

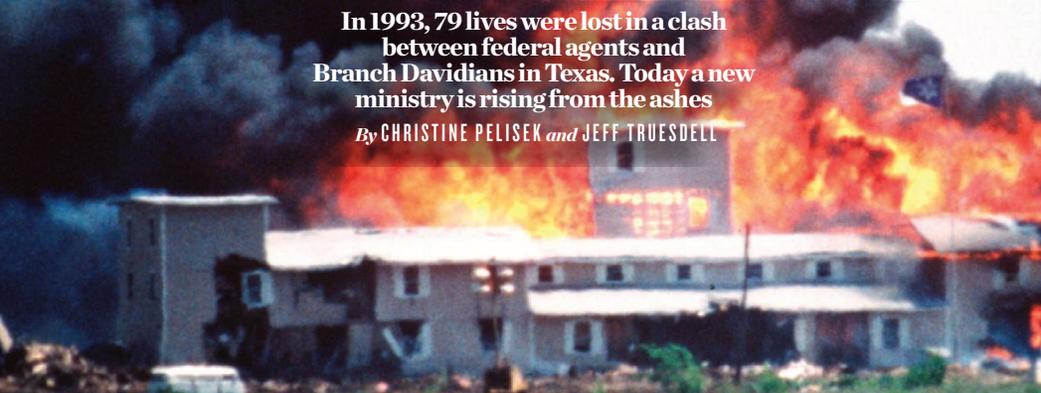


HORROR IN WACO 25 YEARS LATER

RETURN OF A CULT?

In 1993, 79 lives were lost in a clash between federal agents and Branch Davidians in Texas. Today a new ministry is rising from the ashes

By CHRISTINE PELISEK and JEFF TRUESDELL



Twenty-five years after it witnessed one of the deadliest shoot-outs in U.S. law-enforcement history, the flat central Texas prairie 10 miles outside Waco is a picture of tranquillity. Tall grass and brambles dot the road where four federal agents were killed and 17 wounded in a Feb. 28, 1993, firefight with armed members of the Branch Davidians, the religious sect led by the charismatic self-proclaimed prophet David Koresh. And sun-dappled shrubs and trees have sprung up where the former compound once stood and where 75 Davidians—including 25 children and Koresh himself—died on April 19, 1993, when the compound was set ablaze after a 51-day FBI siege.

But for those who were there, the memories have scarcely faded. “It’s not like I haven’t lived this every day of my life since then,” says former

FBI negotiator Byron Sage, who spent 51 days on the scene trying to coax Koresh and his followers out.

Now a self-appointed new leader is ready to welcome survivors, mourners and true believers back. Charles J. Pace, a Branch Davidian who was living in Alabama at the time of the siege, has taken over the sect’s Mt. Carmel property outside Waco and is seeking fresh converts to the group, mostly through an online ministry. “It could be 20, it could be 20,000. I don’t know, and I don’t really care,” says Pace when asked about the size of his flock. “That’s up to the Holy Spirit.”

Stocky, balding and earnest, Pace preaches conspiracy theory and says the deadly fire was an act of God to punish Koresh for messianic behavior, including sex with minors as young as 12 he had

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TAKING CHARGE

“I’m the one the Lord chose to do this,” says Pace (on the land where Koresh, opposite, and 74 Davidians died in a standoff that ended in a fire on April 19, 1993). “God wants us to gather people who believe in the truth.”

claimed as his wives. “The reason he was judged is because he was perverting our teaching to the point where he was actually changing our whole belief system,” says Pace. Koresh’s followers, he says, “were following a man instead of God and thinking that man was God. That was a cult.”

Some, however, don’t buy it. Pace, they say, was not part of the Branch Davidian leadership when Koresh was in power and only became Mt. Carmel’s de facto caretaker by assuming payments on the land that is still in the church’s name. “Charles Pace really was nothing before the standoff,” says cult expert Rick Ross. “[He is] a relent-

KEEPING FAITH

Former worshippers (in the chapel built in 2000 on the site of the siege) have gathered with Pace to hear his preaching.





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STARTING OVER

1. Davidians (at a Sabbath service with Pace) believe Koresh's death was foretold.
2. "I want the truth to be known, that's all," says Pace (moving a piano into the chapel).
3. A memorial to the lives lost in the 51-day siege is maintained by Pace and his family.

less fund-raiser who's making a profit from his endeavors and from the Davidians' legacy."



An offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Branch Davidians had been practicing their beliefs for decades by the time former musician David Koresh took over the sect in the late 1980s with a ministry focused on his interpretation of the seven seals in the Bible's Book of Revelation. "The main thing was always the studies," says Davidian Sheila Martin, whose husband, a Harvard-educated law librarian and legal counsel to Koresh, and her four oldest children died in the fire. Clive Doyle, 77, one of only nine Davidians who escaped the blaze, remembers Koresh's skill as a preacher. "He made the Scriptures come alive," he says.

It was a botched federal raid on Feb. 28, 1993—after reports that Koresh had been sexually abusing children and stockpiling weapons—that led to the deadly siege. After the federal agents—and six Davidians—were killed in the initial firefight, the FBI moved in for a siege that would last 51 days and culminate in the April 19 showdown when agents pumped tear gas into the compound. The ensuing fire—which the FBI maintains was set by sect members—quickly consumed the Davidian stronghold. Doyle, who fled the flames through a hole in the wall, lost his 18-year-old daughter in the blaze. "The skin was

peeling off my hands; my jacket was melting," he says. He spent nearly a year in jail before he was found not guilty on charges that included conspiracy to murder federal agents. "They made all kinds of claims about us that weren't true," he says. "They wanted scapegoats."



For Pace, memorializing the Davidians who lost their lives in the conflict is part of his mission. He intends to build a museum on the site and is seeking donations for a video about the "murder" of Koresh and his followers. Pace has moved his family onto the Mt. Carmel property and says he welcomes visitors, whether they are believers or just curious. "I will let people move on the property if they want to build Mt. Carmel up to be a bastion of truth," says Pace. "Biblical, political, spiritual truth."

No matter how many followers flock to the site of the Davidian compound, the chances of its becoming the cult it was under Koresh's leadership seem dim. "We haven't had any problems with [Charles Pace]," says McLennan County Sheriff Parnell McNamara, who still remembers the siege with sorrow. "I don't fault people for wanting to go back out there; people lost their lives."

Doyle was one of those who returned to Mt. Carmel to help build the new chapel, but conflict with Pace has since led him to move back to Waco. "It's up to God to figure things out," says Doyle, who now holds Bible studies in his home with as few as three Davidians. "He doesn't have a congregation any more than I do." And though Martin still sees Mt. Carmel as a "beautiful place" and has returned for memorials, she isn't ready to move back. "Pace is a nice enough man," she says, "but all these people believe they're God." ●

'CHARLIE THOUGHT DAVID WAS THE DEVIL. NOW HE WANTS TO BE ACCEPTED'
—DAVIDIAN CLIVE DOYLE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES; NOD A/D ELOTT/WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD/P. MELISSA MAHONEY/FILICRIVISION/GETTY IMAGES