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PATRIARCH OF POLYGAMY

Utah man has 8 wives, unique outlook on life

BIG WATER, Utah - A pistol lay at one corner of the table, a Bible at the other. Between them sat Alex Joseph, former policeman, former Marine and undisputed patriarch of this town, beseeching his wife for cigarettes.

"Margaret, would you please run down to the store and get me one pack?" he said.

"No," she said. "They're not good for you and I got them the last time. If you must have them, ask somebody else.

"You know, I'm not your only wife."

In fact, Margaret is one of eight "Mrs. Josephs." In 1970, she became Alex Joseph's second polygamous wife. In the interim, Joseph has had a dozen brief marriages in addition to the eight that have lasted.

"For some reason, women and I just seem to get along," he said.

Joseph is the country's best known and most vocal polygamist. If that were his only distinction, it would be a small one. No one knows how many polygamists are spread between Utah and Mexico, the two strongholds of plural marriage on this continent. Estimates range between 10,000 and 50,000 and few of those are "known" outside their immediate neighborhood.

Fewer still have been willing to publicly acknowledge their marital status and, of those, none has been as ready to openly espouse the benefits of polygamy as has Alex Joseph.

Multiple marriage, however, is not his only distinguishing characteristic. In one lifetime he has managed to be a lawman, soldier, forest ranger, gold prospector, town founder, boat captain, author, head of his own church and counselor to Texas' bad-boy country-western singer David Allen Coe.

Today, at 61 and facing liver cancer, Joseph is pursuing no new careers, though he is no less vocal. He lives in a rambling compound that houses most of his extended family and the cathedral of his "Church of Jesus Christ in Solemn Assembly." Here, he divides his time between being husband to his wives, father to 21 children and grandfather to 27. He pursues an eclectic array of interests and acts as the unofficial head of Big Water.

Joseph founded this town in the late 1970s. Planted near the rocky shores of Lake Powell in southern Utah, just five miles north of the Arizona border, Big Water is remote and the weather can be harsh. Winters are cold and springs bring "micro-bursts," blasts of wind that can flatten a rickety building.

As a result, the town is also small. With a population of about 400, the Joseph family, with close to 50 members, makes up a powerful voting bloc.

Joseph was mayor for three terms, but opted not to run in 1994 and handed the job over to Geraldine Rankin, the polygamous wife of another resident.

Now, he says, he devotes himself to being a "responsible quack."

He's an armchair genealogist who traces his lineage from a Plantagenet queen to the outlaw Jesse James; a theologian who theorizes persuasively that Jesus Christ was a pirate.

He's a man with a penchant for jokes, both good and bad. He coins his own money, one-half troy-ounce silver coins with the inscription "Big Water U.S.A." on one side. He carries a revolver, a nickel-plated, engraved .357 Magnum with the inscription "For Christ's Sake" on the handle.

Now, with a condition that is considered life-threatening, Joseph finds his idiosyncratic outlook unchanged.

"I'm wacky as a wooden watch," he said.

He's also less active than he once was. He speaks little about his cancer, but said he is "85 percent cured."

"And, if I'm not, it doesn't mean that much. When they diagnosed me a year ago the doctor sat down and told me, 'Mr. Joseph, you're dying.'

"Well, I thought about it for a minute and I looked at him and said, 'And you're not?'

"The thing is, I've lived the way I wanted to.

"Most people want to talk to me about polygamy, but I don't find anything very remarkable about polygamy. It comes perfectly natural to me. It comes perfectly natural to a lot of men. Who, besides a stupid, ugly man, would have anything against polygamy?

"I mean, Jack Kennedy and I are the same. I just happened to have married all mine.

"What I didn't find natural was monogamy. I was never meant to be a husband to one woman. I like women, a lot of women, and they like me. Every one of my wives has approached me about marriage. I didn't instigate any of them.

"Polygamy isn't everything it's cracked up to be. With eight wives, they fight sometimes. But I'll say one thing, I've never struck one of my wives and that's more than a lot of men can say.

"I've got 21 children and they all speak to me and not one of them has ever been in jail."

JOSEPH GRAVITATED to polygamy by choice, not upbringing. He was born in a farm labor camp in Modesto, Calif., in 1936 to a family that traced its religious origins to the Greek Orthodox Church.

He graduated from high school in Modesto, joined the Marines and later served on the Modesto Police Department from 1958 until 1962.

He was married then, to one woman.

"We were married in 1960 and stayed married for 10 years," said Joseph. "I'd had enough of police work by 1962 and I did a lot of things - sold cars, managed a horse ranch, figured people's taxes - but I finally got a job in the