



Associated Press File

A warning sign is posted at the entrance to a Utah compound of Warren Jeffs, leader of the polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints. Women on the compounds have allegedly been drugged, brainwashed and impregnated until they are drained. The FBI is offering \$50,000 for information leading to Jeffs' arrest for sexual assault of a minor.



RON BATZDORFF

On HBO's "Big Love," Bill Paxton is married to Jeanne Tripplehorn ...



... and Chloe Sevigny ...



... and Ginnifer Goodwin.

## Putting polygamy in the spotlight

A new series about the practice masks its horrors.

**Suzan Mazur**

has written on U.S. polygamy for The Inquirer and many other publications.

**P**olygamy, American style. That's the theme of the new HBO series *Big Love*, all about a polygamist family in Utah. *Big Love's* executive producer is Tom Hanks, who spent a couple of his childhood years in the Mormon church. The show passes very lightly over issues of rape, child abuse and drug addiction arising in polygamist enclaves.

Despite serious, front-page media coverage for most of the last decade, such human-rights abuses are going on right now in polygamist settlements throughout the country. The Department of Homeland Security knows about it. So does the FBI and the Bush administration. Polygamy continues, if not with the active assistance of government and law enforcement, then certainly with their indolence and incompetence.

The U.S. Department of Justice has failed to dismantle the best-documented polygamy cults. The

epicenter is well-known: the towns of Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Ariz., both dominated by the extremist and secretive branch of Mormon known as the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints, or FLDS. These towns are satirized in the encampment named "Jupiter Creek" in *Big Love*.

The government instead is now singling out one polygamy "prophet" — FLDS leader Warren Jeffs, with the FBI offering \$50,000 for information leading to his arrest for sexual assault of a minor. Jeffs, who has not been seen for four years, has built yet another polygamy compound near Custer, S.D., adding to existing sites on the Utah-Arizona strip; in Eldorado, Texas; and straddling either side of the Idaho-British Columbia border. In these compounds, women allegedly have been drugged, brainwashed and repeatedly impregnated until they are physically and emotionally wasted. Teenage boys allegedly are

See **POLYGAMY** on C3

### ONLINE EXTRA

For the Web site of Polygamy.com, a pro-polygamy clearinghouse, with its take on the HBO series "Big Love," go to <http://go.philly.com/propoly>

For the Web site of Tapestry Against Polygamy, an anti-polygamy group that includes many former plural wives, go to <http://go.philly.com/conpoly>



## Insights & Observations

# Masking polygamy's horrors

**POLYGAMY** from C1 tossed out into the world without any real education so that the ratio of males to females in the cult remains favorable to the alpha males.

Polygamy cults are scattered up and down the Rocky Mountains from British Columbia to the Mexican border. Yet however many there are, they clearly remain an aberration on the American landscape. Experts estimate total U.S. polygamists at only 100,000, with Utah home to an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 practitioners.

Fundamentalist Mormon polygamists include the Kingstons — numbering about 1,500 — who have prospered from investments in the gaming business, and 8,000 to 10,000 Allreds, who live just outside Salt Lake City, in Nevada, and in Pinesdale, Mont. The Blackmore branch of the FLDS is in the logging business on either side of the Idaho-British Columbia border.

Utah's attorney general, Mark Shurtleff, like federal authorities, has chosen to nibble around the edges of the problem — investigating individual domestic-violence complaints, but failing to identify the whole polygamy enterprise itself as domestic violence.

Shurtleff says he is strapped for money, and he warns of the economic consequences of breaking up the cults. But it is clear that the political and economic power of the FLDS so far has prevented the cults' further undoing.

Among non-Mormon cultists there is The Family, organized in the 1960s by David Berg and long scrutinized for sexual practices including pedophilia, incest and rape. Less known is The House of Yahweh, an Old Testament

sect led by former Abilene, Texas, police officer Yisrayl "Buffalo Bill" Hawkins, with 2,500 followers based in Abilene and scattered (many in trailers) through at least a dozen states. Yahweh cultists say no Scriptures forbid plural wives as sin.

Is polygamy a growing phenomenon? Probably not, though it is hard to know. Some cults have their own midwives and hospitals, police, judges and school superintendents. Birth and death records are not reliable, as evidenced by an entire cemetery of unmarked baby graves — "Babyland" — attached to an FLDS cult on the Utah-Arizona border.

Nor is the momentum in the direction of legalization, not even in Utah. My impression, from having studied U.S. polygamy for the best part of a decade, is that significant numbers are leaving the lifestyle.

One polygamist judge, Walter Steed, was recently removed from the bench by the Utah Supreme Court for flouting the state's law against bigamy. Activists from Tapestry Against Polygamy — former "plural wives" — filed a complaint with the Judicial Conduct Commission to unseat Steed, who had heard cases for a quarter of a century. Tapestry Against Polygamy also helped raise Utah's marriage age.

Still, there is *Big Love*. And there is also ACLU president Nadine Strossen, quoted as saying in a speech at Yale that the ACLU has defended the rights of individuals to engage in polygamy. Some interpret this as an ACLU endorsement and link it to the ACLU's protection of gay rights.

But commentators such as Charles Krauthammer, who worry about the

decriminalization of polygamy, protest too much. It's the anti-polygamy activists, like Andrea Emmett, author of *God's Brothel* and an outgoing president of the National Organization of Women chapter in Salt Lake City, who are on the growing, sane side of the issue. She describes polygamy as the "biggest threat to the women and children of Utah."

Rowenna Erickson, a former Kingston wife and cofounder of Tapestry Against Polygamy, says she does not think polygamy will ever be decriminalized in the United States: "They've been trying to lump polygamy with gays and lesbians forever."

So this, if you can even call it a "movement," is a sensational but very small one, linked with extremist beliefs of one kind or another. We don't really need a cartoonish TV series glamorizing it. With the evidence piling up of harm done to women and children within this world, what is truly amazing is that it still exists. What we really need are courageous local and national leaders who will face down local powers and show polygamy some Big Law.

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