Memories of the Branch Davidians

The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother

Bonnie Haldeman
Edited by Catherine Wessinger
MEMORIES
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David Koresh’s Mother

by

Bonnie Haldeman

as told to Catherine Wessinger

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With gratitude to my dear mother and family, and all the friends who have stood by and supported us with their love and kindness through these years.

—Bonnie Haldeman—
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I first met Bonnie Haldeman on the evening of February 23, 2001 in a Cracker Barrel restaurant in Waco, Texas. That restaurant, with its old-style American country theme, embodies for me Bonnie’s warm down-home qualities.

I had participated earlier that day in a symposium hosted by the J. M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies at Baylor University in Waco on “New Religious Movements and Religious Liberty in America.” It was my first trip to Waco, although I had written a long chapter on the Branch Davidian conflict with law enforcement agents in 1993 in my 2000 book, How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate.\(^1\) Dr. Stuart Wright, a sociologist at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas made arrangements for some of the surviving Branch Davidians to come to Baylor and meet with the visiting scholars after the symposium was over. That was the first time I met Clive Doyle, Sheila Martin, Catherine Matteson, and other Branch Davidians, and the only time I met Clive’s mother, Edna Doyle, who passed away later in
2001. I had already met David Thibodeau, one of the survivors of the fire, when he attended the 1993 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Washington, D.C. The Branch Davidians agreed to meet some of the scholars at the Cracker Barrel for dinner, and David Thibodeau gave me a ride to the restaurant.

When David Thibodeau and I walked into the store, there was a long line of people waiting to get into the restaurant that reached nearly to the front door. The Branch Davidians I had met earlier were there as well as a smiling, lovely woman with red hair, who introduced herself as Bonnie Haldeman. She introduced me to her husband, Roy Haldeman, a handsome older Texas man. I was trying to place where I had heard the name Bonnie Haldeman. It sounded familiar from my reading, but I couldn’t quite recall who she was. Attempting to figure it out, I asked her, “When did you come out of Mount Carmel?” I was stunned when she said with a smile, referring to David Koresh, “I’m David’s mother.” I enjoyed having dinner with her that evening and found her to be a friendly Southern woman.

Bonnie Haldeman’s Autobiography

In 2003 I was able to be in Waco on February 28 for the tenth anniversary memorial service for those who died in the ATF raid, and also for the April 19th tenth anniversary service for those who died in the fire and all who died in the 1993 conflict. While I was at the April 19th service I resolved that, if the surviving Branch Davidians in Waco permitted it, I would devote my 2004-2005 sabbatical to recording their life histories and accounts of their experiences with the Branch
Davidians, the tragedy in 1993, and events afterward. I drove to Waco in August 2003 to ask Bonnie Haldeman, Sheila Martin, and Clive Doyle if they would permit me to interview them and then work the transcripts into autobiographies for each of them. They agreed.

I went to visit Bonnie Haldeman in her home near Chandler, Texas over the Fourth of July weekend in 2004. I recorded five tapes totaling 543 minutes with Bonnie. Clive Doyle was also there, and he supplied information that supplemented Bonnie’s accounts. They took me to visit David Koresh’s grave in a cemetery in nearby Tyler and on that trip I recorded ten minutes of their comments. After the transcripts were worked into a manuscript, Bonnie made corrections and additions to the text. I returned to Bonnie’s home in February 2006 to scan the photographs included in this volume and to interview her further.

Bonnie’s oldest son was born on August 17, 1959 just before she turned fifteen. She named him Vernon Howell, giving him her father’s first name and his father’s last name, although she and Bobby Howell were not married. Although Vernon did not change his name to David Koresh until 1990 when he was thirty or thirty-one, Bonnie consistently refers to him as David. All the surviving Branch Davidians call him David even when referring to his early years when his name was Vernon Howell. When recounting her memories of her oldest son to me, Bonnie called him Vernon up until the time he was about nineteen years old. From that point on, she referred to him as David. I have included that shift in her son’s name in Bonnie’s autobiography. Nineteen was a major turning point for David emotionally, and marked his increasing focus on religion.
Bonnie lived, worked, and worshiped with the Branch Davidians from 1985 to 1991. Although she left the Branch Davidian community that was increasingly based at Mount Carmel Center, about ten miles east of Waco, Texas, she still considers herself to be a Branch Davidian. Bonnie lost fourteen grandchildren in the fire at Mount Carmel on April 19, 1993, including two babies in utero. She misses all of her grandchildren, David, his wives, and her friends.

Bonnie speaks in the cadences of a Texas accent. It is easy for me to fall into that rhythm of speech since it is similar to the accent of my native South Carolina. In organizing the transcripts of the audiotapes into this autobiography, I have corrected grammar while seeking to preserve Bonnie’s speech patterns. I have added footnotes to provide context for Bonnie’s narrative. This book is Bonnie Haldeman’s story about her life and her oldest son’s life, and her memories of her Branch Davidian grandchildren, their mothers, and friends, told in her own words.

Acknowledgments

I thank Loyola University New Orleans for a grant that paid for some of my travel to Texas. I am grateful to my parents for a gift that supported my sabbatical and paid for transcriptions and editing. I am grateful for the enthusiasm and involvement of my editorial assistant, Alanda Wraye, who did the initial copyediting of the transcripts, which I then worked into the manuscript. I thank the transcribers, Sarah Vandergriff and Sharon Orgeron, for their careful attention to detail, and Clinton Wessinger for converting the audiotapes into digital files. I thank Clive Doyle for permitting
some of his words to be incorporated into Bonnie's account. Most of all I wish to express my appreciation to Bonnie Hal- deman for her Southern hospitality when I have come to visit and for graciously and honestly sharing her life experiences.

Catherine Wessinger
August 7, 2006
Purpose of This Autobiography

The main thing I want to do is make people more aware of the true facts. I want people to know what type of person David was, and what kind of people were at Mount Carmel. I knew 90 percent of them. David loved people and truth. He wasn’t the person the media say he was. The media say he was just trying to get into people’s brains and they compare him to Jim Jones. I can’t judge Jim Jones because I didn’t know him, but there hasn’t been much of a human side put to David or most of the other people at Mount Carmel. I would like people to understand where David was coming from, and where I’m coming from.

Bonnie Clark

Childhood

I was born September 8, 1944 in Bastrop, Texas, in an Army hospital, as my mother describes it. Daddy was in the Army,
and I don’t think he even saw me until I was about eighteen months old. I was the second of seven children. My brother was two when I was born, and I was followed by four more sisters and another brother.

We lived in San Antonio, Texas until I was about eight or nine, because my father worked at Kelly Field. Then we moved to Houston. His name was Vernon Lee Clark. My mother’s name was Erline Smith Clark.

To hear my mama tell it, my daddy was from a bunch of Kentucky roughnecks, who wore guns and all that kind of stuff. Her mother was a Tillman from England and was a more refined, aristocratic type of person. She came from money, and Daddy’s daddy was very poor. My mama was raised on a farm. My grandmother couldn’t wait to move to town. Eventually she got to move to town.

Daddy got out of the Army when I was a little girl. He then worked at Kelly Field in San Antonio. Kelly Field was one of the Air Force bases there. I think it’s been closed since then. We lived out in the country in a little town called Atascosa. I remember this place from when I was four years old. There was a canal running in front of our house. I went out to wash an apple one day and fell in and almost drowned. My mother heard me screaming and came out and saved me.

I remember helping my daddy dig a well. He dug it by hand. He donated part of his land to build a Seventh-day Adventist church there for us to meet in. There were several families that lived out that way, including my father’s sister and her husband. Those are some of the earliest memories I have from when I was four years old.

My grandparents, Mama’s mother and dad, lived close by. Daddy left the Army and tried farming. We were going
to school. He was working in a bakery and different things. Eventually we moved back into town. We moved to Houston and he went into the construction business. He was a framing carpenter.

We didn’t have a lot of money. We moved around a lot when I was a child. I don’t think Mama and Daddy ever owned a house until they moved to Dallas.

Mama sent us to Seventh-day Adventist Church school most of the time. She always wanted us to have a Christian education.

Brothers and Sisters

I’m next to the oldest. I was close to Gary, my oldest brother, and Janie, my sister who is younger than me. The others all came along a bit later.

When we were kids we used to walk to the library in Houston. We all liked to read. That was the way we entertained ourselves. We walked about fifteen blocks to get there. We read a lot. We didn’t get to go to many places. We didn’t have a car.

When my brother was about twelve he went to San Antonio and stayed with my uncle and aunt for two or three years, because my daddy was a drinker. Gary ran away from home, I guess, and lived with my mother’s brother and their family for a few years. He came back later and then joined the Navy.

Church

We didn’t go to church a lot. My mother joined the church, but Daddy never did go. As a little girl I used to go to church with my aunt and uncle, Mozell and Johnny Davis, who were my daddy’s sister and her husband. They took me to church,
and I spent a lot of time with them when I was a kid. I liked them. We lived just up the road from them. They would take me to church and all the church functions. I was about the same age as my cousin, so we did a lot of things together. That’s where I got most of my religious education, because mama didn’t have a way to go to church. She went when she could, but it was hard for her.

School

In San Antonio I went to the first grade and second grade in a Seventh-day Adventist school. After that we moved to Houston, and Mama got us into an Adventist school. I think I attended third and fourth grades at the Adventist school. I went to public school in Houston for a couple of years. We moved a lot. The majority of my schooling was in Seventh-day Adventist schools, mostly in Houston.

During my childhood, I was always very shy. I didn’t make friends easily. I remember in the first grade I used to think something was wrong with me because I had red hair and my name was Bonnie. I loved my Aunt Mozell and was very close to her. She is the one I would go to visit. I loved cheese and tomato sandwiches, and she always made those for me.

My mama and daddy took us to the lake fishing every once in awhile. We didn’t do much except stay at home.

Since we were poor, Mama never had the money to pay our tuition, so when I was in the seventh grade in Dallas Junior Academy I worked in the kitchen at lunchtime. I helped in there, and then cleaned the restrooms in the evenings to help pay the tuition for myself and for my sister Janie. That’s about the time I met David’s dad. I was just thirteen.
I was visiting with a friend of mine from school. Her name was Roxie, and her sister lived in the projects in Houston. Roxie’s mother lived out in the country, so Roxie often stayed with her sister, and I’d go spend the night with her. That’s where I met Bobby. I started staying over there a lot with Roxie.

Bobby took me to school one morning. He was on his way to work, I believe. He had a pick-up truck, and he reached over and kissed me as I got out of the truck. The principal was walking up the street and saw us. He called me into his office and expelled me.

So I went to a public school and finished out the seventh grade. I think I even started eighth grade in Houston, but then Bobby and I wanted to get married, and my daddy wouldn’t let us. It was a stupid thing for anyone as young as I was to want to get married. I think Bobby was about eighteen. They wouldn’t let us get married. Anyway I ended up pregnant.

I was fourteen by then. I had Vernon a month before I turned fifteen. When I was pregnant, Daddy signed the papers to let us get married, but then Bobby backed out of it. We each have different sides to our stories. God had a plan for my life and Vernon’s life, which didn’t include Bobby Howell.

I lived with my mama and daddy while I was pregnant. I guess I had a pretty good pregnancy.

It hurt my mother and my daddy. They were just shocked when their little girl came up pregnant. I stayed with them, but I visited over to Bobby’s house a lot. His mother, Jean Holub, was always very nice to me, and I was close to his