

Ten Who Quit the Temple Speak Out

Beginning two months ago, when it became known that New West was researching an article on Peoples Temple, the magazine, its editors and advertisers were subjected to a bizarre letter-and-telephone campaign. At its height, our offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles were each receiving as many as 50 phone calls and 70 letters a day. The great majority of the letters and calls came from temple members and supporters, as well as such prominent Californians as Lieutenant Governor Mervyn Dymally, Delancey Street founder John Maher, San Francisco businessman Cyril Magnin, and savings and loan executive Anthony Frank. The messages were much the same: We hear New West is going to attack Jim Jones in print; don't do that. He's a good man who does good works.

The flood of calls and letters attracted wide attention, which, in turn, prompted newsman Bill Barnes to report the campaign in the San Francisco Examiner. The Examiner also reported an unconfirmed break-in one week later at our San Francisco office.

After the Barnes article, we began getting phone calls from former temple members. At first, while insisting on anonymity, the callers volunteered "background" about Jim Jones's "cruelty" to congregation members, in addition to making several other specific charges.

We told the callers that we were not interested in such anonymous whispers. But then a number of them, like Deanna and Elmer Mertle, called back and agreed to meet in person, to be photographed, and to tell their attributed stories for publication.

Based on what these people told us, life inside Peoples Temple was a mixture of Spartan regimentation, fear and self-imposed humiliation. As they told it, the Sunday services to which dignitaries were invited were orchestrated events. Actually, members were expected to attend services two, three, even four nights a week – with some sessions lasting until daybreak. Those members of the temple's governing council, called the Planning Commission, were often compelled to stay up all night and submit regularly to "catharsis" – an encounter process in which friends, even mates, would criticize the person who was "on the floor." In the last two years, we were told, these often humiliating sessions had begun to include physical beatings with a large wooden paddle, and boxing matches in which the person on the floor was occasionally knocked out by opponents selected by Jones himself. Also, during regularly scheduled "family meetings," attended by up to 1,000 of the most devoted followers, as many as 100 people were lined up to be paddled for such seemingly minor infractions as not being attentive enough during Jones's sermons. Church leaders also instructed certain members to write letters incriminating themselves in illegal and immoral acts that never happened. In addition, temple members were encouraged to turn over their money and property to the church and live communally in temple buildings; those who didn't ran the risk of being chastised severely during the catharsis sessions.

In all, we interviewed more than a dozen former temple members. Obviously they all had biases. (Grace Stoen, for example, has sued her husband, a temple member, for custody

of their five-year-old son John. The child is reportedly in Guyana.) So we checked the verifiable facts of their accounts – the property transfers, the nursing and foster home records, political campaign contributions and other matters of public record. The details of their stories checked out.

One question, in particular, troubled us: Why did some of them remain members long after they became disenchanted with Jones's methods and even fearful of him and his bodyguards? Their answers were the same – they feared reprisal, and that their stories would not be believed.

The people we interviewed are real; their names are real. They all agreed to be tape-recorded and photographed while telling their side of the Jim Jones story.

Elmer and Deanna Mertle of Berkeley

They beat his daughter badly: Elmer Mertle.

After Elmer and Deanna Mertle joined the temple in Ukiah in November, 1969, he quit his job as a chemical technician for Standard Oil Company, sold the family's house in Hayward and moved up to Redwood Valley. Eventually five of the Mertle's children by previous marriages joined them there.

“When we first went up [to Redwood Valley], Jim Jones was a very compassionate person,” says Deanna. “He taught us to be compassionate to old people, to be tender to the children.”

But slowly the loving atmosphere gave way to cruelty and physical punishments. Elmer said, “The first forms of punishment were mental, where they would get up and totally disgrace and humiliate the person in front of the whole congregation. . . . Jim would then come over and put his arms around the person and say, ‘I realize that you went through a lot, but it was for the cause. Father loves you and you're a stronger person now. I can trust you more now that you've gone through and accepted this discipline.’”

The physical punishment increased too. Both the Mertles claim they received public spankings as early as 1972 – but they were hit with a belt only “about three times.” Eventually, they said, the belt was replaced by a paddle and then by a large board dubbed “the board of education,” and the number of times adults and finally children were struck increased to 12, 25, 50 and even 100 times in a row. Temple nurses treated the injured.

At first, the Mertles rationalized the beatings. “The [punished] child or adult would always say, ‘Thank you, Father,’ and then Jim would point out the week how much better they were. In our minds we rationalized . . . that Jim must be doing the right thing because these people were testifying that the beatings had caused their life to make a reversal in the right direction.”

Then one night the Mertles' daughter Linda was called up for discipline because she had hugged and kissed a woman friend she hadn't seen in a long time. The woman was reputed to be a lesbian. The Mertles stood among the congregation of 600 or 700 while their daughter, who was then sixteen, was hit on her buttocks 75 times. "She was beaten so severely," said Elmer, "that the kids said her butt looked like hamburger."

Linda, who is now eighteen, confirms that she was beaten: "I couldn't sit down for at least a week and a half."

The Mertles stayed in the church for more than a year after that public beating. "We had nothing on the outside to get started in," says Elmer. "We had given [the church] all our money. We had given all of our property. We had given up our jobs."

Today the Mertles live in Berkeley. According to an affidavit they signed last October in the presence of attorney Harriet Thayer, they changed their names legally to Al and Jeanne Mills because, at the church's instruction, "we had signed blank sheets of paper, which could be used for any imaginable purpose, signed power of attorney papers, and written many unusual and incriminating statements [about themselves], all of which were untrue."

Birdie Marable of Ukiah

"I never really thought he was God, like he preached, but I thought he was a prophet," said Birdie Marable, a beautician who was first attracted to Jones in 1968 because her husband had a liver ailment. She had hoped Jones might be the healer to save him.

On one of the trips to services in Redwood Valley, Marable noticed Jones's aides taking some children aside and asking, "What color house did my friend have, things like that," she says. "Then during the services, Jim called [one woman] out and told her the answers that the children had given as though no one had told him."

She became skeptical of Jones after that, and remained skeptical when her husband's health did not improve; the cancer "cures" Jones was performing seemed phony to her. Yet eventually she moved to Ukiah and ran a rest home for temple members at Jim's suggestion.

One summer she was talked into taking a three-week temple "vacation" through the South and East. "Everybody paid \$200 to go on the trip, but I told them I wasn't able to do so," she added.

The temple buses were loaded up in San Francisco, and more members were packed aboard in Los Angeles. "It was terrible. It was overcrowded. There were people sitting on the floor, in the luggage rack, and sometimes people [were] underneath in the compartment where they put the bags," she said. "I saw some things that really put me wise to everything," she added. "I saw how they treated the old people." The bathrooms

were frequently stopped up. For food, sometimes a cold can of beans was opened and passed around.

“I decided to leave the church when I got back. I said when I get through telling people about this trip, ain’t nobody going to want to go no more. [But] as soon as we arrived back, Jim said . . . ‘don’t say nothing.’” She left the church in silence.

Wayne Pietila of Petaluma and Jim and Terri Cobb of San Francisco

Wayne Pietila and Jim Cobb guarded the cancers. “If anyone tried to touch them, we were supposed to eat the cancers or demolish the guy,” said Cobb, who is six-feet, two-inches tall. Pietila was licensed by the Mendocino County Sheriff’s Department to carry a concealed weapon; reportedly he was one of several Jones aides with such a permit.

It was during the Redwood Valley healing sessions in 1970, when nervous hope for relief from the pains of age spread among the congregation, that Cobb and Pietila would guard the cancers. Finally Jones would ask for someone who believed herself to be suffering from cancer. That was the signal for Cobb’s sister, Terri, to slip into a side restroom and shoo out whoever might be there. Then Jones’s wife Marceline and a trembling excited old woman would disappear into the stall for a moment. Marceline would emerge holding a foul-smelling scrap of something cupped in a napkin – a cancer “passed.” Marceline and the old woman would return to the main room to screams, applause, a thunder of music. Jim Jones had healed again.

But one time, Terri got a chance to look into the “cancer bag.” “It was full of napkins and small bits of meat, individually wrapped. They looked like chicken gizzards. I was shocked.”

Wayne Pietila recalled another healing incident. On the eve of a trip to Seattle in 1970 or 1971, as Jones was leaving his house, a shot cracked out and he fell. “There was blood all around and people [were] screaming and crying, just hysterical.” Jones was lifted to his feet and helped to his house. A few minutes later, Jones walked out of the house with a clean shirt on. “He said he’d healed himself,” Pietila said. “He used [the incident] for his preaching during the whole Seattle trip.”

Micki Touchette of San Francisco

The Touchette family followed Jones to California in 1970. They lived in Stockton for a while, then moved up to Redwood Valley, where they bought a house and converted it into a home for emotionally disturbed boys.

During 1972 and 1973 Micki and other temple members were expected to travel to Los Angeles services every other weekend. One of her jobs was to count the money after offerings. Micki, a junior college graduate, had the combination to the temple’s Los Angeles safe. She says. “It was very simple to take in \$15,000 in a weekend, and this was

[four] years ago. [To encourage larger offerings, Jones] would say, ‘We folks, we’ve only collected \$500 or \$700,’ and we would have [in reality] several thousand.”

In addition to attending Wednesday night family meetings and weekend services, Micki also was part of letter-writing efforts directed by church officials. “We’d write various politicians throughout the state, throughout the country, in praise of something that they had done. I wrote Nixon, wrote Tunney; I remember writing the chief of the San Francisco Police Department,” she said. Micki, who lived in temple houses apart from her parents, would often be handed a sheet listing the points she would have to include in the letter. “It would tell you how and what to say and you’d word it yourself.” She says she also would regularly use aliases she made up.

When Micki left the church in 1973 along with seven other young people, including Terri and Jim Cobb and Wayne Pietila, none warned their parents or other relatives. “We felt that our parents, our families . would just fight us and try to make us stay.” Furthermore, they were all frightened. “At one point we had been told that any college student who was going to leave the church would be killed . not by Jones, but by some of his followers.” Both Terri and Cobb recall the statement being made – by Jones.

Walter Jones of San Francisco

When Walt Jones, who never believed in the church, followed his wife Carol to Redwood Valley in 1974, Jim Jones asked them to take over a home for emotionally disturbed boys. The home belonged to Charles and Joyce Touchette, Micki Touchette’s parents. Walt says he was told that the Touchettes were in Guyana, and that the people who had replaced them, Rick and Carol Stahl, had done such a poor job that “the care home, at that time, was under surveillance of the authorities because of the poor conditions. Some of the boys had scabies due to the filth.”

In 1974 and early 1975, before Walt and his wife were granted a license to run the home, county checks (of approximately \$325 to \$350 per month for each child) for the upkeep of the boys were made out to the Touchettes and cashed by a church member who had their power of attorney. “The checks,” said Walt, “were turned over to someone in charge of all the funds [for the church’s care homes] at the time. [The temple] allotted us what they felt were sufficient funds for the home and supplied us with foodstuffs and various articles of clothing.” Jones says the food was mostly canned staples, and the clothes were donations from other temple members. Walt is uncertain how much of the approximate total of \$2,000 a month of county funds earmarked for the upkeep of his boys actually ended up in his hands; his wife kept the books. But, he claimed, “it was very inadequate.”

After the Joneses were granted their own license in 1975, the checks from the Alameda County Probation Department (which placed the boys in the home) were made out to him and his wife. “But still the church requested that we turn over what remained of the funds,” says Walt Jones. “Approximately \$900 to \$ 1,000 [per month] were turned over to the church.” And he added, “I do remember that there were times when all of the checks were signed over to the church.”

Laura Cornelious of Oakland

They took her best watch: Laura Cornelious.

Laura Cornelious was one of the privates in the Peoples Temple's army. She was in the temple about five years before leaving in 1975 – just one of dozens of elderly black grandmothers who attend each meeting of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission that Jim Jones chairs.

The first thing that bothered her was the constant requests for money. “After I was in some time,” she says, “it was made known to us that we were supposed to pay 25 percent of our earnings [the usual sum, according to practically all the former members that we interviewed].” It was called “the commitment.” For those who could not meet the commitment, she says, there were alternatives, like baking cakes to sell at Sunday services – or donating their jewelry. “He said that we didn't need the watches – my best watch,” she recalls sadly. “He said we didn't need homes – give the homes, furs, all of the best things you own.”

Some blacks gave out of fear – fear that they could end up in concentration camps. The money was needed, she was told, “to build up this other place [Guyana-the ‘promised land’], so we would have someplace to go whenever they [the fascists in this country] were going to destroy us like they did the Jews. [Jones said] that they would put [black people] in concentration camps, and that they would do us like the Jews . in the gas ovens.”

Laura Cornelious was also bothered by the frisking of temple members (but never dignitaries) before each service. “You even were asked to raise up on your toes [to check] your shoes.”

The final straw, she says, came the night Jones brought a snake into the services. “Viola . she was up in age, in her eighties, and she was so afraid of snakes and he held the snake close to her [chest] and she just sat there and screamed. And he still held it there.”

Grace Stoen of San Francisco

They have her five-year-old boy: Grace Stoen.

Grace Stoen was a leader among the temple hierarchy, though she was never a true believer. Her husband Tim was the temple's top attorney, and one of its first prominent converts. Later, while still a church insider, he became an assistant D.A. of Mendocino County, and then an assistant D.A. under San Francisco D.A. Joe Freitas. Tim resigned to go to Jones's Guyana retreat in April of this year.

Grace agreed to join the temple when she married Tim in 1970, and gradually she acquired enormous authority. She was head counselor, and at the Wednesday night family meetings, she would pass to Jones the names of the members to be disciplined.

She was also the record keeper for seven temple businesses. She paid out from \$30,000 to \$50,000 per month for the auto and bus garage bills and also doled out the slim temple wages. And she was one of several church notaries. She kept a notary book, a kind of log of documents that she officially witnessed—pages of entries including power-of-attorney statements, deeds of trust, guardianship papers, and so on, signed by temple members and officials.

She recalled why Jones decided to aim for Los Angeles and San Francisco. “Jim would say, ‘If we stay here in the valley, we’re wasted. We could make it to the big time in San Francisco.’”

And expanding to Los Angeles, Jones told his aides, “was worth \$15,000 to \$25,000 a weekend.”

During the expansion in 1972, members would pile into the buses at 5 P.M. on a Friday night in Redwood Valley, stop at the San Francisco temple for a meeting that might last until midnight and then drive through the night to arrive in Los Angeles Saturday in time for six-hour services. On Sunday, church would start at 11 A.M. and end at 5 P.M. Then, the Redwood Valley members would pile back on the buses for the long trip home; they would arrive by daybreak Monday.

Some of the inner circle, like Grace Stoen, rode on Jim’s own bus, number seven. “The last two seats and the whole back seat were taken out and a door put across it,” she said. “Inside there was a refrigerator, a sink, a bed and a plate of steel in the back so nobody could ever shoot Jim. The money was kept back there in a compartment.” According to attendance slips she collected, the other 43-seat buses sometimes held 70 to 80 riders.

Jones’s goal in San Francisco, Grace said, was to become a political force. His first move was to ingratiate himself with fellow liberal and leftist figures D.A. Freitas, Sheriff Hongisto, Police Chief Charles Gain, Dennis Banks, Angela Davis.

Sometimes Jones nearly tripped up. Once, said Grace, when Freitas and his wife dropped in unexpectedly, temple aides quickly pulled them into a side room and sent word to Jones in the upstairs meeting hall. Just in time. The pastor was wrapped up in one of his “silly little things,” said Grace. “He was having everybody shout ‘Shit! Shit! Shit!’ to teach them not to be so hypocritical.” When Freitas was shown in, everyone just laughed at the puzzle district attorney. (D.A. Freitas confirms making an unexpected visit to the temple, but does not recall anyone using the word shit.)

Jones became impatient at the pace his success. Eventually Mayor Moscone placed Jones on the Housing Authority Commission, and then intervened to assure him the chairmanship.

Strangely, as Jones’s successes mounted, so did the pressures inside his temple. “We were going to more and more meetings,” said Stoen. “[And] if anyone was getting too

much sleep – say, six hours a night – they were in trouble.” On one occasion, she said, a man was vomited and urinated on.

In July of 1976, after a three-week temple bus trip, her morale was ebbing lower, her friends were muttering about her, and there were rumors that Jones was unhappy with a number of members. “I packed my things and left [without telling Tim]. I couldn’t trust him. He’d tell Jim.”

She drove to Lake Tahoe and spent the July Fourth weekend lying on a warm beach. She dug her toes in the sand, stretched her arms and tried to relax. “But every time I turned over, I looked around to see if any of the church members had tracked me down.”