

# Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO)

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## **‘Principle’ is Bedrock Law; Men Take Multiple Wives; Women are Taught to Comply**

**By Deborah Frazier and Gwen Florio, Rocky Mountain News**

Debbie Palmer was raised to follow “The Principle,” the polygamist sect’s law that requires men to have at least three wives to reach heaven’s highest level.

At 15, Palmer was assigned to marry Ray Blackmore, 55, in the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints’ Canadian community.

While some women have escaped “plural marriages” and describe cold, abusive relationships, others see a benefit of having support from “sister wives” and seek additional mates.

Palmer’s story speaks to the darker side of polygamy.

She said women are forced to have sex during the fertility period of their menstrual cycle. She said Blackmore had five other wives and his attentions focused on the woman most likely to conceive.

“Life is about sex,” Palmer said.

Many women bear a child every year, experts on the sect said.

The higher the husband’s rank, the greater the pressure to have children, said Palmer.

“We were all taught that we would become goddesses beside the man who we were assigned to because he would be a God,” she said.

Blackmore died of leukemia in 1974, two years after he married Palmer and then she was assigned to be a wife to Charles Quinton. When she gave birth to a son, Quinton gave the newborn to one of his wives more than 150 miles away in Alberta “to be raised to be a man in the priesthood.

“When they brought the boy back three months later, I was in shock and I was afraid to get attached,” she said.

When Quinton fell out of favor in 1982, Debbie Palmer was released from that marriage and was married to a third husband, Marvin Palmer. He abused her and molested two of her six children, Debbie Palmer said.

Pregnant with her seventh child, Palmer was isolated, frightened and depressed when a small fire started in her house. It quickly burned beyond control and provided her a way out.

“I got the kids out, told the police I had been cooking a turkey and fled in a van with my children. An aunt helped me get to Calgary,” she said.

Debbie Palmer had been raised in a polygamous family and taught to “keep sweet,” to submit to her father, her husband and the sect’s leaders with a smile.

“Children are taught to keep a sweet smile on their face and never complain. It’s ingrained,” she said.

“If you’re assigned to another man, you have to keep sweet,” she said. “It’s the ‘Stepford Wives syndrome.’”

Fear keeps women in the sect’s polygamous outposts in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, said Elaine Tyler of the Utah-based Help for the Child Brides.

“They are told from the time they are very young that they will be condemned to hell and will be ostracized by family and friends,” Tyler said.

“The men say ‘You can leave, but the children stay here,’” said Tyler, who moved to St. George, Utah, from Littleton in 2002 and became a volunteer because, “I had to do something.”

Children as young as 18 months are taught to submit, said Flora Jessop, who also fled the sect. She said crying children are held under cold water until the crying stops.

“Crying offends God,” she said. “That’s the way they’re taught submission.”

Tyler said some of the wives are mentally abused by their husbands and told they are stupid and retarded. Others suffer severe physical abuse from their husbands and jealous plural wives, known as “sister-wives.”

Some women flee before they marry.

Pennie Petersen was 14 when she was told to marry a 48-year-old man in the sect’s Colorado City, Ariz., community.

Raised with 39 siblings and three sister-wives, Petersen decided she could no longer live in the church.

“You are taught if you walked out of town, you’d burn in hell,” she said. “I decided burning in hell was a better option.

“When I didn’t ignite, I kept running.”

Petersen ended up living with friends in Las Vegas who did not belong to the church. After she left, her sisters, 12 and 14, were married off.

Growing up, she was often hungry, she said. The family farmed, but there wasn’t enough to eat until her mother got on food stamps.

“There is no birth control. It is your duty to reproduce, so there isn’t a lot of love,” she said. “It’s like cattle – you feed them and that’s why it’s so easy to hand them over when they’re 14.”

Help for the Child Brides and other nonprofits formed to aid plural wives estimate that hundreds of women have fled plural marriages.

Yet some women express the value of polygamy.

“It’s about the relationship between women,” said Lori Chatwin, the only wife of Ross Chatwin in Colorado City. “Women like to have friends.”

Ross Chatwin was excommunicated last year in a dispute with church leadership and the couple has been shunned. Lori Chatwin is trying to recruit a sister-wife.

Lori Chatwin, 33, has six children ranging in age from toddler to teenager. Ross Chatwin is a builder and travels much of the time. Both grew up in polygamous families.

“I would welcome the opportunity for a second person,” she said. “If it’s someone you can relate to and you can share the duties without conflict, it makes it way easier in your whole entire life.”

Ross Chatwin, whose father had four wives and 36 children, agrees.

“There’s good points to polygamy,” said Chatwin, who fell afoul of the sect for pursuing plural wives without permission. “This is all I’ve ever known.”

David Zitting, mayor of Hildale, Utah, also espouses polygamy and said multiple wives help make the town family focused. He declined to disclose whether he had multiple wives.

“This is the most family-oriented place I’ve seen in America,” he said. “I have never seen a community with such a high percentage of love and structure and organization within a family.”

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