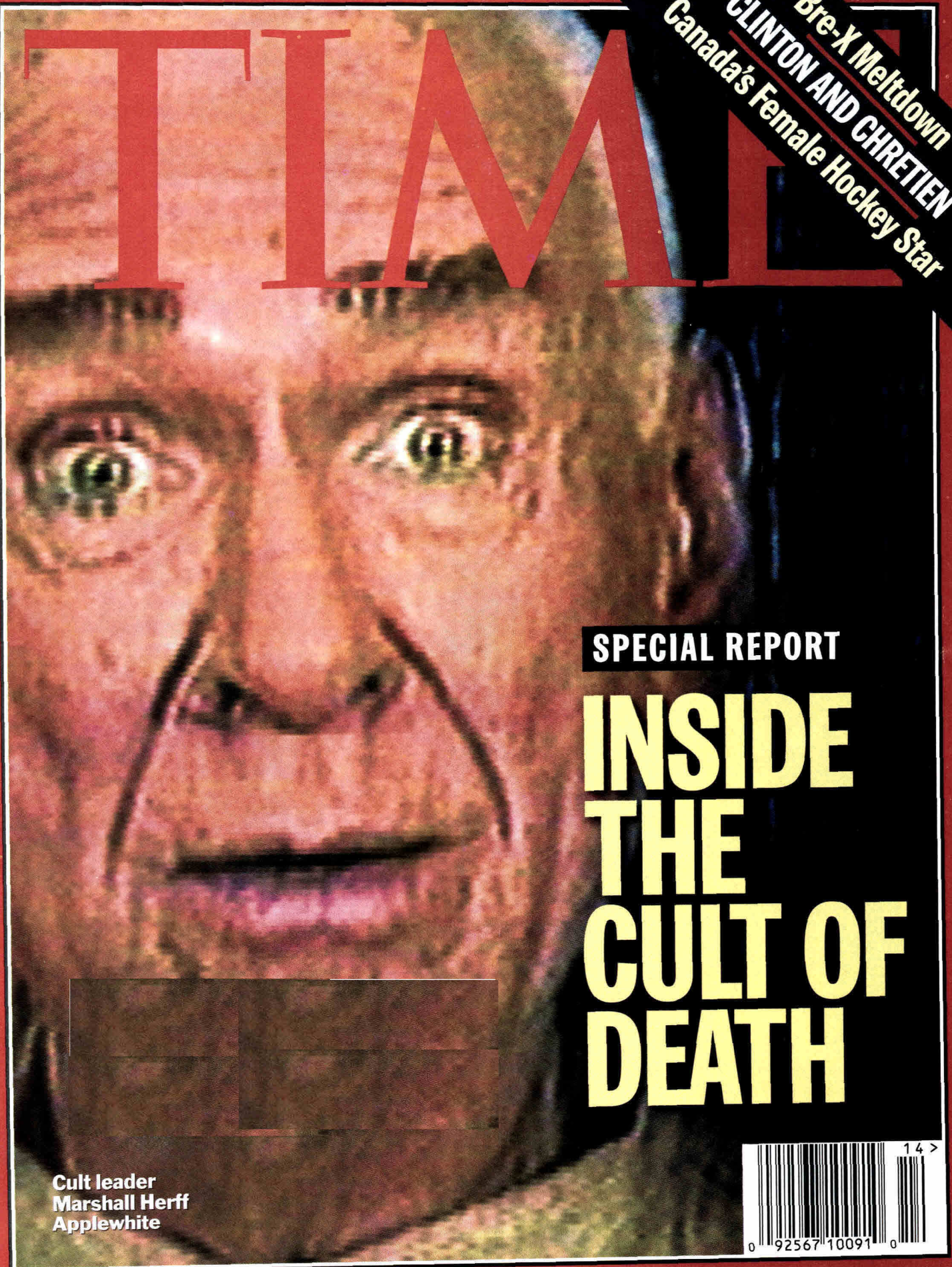


TIME

Bre-X Meltdown
CLINTON AND CHRETIEN
Canada's Female Hockey Star



SPECIAL REPORT

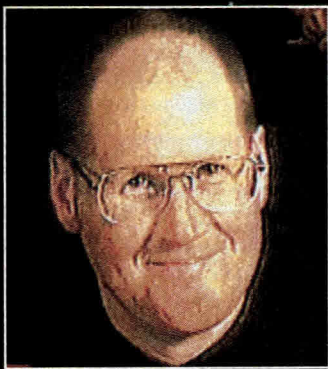
INSIDE THE CULT OF DEATH

Cult leader
Marshall Herff
Applewhite

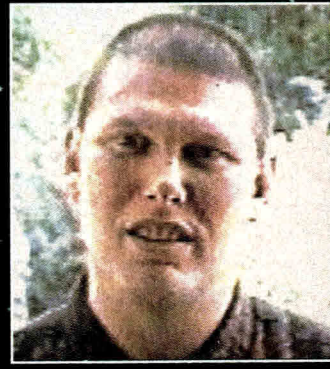
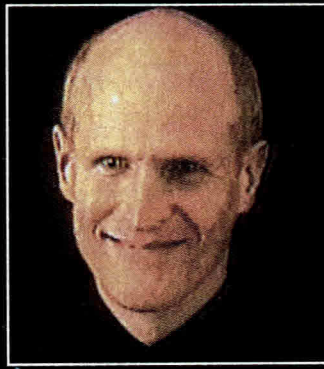
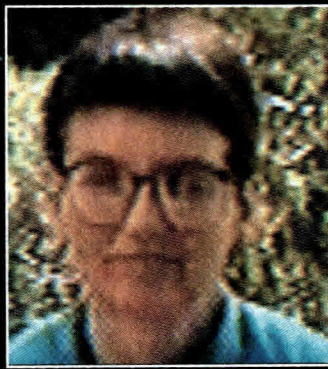
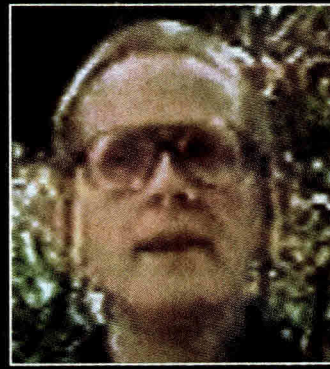
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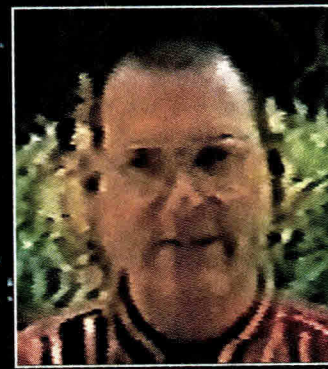
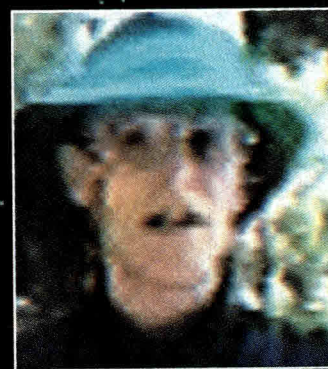
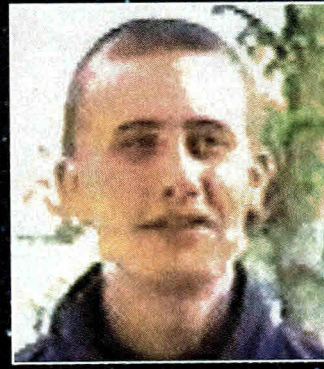
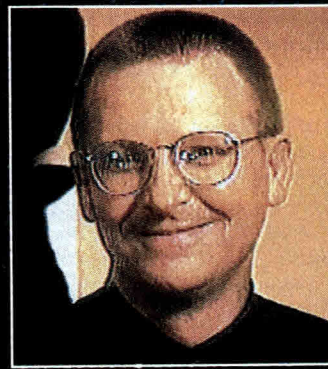
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◀ “And I look very, very forward to this next major step of ours ... shedding these creatures ... moving on to the next evolutionary level ...”

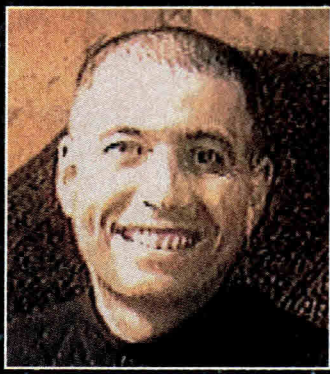


44 THE MARKER

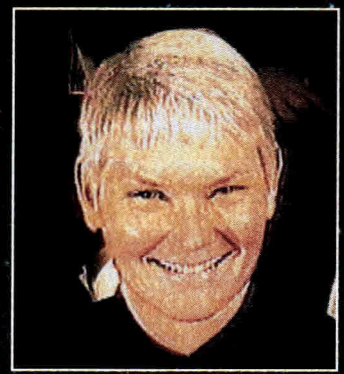


◀ “There’s just no way of describing how great it’s been ... It’s just the answer to all our prayers.”

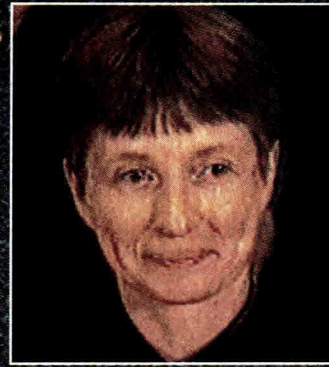
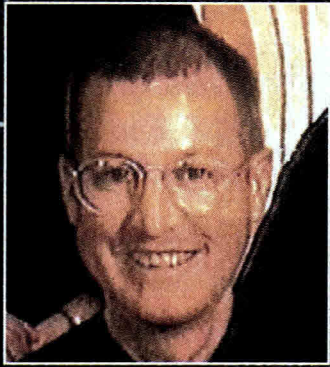




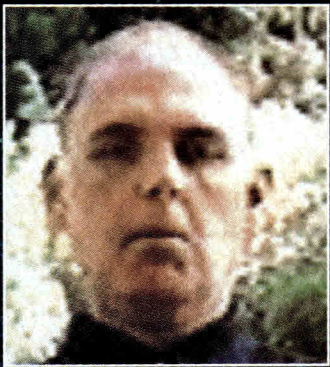
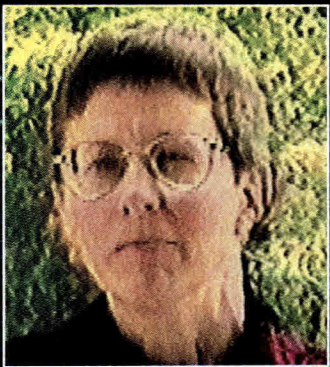
◀ “We watch a lot of *Star Trek*, a lot of *Star Wars*, it’s just, to us, it’s just like ... training on a holodeck ... It’s time to put into practice what we’ve learned.”



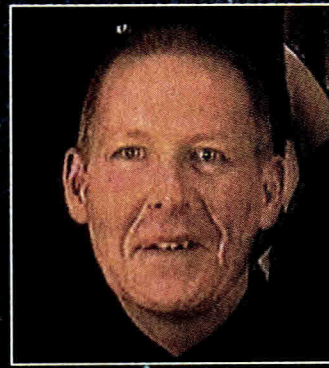
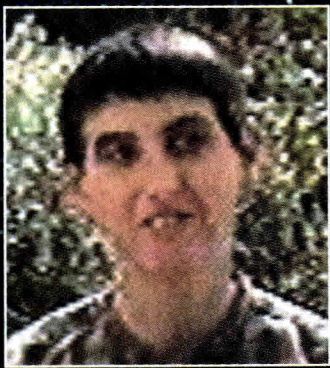
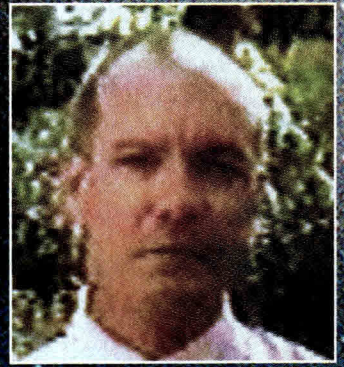
◀ “I’m familiar with irreversible steps ... some students had chosen ... to have their vehicles neutered ... I’m one of those ... and I can’t tell you how free that has made me feel.”



R WE’VE BEEN...



◀ “I’m about to take an act that probably this world would consider the most awful thing that any person could do ...”





WAITING FOR 77

The incredible saga of how a charismatic former music teacher and 38 androgynous followers killed themselves in order to hook up with a UFO

By ELIZABETH GLEICK

"PLANET EARTH ABOUT TO BE RECYCLED. YOUR ONLY CHANCE TO SURVIVE—LEAVE WITH US."

—DO, LEADER OF HEAVEN'S GATE

IF A GROUP OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO choose to die together, it is best to have a master plan: proper burial outfits, packed suitcases, lists, farewell videotapes, even recipes for death. The ghastly jumble of bodies piled upon bodies discovered in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 may have provided a stark lesson in how not to do it. That mass suicide was a disorderly, ungracious way to meet your maker, a study not in serenity but in chaos.

the prophet Isaiah: "Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live."

But though the victims may have believed their bodies were merely irrelevant "containers," to be left behind when they were whisked away by extraterrestrials, to the sheriff's deputies who first encountered them, the corpses were most certainly the real thing. The 21 women and 18 men, ranging in age from 26 to 72, were in varying stages of decomposition; the smell permeating the house was so putrid that two sickened officers went to the hospital to be sure they had not inhaled poisonous fumes. As the San Diego medical examiner reported, the cultists died in three groups: a first round of 15, then the next 15, then seven, all apparently by ingesting phenobarbital mixed with a bit of applesauce or pudding, kicked by a shot of vodka, then

blasted the doors wide open onto a considerably less tidy world—a dense and jumbled universe of UFOs and extraterrestrials careening smack into unusual astronomical happenings, apocalyptic Christian heresies and end-is-nigh paranoia. Do and Ti, or Bo and Peep, or the Two, as Applewhite and his former partner Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles were known, plucked bits of this and pieces of that doctrine like birds building a nest, intertwining New Age symbols and ancient belief systems. And for scores of spiritual seekers, it worked. Some of Do and Ti's followers had been with them as long as 20 years; they were rich and poor, black, white and Latino—people who shared little more than a willingness, or a need, to suspend disbelief, and in the end to participate in a common death.

Students of the millennium and histo-



So last week, in that spacious Rancho Santa Fe mansion, with the bougainvillaea in full bloom outside, 39 bodies were laid out on their backs on bunk beds and mattresses, looking like so many laboratory specimens pinned neatly to a board. Each was dressed in black pants, flowing black shirt, spanking-new black Nikes. Their faces were hidden by purple cloths, shrouds the purple of Christian penance. Those who wore glasses had them neatly folded next to their body, and all, helpfully, had identification papers for the authorities to find. The house, more than one awed witness noted, was immaculate, tidier even than before the victims had moved in. It was as if, in preparing for their death, the members of what the world now knows as the Heaven's Gate cult were heeding the words of

THE "CONTAINERS"
 San Diego sheriffs discovered 39 identically clad corpses, all in varying stages of decomposition

helped along by the asphyxiating effect of a plastic bag over the head. The final two men—the ultimate angels of death—had only bags, no shrouds. Alone in the master bedroom, his order in the march of death still unknown, was the master himself: 65-year-old Marshall Herff Applewhite.

It was a remarkably well-choreographed departure, made more astonishing by the rich trail of video and Internet information the victims left behind. But the largest mass suicide in U.S. history has

riars of the bizarre have long been predicting such a catastrophic event in the twilight years of the 20th century, duly noting the rise in the number of obscure cults and the increasingly fevered pitch of their rantings. And it is not just that time of the century; it is that time of year too, with Holy Week, the vernal equinox and a partial lunar eclipse converging, all heated up by the extraordinary Hale-Bopp comet lighting the night skies. For those who go in for cosmological conjunctions, it was a perfect week for an apocalypse. For those who seek more human motives, there was the intriguing report on the TV show *Nightline* that Applewhite had intimated to a friend that he was dying of cancer.

In one of those odd confluences that keep cults and conspiracy theorists perco-

lating, the day after the bodies were found Charles Manson was up for and denied parole for the ninth time at Corcoran State Prison. "These monks that just took their heads in San Diego," Manson noted at his hearing, "they're way behind the times." But cult experts disagree. What happened in San Diego, they say, was unprecedented. James Tabor, who teaches religion at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and was involved in the last desperate attempts to communicate with David Koresh by radio broadcast, says, "This group is completely different. These people rather calmly followed suicide as their exit, in a very positive way, to a higher level of existence. They define death not as the enemy of life but as life itself." United Methodist minister J. Gordon Melton, editor of the authoritative *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, agrees. "In this case they had a positive motive, a great place to go to," he says. "So why hang around here?"

"THE TRUE MEANING OF 'SUICIDE' IS TO TURN AGAINST THE NEXT LEVEL WHEN IT IS BEING OFFERED."

THE HEAVEN'S GATE VICTIMS DID MORE than leave suicide notes; they left suicide press kits. One of the first to receive the materials was a former cult member using the name Rio D'Angelo (police say he is really Richard Ford), who got a Federal Express package containing two videotapes, a letter and two computer discs. He took the tape home last Tuesday night and watched it. On Wednesday he came to work at the Interact Entertainment Group in Beverly Hills, California, which had employed Higher Source, the cult's Web-page design service. Rio told his boss, Nick Matzorkis, that he was convinced his former associates were all dead. Rio and Matzorkis drove to the house, and Rio went inside. When he came out, says Matzorkis, he was "white as a sheet." They notified the San Diego sheriff's office, whose deputies came in expecting a minor emergency at most and found themselves removing 39 corpses in what was about to become a media circus.

When Matzorkis and Rio finally watched the video together with the sheriff's deputies in the middle of the night, they were stunned by what they saw. The cult members were not just unthreatening in life, they were mild in death. Says Matzorkis: "They were sharing their joy and glee. The excitement really showed." When Matzorkis scanned the computer discs on Saturday evening, TIME learned, he found that they contained messages from cult members intended to be posted on the group's Website—in effect, suicide

notes. One, from a woman who signed herself "Goldenody," seemed to support the notion that their leader was terminally ill. "Once He is gone," she wrote, "there is nothing left here on the face of the earth for me." (In the meantime, Matzorkis has tied up the rights to a TV movie of the week.)

The farewell tape looks like a garden party of the apocalypse, with the California sun shining and the trees in the mansion's backyard blowing in a gentle breeze. The speakers talked as if they were looking forward to a holiday, not a vodka-phenobarb cocktail. Said one woman: "We couldn't be happier about what we're about to do." Said a man in his 40s: "I've been looking forward to this for so long." Said a woman, laughing slightly: "People in the world who thought I'd completely lost my marbles—they're not right. I couldn't have made a better choice."

One of the confusing things about this tape was actually telling the victims apart: all with close-cropped hair and unlined

skin, it was easy to see why sheriffs originally thought all the dead were young men. But shedding any signs of sexuality was integral to the cult, and six of the men, including Applewhite, went so far as to get castrated years ago, which may help explain the odd passivity or gentleness the victims exhibited. "In order to be a member of that Kingdom, one had to overcome his humanness, which included his sexuality," said a former cult member, Michael.

The victims' kin, though, had little trouble recognizing their long-lost, but suddenly gone, relatives. Mary Ann Craig, whose husband John, 62, left her and their six children in Durango, Colorado, in 1975 to join the cult, says she had been waiting for the news of his death for 22 years. "How can you explain something like this?" she asks. On Friday, Nichelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Uhura on the original *Star Trek*, went on CNN's *Larry King Live* to discuss the death of her brother Thomas Nichols. Nichelle said that her brother "made his choices, and we respect those choices."



NICK UT—AP



AP

the post office each day. The area 48 km north of San Diego is a historic landmark, California's oldest planned community and a place so beautiful a writer in the 1940s described it as "the pocket where the Creator keeps all his treasures. Anything will grow there." Live and let live, in fact. In the gated community of 2,500 million-dollar homes, the cult members rented the 850-sq-m mansion at 18421 Colina Norte, complete with pool and tennis court, from Sam Koutchesfahani, paying him \$7,000 a month in cash. And although many locals knew their new neighbors were involved in some sort of religious activity, no one was concerned enough to investigate any further.

The house was for sale, and prospective buyers, who were asked to remove their shoes and put on sterile surgical slippers before traipsing through, described seeing a lot of androgynous people hunched over computers. The tenants were odd but not dangerous. "They were very bright, unique certainly, but very nice. Standoffish but not rude," says Bill Grivas, who was considering buying the house with his girlfriend. "I had been told they were serious about their religion. You could only see the house at certain times because the monks were using it as a monastery. You knew right away: they were dressed in black pajamas like Viet Cong."

Their landlord may have been one of the last to see the victims alive. Koutchesfahani stopped by the house on Sunday, March 23, and was given a gift for one of his children—a computer. Only later did Koutchesfahani realize it was a farewell present. "They were polite people who shared Sam's problems and told him that things would be all right—that God would work things out," says Koutchesfahani's lawyer Milt Silverman. Koutchesfahani had a checkered past, having pleaded guilty to fraud and tax evasion. "There was nothing goofy about them. There was nothing wacky about a spaceship following a comet. They were Christians. I guess they kept their true beliefs hidden from the world." Well, not entirely. Silverman says one of them mentioned they had come to Earth "as angels in human cartons."

Other acquaintances were aware of some of the group's odder beliefs. A man who worked with Higher Source for more than six years on several computer projects discussed the imminent coming of the Hale-Bopp comet with them. "They didn't know, but they felt it could be something other than a comet—that maybe it was a spaceship coming to collect them," the acquaintance says. He says he even joked with them about Jonestown once, but got little reaction. This man last heard from the

JEFF WINNER—SIPA FOR TIME



ORDERLY DEPARTURE

All the victims left packed suitcases at the foot of their bed and identification on or near their body

The mansion's owner says the cultists, who claimed they were "monks," were model tenants

The coroner's office determined that most victims died of suffocation after ingesting barbiturates

The presence among the dead of the brother of a Trekkie demigoddess was only the most startling intersection of reality and science fiction. The cult's work space in Rancho Santa Fe was decorated with posters of alien beings from TV's *The X-Files* and *E.T.* On the farewell tape, a cultist even brings up Nichols' oeuvre in explaining his decision to leave behind his human "container": "We watch a lot of *Star Trek*, a lot of *Star Wars*; it's just, to us, it's just like going on a holodeck. We've been training on a holodeck... [and] now it's time to stop. The game's over. It's time to put into practice what we've learned. We take off the virtual-reality helmet... go back out of the holodeck to reality to be with, you know, the other members on the craft in the heavens."

Most surviving families, however, felt differently, not quite able to see the new dimension their relatives had vanished into. "We are going through a tough time," said a relative of Yvonne McCurdy-Hill, a 39-year-old Cincinnati woman who left her five children (the youngest of

whom were infant twins) to join the cult last August. "It's not the closure we wanted," said Alice Maeder, whose daughter Gail, 28, started following the cult in 1994 after her Santa Cruz, California, T-shirt shop failed, "but now we know where she is." Added Gail's father Robert: "She's finally coming home."

At least one woman who died in Rancho Santa Fe offers a hint in the farewell videotape that all these people may not have been quite as happy as they seemed: "I don't have any choice but to go for it, because I've been on this planet for 31 years, and there's nothing here for me."

"ALL OF US AT THIS TIME ARE FINDING OURSELVES ALIGNING WITH OTHERS OF COMMON MIND."

ABOUT THE MOST EXCITING EVENT IN Rancho Santa Fe is when Victor Mature, 82, the movie actor famed for playing Samson decades ago, putt-putts in his golf cart to

group just a few weeks ago; they wanted help setting up some new domain names on the Internet. "They talked about the future a lot," he says. "That's what's confusing." He, too, received a postmortem videotape.

"WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?"

IF THEIR ACQUAINTANCES HAD CHECKED out the Heaven's Gate Website, they might have been somewhat less nonchalant. Through the teachings of their charismatic leaders, Applewhite and Nettles, who claimed to be extraterrestrial representatives of the "Kingdom Level Above Human," the cult members believed their bodies were mere vessels. By renouncing sex, drugs, alcohol, their birth names and all relationships with family and friends, disciples could become ready to ascend to space, shedding their "containers," or bodies, and entering God's Kingdom. "If you cling to this life, will you not lose it?" Do ask in the Heaven's Gate manifesto.

With a mixture of paranoia and passion, the teachings rail against Judaism and Christianity and complain of oppression by nonbelievers, evil "Luciferians," whom they say will be "plowed under" in the apocalypse. Only those vessels prepared to receive the word will be fortunate

enough to ascend when the time comes. Indeed, while the group may have given outsiders an impression of Christianity, their version of Jesus was most certainly heterodox. Two thousand years ago, the Kingdom Level Above Human appointed a representative to preach the Kingdom of God to earthlings. This being inhabited the container called Jesus (also known as "the captain"), who was killed by forces that eventually turned his legacy into "watered-down Country Club religion." Ti and Do, however, were then appointed as the Kingdom Level's successor representatives to Jesus, in fact, the "two witnesses" prophesied in *Revelation*, who would appear at the time the world was coming to an end, to prepare the way for the Kingdom.

And the time of the end, apparently, was last week. A recently posted "Red Alert" announcement on the group's Website hailed the Hale-Bopp comet as the "marker" the members were waiting for. In this belief, at least, Heaven's Gate

cultists were not alone. According to a popular theory circulating on the Internet, a spaceship is hidden behind the comet—whether inhabited by benign or evil aliens is unclear. Astronomers say the image behind the comet in some photographs is a mere star.

The cult represents more than an *X-Files*-meets-*Revelation* stew, however. The group plainly tailored its message in an attempt to be palatable to the broadest group of people possible. "Our dilemma was multifaceted: How do we present the information in a credible fashion, when to most, our Truth is definitely stranger than any fiction?" one Website posting won-

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH ...

By JOSEPH WAMBAUGH

ABOUT 70 YEARS AGO, A SANTA FE RAILROAD BARON GOT AN idea to create a 6,000-acre worker settlement in the gentle hills of north San Diego County, just far enough from the ocean to avoid morning fog and chill. His second idea was to plant thousands of fast-growing eucalyptus trees for later use as railroad ties, but it was to be the automobile and not the train that defined California. The railroad languished, but the eucalyptus—as hard and brittle as a tycoon's heart—thrived, and soon there was enough to feed half the koalas in Australia. Those towering trees came to shelter the secluded bedroom community of Rancho Santa Fe, the oldest of its kind in California and one of the wealthiest in the nation.

The Ranch, as homeowners call their community of 5,000, is about as private as a residential enclave can be without guarded kiosks. In fact, residents have their own private police force, hired to augment the county sheriffs, who cannot provide enough visible patrol to satisfy property owners.

The business district, called the Village, comprises a gas station so pricey it might as well charge by the liter, a post office where folks meet because there is no mail delivery to intrude on privacy, an antiques shop, banks, brokerage houses and real es-



A Rancho Santa Fe resident objected to describing the house as a "mu-

tate offices. To the east is Chino's Farms, where the produce has more Mercedes-Benz queued up than a tollgate on the Autobahn.

As a wateringhole, the Village features Mille Fleurs, the best restaurant in the San Diego area, and during the Del Mar horse-racing season the wagering crowd flocks to the Village for dinner. A surprising number of visiting celebrities are Washington politicians, no doubt following the money. In Rancho Santa Fe nobody would ever think of asking for their autographs or disrupting their privacy, which probably disappoints them, truth be told.

Since the terrible mass suicide, the media have been referring to the Heaven's Gate residence as a mansion. But around these parts they call it affordable housing. An average homesite in the Ranch consists of about three acres of land, and many homes are far grander than the one in which the cybercultists

dered. "How do we avoid being seen as religious, in order not to 'turn off' those who rightfully despise the hypocrisy of what religions have become? At the same time, how do we acknowledge our past associations with this civilization which are primarily recorded in your Bible, so as to offer those who are waiting for prophecy to be fulfilled enough clues to put it together?" The mixture of philosophies, the author concludes, is like "speaking in tongues."

"WELCOME TO KNOW WHERE."

IN THE 1970S MONTANA SOCIOLOGIST Robert Balch infiltrated the group and

traveled with them through California and Arizona for two months. During the 1970s, the cult suffered from a dramatic attrition rate, until Applewhite instituted what Balch describes as an "intense regimentation." Do had recruits follow detailed schedules—waking for prayer at precise times, taking vitamins at, say, 7:22 p.m., consuming yeast rolls and liquid protein—and had them do drills, mental and physical, to prepare the flock for outer space. According to a man named Michael, who was with the cult from 1975 to 1988, recruits experimented with their sleeping patterns and their diets, trying to break down their bodies so they would be "under control."

The discipline, he said, was "shame based," and when Michael wanted to leave, he was told he was free to go. As *TIME* reported in August 1979, the group encamped in the Wyoming Rockies, moving to a ranch in northern Texas when it snowed. Paul Groll, who was a member, scoffed at comparisons with Jonestown, telling

TIME in 1979, "Anyone can walk away. We just have to turn from a caterpillar into a butterfly, and then we'll be ready to leave."

For a time, at least, the regimen worked wonders on the dropout rate and also enhanced the group's isolation and secrecy. Balch kept tabs on the group until 1982; in 1994 nine cultists walked through his office door in Missoula, Montana, to tell him the 200 or so members that he knew existed in the 1970s had become a band of 24. Nettles, he learned, had died of cancer in 1985. They had also grown dramatically more apocalyptic in their beliefs.

Since then, casually dressed members of the group, identified only by their first names, have been traveling the country proselytizing, informing curious listeners that they were not seeking money, only recruits. Michael Upledger, a reporter for a Tampa, Florida, weekly newspaper, interviewed five cult members in 1994. "Their one vice was science fiction," he recalls. "They loved *The X-Files*, and they loved *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. It was the only time they really brightened up and came alive. They just lit up. We had a long conversation about which *Star Trek* was better, the old one or the new." As recently as 1994, members went on a recruiting drive in New Hamp-



NELVIN GEREIDA—SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE FOR TIME

"\$1.3 million-dollar" mansion; it was on the market for just \$1.3 million

shed their earthly containers. A lot of Rancho Santa Fe's estates are large enough to provide pasture for quarter horses, polo ponies, jumpers and Thoroughbreds. Streets are without curbing, and there are no lights on the winding lanes, trails and roads. At night, other than the occasional cries of coyotes, it is quiet.

Now, alas, the world's media have descended in swarms. They have come in vans, trucks and helicopters. They have demolished the tranquillity and lit up the sky. The media hordes are interviewing everyone. Diners are being harassed and interrogated. Golfers are being interrupted midswing by clicking Nikons and questions. Soccer moms are forced to scoop up their kids and run for their Volvos. They are interrogating non-English speaking gardeners. They have questioned equestrians at the Polo Club. They have questioned horses at the Polo Club. A

German journalist was seen interviewing a pot of geraniums at the local library. Finally, they have even resorted to interviewing each other! The geraniums were probably more informative.

One might assume that Rancho Santa Fe residents are stunned and horrified by the events in the house on Colina Norte, and of course they are. They are even more appalled by the media locusts lurking behind every bougainvillea. And as soon as the residents learned that the suicide victims were only renters, not property owners, they started asking questions of their own in answer to media inquiries. Such as: How did 39 people get to rent a house that's zoned for a single family? How could the cybercult operate its Higher Source computer service without a business permit? This in a private residence that by definition cannot be used as a business in the first place. This in a community where property owners cannot paint the exterior of their homes without approval of an "Art Jury."

These are the burning questions on the minds of Ranch folks as they flee correspondents using the mass suicide to write oxymoronic treatises on "California Culture." So when the sheriff released the video of all those corpses in Nike sneakers, the peevish locals said, "Well, you know Nike's slogan, don't you? Just do it."

The events on Colina Norte have already lost their resonance in Rancho Santa Fe, at least among frazzled residents who look upon the bizarre incident as an aberration that has nothing to do with them. The only question homeowners are asking themselves these days is: When the hell are all these people leaving? ■

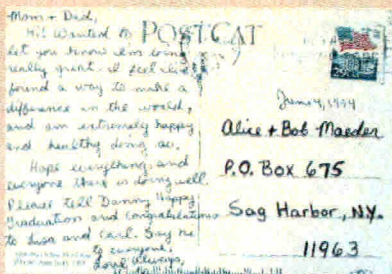
JOSEPH WAMBAUGH, whose latest novel, *Floater*, will be published in the U.S. next week, is a former resident of Rancho Santa Fe.

GAIL MAEDER

AGE: 28

SAG HARBOR, NEW YORK

In 1994, she joined Heaven's Gate after her Santa Cruz, California, T-shirt shop failed



She wrote her parents saying, "Knowing you taught me good judgment in choosing what's best for myself, I hope you will respect this learning I've decided to pursue." Only in 1996 did they suspect she had joined Applewhite's cult. By last week they were viewing her on the farewell video, on which she said, "I'm very happy to be here." Says her mother Alice: "It's not the closure we wanted, but now we know where she is."

YVONNE MCCURDY-HILL

AGE: 39

CINCINNATI, OHIO

An employee at the U.S. post office, she loved to surf the Web, there entering Heaven's Gate



By August she had sold her BMW, cashed in her post-office pension, sold her house and apportioned her five children, including infant twins, among her relatives. Then with her husband Steven, she joined Heaven's Gate in California. Steven didn't last as a cultist, but Yvonne did—to the finish. Her family and friends, left, remain baffled. Said one: "Yvonne is the last I would have thought would end like this."

DAVID GEOFFREY MOORE

AGE: 40

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

A sometime mechanic, he was only 19 and just out of high school when he joined the cult



His mother Nancie Brown, left, formed a support group for parents whose children had joined Heaven's Gate. But eventually Brown came to terms with her son's decision. Still, when she learned of the cult's Website, she eagerly accessed it to learn about the life he had chosen. "I told him I would never interfere as long as he was not harming himself or others. But I never dreamed they would do what they did."

shire, warning audience members that the earth was going to be "recycled."

They also established their presence on the Internet, through both their glossy Heaven's Gate Website and energetic postings to various newsgroups. A disciple, Sister Francis Michael, recently chimed in to *alt.religion.scientology*, giving "a round of applause" to the Church of Scientology for its "courageous action against the Cult Awareness Network." During its most recent upsurge, according to one of the cult's Internet sites, membership "doubled," although from what to what remains unknown. People who have studied the cult estimate that at its peak, there were between 200 and 1,000 followers. And one person friendly with many of the victims insists there are more Heaven's Gaters still alive.

"WE TRY TO STAY POSITIVE IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE."

PEOPLE WHO CAME INTO CONTACT WITH the group agree: the members seemed happy. "They were very loyal," says Matzorkis, who paid the Higher Source em-

ployees a total of \$10,000 to \$15,000 to design Websites. "I'm glad we worked with them." Mike Afshin, who owned Comp-X, a Del Mar computer shop where victim David Geoffrey Moore worked, says when he heard Moore was one of the dead, "it was sad. My wife started crying. He was physically and mentally strong and happy. I never saw him complaining about life. [Moore and co-worker and fellow cultist Real Steele] never tried to advertise for their religion. Both of them were strong, so I don't see how anyone could brainwash them or make them do something like that."

Nancie Brown lost her son David Moore to the cult when he was 19. "My friends said, 'He'll be back in a couple of months,' but 21 years later he hadn't come back," she says. He came home only twice during that time, and she sought solace with other cultists' families, even publishing a newsletter for a while. But Brown grew almost accepting of her son's choice, realizing that the group had become her son's community. "About two dozen of those who died had been in the group for two decades. They had a simple life to-

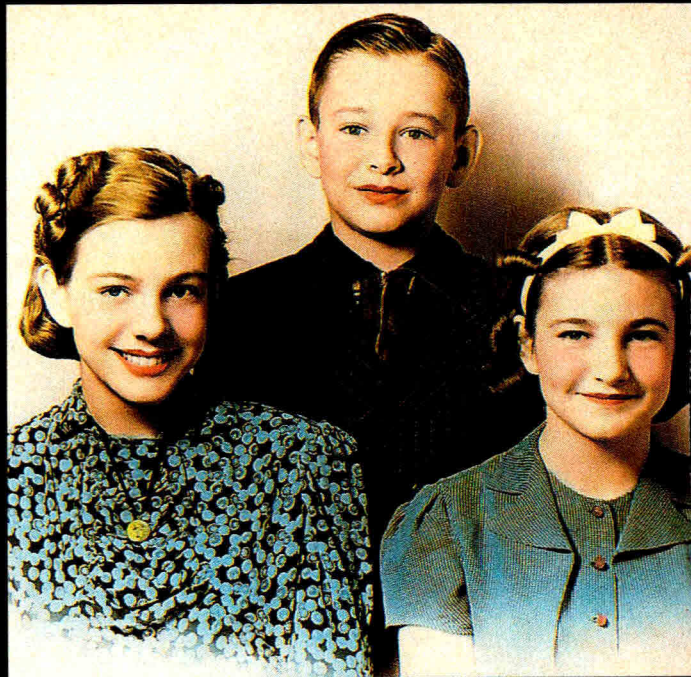
gether. They had formed a close family." So close, she says, that they were unable to see beyond their restricted world view, one that permitted them to consider suicide as a viable option.

Cult experts warn that the public should not be taken in by the cheerful departures, nor by the notion that it was a small number of people exercising their own free will. "I don't consider it suicide. I consider it murder," says Janja Lalich, a cult expert who has been monitoring Heaven's Gate since 1994, when several distraught parents contacted her with their worries about their missing children. "[Applewhite] controlled it, he called the shots. These people were pawns in his personal fantasy." But Marshall Herff Applewhite has died with his followers. And they seemed so happy to have gone with him. The evidence, such as it is, is on tape. —Reported by Cathy Booth and James Willwerth/Rancho Santa Fe, Nancy Harbert/Albuquerque, Rachele Kanigal/Oakland and Richard N. Ostling and Noah Robischon/New York

For more information, a mirror of the cult's Website and continuous updates, see time.com and pathfinder.com

IMPRISONED BY HIS OWN PASSIONS

Penalized for his sexuality, the future guru embarked on a quest for sexless devotion and an antiseptic heaven



By HOWARD CHUA-EOAN

THROUGH THE 1960S, MARSHALL Herff Applewhite, the man who would end his life with the musical name Do, had been relegated to secondary roles at the Houston Grand Opera. The son of a peripatetic Texas preacher, he had given up earlier plans for the ministry to pursue a career in music, supporting himself, his wife and two children with jobs that ranged from rehearsal conductor to part-time English teacher to occupational therapist at a tuberculosis sanatorium. But he was pushing 40, and his struggle against his homosexuality was unraveling both his marriage and his academic post in a religious school. An attempt to reverse his musical fortunes on Broadway had come to naught. Then, in 1970, Applewhite got a break: lead baritone in the American opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. Detractors whispered that his voice was "not of national caliber," that he was "not musically a ball of fire." This was an opportunity for him to prove them wrong.

He didn't. Instead, recalls Charles Rosekrans, then the choirmaster at the opera, Applewhite "felt the part was too much for him. It was a difficult role and required more voice than he actually had, and he had personal problems." Rosekrans vaguely remembers Applewhite's handing him a letter from a psychiatrist before withdrawing from the production. Thus, through crumbling ambition and the denial of desire, the easy affability of a young Texan from Spur, who loved to perform in lavish productions like *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, was transmogrified into the troubled charisma of a cult master in Rancho Santa Fe, California, one who last week

led his 38 followers on a fatal comet chase.

What kind of transfiguration was it? Applewhite's sister Louise Winant maintains that her brother entered a Houston hospital with a heart blockage and had a near-death experience that changed his life. The *Washington Post* reported that in 1971 he checked into a psychiatric hospital to be cured of his homosexuality after an affair with a student at Houston's University of St. Thomas led to his being fired as a music professor. (He had been fired from another job for similar reasons in 1964.) He reportedly confided to a lover that he longed for sexless devotion, passion without physical entanglements. Whatever the facts, Applewhite spun his own myth: the personal turmoil was the result of his body's coming under the influence of a being from the "Next" level, part of the discovery that he was one of the Two.

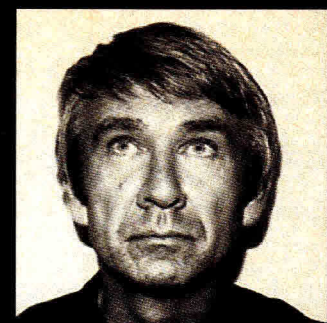
The other half of the Two was the nurse who attended him, Bonnie Lu Nettles, then 44. According to Applewhite's sister, it was Nettles who told him "that he had a purpose, that God kept him alive." "Their relationship wasn't like a romantic thing, more like a friendship, a platonic thing," says Nettles' daughter Terrie, interviewed by *CNN Impact's* Henry Schuster and *TIME's* Patrick E. Cole. But Bonnie Lu Nettles, who dabbled in astrology, believed it was fated in the stars. Says her daughter: "A couple of spiritualists said that there was going to be this guy coming into her life. And then Herff showed up. They linked up on a spiritual plane." Applewhite too saw the union as destiny. In junior high, Nettles had written a novel about a man who died and went to heaven. Somehow, this literary vision became proof of prophecy for Applewhite, who said

he was the manuscript's ascendant hero.

Nettles attended drama classes that Applewhite taught in Houston; she drew up his astrological charts and channeled her spirit adviser "Brother Francis" for guidance. In 1972 she helped him start the Christian Arts Center, a protocult that taught astrology and metaphysics. Applewhite had always been intense and charming. Now he became charismatic. Says Terrie Nettles: "I felt like I was in the presence of an incredible human being. It was like I was being uplifted." She adds, "I felt privileged to be with my mother and Herff. I was the only one who could talk with them together. Their followers had to talk to them in groups, not individually." By 1973 Applewhite and Nettles were convinced they were the Two Witnesses prophesied by *Revelation* to prepare the way for the kingdom of heaven. They traveled around the country, and Nettles wrote her daughter, "I'm not saying we are Jesus. It is nothing as beautiful but it is almost as big... We have found out, baby, we have this mission before coming into this life... All I will say is it's in the Bible in *Revelation*."

Then, in 1975, Bonnie Nettles told Terrie that she and Applewhite were leaving Houston permanently. "They felt like they had a mission and God was leading them and she would keep in touch with me. I never suspected that she would be gone that long." Mother and daughter never saw each other again. Applewhite severed all ties to his family. Says his sister Louise: "He hurt his family and children very deeply."

Nettles and Applewhite set up shop in Los Angeles with their cosmology of Jesus and UFOs. In the beginning, Applewhite and Nettles called their group Guinea Pig, with Nettles being "Guinea" and Applewhite being "Pig." Very soon, howev-



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THE MESMERIZER
The young Marshall with his sisters Stella Jane and Louise; Applewhite in 1969 rehearsing the Festival Chorus in Houston; in 1972 with Bonnie Nettles; and in a 1974 police mug shot after his arrest for auto theft

er, the group was called Human Individual Metamorphosis, and Applewhite was "Bo" and Nettles "Peep"—a reference to their roles as shepherds. They were then called "Him" and "Her" and finally the musical "Do" and "Ti."

The early days of the cult were a far cry from the well-organized, high-tech Rancho Santa Fe operation. Applewhite and Nettles, who did odd jobs to support themselves, were arrested in Harlingen, Texas,

for stealing gasoline credit cards, a charge that was later dropped. Applewhite then spent months shuttling from state to state in a confusing legal tangle over a car. During this period, he wrote his first spiritual manifesto. Applewhite and Nettles also had a brush with a comet. Stranded with a broken-down car in St. Louis, Missouri, they comforted themselves with the thought that "God would provide the means," and on the same night comet Kohoutek appeared.

But they continued to preach with a passion, persuading followers to renounce their families, sex and drugs and to pool their money with promises of a voyage to salvation on a spaceship. A poster for an appearance at Cañada College, in Redwood City, California, read, "If you have ever entertained the idea that there may be a real, physical level beyond the Earth's confines, you will want to attend this meeting." The auditorium was packed.

WITH BO AND PEEP, A CHORE EVERY 12 BEEPS

TIME first wrote about Marshall Applewhite and his group in 1975. Four years later the magazine interviewed Paul Groll, a follower of Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles (then known as Bo and Peep), for a story in the Aug. 27, 1979, issue on their secret camp. An excerpt:

EACH MINUTE, 24 HOURS A DAY, A MUSICAL BEEP SOUNDS across the camp from a command tent ("Central"). During the day, at 12-beep intervals, the disciples check Central for their next task. Among their duties: camp chores, perimeter guarding and stints as "rotating eyes" (monitoring campers' conduct and reporting violations).

Bo and Peep have "thousands of rules," reports Groll, but "they never force anyone to do anything." During one three-month phase, members constantly wore hoods over their heads and peered out through mirrored eye slits. The usual uniform is a brightly colored windbreaker over a jumpsuit. Gloves are worn at all times. Members can say yes, no or "I don't know" but otherwise communicate

only by written messages. They study the Bible, forswear sex, drugs and alcohol. They are, however, permitted to watch TV newscasts and read newspapers to emphasize the differences between the values of the camp and the outside world. The newspaper obituaries, stock-market reports and sports pages are clipped out because they are considered distracting.

At the two daily meals (called "lab experiments"), a blackboard in the dining tent lists "formulas" that specify the menu (PA for potatoes, CA for cake). The food must be consumed with meticulous care to reduce noise. Bo and Peep usually shop for food and supplies personally. They always pay cash.

The Two proclaim that Bo has been Jesus, Elijah and Moses in his former lives. The spacecraft is imminently expected. It will carry believers to an enigmatic "garden" where they will get "energy" from their coequal, the King of Kings, alias Chief of Chiefs, the god who created Planet Earth. Believers will live eternally in hairless, toothless bodies that are free of disease and decay.

Religion

Flying Saucery in the Wilderness
New revelations from the sheep of Bo and Peep

Marshall Herff Applewhite ("Bo") **Bonnie Lu Nettles ("Peep")**

They wily fellow hauling clubs on this summer's pro tour looked to be your friendly, easily disarmed sportsmen. They are not. They are the most dangerous men in the world. They are the most dangerous men in the world. They are the most dangerous men in the world.

The cult came to national attention after two dozen people from the small town of Waldport, Oregon, dropped everything to follow Bo and Peep. A 1975 TIME article described Applewhite as having a "rare ability to impress audiences with the urgency and truth of his message." (Such was Bo and Peep's appeal that NBC aired a series pilot called *The Mysterious Two*—originally titled *Follow Me If You Dare*—about an extra-terrestrial couple.) But Bo and Peep's disciples were not all sheep. One group of discontented followers rejected the cult when a promised space visit never materialized. To stem the drop in membership, Bo and Peep instituted the boot-camp phase of their movement to prepare followers for the rigors of space. Family contacts were frowned upon—except for one time, Mother's Day, 1983.

PERHAPS THERE WAS A REASON for the sentiment. In 1982 Nettles had written to her daughter, informing her that she had had her eye removed because of a melanoma. The cancer, however, did not go into remission. Terrie Nettles said her mother contacted her again in 1984, saying she was so deep into the movement she didn't know how to get out, that "there wasn't a graceful way to leave." In 1985 her mother said she was sending Terrie a "couple of hundred bucks" because "the time was coming close and coming to a point where they were leaving... that she would be transported by a UFO. Maybe she knew she was dying." Nettles died that year. It would be months before her daughter found out.

Applewhite always left an empty chair for his deceased partner, referring to Ti as if she were hovering nearby. Androgyny became even more apparent among the believers—from baggy uniforms and jumpsuits to close-cropped haircuts. At some point, Applewhite had himself castrated, as did at least five of his followers.

In the early 1990s the group renewed its recruitment campaign. (Some members even tried turning the cult's manifesto into a prime-time series.) A 1993 ad in *USA Today* carried this message: "Caution: If the above information is assimilated, you may experience such side effects as loss of marriage, family, friends, career, respectability, and credibility. Continued use could even result in the loss of your membership in the human kingdom." No one can say they weren't warned.

Reported by
Patrick E. Cole/Rancho Santa Margarita, Deborah Fowler/Houston, Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles and Richard Woodbury/Denver

A STAR TREK INTO THE X-FILES

By RICHARD CORLISS

THE ONE THING WE KNOW FOR SURE IS THAT THE INEVITABLE MOVIE VERSION of the San Diego suicide cult won't be called *Heaven's Gate*—that title is taken. As for everything else in the world, most of us haven't a clue. We're agnostics, know-nothings. Certitude was once the American religion, but after Watergate and other scams, we realized that what we thought was certitude was only blind faith. At least, we *think* we realized that. Or maybe...

In two ways, Americans are suffering a crisis of faith. Some people have lost their faith, so they dip into sleaze news, snickering as they scan the more imaginative tabloids. Others have replaced belief in God or government by faith in more eccentric notions; they look to the stars, to *Star Trek*. According to polls, 40% think aliens have visited our planet; 70% believe in a J.F.K. assassination conspiracy. Hey, didn't a U.S. missile shoot down TWA Flight 800? In January, you

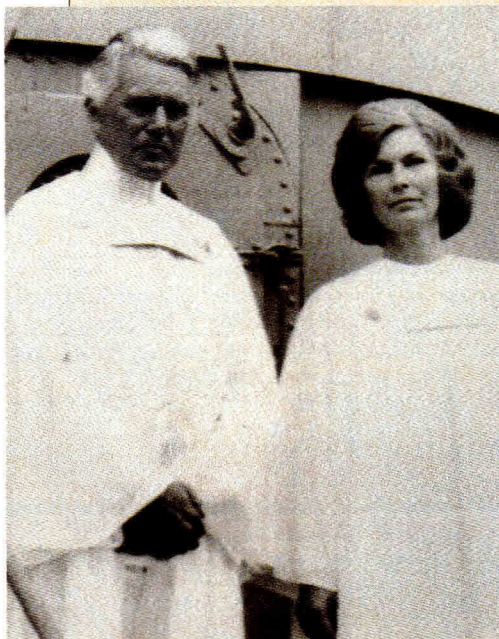
know, Elvis turned 62. Just recently, he cashed his first Social Security check.

O.K., here's our scoop: the real conspiracy is the mind-clouding cocktail of pop culture and hard news. The former has infiltrated and seized control of the latter. Trash is fact, and facts are trash.

The cult members made news by dying, but they also used the pop culture that shaped them. They testified to their love of TV's *The X-Files* and *Star Wars*; counted in their number a brother of *Star Trek's* Lieutenant Uhura (herself a flack for a psychic hotline); spoke of their imminent voyage in gentle, repetitive sentences, like Mister Rogers explaining electricity to his TV toddlers.

Could the Heaven's Gaters distinguish pop fable from cold truth? Can we? Once we could. Not many of us took *My Favorite Martian* or *Mork & Mindy* as sacred texts. *Frankenstein* may have been a parable of science gone haywire and *Dracula* a metaphor for the wages of sex, but we knew they were just stories. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* didn't spur an epidemic of podophobia.

TV's Bo and Peep? John Forsythe and Phyllis Pointer in *The Mysterious Two*



EVERETT COLLECTION

The old separation of real and fake had something to do with real estate. For fantasy and romance we went from our house to the movie house, a cathedral of dreams whose dark grandeur signaled even to kids that what they were about to see was a fiction. Now that most of us watch movies on the same 53-cm machine that gives most of us our news, that NO TRESPASSING sign has disappeared. While *The X-Files* cunningly grounds its fables in docudrama style, items on the news shows get more dramatic and sentimental. Everything is just a story, with a moral, a giggle or a lingering sting.

The X-Files is the cultural touchstone of this millennial decade, as David Letterman was of the '80s. Letterman's withering facetiousness said that no institution was to be respected anymore—everything was up for laughs. *The X-Files* says there *are* things to believe in: the things the government suppresses and the traditional media don't dare reveal. The show is *60 Minutes* for the reality-impaired; Mulder and Scully are the new Mike Wallace and Lesley Stahl.

We hear a ghostly theremin whistling in our inner ear. So a warning: don't infer too much from the connection of cults and culture. For most folks, *The X-Files* is not the Bible, it's a bedtime story. Only 39 people chose to rev the once-upon-a-mind of sci-fi into revelation; only 39 took their jumble of theological and televisionary lore to beds from which they never awoke. At least, we *think* they didn't hitch a ride on that UFO. Unless... maybe... ■