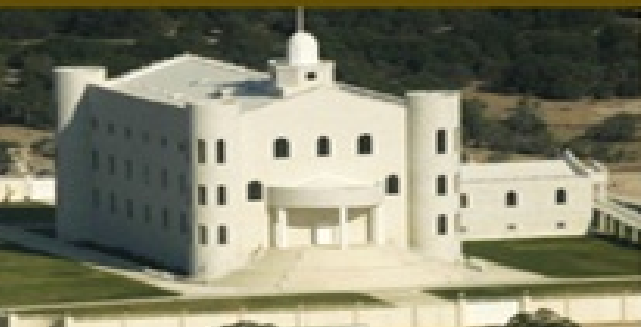


Debra Weyermann



# ANSWER THEM NOTHING

## Bringing Down the Polygamous Empire of Warren Jeffs





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## Note on Sources

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In unraveling such a complicated, contemporary story like FLDS, heavy use must be made of current media sources. There is no shortage of information about FLDS in every form of media. The difficulty lies with making sense of the haphazard manner in which the sect is covered, usually in bits and pieces by journalists who are assigned a one-time task with no background or intended follow-up.

Gathering, collating, and comparing the reams of media coverage would have been nearly impossible without the Hope Organization website. Founder Elaine Tyler has spent a good chunk of her life gathering tens of thousands of print and electronic stories about FLDS (only the *Salt Lake Tribune* refuses permission to reprint), organizing them by topic and date. The website also posts many of the legal documents referenced in this book, as well as links to documentaries and other FLDS-related information. Hope Organization is one website to which I regularly returned. There are dozens of FLDS-related websites. Many are less than reliable. Others, like the ones listed in the bibliography, reprint original documents or other source material to support their headlines and discussions. Though designated an anti-FLDS website by some, FLDS Texas reprinted or provided links to hundreds of original documents, correspondence, and news film, and I visited the site almost daily to track legal developments in that state.

I was fortunate to know people in Utah, Arizona, and Texas who provided me with full court files and then sent new documents as they were filed. In this way, I was able to follow court cases not through the media but from actual legal filings as they occurred. I was also able to obtain most of Warren Jeffs's dictations seized in the 2008 Texas raid. These voluminous and damning diaries containing illuminating details not available to FLDS members allowed me to re-create life in Short Creek in a way not possible before.

Finally, dozens of people were interviewed for the book, many in person. Almost as important were the people who refused to be interviewed for various reasons. No current FLDS members agreed to speak with me. Some ex-FLDS members agreed to anonymous interviews, but many more feared retribution either against themselves or against relatives still inside FLDS. Some individuals, like Dan Fischer, initially granted interviews but withdrew their cooperation as FLDS attorneys drew their personal lives into the escalating court battles. All the judges, as well as the attorneys general for Texas and Arizona, declined requests for interviews with regrets, explaining that they did not want to risk remarks that the sect lawyers might construe as legally actionable. Their actions have been reconstructed from the voluminous public record.

# THE RAID

On July 26, 1953, the fully eclipsed moon didn't afford the lookouts any light, but they knew what to expect. Polygamist sympathizers in Salt Lake City had tipped leaders of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) that Arizona governor Howard Pyle intended to raid their isolated stronghold on the Utah-Arizona border, and he meant to do it conclusively. The boy sentries stationed on the highest ground of the unofficial town of Short Creek felt the rumble of heavy military transport trucks well before the darkened column's silhouette appeared against the desert's star-blurred horizon, affording them ample time to race back to town before Pyle's two hundred troops—more than Short Creek's entire adult population—poured into the settlement. Some accounts record that fully alerted FLDS leaders shattered the predawn silence with dynamite blasts, the signal for the faithful to gather and greet their oppressors.

The alarming ordnance display reassured Pyle that his decision to bring a heavily armed overwhelming force into a dirt-farming community bursting with women and children was justified. After a five-month investigation, his investigators had informed him that the collection of child rapists and welfare embezzlers had amassed a dazzling arsenal for defense against the imminent apocalypse, stashing guns and explosives in the giant caves pocking the soaring red cliffs behind the town. Pyle also never second-guessed his decision to invite truckloads of press well marinated in the lurid details of his five-month investigation into FLDS, an investigation that proved myriad crimes, not least of which was the appalling practice of marrying girls as young as twelve to old men who'd accumulated up to twenty other women.

“We could do no less than this!” an emotional Pyle declared during an address describing the plight of FLDS children he called “innocent chattels” victimized by a handful of foul men from whom the children were “without hope of escaping their degrading slavery from the moment of their birth.” Once his reporters told Americans the truth about Short Creek, Pyle knew a raid that might seem extreme at first blush would be not only understood but embraced.

But FLDS leaders knew the press was coming too. As armed-to-the-teeth American lawmen flooded into an ostensibly American community, the FLDS faithful waited in their mode town hall, erupting into a rousing chorus of “God Bless America” as the swarm of increasingly bewildered reporters filtered through the doors.

Where were the evil child molesters and degenerate “white slavers” promised in Pyle's voluminous report? The people before the reporters were spindly and plain, poor farmers barely squeaking by. The pitted streets and weather-beaten houses spoke to poverty, not wickedness. Children in threadbare nightclothes and cardboard shoes issued heart-wrenching wails as they were torn from their mothers' arms. Anguished women, their faces stamped

with the ravages of backbreaking work, sobbed and implored as the stony-faced American soldiers loaded their men into ominous prison buses.

Cameras rolled and clicked for days as Pyle processed his pitiful-looking prisoners, feeding long queues of stunned women and children what appeared to be cups of gruel from a kind of chuck wagon truck. And then, the horrifying coup de grace: after most of the men were hauled away, the dead-faced women and children were lined up in front of their humble but clean American houses holding numbered cards across their chests for identification. Less than ten years after the end of World War II, it wasn't quite a concentration camp picture, but it was close enough. Whatever traumatized Short Creek women Pyle didn't remove to Phoenix fled to relatives in neighboring communities trying, they said, to evade the jackboots of government. The press ate it up.

The media Pyle had enlisted to document his defeat of a criminal enterprise—and perhaps to launch the presidential bid he mulled—now savaged him from coast to coast. Constituents who had demanded an end to the polygamists in their midst turned on him. Legislators who shared Pyle's revulsion and appropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars for Pyle's investigation and raid now denounced him. Pyle and any other official discovered to be a part of the raid were drawn as big, fat ogres in editorial cartoons and excoriated as heartless fiends in print. But the worst fallout came from the ocean of depressing photographs epitomized by *Life* magazine's September 14, 1953, pictorial essay of the raid and its aftermath.

In the article entitled "The Lonely Men of Short Creek," *Life* photographers flexed their renowned artistry with photo after photo of Short Creek's remaining damaged yet stoic men determined to do their level best to keep life normal for their motherless children. *Life* editors outdid themselves with a half-page photo of a forlorn black dog abandoned to a bleak fate on a bleak dirt road with the caption: "Deserted puppy, left behind when his young master was taken by state troopers to Phoenix, sits in the deserted main street of Short Creek." Without any evidence whatsoever, angry *Life* editors blamed the fatal heart attack suffered by an eighty-four-year-old man a full month after the raid on Governor Pyle's heartless actions.

Text accompanying "The Lonely Men of Short Creek" was perplexing to say the least. Crimes the arrested men were accused of actually committing—child rape, bigamy, fraud—were dismissed in a throwaway sentence, implying the charges were an obvious ruse concocted so that Pyle might storm into a perfectly idyllic American town and ruin everyone's lives. *Life* offered no speculation as to why Pyle might have nourished such an odd ambition, but the rest of the article was pure prophecy of the media's velvet-gloved approach to FLDS from that time until this day. With a few notable exceptions, American media continue to fail the public comprehension of what, exactly, FLDS is by modeling its coverage of the sect on a half-century-old *Life* article.

Concerning the young girls who would be assigned without consent to men old enough to be their grandfathers, *Life* impatiently insisted that polygamy "was the only life they'd ever known." The peeved writer explained that FLDS men were lonelier than most because they were "used to having as many as five women and 21 children around the house," yet they "stolidly" managed to fix their own breakfasts without assistance. Also recommending the

were activities like corn husking, cow milking, and hymn singing. *Life* characterized the required underage marriages, polygamy, and welfare abuses as “tricky” legal questions, but the magazine’s readers were reminded often and sternly that this hardy stock of pioneer folk were practicing a religion upon which no one could form an opinion, much less a judgment.

Pyle was floored, astonished, unable to beat back the tidal wave of public disgust by reminding the public that they themselves had demanded the removal of the polygamous, tax-dollar-siphoning FLDS from their midst in noisy, sometimes raucous, public demonstrations just months before. Pyle couldn’t find work as a street sweeper after he was hounded from the governor’s mansion, a fate shared by a dozen other raid participants who couldn’t get clear of the flying wreckage. Their ghosts would whisper in every politician and police officer’s ear for the next half century: *Go there at your peril.*

For FLDS leadership, the 1953 raid was the ultimate cloud with the silver lining. Flabbergasted by the unexpected tsunami of public sympathy, FLDS leaders moved swiftly to solidify their unlikely new identity as paragons of American family values, besieged by a dangerously secular government. Immediately understood was the power of pictures and that a goodly chunk of professional photographers would overlook a lot of “tricky” questions for the photogenic smorgasbord of women and kids dressed in old-timey pioneer clothes doing old-timey stuff, all against a backdrop of spectacular vistas in the ethereal Southwestern light photographers treasure.

As the decades passed, FLDS leaders sporadically invited carefully prescreened media folks who were not too picky about statutory rape into compounds otherwise fortified against intrusion by the tax-paid FLDS police force. Like the *Life* staff before them, photographers appreciated the opportunity to step back in time, producing montages of apple-cheeked children glowing under golden sunsets as they pulled carrots, played on swings, and of course prayed in the wholesome, somehow reassuring pigtail-and-pinafore garb representing a simpler, better time when butter was churned fresh and no one locked their doors.

The only adults in the essays are quaint, prairie dress-clad FLDS women, who might be snapped braiding one another’s hair or sharing a carefree laugh as they bake bread from scratch. Photos of adult FLDS men are conspicuously absent, a glaring omission that suggests a prearranged complicity between the publications and FLDS men who know there is still a remote chance, however absurd, that a post-’53 raid police officer will prosecute them for taking “brides” as young as twelve. With media help, FLDS over the past fifty years has cultivated the mistaken impression they are a wholesome, if somewhat eccentric, American religion—sort of like the Amish but without the horse carriages. As in the *Life* article in 1953, texts accompanying photos admit polygamy is illegal, but so what? The ferocious American commitment to religious freedom—a bedrock of American society—trumps the admittedly odd practices of a small group far, far away. Nobody wanted to ever again see pictures of armed Americans dragging anguished women from their children and homes.

FLDS wore the 1953 raid like armor against nosy child welfare workers, outside cops, and fraud investigators, and the armor worked. By 2000, the FLDS population in Short Creek—comprising the twin cities of Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah—had swelled from five hundred to ten thousand, with additional known FLDS enclaves in Utah, South Dakota, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, California, Canada, and Mexico, and suspected communities

in a dozen other states. The sect's United Effort Plan—a "trust" that held all land titles of a FLDS members—was worth \$110 million in property alone, even as the vast majority of FLDS members subsisted on millions bestowed from various welfare programs, while millions more in tax dollars to support local government, schools, and police disappeared every year into FLDS bank accounts. Dozens of FLDS businesses in construction, lumber, concrete, and agriculture, staffed by unpaid FLDS members, flourished without the pesky labor costs other firms had to include in competitive project bids. The sect's leaders built 40,000-square-foot homes with trout ponds and wine cellars. They dined on fresh lobster while FLDS mothers parsed food stamps to feed thirty children. They traveled at will in their own aircraft, the only customers for the multimillion-dollar airport built outside Short Creek with a federal grant awarded to "encourage tourism."

Even a little curiosity would have revealed that tourism was the very last thing FLDS leaders wished to encourage. Little by little, Short Creek was transformed from a poor farming community of a few dozen families who governed themselves with a semblance of democracy into a wealthy fortress ruled by the iron words of a single man, the prophet deemed to be God's only representative on earth.

The FLDS prophet controlled not only the wealth but also the daily lives of every man, woman, and child. The prophet decided who would work in a dairy or a construction site or a lumber mill, and on what days at which times. The prophet decided which men would be allowed a family and assigned girls without their consent to the men he selected. No books or magazines save those approved by the prophet were allowed. Television, music, radio, and movies were strictly forbidden. Tape recorders were allowed but only to listen to hour upon hour of droning religious instruction. Education, which had included the sciences until as late as 1986, was effectively ended. The FLDS teachers drove spanking new, high-end SUVs purchased by taxpayers and kept a good eye peeled for children not sufficiently "sweet" while teaching that God lived inside the sun and the fossil record was a nefarious government hoax.

Disobedience, however unintentional, was catastrophic. It would seem the FLDS doctrine of "blood atonement" murder, condoned from the pulpit by FLDS prophets, was too extreme a measure for actual practice, but who needed murder when you could erase an FLDS member's existence with a simple, declarative sentence? Because they did not own homes or cars or even the clothes on their backs, FLDS members had to keep sensitive antennae on the prophet's shifting moods lest they find themselves dropped in the middle of nowhere without a dime, stripped of home, family, and eternal salvation forever. Without explanation or appeal, the prophet could and did disappear a man in the middle of the night by throwing him in the back of a van, driving him out of town, and dumping him with orders that he never contact his family again. By dawn, his weeping wives and children would be reassigned to more favored brethren who would see to it the expelled man's name was never spoken again.

Women were so low on the heavenly totem pole they required their husband's postmortem consent to even get to heaven, but they were invaluable as child-bearing wives.

In a closed religious society that required each man to obtain a minimum of three wives before he could ascend to the celestial kingdom and rule a planet after death, the fifty-fif

gender birthrate was a killer. Many men had more than three wives. The prophet Rulon Jeffs was rumored to have upward of sixty, adding a fourteen-year-old girl when he was eighty-six. Women were too scarce a commodity to be given the boot for even the gravest indiscretion. So long as they could produce children, misbehaving females were isolated for “reflection” in locked in secret houses or even abandoned in the cliff caves far above town for “behavior modification,” which might involve beatings or deprivations of food, water, or sleep.

Even for FLDS members who might have wanted it, there was nowhere to turn for relief. There had never been a contested election in the governments of Hildale or Colorado City. Every tax-paid position was held by favored FLDS men. The police forces comprised FLDS men who reported not to state government but to the prophet, as did the firemen who might or might not respond to your burning home should you break a rule or be even suspected of harboring a bad thought. Outside police didn’t want to get involved. Even when those young girls fleeing forced marriages to men several times their age managed to get out of town, skittish officers heeding the ghosts of 1953 simply returned them to their parents. And the situation was about to get so much worse.

By 2000 the pool of girls available for assignment had run critically low. Prophet Rulon Jeffs tried to remedy the situation by “plucking,” as he called it, younger and younger girls, pulling them from school after the fourth or fifth grade to ready them for his impatient supporters. Yet the measure only extended the problem to a new generation. Now there were teenage boys, as well as young men in their twenties and up, without a single unattached girl in their age bracket, practicing a religion that required them to reproduce with at least three wives to enter the celestial kingdom. Without enlightening these bachelors to their forever single status, scores of young men were shuffled around the country like damaged playing cards to work in FLDS businesses and construction projects. Eventually, boys as young as twelve were also pulled from school to travel the United States as FLDS laborers.

When even those steps did not lessen the pressure, Rulon Jeffs and later his son, Warren, hit upon a solution of unbearable cruelty. Concocting the flimsiest of offenses, the prophet ordered parents to eject their own sons, some as young as thirteen, from the only community they’d ever seen without a penny, scrap of food, or change of clothes to their names. Fathers and mothers obeyed the prophet, driving their children into the yawning desert or to some faraway city. They’d be abandoned on the side of the road, left with these loving words from the parents who’d given them life: “You are eternally damned to hell, and we will never think of you or speak to you again.” Terrified, bewildered, and devastated boys watched their fathers’ taillights vanish into the night, their small bodies wracked with hopeless sobs. Many tried to kill themselves right away. Some succeeded, little sacrifices to the prophet and his supporters’ insatiable appetites for young girls.

Hundreds and hundreds of boys were severed this way, their own parents setting them adrift onto the mean streets of Las Vegas or Phoenix without educations, skills, or knowing a single soul, believing only hell awaited them. There were so many, the press was forced to create an entire classification to describe the drug-soaked, despairing boys who often turned to prostitution—the only skill they could learn on short notice—to eat. The “lost boys” became the shame of Utah and Arizona alike, their inhuman stories eventually printed in newspapers from coast to coast. Yet politicians and police still under the influence of the



1953 raid did nothing, knowing that interference with FLDS spelled political disaster.

Anti-FLDS activists screamed about the young girls and boys whose lives were being shattered with the support of tens of millions of tax dollars. They presented cases of appalling incest, rape, and assault, of mothers permanently separated from their children on a prophet's power whims, not to mention outrageous abuse and misappropriation of education and law enforcement funds. They issued press releases about missing FLDS persons for whom the authorities would not search—frantic girls running for their very lives who were returned to their oppressors without investigation and dead boys for whom no one grieved.

In the unassailable name of religious freedom, the entire nation averted its eyes, preferring instead the sanitized, wholesome picture stories that showed up on newsstands every eighteen months or so. FLDS judges, policemen, teachers, city councilmen, and public utility administrators all abused their authority with impunity, blindly obedient to the self-proclaimed prophet Warren Jeffs and his increasingly draconian and bizarre revelations. Short Creek was allowed to morph into a dictatorship on U.S. soil with a dictator who openly and defiantly rejected U.S. law, declaring that snippets from his incoherent dreams were the only true laws from God.

“Fifty years of darkness” is what despairing activists call the madness allowed to flourish in the years between 1953 and 2000. They feared that the wall of darkness around Short Creek was too thick to breach. But in 2001, it cracked from within.

## RUTH CROSSES THE RUBICON

*Sisters, do you wish to make yourselves happy? Then what is your duty? It is for you to be children in the name of the Lord, that are full of faith and the power of God—to receive, conceive, bear, and bring forth in the name of Israel's God.*

—Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol.

*The devil uses a certain weakness. He whispers selfishness, and that weakness in a girl—since I am talking to girls—is vanity, wanting to be noticed, wanting to be looked at. Vanity is something useless where you want it, but it gets you nowhere, and when girls want to be where the boys are looking at them, that is called vanity. The good boys won't even pay you any attention. Faithful and good Priesthood men won't pay you attention and try to get you to like them. The boys that pay you attention and tries [sic] to get you to like them are the boys that would destroy you, and you can see that difference.*

—Warren Jeffs, lecture to eighth grade girls, November 1, 2001

*I just want to eat sugar or drink a cup of coffee without asking permission. I want to take my kids across town to the park without being followed. I want to get off all the welfare and be a real person. I want to be free and my kids to live free and I want my kids to have an education and have hope. I just want to be a real person.*

—Journal of Ruth Stubbs, nineteen-year-old plural wife, June 2001, Phoenix

On a night nearing Christmas 2001, a resolved Ruth Stubbs stroked the perfect faces of her two sleeping toddlers, reviewing her deliriously dangerous plan to save their lives. If it worked, and that was a big qualifier, the plan would save her life as well, but Ruth didn't care about her own messed-up life. Looking back on the eternity of her nineteen years on earth, she understood she had never cared. FLDS had tricked her into self-loathing from birth, and tomorrow they'd begin hunting her like an animal.

The last three years had been the most monstrous. So monstrous it was sometimes hard to remember what had come before the prophet, out of the blue, “gave” her to a guy twice her age whom she didn't know. Until that surreal day almost exactly three years ago, Ruth felt she'd enjoyed a pretty OK childhood despite living it around the utterly twisted Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, with “around” being the operative word. Looking back on it, Ruth realized she'd never truly been *in* FLDS. Until recently, her life had not been the physically battering, emotionally hopeless existence that she'd handed her own children, but in her defense, Ruth never imagined there would be any children in this picture. She'd only just turned sixteen when they'd literally thrown her in a pickup truck and driven her to hell.

That her father had helped them had been completely out of character and very difficult to accept, but Ruth didn't really blame him anymore. David Stubbs was FLDS raised. He acquired the three wives needed to enter the celestial kingdom and rule a planet after death before Ruth was born in 1982. That was lucky, because not so many men got a shot at the celestial kingdom after Rulon Jeffs and his son Warren took over Short Creek in 1986. After that, you had to be on the good side of Uncle Rulon, as he was called, to get the not-quite-ripe young girls assigned to you, and the Jeffs had some high-handed notions about strengthening Israelite bloodlines when making the assignments.

Until the Jeffs happened, David Stubbs had been kind of like FLDS royalty, being descended from one of the oldest polygamist families since The Work—as FLDS used to be called—got started in Short Creek during the 1930s. Consequently, the Stubbs family had some of the best lands with the most water rights—very important in the desert. Stubbs women had married into all the important Short Creek families who were also there from the beginning, and everybody was cool with the Lord and one another. Not to be too profane or anything, but Ruth had observed that the bonds of a more terrestrial nature could make the day-to-day business of living go a lot smoother.

Which was probably why David Stubbs wasn't too impressed with the Johnny-come-late-to-the-party Jeffs family when they moved from Salt Lake City to Short Creek after the former prophet Leroy Johnson, died. Naturally, Ruth hadn't known Uncle Leroy personally because she was just four years old when he died in 1986, but she did know he was beloved by a lot of Short Creek people, her dad included. When Rulon Jeffs just up and announced he was the new prophet when he'd lived in his Salt Lake all that time, a lot of Short Creekers didn't buy it. The first prophet, Joseph Smith, said that only God selects the prophet, and Uncle Leroy, who was the only one talking to God at the time, hadn't said squat about Rulon Jeffs before he passed on.

Plus, it was very cheeky, the way Uncle Rulon moved down from his big house in Salt Lake to take over Short Creek. Rulon and his favored son, Warren, had always been a little snooty to the Short Creek folks, who were still in shock that the prophet Leroy Johnson had died. Like all the prophets before him, Uncle Leroy said he'd *never* die until the apocalypse, which FLDS people have been expecting just about any day now from the beginning. Uncle Leroy predicted the end of days about three times, even anointing with sacred oil the ATF God's chosen people—FLDS people—would need to hightail it to higher ground once the wholesale butchery of all the disbelievers started.

The descriptions of it could just make you sick with all the Gentiles' guts and blood flying everywhere and getting on your clothes. FLDS held survivalist skills classes where you learned how to slit cows' throats and everything, but nothing ever happened. People were disappointed when the world didn't end, but they felt even worse when Uncle Leroy explained that it hadn't happened because the FLDS people hadn't been pure enough for Joseph Smith and Jesus to ride their heaven cloud back to earth. The people felt really bad they'd let Jesus down that way. Uncle Leroy said that everybody had to double down and do better to help end the world, but he never said *anything* about the stuck-up Rulon Jeffs being elevated.

There was a big fight over it with a good number of people, Ruth's dad included, saying

that Rulon Jeffs was not the prophet. But Uncle Rulon had his supporters too. They got kind of ugly about it, forming what some dubbed enforcement “God squads”—men who did what Uncle Rulon told them to do, including men in the police force. Uncle Rulon started “poofing” people, sometimes in the middle of the night, which meant they were excommunicated and driven away. Their wives and kids got reassigned to guys Uncle Rulon liked, and nobody could ever say the other guys’ names again.

There were too many dissenters to poof them all, though, and it might have turned into a standoff, except the people on the wrong side of Uncle Rulon were alarmed about the rough exuberance of his support, so the dissenters banded together and moved onto land adjoining Short Creek. They were still fundamentalist Mormon polygamists, but they called themselves the Centennial Park group, later naming their town Centennial Park City. The men were allowed to wear short-sleeved shirts, which Uncle Rulon said just proved how they already had one foot in hell.\*

David Stubbs still didn’t accept Rulon Jeffs as the prophet, but he didn’t want to abandon his choice lands by moving to Centennial Park either, so he stayed put. This was unheard of. Living in Short Creek without acknowledging Rulon Jeffs as God’s prophet pretty much made David Stubbs an apostate, and everybody knew that those who renounced FLDS were stripped of everything they owned and run out of town. But David Stubbs didn’t take the hint, so in 1986, Jeffs sent notices all over Short Creek that FLDS folks were “tenants at will” of the prophet, and it was the prophet’s will that Ruth’s father and twenty other guys get the hell out of town. When this legal-sounding declaration, along with all the preceding threats and harassment, still failed to persuade the upstart FLDS men to abandon their lives, Rulon Jeffs was stumped. He’d never needed a backup plan in the past, but before he could fully consider his next move, Stubbs and the others hit Jeffs with the unimaginable. They filed a lawsuit against Rulon Jeffs in federal court claiming that they actually owned their lands under the terms of the UEP trust.

This was a lot more serious than the Centennial Park insurrection. That had been a storm shocker too, but those people had run away like they were supposed to. If people who didn’t believe that Rulon Jeffs was God’s prophet were allowed to live among those who did, they could really mess up Jeffs’s power, which was utterly dependent on blind obedience coupled with Jeffs’s ability to destroy the lives of anyone who opposed him. If the twenty-or-so families refusing to leave their lands won, what kind of message would that send? If Jeffs couldn’t take away a man’s home and family, would people still fear him? Would they still do what he told them to do? Jeffs didn’t want to know the answer to those questions, so he dialed up FLDS’s trusty Salt Lake City law firm of Snow, Christensen, and Martineau and the most dedicated FLDS attorney of all: Rod Parker.

Like he always did, Rod Parker just blistered the apostates led by David Stubbs in court, saying that a religion is untouchable in America, and religious leaderships—not the courts—have the right to decide who stays and who goes. This argument had always prevailed, so you could have knocked everybody in FLDS over with a feather when, after years of battling, the Utah Supreme Court ruled against Rulon Jeffs in 1998, meaning that David Stubbs and the others got to stay put without declaring Rulon Jeffs the prophet.

Sure, the court had ruled only on a small technicality concerning the definition of the trust

It had not addressed the overall religious questions, which were still open for the legal hunt. But technicalities—life's little details—have a strong historical track record of tipping even in one direction rather than another, and so it was with the 1998 decision in *Jeffs v. Stubbs*. Seven years, the case would act as the explosives in a legal bomb that would leave the FLDS leadership fighting for their lives in three states, or at least fighting to retain control over every aspect of the members' lives, which was more or less the same thing.

Though they weren't planned or intended, the unrelated actions of three members of the Stubbs family would undo fifty years of FLDS untouchable status imparted by the disastrous raid of 1953. On the night nearing Christmas 2001, Ruth hadn't a clue that her desperate bid for freedom would be the timer set upon the ticking bomb, but Ruth and David Stubbs had been the only family rebels. Ruth had another example from which to draw strength.

**WHEN RUTH WAS** five years old, her full-blooded sister, Pennie, accomplished the impossible. Threatened with the prospect of an intolerable marriage, Pennie fled Short Creek and got away clean. She'd been fourteen years old with flashy blue eyes, a beautiful brunette child with a woman's full figure, one that had not been overlooked by Rulon Jeffs. Without fanfare, Jeffs gave Pennie to a fifty-eight-year-old loyalist the girl absolutely detested, a swaggering bully with five other wives and something like seventy kids, many of them far older than Pennie. Ruth expected the guy must have been a serious Uncle Rulon fan to be given this juicy young girl, but Pennie wasn't having it.

In FLDS fashion, Pennie had only twenty-four hours to get herself together. As their mother worked on the wedding dress with other FLDS women, Ruth could just barely remember Pennie's loud despair, screaming at their mother, who was urging her to obey the prophet on the strongest terms. In an astonishing display of independent thinking, Pennie shrieked that her life was worth something and she would not forfeit her future to become a pedophile concubine. Their mother, Sally Stubbs, told the girl to hush up and accept her place like all the other FLDS women before her. Sally did not go after her daughter when the girl stormed from the house. Where on earth could she go?

Even today there is no public transportation in Short Creek, not even taxis. Girls are closely monitored. A girl even walking alone on the streets would be reported to the cops, who'd come pick her up.\* Even if she managed to get to the main road and hitchhike, the first person who stopped would be driving her straight back to town. Walking out of the desert southwest was laughable, and even if, wonder over wonder, she did get past Short Creek, they'd be coming after her for sure. She might get flat out kidnapped from wherever she landed. Or FLDS would sic one of their law firms on her. Parental rights were tried and true. If she had kids, they'd go after them through her husband. If she were a kid, they'd come after her through her parents. If all else failed, some women had been legally committed to insane asylums.

But Pennie Stubbs beat them. Keeping to the bushes, flattening herself against walls where camouflage was scarce, the scared but steady girl made her way through Short Creek's dark streets to the two-lane blacktop leading out of town. In those days, getting past the polygamy-sympathetic town of St. George forty miles away was imperative. A fleeing girl had to make it almost to Las Vegas to be truly clear of FLDS influence. Between the FLDS police

the members, and the fact that nobody outside of these two groups would be afoot at the late hour in the remote area, Pennie's chances were as close to zero as it got.

But as a confident Sally Stubbs continued the wedding dress as she waited for her daughter to be returned, the impossible materialized behind a lone set of headlights on the highway illuminating a quivering, bedraggled teenage girl with a tear-stained face and her thumb out. The driver who should have been an FLDS cop or member was instead a businessman who elected to take the back roads on a whim, then decided he felt fresh enough to push through the night to his Las Vegas destination. Most staggering of all, the man knew all about FLDS and he didn't like anything he knew. Although the businessman was inviting big trouble by driving a runaway minor girl across state lines without parental permission, that is exactly what he did. The man Pennie still regards as heaven-sent risked his own arrest rather than return her for the rape and misery that awaited her. He drove out of his way to bring her to a women's shelter, which would not report her presence, and left her with all the money in her wallet, \$200, and an order to have a good life.

That is exactly what Pennie intended. Today, she is Pennie Petersen, happily married mother and a scourge for FLDS, one of a half-dozen people denounced from FLDS pulpits by her name. Her outspoken public activism is irritating enough, but it has been her success in helping dozens of young girls escape Short Creek that has proved most devastating for a sect that needs to keep every single female born into the cocoon available for its older men.

**WHEN RUTH STARTED** thinking about leaving, she was sure glad she had Pennie for a sister because everybody knew that getting out of town was just part of the fight. Like most FLDS girls, Ruth had been pulled from school, such as it was, in the fifth grade. With abbreviated educations, FLDS girls have no job or social skills. More insurmountable than that, they don't know anyone in the outside world who can offer support and guidance. They've nowhere to live and have never handled money outside of food stamps. They end up frightened and destitute, usually with small, wailing children for whom they cannot provide. Disoriented, confused, terrified, it is usually not difficult for FLDS to lure them back with promises of forgiveness and love.

For the less persuadable, there were always the FLDS lawyers and the polygamy-friendly Utah courts bordering Short Creek. Going after a girl's children killed two birds with one stone, because once FLDS lawyers got custody of a woman's children, she almost always returned to the sect. Ruth was sure she'd react to losing her kids the same way other FLDS women had: unable to bear life without her children, she would return.

When she did, there would be terrible punishment. The loss of eternal salvation was always deterrent enough for the most desperate FLDS girls. Elders had to be certain potential runaways suspected more corporeal consequences. The possibilities were whispered shadows as elusive as snow on the wind. Women weren't supposed to know anything at all about FLDS worldly workings, and damn few men did either, but Ruth figured the elders let just enough slip out, oopsy-like, to give the community a shudder of what "uppity" women could expect. Maybe you'd be stuck up in one of those caves in the vermilion cliffs with not enough food or water. Cold, hungry, scared, with only sporadic visits from these gnarly old men who would yell at you or even hit you. You might be shipped off to some other FLDS settlement.

for the same treatment. After a few weeks of that, girls would be just begging for that sealing ceremony. It was known definitely that if you had kids, they'd be taken away, maybe forever. This was a measure that could be taken in the open, with the full support of folks who agreed a hell-bound, disobedient woman shouldn't be taking her kids with her.

Ruth knew all this, but it had just come to the point where staying was scarier for her kids than being caught. Pennie was her ace in the hole, the sister who knew the ropes. And Ruth's father had given her another set of skills most FLDS girls didn't have: the freedom to think for herself.

To the horror of his three wives and everybody else in Short Creek, David Stubb allowed Ruth to wear pants. Don't ask her why, but Ruth had fallen in love with tractors as a little girl. Her dad let her work on the family's tractors while wearing pants, a double whammy scandal that first set the harsh Short Creek rumor mill churning. Ruth was a natural, the ultimate tomboy. She worked alongside her brothers loading timber, digging fence posts, and laying pipe. For a while, she had a tomboy twin, her sister Jinny, who was born the same year as Ruth by a different mom. They were like the two musketeers, sacrificing the sacrosanct FLDS modesty for such disturbing activities as fishing, camping, and hunting, although she didn't enjoy the death part of hunting.

David Stubbs also allowed Ruth to have friends, even friends who were boys, as she grew older. That was another bad scandal, made worse by the fact she could also talk to boys and girls from excommunicated or apostate families. This behavior was so shocking, the fact that Ruth smoked the occasional cigarette and drank a watered down, convenience store beer now and again was practically overlooked, except by the FLDS cops. They kept picking her up, giving her tickets, and threatening to take her before the prophet for hanging around the wrong people and having fun. Ruth sure got tired of getting those stupid, expensive tickets from the police, but David Stubbs always straightened her legal difficulties out quietly. One day she'd be facing hundreds of dollars of tickets and court dates, and the next day her troubles would disappear as easily as did the guys the prophet didn't like.

"Don't get caught again," Stubbs would advise her with a jocular wink and no insight into the true meaning of the tickets. But then, Ruth's perceived idyllic relationship with her father deteriorated with the rest of his life. David Stubbs's marriages had never been what you'd call happy. Like many FLDS men, Ruth's father kept a house separate from his wives and children, but that didn't ensure peace among "sister wives" afflicted with the same jealousies, insecurities, and need for affirmation as the rest of the human race.

Ruth's biological mom, Sally, was particularly unpredictable, displaying wild, sometimes violent mood swings. The family of three wives and forty-two children seemed dependent on David's second wife for what structure there was, and when she died of cancer, everything fell apart. David started drinking too much and carrying on with apostate women. Sally divorced him—as his first wife, she could do this legally, in court—and he kind of disappeared.

It was a wrenching development for Ruth, who clung to her family—or at least the good idea of one—like a buoy on pitching seas. Most FLDS children remain single-mindedly devoted to their families no matter what those families do to them in the name of the religion. Ruth was no exception. As more and more of her siblings fell away from FLDS,

became Ruth's mission in life to reunite her clan under one happy umbrella of camping, fishing, cookouts, and reunions. She didn't care one way or the other about the religion, but she was open to it, if that's what it took to reclaim family unity.

Ruth certainly had her work cut out for her, especially after her mom took up with the independent, slickly handsome FLDS grifter and convicted pedophile, Orson William Black.\*

It wasn't long before Sally was trying to convince her fourteen-year-old daughter to share Black's bed. Even at that tender age, Ruth knew her mother's behavior was crazy and reprehensible, but she refused to give up hope the family could be mended. To that end, she stayed in her mom's house instead of moving in with one of her adult siblings. While trying to break through to her mother, Ruth developed escape strategies to skitter away from the offensive Black when he was in the home.

It was difficult because Black and every other man in Short Creek had their eyes on Ruth Stubbs, who'd blossomed into something of the town beauty. By the time she was fifteen, Ruth could be accurately described as a wholesome blond bombshell. Her statuesque five-foot-eight-inch frame supported 135 pounds of curves toned by a lifetime of tomboy exercise, but her figure wasn't even her most outstanding feature. Ruth possessed a dazzling, welcoming smile that made people happy to be alive, eager to be in her company. Tumbling thick blond hair set off dancing eyes of the brightest blue. She was honest, quick to laugh, and quicker to sympathize, console, and encourage. Ruth Stubbs didn't have a bad bone in her body.

It was a package Hildale police officer Rodney Holm certainly understood when he started singling her out for all those moral turpitude tickets. Without her father's intervention, the tickets were a hassle, but Ruth didn't excite herself over it. She never even glanced at the cop who wrote her up. There were worse things happening in her life than tickets for smoking.

Confused, without guidance, and isolated in a fundamentalist religious community that condemned her daily, Ruth's confidence began to teeter, and she went a little crazy. She further damaged her self-esteem by keeping secret company with boys who couldn't acknowledge her existence on the street in daylight. Her cigarette consumption soared to four a day. Her weak 3.2 beer consumption put her perilously close to drunkenness a few times.

What if she were truly damned? What if it were true that Satan controlled her very soul? Dreams once populated by happy scenes were now invaded by visions of the eternal flames, so real her skin felt singed as she bolted awake in cold sweats. All the FLDS teachings, carelessly discarded under her father's protection came surging back, strengthened by the fact that David Stubbs now seemed to be on the fence about Rulon and Warren Jeffs. She'd been fooling herself. They'd been right all along. Why else would this be happening? She'd turned a defeated sweet sixteen, not knowing where to turn.

Then, a miracle. Visiting a girlfriend who would still see her in daylight, Ruth saw the man of her dreams, her deliverance from the abyss. His name was Carl Cook, her friend's cousin from Salt Lake City and a strict Rulon Jeffs FLDS guy. Though he was twenty-six—a man, really—he was too adorably shy to look at her, but he was her white knight for sure. Brave, honest, and true blue. Ruth just knew it. She could die, he was so cute. From that point on, there was no one else. She would marry Carl Cook or die trying. What Ruth didn't—couldn't—possibly know about Carl Cook would soon shatter her heart and issue her a lifetime of



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