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## Backwoods Celebrity Faces Long Prison Term for Incest

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Robert Hale, a Bible-toting father of 15 who calls himself Papa Pilgrim, became an anti-government celebrity in Alaska by driving a bulldozer across a national park that encircles his land.

The Lord told him that using the bulldozer to clear 14 miles of derelict road through the park was a loving thing to do, Hale said in an interview three years ago.

"In order for me to love my children, I have to be a provider," Hale said then, explaining that he needed the bulldozer to fetch supplies for his children, whom he and his wife were home-schooling in an ultra-strict Christian way.

He said his children read only the Bible, always bathed with their clothes on and were not allowed to see one another naked.

Yesterday in a Palmer, Alaska, courtroom, Hale, 65, answered very different questions about his behavior and his family: He pleaded no contest to multiple charges that he raped one of his daughters.

The plea, which came three weeks before Hale was to face trial on 27 felony charges of rape, incest and coercion, punctuates an implausible saga that stretches from Texas to the outback of eastern Alaska. It is a story by turns picaresque, outrageous and sad.

Hale and his now-estranged wife, Kurina, who calls herself Country Rose, and their children, who all have names from the Bible, bought a 410-acre ranch inside Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, the largest national park in the United States.

Much of the money for the \$450,000 purchase in 2002 came from the Alaska permanent fund dividend. It is an oil-funded annual payment that this year was worth \$1,107 to each state resident. After Hale and his family moved to Alaska in 1998, the dividend provided the onetime subsistence farmers -- who also earned money performing gospel music -- with more cash than they had ever had.

The ranch, which they named Hillbilly Heaven, is an in-holding, which means it is surrounded by federal land controlled by the National Park Service. Under the 1980 law that established much of the vast national park system in Alaska, in-holders are guaranteed "reasonable and feasible" access to their property.

Hale's bulldozer romp stretched that guarantee beyond the breaking point. The Park Service cited Hale for violating federal law.

But land-rights activists, who in Alaska and across the West have complained for decades about persnickety law enforcement in and around federal parks, adopted Hale and his family as camera-ready symbols of America's frontier spirit.

They could sing, they made their own clothes, and Papa was handy with a sound bite. He accused the federal government of trying to starve his family. "It is like the Alamo," he said.

"We are going to make the Pilgrims poster children for abuse of federal power," Chuck Cushman, executive director of the American Land Rights Association, said in 2003.

With land-rights activists footing the legal bills, Hale's challenge to federal authority went all the way to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit in San Francisco. This February, a three-judge panel ruled against the family, although the court said in the fall that it might take another look at the case.

To drum up publicity for the court challenge, Hale and his handlers from the land-rights movement invited me and other reporters to spend the night at Hillbilly Heaven in the late summer of 2003.

In the course of a long evening spent with his children and his wife, who listened to Hale in worshipful silence, it seemed that he held a cultlike control over his family. None of the older children, several of whom were in their 20s, wanted or needed any life outside the family, Hale said then. He said they were all virgins.

Hale, it turned out, had had an extraordinarily odd life before bringing his family to Alaska.

He grew up affluent in Fort Worth, the son of I.B. Hale, an All-America tackle at Texas Christian University who in 1939 was the first-round draft pick of the Washington Redskins.

While in high school, Robert Hale eloped to Florida in 1958 with Kathleen Connally, the 16-year-old daughter of John B. Connally; Connally was to become governor of Texas and was wounded when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Shortly thereafter, she died of a shotgun blast to the face, an apparent suicide that Hale said occurred while he was with her in a hotel room.

In the 1970s, when Hale called himself "Sunstar" and lived as a hippie, he met Kurina Rose Bresler, then 16. They moved with their first two children to a subsistence farm in New Mexico on land owned by actor Jack Nicholson. They lived there for more than 20 years, tanning leather, breeding dogs and antagonizing many neighbors. It was there they became born-again Christians, Hale said.

But it was in Alaska, after the celebrated bulldozer ride and while Hale's lawsuit was still rattling through the federal court system, that family life exploded.

Hale was indicted in the fall of 2005, accused of raping and abusing an unnamed daughter, and he fled the area where he had lived with his family. After a two-week manhunt he was arrested without incident, and he has been in jail since.

Until last week, Hale had been expected to contest the charges against him. In a trial, his wife and many of his children would have testified against him.

In the end, he made a deal. Hale, a diabetic in poor health, pleaded no contest and will receive a sentence of at least 14 years in prison.

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