to power in the late Nineties, and everything

wanted list for multiple counts of sexually assaulting minors, and went on the run with his favorite wife, Naomi (code name: 91). With the help of Jessop, who ran the church's security force – called the God Squad by detractors – Jeffs communicated through coded letters and burner phones and shuttled between the church's “houses of hiding” scattered throughout the West (in particular, he often visited his favored brides at the compound in Texas). In August 2006, he was arrested during a routine traffic stop on the



“The more power Warren Jeffs loses, the more desperate he becomes. That's the really scary thing about this.”

changed. The ambitious, twisted son of the previous FLDS prophet, Jeffs took control and became obsessed with the idea of “perfect obedience.” He started kicking people out of Short Creek that he deemed sinners: young men who came to be known as Lost Boys, teenage girls he considered too rebellious and men no longer “worthy of priesthood,” reassigning their wives and children to loyalists he felt he could trust.

Beginning in 2002, he came under investigation for child rape in Utah. He then began evading authorities while marrying off teenage girls to the sect's leadership. He also ordered the construction of a new FLDS compound, the Yearning for Zion ranch, in the West Texas desert. In May 2006, he landed on the FBI's 10 most-

outskirts of Las Vegas, carrying 16 cell-phones, three wigs and \$56,000 in cash in the lining of a suitcase.

Convinced God would liberate him from his prison cell in Utah, he had his wives record his sermons when he called them, to be played for his followers in Short Creek. The end of the world was coming and they must be ready.

For a time, with various cases against him falling apart, it seemed like Jeffs might actually be released. And then in the spring of 2008, responding to a complaint, Texas police breached the gates of the FLDS compound in West Texas, seizing evidence that resulted in the temporary removal of more than 400 children. The raid made international headlines and sparked the largest child-custody battle in U.S. history.

Suddenly, news trucks from around the country were descending on Texas and Short Creek to talk about Jeffs' taste for young girls and what life was really like inside the secretive cult. In the meantime, investigators had uncovered evidence that Jeffs had taken several teen brides and married one girl who was only 12, consummating their marriage on a temple bed. Jeffs was eventually extradited from Utah to Texas and in August 2011 was sentenced to life in prison, plus 20 years.

Yet despite being in jail, Jeffs was still the prophet and determined to keep his stranglehold over Short Creek, where the majority of his estimated 10,000 followers lived. But the town was changing. During Jeffs' years on the run, an obscure legal case made its way through the courts, challenging FLDS control over something called the United Effort Plan. Created by the town elders in the 1940s, the UEP was a charitable trust designed to allow FLDS members to live communally and keep outsiders at bay. All FLDS members

SHORT CREEK SITS AT THE base of towering vermilion cliffs, a few miles from a rusted collection of trailers occupied by meth tweakers and end-times preppers. Hemmed in by the Grand Canyon and a winding mountain pass known as Hurricane Hill, it is one of the most isolated places in America, bracketed by red-rock mountains on one side and a dusty expanse on the other.

It's a chilly November morning, and as I drive through town, the divisions be-

lected a small number of men who were allowed to drive to a nearby Costco to stock up on food and deliver it to members.

I stop at the apostate-owned Merry Wives Cafe, which is one of the few places in town to get a cup of coffee, to meet Isaac Wyler. Other than Jessop, Wyler may be the most hated man in town among the FLDS. A farmer with a ruddy complexion, he grew up here in the FLDS, although, like many in the lower echelons, he never took more than one wife. He was always wary of Jeffs, but the last straw came when he heard his prophet pray for the execution of his neighbor Jason Williams. Not long afterward, Wyler says, Williams' truck blew up in his driveway. Wyler went online, started researching the church and began secretly recording Jeffs' sermons and leaking them to law enforcement. In 2004, Wyler was kicked out for reasons that were never explained to him.

He was told to leave his property and hand over his farm. He refused and says he has since suffered constant harassment: His fences were torn down, his tires slashed nearly every week. "They started leaving dead animals on my property," he says in a wry desert drawl. "Chickens, cats, dogs, ducks, you name it. They'd splatter their heads all over my porch, hang them

with their throats slit."

Today, Wyler works with the accountant in charge of the UEP to help those exiled by Jeffs return to their homes, which have sometimes been taken over by FLDS members. The state's legal backing comes from a 2014 judge's order mandating the eviction of FLDS members who refuse to comply with the UEP. This is the true front line in the battle for Short Creek, and it has law enforcement on edge. Wyler tells me he's carried out more than 100 evictions in the past year alone, and the threat of violence is constant. A few weeks ago, he says, an FLDS woman pulled a knife on a member of his team during an eviction. He also claims the town police show up and tell him he's trespassing, even though he's carrying out state law. Wyler has begun asking deputies from nearby Mohave County to accompany him for his safety.

Wyler takes me to a property he recently vacated: a large brick house with state-ly Greek columns. Wyler says that when he starts the process of eviction, the FLDS sometimes sends "guards" over to take up temporary residence in the home. These squatters are usually women and children, and if possible, Wyler's relatives. "It's a sort of psychological warfare they're trying to pull," he says. "They call me a traitor, say I'm turning on my own."

He points to a closet where the water heater should be. It's missing. He explains



Blood Feud

Far left: Jeffs appearing in court in Las Vegas in 2006. Left: Jessop was once Jeffs' right-hand man but has now become a top witness for the prosecution.

gave ownership of their property to the church-controlled trust, on top of paying a percentage of their incomes. By the time Jeffs took over the church, in 2002, the FLDS owned nearly all of the land in Short Creek, which meant he could kick out whoever he wanted from their homes, a power he regularly abused.

But that all changed when several Lost Boys sued the church in 2004 for kicking them out. "Answer them nothing," Jeffs told his lawyers. Any kind of response, he reasoned, would be an acknowledgment of the unholy power of the government. As far as legal strategies go, it was a disaster: Ignoring the lawsuit put the church's assets in jeopardy. The state stripped Jeffs of his control over the trust, eventually revising it to benefit anyone who'd contributed time or money to building the community. Soon, apostates started trickling back into Short Creek, taking up residence in their former homes. "Leave them alone, severely," Jeffs instructed, which meant don't shop at their stores, speak with them or even wave while passing in the street. By the time Jeffs was sentenced in 2011, the apostates were returning in droves. The town was bitterly divided. Brothers and sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews were forced to choose sides.

The battle for Short Creek had begun.

tween the FLDS and nonbelievers are apparent. Church members have built tall fences around their homes, making them look like mini-fortresses, and affixed Zion signs above their doors to separate themselves from the rest of town. Every once in a while, I can peek beyond a fence and spot a little boy playing in his long pants and shirtsleeves, or a girl in a prairie dress. Because pretty much all games have been banned, "fun" amounts to something like jumping back and forth over a large rock. I see a few women, sister wives presumably, but mostly the streets are empty, other than the large SUVs and pickup trucks with darkly tinted windows that rumble through town.

Since the FLDS started losing ground to the apostates, it shuttered almost all church-owned businesses, especially those open to the public, which included the pizza place and the only grocery store in town. While I could have patronized any of those places as a "gentile," or nonbeliever, they were off-limits to apostates, who could be threatened with arrest for trespassing if they so much as walked through the door. Now, only FLDS members can enter the few remaining church-owned shops in town, and they must call ahead and use a password. To further limit contact with outsiders, the church had also se-

that when the state takes possession of a house, they often find it stripped of anything of value – the water heater, the furnace, the light fixtures – before the state can sell it. “Sometimes you can’t find a doorknob,” he says.

“So why don’t you report this to the police?” I ask.

“The town marshals?” he says, laughing. “I have. Nothing happens. Heck, they’re probably the ones doing it.”

Next, Wyler takes me by a tent encampment within the town limits that some have taken to calling Lyleville, a not-so-subtle jab at Jeffs’ brother Lyle, the current bishop of Short Creek. Wyler explains that the properties carry years of unpaid taxes. A state judge empowered the UEP to work with the FLDS members so they can stay in their homes if they pay their back taxes and a \$100-a-month occupancy fee. But Jeffs’ code of silence still rules. So instead of cooperating with the state in any way, the evicted have set up what looks like a U.N. refugee camp surrounded by 10-foot-tall metal walls. It’s hard to see what’s

he eventually became the principal of Alta Academy, the church’s private school for the 90 or so families who lived in the city and secretly practiced polygamy, like the family in HBO’s series *Big Love*. Tall with a pale complexion, Jeffs wore thick Coke-bottle glasses and spoke in a flat nasal monotone that rarely moved an octave.

Former students have described Jeffs as an exacting taskmaster who had little tolerance for those who broke his rules. “Perfect obedience requires perfect faith,” he taught. Jeffs would sneak up behind students in class, grabbing them by the neck and whispering things like, “Are you keeping sweet or do you need to be punished?” But there was nothing more terrifying than walking up the stairs to Jeffs’ office. For some students, the punishment that awaited was a beating with a yardstick, and for some the horrors were far worse. One of Jeffs’ nephews would later sue his uncle for raping him repeatedly when he was between five and seven years old.

In the late Nineties, Jeffs started spending more time in Short Creek. His father

protect Short Creek’s leadership from rival polygamists who had created a hit list of state sects. By the time he got a call from Jeffs in 2004, Jessop had worked his way up to become head of the God Squad – and wouldn’t hesitate to give his life in order to protect the church.

“Can you meet me?” Jeffs asked.

It was a Saturday morning and the townsmen had gathered at the meeting-house to get their assignments for work projects around the community, which were mandatory under Jeffs’ rule. Jessop met Jeffs in the building’s kitchen, where the prophet arrived with a few of his wives. He looked worried. “He was concerned about his ability to leave the meeting alive,” Jessop recalls. Jessop unholstered his .357 Magnum and stood behind the curtain onstage while Jeffs walked to the lectern. “The work of God is a benevolent dictatorship,” Jeffs said to the nearly 2,000 people gathered before him. “It is not a democracy.” He read the names of 21 “master deceivers,” which included four of his brothers and the mayor of Colorado City. These men, he said, would all have to go. And then he slipped out a side door. “It was a shot straight through the church,” Jessop says. “That was when it changed from a church to a cartel.”

As prophet, Jeffs’ father had instituted bizarre new rules to test the loyalty of his followers, such as no one could wear red or drive a red car, because Jesus would return in red. But Jeffs took it to a new level. He ordered everyone to turn in their guns, and then their tools. Holidays were banned and books burned.

If Jessop had misgivings about any of this, he kept it to himself. “I very much believed in my religion,” Jessop tells me. “I believed in our society. I believed in our ethics. Back then, a lot of these charges against Warren, I just didn’t believe.”

And so, Jessop did whatever he could to protect the prophet and church leaders. When Jeffs wanted to meet with one of his wives, Jessop says he secured the perimeter, sometimes shivering outside the compound walls until Jeffs was done.

“It’s pretty hard realizing now what he was doing at the time inside, because I didn’t know,” Jessop says. “I didn’t coordinate who was inside with him. I’m out there freezing my butt off in a snowstorm. I would’ve given my life in a heartbeat for him, and he’s inside with little girls.”

After Jeffs’ 2006 capture, he was tried in Utah and sentenced to 10 years to life as an accomplice in the rape of an underage girl. In 2010, that conviction was overturned on trial technicalities, but the state extradited him to Texas, where he was facing more-serious charges stemming from the raid of the church’s Yearning for Zion ranch – allegations that would eventually land him in jail for life.

Jessop went to Texas to review that evidence, trying to help build Jeffs’ defense.

“Perfect obedience requires perfect faith,” Jeffs said to his students. “Are you keeping sweet or do you need to be punished?”

going on inside, but through the slats we can see a cluster of trailers and huge white tents. Before long, snow will dust Canaan Mountain and temperatures will plummet to near freezing. “I can’t believe they would rather have women and little kids sleep out here than cooperate with us,” Wyler says.

HOW A PLACE LIKE SHORT Creek even exists is rooted in early Mormon history. The mainstream church – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS – banned polygamy in 1890, but some Mormons kept practicing it in secret for years, sending prominent members like Mitt Romney’s great-grandfather to places such as Mexico to start polygamist colonies. When the church finally decided to excommunicate polygamist families, they went underground. In the 1930s, several of these clans established Short Creek.

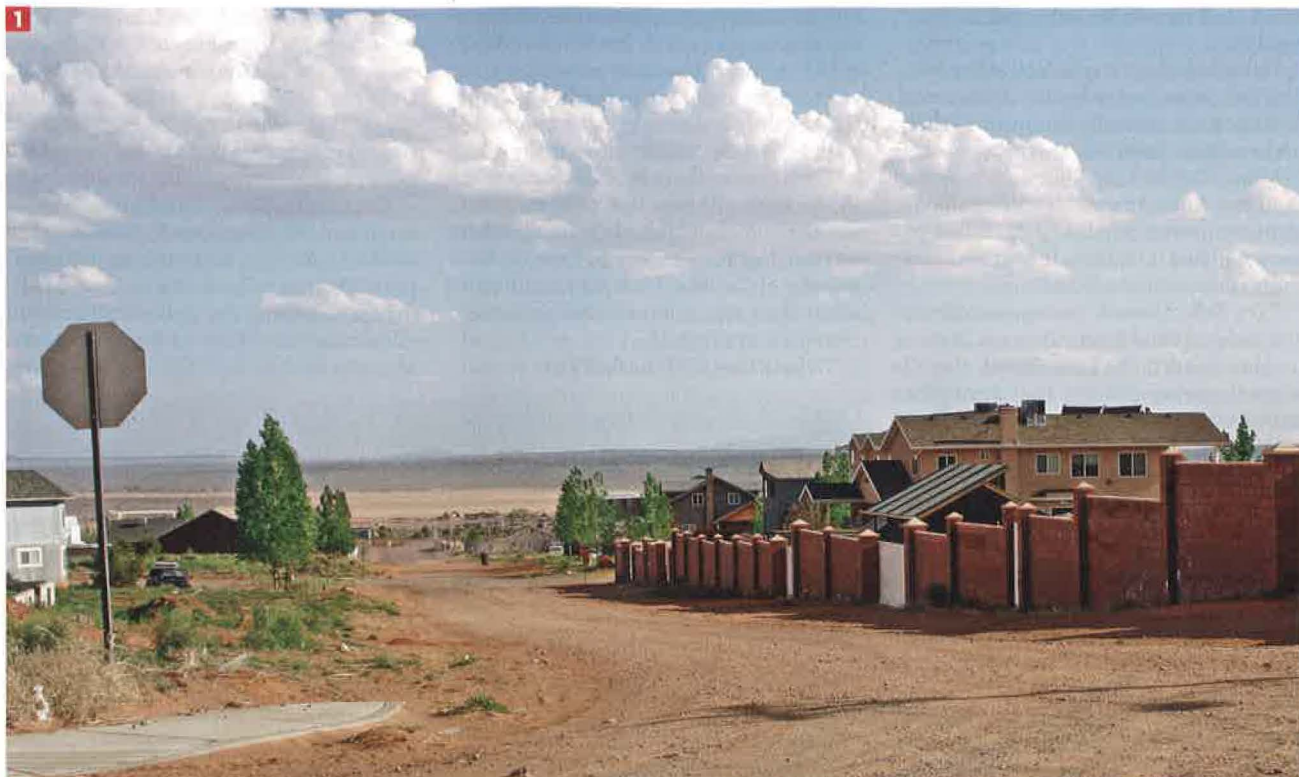
Jeffs was born in 1955, the son of Rulon Jeffs, who later became the FLDS prophet. Born premature and near death, Jeffs was so small, it’s said he came home in a shoe box, but his survival was a sign that he was God’s chosen one, his mother insisted. As one of his father’s favorite sons, he lived a life a world apart from the kids in Short Creek.

Growing up in his family’s well-appointed compound in suburban Salt Lake City, 400 miles north of Short Creek,

had become the prophet in 1986, but a series of strokes had left him mentally incapacitated, and over time, Jeffs became his father’s most trusted counselor, and eventually his mouthpiece. At a meeting shortly after his father’s death, Jeffs sat near the podium in the FLDS chapel, peering down at the congregation with a large portrait of his father propped up on a chair beside him. He explained that Rulon wasn’t dead at all – he’d been “renewed,” or reincarnated, and was standing before them. In other words, Jeffs was Rulon, which is why it was perfectly acceptable for him to marry his dad’s wives. Jessop, by then the prophet’s head bodyguard, fell in line.

Jessop had grown up in Short Creek and remembers it as an idyllic desert town – 5 square miles bordered by sandstone cliffs where everyone knew one another. He hunted jack rabbits in the mountains, attended church dances and ice cream socials and, like all the other boys, participated in volunteer work projects (constructing barns, putting in water systems) without question or complaint, essentially building the town. Because the FLDS had so many children, it had a large and free labor force, allowing it to build big businesses, from dairies to hay farms to construction companies.

But as he grew older, Jessop began to learn about the sacrifices required to maintain the town’s way of life. At about 17, he was asked to become a bodyguard to



Big Love

(1) Brick walls surrounding the FLDS homes in Short Creek. (2) Children watch as crews clear mud and debris from the streets after a flash flood in September that killed 13 people. (3) A chimney on Jeffs' home.

with what he'd found out about Warren. Instead, Jessop says, Lyle refused. "At that point, I knew I was done," Jessop says.

Jessop went home and told his family, unsure of what they might say. Most FLDS members, when faced with a choice between family and the church, had chosen the church. All around their town were broken families where the husband had been exiled from the community and the wives and children had stayed behind. But Jessop was lucky.

His wives and children stood by him, deciding to leave the church with him.

The retribution was fast and fierce. "I had pieces of concrete slung through the front window of my house," he says. "I had my office raided, my vehicles raided. They said, 'God is going to kill and curse you, Willie. He's going to send fire from heaven and burn you.' That was a direct statement from one of my own family."

For a while, Jessop carried his gun with him wherever he went. And then he de-

But he came across something that stopped him in his tracks. A 12-year-old girl named Merrienne Jessop, Willie's niece, had told investigators that during her marriage ceremony in the YFZ temple, Jeffs had laid her down on a ceremonial bed and had intercourse with her while some of his other wives watched. The state also had an audiotape of the encounter.

Jessop was incredulous. His niece's statement made reference to "the law of Sarah," the FLDS doctrine that allows for plural marriage, though here it had been grossly misinterpreted to cater to Jeffs' sexual perversions. It was so outlandish, Jessop figured the police were lying. He met with some of the young wives at one of the church's houses of hiding, in New Brunnsfield, Texas. To be alone, they walked

out to an orchard behind the house.

"What's this law-of-Sarah stuff?" Jessop asked, expecting the girls to say they had no idea. Instead, they confirmed that Jeffs had raped Merrienne, while they watched.

Jessop felt like the floor had gone out from underneath him. He asked his driver to take him for a ride. After only a few minutes, Jessop asked to pull over, and he got out and threw up. "My whole world came apart," he says. "Everything I thought I knew was turned upside down."

Jessop flew back to Short Creek and confronted Lyle Jeffs. He told Lyle he wanted the authorization to go public

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ERIN SEGAL/REDFUX; TRENT NELSON; RICK BOWMER/AP IMAGES

cided God was on his side, and he didn't need it.

"I think the best way to look at this is organized crime, not religion," Jessop says. "This town is basically run by one family, and everyone here has always done their bidding. They've been able to hide behind the First Amendment, claiming religious rights to protect what they do. When you see it for what it really is, the Mafia, everything starts to make sense."

Like Jeffs himself, Jessop is a divisive character around town. Perhaps because he once headed the God Squad, there is some lingering distrust that Jessop has truly switched sides. The fact that he is still in contact with Lyle Jeffs, the de facto FLDS leader, only deepens the suspicion.

"Willie will always be Willie," says Brower, the private investigator who was instrumental in bringing Jeffs down. "He hasn't changed from when he was with Warren. He says he didn't know about the sex? Of course he knew. He was enabling it. Other than Warren Jeffs, he's the most corrupt guy in Short Creek."

Jessop knows people like Brower don't trust him, but he says that's of minor concern. "I get it, I was on one side one day, and now I'm on the other," Jessop tells me. "But that's this whole town. One day your neighbor won't talk to you because he thinks you're an apostate bound for hell, and the next he's calling you saying, 'Hey, how do I get out of this thing?'"

SPEND ANY TIME IN SHORT Creek and it's hard to escape the feeling that things are getting darker and scarier. When I visit, walls are going up everywhere we look. Passing by the meetinghouse - the Walmart-size church at the edge of town - Isaac Wyler points to a big cement wall; again, too high to see inside. The church was once the gathering place for the community. Now, either to prevent apostates from seeing what's going on inside, or just to put them in their place, the nonbelievers can't so much as look at the church; the only thing visible is the roof.

At this point, seemingly nothing can be done to repair the fractured town. Case in point: In September, a devastating flash flood ripped through town, killing 13 members of the church, including 10 children. It was one of the worst natural disasters in Utah history. At first, it seemed the tragedy could unite families. Nonbelievers and the faithful worked long into the night, digging through waist-high mud in search of those who had been swept away. The FLDS leadership even begrudgingly accepted help and donations from gentiles. But a few days into the search, the FLDS announced it didn't want any further help, and anyone who didn't belong to the church would not be welcomed at funerals, even if they were

family members of the victims. Many of the dead were secretly buried in order to ensure no outsiders were present.

From prison, Jeffs is further dividing the town by building a cell of hardened zealots that he has christened the United Order, essentially an elite group within the faith. All over town, Wyler points out the homes of United Order members as we drive. They're easy to spot: an olive wreath above the Zion sign, and more often than not, a bunkhouse or a cargo container in the yard.

"What's that for?" I ask Wyler.



Jeffs' Unholy Legacy

Above: Jeffs' ritualistic altar bed from his YFZ compound in Texas. Right: With his bride Merrienne Jessop, who was 12 at the time, in 2006. She is still married to him.

worthy to live with her husband. They were no longer members of the FLDS, but could still live in the community and turn their paychecks in to the church. "But we wouldn't be able to talk to each other or to anybody, we wouldn't be able to talk to our kids or see them," Thomas says.

Eventually, Thomas and his wife separated and left Short Creek. Now living in the Salt Lake area and working in IT support, Thomas tells me his wife and children are hoping the Jeffs brothers will allow them to return to the community. He calls his wife and children every day,



He says that if you're married to a United Order bride, you can't sleep under the same roof. "So the men get put outside," he adds. Jeffs has made all marriages null and void, explaining to the women of Short Creek that they are property of the priesthood. Even sleeping with your spouse is now considered adultery.

For those who decide to finally leave, the road can be harrowing. Ben Thomas and his family were exiled from the community three years ago, even though his wife and seven of his eight children had been in the United Order. "It was just, 'OK, this is another test, you have to pass this and move forward,'" Thomas tells me. "You live there 40-some-odd years, and if you screw up in the last year, that really sucks."

Gripped with guilt, his wife had begun writing confession letters to Lyle Jeffs, informing him of her perceived sins. Not long afterward, he told her that she wasn't

but they refuse to talk to him. "Some days I get on the speakerphone and tell them I love them," Thomas says. "I get about 10 seconds, and then the phone hangs up."

Like other people I talk to in Short Creek, Thomas is especially concerned about the rise of something called the seed bearers - perhaps the most disturbing of commands from the jailed FLDS prophet. According to former members who still have family inside, Jeffs has decreed that only men of a "royal bloodline" can reproduce, and only with women selected to the United Order. According to rumors, these men (there are said to be 15) are the seed bearers. To have a child,

women must eat a special detox diet and apply to Jeffs in prison. Husbands are made to watch these breeding sessions, in which seed bearers wear a hood, and a sheet is placed between the man and woman during intercourse to keep their identities secret. Any children born from these unions are put into hiding, likely at the FLDS network of secret compounds scattered throughout the West. They then become property of the church, with no knowledge of the identity of their parents. Several former members tell me they think Jeffs is trying to create a master race, loyal only to him.

Thomas' worst fear is that his oldest daughter, who has returned to Short Creek, will become a United Order bride. "At my low point, I was sitting there with a gun on my bed," he tells me. "The pain is quite unbearable."

It's a refrain I hear again and again. Virtually everyone I talk to in Short Creek knows at least one exiled family member who has committed suicide. Jessop says he has a brother who killed himself and an uncle who recently drove himself off Hurricane Hill after Jeffs dissolved his marriage and reassigned his family. Jessop tells me there were two to three suicides a month in the fall. These are the true casualties of the war over the town.

"They call them Lost Boys, but it's more than that," he says. "It's lost children, it's lost mothers, it's lost women, it's lost men. It's a lot of hurt, and the magnitude of it's beyond my ability to even describe."

BACK IN PHOENIX, THE LAWYER for the city of Hildale is trying to take Willie Jessop apart on the stand, pursuing a line of questioning that seems designed to get the jury to wonder if they can trust him. After all, here's a guy who repeatedly lied for the church. Is he telling the truth now? But Jessop holds his ground. "I never left the church," he says. "The church left me."

As strong as Jessop's testimony is, there's no telling what the jury will decide in the next few weeks. If the jury rules in favor of the DOJ, it is likely that Colorado City and Hildale would go into receivership, or possibly federal control. Nearby Hurricane, Utah, would take over police calls on the Utah side of the border, while police in Kingman, Arizona, would respond to calls coming from Arizona, even though it's a five-hour drive.

During my time in Short Creek, I tried to talk to FLDS members to get their perspective on what was happening in town. I stopped by the Jeffs' family compound, which takes up an entire block, but no one answered.

Hoping to meet with an official, I stopped by city hall, noticing the flag was at half-mast. When I asked why, I learned that it had been that way since Jeffs' incar-

ceration, perhaps the most powerful symbol I'd seen of who really runs Short Creek. Inside Hildale City Hall, I was met by an FLDS woman wearing a green prairie dress and an elaborate updo, who worked as a secretary. She told me the town manager wasn't there but took down my name and number. She seemed nervous to be talking to me, and eager to see me leave.

Eventually, I reached Blake Hamilton, a Salt Lake City attorney who represents the city of Hildale in the civil rights case brought by the DOJ. "What's happening here is very alarming," he tells me. "The federal government is doing exactly what they claim my client is doing, and that is discriminating on the basis of religion."

Hamilton says that contrary to stereotype, not all of the FLDS answer blindly to Warren Jeffs and that not all city officials belong to the church. What's at stake, Hamilton argues, is whether a town can

"Jeffs may take it to violence - he'd like nothing more than to go out in a blaze of glory like some Old Testament story."

govern itself. "This case has pretty far-reaching implications," says Jeff Matura, a Phoenix attorney representing Colorado City. "Because it's an effort by the federal government to eradicate a religion it doesn't like. If it happens in a community in northern Arizona with 10,000 people, it could happen anywhere."

There are rumors the FLDS plans to abandon the town, possibly spreading to compounds in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. If it does, it would be following a pattern established by Mormon founder Joseph Smith. Polygamy pushed Smith's flock from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City. In both places, they tried to establish a theocratic society they called Zion, until it collapsed. The FLDS appears to be following the same script.

But it seems that no matter where they go, the faithful will continue to answer to Jeffs, seeking meaning in his apocalyptic pronouncements. Even as a boy, Jeffs saw himself as messianic, believing the blood of Christ coursed through him. Ironically, his lasting legacy may be the destruction of the very cult that gave him birth. Criminal charges against the remaining FLDS leadership (nine church elders are already in prison with Jeffs) could possibly follow, depending on the jury's verdict. "He imploded this religion," Jessop says.

While the DOJ has alleged that Jeffs continues to run the cult from jail, there's

not much they can do to stop him. On the stand, Jessop says that Jeffs would send encrypted letters to Short Creek that only three of his wives could decode, and these orders were then passed on to the faithful. His wives also visited him while wearing watches equipped with recording devices, taping his commands. And when all else failed, he relayed instructions through his battery of well-paid defense attorneys, financed by the tithing of his humble followers.

Still, despite his status as prophet, Jeffs lives in humiliating conditions compared with his former life. He spends almost all of his time alone in a cell deep in the pine forests of Palestine, Texas. Segregated from the general population, he never interacts with other inmates, even during the rare times he leaves his cell to walk around the yard. Mostly, he sits alone, reading letters from his followers and scribbling revelations. At one point, he was praying so much that open wounds began to fester on his knees, and prison officials had to chain him to the wall, forcing him to stand.

Not long ago, Brower visited him in prison to assist in a deposition. Stopped and graying, Jeffs was no longer the towering figure who had once inspired fear in his followers. His skin now ghostly pale, he looked weak and feeble. Jeffs refused to answer a single question investigators asked that day, Brower says, quietly asserting his Fifth Amendment rights again and again.

"He's got a boatload of mental illnesses," Brower says. "I believe he's schizophrenic, that he really hears voices."

And yet, Jeffs' power over his followers in Short Creek remains absolute.

"The control he has is monumental," Brower says. "I still worry deeply that he'll take it to some kind of violence, some kind of bloodshed, because what does he have to lose? He's in prison, and I think he'd like nothing more than to go out in a blaze of glory like some Old Testament story."

Not long after my last visit to Short Creek, I hear about an alarming prophecy that Jeffs has recently issued from jail. The end of the world is coming, and soon. It's a prophecy he has made many times before. In fact, he had once predicted the world would end at the dawn of the new millennium, and had selected a few families to go out into a field known as Berry Knoll on New Year's Eve in 1999 to be "lifted up" as the pestilence and plagues rolled forth upon the land. FLDS apostates still laugh about it.

But it turns out Jeffs had been right back then, he just hadn't realized one important detail: Man's calendar is 16 years different from God's. The world will in fact end as Jeffs had predicted, and God has even given him a date: April 2016.

The faithful need to get ready. Only the most loyal will survive. **ES**