

2017

## On Trial: The Branch Davidians of Waco Texas 1987-1993

Andrew Michael Pedrotti  
*Wright State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd\\_all](https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd_all)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Pedrotti, Andrew Michael, "On Trial: The Branch Davidians of Waco Texas 1987-1993" (2017). *Browse all Theses and Dissertations*. 1733.

[https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd\\_all/1733](https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd_all/1733)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Browse all Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact [library-corescholar@wright.edu](mailto:library-corescholar@wright.edu).

ON TRIAL: THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS OF WACO, TEXAS 1987-1993

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

By

ANDREW MICHAEL PEDROTTI  
B.A., Wright State University 2011

2017  
Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

May 4, 2017

I HEARBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER  
MY SUPERVISION BY Andrew Michael Pedrotti ENTITLED On Trial: The Branch Davidians  
of Waco 1987-1993 BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Arts.

---

Nancy Garner, Ph.D.  
Thesis Director

---

Jonathan Winkler Ph.D.  
Chair, Department of History

Committee on  
Final Examination

---

Nancy Garner, Ph.D.

---

Jacob Dorn, Ph.D.

---

Ava Chamberlain, Ph.D.

---

Robert E.W. Fyffe, Ph.D.  
Vice President for Research and  
Dean of the Graduate School

## ABSTRACT

Pedrotti, Andrew Michael. M.A. Department of History. Wright State University, 2017.  
On Trial: The Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas.

This study examines the integration of the Branch Davidians into the Waco, Texas community during the years immediately preceding the BATF siege of 1993. An examination of media and biographical sources indicates that the Branch Davidians were better integrated in the community than is commonly suggested. Survivor accounts describe the Branch Davidians working and relaxing in Waco, rather than hiding in their compound. A survey of local newspaper coverage reveals that the press in Waco had a positive view of Koresh and the Branch Davidians in the late 1980s. In particular, coverage of a 1988 trial involving David Koresh and his followers in the Waco Tribune Herald was markedly more positive than the later and more famous coverage of the group in 1993.

## CONTENTS

Introduction, Historiography and Methods.....	1
Chapter 1: National media exposure of the Branch Davidians. The Cult Stereotype.....	11
Chapter 2: The Branch Davidians of Waco Before 1987.....	20
Chapter 3: Trial and Coverage 1988.....	30
Chapter 4: Comparison Between 1987-88 and 1993.....	47
Chapter 5: Biographical Sources.....	64
Conclusion.....	74

## INTRODUCTION, HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHODS

In the early spring of 1993 an armed standoff outside the city of Waco, Texas captured the attention of the nation. On one side of the standoff were members of federal law enforcement: The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. On the other side was a small and obscure religious group who called themselves Branch Davidians. They were heavily armed and determined to bar entry into their home. The standoff started on February 28 with an armed “dynamic entry” style assault on the Mount Carmel Complex by the BATF, and it ended horrifically on April 19 when, in the midst of another assault, fire engulfed the complex killing seventy-six people and leaving only sixteen survivors. Throughout the standoff, the national media reported what happened and as a result the men and women of the Branch Davidian church and their leader David Koresh became household names. Over the course of the standoff, the Branch Davidians became known as a doomsday suicide cult associated with militant gun violence, sexual perversion, child abuse, brainwashing and religious deviance.

According to the prevalent narrative, when the news broke on February 28 about the BATF raid and the deaths that ensued, the people of Waco looked around them and said, “Well, who are these crazies?” just like the rest of America. The local paper, the *Waco Tribune Herald*, was in the middle of an in-depth series of articles called “The Sinful Messiah” which exposed the evils of the Branch Davidians and their nefarious

leader, David Koresh, who, in every way, lived up to their stereotype of a “cult leader.” The *Herald's* series described the Branch Davidians as heavily armed fanatics who had been brainwashed to kill and die for their leader. Duly warned about the sudden and unprecedented danger in their midst, the people of Waco watched the events unfold outside of their town along with the rest of the nation, baffled and angry that such a thing could happen.

The problem with this summary of events is that it is not true. While somewhat isolated by geography and by their own communal lifestyle, the Branch Davidians had been a part of the Waco community for almost sixty years. In February 1993 there were over one hundred people living at the Mount Carmel Center. They had worked and relaxed and performed alongside the people of the city. They had gone to college there. They worked as roofers, nurses and musicians. They caused their share of petty trouble for the city government. There are streets in Waco named after members of the church, and a local school uses buildings that were part of the former Mount Carmel Center, which the Branch Davidians sold in the 1950s when they relocated outside of town.

Sources confirm this integration. In particular, local media reports surrounding a sensational attempted murder trial involving the Branch Davidians portrayed the group as harmless and interesting, if eccentric, neighbors. Reports described Koresh as a minister/musician, a rock and roll preacher whose millennial rhetoric involved raising the consciousness of the nation through music. His followers formed a poor but peaceful commune scraping out an existence in exile, hoping that they would be restored to their true home at Mount Carmel. The children of the community were well taken care of, and

the women of the community lived simple lives free from ostentation or pretension.

These reports never referred to the Branch Davidians as a cult.

This is important considering that this positive view of Koresh and his followers arose in the middle of a trial in which Koresh and several of his closest friends were accused of the attempted murder of George Roden. Roden was the leader of the Branch Davidian faction which lived at Mount Carmel in 1987 and that had successfully ousted Vernon Howell, who would later change his name to David Koresh, and his followers in 1985. Allegedly, Roden had exhumed a body that had been interred at the cemetery at Mount Carmel. He then challenged Howell to a contest of resurrection to see who should lead the community. Rather than take Roden up on his challenge, Howell and several others attempted to sneak onto the Mount Carmel property to take pictures of the exhumed body so that they could get the local authorities to charge Roden with desecration of a corpse. Roden caught the intruders and a gun battle ensued in which he was shot in the hand. Howell and several followers were then arrested and brought to trial.

The conflict between Roden and Howell interested the local media due to its lurid nature and odd personalities. Due to a history of erratic behavior, local authorities thought Roden unstable. He was immediately cast by the media in the role of the “bad guy” and therefore, perhaps by default, Koresh and his followers became the good guys. This depiction of the Branch Davidians in 1988 was starkly different from the later and more famous images that characterized the coverage in 1993. Despite this, the 1988 trial and the local coverage that accompanied it have been ignored by scholars analyzing the Branch Davidian movement.

The 1993 fire that ended the standoff between the FBI and the Branch Davidians was a horrific tragedy and one that unfolded live on television in a way that such tragedies rarely had before. Of the ninety-two people inside the Mount Carmel compound on the morning of April 19, seventy-six were killed. Responsibility for the fire has proven the focus for most scholarship on the Branch Davidians, although that trend has changed as the human faces and stories from the tragedy become more and more important to those attempting to make sense of the sad events of 1993. Immediately following the fire, quickly written popular works describing the Branch Davidians and the standoff at the Mount Carmel Center began to appear. These works tend to support the already dominant media narrative of brainwashing, cult behavior and mass suicide. Properly researched scholarly monographs were slower to arrive.

Scholarship on the Branch Davidians of Mount Carmel falls into three broad, overlapping categories. There are scholars who attempt to defend the Branch Davidian beliefs and to normalize their religious experience in the face of a demonizing media. These tend to be critical of both the media and law enforcement. There are scholars who react to this first position who, while preserving the rejection of the cult label, argue that the main media narrative of mass suicide is, in fact, the most likely cause of the Waco tragedy. Then there are scholars who work to the side of this main debate and concentrate on preserving the stories of the survivors. These are not clear distinct groups. Humanization of the Branch Davidians and rejection of the cult label, for instance, is present in most scholarly work on the group.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Examples of these trends can be found in the work of James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher, as well as that of Kenneth Newport. In particular the books *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* by Tabor and Gallagher and *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* by Newport.

None of this is to say that David Koresh and his followers were entirely benign or that there was no truth to the accusations made against them either in the media or in the courtroom. Under Koresh, whose millennial rhetoric had grown darker and more confrontational in the years before the BATF siege, the Branch Davidians had begun to stockpile high powered weapons. Koresh himself, while requiring celibacy from the men of Mount Carmel, slept with any female member of the group that he pleased, including some who were below the age of consent. In 1988, when Koresh became the undisputed leader of the movement, he began to make these changes to the Branch Davidian system. Despite this, most scholars agree that the Branch Davidians were not a cult. Koresh's leadership did not change this fact, though his sexual predation both alienated and endangered church members.

As will be seen, the stereotypes about the Branch Davidians come from a combination of public ideas about cults and cult leaders with the atrocity tales told by former members of the movement who were alienated by the sexual restructuring that occurred under Koresh. That the Branch Davidians lived in a way that was well outside of the mainstream is beyond argument. Despite this, however, they were a functional part of the Waco community and the kind of vilification that occurred just before and during the BATF standoff was deeply uncharacteristic of the established relationship that the people of Mount Carmel had with the rest of their community. That relationship had not been without its problems. The Branch Davidians were, after all, men and women with Seventh Day Adventist roots who lived on a commune in the middle of an area of Texas that was predominantly Baptist and anti-communist, but the relationship had remained, for the most part, benign. In the early 1990s that relationship changed. For a

variety of reasons, local media and law enforcement began to view the Branch Davidians as a dangerous cult.

This study examines media reporting on the Branch Davidians prior to the 1993 standoff and utilizes autobiographical sources to demonstrate that the people of Mount Carmel were both better known among the people of Waco and were also better integrated into the community than is commonly described. Under Koresh's leadership, the Branch Davidians engaged in some social practices that were far outside the American mainstream. Koresh himself engaged in criminal abuse of underage girls. These problems remained private, however, and did not stop the Branch Davidians from being part of the Waco community.

Starting in 1992, local media organizations began talking to ex-members of the Branch Davidians with grudges against Koresh and to national anti-cult organizations such as the Cult Awareness Network. The former members gave a sometimes sensational view of what was happening inside Mount Carmel, including Koresh's alleged child abuse. The anti-cult organizations explained to the reporters and researchers at the *Waco Tribune Herald* that the Branch Davidians were a cult. Simultaneously, the BATF was investigating the Branch Davidians' purchases of guns, trying to determine if they had illegally modified any of them. The combination of these two factors created a media image of the Branch Davidians that was drastically different from previous reporting and functionally exiled them from the Waco community. This exile occurred just a few days before the BATF raid that started the 1993 siege.

The national media descended upon Waco when the BATF raid ended in tragedy and the FBI siege that followed showed no sign of a quick and easy resolution. The press

did not treat the city kindly, portraying Waco as a hopelessly backward and provincial place where the people were religiously crazy and everyone had a gun. The people and the government of “Wacko” Texas have been fighting this unfair stereotype ever since. Part of this effort to rejuvenate the city’s image involved the functional exile of the Branch Davidians, stripping them of their traditional place in the community.

The relationship between the Branch Davidians and the community around them is important for several reasons. The Waco standoff and the subsequent tragedy made a significant impact upon American culture. The persistent conviction that the climactic fire on April 19th was not an accident or an act of religious suicide, but was instead set by agents of the United States government, has permeated American right-wing extremist culture, fueling conspiracy theories and anti-government rhetoric. As Patricia Ward Wallace writes in her history of Waco: “Waco ceased to be a place name and became an Alamo for anti-government extremists, a rallying cry for the tragedies that followed at Ruby Ridge and Oklahoma City.”<sup>2</sup>

The Waco standoff and the perceived missteps on the part of Federal law enforcement have provoked debate among scholars and teachers of negotiating tactics as well as various government studies of what went wrong during the siege.<sup>3</sup> The role of the media during the standoff also received scrutiny. In addition, scholars still debate the role that the Sinful Messiah series played in moving public opinion against the Branch Davidians.

---

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Ward Wallace, “Waco: A Sesquicentennial History” (Virginia Beach: The Donning Company, 1999.), 163.

<sup>3</sup> Of note on this topic is Jayne Seminare Docherty’s book *Learning Lessons from Waco: When the Parties Bring their Gods to the Negotiating Table*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.)

Finally, the issue of how socially accepted and integrated into the community the Branch Davidians were is important because of how it frames the way the lives and deaths of the people of Mount Carmel must be regarded. If there was an established and ongoing relationship between the Branch Davidians and the larger Waco community, then the question of how they came to be viewed with such venom shifts. No longer must it be asked how a group can be introduced to the public as a sudden and mysterious menace in their midst, but instead it must be asked how a group that has been a part of the community for decades can be transformed from strange, mildly interesting and ultimately harmless people into a threat that warrants an immediate and violent response.

As it sets aside the question of the immediate causes of the 1993 fire and instead concentrates upon the relationship between the church members of Mount Carmel and the larger community around them, this study embraces the humanizing trend of scholarship. That is not to say that the question of how the Branch Davidians fit among the people of Waco is irrelevant to the tragedy of April 19. Scholars have pointed to local and national coverage of the Branch Davidian standoff as a contributing factor to how the siege played out. In particular, they argue that the vilification of the Mount Carmel people, especially Koresh, in the media, was a factor.<sup>4</sup> How this media portrayal of the Branch Davidians changed and how they were made into pariahs is important. To answer this question, it must first be determined how the people of Waco had viewed the Branch Davidians before the siege and how that view had changed over time. It appears that the idea that the Branch Davidians were a cult, rather than simply an odd religious group, is essential

---

<sup>4</sup> James T. Richardson, "Manufacturing Consent about Koresh: A Structural Analysis of the Role of Media in the Waco Tragedy." In *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, edited by Stuart A. Wright, 153-76. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 155.

to that shift. This shift occurred due to several factors, including the efforts of ex-members of the Branch Davidians who had a grudge against Koresh, changing views of cults in the media and among the American public, and significant changes to the social structures and theology of the Branch Davidians themselves.

To establish the relationship between the Branch Davidians and the community of Waco in the decade leading up to the BATF standoff, I have consulted a variety of sources. These sources include government documents relating to the siege, court documents relating to the 1987 trial and other legal issues and articles from local media. In addition, interviews, correspondence and memoirs from the Branch Davidians and those who knew them have proven invaluable to this study. I have also consulted secondary literature on the Branch Davidians, new religious groups, and apocalyptic groups in particular.

The Texas Collection archive at Baylor University was an invaluable resource and many of the documents cited here come from their shelves. Of note are the *Waco Herald Tribune* archive and the various collections of documents and correspondence relating to the Branch Davidians, especially the Joe Roberts Collection. The Baylor Department of Oral History provided transcriptions of interviews with Branch Davidian members as well as some of the people they worked with, including Judge Bill C. Logue and Gary G. Coker, who was the lawyer for the Branch Davidians throughout the late 1980s.

Government documents, including the Danforth Report, which were the result of the federal government inquiry into the causes of the fire at Mount Carmel, were obtained either from government sources or through the Texas Collection. Documents from the BATF and from Waco law enforcement regarding the siege were obtained through the

Texas Collection library. The memoirs of Clive Doyle, Bonnie Haldeman and David Thibodeau, each of whom survived the 1993 fire, were published with the aid of Catharine Wessinger, Matthew D. Wittmer and Leon Whiteson. Histories and analyses by James Tabor, Eugene Gallagher, Kenneth Newport and Jayne Seminaire Docherty were instrumental in putting together the broader story of the Branch Davidian movement.

## CHAPTER 1: NATIONAL MEDIA EXPOSURE OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS. THE CULT STEREOTYPE

The general facts of what happened at Mount Carmel in the spring of 1993 are well established. On February 28, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms attempted a “dynamic entry” style assault on the Mount Carmel Complex. This meant that the BATF planned to assault the Mount Carmel Complex with a large number of armed agents and force entry without warning or negotiation. This action was in the interest of serving a warrant granted to the BATF to find and recover caches of illegal firearms that they suspected the Branch Davidians possessed. The BATF determined that the dynamic entry style approach was necessary in order to prevent the Branch Davidians from hiding or getting rid of the firearms in question. The assault on the compound resulted in a pitched gun battle between the BATF agents and members of the Branch Davidians. Four agents of the BATF and five members of the Branch Davidians were killed in the firefight.<sup>5</sup>

There followed a protracted negotiation and siege of the Mount Carmel center that lasted until April 19. Law enforcement officers surrounded Mount Carmel and prevented anyone from entering or leaving the complex. During this period, the FBI took over the standoff and introduced a variety of negotiation and coercion tactics to force the Branch Davidians to leave the compound. Over the course of the next month, some members of

---

<sup>5</sup>Ward Wallace, 162.

the Branch Davidians did choose to leave Mount Carmel, particularly those with children, but many, including Koresh and his family, remained. On April 19, a fire broke out in the Mount Carmel center amid a renewed FBI assault using tanks to breach the compound walls and insert CS gas to force the Branch Davidians to leave. The fire spread quickly and seventy-six Branch Davidians died.

The BATF invited members of various media outlets to report the initial assault of February 28 as it happened.<sup>6</sup> After the disastrous initial assault, reporters from all over the country descended upon Waco, and the Branch Davidians became a source for relentless media speculation. The characterization of the Branch Davidians in this deluge of reporting was almost exclusively negative.

A survey of media outlets compiled by Chad E. Litton in 1994 found that while there were certain differences in the ways that national media companies portrayed the Branch Davidians, depending upon the media source's political affiliations, there was broad agreement on the way in which the Branch Davidians were presented.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the classification of the Branch Davidians as a cult, as a group of brainwashed followers with little volition at the mercy of a manipulative leader, and as an apocalyptic or doomsday group was nearly universal.

Cult is a difficult word to define to the satisfaction of scholars of sociology and religion. Where once a group that was largely informal, outside of mainstream culture and centered around a charismatic leader would be referred to as a cult, as opposed to a

---

<sup>6</sup> James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher. *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, Kindle Edition. 1997.) location 46.

<sup>7</sup> Chad E. Litton. *The Creation of a Cult: Media Representations of the Branch Davidians*. 31.

sect or a church, terms which implied a larger religious body, the term took on a more negative connotation in the decades before the siege of the Mount Carmel Center.<sup>8</sup> The term cult is found throughout media reports on the Branch Davidians and throughout the popular literature that quickly appeared after the fire. By 1993, the term cult used to refer to any religious group that appears to be sinister or bizarre.<sup>9</sup> Anti-cult advocates and popular media often portray cults as being led by men or women who prey upon the credulous, using a variety of brainwashing techniques to ensure fanatical obedience. Bolstering this stereotype are the actions and publications of cult busters, people who make their living by rescuing and “deprogramming” those who have been caught in the clutches of a sinister cult.<sup>10</sup>

Cult were seen as a “deadly social problem” and had several characteristics in common. They generally feature “a megalomaniacal leader, brainwashed victims and an inherent propensity for violence directed both against those within and outside the group.” This image of cults was driven by anti-cult organizations which had successfully influenced public opinion on the topic.<sup>11</sup>

This nearly universal portrayal of the Branch Davidians as a cult strips the movement of any religious legitimacy. The cult label neatly implies both zealotry and irrationality. James T. Richardson argues that this characterization was essential to the

---

<sup>8</sup> James T. Richardson. “Definition of Cult: From Social-Technical to Popular-Negative,” *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (June 1993): 348-355.

<sup>9</sup> cult, n.". OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu> (accessed November 16, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Tabor and Gallagher, loc 1806.

<sup>11</sup> Tabor and Gallagher, loc 1876.

events that unfolded in the spring of 1993.<sup>12</sup> Richardson describes the “thoroughgoing contempt” for new religious movements as a “powerful weapon to be used against groups thought to be deviant by some.”<sup>13</sup> Established societies tend to be wary of and hostile toward new religious movements, and these movements are often described as cults to undermine them and turn public opinion against them. Religions that do not fit the standard mold of a new religious movement can be made into one by describing it as a cult.<sup>14</sup> Without the dehumanization of the cult label, the actions that were taken by law enforcement to deal with the Branch Davidians would not have been possible.

One way in which the Branch Davidians actually were outsiders in Waco was geographically. While many in the community worked in town, the Mount Carmel Center was in the scrub land outside of the city. This physical removal made later claims that the Branch Davidians were generally outsiders easier to believe. In addition, the increasing hostility of the Wacoan community in late 1992 and early 1993 was not lost on the Branch Davidian members, and they became more insular as a result. This served to further reinforce the image of the people of the Mount Carmel Center as secretive and separate.

In the public mind, cults have certain characteristics: they are alien, dangerous, secretive and isolationist. Cults are hostile to the world around them and that hostility is part of what makes them dangerous. Cults and their leaders wish to seduce young people into their ranks and then brainwash them into mindless automatons ready to die or kill at

---

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Richardson, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, 156.

the command of their leader.<sup>15</sup> Once the people of Waco and of the United States accepted this portrayal, generating sympathy for the Branch Davidians became difficult. If the Branch Davidians were a cult, they were a particularly troubling one because by 1993 they had amassed a large cache of high powered firearms. The combination of the guns and the cult label created a public boogey-man, a tragedy waiting to happen.

Scholars who have studied the Branch Davidian movement have emphatically refuted the portrayal of the movement as consisting of brainwashed dupes of Koresh. Kenneth Newport points out that Branch Davidian members were generally serious students of the Bible, strong willed and often very well educated.<sup>16</sup> Education and will do not render one immune to making poor decisions, of course, but the popular image of the Branch Davidian as uncritical and passive is undermined by the biographies of those who were members of the movement as well as by scholarly analysis.

It is true that in Waco's local media and particularly in the *Waco Tribune Herald* paper, characterizations of the Branch Davidians that suggested "brainwashed" and "cultic" behavior are found as early as the mid-1980s. At that point, however, the *Herald* implied rather than baldly stated these ideas and this was characteristic of only a small minority of the reporting on the Branch Davidians. The cultic characterization is brought to full fruition in the 1993 "Sinful Messiah" series. The series, which was meant to be

---

<sup>15</sup> This characterization of 'cult' behavior and structure was found throughout the "Sinful Messiah" reporting in the *Waco Tribune Herald*. See also James T. Richardson "Manufacturing Consent about Koresh: A Structural Analysis of the Role of Media in the Waco Tragedy." and Stuart A. Wright "Construction and Escalation of a Cult Threat." Both articles found in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, edited by Stuart A. Wright. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Newport, Kenneth G. C. *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.) 4.

published in seven parts, began just before the BATF raid of February twenty-eighth. The BATF had asked the *Waco Tribune Herald* to delay the publication until after the raid, but the *Herald* refused.<sup>17</sup> This series broke from previous reporting about the Branch Davidians in that the authors repeatedly referred to the Branch Davidians as a cult, rather than as a “religious commune” or “church” as they had in the past. The Sinful Messiah series characterized the followers of Koresh as brainwashed and dangerously fanatic. Sources for the series were generally alienated former Branch Davidians and cult experts and deprogrammers.

Other well-established negative characterizations of the Branch Davidians involved accusations of child abuse, both physical and sexual. Law enforcement and culture generally take child abuse allegations very seriously. Widespread media reports of children being beaten as part of discipline appear to have been under-investigated at the time.<sup>18</sup> These accusations were made by disgruntled former members and family members outside of the Branch Davidians in 1991 and 1992. Children’s Protective Services investigated the Mount Carmel center in the years leading up to the BATF siege, but found no evidence that children had been beaten. In contrast, however, a variety of sources, including ex-members of the Branch Davidians generally supportive of David Koresh and his policies, report that the religious leader had sex with underage girls. David Koresh’s penchant for sex with underage members of his religious community was

---

<sup>17</sup> Lott, Bob, “About Our Series on Mount Carmel.” *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 1, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher G. Ellison and John P. Bartowski. “Babies Were Being Beaten’: Exploring Child Abuse Allegations at Ranch Apocalypse.” In *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, edited by Stuart A. Wright, 111-51. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 137.

among the primary accusations leveled against him by the press. It was also one of the most effective means of turning public opinion against the Branch Davidians.

In the same way, the association between the Branch Davidians and guns was indisputable. It was also fairly recent, as even a decade before the standoff the idea of members of the Branch Davidians carrying firearms would have been unheard of. Many members of the Branch Davidians came from pacifistic backgrounds. Donnie Adair recalls that when he joined the Branch Davidians in the 1950s, Ben Roden, the community's leader at the time, required that he resign from the Naval Reserve and become a conscientious objector because "it was wrong to kill people."<sup>19</sup> The introduction of guns into the Mount Carmel culture was connected to the struggle for leadership between Vernon Howell and George Roden during the middle of the 1980s. After Koresh became the group's undisputed leader, the Branch Davidians began to make bulk purchases of high powered firearms. A general interest in firearms eventually grew into a gun, ammo and survival paraphernalia business that became a reliable source of income, and of high powered weapons, for the people of Mount Carmel.

Law enforcement suspected an associate of the Branch Davidians of dealing drugs. This is one of the reasons given in the 1992 request for a search warrant to examine the Mount Carmel Center. The association of the Branch Davidians and drug sale and manufacture seems to come from the era before David Koresh took over the movement and was linked to George Roden's tenure as the community's prophet. Allegedly George Roden allowed a group of men to use part of the Mount Carmel

---

<sup>19</sup> Oral Memoirs of Donnie Wayne Adair, Interview by Glenn Jonas and Daniel B McGee, August 20 1993-April 6 1994. Religion and Culture Project, Baylor Institute of Oral History, Baylor University, Waco Texas. 2005.9.

property to produce methamphetamine, though this accusation was made in the context of a bitter dispute for leadership among the Branch Davidians.

As will be shown, the idea that Koresh could display uncanny control over his flock was reported in the *Waco Tribune Herald* during the coverage of the 1988 trial. Despite this, the idea that the Branch Davidians were brainwashed or fanatic is absent from the trial coverage. George Roden made reference to Koresh's use of drugs, brainwashing and fear to ensure compliance from Lois Roden, George's mother and the community's former prophet. The more lurid accusations about Koresh, however, never made it into the *Herald*. As we will see, few regarded Roden as a reliable source on Koresh's behavior and his accusations went largely ignored.

Each of these negative images of the Branch Davidian movement would become more pronounced after the end of February 1993, but were present in media sources and in statements made to law enforcement and the courts of McLennan county in 1987 and 1988. These elements failed to cohere in the way that they did five years later, when media reports depicted the Branch Davidians as a public danger. In 1987 and 1988, the image of Koresh's faction of the Branch Davidians in the *Herald* was largely positive. When seen through the eyes of local media, the relationship between the Branch Davidians and the rest of Waco was tolerable. It was not without its problems, but the fact that the Branch Davidians owed back taxes to the County and had an almost comically strange leader seemed to be the extent of the negative comments on the group.

The way in which the 1988 trial played out in the public eye is, in fact, reminiscent of the later coverage of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in 1993, but in reverse. In 1987, Vernon Howell was a leader in exile, having been ousted from Mount

Carmel as part of an ongoing dispute with George Roden, his rival for leadership. Howell led a small group of loyalists who lived outside nearby Palestine, Texas. At that time, Koresh was the outsider “good guy” member of the movement and the *Herald* portrayed George Roden, the leader and prophet for those Branch Davidians who still lived at Mount Carmel, as the “crazy man.” In 1993, when various apostate members of David Koresh’s flock came forward to expose the evils of their leader, Koresh was placed by the media firmly into the position which had been Roden’s: that of a madman and a religious wacko. In both situations, the media uncritically reported accusations made by the outsider group against established Branch Davidian leadership. It is worth noting, however, that while the *Herald* was quite critical of Roden in 1987 and 1988, they never portrayed him as a cult leader.

## CHAPTER 2: THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS OF WACO BEFORE 1987

The Branch Davidians had never been a particularly visible part of Waco. This is not strange as the people of the Mount Carmel center tended to evangelize exclusively among Seventh Day Adventist groups rather than to the public at large. They were a small community, their numbers fluctuating but rarely numbering more than one hundred members. They were insular in that they lived communally, and while many of the Branch Davidians had jobs in Waco that took them regularly off the Mount Carmel property, others lived and worked at home and so rarely interacted with outsiders. Despite this, the Branch Davidians were hardly an invisible presence in the city. Some of their members who worked in town had fairly visible jobs, such as nursing and even bartending. Vernon Howell regularly went to Waco with some of his followers to attend shows and to play music. Those who did know them, their neighbors, those they worked with and who knew them from town, tended to think of the Branch Davidians as a small and somewhat peculiar “religious commune.”

The history of the Branch Davidians in Waco extends back into the 1930s when the group’s founder, Victor Houteff, bought a parcel of land on the shore of Lake Waco and built the original Mount Carmel Center. Eventually, the group relocated outside of town, but their legacy remained. From streets in the city named after prominent Davidians to the “Doomsday” clock mosaic set into the floor of a local school, the people of Mount Carmel left their mark. The relationship between the Branch Davidians and the

rest of Waco did not end with the group's relocation. Members continued to work, shop and relax in town, and while they were always a little distant, they were not as isolated or secretive as popularly portrayed.

Ridicule of new and fringe religious movements in media and in the public square is hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, some of the Branch Davidian's religious forebears had to endure the same kind of ridicule and dehumanizing rhetoric. Apocalyptic groups seem to draw attention and consternation from the mainstream world, and it is easy to mock and dismiss any group that is labeled a cult.

The Branch Davidians trace their origins to a mid-nineteenth century movement led by William Miller, a man who famously predicted that the end of the world would occur on or around the year 1843.<sup>20</sup> Despite gathering many followers, Miller's ideas were routinely mocked by the press, particularly after 1843 came and went without the world ending. This "Great Disappointment" might have spelled the end of the Millerite movement, but prominent followers of Miller instead transformed the remains into what would become the Seventh Day Adventist church, a church that today has millions of members throughout the world.

The Branch Davidians are a splinter group of the Seventh Day Adventist church and many of the ideas that characterize the SDA are also found in the theology of the Branch Davidians. In addition to both groups keeping a Saturday Sabbath, there are other points of similarity, the most important of which are the belief that the end of the world is near, the belief in ongoing revelation, and the self-characterization of both groups as "remnant" communities.

---

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh Day Adventism and the American Dream*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.) 2.

Disheartened by the Great Disappointment, the early leaders of the Seventh Day Adventists, while endorsing the idea that the end of the world was near, did not predict a concrete date for the event. This was true for the Branch Davidians as well. The people of Mount Carmel thought that they were in the midst of prophecy, that they were living out the drama of the end of days illustrated by their interpretation of the Bible and the revelations of their leaders. They did not, however, give concrete dates for when the pivotal events of this drama were to occur. The only exception to this was Florence Houteff, the wife of Victor Houteff who led the Davidians as prophet following her husband's death. She predicted that a great war in the Middle East that was to inaugurate the end of time would occur in 1959. When the predicted event did not occur, it resulted in Houteff losing her flock and the mantle of prophethood to Ben Roden.

The SDA and the Branch Davidians both believe themselves to be a pure and uncorrupted remnant of the true, original church set up by Christ on earth, in contrast to other "Christian" communities. This is important as it is connected to each group's end of the world beliefs. If the Branch Davidians are the true remnant, then it follows that the apocalyptic prophecies regarding the church in the last days are about their small community specifically rather than about the Christian world generally. This provides a focus and urgency to apocalyptic stories because they will unfold in such a way as to place the believer's immediate community at the center of events.

Finally, belief in ongoing revelation is essential to Branch Davidian theology. The idea that the church's leadership has been passed down through a succession of latter-day prophets is at the core of their apocalyptic understanding. This prophetic line passed through Ellen White, the SDA prophet, eventually reaching Victor Houteff, the

founder of the Davidians. After Victor Houteff's death in 1955, his wife Florence took up the mantle of prophecy and leadership, though she was ousted after her prediction of the end in 1959 proved inaccurate. Lois Houteff was replaced by Ben Roden, who led the Branch Davidians as prophet until his death in 1978. After that his wife Lois Roden took control of the movement but not without challenge from her son George, who saw himself as the anointed successor to his father. Eventually the mantle of prophet would be assumed by Vernon Howell. Once he was the undisputed leader of the Branch Davidians, Howell would legally change his name to David Koresh, to better represent his understanding of his prophetic role.

Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian born entrepreneur and the leader of the Davidian movement, founded the first Mount Carmel Center on the shores of Lake Waco in 1935. Houteff had joined the SDA church as an adult in the United States but his developing beliefs about prophecy started to alienate him from the larger church. Houteff outlined his beliefs in a publication that he called *The Shepard's Rod*. The early followers of Houteff came to be called the Shepard's Rod movement and they moved further and further from the accepted theology of the SDA. They were finally disfellowshipped in 1930. The group was formally named The General Association of Davidian Seventh Day Adventists in 1943. Houteff would define the "essential lines of the movement... it would remain millenarian, Sabbatarian, authoritarian and communal."<sup>21</sup> Strong central control and communal organization, two features which would make the Branch Davidians seem more cultic in 1993, were part of the movement from its beginning.

---

<sup>21</sup> "The Davidian Tradition" Nov. 1993. [The Bill Pitts Papers, Box 1, Folder 7] The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

Waco was founded on the banks of the Brazos River in 1841. In 1935, when the Davidians arrived, it was a modest city that was economically devastated by the Great Depression's impact upon cotton production.<sup>22</sup> Waco remained mired in the depression until World War II when the US Air Force opened training bases in the area. Economic life in the region then began to improve, aided by the Rural Electrification Act which allowed Waco farmers to use modern farming equipment. The population of the city also increased, reaching 84,706 by the war's end.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Waco was known as the "City with a soul" due to the large number of churches located there.<sup>23</sup> Baptist and Methodist churches were the most common. Waco is something of a Baptist city due to the large number of Baptist residents and the presence of Baylor University, the largest Baptist university in the world. In her correspondence, Amo Bishop Roden, who had been the wife of George Roden, quotes what she calls an old adage that Waco is "One tall building surrounded by Baptists."<sup>24</sup> In later years, members of the Branch Davidians would express feelings of alienation and persecution arising from the fact that they were not part of this Baptist mainstream.

Twelve church members representing seven families settled in Waco at the Mount Carmel Center on May 24, 1935.<sup>25</sup> Houteff quickly moved to organize the new community along what he considered to be biblical lines. The result was a church

---

<sup>22</sup> Ward Wallace, 109.

<sup>23</sup> Ward Wallace, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Amo Roden to McLennan County Court, undated, [Robert F. Darden Collection, Box 1, Folder 18] The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

<sup>25</sup> Newport, 56.

emphatically communal in character. In 1937, he instituted what was called the “second tithe,” a tax of sorts on the community that went toward educating the community’s children and paying the hospital bills of members.<sup>26</sup> By 1938, 125 residents lived at Mount Carmel.

The theology of Victor Houteff’s movement was complex and relied heavily upon a typological approach to the Bible.<sup>27</sup> In brief, this method of analysis assumes that passages in the Bible contain secret double meanings and that those meanings can be understood through study and by comparison with other, seemingly unrelated passages. This tool was important to Houteff and his successors in framing their understanding of the apocalypse. His reading of the Bible found correlative verses that revealed prophecies about the end times that went beyond a comparatively straightforward analysis of the normal apocalyptic books of the Bible.

Important elements of the Bible such as places, characters and events, correlated with future equivalents called antitypes that would fulfill the same roles as their original versions. This theology is not as strange as it might seem. The idea that John the Baptist was echoing Elijah’s role or that Christ was in some way the new King David is found in other branches of Christian thought.

Houteff viewed himself as antitype to both Elijah and to John the Baptist: a herald of the coming Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> This is important as it is later echoed by Vernon Howell’s view of his own antitypic role. In 1993, David Koresh was widely reported to believe

---

<sup>26</sup> Newport, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Newport, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Newport, 83.

that he was the second coming of Jesus Christ. The reality of his belief was more complex. He apparently thought of himself as an antitype to the biblical Cyrus, who he considered a Christ, an anointed one, rather than Jesus Christ. The name Koresh is the Hebrew name for Cyrus the Great.<sup>29</sup> This somewhat obscure point was lost in the frenzy of media reporting, and the fact that Koresh “claimed to be Jesus” was given as more evidence of his madness and megalomania.

Houteff heralded the establishment of a new Davidic Kingdom in Israel centered in Jerusalem where the true remnant of the church, his own “cleansed” SDA members who lived at the Mount Carmel Center, were to be at the center of apocalyptic events. The establishment of the Davidic kingdom and its repopulation with purified members of the Seventh Day Adventists, the remnant of the remnant, so to speak, became the cornerstone of not just Houteff’s philosophy, but that of his successors in the movement.

When Victor Houteff died in 1955, his wife Florence had already assumed the prophetic mantle and was leading the Mount Carmel community. Florence Houteff led the community at a critical time in the life of a new religious movement. The founder of the movement was gone and many such communities do not survive past the trauma of losing their leader. Florence Houteff’s ascension to leadership of the community did not go unchallenged, however; Ben Roden, another well respected and charismatic member of the community, also claimed the role of prophet.

Despite providing critical leadership of the community and continuity with the teachings of her husband that eased the Davidian’s transition to the post-founder phase of their movement, Florence Houteff only lead the community for a few years. She made an

---

<sup>29</sup> Tabor and Gallagher, location 769.

error that SDA members had been studiously avoiding for a century: she predicted a specific date for the establishment of the Davidic Kingdom, heralding the end of the world.<sup>30</sup> According to Florence Houteff, the kingdom would be established on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1959.

Florence's prediction was made at a time of transition and uncertainty for the Mount Carmel Community. The Davidians had not only lost their founder, but were also moving the Mount Carmel Center to a parcel of land about 12 miles from the center of Waco, near Elk, Texas. This property was purchased in December of 1957 and the Davidians, and their Branch Davidian successors would remain there until the fire of 1993.<sup>31</sup> There was a good deal of media interest in Florence Houteff's end-time prediction. National media reported the gathering of the Davidians in Waco in 1959 and their disappointment when the day of reckoning came and went.<sup>32</sup>

When the appointed date for the establishment of the Kingdom came with no manifestation of prophetic events, the Davidian movement again descended into uncertainty. This resulted in a schism that split the Davidians between Houteff traditionalists, who eventually settled in California, and the group that would become the Branch Davidians, who maintained control of the Mount Carmel property in Waco.<sup>33</sup> The Waco group were led by a new Prophet, a Jewish convert to Christianity, Adventism and Davidianism named Ben Roden.

---

<sup>30</sup> Newport, 97.

<sup>31</sup> Newport, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Ward Wallace, 161.

<sup>33</sup> Newport, 108.

Ben Roden came into possession of the Mount Carmel property in 1965 during a protracted legal battle over property taxes and formal ownership of the site. He also formalized his new Branch Davidian movement as an extension and evolution of Houteff's Davidians. Theologically, the Branch Davidians were quite similar to the Davidians, but Roden added a particular emphasis on Jerusalem's centrality to the apocalyptic scenario. It was during Benjamin Roden's tenure as the Branch Davidian's leader and prophet that the group relocated from what had become central Waco to a new property about ten miles from the city center near the town of Elk. The central building of this new Mount Carmel Center would be the compound that burned on April 19, 1993.

The religious tradition that the Branch Davidians had inherited from their Seventh Day Adventist forebears allowed for a succession of prophets, easing the Davidian and, later, the Branch Davidian movements through the crises that inevitably follow the death of the leader of a new religious movement. This is a distinct advantage, increasing the survivability of the religious tradition, but it can also create intense rivalries when there are multiple claimants to the title of prophet.

Following Benjamin Roden's death in 1979, Lois Roden assumed control of the Branch Davidians, acting as prophet and placing her own theological stamp upon the movement. Lois Roden had been Benjamin Roden's wife and was seen by many among the Branch Davidians as his natural successor, just as Florence Houteff had been the successor of her husband. Under her leadership, the Branch Davidians published a series of tracts under the title *SHEkinah*. The tract's central message was the feminine nature of the Holy Spirit. Lois Roden's claims about the gender status of the Holy Spirit were broadly accepted by the Branch Davidians. Despite this, her leadership status was

contested from an unlikely source, her own son, George. As the rivalry between Lois and George Roden escalated in the early 1980s, a newcomer to the movement, a man named Vernon Howell, arrived at the Mount Carmel Center, further complicating the Rodens' struggle for leadership.

### CHAPTER 3: TRIAL AND COVERAGE

By the middle of the 1980s, the Branch Davidians had split into two rival groups. George Roden led the first group and remained in control of the Mount Carmel Center. Roden had successfully driven the other group, led by Vernon Howell, away from Mount Carmel. Howell's group lived on a wooded lot outside of nearby Palestine, Texas. The rivalry between Roden and Howell and their constant vying for control over the Branch Davidians ended in a gunfight outside the Mount Carmel Center. The trial that followed was the way in which the Branch Davidians, as a whole, were first introduced to many of the people of Waco. While not without its ominous undertones, this introduction was surprisingly positive for Vernon Howell and his followers.

Vernon Howell was born in Houston Texas on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1959. He grew up troubled and bullied in school, called "Mr. Retardo" by his classmates. He was generally thought to have a learning disability such as dyslexia.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, Howell grew up into a talented and able interpreter of the Bible with impressive knowledge and a complex, if idiosyncratic, theology.<sup>35</sup> He had a love of music and played the guitar. He also displayed an interest in cars and was an able mechanic.

Lois Roden died in 1985. Before her death, she had become very close to Vernon Howell. He had become a sort of protégé of hers and was regarded as the next prophet

---

<sup>34</sup> Newport, 173.

<sup>35</sup> Newport, 174.

by many of the Branch Davidians in Waco. Persistent rumors of a sexual relationship between Lois and Vernon, who was over thirty years younger than her, complicated this succession. During this period, Lois had taken out a restraining order against her son, George, stating that he was no longer allowed to come onto the Mount Carmel property.

There were, however, those who still supported George's claim to leadership and when his mother died, the General Association of the Church voted George Roden in as president of the Association and granted him leadership of the community. By this time, Vernon Howell was already gone from Mount Carmel, operating in exile after George's takeover. Many of those who were loyal to Howell and who followed him as their leader left the community as well. The Howell loyalists relocated to the Palestine camp where they lived in shacks and converted buses.

In addition to having leadership problems, financial problems also faced the Branch Davidians during the 1980s. While there were tithes and other sources of money that helped support the community, expenses had, for some time, outstripped income. By 1987, the community owed more than sixty thousand dollars in property taxes to McLennan county and to the local school system.<sup>36</sup>

George Roden had been campaigning for some time to gain tax exempt status for the Mount Carmel property because it was a religious community. He had succeeded in getting a tiny portion of the land, the area which contained the chapel, declared exempt, but despite repeated affidavits and requests to the courts, he made little further progress. These affidavits became infamous among the legal community and eventually in the press for their disjointed, vulgar and abusive tone. A big man who was said to have a

---

<sup>36</sup> Alan Nelson, "Religious Group Fights to Keep County Land." *Waco Tribune Herald*. October 18, 1987.

threatening manner, George Roden gained a reputation for being obnoxious and possibly dangerous. This already established distaste for George Roden was likely one of the reasons that Howell's Palestine group received favorable press in 1988.

When Roden took over the Mount Carmel community, he formally renamed it Rodenville, and set about consolidating his authority over those faithful who remained. Rodenville, despite the name change, basically carried on the Branch Davidian religious tradition that had been started by Ben and Lois Roden. It had, however, a fraction of its former residents. Roden controlled the community closely and had established elaborate rules for who was allowed on the property, how long they could stay, and how visitors must conform to Branch Davidian practices such as vegetarianism.<sup>37</sup>

The Palestine camp became the object of some media interest after the shootout at Mount Carmel in 1987. The *Waco Tribune Herald* article "Voice Crying in the Wilderness"<sup>38</sup> depicts the simplicity and back to nature style living characteristic of the Palestine community. In their memoirs, Bonnie Haldeman and Clive Doyle also paint a vivid picture of the hard living at Palestine. The lot that Howell bought had to be cleared of trees and brush before the camp could be formed and the people lived in gutted out school buses. The people cooked in a central log cabin built from cleared trees. Seats from the buses were used as pews in a small natural clearing where Bible studies and services were held.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> *Visitor's Temporary Permit at Rodenville*. [Robert Darden Collection, Box 3, Folder 7] The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas. Undated.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Nelson and Sandra Gines. "Crying in the Wilderness: A Religious Commune Sets Up a Dwelling Place in the Woods Amid a Struggle Between Rival Prophets." *Waco Tribune Herald*, January 17, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Nelson and Gines, "Crying in the Wilderness."

Howell and his people at the Palestine camp were anxious to return home. They felt that they could not do this as long as George Roden controlled the Mount Carmel community. The Howell faction accused Roden of allowing criminals to rent out houses on the Mount Carmel property for the purposes of producing pornography and methamphetamine. Roden was even more vociferous in his attacks upon Howell and his close supporters. He became notorious to McLennan county and Texas state law enforcement for filing profane motions to the court in the interest of gaining tax exempt status for the Mount Carmel Center. Alongside these pleas were disjointed attacks upon Howell and his supporters. In these letters, George Roden would not simply write the name Vernon Howell. Instead he is always referred to as “GODDAMN RAPIST VERNON HOWELL.”<sup>40</sup>

In these all-capitals missives, George Roden claimed, among other things, that Vernon Howell raped Lois Roden and that Howell brainwashed her with the aid of illegal drugs. He claimed that Howell’s sexual predation of Lois Roden is what led to her death. He requested that the court allow him to kill Howell in retaliation for what Howell did to his mother. In these letters, George Roden accused Howell and his followers of murder, arson and a myriad of other crimes. Howell was not the only target of Roden’s ire. Members of the Waco legal establishment who Roden found to be unsympathetic to his cause also shared in the abuse.

The bad blood between the Branch Davidian factions poisoned any real chance of reconciliation and the situation between George and Vernon came to a head in 1987. During this period, George Roden and his followers dug up a coffin that had been

---

<sup>40</sup> George Roden, *Appeal*. [Robert F. Darden Collection, Box 1, Folder 20] The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco Texas. Undated.

interred on the Mount Carmel property. The coffin contained the remains of Ann Hughes.<sup>41</sup> The reason for this, according to Roden, was that they were trying to move the community's cemetery to a different location on the property and during this project, their bulldozer broke down.<sup>42</sup> Roden had moved the coffin of Mrs. Hughes into the chapel out of respect and it would remain there until they were able to repair their equipment and complete the relocation of her grave.

According to Vernon Howell and his followers, the reason for Hughes' disinterment was far stranger. Howell claimed to have received a letter from George Roden challenging Howell to resurrect the dead woman. In the letter, Roden said that if Howell could do this, then he would give over control of the Branch Davidians to him. If he could not, then Howell would have to acknowledge Roden as the true prophet of the community. Vernon told his followers that he was "not into that,"<sup>43</sup> and decided instead to go to the police and inform them that George Roden was out at the Mount Carmel center digging up graves for odd purposes.

Howell felt he finally had an opportunity to remove Roden from Mount Carmel for good. The police told him that they would be unable to help him as they could not go onto the Mount Carmel property without cause and Howell's word that Roden was disinterring bodies and desecrating graves was not enough to get a warrant. In addition,

---

<sup>41</sup> Clive Doyle with Catherine Wessinger and Matthew D. Wittmer. *Journey to Waco: Autobiography of a Branch Davidian*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012.) 65.

<sup>42</sup> Mark England, "Families Gather at Trial: Courtroom serves as 'Kindergarten,'" *Waco Tribune Herald*, April 18, 1988.

<sup>43</sup> LaMarriol Smith, "Eight Arrested in Connection with Rodenville Shooting." *Waco Tribune Herald*, November 4, 1987.

the police advised Howell to stay away from Roden because Roden was considered dangerous.

Interestingly, according to the accounts of both Bonnie Haldeman and Clive Doyle, the police told Vernon Howell that if he was going to go to the Mount Carmel center, he should have protection due to Roden's volatile nature. This prompted Howell to go and purchase the firearms that would later be used in the shootout at Mount Carmel. Haldeman states that this was the first time that Vernon Howell ever went out and bought guns.<sup>44</sup> If this is true, then the events leading up to the 1987 shootout mark the pivot point at which the Branch Davidians begin to transform from a group with strong nonviolent tendencies, heirs to a long line of pacifists and conscientious objectors, into a group intimately connected to the possession, usage and sale of high powered firearms.

Apparently, Howell and his followers were able to sneak onto the property and take pictures of the casket, which was covered by an Israeli flag, inside the Chapel at Mount Carmel. When they took this evidence to the police, they were told that it was not good enough, that all it proved is that there was a casket, not a body, in the chapel. When Howell's cadre returned to try to obtain the damning evidence, George Roden was waiting for them. Howell shot Roden in the hand in the subsequent gun battle. Police arrived on the scene, called by Roden's wife, Amo, from inside the main building. The police arrested Vernon Howell and seven of his followers and charged them with attempted murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

---

<sup>44</sup> Bonnie Haldeman with Catharine Wessinger, *Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother*. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.) 56-57. In his autobiography, Clive Doyle also claims that the police advised Vernon Howell to carry a weapon if he was planning to confront George Roden, but he does not claim that this was the first time that Howell bought a gun. Doyle, 67.

The whole sordid story was front page news in the *Waco Tribune Herald* the next morning. In the days that followed, other articles were written, and Howell's story about the resurrection contest was repeated. In these articles, even though Howell and his followers were the ones charged with attempted murder, it was Roden, rather than Howell, who tended to come off the worst. Roden was portrayed as the nut who thought he could resurrect a corpse. Howell was portrayed as the more reasonable, realistic man who simply wanted to prevent Roden from desecrating graves.

The trial was not the first time that George Roden had been in the news. Roden's propensity for writing abusive motions to the court had been reported in the *Waco Tribune Herald*. Roden had submitted a motion to the McLennan county courts in which he threatened to smite the courts with AIDS and other diseases in punishment for not cooperating with his continuing requests that Rodenville be granted tax exempt status.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, George Roden was in jail by the time the trial began. Judge Bill C. Logue admonished Roden to stop filing the profane motions but he had continued to do so, leading to a contempt of court charge. Articles about the shootout and the trial proceedings reminded readers of George's incarceration, as well as his claims of magical powers and ambitions of running for President of the United States. George's continuing deterioration seemed to suck up all the bad press that might have otherwise gone the way of Howell and his followers who had, after all, snuck armed onto Roden's property and had wounded him in a pitched gun battle.

That this may have been the case, that Roden as the "crazy" was distracting the press, is significant. According to some sources, Howell's sexual predation, including the

---

<sup>45</sup> Nelson, "Religious Group Fights to Keep County Land."

establishment of the “house of David” harem and his ongoing molestation of young girls, was already under way at the Palestine camp.<sup>46</sup> There was no reporting of such practices at the time in the *Herald*. There are ostensible reasons for this. Most of the later testimony about Howell’s sexual practices came from disgruntled members of the movement. While Howell certainly had enemies among the Branch Davidians at this time, he had none who had been very close to him. Accusations of sexual impropriety were made against Howell, but their source was Roden, and he had already established himself as unreliable.

When George was incarcerated, Howell’s followers left the Palestine camp and returned to Rodenville, which they began to refer to as the Mount Carmel Center again. Amo Roden attempted to keep them off the property by barring the gate to the Palestine followers, but they were able to gain entry and shortly thereafter Mrs. Roden left the center. The *Waco Tribune Herald* reported the story of the Howell loyalists returning home as a human-interest style story. Reports about damage to the property and the criminal element that had been allowed to use part of the land he owned did nothing to improve the public view of George Roden.

When the trial commenced, the Branch Davidian faction that followed Howell came out to “support their men.”<sup>47</sup> The *Herald* described the courtroom as a chaotic “kindergarten” full of children and mothers. The trial did not last very long and the jury acquitted all of Howell’s followers. The jury was split on Howell himself, so he also went

---

<sup>46</sup> Ellison and Bartowski, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Mark England, “Families Gather at Trial.”

free.<sup>48</sup> After the rather anticlimactic ending to the trial, the Branch Davidians again faded from the public eye. Reporting on rumors of mass suicide in 1992 is the only media exposure that the group has in Waco until February of 1993.

News coverage of the Branch Davidians during this period was generally positive toward Vernon Howell's Palestine faction and negative toward George Roden. The *Waco Tribune Herald*, almost unvaryingly, characterized Roden as a nut. His disturbing letters to the court, his grandiose threats, his claims about being a United States presidential candidate and requiring secret service protection and his outrageous claims about the Howell faction being agents of the Palestine Liberation Organization were all part of the coverage of Roden. In addition, the *Herald* also reported the claims made by the Palestine faction, that Roden was allowing pornographers and meth producers to use the Mount Carmel property and that the property itself had been allowed to deteriorate and fall apart during his tenure as prophet. This coverage did not simply appear at the time of the trial but had been ongoing, starting with reports of Roden's odd motions in court and his belligerence when arguing that he should not be paying taxes on the Mount Carmel Center property.

In contrast to the media depiction of George Roden as a belligerent nut, the *Herald* gave Howell and his faction excellent and complimentary coverage. In general, the coverage of the Palestine group takes the form of human-interest stories. One story concentrated on the life of the religious community in Palestine and presented the Davidians there as a kind of benign, back to nature commune. Another described the Palestine people returning to the Mount Carmel Center and beginning to rebuild their

---

<sup>48</sup> Oral Memoirs of Gary J. Coker Jr. Interview by Rebeckah Ann Crowe, November 20, 1993, transcript, Religion and Culture Project, Baylor Instituted of Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

homes after Roden was jailed. There were vivid descriptions of the courtroom 'kindergarten' in which the Davidian mothers were interviewed about how they were educating their children through taking them to court and explaining the proceedings. All of these things were characteristic of the newspaper coverage of the trial.

The Palestine faction of the Branch Davidians in 1988 were both benign and an accepted, even interesting, part of the community in the eyes of the local press. The press also presented the Branch Davidians as religiously legitimate. Moreover, while the *Herald* routinely presented George Roden as a disturbed individual, this did not extend to his followers despite his leadership of the Mount Carmel community. In fact, Roden's faction of the Branch Davidians, apart from the occasional mention of his wife Amo Roden, is entirely absent in the coverage of the trial. Roden, despite his alienating theology and obnoxious manner, despite his tight control over his followers, is not presented as a cult leader nor were his followers presented as brainwashed fanatics or victims. This is very different from the *Herald's* treatment of Koresh and his followers, just five years later.

An interesting article appeared in the *Waco Tribune Herald* on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1987, just about a month before the shootout at Mount Carmel. The article entitled "Religious Sect Fights to Keep County Land," written by staff writer Alan Nelson, details the ongoing dispute between George Roden and McLennan County over the issue of property tax. While the article is not particularly complimentary to Roden, who was by that time sending his nasty letters to the court, it does include a remarkable and detailed summary of the Branch Davidian's history in Waco as compiled by Dr. Bill Pitts, a professor of Religion at Baylor University.

Pitts' summary serves to place the Branch Davidians squarely as part of Waco's history and even heritage. This is remarkable as a contrast to the willful forgetting of that history that occurs starting in 1993. Pitts explains the millennialism of the Branch Davidians, if only in general terms about what postmillennialists throughout Christianity tend to believe, and he describes the theology of Victor Houteff, again in very general terms. Pitts describes Houteff's relationship with the Seventh Day Adventists as well as the theological rift that eventually caused him to leave the church.

What is perhaps more interesting than the grounding of the Branch Davidian tradition within the larger history of American Christianity is the acceptance of the Branch Davidians as part of Waco's history. The first Mount Carmel Center, which was located on the shores of Lake Waco and was sold when the Branch Davidians relocated to the Elk property in 1957, turned out to be very desirable real estate in later years as Waco expanded. Pitts points out that many of the streets in what had become a respectable neighborhood in Waco were named after prominent Davidian members. The Mount Carmel water treatment plant was another legacy. The Vanguard School and a local Presbyterian church still used buildings that were part of the original Mount Carmel complex. A picture published with the article shows a doomsday clock mosaic set into the floor of the Vanguard school library, a leftover from the building's original owners.<sup>49</sup>

This sort of reporting, which accepted the Branch Davidians as part of the community, extended into the period of the 1988 trial. In various articles covering the trial, the Branch Davidians generally and the Palestine faction particularly, are given sympathetic, humanizing press in which they are presented as a curiosity, but not a

---

<sup>49</sup> Nelson, "Religious Group Fights to Keep County Land."

threatening one. This trend ends abruptly in 1992 and 1993 as the *Herald* becomes more hostile to the Davidians due to the influence of former members and anti-cult organizations. The difference is not only marked by the content of the coverage but its tone.

In an article entitled “Crying in the Wilderness” *Herald* staff writers Alan Nelson and Sarah Gines pen an extensive and sympathetic account of the Palestine camp under Howell. The article begins, “In a split-log meetinghouse of a religious commune, children quietly learn their daily lessons.”<sup>50</sup> The difficult living conditions of the Palestine camp are described, with the homes of the various Branch Davidians as “makeshift plywood boxes” and the local school as a repurposed bus missing the wheels. The tone of the article is not critical of those who live in such conditions, however. Instead the Branch Davidians are presented as simple and dedicated spiritual seekers who have been driven at gunpoint from their real home.

Nelson and Gines interviewed various members of the Palestine faction and those who are quoted have a brave and cheerful attitude in the face of the hardship that they endure. The article contains a summary version of the movement’s history starting with Victor Houteff’s arrival in the 1930s. Far from the doomsday cult described five years later, the Branch Davidian end time preparations described in the article consist of writing and recording music that will aid in spreading their message. The authors of the article present the Branch Davidians as displaced men and women of faith who are making do as best they can while they wait and hope that they will be able to return to their home.

---

<sup>50</sup> Nelson and Gines, “Crying in the Wilderness.”

When Roden was eventually jailed on a contempt of court charge and the Palestine faction return home to Mount Carmel, the *Waco Tribune Herald* interviewed members about their homecoming. Alan Nelson's article "Religious Group Returns Home" again gives a sympathetic portrayal of Howell's faction. Nelson wrote that "as the group walked through the religious community, they were weeping or shouting praises."<sup>51</sup> Later in the article, Nelson wrote that the Branch Davidians reported that many of their houses were damaged in their absence and that they did indeed discover a coffin that had been disinterred on the property and were planning to return it to the earth in a proper burial. The authors presented George Roden's jailing as a great boon for the tired members of the Palestine faction.

Another article written during this period described scenes in the courtroom at the trial itself. The article "Families Gather at Trial" was written by Mark England, a staff writer for the *Herald* who would later go on to be one of the two primary writers of the *Sinful Messiah* series in 1993. England described a scene incongruous with any normally associated with a somber courthouse. "Their teacher went down the row of young boys and girls handing out books and whispering instructions. A mother tiptoed out of the room with a wailing baby. Across the aisle a teenaged boy played musical chairs with himself."<sup>52</sup> The courtroom was filled with children and their parents, all present to support the eight men who stood accused of the attempted murder of George Roden.

England described Howell as a minister/musician, again emphasizing the connection in the 1988 coverage of the Palestine faction and music rather than violence.

---

<sup>51</sup> Alan Nelson, "Religious Group Returns Home." *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 24, 1988.

<sup>52</sup> Mark England, "Families Gather at Trial."

In the article, Howell self-deprecatingly called himself a “bonehead” contrasting himself with Roden who calls himself the “son of Christ” and with televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart who claim that God talks to them.<sup>53</sup> Howell described his ministry in simple, humble terms. England interviewed other members of Howell’s flock and the Branch Davidians were given a voice that they are denied in the later Sinful Messiah series. Members took the opportunity to make their case to the press that they were harmless, normal people. One Branch Davidian, Perry Jones, said that “we want to show everyone that we’re a group of people who value family, that we’re a cross section of society.”<sup>54</sup>

England’s article highlights the Branch Davidian women, as the Sinful Messiah series also did five years later. He describes them as simply and conservatively dressed and devoid of makeup. England interviewed Brenda Kendrick who says that she “has it as good as anybody” and explains the Branch Davidian conservatism in dress and makeup as simply being modest. She does remark that the Mount Carmel faithful do not want to seem strange, so they dress within the bounds of normal fashion. They simply stay covered. No dresses above the knee. England presents the children as being interested in the trial and the women who are taking care of them as making the courtroom an extension of the schoolhouse, using the situation to discuss how law works.<sup>55</sup>

It seems that there was a certain fascination with the Palestine group. The coverage of the court proceedings, much like the earlier coverage of the Palestine camp

---

<sup>53</sup> Mark England, “Families Gather at Trial.”

<sup>54</sup> Mark England, “Families Gather at Trial.”

<sup>55</sup> Mark England, “Families Gather at Trial.”

itself or of the return of Howell's followers to Mount Carmel, reflected an interest in the Branch Davidian members and their lifestyle, as well as a tacit approval of them. In the court of public opinion at least, the Palestine camp members were seen as the "good guys" and with George Roden playing the part of the villain. Each of these articles presented the Branch Davidians in a positive light and as part of the community. The Branch Davidians could speak in their own voices, reasonably, and in some cases with an interesting political consciousness. They knew that many saw their lifestyle as strange and made some efforts to normalize themselves. Their explanations served to humanize them in the face of the public.

There were some ominous signs of things to come, however. Despite generally favorable coverage for the Palestine faction, the image of the Branch Davidians shooting at one another in a OK Corral style gunfight in broad daylight outside of town inextricably linked the Branch Davidians to gun violence. The rumored resurrection contest and Roden's claims that he would smite the courts with plagues connected the Branch Davidians to outré and bizarre "cultic" practices.

An interesting episode in the courtroom also had overtones of odd "brainwashed" or "cultic" behavior. This episode was reported by the *Herald* reporter Mark England who, just a few years later, would be the writer responsible for the Sinful Messiah expose series attacking Howell and the Branch Davidians. Gary J. Coker, the lawyer who defended the accused members of Howell's faction, also recalled the scene.

Early in the trial proceedings, the Judge asked the Davidians if anyone was going to need to be sworn in so that they could testify. The assembled faithful did not respond and seemed reluctant or confused about answering. Gary Coker then repeated the

question and there was still no response. Vernon Howell then stood and faced his followers. He raised his hand, telling them “They had done nothing wrong.”<sup>56</sup> The assembled Branch Davidians stood en masse when Howell raised his hand. England described this scene almost as though Howell had some kind of mystical control over his followers.<sup>57</sup> In the same article, England described Howell as ‘directing his followers’ lives,’ after describing him as looking somewhat like director Stephen Spielberg. This sort of image seems to engage the cult stereotype. England described the Branch Davidians in the courtroom as unable to act without their leader’s express permission.

Despite this anecdote, the later characterization of the Branch Davidians under Vernon Howell as a cult was entirely absent in the 1988 articles. The *Herald* writers call the people of the Palestine camp and then later of Mount Carmel a religious commune, a religious community and a religious sect. The *Herald* articles present the Branch Davidians as legitimate. They had a history that extended back to Victor Houteff in the 1930s and to the Seventh Day Adventists before that. They also have a history in the city of Waco, as citizens who, while peculiar, are part of the community.

So, while the coverage of the trial was generally favorable to Vernon Howell and his followers from the Palestine camp, there were negative depictions as well that would be echoed later. From the rantings of George Roden there was introduced the idea of Vernon Howell as a sexual predator. From the media coverage of the trial and again from Roden’s writings came the association between Howell and cultic and brainwashing behavior, possibly aided by illegal drugs. From the shootout itself came images of the

---

<sup>56</sup> Mark England, “Families Gather at Trial.”

<sup>57</sup> Mark England, “Families Gather at Trial.”

Branch Davidians as armed and dangerous, not only possessing weapons but willing to use them. The trial marks the turning point in the public and media perception of the Branch Davidians and marks the last time that Vernon Howell would ever receive positive local press.

#### CHAPTER 4: COMPARISON BETWEEN 1987-1988 AND 1993 COVERAGE

As will be shown, media coverage of the Branch Davidians under Vernon Howell in 1988 was significantly different than subsequent coverage in 1992 and 1993. The image of the Branch Davidians as a kind of admirable, back to nature, religious commune was gone. Instead, local media presented the Branch Davidians as victims, as brainwashed dupes of an arch-manipulator, ready to die or kill at the command of their nefarious leader. The idea that the Branch Davidians wished to change the world through music is also absent from this later coverage. Instead, the Sinful Messiah series describes the Branch Davidians as grimly stockpiling weapons for some kind of apocalyptic uprising. A variety of factors cause this transition, among which are significant changes to the social structure of the Branch Davidians themselves. Changes to the sexual mores of the Branch Davidians under the leadership of Koresh, as well as an emphatic embrace of gun culture serve to fuel suspicion and marginalization of the people of Mount Carmel. In addition to social changes, the period is marked by subtle but significant changes to Branch Davidian theology.

The reordering of the sexual culture of the Branch Davidians was already under way during the years in which the followers of Koresh were at the Palestine camp. Vernon Howell established what he called the House of David based upon certain revelations that were given to him and certain interpretations of the Bible. The House of David was a spiritual marriage in which Howell slept with various of his followers with

the intent of having children. At first, Howell inducted a relatively small number of women into the House of David, but the harem grew with time. Also, disturbingly, the House of David reportedly contained girls as young as twelve years old, well below the age of consent, which in Texas at that time was fourteen years old with parental permission.

Most of the Branch Davidian faithful grudgingly accepted the House of David, although many were disturbed by Howell's rumored interest in young girls. The situation continued throughout the late 1980s and once the Howell faction were in control of the Mount Carmel property again and Vernon Howell, soon to be David Koresh was firmly in power, a new revelation was revealed to him. This "New Light" Revelation was to be the last straw for some among his flock.

The New Light revelation that Koresh explained to his people held that all Branch Davidian faithful were to become celibate. Koresh himself and any woman among the Branch Davidians who he chose to sleep with were the exception to this rule.<sup>58</sup> In effect, the New Light revelation extended the House of David to encompass all female members of the Branch Davidians. For some of the faithful, many of whom had been married for some years and who were deeply devoted to their spouses, this proved too much to bear. Some left the Branch Davidians for good, and it is from among these men and women that the apostate members who began to publicly campaign against Koresh and his leadership would come.

---

<sup>58</sup> David G. Bromley and Edward D. Silver "The Davidian Tradition: From Patronal Clan to Prophetic Movement." In *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, edited by Stuart A. Wright, 43-72. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 58-59.

The period between the shootout at Mount Carmel in 1987 and the BATF assault and siege in 1993 saw another marked shift in the Branch Davidians: a whole-hearted embrace of guns and gun culture. David Koresh, as well as Branch Davidian members Paul Fatta and Michael Schroeder, became avid buyers and sellers of firearms. Former members, both survivors of the fire who were loyalists of Koresh and apostate members, describe Koresh's fascination with firearms. The last vestiges of Seventh Day Adventist pacifism and distaste for firearms disappeared in the years following Koresh's takeover of Mount Carmel.

Unfortunately for the men and women of the Mount Carmel Center, local officials and federal law enforcement noticed this change in behavior. The main point of interest for law enforcement was an establishment called the Mag Bag. Depending on who was asked, the Mag Bag, a business set up by David Koresh and largely maintained by Mike Schroeder, was either a legitimate source of income for the Branch Davidians, or a front for obtaining illegal firearms and firearm components.

According to David Thibodeau, one of the survivors of the 1993 fire, the Mag Bag was the name of a stall that the Branch Davidians operated at gun shows and which "offered a catalog of military gear including gas masks, MREs, flak jackets, dummy grenades and ammunition magazines."<sup>59</sup> The Mag Bag sold guns and ammo as well. Thibodeau presents the Mag Bag as one business among several that the people of Mount Carmel used to support their community. Others included an auto body shop and piecemeal seamstress work. Paul Fatta and Mike Schroeder traveled to gun shows in Texas and sold firearms and military gear.

---

<sup>59</sup> David Thibodeau, *A Place Called Waco: A Survivor's Story*. Leon Whiteson ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 1999.) 124.

The affidavit to obtain a search and seizure warrant for the Mount Carmel property and other Branch Davidian holdings including the Mag Bag presents a different image of the business. In this affidavit, Davy Aguilera, an agent of the ATF, alleges that the Mag Bag was a front for the buying and stockpiling of weapons, as well as the illegal conversion of AR 15 style semiautomatic rifles to fully automatic usage. The suspicion that the Mag Bag commerce was not a legitimate business but was instead a way for the Branch Davidians to stockpile high powered and illegally converted weapons was the primary reason for the BATF assault on the Mount Carmel property.

According to Bill Pitts, a professor of Religion at Baylor University who had conducted interviews with Branch Davidian members and had researched the movement for Baylor University's Religion and Culture Project, there was also a marked theological shift in the movement under Koresh. This shift is characterized by an increasing radicalization of the end time beliefs of the movement. Pitts describes a shift from Millennialism to Apocalypticism in their theology.<sup>60</sup> This shift started an emphasis on the seven seals section of the Book of Revelation and an increasing hostility toward the US federal government. Pitt links the stockpiling of weapons at Mount Carmel to Vernon Howell's apocalyptic expectations of conflict with the US government.<sup>61</sup> Koresh began to envision the expected eschatological conflict to occur in the United States. This was a shift from earlier Branch Davidian thought, which assumed Israel would be the center of the end times story. Koresh's theology associated Babylon with the government of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Bill Pitts, "The Davidian Tradition" November 1993. [The Bill Pitts Collection, Box 1, Folder 7] The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

<sup>61</sup> Pitts "The Davidian Tradition."

United States, and Koresh saw himself as the anti-type to Cyrus the Great, the enemy of Babylon.

As can be imagined, Koresh's New Light revelation drove some members of the community away from Koresh and ultimately from Mount Carmel. Among these disaffected members, who the Koresh loyalists referred to as "apostates" were a few individuals who decided that David Koresh was dangerous and that he must be removed from leadership of the Branch Davidians. These men and women, including most prominently Marc Breault and Robyn Bunds, came to fill an interesting role in the local media. It was much the same role that David Koresh and his Palestine group had filled in 1987 and 1988, that of the noble outsider opposed to a dangerous and deranged religious leader.

Marc Breault, a Hawaii born Adventist theology student, joined the Branch Davidians in 1986. Kenneth Newport describes Marc Breault as "an able evangelist and firm supporter of, and confidant to, Koresh."<sup>62</sup> Despite this, Breault left Mount Carmel in July 1989 due to various reservations about Koresh's leadership including the New Light doctrine and his predilection for sex with very young girls.<sup>63</sup>

Robyn Bunds was one of David Koresh's "wives" who left the community after she discovered that Koresh had begun a sexual relationship with her mother.<sup>64</sup> She later became one of the informants for the BATF investigation into the firearms stockpile at

---

<sup>62</sup> Newport, 192.

<sup>63</sup> Newport, 201-202.

<sup>64</sup> Mark England, "Woman Makes A Break From Cult." Waco Tribune Herald, March 1, 1993. This article was presented in the Herald under the general title of the *Sinful Messiah* Series.

Mount Carmel.<sup>65</sup> In addition to this, Breault and Bunds both generally worked against Koresh, attempting to encourage legal action against him and, barring that, encouraging media scrutiny of his activities.

The efforts of Breault, Bunds and others did cause government officials to investigate Mount Carmel to determine if their accusations of child abuse had any substance to them. These accusations, which included both physical abuse, excessive beatings as discipline, as well as sexual abuse of minor children, prompted McLennan county CPS to visit Mount Carmel in 1992. This investigation did not yield enough evidence to move forward against Koresh and the Branch Davidians, and the investigation was closed after two months, though there were some among CPS who thought that this closing was premature.<sup>66</sup> While government officials declined to act against Koresh and his followers for their alleged abuses, the apostate members of the Branch Davidians found a more sympathetic ear in the form of the *Waco Tribune Herald*.

Meanwhile, the BATF investigation of the Branch Davidians proceeded along different grounds. The investigation centered on certain suspicious deliveries that had been made to the Mag Bag. The agent in charge of this investigation was Davy Aguilera. Aguilera cited several reasons for moving forward on the investigation of the Branch Davidians, but his primary rationale was the suspected presence of illegal, high-powered weapons at Mount Carmel.

Aguilera was alerted to possible illegal firearms trafficking on the part of the Branch Davidian leadership by a local McLennan county police officer, Lieutenant Gene

---

<sup>65</sup> Davy Aguilera, *Affidavit: Affiant Alleges the Following Grounds for Search and Seizure*. February 25<sup>th</sup> 1993. [William Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 10] The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

<sup>66</sup> Ellison and Bartowski, 122.

Barber. Barber had been in contact with a source who worked for the United States Postal Service and had been told that the Mag Bag had received deliveries of various suspect materials, including inert hand grenades, black powder, powdered aluminum and various other devices and substances used to make explosives and to modify semi-automatic firearms to be fully automatic.<sup>67</sup>

In his affidavit requesting a search warrant for Mount Carmel, Agent Aguilera gives a brief history of the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel in which he describes the gun battle between the followers of Roden and Koresh. This information must have been included to show that the Branch Davidians had a history of violence and that illegal firearms in their possession were a danger that required immediate action. Other sources of information included Joyce Sparks, who conducted the investigations of Mount Carmel on behalf of Texas Children's Protective Services and who was among those who thought that the evidence of child abuse at Mount Carmel was persuasive. Robyn Bunds was another source for Aguilera's investigation. She described Koresh showing his followers violent war movies, which he called "training videos" and reported that the Branch Davidians were in possession of kits used to convert a semi-automatic rifle into a machine gun.<sup>68</sup>

This overview of the years between the 1988 trial and the 1993 BATF assault demonstrates several things. Firstly, it shows an increasing wariness of the Branch Davidians in general and of David Koresh in particular on the part of local government agencies and local law enforcement. Secondly, it shows the influence of the "Apostate"

---

<sup>67</sup> Aguilera, *Affidavit*.

<sup>68</sup> Aguilera, *Affidavit*.

members of the community and their public denunciations of Koresh and his cadre. Finally, it shows a marked change in law enforcement interest from 1987 when it seemed that local police could not be bothered to investigate George Roden's alleged desecration of a corpse or drug lab. They were not interested, and they were reluctant to disturb Roden who was a difficult individual to deal with.

Changes among the Branch Davidians seemed to drive some of this increased interest. The Mount Carmel community that George Roden presided over did not stockpile high-powered weapons nor were there accusations of child abuse and molestation associated with his leadership. That said, rumors of Roden's methamphetamine production are not easily dismissed, regardless of whether such rumors have merit. The central difference seems to be the identification of the Branch Davidians as a cult. Once this occurred, media coverage of David Koresh and his followers in 1992 and 1993 took on a much darker tone.

In the interim period between the trial of 1988 and the BATF raid in February of 1993, Vernon Howell, by now called David Koresh, once again appeared in the news, but this time in a decidedly less positive light. An article in the *Herald* regards persistent rumors that the Branch Davidians were preparing a mass suicide.<sup>69</sup> The rumors were said to be sourced in Australia and may arise from Marc Breault and his anti-Koresh faction. The rumors were also serious enough that the Seventh Day Adventists sent an official to discuss them with Koresh and his people. An apparently frustrated Koresh denied that

---

<sup>69</sup> Mark England, "Religious Group Denies Mass Suicide Rumor," Waco Tribune Herald, April 18<sup>th</sup> 1992.

the rumors had any merit, calling them hogwash and asserting that his people are simply gathering for Passover, as they do every year, rather than preparing for mass suicide.<sup>70</sup>

This event adds the last component of the emerging stereotype of the Branch Davidians, the doomsday suicide cult image. Alongside the earlier association between the Branch Davidians, particularly David Koresh, with brainwashing, cultic behavior, sexual deviance and gun violence, the elements of later views of the “cultists” are all in place. What follows is the amplification of this image to dangerous proportions through two roughly simultaneous sources, local press and local law enforcement. The investigations of the *Herald* and of local and then federal and state law enforcement uncovered evidence of weapon stockpiling and suggested that abuse of minors was occurring among the Branch Davidians. In addition, the Sinful Messiah series of articles published in the *Waco Tribune Herald* unequivocally characterized the Branch Davidians as a cult and David Koresh as a manipulative, brainwashing monster.

While the efforts of the apostates working against Koresh and his followers generally came to naught legally, their efforts to sway public opinion were far more successful. As early as eight months before the BATF raid on Mount Carmel, staff writers at the *Waco Tribune Herald*, using apostates such as Marc Breault and Robyn Bunds as well as members of the Cult Awareness Network as sources and experts, began work on a series of articles that were an expose of the alleged evils of David Koresh and his cult at Mount Carmel.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> England, “Religious Group Denies Mass Suicide Rumor.”

<sup>71</sup> Lott, “About this Series.”

The *Herald* intended the series to have seven parts. Parts one and two were published on February 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of 1993. The disastrous BATF raid of February 28<sup>th</sup> prompted the Herald to release the remainder of the series on March 1. The *Tribune Herald* Editor, Bob Lott, in a sidebar article in the March 1 issue of the *Herald*, explained the problematic timing of the series. He wrote that the *Herald* had been investigating the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel for eight months and was doing so because their research had determined that the Branch Davidians were dangerous and that the legal establishment was doing nothing about them.<sup>72</sup> The *Herald* took it upon itself to inform the community of the dangerous cult in their midst in an effort to drive public opinion against Koresh and his followers.

Lott also states that the BATF had told the *Herald* that they were in the midst of action against Koresh and had asked that they delay publication of the article until after their action had taken place. The *Herald's* editors refused to do this and after informing the BATF that publication was imminent, they went ahead with their series, though they were “careful to avoid any mention of the impending BATF raid.”<sup>73</sup> Lott goes on to say that he disagrees with those who have accused the *Herald* of contributing to the tragedy of February 28<sup>th</sup>, to the deaths of both federal agents and Branch Davidians in the botched raid.

This article is interesting both in its self-conscious defense of the series' timing in the face of the BATF raid, but also because of its strained logic. The justification for the expose in the first place is that local authorities are doing nothing, but the editor also has

---

<sup>72</sup> Lott, “About this Series.”

<sup>73</sup> Lott, “About this Series.”

specific knowledge about an impending federal investigation and raid on Mount Carmel. The editor presents the paper as informing the public about an ongoing problem the authorities are doing nothing about while they have specific information that the authorities are doing something about it and are asking that the *Herald* not complicate the situation by inserting itself prematurely.

Another portion of this article that is worthy of note is the emphasis on the sexual danger that David Koresh presents. Lott writes, “We knew the situation at Mount Carmel had been going on for quite a while. It was a dangerous and sinister thing the public should know about. We are not just talking about stockpiling of weapons, but such things as the sexual exploitation of young girls and other abuses of children in the name of religion.”<sup>74</sup> This passage is interesting because while the danger of the Branch Davidians as armed fanatics is duly extolled throughout the *Sinful Messiah* series, the sexual deviance of David Koresh also gets an impressive amount of treatment in the expose.

The significance of the timing of the *Sinful Messiah* series should not be underestimated. Alongside coverage of the BATF raid and the resulting deaths was an elaborate description of the evils of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. The immediacy of this coverage undermined any chance for the Branch Davidians to explain themselves or to begin to shape the narrative of what was happening. Local newspaper’s mind was made up and other media sources seeking to make sense of the events at Waco picked up the research done by the *Herald*.

The difference in tone between the coverage of Koresh and his followers regarding the shootout of 1987 and the subsequent trial and the presentation of Koresh

---

<sup>74</sup> Lott, “About this Series.”

and the Branch Davidians in the Sinful Messiah series could not be starker. The story of David Koresh's followers as a rustic back to nature commune full of dedicated religious men and women who wanted to change the world through music was gone. Instead the series presented long articles broken up by bold type quotations such as "maybe I was just blind, walking time bombs, extremely dangerous," and "it just has to stop."<sup>75</sup>

The stories of the people of Mount Carmel in the Sinful Messiah series are exclusively stories told by former members who have left the community. They show the Mount Carmel loyalists through the eyes of those who had already lost faith in their leader and who left in disgust. The followers of Koresh are fanatics, driven by fear and by misplaced, artificial loyalty to their nefarious master. They are victims, good men and women who have fallen to David Koresh's odd charisma and who were now his virtual prisoners.

This presentation of David Koresh having an uncanny influence over his followers echoes earlier observations made in the *Herald* during the 1988 trial. Staff writer Mark England wrote about Koresh raising his hands and his flock's immediate rising during the court proceedings and describes the scene as odd. England, one of the writers central to the Sinful Messiah series, may have already been wondering about cult behavior among the Branch Davidians in 1988 and his suspicions may have been confirmed by the accounts of the apostates. This is important because the image of Koresh having an odd control over his followers was really the only negative characterization of the Koresh faction to come out of the 1988 coverage, despite the

---

<sup>75</sup> Mark England and Darleen McCormick, "Relatives of Cult Members Waiting." *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 1, 1993. This article was presented in the *Waco Tribune Herald* under the general title of *The Sinful Messiah Series*.

group being involved in a gun battle and Koresh having wounded George Roden with a gunshot.

The majority of the Sinful Messiah coverage centers on the control that Koresh had over his followers and concentrates on two facets of this control. One facet of this influence was the fact that his followers were training with weapons and were willing to die for their leader. The other was the sexual control that Koresh exerted over his flock. This second facet, as the explanation written by Lott indicated, was a central focus of the series and a subject that was independent of the ongoing standoff with the BATF, who were there serving an affidavit to seize firearms, not addressing the accusations of sexual and child abuse among the Branch Davidians.

Indeed, children and family were primary concerns in the Sinful Messiah series. Even when presenting the danger of the Branch Davidian “fanatics,” the authors tended to frame things in terms of familial concern. Often this is due to the interviews that the series draws from being with family members who had a relative in the Mount Carmel community and who were worried for their loved ones. The series quotes a relative of a cult member as saying, “My two children, and Nicole’s children are walking time bombs... Vernon Howell has brainwashed them so badly.”<sup>76</sup>

A survey of the media presentation of the Branch Davidians in 1988 versus the media depiction in 1993 is a study in opposites. Even though Howell and several followers were accused of trying to kill George Roden in a forty-five-minute gun battle, the Palestine faction received excellent press. Five years transformed Vernon Howell the minister/musician into David Koresh the cult leader. The way that the children in the

---

<sup>76</sup> England and McCormick, “Relatives of Cult Members Waiting.”

courtroom were portrayed, as intelligent and interested in the proceedings is quite a contrast with the haunted, abused children of the Sinful Messiah coverage. The series replaced the dedicated and wholesome relationship between the parents and their children given in earlier coverage with a lurid description of a fundamentally poisonous and violent situation. The humble and dedicated back to nature commune had become a group of brainwashed and powerless victims. Again, the change seems to be in the framing of the Branch Davidians as a cult. In the earlier articles, the Branch Davidian members got to make their own case, to speak in their own voices. In the Sinful Messiah articles, the only voices are those of their accusers.

One of the fundamental differences in the presentation of the Branch Davidians in the *Herald* articles has to do with the assumptions the authors make about the leadership of the group. In 1988, George Roden was the head of the Branch Davidian Agricultural Association and was the leader of the group who lived at Mount Carmel. The *Herald* presented him as being crazy and possibly dangerous. The basic narrative that emerged about the shootout was that Roden had been digging up bodies on his property and challenging his rival to a test of resurrection powers. This, coupled with his being presented as an unannounced candidate for president and as the writer of nasty and profane letters to the court, did nothing to discourage the portrayal of Roden as nuts. Despite this, there was no indication in any of the articles about the trial that Roden was the head of a cult, or that he exercised unwarranted control over his people. This is despite the fact that the Mount Carmel community was closely restricted in terms of diet, activity and access during Roden's time as prophet.

The Sinful Messiah series presented Koresh as being a different kind of crazy. Koresh is a selfish, manipulative, megalomaniac rather than an erratic and potentially dangerous blowhard. Koresh, as presented in the Sinful Messiah series, is the quintessential cult leader. The key difference in portrayal seems to be an assumption of competence. The media could dismiss George Roden with his grandiose and bellicose manner in a way that they could not dismiss Koresh.

Former Branch Davidians such as Marc Breault and Robyn Bunds as well as prominent anti-cult organizations such as CAN were the primary sources for the Sinful Messiah series. Scholars agree that the influence of these men and women was the primary factor in turning media attention to the Branch Davidians. What is apparent from the material that the *Waco Tribune Herald* had already printed regarding the people of Mount Carmel is that the anti-Koresh forces were the primary factor in changing the media's mind about the Branch Davidians. The apostates and the anti-cult movement did not bring a problem to the paper's attention out of nowhere; they instead turned the media against Koresh who had, until that time, enjoyed reasonably good press. Central to this transition was the transformation of the Branch Davidians under Howell from being a 'religious commune' or a 'religious sect' into a cult. Once that occurred, all the previous reporting in which the Branch Davidians were presented as part of the community was dismissed. Instead, they were shadowy outsiders without a past and certainly not Wacoan.

Perhaps understandably, official histories of Waco present the Branch Davidians of Mount Carmel as being entirely separate from, and fundamentally non-representative of, their community. Some sources, such as the Waco History Project Online, do not

refer to the Mount Carmel tragedy at all. In her survey history *Waco: A Sesquicentennial History*, Patricia Ward Wallace devotes two pages to the events of 1993. Her characterization of the Branch Davidians is interesting. She describes how some “older citizens” in Waco may have remembered a peaceful agricultural community called Mt. Carmel which had relocated outside town in the 1950s.<sup>77</sup> She also mentions the media interest in the apocalyptic predictions of the Branch Davidians in 1959, but then goes on to say that from that point forward the Branch Davidians had “faded from memory.”<sup>78</sup> In Wallace’s history, the people of Waco are suddenly reintroduced to the Branch Davidians outside of town on Feb 28, 1993 along with the rest of America. She makes no mention of the 1988 trial and the media interest surrounding it.

This sort of description, which distances the Branch Davidians from the people of Waco, is unsurprising. The negative stereotype of “Whacko” Texas was not exactly a compliment, and in works like Wallace’s or that of the Waco History Project, which are, essentially, celebrations of the city of Waco, care was taken not to encourage the stereotype. A *London Times* article written in March of 1993 entitled “Media Cavalcade Besieges Tinpot Town of God and Guns” portrays Waco as “a place of pick-up trucks and drive ins, Stetsons, poverty, religious devotion and lots of guns... a one-horse town in which the horse died.” The author of the article goes on to describe the city as a provincial purgatory, a place boring enough for people to take religion seriously and poor enough that there is nothing to buy but guns.<sup>79</sup> While the article is obviously tongue in

---

<sup>77</sup> Ward Wallace, 161.

<sup>78</sup> Ward Wallace, 161.

<sup>79</sup> Ben Macintyre, “Media Cavalcade besieges Tinpot Town of God and Guns.” *The London Times*, March 6, 1993.

cheek and the author is making fun of the prissiness of media personalities as much as the people of central Texas, the sort of coverage that the *Times* gave the city of Waco was hardly the kind of thing to please a local. Indeed, following the events of 1993, the local government under mayor Bob Sheehy established a Waco Image task force to “educate others to the reality of Waco and its limited geographic association with the Davidians.”<sup>80</sup>

It is also important to note that many of the people of Mount Carmel were a poor fit for Waco in a way that was unrelated to their status as Branch Davidians. Few members of the group were locals and many were from outside the US, particularly from Great Britain, Australia and the Caribbean Islands.<sup>81</sup> Many of those from within the United States were from the West Coast. Most were from Seventh Day Adventist backgrounds that were alien to the predominantly Baptist people of Waco. The group was communal and as self-sufficient as they could afford to be and were geographically isolated outside of town. Often, members travelled to other cities across the country to work at various jobs or to recruit new blood for the movement.<sup>82</sup> All of these factors served to isolate the Branch Davidian members from their neighbors and their peers. For reasons like these, the people of Waco may have known a Branch Davidian, but may not have known the Branch Davidians outside of newspaper articles.

---

<sup>80</sup> Ward Wallace, 164.

<sup>81</sup> Clive Doyle gives an excellent summary of the ethnicities and national origins of the Branch Davidians present at Mount Carmel during the BATF raid of Feb. 1993. Doyle 99-111.

<sup>82</sup> Haldeman, 48-9 and Doyle, 66.

## CHAPTER 5: BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

The media interest in the Branch Davidians and the spectacle that their membership brought to the courthouse during the 1988 trial was intense. So much so, in fact, that when interviewed and questioned about events in the courtroom, Gary Coker reminisced that he thought at the time that “‘87, ‘88 was my fifteen minutes of—Andy Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame and I’d had that and it wasn’t a great amount, but there wasn’t even national but it was—enough stuff written about—locally about that.”<sup>83</sup> Not knowing what fate had in store about for the Branch Davidians just a few years later, Coker assumed that the trial was his moment in the sun. The local papers wrote articles quoting him and following his arguments in the courtroom. He was interviewed. He was, for a brief time, a minor celebrity. Branch Davidians such as Vernon Howell, George Roden and others who were interviewed about their lives, their beliefs and their plans for the future, shared in this brief and modest celebrity status.

The idea that the events of 1987 and 1988 made the Branch Davidians under Vernon Howell into local celebrities, no matter how minor, is absent from both popular and scholarly work on the subject. The image of the Davidians as cut off and close mouthed was too strongly ingrained. The issue is complicated. In many ways, the Branch Davidians were cut off and isolated, but the evidence for this view of the group is not

---

<sup>83</sup> Coker Interview, 22.

monolithic and is firmly contradicted, at least in the case of Koresh and his “mighty men,” in multiple sources. Koresh and this cadre of loyalists were a presence in the community. While not particularly noteworthy, they were hardly hiding. They did not advertise their beliefs or their lifestyle at home, but many people do not. There is a difference between being secretive or insular, and simply being private.

Part of the popular view of the Branch Davidians as a closed and separatist society comes from general stereotypes about cults. The popular view of cults in media, movies and literature typically depicts a small, insular society in which members are not even permitted to speak with non-members. The idea of the “cultists” working in town, socializing with their neighbors, bar hopping and playing in a rock and roll band seems incongruous versus the established stereotype. As an explanation, however, this only goes so far, and there are other factors which complicate the issue of social engagement among the Branch Davidians.

In the weeks leading up to the BATF siege, the Branch Davidians did become more closed to the outside world. Survivor accounts agree that the Branch Davidians were increasingly aware that they were being watched during the period just before the raid and that they were quite wary. Federal agents moved into a house across the street from Mount Carmel on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1993, and it was not long before the Branch Davidians had good reason to suspect who their new neighbors were and what their purpose was.<sup>84</sup> On the day immediately preceding the assault, the *Sinful Messiah* series began in the *Waco Tribune Herald*, further fueling the fear and suspicion among the people of Mount Carmel.

---

<sup>84</sup> Thibodeau, 142.

The matter is further complicated by the issue of blame. The question of who was responsible for the fire that ended the Mount Carmel standoff dominates the literature. Scholars, as well as popular writers are polarized on the question, and often write to either exonerate or to condemn the actions of the government in the siege. Kenneth Newport, in his book, vigorously defends the actions of federal law enforcement as reasonable and in making a case that the Branch Davidian leadership was responsible for setting the fatal fire.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, Tabor and Gallagher concentrate on the failures of law enforcement from the beginning to the end of the siege, and while not arguing that the US government intentionally started the fire, the authors certainly imply that government negligence contributed to the problem.<sup>86</sup> The backdrop to both of these arguments and others like them is the assertion made by the fringe media on the political right that states that the US government intentionally set the fire that burned down Mount Carmel in order to cover up their mistakes. Authors who are critical of government explanations for how the fire began must be careful or be lumped in with the fringe, making their arguments easy to dismiss.

Why this matters to the issue of the exposure of the Branch Davidians has to do with the initial “dynamic entry” tactic that the BATF used to assault the Mount Carmel Complex. Critics of the BATF concentrate on this tactic and describe it as a poorly thought-out publicity stunt. Central to this argument is the criticism that the BATF decided against trying to arrest and detain David Koresh while he was out and about in town. Critics allege that the BATF instead opted for the far more dramatic dynamic entry

---

<sup>85</sup> Newport, 17.

<sup>86</sup> Tabor and Gallagher, Kindle Edition, location 79.

tactic to give their organization a higher public profile. The fact that the local and national media were invited to record the assault on Mount Carmel supports this view of the situation.

The BATF argue that Koresh was rarely, if ever, away from the complex, so the dynamic entry was the soundest tactic that they could apply.<sup>87</sup> The idea that David Koresh and his followers were essentially cut off from Waco and did not leave their property is tied up in the justifications of BATF tactics in the initial raid. Later, Kenneth Newport would argue that there were additional considerations that led the BATF to the dynamic entry plan, including a fear that if Koresh was arrested outside the complex, those loyal to him at Mount Carmel might destroy evidence, including their suspected cache of illegal firearms.<sup>88</sup>

The second guessing of BATF tactics and the arguments surrounding responsibility for the fire complicate the issue of community engagement among the Branch Davidians. The fact that in the last days before the siege, the Branch Davidians came to more closely resemble the later stereotyped image of the insular cult does as well. Despite this, there is excellent evidence that many Branch Davidians were an engaged part of the Waco community.

The presentation of the Branch Davidians as alien and entirely separate from Waco is undermined by accounts from survivors of the 1993 fire and by other Waco residents who knew members of the Mount Carmel community. The accounts of Clive Doyle and David Thibodeau, both of whom survived the fire that claimed the lives of

---

<sup>87</sup> Newport, 244.

<sup>88</sup> Newport, 244.

most of their fellow Davidians, and of Gary J. Coker, the lawyer who defended Howell and his allies during the 1988 trial, are particularly interesting on this topic.

Doyle and Thibodeau came to be at the Mount Carmel Center in February of 1993 via very different paths. Clive Doyle was born in Australia and became a Seventh Day Adventist as a young man, joining the Branch Davidians in the 1960s while Ben Roden was still prophet. He had been a part of the Mount Carmel community for thirty years when the fire occurred. David Thibodeau, on the other hand, was an American from Maine with no religious beliefs to speak of before meeting David Koresh in a California Guitar Center store.<sup>89</sup> Thibodeau became involved with Koresh through their shared love of music and became the drummer for Koresh's rock band, and eventually a religious follower. Thibodeau met Koresh in the spring of 1990 and had been with the Branch Davidians for a comparatively short time. What is revealing about both men's accounts of their time at Mount Carmel is their description of a lifestyle that was inward looking, but which also had a surprisingly public face.

The primary ways in which the Branch Davidian members met other Wacoans was through their jobs and through interactions with their neighbors. Clive Doyle's description of his time at Mount Carmel indicates that the Branch Davidian men typically worked outside of the Mount Carmel complex and held jobs in the city. Doyle worked as a roofer, as well as doing other odd jobs in town.<sup>90</sup> There does seem to be a gender gap however, as women working in the city are mentioned less often, although in her own account of her time with the Branch Davidians, Bonnie Haldeman does describe having

---

<sup>89</sup> Thibodeau, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Doyle, 60-8.

multiple jobs, and some of the other women working in town.<sup>91</sup> In a community that was often cash-poor, these sorts of jobs were what kept the Mount Carmel Center running. They also exposed the Branch Davidians to the community and the community to the Branch Davidians.

Doyle's account also shows the complicated relationship that the Branch Davidians had with their immediate neighbors. Mark Spoon and his family were neighbors of the Branch Davidians. Doyle describes the Spoons having a good relationship with the people of Mount Carmel. He recalls, "They would come over sometimes to Mount Carmel for David's Bible studies or to watch movies. Their kids played with our kids on the go-carts."<sup>92</sup> According to Doyle, the Spoons and the Davidians would help each other out on projects and the like.

Marcia Spoon, Mark's wife, later described her family's relationship with the Branch Davidians in different terms. According to Marcia, her family did not go to Mount Carmel for Bible studies. In fact, she says that her husband "stopped welcoming them into their house when religion started becoming a topic of conversation."<sup>93</sup> She stated that one of Koresh's wives, Judy Schneider would come over to her home from time to time, but that "all she would ever talk about was dying and how she was ready to die for David."<sup>94</sup> Rather than being friends with the Davidians across the road, Marcia

---

<sup>91</sup> Haldeman, 47-61.

<sup>92</sup> Doyle, 117.

<sup>93</sup> Christopher Hall, "Family Uneasy about Flea Market: For Neighbors of Infamous Cult Compound, Home may Never be the Same." *Waco Tribune Herald*, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1993.

<sup>94</sup> Hall, "Family Uneasy about Flea Market."

Spoon describes helping cult members escape the clutches of the cult by secretly taking them to the airport in Waco.

Both Clive Doyle's account of the Spoons and Marcia Spoon's account of the Branch Davidians were written after the fire at Mount Carmel. These seemingly opposing views of the same relationship are indicative of the difficulty of getting at the truth of how the Branch Davidians viewed and were viewed by their neighbors. The Branch Davidians were widely viewed as, at best, victims and dupes of an evil leader and at worst as murderous religious crazies. Doyle would naturally want to debunk this view by showing normal and supportive relationships with his neighbors. Spoon, on the other hand, would want to distance herself from people who had such a bad reputation and certainly to refute any indication that she and her husband were religiously sympathetic to the Branch Davidians. While it may not be the case with Doyle or Spoon specifically, the likelihood of such defensive reframing can muddy the water when it comes to determining how sympathetic a group was before they become viewed as a public menace.

In a 2003 interview, Gary Coker recalled that he first became aware of the Branch Davidians when he was in junior high school.<sup>95</sup> This was in the 1950s when the Davidians were selling their property in Waco and relocating to Elk outside the city. Coker's impression of the Davidians was that "they raised peaches and issued their own money at one point and were strange."<sup>96</sup> Coker's family owned land very near the location of the new Mount Carmel Center, so he also grew up a neighbor of sorts to the

---

<sup>95</sup> Coker Interview, 1-2.

<sup>96</sup> Coker Interview, 1-2.

Branch Davidians. He had little contact with them, however, until Vernon Howell approached him in the middle 1980s about assistance taking legal action against George Roden.

After the trial in 1988, when all the Davidians except Howell had been acquitted and Howell was free as well, Coker was invited to a party that the Davidians threw for the jurors. The party, which served non-alcoholic beer and vegetarian pizza was held in an “old bar” off nineteenth street that the Branch Davidians had turned into a house of worship.<sup>97</sup> Coker recalls seeing a lot of sound and recording equipment at the bar.

This bar was called the Cuestick and was a place that David Thibodeau would come to know well during his time with the Branch Davidians, as he actually lived there. The sound equipment that Coker describes was bought by the Davidians because David Koresh aspired as a guitar player and had, over the years, assembled a band that played Christian rock songs in an attempt to broaden the Branch Davidian message. This was why he was often characterized as a musician or a musician/minister in the *Herald* articles written about the 1988 trial. Koresh was apparently a regular at bars that had live music and at stores that sold instruments and musical paraphernalia. It was in this context that he met David Thibodeau, who would become the drummer for the band and a convert.

Thibodeau, in contrast to the insular image of the typical Mount Carmel loyalist, played in the band at the Cuestick as well as tended bar there. Even before the Davidians became involved in operating the Cuestick, it was a place where Koresh and his friends

---

<sup>97</sup> Coker Interview, 14.

hung out “when they went into Waco for relaxation.”<sup>98</sup> Thibodeau describes his “Cuestick period” as a time in which he was highly visible and part of the nightlife of Waco. His descriptions of how David Koresh interacted with the people in the bar are interesting. He says that “David went out of his way to maintain a good relationship with townspeople. When a deal went sour, he always preferred to take a loss rather than engage in a dispute.”<sup>99</sup> Thibodeau goes on to say that “all that most Wacoans knew about David was that he led a community that owned a farm property on the outskirts of town. I don’t think they knew that a lot of the kids were his or were particularly concerned about our set up. In general, Texans prefer to mind their own business, to live and let live, and Mount Carmel enjoyed a vague existence way out on the edge of Waco’s consciousness.”<sup>100</sup>

According to the survivors, the people of Mount Carmel were not unknown to the community. The people of Waco were aware that they were out there, but did not much care. In contrast to the cult stereotype of a group of people cut off from the outside world and ruthlessly controlled from within, the Branch Davidians worked and played in the city. Mount Carmel was not Jonestown. The Branch Davidians were part of the Waco community in every way that could be reasonably expected. They were known to the authorities. Up until the early 1990s, the local media treated them well. They labored and enjoyed themselves in town. They were known to be a little odd, but the image of the Branch Davidians in the survivor accounts and in local media before 1993 was so

---

<sup>98</sup> Thibodeau, 94.

<sup>99</sup> Thibodeau, 96.

<sup>100</sup> Thibodeau, 96.

different from the portrayal of the community given in the Sinful Messiah series as to be nearly unrecognizable.

Another clue as to why the isolated portrayal of the Branch Davidians became so prevalent may lie in the fact that while the Davidian men worked in town, the women seemed to work primarily at the Mount Carmel Complex. With some exceptions, it seems that the people of Mount Carmel subscribed to traditional gender roles. Men went into town to work and women maintained the household. The New Light revelation and the formation of the House of David further complicated this situation. The makeshift harem that David Koresh created at Mount Carmel and the number of children that he fathered may have made him more reluctant to encourage the Branch Davidian women to leave the complex.

Even the women were not uniformly isolated from the community. Bonnie Haldeman, David Koresh's mother, who lived at Mount Carmel for a few years before leaving in the early nineties, had a very active life outside of the center. She put herself through nursing school and attended McLennan Community College starting in August 1990. She and two other Mount Carmel residents worked at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center in Waco.<sup>101</sup> The Branch Davidians were well represented in the city of Waco.

---

<sup>101</sup> Haldeman, 61.

## CONCLUSIONS

In some ways, a comparison of media coverage of the Branch Davidians in 1988 to 1993 raises more questions than it answers. At what point, exactly, did the Branch Davidians under Koresh come to be thought of as a cult, and once that had happened, was the souring of public opinion inevitable? And, setting aside the public view of the group, were the Branch Davidians under Koresh more “cultic” than they were under George Roden or even Victor Houteff? George Roden tightly controlled his followers, limiting access to Mount Carmel and deciding who could leave and when. Victor Houteff resorted to printing his own money for a time and then requiring his followers to buy and sell using it to tie them to him and to keep them from the corruption of the world outside Mount Carmel. What made Koresh a cult leader and not Victor Houteff? Was it simply that Koresh was living in the wrong time, when “cult” was used as a pejorative, a term that delegitimized a nonstandard religious movement? Or was the leadership of Koresh fundamentally different, what he asked of his followers essentially more disturbing, than what his predecessors had done? Were his own faults, his interest in guns and his objectionable fondness for young women, enough to make the distinction? It seems so, at least in the eyes of the *Waco Tribune Herald* and subsequently the eyes of the national media.

A point of similarity between the coverage of 1988 and of 1993 seems to be a willingness on the part of the *Herald* to take the outsider members of a religious community at their word and to dismiss the claims of insider members. In 1993, this extends to the national media as well. In 1988, it was the Koresh faction whose claims about resurrection challenges, meth labs and the trashing of the Mount Carmel property were reported uncritically. In 1993, the claims of apostate members of the church about child abuse and survivalist style gun training were greeted with equal acceptance. The claims made by the apostates in 1993 were enough for the *Waco Tribune Herald* to begin a vigilante-style smear campaign against Koresh.

This analysis does show that the interaction between the Branch Davidian leadership, whether split between Roden and Koresh in the mid-eighties or united under Koresh in the late eighties and early nineties, and local law enforcement and media was ongoing and did not start with the *Herald* deciding to do an expose on “cultists” that no one had ever heard of. Impressions of the Branch Davidians that were not dissimilar to those presented in 1993 were circulating in the media and among law enforcement in 1988. These impressions simply lacked the unifying category of “cultic” behavior to create a disturbing whole rather than unrelated parts. Among the accusations thrown around between Roden and Koresh were accusations of rape, desecration of a corpse, madness, attempted murder, drug production, drug use in brainwashing followers, as well as many others. Moreover, even where criminal conduct was not the issue, strangeness and perhaps dangerous oddity were. The idea of a man who leads a religious community challenging his opponent to resurrect a dead follower to determine who should be the prophet is far outside the American religious mainstream, far enough to make most

people uncomfortable. Despite all of this, Howell and his followers were not vilified in 1988. The media argued for the Branch Davidians' acceptance and tried to show how this nonstandard church enriched the city and made the community more varied and interesting.

On the other hand, there are few things that, quite rightly, make people more uncomfortable than sexual predation and the stockpiling of weapons by those who plan to use them. It seems that rather than these accusations being enough to vilify the Branch Davidians on their own, they were, rather, what tipped the scales of public opinion. Already uncomfortable with people who they saw as strange, the media and the public at large, it seems, were prepared to believe the worst.

None of this is to say that the Branch Davidian leadership, especially Koresh, were innocent. Koresh was a man who at the very least took sexual advantage of his followers. Any sexual exploitation of other human beings is unconscionable, but taking such advantage of the young and the vulnerable is hideous. This is not simply a matter of refusing to accept those who live differently than the mainstream. It is a matter of crimes being committed within an alternate system that is, nevertheless, subject to mainstream law. David Koresh deserved some significant legal repercussions for his crimes. What he did not deserve was to burn to death in a fire along with seventy-five of his followers.

What is interesting about looking into previous media accounts of the Branch Davidians is that it seems that the scrutiny that eventually culminated in the Sinful Messiah series, which scholars almost universally cite as one of the various factors combining to complicate an already difficult situation in Waco, was part of an ongoing interest in the doings of the Branch Davidians on the part of local media: An interest that

extended back into the late 1980s and which initially cast Vernon Howell and his cadre of followers at the Palestine camp as the “good guys.” Once Howell was in power at Mount Carmel, however, this media honeymoon came to an end, and the lines between good and bad Branch Davidians were redrawn. The apostates became the good guys, trying to warn people about the danger in their midst and to rescue innocents from Koresh’s influence. Howell took on the role that George Roden played in 1988, the crazy man. The difference between Howell and Roden appears to be a perception of competence. Where Roden was obnoxious, Howell was dangerous.

Would more sympathetic coverage or a greater opportunity for the Koresh faction to present their side of the story have resulted in a different outcome during the siege? It is impossible to say. While James T. Richardson, among others, makes the case that the defining of the Branch Davidians as a cult, with all that entails, made the actions taken by the FBI and BATF easier to justify, he is also careful to avoid blaming the media for “the specific way in which the tragedy developed.”<sup>102</sup> The timing of the *Sinful Messiah* series, released as it was alongside the reporting about the BATF raid and its consequences, presented to the public a monolithic argument that not only were the Branch Davidians besieged in their own home, but that they were so dangerous that such an outcome was surely deserved.<sup>103</sup>

Scholars have already gone over some of this ground, and there is no consensus as to exactly how the *Sinful Messiah* series influenced events. Certainly, there were critics of the *Herald*’s decision to release it when they did. Bob Lott’s article defending the

---

<sup>102</sup> Richardson, 167.

<sup>103</sup> Richardson, 167.

timing was responding to such critics. What is important to note is that the series did not come out of nowhere, and interest in the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel did not begin with the appearance of the apostate members and their crusade to raise public awareness about David Koresh and his excesses. Media scrutiny of this group began even before the shooting in 1987, and law enforcement were already well aware of the Mount Carmel faithful due to the actions of George Roden in in mid-eighties.

It is readily apparent from articles in the *Waco Tribune Herald* and from the accounts of survivors that there was an ongoing relationship between the Branch Davidians and the people of the region around them. They were geographically isolated and they kept their affairs private, but they were part of the community nonetheless. The people of Waco had shown interest, some of it quite friendly and sympathetic, in the Branch Davidians, their history and their ways, in the years prior to the standoff that made Waco, Texas a household name. The transformation of the Branch Davidians from an interesting, even admirable, oddity to a danger to the community mirrored the group's shift from a religious group to a cult in the mind of the community. How this happened seems to be a kind of 'chicken and egg' argument. Did the community come to view the Branch Davidians as a cult and then come to consider them dangerous, or was it the other way around?

The tragic ending of the FBI siege on April 19, 1993 in which more than seventy people burned to death was not unavoidable. Even if the Branch Davidians set the fire themselves, which is by no means the consensus position among those who have studied the tragedy, they endured weeks of deprivation, constant threat, physical danger and horror before taking that final step. Public opinion matters in such situations, and if there

had seemed to be more cracks in the wall of opposition that faced the Branch Davidians as they lived out their last days inside Mount Carmel, that last step might never have been taken. If the world outside had seemed less hostile, would the Branch Davidians have been more willing to come out? These are important questions regardless of whether the fire that took so many lives was intentionally set by some of the faithful, or was an accident as many scholars argue. Media are not, of course, the only way in which public opinion is driven, but it is perhaps the most powerful and pervasive. Examinations of how the image of outsider groups change over time and what creates those images in the first place are an important step toward ensuring that tragedies such as that which took the lives of the Mount Carmel faithful do not happen.

## Texas Collection Resources

The following resources are all archived as part of the Texas Collection at Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

Bill Pitts Papers.

Amo Paul Roden Papers.

Mount Carmel Seventh Day Adventist Collection.

FBI Letters and Negotiation Transcripts Collection.

Krik D. Lyons Collection.

Mark Swett Collection.

Joe Robert Collection.

William Smith Collection.

*Waco Tribune-Herald* Archive.

## Other Primary Resources

Baylor University Institute of Oral History Online Collection. Baylor University, Waco TX. <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/buioh>.

The Waco History Project at [Wacohistoryproject.org](http://Wacohistoryproject.org)

## Secondary Source Books

Barkun, Michael. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, Kindle Edition. 2013.

- Boyer, Paul. *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*. Cambridge, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Conkin, Paul K. *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity*. London, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Doyle, Clive, Catharine Wessinger and Matthew D. Wittmer. *A Journey to Waco: Autobiography of a Branch Davidian*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012.
- Haldeman, Bonnie. *Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother*. Wessinger Catherine ed. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.
- Martin, Shelia and Catharine Wessinger. *When They Were Mine: Memories of a Branch Davidian Wife and Mother*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006.
- Newport, Kenneth G. C. *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Tabor, James D and Eugene V. Gallagher. *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, Kindle Edition. 1997.
- Thibodeau, David. *A Place Called Waco: A Survivor's Story*. Whiteson, Leon ed. New York: Public Affairs, 1999.
- Ward Wallace, Patricia. *Waco: A Sesquicentennial History*. Virginia Beach: The Donning Company, 1999.
- Weber, Timothy P. *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982*. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Wright, Stuart A. ed. *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

#### Secondary Source Articles

- Docherty, Jayne Seminare "Why Waco Has Not Gone Away: Critical Incidents and Cultural Trauma." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, No. 1. (October 2001). 186-202
- Docherty, Jayne Seminare "Bridging the Gap Between Scholars of Religion and Law Enforcement Negotiators" *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 3, No. 1 (October 1999) 8-26.

- Newport, Kenneth G. C. "A Baptism by Fire: The Branch Davidians and Apocalyptic Self Destruction." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, No. 2. (November 2009) 61-94.
- Olson, Paul J. "The Public Perception of 'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements'." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45. No. 1 (March 2006) 97-106.
- Richardson, James T. "The Definition of Cult: From Social-Technical to Popular-Negative," *Review of Religious Research* 34 no. 4 (June 1993) 348-355.
- Rosenfeld, Jean E, Mary Zeiss Stange and Ivan Strenski. "Understanding Waco." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, No. 3 (Autumn 1994) 919-46.
- Rosenfeld, Jean E. "The Use of the Military at Waco: The Danforth Report in Context." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, No. 1 (October 2001) 171-185.
- Sullivan, Lawrence E. "No Longer the Messiah': U.S. Federal Law Enforcement views of Religion in Connection with the 1993 Siege of Mount Carmel near Waco, Texas." *Numen*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Religion, Law and the Construction of Identities (May 1996) 213-34.
- Wessinger, Catherine. "Deaths in the Fire at the Branch Davidian's Mount Carmel: Who Bears Responsibility?" *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, No. 2 (November 2009.) 25-60.
- Wessinger, Catherine. "Bonnie Sue Haldeman." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 12, No. 4 (May 2009) 136-37.
- Wright, Stuart A. "Revisiting the Branch Davidian Mass Suicide Debate." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, No. 2. 4-24.
- Wright, Stuart A. "Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, No. 1 (October 2001) 143-51.
- Wright, Stuart A. "A Decade After Waco: Reassessing Crisis Negotiations at Mount Carmel in Light of New Government Disclosures." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, No. 2, (November 2003) 101-10.