

Sunday, Apr. 13, 2008



The Future of the Polygamist Kids

By Hilary Hylton/Austin

The raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas produced haunting images: 416 children, the girls in calico dresses, removed from log cabin homes, looking questioningly into nowhere as they were led from their polygamist enclave into a secular world they have always been taught to fear. They sang hymns as they were driven away along with 139 adult women from Eldorado's Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a renegade branch of the Mormon faith.

And now, it's the secular power which cracked down on the ranch because of sex-abuse allegations that faces its own quandary: what is Texas going to do for the well-being and the future of these boys and girls? It is an enormous legal and welfare challenge. Most have never attended school nor worn contemporary clothes; and each one is likely to require his or her own lawyer. (Fortunately more than 350 lawyers have already offered their pro-bono services to represent the children.)

The children were being vetted and screened at Fort Concho, an historic frontier fort in nearby San Angelo. Texas officials say they were removed from the polygamist enclave because they were in danger of sexual, physical and psychological abuse. But on Monday, the kids were relocated from Fort Concho to the San Angelo Coliseum because their mothers claimed they were falling sick. The Associated Press said about 20 children had come down with mild chicken pox.

Meanwhile, the legal fact-finding is going slowly. At a conference with lawyers on Monday, Texas District Judge Barbara Walther expressed confusion over how to handle an initial custody hearing scheduled for Thursday; "Quite frankly, I'm not sure what we're going to do," she said at one point. "It would seem inefficient to have a witness testify 416 times." While the children and adult women with them are polite to social workers, they are not forthcoming, often giving different names with each interview. "We don't have a problem with evaluation," said Dr. Bruce Perry, a Houston psychiatrist. "We have a problem with cooperation." Simply identifying the children has proved difficult and the state may have to turn to court-approved DNA analysis to confirm relationships and identities.

Perry, senior fellow at The ChildTrauma Academy, had worked with the surviving children from [the Branch Davidian sect](#), a conflagration that killed 82 men, women and children 15 years ago

this month. "I am not sure what is going happen," he says of the Eldorado kids. "I think we will have multiple outcomes, some children will want to stay out, some will go back." Half of the Branch Davidian children returned to the group, but those kids were less homogeneous than Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints (FLDS) children: they were more traumatized and many were relative newcomers to the Davidian way of life. Says Perry: "With the FLDS most of them grew up with these beliefs, there's a multigenerational world view and they are much more socialized [to the FLDS lifestyle]."

In some ways, Perry said, the children have "wonderful qualities — understanding of others, respect for their elders, kindness." But they have also been taught the outside world is filled with Satanic forces — movies, music, games — and as they are exposed to them in foster care, Perry says, they may well believe "My parents were right!" In some ways, Perry said, this situation highlights "fracture lines in our culture" about lifestyles and parental control. "But the state is not saying 'Don't wear those dresses,'" Perry says, referring to the legal basis of the Eldorado raid. "It's saying you cannot have sex with 12-year olds."

For other experts, however, the concern is not the separation of church and state but deprogramming. The bottom line, according to Utah psychologist Dr. Larry Beall, who has worked with women and children who have fled polygamists sects, is the FLDS is a "cult" involved in "plain ole brainwashing since birth." Says Beale, "They have been taught that anyone on the outside is untrustworthy. They are the enemy and they are going to hurt you." He adds, "My experiences with these kids is once they are out of the controlled environment they come to enjoy their freedom."

Some, of course, Beall says, may not. [For the boys](#), particularly those who had found favor with their fathers, the transition will be more difficult; meanwhile the young, teenaged mothers who see themselves as an integral part of the culture will also pose complex challenges. The young mothers occupy a crucial place in their community, proud symbols of a central tenet of their faith that only "celestial marriage" [polygamy] gains believers admission to the highest level of Heaven. (Upon reaching puberty, FLDS girls are required to marry, usually into the existing families of older men.) Furthermore, says Beall, the young women may harbor feelings of guilt and shame as victims now that they left what they have been taught to believe are the safe and sacrosanct confines of the FLDS community.

But right now, there is the practical problem of keeping adult mothers and children together. While the women who accompanied the children are being housed together with the youngsters right now, if they leave to see to their husbands in Eldorado, they will not be allowed back in, says Darrell Azar of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS). On April 17, a district judge will respond to the state's request to extend the temporary custody for all 416 children. "We are going to ask to maintain temporary conservatorship for the foreseeable future until we conclude the investigation," said TDFPS spokesman Darrell Azar. Each child will be given legal representation, said Scott McCown, a former district judge who now heads the Center for Public Policy Priorities, an Austin think tank that has been critical of state funding for social welfare agencies. Any parent who is indigent or can't afford a lawyer also will get legal representation. But the sheer size of the case and the number of children is going to be a "challenge for an underfunded system," McCown said.

Massive amounts of personnel and state aid has been mobilized to deal with the problem. But it comes at a time when the state of Texas has been criticized for not putting enough resources into child protective services. In 2006, following several headline-grabbing stories of deaths of children in abusive environments, the legislature approved additional funds for investigative caseworkers, but critics say it has not been enough. Additional conservatorship caseworkers are needed, according to Rebecca Lightsey, director of Texas Appleseed, a nonprofit social justice organization. The nationwide average is 25 children per caseworker, the Texas ratio is 43 to every one caseworker, Lightsey says, and more foster care is needed. To that end, TDFPS has set up a webpage that lists all the ways the public and volunteer groups can help the children of Find this article at:

- <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1730471,00.html>