

Bountiful Summer-- An afternoon with the children of polygamists

Non-stop play belies trouble brewing for the Canadian family

Brooke Adams, The Salt Lake Tribune

LISTER, British Columbia - The girls of Cryptic Doubt give in after a little coaxing and agree to a short performance.

They gather in Brenda's basement bedroom, pick up guitars and drum sticks and tweak the amplifiers. Sally, 13, and Chelsea, 15, both play lead guitar. Brenda, 12, is behind the drums.

"Okay, Brenda, we're going to play quiet," Chelsea said before they launch into Bon Jovi's "Have a Nice Day."

"She doesn't know how," said Sally.

"I broke two pairs of drum sticks on this song," Brenda said.

Brenda counts down: One, two, three. And the children of polygamist Winston Blackmore are rocking out, pulling songs from a repertoire that includes The Killers, Green Day, The Backstreet Boys and Avril Lavigne.

In a rare opportunity, a Salt Lake Tribune reporter and photographer spent an afternoon visiting with Winston Blackmore, some of his wives and many of his 100-plus offspring in May. We were allowed to talk freely with many children. This story - to be followed with more about Blackmore and his family - offers a snapshot of one afternoon.

Outside the home, young children are in motion everywhere you look. There's still one school day to go, but the weather is unseasonably hot so the children of Bountiful have jumpstarted summer. Bicycles, badminton racquets, skateboards, slides, trampolines, a rope swing, tree forts and a sandbox are all in use.

There is a little hint of the trouble looming over Blackmore and his family, problems that led them to invite media to their home a day earlier.

Three of Blackmore's American-born wives face deportation and two options: leave without their children, all born in Canada, or leave with them. Either way, they say, the greater family will suffer - a plight of the family's own making, retort the community's critics and Canadian media.

These critics paint a dismal portrait of polygamous life, of oppressed women force-marched into early marriages and children denied educations. Blackmore, they say, has been complicit in such behavior.

Despite numerous investigations, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police has found nothing substantial enough to prosecute. A new investigation is looking into Blackmore, who has acknowledged taking underage girls as wives in the past, but no charges have been filed.

The older children are aware three mothers may soon be booted out of Canada. While the nuances of the law may be lost on them, they understand the impact it will have on their family.

"If I had to choose which mother had to leave, I couldn't choose," said Adree Blackmore, 11, whose mother Christina is among Blackmore's Canadian-born wives. "I've lived with all my moms all my life."

"It would break all of our hearts," said Darla Blackmore, 10, one of Marsha Chatwin's six children. Chatwin's visitor's visa expires this month. "It's where our whole life is."

"We love them so much," said Doris Blackmore, 10, whose mother Zelpha Chatwin also has been told to leave Canada.

"My heart would be broken. Sometimes we get in fights . . ." Adree said.

"But we are best sisters most of the time," Darla said.

"A family without a lot of mothers wouldn't be a family," Doris finishes.

Blackmore's oldest child is in his 30s; his youngest is a newborn. He has 20 grandchildren. These girls, in the midst of childhood, see their lives as perfect and spill over one another in their excitement to describe it. There is gardening with the mothers, farming with their father, trips to nearby Creston to shop "for our birthdays and special occasions and for the fun of it," Adree said.

In the winter there is always a festival, staged by their father on a hill rigged with a rope tow. There are mandarin oranges! And hot chocolate! And a "great big party!" Darla said with visible

excitement.

The school-year routine is chores and homework. Some mothers have enrolled their children at a public school in the nearby community of Yahk. But most children attend Mormon Hills School, a first- through-seventh-grade private, community-run school just down the lane.

Brenda, the 12-year-old drummer, explains that she is the only girl in her class. But it's not a problem, she said, because her classmates are her brothers or cousins.

After Mormon Hills, many children are enrolled in Homelinks Learning Program, a highly regarded online education program that takes them through 12th grade.

The home school curriculum is a challenge for some; a couple girls are taking GED classes. But others are flourishing. One of Blackmore's daughters is in her second year at a Utah college; several more children will enroll in college this fall.

The Homelinks Centre in Creston offers extracurricular classes that include metal working, art and physical education, giving the home-schooled children a chance to socialize. Many children of Bountiful - including the members of Cryptic Doubt - take music lessons, play in sports leagues and participate in other activities in Creston.

While most children are dressed in the conservative fashion that has become a stereotype of polygamy, not all are. Chelsea wear blue jeans, for instance - as does one mother. The kids use computers, Walkmans and watch DVDs. The Dreamworks animated movie "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron" is a favorite.

As Darla, Adree and Doris converse, a group of boys slide in on bicycles and briefly listen.

"This is my big brother Brett," said Darla. "He is really good at inventions."

"He made a [egg] beater," said Adree.

Brett makes little explosions in a plastic quart soda bottle, Doris adds. So you can see why he's so highly regarded.

The boys keep their distance most of the afternoon. So do several older teenage girls, who watch from the window of one home. The family currently has only a "small handful" of teens, one mother said, with Chelsea the oldest now at home. It has had runaways and teen rebels in the past, but no one has been cast out.

So Darla, Adree and Doris serve, at least today, as family spokeswomen.

Each summer, they said, their father brings home a truckload of bicycles from a pawnshop in town, setting off a domino-style exchange between older children and younger ones.

The big brothers hold a "pony club" most Saturday afternoons at the community corral. They teach younger kids how to saddle, ride and care for the horses. The boys also set up a hotdog stand to earn money.

Next weekend, the community of about 400 people will put on the annual rodeo as part of a celebration honoring the birthday of their late leader, LeRoy S. Johnson. Blackmore admits he gets a kick out of bringing in a few wild horses and letting the boys try riding them.

"We go hiking lots," said Doris, sweeping a hand at the towering Skimmerhorn Mountain behind their cluster of homes.

"And camping," Adree said, in places like Hawkins, Deep Creek, the Deep Hole, Ryan River.

"Father takes us to a different place every time," Darla said.

When the newness of summer wears off and the children get "too lazy," the girls said, their dad holds one-hour classes on scripture, spelling and Spanish.

The talk moves to a more pressing matter: the round-the-world party planned for tomorrow, the last day of school. The children have picked countries to represent, with costumes and food. For Adree, it is Chile. Darla has India. Doris has Scotland, an easy choice, she said, because she takes lessons in traditional Highland Dance.

"I'll be dancing in the parade this weekend," she said, referring to Creston's annual Blossom Festival.

Cryptic Doubt - a name picked from a list provided by the band's instructor - is part of the festival, too. The band will play at a teen concert at the Creston rec center, joining 12 other bands.

Chelsea is pushing the band to play one more song, "Somebody Told Me" by The Killers.

"I don't have the right music for it," said Dayna, 10, who has joined in on keyboards.

Brenda starts banging out a song. "Sing!" she shouts at Jayson, 13, who handles all the "boy" songs.

The music ends and Sally is quickly out the door and in command of a short trampoline, hosing water on its rubber surface for a slip-and-slide.

Several mothers sit at a cafeteria-style table, refereeing the free-for-all from the shade. As afternoon fades, mothers call children to dinner. Some sit at the table, eating shepherd's pie.

Others scamper off to one home or another. There's a lull in the action.

But it doesn't last long. The rope swing is pulled into action. The sprinklers are taken over. Bicycles whiz by.

"It's fun and it's fresh and it's safe," said Darla. "My family is here and it's where I want to belong all my life."

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