

# **Memories of the Branch Davidians**

The Autobiography of  
**David Koresh's**  
Mother



**Bonnie Haldeman**

Edited by Catherine Wessinger

MEMORIES  
OF THE  
BRANCH DAVIDIANS

This page intentionally left blank

# MEMORIES OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS

The Autobiography of  
David Koresh's Mother

by

Bonnie Haldeman

as told to Catherine Wessinger

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS

© 2007 by Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas 76798

*All Rights Reserved.* No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of Baylor University Press.

*Cover Design:* David Alcorn, Alcorn Design

*Cover Photo:* David Koresh at age 8. Photo courtesy of Bonnie Haldeman.

Used by permission.

Interior photos, courtesy of Bonnie Haldeman. Used by permission.

Except the following:

Photo 25, courtesy of Paul Fatta. Used by permission.

Photo 36, courtesy of Mount Carmel Visitors' Center. Used by permission.

Photos 51-52, government exhibit in the Branch Davidian civil trial. Public domain.

Photos 20, 58-68, courtesy of Catherine Wessinger. Used by permission.

eISBN: 978-1-6025-8088-6 (Web PDF)

This E-book was converted from the original source file by a third-party vendor. Readers who encounter any issues with formatting, text, linking, or readability are encouraged to notify the publisher at [BUP\\_Production@baylor.edu](mailto: BUP_Production@baylor.edu). Some font characters may not display on older Kindle devices.

To inquire about permission to use selections from this text, please contact Baylor University Press, One Bear Place, #97363, Waco, Texas 76798.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Haldeman, Bonnie, 1944-

Memories of the Branch Davidians : the autobiography of David Koresh's mother / by Bonnie Haldeman ; as told to Catherine Wessinger.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-932792-98-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Haldeman, Bonnie, 1944- 2. Branch Davidians--Biography.
3. Waco Branch Davidian Disaster, Tex., 1993. 4. Koresh, David, 1959-1993. I. Wessinger, Catherine Lowman. II. Title.

BP605.B72H35 2007

299'.93--dc22

[B]

2007022395

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—

This page intentionally left blank

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	
<i>Catherine Wessinger</i>	ix
Purpose of This Autobiography	1
Bonnie Clark	1
The Haldeman Family	12
Vernon Howell Becomes a Branch Davidian	25
Bonnie Haldeman Becomes a Branch Davidian	30
David Koresh's Shootout with George Roden at Mount Carmel	55
Resettling at Mount Carmel	59
Bonnie and Roy Leave Mount Carmel	66
Visits Back and Forth with Folks at Mount Carmel	71
The ATF Raid, February 28, 1993	76

The Siege	78
The Fire, April 19, 1993	80
1994 Criminal Trial	80
2000 Civil Trial	81
Life after the Fire	82
Going Back to Mount Carmel	85
Remembering the People and Lifestyle at Mount Carmel	88
Remembering the Children	96
Remembering David	101
Appendix: Poems by David Koresh	105
Notes	121
Works Cited	177

## FOREWORD

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*.<sup>1</sup> 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?"<sup>2</sup> 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 Haldeman for her Southern hospitality when I have come to visit and for graciously and honestly sharing her life experiences.

Catherine Wessinger

August 7, 2006

This page intentionally left blank

## **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.

## *Bobby Howell*

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.

## *First Pregnancy*

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

sisters. We would go visit their grandmother. I stayed at their house a lot, and my mother helped me, too. After I had Vernon on August 17, 1959, my mother helped a lot with him. God bless my mama. I don't know what I would have done without her.

At that time, Bobby's mother's last name wasn't Holub, it was Smith. Virginia was her real name, Virginia Smith. Bobby was her oldest child. She was always very good to me, she was just a big-hearted woman. She took in everybody around the neighborhood. All the time that I was pregnant and staying at their house, Bobby had another girlfriend. He would bring her around and Jean would run them off.

I spent a lot of time there, but Bobby and I weren't having a relationship at that time. When I had Vernon in Herman Hospital in Houston, his mother came to the hospital, but Bobby never came to the hospital to see Vernon. He never supported Vernon or anything like that. Later we talked about getting married, but we never did.

August 16 was a Saturday or a Sunday night. Daddy wasn't home. He finally came home very late. He was drunk. My daddy was an alcoholic. I remember waking up about 2:00 or 2:30 in the morning and going to the bathroom. I had a stomachache. My mother kept hearing me go to the bathroom. She said, "Let me see what's wrong!" I said I had a stomachache and she said, "You're going to have that baby." She started trying to wake Daddy up and he didn't want to wake up. Finally about 6:00 a.m. we got him up and the three of us got in the truck. We lived in the Heights in Houston, and he drove us to Herman Hospital. Of course, he wasn't feeling too good. That was the roughest ride I've ever had in my life!

We got to the hospital about 6:30 a.m., and I had Vernon at 8:49 a.m. I remember that the worst part about it was when they bent me over the side of the table and did a spinal block. That hurt. They took me right on in. I remember they laid Vernon across my leg when he was born. You know, they lay the baby across your abdomen to cut the cord. He was crying. I thought, "He's my baby." It felt good.

They held him up and said, "You have a little boy." I stayed in the hospital for five days. I remember they came in and said, "You can go home but we can't let your baby go home. He's got a fever." I started crying. They said, "We're just kidding you. No, we're not going to send you home without your baby." That was when they didn't kick you out of the hospital twenty-four hours after you had your baby. You stayed several days.

I remember going home and wanting to get back into some clothes, which didn't fit. I walked up the street to use a neighbor's telephone, and it just wore me out. I didn't realize how tired I was.

I stayed with my mother and she helped me with Vernon. He had colic and cried a lot. He was several months old when I got on a bus and rode to my aunt and uncle's house in San Antonio. They had invited us to come stay with them.

*Vernon Howell [David Koresh]*

Vernon was special. He was such a cute little boy and just a sweet little thing, a pretty little baby. He had golden hair and dimples. He was a good little boy. My mother helped me a lot with him. I remember when Vernon was two I bought him his first little tricycle. He was so cute. I adored him.

When Vernon was still a little baby, about six or eight months old, I went to San Antonio and stayed with my aunt and uncle for a while. Bobby brought Mama down there to get me, and we came back with him. He wanted to get back with me, but that never did work out. We just never did get together.

I still had a relationship with Bobby's family during that time. I'd go over there a lot and stayed with them. His sisters and his mother and I were friends. I remember we were in the kitchen one day cooking. Vernon had the measles while we were there. I stayed in a dark room with him for three days.

When Vernon was big enough to be in a walker, I was cooking something on the stove, and I put the oven door down. He scooted across the room real quick and stuck his hand down on that hot oven door and burned his hand. That was traumatic. He cried.

When Vernon was four, I took him with me to Dallas, and Vernon never saw his father again until he was about nineteen years old.

I don't know what I would have done without my mother. Actually from the time Vernon was two until he was four years old she pretty much had him. By then I was working and I think I had moved to Dallas. I had met Roy [Haldeman] and moved, and Mother took care of Vernon, pretty much most of the time between two and four. It was during that time that my mother took Vernon to Sabbath school. He fell in love with Sabbath school as a little boy of four years old. He was such a good little boy.

When he was nineteen David [Vernon]<sup>3</sup> looked Bobby up on his own. He started by looking for his grandmother Jean. Somehow by looking in a Houston phone book at all the

Smiths and Howells, he was able to reach Bobby's next oldest son. That is how he got Jean's telephone number and he called his grandmother.

This other boy must have been about seventeen or eighteen at the time, and he had never heard of David, but he gave him Jean's phone number. When David called Jean and told her who he was, she was just elated to hear from him. Over the years they had tried to find out where we were, but I didn't want them to know. I had started a new life. One of Bobby's sisters had lived right down the street from my brother, but they never told them anything.

Jean was very happy to hear from David. After that David went to Houston and met his father.

David was about nineteen when he looked them up, but I think it was still quite a while before he went and met them. David had more of a relationship with his grandmother. Bobby sort of stayed in the background.

Bobby comes to the memorial every year on April 19.<sup>4</sup> He regrets a lot.<sup>5</sup> Of course, we all grow up with regrets about what we did when we were younger. Jean came to the memorials, too, until she died about five years ago.<sup>6</sup>

### *Bonnie Out on Her Own*

When Vernon was about two I met this guy named Joe. Actually I was with Bobby's sister one night, and she was with her boyfriend, and we went to a drive-in restaurant and there we met Joe. He had just gotten out of prison. We started liking each other. It wasn't very long before he wanted to get married. I told Bobby about it and he begged me not to marry Joe, but I did. I was married to Joe for about a year, two years maybe. Vernon came and stayed with us, but that didn't work

out. Vernon cried a lot, and Joe spanked him a lot. That was when my mother got Vernon. She started taking care of him because Joe spanked him when he cried. I divorced him. I don't usually give Joe's name. He hasn't been in the picture in a hundred years. That's all I'll say. His name was Joe. That was a big mistake. You make a lot of mistakes when you're young.

Joe and I were together about a year and a half, and it was up and down, up and down, up and down. He eventually broke his parole and they picked him up and put him back in prison, so I never saw him again after that.

Joe sent a buddy of his who had gotten out of prison to find me and Joe wanted me to stay with him until he got out. I didn't know the guy from Adam, but indirectly that's how I met Roy.

### *Meeting Roy Haldeman*

Bobby had an aunt, Joyce, and I heard she was working as a waitress at a lounge over on Canal Street, so I went over there one night to see her. It just happened to be the lounge that Roy owned, called the Jade Lounge.

When I first went there, Roy wasn't there. He had a partner named Doris. Roy called later on and Doris told him, "We've got a pretty little girl here who just came in," and he said, "Well, put her to work." He said he would be in later that night. I met him that night.

My friend Joyce lived upstairs from Roy in the same apartment complex. I was staying with her. I had an apartment of my own, but my sister was staying with me, and there was

another couple staying there, too. They had my car. When I was visiting Joyce, before I stayed with her, some guy came over, took my car, stole it, and wrecked it. So Roy went over to move me out. We got to be friends. That's how I met Roy, and I did go to work in the lounge for a short time.

That's when he fell in love with me. All his friends told him it was a mistake, but he fell in love with me. He was from Wylie in the Dallas area. He took me up there to meet his family. We went up to meet them, and he sold his part of the club to Doris. He was thirty-four and I was eighteen. He was a *handsome* guy. He had been a seaman for seventeen years. He never did ship out after I met him.

The guy my former husband had told to take care of me until he got out of prison was named Danny and he came looking for me at Roy's club. I was scared of him. Danny came into the club right after I met Roy and wanted me to go with him. Roy told him to get out, that I didn't want to go, and to just leave me alone. Danny left, and we went to another private club, and he followed us there. Roy put me out the window in the back, and we took off and got away from the guy. I never did see him after that. Roy was sort of my knight in shining armor. He rescued me.

I had a lot of fun with Roy. We went to El Paso. We always liked to get out and drive to places and do things. Before we left Houston we did a lot of partying. Roy owned the lounge, so we had the nightlife. We would go to Dallas and go out with his brother-in-law, his brothers and sisters. That was before I got back in the church. Of course, all during that time I had been away from the church.