The ties that blind
By MEL PARKINSON

From the roadside, Colorado City looks like any other agriculture-based town along a highway. There's a dairy not far from the turnoff that takes you through the enclave, and the crude dirt roads are dotted with pickup trucks and farming equipment. Driving through town, however, certain oddities force a second glance. First, the entire community is under construction. Nearly every home is being remodeled—towering additions tacked on with little regard for architectural continuity. Those homes without extensions are either three- and four-story cube-shaped monstrosities or small hovels encircled by a ring of trailers on cinderblocks.

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The yards of the more decrepit dwellings are littered with tires, lawn mowers and assorted car parts, while the well-to-do establishments have manicured lawns. But each home shares a common decoration: an array of two-wheelers the likes of which has not been seen outside a bike store showroom. Eight, 10, a dozen bikes parked in each driveway, leaned against the side of the house, discarded carelessly at the bottom of the steps.

Senses now keenly attuned for the bizarre, other indicators of the town's peculiarity jump out at passersby. Despite the 100-degree-plus temperatures, not a single child riding past on a bike, playing in the muddy ditch along the side of the road or splashing in an inflatable pool is wearing shorts. Or a T-shirt. Each girl is dressed in a long-sleeved, calico-print dress, and beneath that a pair of jeans, leggings or tights—anything opaque and sure to hide any hint of bare skin. Boys wear slightly fewer layers, although they also sport jeans and long-sleeved shirts rather deepening their tans in cutoffs and tank-tops.

Children roam the streets, adults appearing only occasionally to gather wash from sagging clotheslines or bark orders at the towheaded masses. Time after time, a friendly greeting to a toiling housewife is returned with a curt "hello," and long after she's returned indoors, her curious eyes can be felt. The men are equally curious, though perhaps not as threatened.

Several yards away, a horse carrying two young riders makes its way ploddingly down the mud-packed road. The girls—both riding bareback, both with their skirts yanked to their waists, their jean-clad legs digging into the steed's side—wobble from side to side, their bodies swaying with the movement of the beast. With fluid grace, the one in front leans toward the horse's head, stroking it with her hand as she wraps her arms around its neck. The horse tilts his head to the side, snorting as she whispers something in his ear. Suddenly, the animal picks up its pace, breaking into a steady trot. The girl in the rear frantically grabs at her companion's dress to stabilize herself, but the girl in front loosens her grip on the animal's neck, tosses back her head as she lets out a squeal and throws her arms out, bouncing with the impact of his feet hitting the hard dirt.

It's an image that reminds Laura Chapman of her own childhood. Her favorite memories of her youth are those of time spent with her "pint-sized horse, Butch." She remembers speaking to Butch often, saying "he seemed to understand and accept me unconditionally."

Laura Chapman, shown here at age 13, was the 25th child of 31, the result of a polygamous marriage.

Raised in Sandy, Utah—a suburb of Salt Lake City—Chapman's moments of freedom were scarce. Her moments of privacy were even scarcer. Chapman was born the 25th child of 31. Her mother was the third wife of four, and Chapman the sixth of her seven children. Like countless other children in Utah and throughout the West, Chapman was born into a polygamous marriage—one not unlike the horribly abusive Kingston case currently garnering national media attention.

The Kingston news first hit the papers on June 4, 1998, when the Salt Lake Tribune reported that a Sandy man, later identified as John Daniel Kingston, had been arrested for allegedly beating his teenage daughter after the girl fled a polygamous marriage to her 32-year-old uncle, David O. Kingston. The girl had just turned 16 when she married her uncle in a secret ceremony, becoming David Kingston's 15th wife in September 1997.

According to preliminary hearing testimony given in July, the girl was taken to a remote family ranch near the Utah-Idaho border and whipped with a belt. She said he hit her with it 28 times, and then she passed out. She suffered a swollen nose, cut lip and deep bruises on her arms, buttocks and legs, according to testimony. John Kingston has since been charged with felony child abuse. David Kingston has been charged with incest and unlawful sexual conduct with a minor.

Both Kingstons are sons of John Ortell Kingston, brother of Charles Eilen Kingston, who founded the order—known as either the Latter Day Church of Christ or the Davis Cooperative Society. Estimated at being more than 1,000 members strong, the sect is a tight-knit group that settled in Bountiful, Utah—roughly half an hour from Salt Lake City—in the 1920s. Since then, the group has continued to operate within mainstream society while retaining the purity of its bloodstream by intermarrying.

The family is also quite financially well-off, though many of the wives and children live on public assistance. In fact, John Ortell Kingston was ordered by a Utah judge in the early '80s to undergo paternity tests to determine if he had fathered 26 children from three women who received $200,000 in state child-support and medical payments. Kingston settled the case out of court in exchange for having the paternity tests waived. And David Kingston is said to be a "financial whirl," his name listed as an officer in three Nevada corporations and one in Utah: N.P.M.C., N.U.R. Inc., National Business Management Inc. and ABM Inc. All in all, current estimates of the Kingston clan's wealth put it at $150 million.
While the Kingston trial has brought polygamy into the light, it's an issue that has boiled just beneath the surface for more than a century. Though polygamy is banned by the Utah constitution and the Mormon church, and is a crime punishable under Utah's bigamy statute, the practice continues today—with little or no threat. While most think the practice was abandoned at the turn of the century or at least relegated to small clusters of backwoods hicks, polygamy is far from being a memory.

Conservative estimates of the number of practicing polygamists in the U.S. hover around 20,000—more optimistic projections by polygamous leaders skyrocket to 100,000. Regardless of the actual figure, one thing is certain: Polygamy is alive and flourishing. And it's happening just a couple of hours from Las Vegas in Colorado City, Ariz.

Nestled in the red sandstone hills 40 miles east of St. George, Short Creek—later renamed Colorado City—was founded in 1913, though it wasn't until several years later that polygamous families began to move into the town. Most sources credit John Y. Barlow, revered as a prophet among Mormon Fundamentalists, with beginning the polygamous colony on the Arizona-Utah border. It became obvious there was a strategic advantage to the town's state-line location, and residents trying to avoid the law on either side of the border soon learned they could easily dodge either jurisdiction.

After an unsuccessful raid in 1935 failed to quash the growing colony, Short Creek was heralded as the ideal homeland for believers of the true gospel, calling themselves the United Order Effort. The United Order is one of the most conservative wings of the Mormon Fundamentalist movement, allowing sexual relations only for the purpose of procreation and prohibiting sexual contact altogether during pregnancy, nursing and menses. In 1936, the leaders of the Short Creek community established a "charitable philanthropic trust" called the United Effort Plan to hold all the land in common. The UEP is still in existence today—homes and fences are blurred with the UEP mark.

Soon thereafter, Short Creek reached a population of 36 men, 86 women and 263 children. The FBI raided the town again in 1944, and 15 men were sent to prison in Salt Lake City. Nine were later they were granted release by signing a "manifesto" pledging to renounce the teaching or practice of plural marriage. Most returned to Short Creek and immediately broke their promise to the government.

The Short Creek group experienced some internal strife with the death of Barlow in 1951. Joseph W. Musser, a member of the council and avid defender of polygamy, was named his successor, but a paralytic stroke left him partially disabled. Many church followers opposed his retention of an active leadership role. Opposition mounted when Musser appointed his physician, Rulon C. Allred, and Mexican leader Margarito Bautista, to vacant council seats. The final straw came when Musser then disbanded the existing council and appointed a new one, naming Allred as his successor. Musser died just three years later.

Those Fundamentalists who remained loyal to Musser relocated to Salt Lake City and followed Allred after Musser's death. The Short Creekers who stayed behind selected Leroy Johnson to lead them. By most accounts, the community flourished under Johnson's leadership and by 1985 there were an estimated 3,000 members residing in the border town. Johnson remained the group's leader until he died in 1986 at age 98.

Outsider criticism of Short Creek did not end with the '44 raid. Complaints continued to trickle in and Arizona Gov. Howard Pyle responded by hiring a private detective agency from Los Angeles to snoop around Short Creek, looking for abuses of taxpayer money.

On July 26, 1953, a convoy of social-service workers, law-enforcement officers and reporters rolled into Short Creek. The husbands of Short Creek were immediately jailed in Kingman, while the women and children stayed behind. Arizona social workers spent almost a week sorting out the intertwined family lines. Ironically, the LDS Church-owned Deseret News in Salt Lake was almost alone among newspapers in proclaiming support for the raid. The rest of the nation, meanwhile, saw newsreel images of children being torn from their mothers, and despite the seemingly noble intent of the raid, Pyle fell under attack for his actions.

Twenty-three Short Creek men were sentenced to a year's probation for conspiracy. But after the negative publicity that followed the 1953 raid, few politicians were prepared to champion the campaign to eradicate plural marriage, and polygamy enforcement throughout the West died.

Though it's been nearly 45 years since the last arrests were made, Colorado City residents have not let down their guard. Townsfolk exude a pervasive sense of mistrust and suspicion. City Life is unable to reach Colorado City Mayor Daniel Barlow, but he did speak with a reporter from the Salt Lake City Weekly (then the Private Eye Weekly) two years ago for an article on the UEP. (Barlow is one of polygamous prophet John Y. Barlow's sons.)

At that time, Barlow told reporter Maureen Zent that "the liberal influence from out in the world is a bigger concern to us than a few bellyachers within our own group." Children are raised to fear intrusion by outsiders, and the level of resentment that enfolds the town is evident in the words inscribed on a monument that stands in the center of the city's small, primitive cemetery:

"The Fundamentalist Church has repeatedly defended religious freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment. Persecution of its members for their religious beliefs and practices was evident in state and federal raids in 1935, 1944 and 1953.

"In the 1953 raid, the mothers and the younger children were evacuated en masse. Governor J. Howard Pyle's declared intent was to 'imprison the men, place the women in detention homes, adopt out the children, and destroy the records.'"

"The community remains primarily an agricultural settlement built upon traditional Mormon ideals."

The monument was dedicated by the Colorado City United School District Senior Class of 1990.

Eerily, the monument isn't the only thing off-kilter about the cemetery.
A stroll among the headstones reveals that nearly 50 percent of the tombs contain the remains of children under age 20. While one would expect a high rate of child mortality in the early part of the century when medical care was still scarce and rudimentary, a large portion of the markers bear dates in the '80s and '90s. While there's no hard evidence explaining the seeming disproportionate number of child graves, it's plausible to link the untimely deaths to several generally accepted Fundamentalist beliefs.

Members of Tapestry of Polygamy, a support group for former polygamous wives, say that children are often not immunized and must rely on "the laying on of hands" to cure illnesses. Chapman in particular recalls an incident during her marriage to a polygamous-raised man when she was prevented from taking her 2-month-old, feverish with pneumonia, to the doctor. "He sat me down and told me he didn't believe in going to the doctor. He said to use herbs and pray. I laid awake all night listening to her breathing afraid she was going to die."

Another contributing factor to the apparently high infant mortality rate in Colorado City may be the rampant intermarrying that occurs among polygamous clans. TOP member Rowena Erickson, 58, was born into the Kingston group and lived among them for 34 years. She was the second wife in a two-wife household, and gave birth to eight children in 13 years. Erickson says birth defects were beginning to happen more regularly within the family. "There is now macrocephalous [enlarged heads] and dwarfism in the Kingston group," she says. "One family with intermarrying that was really dysfunctional was the family where this girl came from. They had visual problems, and legal blindness at an early age."

In an article in the Salt Lake Tribune in June, Karen Barlow—married to Truman Barlow, son of polygamous prophet John Y. Barlow—described the importance of childbearing in the Fundamentalist faith. "Nothing should stand in the way of you and the Lord sending children," she says, having given birth to 20 children and now grandmother of 93. "Every child that came to me, the Lord sent. If someday there's overpopulation, the Lord will work it out." Barlow described her last pregnancy in which the baby died at birth, a tale that mirrors those told by other residents of the small town. Indeed, the cemetery is riddled with unmarked graves, suggestive of stillbirths.

Though the city is well-known for its plural marriage roots, this tombstone is one of the few in the Colorado City cemetery that commits the practice to granite.

While polygamy has not been aggressively investigated since the '50s, the recent national media attention given the Kingston case could change the climate for practicing polygamists. It's also what forced TOP into the spotlight sooner than planned. The nascent organization is a network of women who have had experience with polygamous marriages, either as children raised in the lifestyle or as women marrying into it. Amid the Kingston coverage, the group has been very vocal on the importance of having support systems in place for those women wishing to leave polygamy, and it has publicly condemned Gov. Mike Leavitt for his comments in late July that polygamy may be protected under the free exercise of religion clause in the First Amendment.

TOP member Carmen Thompson entered polygamy when she married a Fundamentalist, becoming the sixth of his eventual eight wives. She stayed in the marriage for 13 years, giving birth to five of his 32 children. She entered the union believing she was following the true doctrines of the Mormon Church and says she bought into "the lies that were told before me. I thought I would have the support of my sister-wives, the freedom to pursue my career and the safety net of the extended family to support me in these endeavors."

Thompson soon found she had none of those things. She and the other sister-wives lived in poverty, requiring each of the women to support themselves. She describes having to "dumpster-dive" for food behind grocery stores and being subjected to the most base forms of humiliation and degradation imaginable. She soon fell into a deep depression.

Fortunately, Thompson found a way to fight her depression and eventually win her freedom. She began performing at stand-up comedy joints throughout Utah, saving all the money she made for a deposit on an apartment. And she had a time line. She had recently given birth to her only daughter. "Up until then," she says, "I'd had four boys. I didn't see it as being as bad for boys. But I was not going to subject a female child of my own to this."

While the most outspoken voices in the polygamy debate are those who condemn the practice, there are some who defend the unorthodox arrangement, rebutting claims that polygamy is inherently abusive and damaging. "It's quite healthy for women," says Mary Potter, 40. "It's honorable and fulfilling. Just like any other family structure."

Potter is a founder of the Women's Religious Liberties Union, formed last month to promote the legalization of polygamy. She is also one of three wives of former Murray City, Utah, police officer Royston Potter, who was fired in 1982 when he admitted his plural marriages. Though he fought his termination to the U.S. Supreme Court, his plea was denied.

In a press conference held on the front lawn of the Salt Lake Community College on July 31, Potter said the 16-member group was formed largely in response to Tapestry of Polygamy. "We respect [TOP's] efforts to stop abuse," Potter said. "We remind you, however, that you do not speak for all women. We are intelligent adults." Potter advocates legalizing plural marriages, believing it would bring secretive clans out of hiding, and make it easier for authorities to investigate abuses.

Then there is Elizabeth Joseph, a Utah lawyer who wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times in 1991 and spoke before the Utah chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1997, extolling the virtues of polygamy on both occasions. Joseph is one of nine wives of Alexander Joseph, leader of the Church of Jesus Christ in Solemn Assembly. Alexander Joseph formed the Assembly in 1974 after leaving another Fundamentalist polygamous sect. Shortly after founding the Assembly, he attempted to homestead federal land but was denied access by court order.
He then moved to Glen Canyon, Utah, and established a new town incorporated as Big Water.

"Polygamy is an empowering lifestyle," she said at the May 97 conference. "It provides me with the environment and opportunity to maximize my female potential without all the trade-offs and compromises that attend monogamy. The women in my family are friends. You don't share two decades of experience, and a man, without those friendships becoming very special."

But supportive statements don't hold water for members of TOP.

"They say that out of one side of their mouths while they cry out of the other," says Chapman. "Even with ideal circumstances the rivalry for the top slot is unhealthy--not just among sister-wives but among the children. With that many siblings there's just no way they receive the care they should. Polygamy, no matter how you put it together, is abusive."

Thompson was able to leave her husband and obtain a divorce, yet she later returned to polygamy, believing it was still God's law. She met a Christian polygamist and married him, assuming the difficulties she'd had with the first marriage were the result of Mormon theology. Within a year, however, she had divorced her second husband as well. Last year, Thompson married again, this time to a monogamist. She is currently finishing her degree in communication at the University of Utah and continues to perform her stand-up comedy routine whenever possible.

Chapman managed to leave her marriage before her husband married again, though she lived in the same home with her father-in-law and his three wives for a number of years. During her marriage and with the help of a therapist, she also discovered a history of sexual abuse committed against her by her father. Since uncovering the molestation, she has campaigned on behalf of other incest victims, particularly those in polygamous households.

It's now been seven years since Chapman left her husband. In that time she has struggled to support her five children as a single mother (two years after her divorce, Chapman placed her son, George, in a group home better equipped to deal with his autism). Soon after leaving her husband, she took the GED and was pleasantly surprised when she passed. She proceeded to attend and graduate from the University of Utah where she majored in sociology and human development and minored in psychology. She is currently applying for the Graduate School of Social Work and would like to "be a therapist for women and children leaving polygamy."

Chapman has been open about her past and the life she left behind with her five children. She tells them polygamy is against the law and that their father still believes in the practice. Keeping her daughters from falling prey to their father's wishes remains a struggle. She recently sent the children to visit their father in Colorado City for the summer in accordance with a court-ordered visitation schedule, but after talking to them on the phone and "getting a bad feeling," she "hopped in the car and drove down to get them." There, Chapman says, she found her children packed into a two-bedroom trailer, the oldest babysitting for their half-siblings. She decided from that point on that they would have no contact with their father while he remained in a polygamous community.

"They're scooping her out already as wife number I don't know what for a man down there," she says of her oldest daughter, now 14. "If there's one thing I've accomplished by leaving it's making sure that my children don't have to live in polygamy. They have options. They have choices. They can do and be what they want. Their whole life is their choice, not something set up for them."

Though Chapman's immediate siblings have left polygamy, not all of her family members share her disdain for the practice. Her mother has now entered into two other plural marriages--one as a third wife and, most recently, as a second wife. Chapman says the philosophical difference has caused a schism in their relationship, but she has given up trying to convince her mother to abandon the lifestyle.

"She's been in denial for so many years you'd think the light would come on," she says. "But she hangs on at all costs to her belief system and doesn't let go because it would rock her. She hangs on to the fairy tale life of what polygamy should be, and doesn't have the strength to face what it is. If my mother had to look at a picture of herself as an outsider does, she couldn't handle it."