

The New York Times

Families Learning of 39 Cultists Who Died Willingly

By B. DRUMMOND AYRES JR.
Published: March 29, 1997

Also contributing were Verne G. Kopytoff, Christine Biederman, Dean Nelson, Dan Dorfman, Lauraine Miller, Shelly Reese, Jesse McKinley, Michael Sorkin and Rod Paul.

After fielding more than 1,500 telephone calls from anguished relatives across the country in the last 24 hours, investigators said today that they had identified 30 of the 39 members of a millennialist cult who had committed mass suicide in a hillside house here.

Officials of the San Diego County Sheriff's Office released the names to the public this evening and pleaded for help in identifying the remaining 9 bodies.

At the same time, investigators disclosed that about a half-dozen of the 18 men of the cult who died had been surgically castrated, including Marshall Herff Applewhite, 65 and the group's leader. The group demanded celibacy of its members and avoided any suggestion of sensuality.

At an afternoon news conference, Brian Blackbourne, the Chief Medical Examiner, said the castrations appeared to have been done some time well in the past and had been carried out with satisfactory surgical skill. He offered no other details or explanations of the finding.

The bodies of the group, identified by the authorities as Heaven's Gate, were discovered in the house on Wednesday, scattered on their backs on cots and mattresses. All but two had purple cloths over their heads and shoulders like shrouds. Most of them had died of suffocation. Plastic bags had apparently been placed over their heads after they had ingested a potent mix of phenobarbital and alcohol.

According to material the group posted on its Internet site, the timing of the suicides were probably related to the arrival of the Hale-Bopp comet, which members seemed to regard as a cosmic emissary beckoning them to another world.

As the authorities went about the task of notifying and talking with relatives of the victims today, a farewell videotape made by the cult members suggested that they had gone to their deaths quite willingly, some even joyfully.

"We couldn't be happier about what we're going to do," one woman said, her voice choking a bit but her face anything but sad. Another woman, smiling, added, "We are all happy to be doing what we are doing."

A toll-free number set up by the police prompted many relatives to call, already suspecting the worst because, in many cases, their loved ones had been away or out of contact for months or even years. Other relatives called after excerpts of the tape, in which pairs of cult members spoke, one after another, were broadcast over national television.

"Most of the families are breaking down when we talk to them," said Calvin Vine, an investigator from the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office. By contrast, there was a tear or two on the farewell tape, but they seemed almost tears of joy.

The authorities said that although they were dealing with a mass suicide almost without parallel in the United States, it appeared to be nothing more than that, with no suspicious criminal elements.

"We are proceeding with the preliminary conclusion that what we are looking at is, in fact, 39 suicides," said one investigator, Jack Drown, a San Diego County undersheriff.

Yet Mr. Drown conceded that it might never be known just what kind of mindset had led the members of the group to shut themselves up in the house and then consume lethal combinations of vodka and phenobarbital.

"I'm not too sure we will ever have satisfactory answers," he said.

The group had lived quietly, almost unnoticed in this upscale community, with members spending much of their time designing computer programs for various commercial clients.

Mark Applewhite, the son of the group's leader, said in a letter addressed to "anyone hurt by the actions of Marshall Herff Applewhite" and given to KZTV, a CBS affiliate in Corpus Christi, Tex., that he was "deeply hurt by the knowledge that people have now lost their lives in connection with my father." Saying he had not seen his father since he was 5, the son said he was a born-again Christian and hoped that God would take the "terrible news" and turn it into a message of hope.

Investigators also disclosed today that the cult, which had a nomadic history in this country, might have been planning a trip abroad. They said that while checking the house, they had found a map plastered to a wall with markings that indicated the course of an overseas journey. The investigators did not elaborate.

The farewell tape, broadcast by ABC television, was especially strikingly for its upbeat tone, considering what lay ahead for those speaking and peering into the camera. On it, one cult member -- none identified themselves -- said his death would bring him "just the happiest day of my life." and added, "I've been looking forward for this for so long."

A woman who appeared to be in her 20's looked intently into the camera and said, grinning broadly, "We are all choosing of our own free will to go to the next level."

Another woman said, "We just wish you could all be here and doing what we are doing."

The tone of that farewell tape, made with the cult members sitting in pairs on chairs placed outside in a setting of trees and bushes, was similar to the tone of another tape found after the 39 bodies were discovered, with men

and women alike dressed all in black, their hair closely cropped and their faces covered by diamond-shaped purple cloths.

On the second tape, Marshall Applewhite tried to explain why he and the others were about to take their lives. He said that human bodies were just temporary earthly parking places for the soul and that suicide would free the soul to make a rendezvous on a higher plane of existence with an unidentified flying object that is trailing the Hale-Bopp comet, now on a swing past Earth.

"We have no hesitation to leave this place, to leave the bodies that we have," Mr. Applewhite concluded.

Late today, the coroners had completed 21 of the autopsies, and medical examiners said they were prepared to release some bodies to relatives as early as this weekend. Relatives were told that they did not need to come to San Diego to claim their loved ones but could instead have mortuaries arrange shipments.

While the cult members may have taken many of their secrets to the grave, the authorities said today that they were confident that the people who died here were the only active members of the group.

"We have been told that this is not a splinter group," said Jerry Lipscomb, a San Diego County homicide detective. "We see no other tie. They are not a splinter group. They are not a group that controls any other."

The authorities provided further details of the elaborate planning that went into the suicides.

Dr. Blackbourne described one document, found by detectives, that was titled "The Routine." It outlined how the cult members were to go about killing themselves.

First, it said, 15 of the 39 cult members, called "classmates," would kill themselves with help from 8 "assistants." Then 15 more "classmates" and 8 more "assistants" would repeat the process.

It was unclear how the final 9 cult members were to go about killing themselves. To bring on death, the cult members were to ingest a dose of Dramamine, followed by "tea & toast," followed an hour later by "alco. & med."

When the bodies of the cult members were searched, Dr. Blackbourne said, the pockets of their matching black tunics were found to contain a collection of odd items -- \$5 bills, rolls of quarters, tubes of lip balm, pencils and ballpoint pens, and facial tissue. Beside each body was a travel bag. But Dr. Blackbourne said he had not been told what the bags contained.

These New York Times reporters and photographers contributed to the coverage of the Heaven's Gate cult:

Gustav Niebuhr, Todd S. Purdum, Tim Golden, Carey Goldberg, B. Drummond Ayres Jr., James Sterngold, James Brooke, Barry Bearak, Bernard Weinraub, Allen R. Myerson, Keith Bradsher, David M. Herszenhorn, Don Terry, Vivian S. Toy, Jacques Steinberg, John T. McQuiston, Frank Bruni, Jim Wilson and Michael Shavel.

Also contributing were Verne G. Kopytoff, Christine Biederman, Dean Nelson, Dan Dorfman, Lauraine Miller, Shelly Reese, Jesse McKinley, Michael Sorkin and Rod Paul.