

Ex-Yahweh members distribute anti-Hawkins video

By RICHARD HORN and LORETTA FULTON / Abilene Reporter-News

A number of disillusioned members are leaving the House of Yahweh and circulating a video refuting Yisryal Hawkins' teachings.

Forty to 50 people have left the Abilene-based sect in the past few weeks and months, interviews show, and for the first time two people who changed their last names to Hawkins have returned to the Taylor County Courthouse to have them changed back.

Ex-members said they expect more to follow suit, and hope their video gives them the courage to do so.

"It's all a money game," said 50-year-old Norman S. Davis, a New England native who joined House of Yahweh in 1994 but now refers to Hawkins' House of Yahweh as "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show."

"I've been here for two years and not one prophecy or whatever you want to call it has come true," Davis said.

"Last Easter, Satan came to the Earth, according to Yisryal," he said. "This coming Sunday it will be 10 months since Satan's been here. What the hell is Satan doing? Sitting in the Vatican, drinking tea with the pope?"

"Buffalo Bill" was Hawkins' original first name, before he changed it in 1982 as he built the sect. More than 200 men, women and children have also changed their last names to Hawkins in Taylor County in the past two years.

Said one other member who has recently left, and who asked that her name not be used: "I'm just embarrassed about the whole thing. Some of us aren't even going to get our names changed back; we'll just go back where we came from and get on with our lives."

That doesn't mean Hawkins' sect is dwindling away, the ex-members stress. It still counts many hundreds of adherents and continues adding new ones around the country. But an increasing number are asking questions, Davis said, and he hopes the video helps.

Hawkins is fighting back. An audio cassette by an elder is also circulating, attacking those who've fallen away and stressing the scriptural basis of Yisryal Hawkins' teachings.

Late last month, Hawkins himself acknowledged the discontent in a newsletter. He warned his followers about a "deception that Lucifer is carrying out against Yahweh's work."

Some of his people had fallen away, he said in the Dec. 31 newsletter, because they "listened to the lies and gossip of those who desired to take over the House of Yahweh."

The message concludes with a warning that "we have about three years left before the kingdom of Yahweh is set up. I plead with each one of you to remain strong in Yahweh's only prophesied established work -- the House of Yahweh." VIDEO MESSAGE

Recent departures were spurred by several factors, ex-members said, including widespread media coverage, and especially a long <I>Texas Monthly<I> article last summer.

That piece, by Austin writer Robert Draper, delved extensively into Hawkins' background and quoted people accusing him of sanctioning multiple marriages and manipulating religious texts and followers for financial gain.

The video shows former members also grew frustrated that Hawkins never successfully addresses their own questions about his inconsistencies.

On the tape, former elder Miciah Michaels explained why scripture does not support Hawkins' teaching that he and his brother, Jacob Hawkins, are the two "last days witnesses" who alone could lead their thousands of chosen followers to salvation in Israel after the fall of the world.

Jacob Hawkins died of natural causes in Odessa in 1991, and critics say Yisryal Hawkins quickly amended his scriptural findings.

That inconsistency is one point Michaels stresses in the video.

"When I moved down here to the House of Yahweh, I was looking for great joy and love and what I ran into was heartache and moaning and groaning," Michaels said on the tape.

"I saw a body of people who were crying out with all their hearts and all their souls about the double standards of the elders and the double standards of Yisryal, unjust things Yisryal is doing, lies he has told."

Michaels, who has since left Abilene, explained two deacons tried to bring these concerns to Hawkins, and Hawkins said he would address the problems personally.

"Seven weeks later, he never asked a man about the lies," Michaels said. "He never showed the love and compassion to save them from falling away or leaving the House of Yahweh, and he showed no care for their salvation.

"That sent a message to me, a very strong message," he said.

Davis added last week that Hawkins has recently announced only a few key people will be going to Israel, another amendment to earlier prophecy, he said. Efforts to reach Hawkins for comment were unsuccessful.

SEWAGE DISPOSAL

There's other evidence people are leaving the Callahan County compound, which has had a resident population of 100 to 200 but draws many hundreds more for feast celebrations.

The county's Justice of the Peace Don Burns said he has been contacted by several who have become disillusioned with Hawkins.

"They want to know if I know what's going on," Burns said. "They keep me informed. They just insinuated they didn't like what was going on out there."

Most of the calls to Burns concern the sewage disposal system at the compound. Burns' office must issue permits for septic tanks in the county. Recently, he has been told that several additional trailer houses have been placed either inside the compound or nearby with no septic system.

Burns said he is investigating the sewage complaints as fast as possible in his one-man office.

"I want to determine what really and truly is going on out there," he said.

His office started issuing permits in 1991. Since then he has issued 20 single-use permits to people living in the compound and three "professional-design" permits for systems to be used by multiple families. Usually eight to 10 trailers will share one system, he said.

Burns said that for six months last year no one filed for a permit, although he knew that several trailers had been moved in. Burns said House of Yahweh members are used to installing the systems and for a while they didn't have a certified installer, which may have accounted for the delay in getting permits from his office.

TRAVEL AGENCY

Some ex-members have also consistently questioned Hawkins' financial dealings.

He has recently opened a new business, Ahoy travel agency, at 901 T&P Lane in Abilene. Its managers, however, claim not to know anything about Hawkins or his House of Yahweh, whose headquarters is located nearby.

During an open house on Jan. 5, attended by the Abilene Chamber of Commerce Redcoats, two women who run the business adamantly denied that the business had any association with the House of Yahweh.

They said that it was mere coincidence that their last names were Hawkins and that the House of Yahweh headquarters was located in the next block, at 1025 T&P Lane.

They said they had never met Yisryal Hawkins and didn't know anything about him or the House of Yahweh.

However, three permits were issued to Hawkins through the city's building inspection office to do work on the travel agency office.

The property at 901 T&P Lane has been deleted from records at the Central Appraisal District office and an appraiser there said most likely it is included with the 1025 T&P Lane property. The property wouldn't be listed on the tax roles since it is exempt because of being owned by a religious group, said Sharon Wheat, business appraiser.

"We don't have any of their other stuff on the tax roles," Wheat said.

Like many other people who've left the sect, Davis insists he has not "fallen away" from the faith but only from Hawkins' interpretation of it, including his establishment of multiple tithes from followers.

"I still follow the Sabbath, I still study the scriptures as much as I did when I was out there," he said. "A lot of people get caught up with the fact, 'Yisryal said it, that's all you need to here.' And that's stupid."

What will happen? Davis, noting as others have that Hawkins has at least two Social Security numbers, believes some day he may be gone.