

On April 6 women and children are escorted from the ranch by law enforcement.



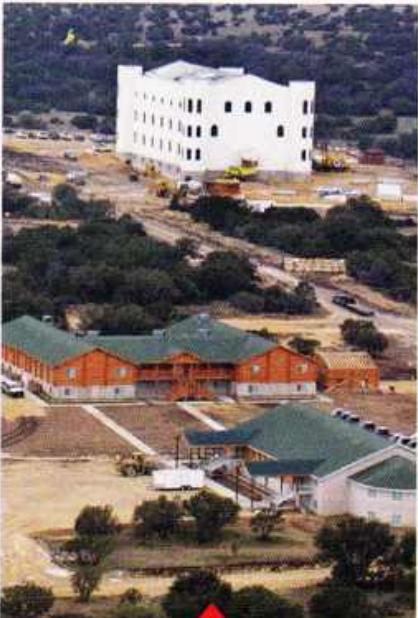
# RAIDED!

## Inside the Polygamy Sect

More than 500 women and children are removed from the FLDS church compound, exposing a strange world where 50-year-old men are free to marry teenage girls

When the hundreds of children and mothers arrived at the First Baptist Church in Eldorado, Texas, Helen Pfluger did her best to put them at ease. She chatted with them as she passed out food. She also offered crayons, which quickly demonstrated just how different these kids were. "When we handed out the Crayolas, they just stared at them," says Pfluger, who was volunteering at the church. "I think they were trying to decide if a crayon was something you were supposed to eat."

That was not the only culture shock in a bizarre odyssey that was still unfolding. On April 4 swarms of Texas Rangers and representatives of Child Protective Services raided a compound outside Eldorado belonging to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a breakaway sect



THE COMPOUND Members had turned the once-barren property into a bustling community.

from the Mormon church, notorious for its practice of having older men take multiple young girls for their wives. Authorities were acting in response to a report of physical and sexual abuse. They found an undisclosed number of teenage girls who were pregnant and hordes of children wearing clothes that looked like something out of *Little House on the Prairie*. Officials took the extraordinary step of removing 419 children and 159 adults from their home for their own safety, by far the largest such effort in the state's history. "These kids have been raised in a cave, basically," says Sam Brower, a private investigator who has interviewed many former members of the FLDS. "They have little or no education, have never seen TV or listened to radio."

Investigators were also questioning an unknown number of men found at the compound, disciples of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs (see box), who



Morning and evening the group sang hymns. Their voices were as sweet as an angel choir"

—HELEN PFLUGER



**HOLDING PATTERN** It was fun and games after the kids left the compound.

a mother," says Carolyn Jessop, now an antichurch activist who chronicled her life as an FLDS wife and mother of eight in a book, *Escape* (PEOPLE, Oct. 29, 2007), "but if she is not able to protect them from being victimized because of the mind control, they're not safe with her." In the days after the raid, Jessop, who says she had four stepdaughters at the compound, brought two of her daughters to Eldorado to allay the sect members' fears. "I thought, if my stepchildren could see their half sisters and see how they're doing, it will help them [see]," says Jessop, "that it's not all bad on the outside."

The children's futures remain uncertain. Proving abuse can be difficult if the minors are unwilling to testify



**CLOSE QUARTERS** At Fort Concho sect members wave to friends in another building.

against their elders, in which case the kids would likely be returned to their families. Pfluger says that to her eyes the kids seemed to be enjoying the outside world. The day after they arrived at the church, the kids were allowed to go out and frolic on the playground. "I don't know if they'd ever been on slides, swings or monkey bars before, but it doesn't take any child long to figure out what to do," she says. "You should have heard the squeals of laughter. The joy, the glee in their voices just thrilled my soul."

**By Bill Hewitt and Bob Meadows. Cary Cardwell and Anne Lang in Eldorado, Darla Atlas in Fort Worth, Vickie Bane in Denver and Cathy Free in Salt Lake City**



## HOW I TOOK CARE OF THE SECT'S CHILDREN

Helen Pfluger served food to dozens of women and children from FLDS who spent the weekend at First Baptist Church in Eldorado: "The girls didn't ever wear any of the clothes that were brought in, because their needs are so restricted; they all stayed in the same clothes they arrived in, and so

did the boys. The females' dresses were all basically the same: all-cotton, long-sleeved to the wrist, high necks, ankle length and loose waisted. The women and girls wore black leggings and clunky, work-shoe-type styles in either brown or black. And yet there were people who wore contact lenses. We know because they

asked for contact solution.

"We discovered pretty quickly that they are very particular about their food. But we asked some of the younger girls if they'd like to try some boxed cereal. They absolutely loved it: Froot Loops were an especially big hit. Shredded wheat not so much. The kids loved the Capri Sun juice boxes, once they were taught how to use them. They were also big on nuts and yogurt. I know they did a lot of physical labor. It showed. Everyone was in great shape. Whatever they're doing nutrition-wise, they look wonderful. They look like we all want to look: very slim, with clear complexions and rosy cheeks."