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Residents, businessmen say Howell not a recluse

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Despite law enforcement claims that Vernon Howell had not left his heavily fortified compound “in months,” residents and business owners Wednesday said they have seen him in the past two months.

Dan Hartnett, associate director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, defended the bureau’s execution of search and arrest warrants at a religious encampment 10 miles east of Waco that left four of his agents dead.

ATF agents, who said they have been investigating the cult’s activities for more than eight months, said they considered apprehending Howell outside the confines of the compound but dismissed the idea.

Asked again about ATF tactics, which included brining in about 100 agents in cattle trailers while three helicopters buzzed overhead for diversion, Hartnett said Howell, who changed his name to David Koresh, had not left the compound “in months.”

“I don’t have the exact time when he was not coming out,” Hartnett said.

Mounting critics of the raid have said it was ill-conceived and it unnecessarily endangered the lives of the agents and more than 30 children believed to have been inside.

While ATF officials were saying Wednesday that they had not seen Howell outside the compound recently, several people said they know Howell was in Waco in January and off the 77-acre ranch as recently as Feb. 22.

ATF spokeswoman Sharon Wheeler declined additional comment Wednesday night.

The picture of Howell as a recluse behind his fortified walls is just not true, said Margaret Jones, a friend who last saw Howell about four months ago in a Waco store.

“I know Jesus with a 9 mm is not particularly enticing, but I don’t like to see the federal agents lying about the situation, either,” she said. “It is very aggravating to me.

“To say that he never leaves that place is ridiculous. He is always out everywhere. Everybody and their dog see him and many of the people out there. But I guess they are just trying to cover themselves because they are going to be in big trouble — hopefully,” she said.

Howell and five other followers once did some landscape work at her home, Jones said, with the agreement that Jones’ husband, McLennan County music instructor Julian Jones, would pay Howell back with music lessons. Howell later went to California and never asked for the lessons, she said.

Howell also came frequently to see her son Vaughn’s former band, Fivous, appear at Chelsea Street Pub, she said.

As part of his work on the Tribune-Herald series, “Sinful Messiah,” reporter Mark England called Mount Carmel just before noon Feb. 22 to interview Howell about the Branch Davidians.

England said he needed to get Howell's response to certain allegations made by former cultists in the series.

Reportedly at garage

The person who answered told England that Howell was off the compound working on an automobile engine. During research for the series, former cult members had told England that Howell likes to work on engines at an auto shop near Loop 340 and FM 2491, about five miles from Mount Carmel.

The shop, which was not occupied Wednesday, is owned by cult member Bob Kendrick, who is believed to be in the Mount Carmel compound with Howell and the other Branch Davidians.

The person who answered the phone took a message, and Howell called back while England was out of the office. At about 2 p.m. Feb. 22, England called Mount Carmel and spoke to Howell.

Howell also was seen dining and drinking at Chelsea Street Pub, a popular West Waco eatery, at least twice in the past six weeks.

About three weeks ago, Howell, a woman and another man ordered bean and cheese nachos and iced teas at the Richland Mall restaurant, said Brent Moore, the restaurant's general manager.

Moore said Howell had come to the restaurant about once a week for lunch from late January to mid-February. Each time, he used a cellular telephone he was carrying and was accompanied by two or three companions.

Moore said he is "90 to 95 percent" sure that the customer is the same man who is leading his band of followers in the bloody siege at Mount Carmel after seeing Howell's photograph in Saturday's Tribune-Herald.

“I saw the picture and that’s the first thing that came to my mind — this person has been here,” Moore said.

Enjoying a band

About a “month to a month-and-a-half ago,” Howell spent about two hours of an early evening listening to a band at the restaurant and drinking beer, said restaurant manager Angela McDaniel.

“The last time he was in, he was with about 10 people,” she said.

McDaniel said she was sure the man was Howell after other restaurant employees, including the one who met Howell in 1990, told her they had recently seen Howell at the club.

“He’s got real strong features,” McDaniel said. “He’s just not an ugly person.”

Moore and McDaniel said Howell and his companions never caused any problems for the other patrons and restaurant employees.

A Waco businessman and his wife who have known Howell for about five years said Wednesday that at different times, he would come in their store three or four times a week.

The last time was Jan. 4, said the store owner, who asked not to be identified. He remembers the date because he wanted to show Howell some merchandise that arrived Jan. 5, according to an invoice he pulled from his desk.

The owner and his wife were complimentary of Howell, saying he and other followers they know are generous, kind and gently people.

Talk about guns

The merchant said he shared an interest in guns with Howell. The cult leader frequently invited him to the Branch Davidian compound to fish in a tank Howell said he had stocked with Florida bass and to ride go-carts Howell had bought for the children. He also asked him to lunch a lot, but the businessman always declined, saying he was too busy.

Once Howell arrived carrying about 10 pre-packaged military meals that the shop owner said Howell reportedly bought at gun shows he is said to have frequented.

Federal agents believe Howell and his band are not lacking in vital supplies at the surrounded Mount Carmel.

“Our impression is they’re very self-sufficient in there,” said Jeffery Jamar, special agent-in-charge of the FBI San Antonio office. There have been reports that the Branch Davidians have laid in enough crates of pre-packaged military meals and water to last several months.

The businessman said he thinks Howell probably has the meals “stacked to the ceiling.”

“He came in laughing and said, ‘Here’s your lunch. You always say you can’t get away to eat, so here it is.’ He was always generous and never asked anything in return. But I’m not saying that he is not capable or not guilty of all the things they say he did out there. But the man has some good in him, I can tell you that.”

“We have seen the best of him,” his wife said.

Howell also introduces the merchant to a gun dealer and told him the dealer could get him better deals on weapons. The merchant said Howell possibly bought many of the weapons used in Sunday’s shootout from the arms dealer.

A Waco physician said Wednesday that he had treated Howell and about 25 of his followers for about three years.

Howell was in his office last for treatment of stress-related back spasms in November or December, the doctor said, adding that he has treated Howell in his office about 15 to 20 times in those three years.

“He is a very gentle man,” said the doctor, who also requested anonymity. “He is very intelligent and very articulate. They make him sound like a ruthless killer, and that’s just absurd.”