BY ASHLEY POWERS

THEIR
ON THE BORDER OF UTAH AND ARIZONA, MORMON FUNDAMENTALISTS HAVE LONG LIVED ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN RULES.

BUT IN RECENT YEARS, THE OUTSIDE WORLD HAS STARTED TO ENCROACH.

WHEN A FORMER SECT MEMBER AND HIS FAMILY MOVED TO THE TOWN WHERE HE'D GROWN UP, THEY EXPECTED A HOMECOMING OF SORTS.

WHAT THEY GOT WAS A WAR.
IT'S EASY TO STAND in the northwest corner of Arizona, cut off from most everything by the 277-mile-long Grand Canyon, and feel like the rest of the world has vanished. The sky is massive, the clouds wispy, the land pancaked and parched, until it isn't.

From Highway 389, at the base of jagged red cliffs, the twin towns of Colorado City, Arizona, and Hildale, Utah, appear as blips on the desert floor. For close to a century, they have flourished because of the land's solitude. Mormon fundamentalists have holed up here, husbands in long sleeves and sister-wives in prairie dresses, even on 100-degree days, fending off the outside world.

The plaza near Central Street and Township Avenue in Short Creek, as the towns are collectively known, was once a sort of community center. At various times, it housed a food co-op, a health-food store, and a pizzeria. In June, when I drove through, the parking lot was weedy and the windows darkened. The Flower Depot was closed, the Country Clotheline abandoned. The lettering on the pizza-shop window had worn away, and it now advertised PIZZA LIVER. Only a general store was open.

These are the scars of battle. In recent years, this enclave has been ripped apart by a modern holy war, led by a divisive spiritual leader who ended up on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list and is now in prison. The majority of Short Creek residents remain loyal to him and his sect, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or FLDS. But they are losing ground to apostates — those who either walked away from the church or were pushed out — who are starting to build their own community. To the FLDS, they are nothing less than an existential threat.

You can glance at a home here and tell which side the occupant has chosen. FLDS households have affixed "Zion" signs over their doorways and erected fences: some metal, some brick, all as imposing as fortresses. When a family leaves the church, often the first thing they do is knock down their fence. For a time, church members stocked up on groceries at an FLDS storehouse that looked like an airplane hangar and was protected by a concrete barricade, while the apostates shopped at a market down the road. There are small church-run shops here and there, which always seem to be closed — except to the faithful, who use passwords or call ahead to gain entry. The plaza was one of the few places where the two sides were forced to cross paths, until an outsider bought it, and the FLDS tenants fled.

In the time I spent in Short Creek this summer, I was struck by how few church members I saw and how quickly they disappeared when they saw me. One woman ducked behind a fence. A little girl stuck out her tongue, and not in a friendly way. It's risky to talk to outsiders. People have been banished for lesser sins, I was told, and that perpetual threat shapes life — and throttles civility — more than anything else.

I spoke to one former church member who's surrounded by FLDS homes. She waves to one of her neighbors, but only after dark, so that the other neighbors won't see. Another ex-member said that when his kids bounce on their trampoline or play with their rabbits and turtles, the FLDS children next door peer over the fence and watch in silence.

WHEN JINJER COOKE and her family pulled into Short Creek in 2008, with a giant Ryder truck and a Weekend Warrior trailer, they didn't realize the community was at war with itself. Jinjer was an outsider, a woman who'd spent much of her life in Phoenix and favored jeans and flip-flops. She had one husband, three children, and no interest in polygamy.

They were moving to a half-construction house on a dirt road, with a backyard of pink earth and green scrub and a breathtaking view of the cliffs. At the time, it was little more than a roof and a frame that had moldered for years, so the Cookes planned to spend a few weeks in their trailer while it was fixed up. Jinjer didn't mind. To her, the house marked a fresh start after years of anguish. She felt so hopeful that she stopped taking her antidepressant.

Jinjer's husband, Ron, was born here, the son of polygamists, one of 57 siblings who grew up clambering over the cliffs. Then, Short Creek's neat grid of homes had few locked doors or tall fences. Kids raced around on bikes and giggled through church dances. Their prophet, Leroy Johnson, was known as "Uncle Roy," and on his birthday, townsfolk trucked in watermelons to Cottonwood Park.

Ron's parents struggled to make ends meet. When he was 10, he was sent to live with his uncle. A few years later, Ron was yanked out of school and put to work on a construction crew outside of town for little pay. He spent his weekends framing, stuccoing, bricklaying, and weatherproofing Short Creek for nothing.

By 19, Ron had fled to Phoenix. He and Jinjer met at a barbecue around 1999. He was 6 feet 4 inches tall, with sandy hair and an easy smile. She was dark-haired and shy, a single mother struggling to support two girls and a boy with a string of restaurant jobs. She swooned at how this bear of a man, someone who she was sure could have his pick of women, embraced her family. Within a month, they moved in together.

By the mid-2000s, Jinjer and Ron were prospering. She ran a home-cleaning business; he worked construction. They rented a house in a neighborhood called Dreaming Summit. Then, one December morning, Jinjer tried to turn left down a nearby street. It was blocked off with yellow police tape. Ahead, paramedics
huddled around someone at a construction site. It was Ron.

He had been rearranging traffic cones when a truck barreled into him. At the hospital, he was tethered to a knot of tubes, and his doctors asked Jinjer if they should remove him from life support. She said no, convinced he was still present. Three months later, Ron came home. He was mostly confined to a wheelchair. His vision blurred. His memory fuzzed. His bowels betrayed him.

Navigating their two-story home was a monumental task. Jinjer threw together a makeshift bedroom downstairs, and a friend rigged up a portable shower. But the setup was untenable, and so was staying in Phoenix. Ron couldn’t work. Neither could Jinjer; she was caring for Ron. They relied on Social Security and workers’ comp, and dreamed of moving somewhere slower-paced. By Christmas 2007, Ron’s brother Seth came up with a solution: Ron, he said, come home.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints renounced plural marriage in 1890, bowing to the rest of the country’s unease and clearing Utah’s path to statehood. But the Manifesto, as the edict is known, didn’t wipe out polygamists. Instead, they splintered into sects and fanned out across the West.

Since its early days as a fundamentalist settlement in the 1920s, Short Creek has been a place on guard. Adherents of “The Work,” as the FLDS doctrine was once called, believe that a man must have at least three wives to reach the highest level of heaven. Each is expected to deliver as many children as possible, and it’s not uncommon to meet a woman who has borne 16.

The faithful have little say these days in whom they marry, or much else. They heed their prophet, revered as God’s mouthpiece. He can force girls to wed men as old as their grandfathers. He can banish fathers on a whim and reassign their wives and children. He can oust entire families from their homes, with few repercussions: Since the 1940s, Short Creek
residents have handed over property to a trust called the United Effort Plan, meaning almost no one has a deed to his home.

How could the outside world, the gentiles, understand?

In 1953, at the behest of Arizona Governor Howard Pyle, dozens of law-enforcement officers flooded Short Creek, arresting 122 men and women and seizing 263 children. Pyle spared no outrage in defending the raid: “Here is a community — many of the women, sadly, right along with the men — unalterably dedicated to the wicked theory that every maturing girl should be forced into the bondage of multiple wifehood,” he said. It was a political disaster. Photos of children wrested from their mothers convinced voters that Pyle had made a grave mistake. He lost re-election.

For decades afterward, politicians were wary of meddling with Short Creek. But the towns remained vigilant. When I visited, an ex-church member named Isaac Wyler drove me to a cavern where, as a child, he had been instructed to hide during the next ambush. “We were absolutely forbidden to talk to outsiders, absolutely. Don’t answer any questions, don’t tell them your name, don’t give them directions, just gum up,” Wyler told me. “They did say, if you are going to talk to them, you can tell them which way out of town.”

Several years after Ron left, in the late 1990s, Warren Jeffs started to take control of the sect — first as an adviser to his ailing father, the prophet Rulon Jeffs, and then as a prophet himself. A gangly man who’d spent much of his life in Salt Lake City, he had a reputation for piety and a nasal voice that belied his ruthlessness. He banned television, fishing, dancing, swimming, basketball, and the color red. After he banned dogs, every canine in town was rounded up and shot. He exiled teenage boys for wearing short sleeves and reading love letters; he married teenage girls to old men.

A few years into Jeffs’s reign, a sect member (and police officer) was convicted of bigamy and unlawful sexual conduct with his 16-year-old “spiritual wife.” Feeling persecuted, Jeffs wrote off Short Creek. “The Lord has withdrawn the blessings from there, and they will not be given back,” he said, and turned his attention to building a compound on 1,691 acres in Texas. Jeffs decided which families would move to the new Yearning for Zion ranch and which would languish in the “dying community” of Short Creek, which he continued to run from afar.

When ex-members sued Jeffs for fraud and abuse, he ignored them, proclaiming that God told him to “answer them nothing.” In response, in 2005, a Utah court stripped Jeffs of control of the church’s more than $100 million trust, which included hundreds of homes and thousands of acres of land. The court eventually revamped the trust to benefit anyone who’d contributed to the community, regardless of his faith. Some apostates who had stayed in town, but the changes would allow many more to return, including Ron.

As documented in court records, Jeffs had told his flock years before how he felt about apostates: They were liars, traitors, tools of the devil. His followers were not to hire them or shop at their stores, let alone welcome them as neighbors — even if they were family. ‘Leave them alone, severely,’ Jeffs instructed.

As outsiders began to trickle into town, the faithful believed they were under siege again. “We just said the hell with you,” recalled Patrick Barlow, whose family was once one of Short Creek’s most prominent. “This is our place; this is our home. Get the hell
out of here. We don't need your help," Church members dropped letters from the trust on the post-office floor, unopened. They refused to pay property taxes or open their doors to law enforcement. One family developed its own alert system in case "the enemy" was spotted: Code yellow meant police from outside the community; code red, an FBI agent.

In 2006, Jeffs was apprehended in Nevada during a traffic stop. The next year, he was convicted in Utah of being an accomplice to the rape of a 14-year-old girl who had been forced to marry her cousin. (The verdict was later overturned.) In 2008, in an echo of the Short Creek raid decades before, investigators marched onto the Texas compound, breaching the doors of its limestone temple with a battering ram. Authorities removed more than 400 children from their families. On television, tearful mothers, their hair poofed in front and braided in back, begged for their children back, and again public opinion turned against the government. One month later, an appeals court in Texas ordered the state to return all the children to their families.

In the midst of all this, Ron and Jinjer arrived in Short Creek.

**Within weeks**, Jinjer's euphoria faded. Close to 8,000 people lived in Short Creek, more than half of them younger than 15. There were two town halls, a post office, police and fire departments, a school that FLDS kids weren't allowed to attend, a puddle-jumper airport, some gas stations, and the small shopping plaza. It felt like a busted mining town. Dozens of homes, abandoned after the exodus to Texas, stood rotted, their windows smashed and their insides smeared with pigeon droppings. The roads were oddly empty, save giant trucks rumored to belong to the "God squad," or church security.

When Jinjer did run into townsfolk, she felt a chill, even at city offices. She and Ron applied for water, sewer, and electricity soon after their arrival — a simple request that would reshape their lives. They said they didn't anticipate a fight; their neighbors already had service, indicating there were lines nearby. But summer cooled to fall, and the Cookes still had no utilities. Officials said the towns had been grappling with a water shortage since the summer before, when a pump briefly failed, and had placed a mortuary on new meters — though, strangely, reconnecting a pre-existing hookup was allowed.

Frustrated, Ron wrote a letter describing his medical woes. He realized the towns were parched, but a few houses had recently burned down — perhaps that freed up a meter?
He gave the letter to his brother-in-law, who showed it to David Zitting, then the mayor of Hildale. If the Cookes were FLDS, Ron’s brother-in-law recalls Zitting saying, they’d have service by next weekend. (In a deposition, Zitting later said he did not recall the conversation.)

In December, as the temperature plunged into the 30s and gusts buffeted the rocks, the Cookes again requested electricity. They’d had enough of the Weekend Warrior. The trailer was roughly 35 feet long and 8 feet wide — roomy during a camping trip but cramped after seven months. The outside was white with blue swooshes, the inside beige. There was a stovetop that took forever to boil water, a sitting area where everyone ate plate-in-hand, and a bathroom so small that Jinjer stood outside it to bathe Ron. At one end, the kids shared bunks; at the other, their parents huddled in bed.

In response to Ron’s letter, a Hildale official claimed there was no record of the Cookes’ applications and that their recent paperwork was incomplete. The cities had no water to give, he wrote. The Cookes fumed. They were convinced that what the cities called a water shortage was the equivalent of a sign that said KEEP OUT.

By that time, they’d poured tens of thousands of dollars into making the house wheelchair-friendly. Ron’s brother Seth, who’d left the church years ago, was a general contractor, and he’d spent months reframing every doorway. The kids were starting to make friends, and they wanted to stay. So Ron filed a complaint with the state of Arizona alleging religious and disability discrimination. The family battened down the trailer for one winter. Then two.

While the faithful prayed on Sundays, Jinjer and her son, George, fetched water, using spigots at a park to fill a giant fiberglass tank. At home, they linked the tank to the Weekend Warrior with a garden hose. It frequently iced up, and they had to thaw it in a relative’s tub. Emptying the trailer’s black-water tank was even worse: It contained human waste. When Jinjer’s daughter Mahli tried to help, she threw up.

Jinjer watched her son recede and her husband struggle, and she blamed herself for leaving Phoenix. Sometimes Ron awoke to her crying. Friends offered their guest rooms, but it was tough to haul around Ron’s medical supplies. Jinjer also feared they’d return to a ransacked trailer, or worse. She’d already been run off the road by a truck, and one time when she had met with an attorney, she walked outside to find a chicken with a slashed throat. And she was wary of the police, as most of them were FLDS.

Two years after they’d arrived in Short Creek, the Cookes had finally obtained sewer service and electricity (a private company had taken over power hookups) and had moved out of the trailer. But they were still hauling water.

One day in June, as the midday sun bore down, a mechanic for the Short Creek water system pulled up to the Cookes’ house with a police officer and a big yellow backhoe. The mechanic accused the Cookes of illegally tapping a water line that ran through the property, and the officer claimed he needed to dig up their yard. The Cookes called the county sheriff’s deputies for help. “You’re not digging here until then other cops get here,” Ron’s brother Seth said, as the Cookes recorded the encounter with a hand-held camera. “Well,” the officer replied, “unfortunately, you don’t get to decide what cops come.” The backhoe rumbled and tore into the red earth, leaving a crater more than 7 feet deep. Three weeks later, Ron and Jinjer filed a lawsuit.

**DURING THE 2008 RAID OF WARREN JEFFS’S TEXAS COMPOUND, TEXAS RANGERS FOUND A BANK-STYLE VAULT WITH CONCRETE WALLS NEARLY A FOOT THICK. THEY JACKHAMMERED A HOLE JUST BIG ENOUGH FOR THE SMALLEST RANGER TO SQUEEZE THROUGH. INSIDE, MORE THAN 300 CARDBOARD BOXES HELD AN ASTONISHING CACHE: THE DAILY DICTIONARIES OF WARREN JEFFS.**

They started in 2002 and read like journal entries, albeit with oddly formal language and some passages written in the voice of one of the prophet’s wives. No detail was too trivial — for instance, the time Jeffs decided to buy shorts at Walmart. While defense attorneys have questioned the documents’ authenticity, investigators
have confirmed many details via public records. Along with letters and other documents seized in Texas and elsewhere, they suggest Short Creek was a theocracy, a place where Jeffs could launch a police investigation or end a political career in the name of divine revelation.

Richard Holm knew this better than most. When Colorado City was incorporated in 1985, he was appointed to the seven-member council. That’s what Uncle Roy wants, he was told. When we met for breakfast in Hildale, Holm couldn’t recall a single contested election. On occasion, he said, council members balked at church orders, but they never disobeyed. In 2003, not long before taking his flock to Texas, Jeffs included Holm on a list: “Men the Lord Has Told Me Do Not Hold Priesthood.” He kicked Holm out of the church, assigned his two wives to Holm’s brother, and ordered him off the council.

On a brisk morning two months later, close to 2,000 townsmen packed into the church meetinghouse, expecting to be assigned volunteer work. Jeffs sat on the stage where kids once held plays, his legs crossed, his expression stony. God, he said, had revealed to him the existence of several “master deceivers.” In between sips of water, Jeffs named 21 men, including four of his own brothers, a Hildale city councilman, and Dan Barlow, the only mayor in Colorado City’s brief history. “The work of God is a benevolent dictatorship,” Jeffs said. “It is not a democracy. You men who I have named, stand up!” Jeffs commanded them to leave the meetinghouse, and the community, without even touching their wives’ hands. The message was clear. No one was safe.

After the purge, Jeffs, or “Uncle Warren” to his flock, rarely returned to Short Creek. Instead, he and a small entourage hopscotched the country, from the Texas compound to Colorado to New Orleans, where, at the Lord’s urging, he bore witness to the “dark immorality” that is Mardi Gras. He expected town officials to keep him in the loop, even after a warrant was issued for his arrest in 2005. When the police chief wanted to make a hire, he checked in with Jeffs; the letter was signed, “Your servant!” Jeffs appeared to orchestrate other municipal decisions. According to his dictations, he panicked when Holm bought a building in Short Creek and ordered city leaders to block him from renting it to apostates. He scuttled another ex-member’s plan to sell beer at a gas station.

When Jeffs lost control of the trust, he was particularly furious. If followers could leave the church and keep their homes, if outsiders could infiltrate Short Creek, his power would be at risk. He railed
against the head of the trust as "an instrument of great evil" (townsfolk preferred the nickname "state-ordained bishop," or "S.O.B."); not long before, he had warned his flock, "Those lands and houses were consecrated unto the Lord, and they belong to Him. And for any of us to put lands or houses that belong to the Lord in our own name, we become the thieves."

The dictations ended before the Cookes moved to Short Creek. Jeffs barred his followers from reading them. In 2011, he was convicted in Texas of sexually assaulting two of his "spiritual wives," ages 12 and 15, and sentenced to life in prison. He did not respond to a letter I sent him; neither did almost a dozen city and church officials mentioned in the Cooke case.

One evening, I met Sam Brower, a private investigator who wrote a book about Jeffs and the FLDS called Prophet's Prey, at Cottonwood Park. Brower recently visited the rural Texas prison where Jeffs is incarcerated. The prophet (Continued on page 54)

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JIM MANGAN'S most recent project, Blast, was published by Dashwood Books and is currently a solo exhibition at 205-A gallery in New York City.
placed around the town, and parked a jeep in the mountains in case the bishop needed to flee. Defense attorneys said the cities played no part in the operation, but team members said when they spotted unfamiliar cars, cops ran the license-plate numbers. Mostly, Barlow testified, he and his fellow security cronies spied on their neighbors. They tattled on churchgoers who didn't raise their hands to show they accepted the prophet's revelations. They ratted out townsperson who attended a Sunday school run by a former bishop. They also tracked "unfriendly" as the team called them, including Ron and Jinjer.

One year after the Cookes moved to Short Creek, Barlow was asked to find proof that Ron was failing his disabilities. He trailed them for years, parking his truck near their home, taking pictures of their comings and goings, and radiating the control room when they hauled water. "They just came and went peaceably," he said at trial. "I had no reason to believe otherwise all the time that I watched them." Plenty of townsperson testified against the Cookes. Under oath, city managers, a mayor, utility officials, and cops vowed that their faith did not interfere with their work and that they treated all residents the same. Other ex-church members received water and sewer service, said defense attorneys, who chastised the trust for moving the Cookes to a house with no utilities. Jeff Matura, who represents Colorado City, urged jurors to ignore "salacious issues and details that might form the plot for an interesting book or movie one day." But that proved difficult. The Cookes' attorney, Bill Walker, asked for $4 million. The jury awarded that — plus $1.3 million more. (The Cookes recently settled for a confidential amount.) Meanwhile, the cities are fighting a civil-rights lawsuit that the U.S. Department of Justice filed in 2012, alleging that city officials and police essentially operate "as an arm of the FLDS.

IN APRIL, six years after their arrival, the Cookes finally got water. Their old fiberglass tank now gathers dust in the backyard, near the picnic table where Jinjer puffs Newport's and the coop where a dozen chickens cluck. When I came by, Jinjer wouldn't even open the trailer — their years living in it were too recent. The exterior of their house is unpainted particleboard, but the inside is now well lived in. The living room is airy and modestly decorated with beige furniture and photos of the kids making goofy faces. Archways wide enough for a wheelchair give way to the kitchen. Ron relied on a cane to get around, and Jinjer pattered back and forth with drinks (and plenty of ice).

Winning the lawsuit was a relief, Jinjer told me, but also bittersweet. The couple's ties to Short Creek are stronger than ever — both of their daughters' boyfriends grew up here. But they routinely consider leaving; the house feels almost haunted. Their son remains withdrawn and Jinjer fearful, though they haven't been harassed much since county deputies started patrolling the area. She won't leave their dogs — Buddy, Boots, and Rebel — outside for long; she's convinced they'll be killed.

The afternoons I spent at their home were picturesque, with the fading light painting contours on the escarpment behind the house. Yet, after years of looking outside and catching someone looking in, Jinjer closed most of the blinds. The one window she left uncovered, in the kitchen, offered a reminder of what lured her and so many others here: the wide-open desert, those stunning red cliffs.