



# The Making of David Koresh

Two *Washington Post* staff writers report on the kind of Adventist culture from which David Koresh came.

by William Claiborne and Jim McGee

IN THE BEGINNING, THE MEMBERS OF THE Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Tyler, Texas were intrigued by the handsome young man who returned to the faith after years of straying wildly from its strict moral code.

His name was Vernon Howell, and when he first arrived in 1979, he seemed genuinely hungry for spiritual guidance. But soon he proved resentful of the church's authority. Demanding of attention, he used the Bible to justify his sexual appetite and he had a worrisome ability to hold the church members' children in thrall.

When Howell was 20, he tried to use the Bible to justify a romantic relationship with the 15-year-old daughter of a prominent church member. After Howell insisted that God had given him the girl, church deacon Hardy Tapp said he confronted him about the situation.

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*William Claiborne and Jim McGee are Washington Post staff writers. Excerpts of their May 9, 1993, article "The Transformation of the Waco 'Messiah'," are reprinted by permission of the Washington Post. Washington Post staff researcher Barbara J. Saffir contributed to the report.*

"His response to me was that she was already his wife in a Biblical sense. I said you can call it anything you want, but what you are doing is wrong. . . ."

The church grew increasingly wary of Howell, whose intensity was as unsettling as his hold over the young. He confronted church leaders again and again, arguing over everything from whether the church should buy a new organ to how Scripture should be interpreted.

One Sabbath, Howell forced a showdown, striding to the pulpit and launching a longwinded Scriptural harangue. When it happened again on the very next Sabbath, the deacons confronted Howell and told him, "We would like for you to leave, and if you're not willing to leave on your own, if we have to carry you out, we will," Tapp said.

Howell was formally "disfellowshipped" from the Tyler congregation in April 1983, a formal rejection by the church. The split would lead him eventually to a much larger destiny, in a compound just outside Waco that he called Ranch Apocalypse.

There, under his new name of David Koresh—an amalgamation of the names of two Biblical kings—he found a role that fed his seemingly bottomless hunger to hold center stage and his lust for a rich and varied sex life. It was there, inside a ramshackle collection of wooden buildings over which his rule was supreme, that Vernon Howell—an abused child, itinerant carpenter, would-be rock star and self-styled prophet—would come to think of himself as Jesus Christ. And it was there, in an apparently self-set conflagration on April 19, that he would die, along with 71 of his followers.

## A Disruptive Early Home Life

Vernon Wayne Howell was born in Houston on August 17, 1959, to Bonnie Clark, a 14-year-old, unmarried high-school dropout. His father, Bobby Wayne Howell, soon married another woman.

Shortly after Vernon's birth, Bonnie married a man who had just been released from prison, according to family members who remember him as an abusive man who beat both his wife and her infant son. Bonnie managed for nearly 18 months, then asked her mother, Erline Clark, for help.

Erline took her grandson, then quickly had two more children of her own—a daughter, Sharon, then a son, Kenneth. With Vernon—technically their nephew—they became a roisy trio in the Clark home, almost siblings.

According to the Clarks, Vernon was a bright and precocious child who grew up calling his maternal grandmother "Momma." Once, trying to help out at the age of 4, he put a garden hose in the gas tank of the family car and filled it with water.

Her husband was never affectionate with Vernon, Erline Clark said in an interview, nor was he expected to be. He was a hard-drinking "macho man . . . country-type Texan,"

she said, of a generation that did not encourage men to show emotion toward children unless it was time for discipline.

When Vernon was 5, Bonnie, who had divorced her first husband, married Roy Haldeman, and they took her son back to live with them in Dallas. Haldeman, David Koresh later claimed, administered physical discipline. "When I used to act up? When I had a bad report card? Can you imagine? We got our tails whomped," Koresh told an Australian television crew last year.

In a recent interview, Haldeman denied that Vernon grew up in an abusive household. "We had our normal problems . . . We got along okay," Haldeman said.

Sharon, his mother's young sister, said there were many happy visits with the Haldemans, but they usually ended very sadly, with Vernon begging to come home with "Momma." Sharon said her most enduring memory of this time was looking out the car window as they drove away and seeing Vernon on his bicycle, peddling furiously after the Clarks, tears streaming down his face.

During his early years in Dallas, Vernon attended public school, but was plagued by what family sources said the school told them was a learning disability. He was held back to complete first grade twice, and in the third and fourth grades was put in a special class for learning disabled children.

When Vernon was 14, it was decided he would go back to live with his grandparents. By then the Clarks had moved to a one-story brick house on Ardmore Avenue, a lovely tree-lined street in Tyler.

There was a place for Vernon to sleep in Kenneth's room, but he was fascinated with a small shed in the backyard. It was a mess when he first arrived, but Vernon was handy with tools. He cleaned and hammered and transformed it into his own private place. "It wasn't for lack of a bedroom in the house," Sharon said. "He just liked the idea of fixing it

up.”

The backyard shed was a typical teenager’s room, she said. He fashioned a bed, ran an extension chord for a black light, covered the walls with posters of 1970s rock star Ted Nugent and fluorescent designs. “It was like a clubhouse,” said Kenneth, now 30. Vernon taught himself to play the guitar.

And always, Sharon said, there were girls. They came from around the neighborhood, ostensibly to visit her, she said, but really to meet this dreamy new guy with wavy blond hair who had his own place in the back and played rock-and-roll. “I don’t think he really had to chase the girls,” Sharon said. “Everybody that met Vernon liked him.”

Sharon and the others remember this as a happy, stable time in Vernon’s life. It ended, Erline Clark said, when her husband objected to Vernon’s continued presence and he was sent back to his mother and Haldeman in Dallas.

Both his mother and grandmother were practicing Seventh-day Adventists, and Howell’s early life was steeped in Bible study and governed by strict moral codes that applied the Ten Commandments literally and banned smoking, drinking, and fornication. But he had problems with formal instruction.



When he was 16, Vernon left public school and went to the church-run Dallas Junior Academy. He dropped out in the 10th grade. One family member said he became fascinated with the Bible during this period but had always listened to preachers on the radio.

The family is reluctant to discuss what happened at the school, but Erline Clark said she was told that Vernon got into a dispute with a teacher and was feuding with his parents. Sharon recalled that “he was having a lot of trouble at home with Bonnie and Roy,” and “Bonnie had to take him out of school there.” Back he came to the Clarks, who by now had moved to the picturesque rural town of Chandler.

Throughout the years of shuttling back and forth between his mother and his grandparents, Vernon was left to find his own way into manhood. “There was never a very really good male role model for him—someone who really took an interest in him and genuinely wanted to spend time with him and teach him something,” Sharon said.

His sexual education began early, an example set by his mother and Sharon, his surrogate little sister, who married a soldier at 14. Years later, Vernon told women the story of an older girl who attempted to have sex with him when he was 6, and of the time when a group of older boys tried to rape him in a barn.

Erline Clark suggested that Howell’s later sexual involvement with the young girls at the Waco compound whom he called “wives” ought to be viewed in the context of the prevailing sexual mores of rural East Texas. “The youngest girl that had a baby [at the Branch Davidian compound] was 14 years old,” she said. “He never raped anybody in his life. . . . They grow up faster.”

In interviews, his relatives frequently returned to the rejection they said he encountered from older males and father figures, including his natural father, grandfather and

stepfathers, to men who refused to let him marry their daughters. "Vernon seemed to be always wanting to be accepted and loved by the men in his life and it never seemed like he got what he was looking for," said one relative.

## Rock-and-Roll Becomes 'Main Thing'

**B**y 1978, Vernon was 18 and facing an uncertain future.

"In his younger years, he had a hard time," Kenneth said. "He was always looking for something. He had his rock-and-roll; he had his women. But it was never enough."

Howell did make enough money in construction to afford the down payment on a new Silverado pickup truck. It was black, with red velour interior, and he kept it full of rock tapes—Van Halen, Aerosmith, Eric Clapton and, of course, his idol—Nugent, a Detroit-based rock star whose videos featured violent hunting scenes. He was seriously into bodybuilding that year, pumping up his biceps to the point where they almost looked too big on his lean frame.

Debbie Owens, then 16 and working as a waitress at an all-you-can-eat catfish restaurant, counted herself lucky to be dating Vernon. "He was a typical teenager," she said in an interview, a "rocker" who carried his guitar wherever he went.

When Owens was not working, she hung out at a community pool in a mobile home subdivision. There was an open-air pavilion next to the pool with a roof and an electrical outlet and, during the summer, Vernon made it his own. He set up his amplifier, Owens said, and practiced for hours, usually drawing a crowd with hot riffs copied from Nugent and Clapton.

He would "zone out," Owens said. "It was like nothing else existed when he played,

unless he messed up," and then he was super critical of himself, a real perfectionist about chord changes. "That was the main thing in his world. I was second. Music came first," she said.

Owens said the most striking thing about Vernon was the effect he had on younger boys, such as Kenneth, then in his early teens, and others who, she said, "idolized him." Guitarist Grant Cook, who sometimes practiced with Howell and later became a professional musician, said the same: Vernon always was hanging out with much younger boys.

"He really pumped them up, played with their self-esteem and they thought it was so neat that here this older guy would take the time to talk to these 14- to 16-year-olds," Owens said.

"It was real important to him that they thought highly of him, respected his music, his brain, his values," she said.

His younger uncle, Kenneth, said Vernon taught him to drive and counseled him on facing up to older bullies at his school. "I learned to stand up for myself," Kenneth said. "He taught me that."

Never, Owens said, not once in the seven months they dated, did she ever hear Vernon talk about the Bible or religion. What she did discover was that he was seeing another girl in Dallas, a girl whose family members said eventually became pregnant. Owens said they planned to have a meeting to talk things out, but Vernon never showed up.

**I**n the months that followed, Howell headed into what family members and friends described as a pivotal emotional crisis. He had taught himself to be a capable carpenter, but held no steady job. He formed a band, but no one can remember a single paying gig. He was well read in the Bible, but apparently lacked a high school degree. And he still had no permanent residence, sometimes living in Dallas, sometimes in Chandler.

Although the date is unclear, this also was the period when he chose to confront one of the mysteries of his youth, the disappearance of his natural father, Bobby Wayne Howell. Vernon began a search that ultimately took him to the Houston living room of his paternal grandmother, Jean Holub, who said she arranged a meeting between father and son.

"When his dad pulled up," she said in an interview, "they grabbed each other and they hugged each other. And that was a wonderful thing." Vernon was delighted to find out that his father was both a carpenter and a skilled mechanic. "He started telling his dad . . . 'I know how to do carpenter work. It was just natural. And I am a mechanic, and that came natural. Now I know that I got it from you.'"

Whatever happiness Vernon found in this reunion, he was devastated by the breakup of his love affair in Dallas. When the girl's father refused to allow him to marry his pregnant lover, Howell returned to live in Chandler and, with Sharon [his younger aunt], began going to the Tyler Seventh-day Adventist Church.

"He was going through a chastising," Sharon said, seeking atonement for the guilt he felt over his sexual appetite. He told her, "I am having a hard time keeping these thoughts out of my head," she said. "He prayed a lot and he lost a lot of weight."

## A Return to the Adventist Church

From the first day he walked into a midweek prayer meeting, said Bob Bockmann, now an elder in the Tyler church, Howell commanded attention. If his discussions of Scripture were sometimes obscure, it was still nice to have a young man who was serious about the Bible.

The Tyler congregation was delighted to

have a young, apparently fallen-away member return to the faith. When members learned that Howell was out of work, Harriet Phelps, an elderly woman whose sons were grown, offered him a room in exchange for work around her farm.

Bockmann and his wife, Maggie, befriended Howell, and Bockmann said the young man seemed to be burning with guilt over his past sex life and resentment that he had not been permitted to marry his ex-girlfriend.

"The girl he was with in the Dallas area was about to have his baby," Bockmann said. "It was just killing him, because her parents didn't want him around anymore. He really missed the girl and felt terribly rejected that he wasn't able to be with her."

Bockmann said Howell also professed to have intense feelings of guilt over his lifelong devotion to playing rock-and-roll. "He would not even touch a guitar," Bockmann said. "They [the rock songs] implied very strongly to him that he was under a satanic influence, so he had washed all that away."

At first, Bockmann said, Howell seemed receptive to the church's teachings. "He said, 'I am just a newborn baby.' Here was a point where he was asking to be led, asking to be counseled. Sad to say, it was very shortlived."

In a church with strict moral values, the reformed Howell suddenly became everyone's judge, especially when it came to the conduct of women. He told at least one father that his daughter was "wearing what he thought was immodest dress," Bockmann said. "He became very strait-laced."

Adding to the tension was the fact that Howell seemed able to command the rapt attention of younger members. He would stand in a corner and "all-encompass them," said deacon Hardy Tapp's wife, Annette, "and just totally take over the conversation."

And whatever his feelings of sexual guilt, he used the church to develop relationships

with women, both platonic and sexual. "He alluded that he was attracted to me," recalls Bockmann's wife, Maggie, who was much older than Vernon.

She said he would speak to her for hours about his childhood, often tearfully recounting physical abuse. Once, she said, he showed her a pattern of burn scars on one leg he said were caused when he was forced to kneel on a heat register.

His younger aunt, Sharon, said she believes that this period was the last, best chance for anyone to have interrupted Vernon Howell's transformation into David Koresh. His life might have turned out differently, she said, had Howell not been captivated by a powerful series of revival meetings sponsored by the church.

They were called Revelation Seminars and were conducted by evangelist Jim Gilley of Arlington, Tex. They featured dramatic, even frightening, images in a multimedia portrayal of Armageddon. Gilley, who still presents his "Prophesy Panorama" in the United States and abroad, is a rousing speaker and his video representations of the Apocalypse as foretold in the Book of Revelation—featuring earthquakes, pestilence and religious persecutions—was combined with a video of current events that seemed to point toward the imminent millennium.

"We went every night of the week," Sharon said. He couldn't stop talking about the details, which seemed to bring all his years of Bible study into focus. He felt he could expand on Gilley's teachings. Gilley said in an interview that Howell approached him one night and offered to reorganize the show

and change its message. Gilley said he rejected the offer.

"That's when it took off," Sharon said. "That's when he really became serious.

"Vernon said that even Mr. Gilley had a piece of the puzzle missing," she said. The missing piece, Howell told her in earnest, was the Seventh Seal, something that could be opened only by a new prophet. The Seven Seals, as described in the Book of Revelation, bind a scroll held in God's right hand that prophesies the calamities that precede the Apocalypse.

Sharon said Vernon was convinced that it was time "to have a new prophet and a new light" in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and that he was quite possibly that person.

Vernon tried hard to bring his message to the Tyler congregation, but by that point, they had had their fill of him. Following his formal rejection from the church, he took a high-speed turn into the insular world of the Branch Davidians, a

group formed 60 years ago by a man named Victor Houteff, another disaffected Seventh-day Adventist who quit the church after becoming convinced that he was a prophet. Since then, the Branch Davidians always had had a prophet living in their midst, someone who could convey the "message."

The Waco section of the Branch Davidians was headed by Lois Roden, who assumed the role of chief prophet after the death of her husband, Ben. But she was in her sixties and everyone understood she would soon have a successor. Here Vernon found his niche, in an isolated and insular group that was willing,

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perhaps even anxious, to accept his claim of divine inspiration.

Howell recruited his uncle, Kenneth, to the sect. The two rented an apartment, working construction to pay expenses and spending their off hours recruiting on an Adventist campus or going door-to-door in the neighborhoods.

During this period, Howell developed a close relationship with Perry Jones, who ultimately gave Howell permission to marry his 14-year-old daughter, Rachel, Howell's first and only legal wife. A lifelong member of the Branch Davidians, Jones was convinced that the federal government posed an oppressive danger to devout Christians.

"He was real involved with our rights, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms," Kenneth said of Jones, who died from wounds inflicted in the Feb. 28 shootout with federal agents at the Waco compound.

The three took long trips to revival meetings, carrying along Davidian tracts filled with elaborate diagrams of the faith. As they drove, the car was filled with talk of "God, government and religion," Kenneth said.

At the camp meetings, Howell's natural gift for empathy and public speaking served him well. "He would have a lot of people surrounding him," Kenneth said, so much so that the revival organizers sometimes had police ask him to leave.

His old friends back in Tyler and Chandler heard that Howell, now in his mid-twenties, had transformed from a rock-and-roll libertine into a sanctimonious, Bible-quoting martinet.

After not talking to Debbie Owens for many months, Vernon suddenly showed up and wanted to talk to her about Scripture. He had lost the Silverado pickup, she said, and was driving a beat-up Chevy Nova filled with religious tracts.

He told her he had really changed and wanted to lead her to a better life. "I told him,

'You are the last SOB to take me to God,'" Owens said.

## Gaining Leadership of the Cult

According to a number of former disciples, the gun battle at the Branch Davidian compound on Nov. 3, 1987—and the trial that followed—was the catalyst that rallied Howell's followers around the aspiring, 28-year-old evangelist and—perhaps more importantly—demonstrated to him the extent to which he could control them.

The dispute began when Lois Roden, who died in 1986, skipped over her son, George, and anointed Howell to be the Waco cult's new prophet.

To settle the dispute, George Roden had disinterred the corpse of a long-deceased cult member named Anna Hughes, who died at the age of 85. Whoever could bring Anna Hughes back to life would be revealed as the Branch Davidians' true prophet, he said.

Shortly before dawn on that November day, Howell and seven of his supporters, dressed in camouflage fatigues and carrying assault rifles and a camera, slipped into Mount Carmel, as the compound was officially known, to take a photograph of the corpse.

Howell later claimed he was seeking photographic evidence of the disinterment to support a criminal charge against Roden.

They were met in the yard by Roden, armed with a submachine gun. In a brief shootout, Roden was slightly injured. Howell and his self-styled "commando" squad were brought to trial on charges of attempted murder. Roden, now 55, is in a Texas mental hospital, where he was committed after killing a man in Odessa, Tex., in 1989.

Waco lawyers who were present at Howell's trial still recall the moment when he displayed his control over his followers.

As the Branch Davidians crowded into the

spectators' gallery at the start of the trial, McLennan County Judge Herman Fitts declared that anyone in the courtroom who needed to be sworn as a witness should stand and identify themselves. When there was no response, Howell's lawyer, Gary Coker, turned to the Branch Davidians present and urged—also with no success—that the defense witnesses rise.

Then, in a moment of high drama, Howell stood, smiling benevolently. Raising a hand, he declared: "It's all right. You've done nothing wrong. Stand." At this command, the witnesses stood.

After the jury acquitted Howell's lieutenants and deadlocked on the charge against him, resulting in dismissal, he was given another moment with which to savor his growing power. The Branch Davidians backed a truck up to the county sheriff's department and watched with satisfaction as deputies loaded it with dozens of weapons they had seized at Mount Carmel after the shootout.

"You don't have to stretch your imagination too far to appreciate how his followers must have interpreted that. He had won the verdict, the weapons and the compound. In his mind,

and in those of his people, he must have felt that he was guided by the hand of God," former cult member Mark Bunds said.

## A Name Change and 'New Light' Edict

During the five years of his leadership, Howell transformed the cluster of dilapidated bungalows at Mount Carmel into a fortress-like compound, greatly expanded its weapons arsenal and began training his followers in military tactics.

He also legally changed his name to David Koresh and declared himself a "sinful" incarnation of Jesus Christ. He issued his "New Light" declaration, proclaiming that, while his male followers would eventually find their perfect mates in heaven, their earthly wives and daughters were reserved exclusively for his sexual gratification and procreation.

"Only the Lamb is to be given the job to raise up the seed of the House of David, isn't he?" Howell asked rhetorically in a tape-recorded message he sent to Australia in 1989.