

ALL IN THE FAMILY:
JEFF AND JOANNE
HANKS WITH THEIR
CHILDREN, ON THE
UTAH SALT FLATS,
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PHOTOGRAPHED BY
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a question of faith

Did Elizabeth Smart's religion prolong her ordeal? A formerly polygamous couple offers insight into the seduction of an underground sect—and why it was so difficult to break free. **Rebecca Johnson** reports.

When the news broke that Elizabeth Smart had been found alive, living as a “wife” to Brian Mitchell, Joanne Hanks began to get a sinking feeling. The kind you get when you see yourself in the mirror on a bad day. She never kidnapped a child in the middle of the night, as Mitchell did, but like him, Hanks, her husband, Jeff, and his teenage bride led a polygamous lifestyle in the name of religion. Believing they were living the righteous life before the eyes of God, the *upfront* ▶ 76

Hair, Nathaniel Hawkins for Contact; makeup, Rebecca for Contact; Details, see In This Issue.

PICTURE IMPERFECT: THE HANKSES WITH JEFF'S SECOND WIFE, AMANDA, IN MANTI, UTAH, CIRCA 1996.



Hankses carried their message far and wide by speaking openly to any reporter who came asking.

When I met recently with the couple in Salt Lake City, Jeff brought his clippings from newspapers around the world—Japan, Australia, France, Brazil, Germany; the UK's Channel 4 spent more than two months with them gathering footage for an hour-long documentary on the subject. He kept the articles in a locked silver briefcase and seemed to regard them with a sense of pride, anguish, and, in the light of the Elizabeth Smart case, a newfound desire to explain how such an aberration could occur.

The figure you hear most often when people estimate the number of men and women living polygamously in America today is 30,000, which seemed suspiciously high to me until I traveled 300 miles south of Salt Lake to the neighboring towns of Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Arizona, to see for myself. The inhabitants of those towns are notorious for not speaking to strangers, but just looking at them was enough to make me realize that something was unusual. It must have been 90 degrees in the sun, but the first children I saw, two little boys on bicycles, were dressed in long-sleeved plaid shirts and long pants. At a stop sign, a pickup truck filled with girls in pinafore dresses of the sort Laura Ashley used to make in the early eighties idled next to us. Underneath the dresses they wore what looked like long cotton underwear, covering every inch of exposed skin. Most of them were blonde, and their long hair hung to their waists in thick braids. The town itself was devoid of any aesthetic improvement—no shrubs or flowers of any kind graced the lawns—and there was something oddly haphazard about the houses. Many appeared as if they were in the process of being expanded; others looked like small apartment complexes with lots of doors to the outside. Even among polygamists, there's a hierarchy. When I mentioned the Hildale community, Jeff Hankses was quick to distance himself. "Those people are way out of the mainstream," he said. "That wasn't us. We were the prototypical college-educated yuppies."

In fact, all polygamy is frowned upon by the mainstream Mormon church and has been ever since 1890, when, under pressure from the U.S. government, it was denounced by church officials in exchange for Utah's statehood. The Hankses, both now 43, and the polygamous families in Hildale and Colorado City skirt state and U.S. law by foregoing civil wedding ceremonies and getting married in the church. But the church is in an awkward position when it comes to polygamy because as much as it would like to distance itself from its polygamous past, it also preaches respect and adoration for its forefathers, like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, which helps explain why the Elizabeth Smart case has had such a grip on the state. "The first reaction everybody had in Utah was jubilation that she was alive," explains Maxine Hankses (a distant cousin of Jeff's—when your great-great-grandfather was a polygamist, you have a lot of relatives), editor of *Women and Authority*:

"I thought I had inside information. I was going to have a front-row seat when Christ returned"

10 percent of their income to the church and faithfully attending services. Like many Mormons, they had polygamous ancestors in their background, but the subject was never openly discussed. "I saw some [polygamists] once at a country fair," Joanne said, recalling how she and her teenage friends had made fun of their odd clothing, "but that was it."

As a member of church leadership in his own ward (the Latter Day Saints' term for a parish) at the time, Jeff wanted to deepen his understanding of the roots of Mormonism in the light of the coming millennium, but what he found when he started reading documents from the middle of the nineteenth century shook him to his core. "In mainstream Mormonism," he explains, "there's this idea that polygamy will be lived in Heaven, not on Earth, but when I started looking at the early speeches, I saw that wasn't true. There was a big difference between what these faithful, strong pioneers believed and what the church is preaching now." Looking for others who shared his belief, he found one in Jim Harmston, a former businessman in his early 60s who was living in Manti, Utah, a small farming community two hours south of Salt Lake.

Just listening to Harmston, who had already been excommunicated by the church, put the Hankses in jeopardy with their own ward, but the more they came under his spell, the less they cared. "One thing he would do to convert people," Joanne remembers, "is talk about things like God and Christ coming back. If you've been brought up in the church, these are topics that are guaranteed to get some kind of emotional response. So your eyes would mist up a little, and Jim would say, 'See? That's the spirit talking to you.' It was never just an emotion." In later years, as Joanne began to question the validity of

Re-emerging Mormon Feminism, "but the next was embarrassment that this man came from the culture. The church would

like to ignore polygamy, but it is always lurking in there somewhere. It's in the doctrine, so it's in our subconscious, and the Smart case is a perfect metaphor for the way the subconscious reaches up and grabs you if you ignore it."

Jeff Hankses wasn't looking for a justification for polygamy when he began his search into early Mormon doctrine twelve years ago. He and Joanne, who originally met through a Church of Latter Day Saints dating service, were living in a middle-class suburb of Salt Lake City, quietly pursuing what would, for many, constitute the American Dream. Having married late in life for Mormons—"I was 27," Joanne says, "an old maid"—the two quickly went on to have three children: two

girls and a boy. Jeff had a thriving practice as a chiropractor and was even president of the Utah state association. Joanne was working as an interior designer and raising the children. Both practiced the faith of their childhood without question, tithing

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Jim's teachings, she would notice that her children's favorite movie, *Beauty and the Beast*, also made her choke up. Was that the spirit, too, she wondered?

When Elizabeth Smart was finally located, one thing people had a hard time understanding was why she denied her identity to the police. "You think I'm that Elizabeth Smart girl," she said when they approached her, "but I'm not." Having lived through their own experience, the Hankses understood. "I could completely relate to the brainwashing and manipulation," Joanne said. "Women are followers in Mormonism," Jeff explained, "and I think Brian Mitchell played on Elizabeth's religious background by hitting on common themes that echoed in her head. This is a man who had the *Book of Mormon* memorized, so when he started saying to her, 'You're my wife. God has given you to me,' she must have listened."

Going from the comfortable home where she lived with her mother and father, a successful Salt Lake City contractor, to the makeshift mountain sites where the Mitchells camped must have been a shock for Elizabeth, but sacrifice can be a potent part of the religious experience. Even mainstream Mormonism requires more church attendance from its believers than most mainline denominations: "With Episcopalians or Methodists," says Jeff, "you can get away with going at Easter and Christmas, but Mormonism is so intolerant and highly regimented, you go every week for three hours or you're a sinner."

"Everybody watches each other," Joanne added, noting that a head count is taken and attention is paid to whom ever drinks coffee or tea, both forbidden by the church (which explains the noticeable lack of Starbucks on Salt Lake City's main street). In that context, the more you are asked to give up, the more righteous you feel, which may be why fundamentalism thrives more readily among Mormons than less demanding religions. Indeed, within four months of meeting Harmston, Jeff sold his practice and his home and moved to Manti. "For me," Jeff explained, "it was like being part of the Iraqi Republican Guard. I felt like the elite."

"I remember being so excited because I thought I had inside information," agreed Joanne. "I was going to have a front-row seat when Christ returned." The fact that Joanne's husband might take on a new wife was simply part of her sacrifice. For Jeff, on the other hand, it was an intriguing perk. "Was it my primary motivation?" he asks. "No. But I was raised with a strict Mormon upbringing in which you thought you were going to die if you masturbated and premarital sex was an absolute no-no, which is how you end up with someone like Brian Mitchell. Sex is a natural feeling, but if you have it, it's slap-slap [*he hits himself as he says it*]. All that repression makes for a weird

chemistry. So if you get God-sanctioned freedom to have sex with multiple partners, you better believe there's a part of a man's brain that's thinking, OK!" All that emphasis on chastity and purity isn't too good for women, either, which may be another reason Elizabeth Smart was anxious about returning to her old life. "After what happened to her," Maxine Hanks speculates, "I wonder if she even felt she could go back."

The big problem for most would-be polygamists is finding someone willing to go along with what is clearly a rotten deal for women. At its apex, the church in Manti could claim about 500 members, but in the early days, there were only a couple dozen and very few women of marriageable age. Brian Mitchell had to resort to kidnapping, but Jeff got lucky the day a devout Mormon couple from New Mexico arrived for a visit. Their oldest daughter, Amandah, was seventeen, just out of high school and, having grown up with fundamentalist parents, receptive to the idea of polygamy. Even now, when the couple discuss her, you can see the subtle battle lines being drawn between them.

"She was pleasant," Jeff said.

"She was overweight," Joanne countered.

"She was talkative and friendly, mature for her age."

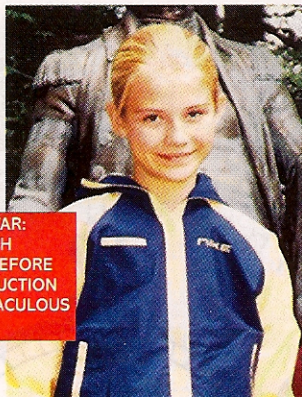
"When we met her, I thought, If we don't do this, no one in the group will."

"Why?" Jeff asked warily.

"The others wanted someone cute and young," Joanne said.

Jeff handed me a picture of himself with Joanne, their children, and a pretty, dark-haired young woman who was slightly on the heavy side but not excessively so. Maybe it was the pose—the girl had her hands resting possessively on the oldest child's shoulders—but I was immediately struck by how closely she resembled an au pair, one of those young European women who spend a year working for a family before going off to college to begin their own life. In the last decade, as Mormons have struggled to make peace with their polygamous past, a small group of scholars has arisen to study the topic, offering explanations beyond lechery for the practice. One of those scholars, Kathryn Danes, Ph.D., an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University who has conducted extensive research on the early polygamists of Utah, notes that pioneer life was difficult and the need for warm bodies to work the land was pressing. She believes polygamy was a way to take care of women who might have lost their male support. (Taking on the care of widows is, coincidentally, the same rationale the Muslim prophet Muhammed offered when he began marrying several women after the death of his first wife.) Danes also notes that the division of labor made it possible for some women to pursue work outside the home—the first female Mormon doctor was able to go East for an education because other women took care of her children.

The courtship between Jeff and Amandah lasted only a month and was completely chaste—"I gave her a peck on a cheek and that was it"—but those were hard days for Joanne. "He'd leave to take her home, and I'd be freaking out, wondering what they were doing and why God had forsaken me." Emma Smith, wife of Joseph Smith, wondered the same thing. Many years after her husband's death she denied that he even took other wives. There is ample evidence, however, that Smith *upfront* ▶ 84



LUCKY STAR: ELIZABETH SMART, BEFORE HER ABDUCTION AND MIRACULOUS RESCUE.

Ironically, the thing that came to irritate Joanne about her husband's second wife was not sexual jealousy—it was housework

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repeatedly “sealed” himself (as Mormons refer to the process) to several women. In fact, his wife was so mistrustful of her husband that she would enlist other anti-polygamous women to keep an eye on him when he entered homes where girls of marriageable age lived. Sometimes the struggle could be comic—Emma once returned from a trip to St. Louis only to find that her husband had married the seventeen-year-old servant living in her home while she was away.

Some polygamous families living in Manti would try to solve the issue of sexual jealousy by instituting a policy of “three in a bed.” If a first wife was tortured by thoughts of what her husband was doing with his new wife, the thinking went, all three of them would simply sleep together so there would be no mystery. Double and queen-size beds were moved to the basement; king-size mattresses were moved to the master bedroom. The Hankses never went for “three in a bed” (much to the disappointment of the reporters who came to interview them), and Harmston himself eventually ruled against it. Ironically, the thing that came to irritate Joanne the most was not sexual jealousy—it was housework. “I felt like I had a teenage daughter,” she said, complaining about the way the girl preferred to watch television instead of doing chores. Meanwhile, Amandah was beginning to get restless about her own reproductive potential. Jeff had undergone two operations to have a vasectomy reversed, but Amandah never did get pregnant. Knowing that she had given up hope of ever having a child with him, he gave her permission to leave. Soon after, she “married” Harmston himself, who quickly got her pregnant with the baby she craved.

I noticed a triumphal note in Joanne’s voice when she talked about Amandah’s departure. “His ego,” she said of her husband, “was totally beaten down and rubbed in the salt.” Jeff shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I began to go through some tough inner thinking around that time,” he admitted, citing not just Amandah’s departure but also the imminent arrival of the millennium. Believing Harmston’s prediction that Christ would visit Manti, Jeff and Joanne threw themselves into preparation for the event with renewed vigor, decorating the church with fresh flowers and buying

thousands of dollars’ worth of food deemed worthy of God’s son, including lobsters. When the day arrived, the devout were ready, but Jesus was a no-show.

“It’s amazing that we bought into it as deeply as we did,” Jeff said, shaking his head grimly. “It’s a joke,” Joanne agreed,

“He’d leave to take her home, and I’d be freaking out, wondering what they were doing and why God had forsaken me”

rolling her eyes. “I’m embarrassed.” But while Joanne seems to have found the ability to laugh at herself, Jeff maintains an unsmiling intensity that never seems to lighten up. When I asked his brother if Jeff had always been so humorless, he answered, “Not at all. He has a great sense of humor, but on this one topic, he can’t laugh about it yet. He gave up too much.”

“When I look back and try to analyze how this happened to me, it’s been humbling,” Jeff admits, “but I keep coming back to this image I had of my great-great-grandfather with all those wives. He was this larger-than-life character who carried the U.S. mail between Missouri and Utah and supposedly raised someone from the dead. Half of it’s myth, I’m sure, but I wanted to be someone special like him. A hero.

“And I have to believe that’s part of what happened to Brian Mitchell. He had this craziness in him that took over, but those original marching orders came from Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and it makes me mad that the church won’t acknowledge that.”

today, Jeff and Joanne have given up on organized religion altogether and are contemplating a move out of Utah, where the population is overwhelmingly Mormon; as for the Smart family, their commitment to the church has only grown stronger. When Elizabeth was found alive, the family thanked everyone around the world who had prayed for her, but most of all, they thanked God. □