BUNDYLAND
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BY JOHN SEPULVADO
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This story was reported in collaboration between WW and Oregon Public Broadcasting.

On the sixth day of the Harney County siege, a mother and two children visited Ammon Bundy. To pray.

The three walked past a silver pickup truck blocking the snowy road, past the three armed guards huddled around a campfire they had built alongside a barricade, and past the TV satellite trucks and a handful of reporters who were waiting for breaking news or the next staging of a press conference.

Another half-mile down the road the family went, into a compound of about a dozen stone office buildings, a gas station, and several sheds filled with tools and heavy machinery.

It was Thursday, Jan. 7, and the three slogged through the snow to the stone building that serves as headquarters for the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

The mom’s blond hair was in a bob. Her daughter, a toddler, wore a pink camouflage snow jumper with a hoodie.

Her son’s white Stetson hat reached as high as the pistol holstered on the belt of the man guarding the door of the seized federal building.

“Hey, bud,” the guard said to the kid, smiling.

Inside the building stood Ammon Bundy: a thickset 40-year-old devout Mormon car mechanic from outside Phoenix, who, along with a group of armed anti-government militants, broke into the empty federal building in southeast Oregon’s Malheur refuge, 187,757 acres of frigid desert.

Bundy had a neatly trimmed beard, a placid disposition, and a plaid shirt that always looked ironed.

Since Bundy first occupied Malheur on Jan. 2, about a dozen families from as far away as Nebraska have traveled to southeastern Oregon to bring supplies, hear Bundy talk and join him in prayer.

WW and Oregon Public Broadcasting sent this reporter—who covered the Bundy family for KNPR radio in Las Vegas during their previous standoffs with the federal government in Nevada—to get inside the occupation.

For nearly seven hours last week, we were granted a rare level of access. The militant leaders allowed us past the media staging area to roam, without escorts, through the compound—including in buildings the Bundys had kept off-limits to most other press.

But a spot in the prayer circle with Bundy? No dice.

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HOME ON THE RANGE:
Ammon Bundy, who runs a fleet maintenance company in Phoenix, gives press conferences at 11 am each day in the federal building he’s seized in rural Harney County, Ore.
As the mother and kids entered the headquarters, this observer could see Bundy form a circle with five children and two adults and bow his head to pray.

Snatches of conversation could be heard: Bundy explaining his political system, called the five circles of authority, which laid out the power of local and federal governments under the authority of God.

The takeover of the Malheur sanctuary by Bundy, his two brothers and a small posse of anti-government radicals has for nearly two weeks has captured the imagination, stoked the anxiety and even entered the Zeitgeist of much of America (no small thanks to late-night hosts like Stephen Colbert mocking the militants’ request for snacks). The confrontation introduced the world to southeast Oregon’s Harney County, a place where sagebrush and mesas are white with new winter snow.

At the center of this spotlight is a camp where about three dozen socially isolated men have taken up arms and bonded despite deep contradictions among themselves. Even one day spent bivouacked with these militants reveals a sketch, if not a fully formed picture, of a group of people searching for meaning and eager for attention from the media they profess to hate. Their ideology, a mash-up of radical Mormonism and militaristic fantasy, is a distillation of the frustration of people who’ve been marginalized by a world in which they do not fit.

Now, they have created a place of their own. They call the occupation Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, and have renamed the refuge the “Harney County Resource Center.” But the place might be more precisely described as Bundyland.

And they can’t explain how they’re going to get out. While Ammon Bundy is the face of the resistance, in some ways his brother provides a more interesting window into the family business of rebellion.

Ryan Bundy, 43, is his younger brother Ammon’s right-hand man, and has been for most of his life. Ryan grew up watching his charismatic younger brother. (A third brother, Mel, was also part of the occupation.)

One of 15 children of Nevada cattle rancher Cliven Bundy, Ammon was elected student body president at Virgin Valley High School in Mesquite, Nev., in 1992. “Besides being student body president, he liked to box,” Ryan recalled last week. Ryan Bundy said his brother held lunchtime boxing matches in defiance of school administrators. “[He] would go out into the schoolyard to do this boxing.”

Ryan Bundy is a sympathetic figure, no matter your politics. Just after his seventh birthday, he was hit by a car, severing nerves and permanently deforming his face, causing the left side to droop—almost as if he had suffered a massive stroke.

After high school (neither Bundy brother attended college), Ryan worked with Ammon servicing fleet vehicles, but for at least two years he has lived with his wife and eight children on the Mesquite ranch that belongs to his father, Cliven Bundy, where he says he helps his father with cattle.

On the Malheur compound last week, Ryan dressed like a sheriff from a children’s book. He wore a brown vest over a blue wrangler shirt, with a Stetson hat and cowboy boots. He often hid his face with his cowboy hat.

Like his brother, Ryan is a self-described devout member of the mainline Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Last week, he took part in private prayer sessions roughly every three hours—prayers led by Ammon.

“We pray mainly for safety, and deliverance,” Ryan said. “Ammon’s well-spoken, and very, very intelligent, so the men like when he leads us in [prayer].”

Parts of Bundyland cast doubt on the sincerity of the camp’s religious devotion. The snow outside the Malheur headquarters building is stained brown from five days’ worth of cigarette butts thrown on the ground, and most of the men carry paper cups filled with coffee—both violations of Mormon scripture. (While the Bundys are Mormons, many of their followers are not.)

But there is little denying that many of those in the encampment do believe in the power of prayer—and fasting.

Inside the Malheur headquarters building at 3 pm Jan. 7, a skinny, 20-something militant from California named Joe, dressed in a black hoodie, said he wanted to be mentally strong for any upcoming fight. Ryan Bundy told him to try fasting.

“The key is you got to get through the first 24 hours,” Ryan told him. “Then your stomach will start to shrink, and you won’t get any hunger pains.”

“I’ve done two days before, one without water,” Joe said eagerly.

“That’s good, that’s good,” Ryan said. “I don’t think you should ever go more than two days without water. One’s hard enough. After two, you’ll get real dizzy and collapse, and fall to the ground.”
Fasting once a month for two consecutive meals to seek guidance from God is common practice within the LDS church. Some Mormons also employ fasting when they are trying to break an addictive habit or understand scripture.

Ryan Bundy said he went 96 hours without eating in the days before seizing the Malheur refuge building. And he claimed that fasting may be needed to give him divine guidance as to how to end the occupation peacefully—because, while they won’t admit it, the Bundys must know that the federal government won’t release fellow ranchers Dwight Hammond Jr. and his son Steven Hammond from prison and return federal lands to individual states, which are the Bundys’ non-negotiable demands. (See sidebar at right.)

Their inspiration, Ryan Bundy said, comes straight from the Book of Mormon, specifically the story of Captain Moroni, a scriptural figure who rescues his people by raising a flag—called a “title of liberty”—against an evil force.

The Bundys are aware that the land they’ve seized appears to be part of old Mormon territory.

The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge lies at the northern boundary of the Mormon state of Deseret. LDS pioneers established Deseret in 1849, and church leaders, including Brigham Young, proposed its borders to Washington before accepting the smaller Utah Territory. Deseret was a vast space that extended into the land that is now southeastern Oregon—including a swath of Harney County.

Ryan Bundy declined to comment on Deseret, except to say the land’s history gives the militants power “from the ground up.”

By the middle of last week, as the core group grew, there was discord and a growing suspicion of others.

One of the Bundys’ closest confidants, an Arizona tattoo artist-turned-bodyguard named Brian “Booda” Cavalier, had vanished from the camp, several days after arriving. He disappeared after a story appeared in British tabloid the Daily Mail that he lied about his military service. “Stolen valor,” the story called it—perhaps the worst sin in a camp where everyone wants to be a soldier.

Ryan Bundy said Booda went to Nevada to bring back supplies and new recruits.

In Bundyland, it’s easy to find followers who are as paranoid and brutal as Portlanders might expect.

Wes, 31, is from Utah and claims he quit his job in North Dakota to come here. He met the Bundys for the first time a few days ago. His new job: guard the door of the building where the Bundy brothers were staying.

Wes is not without a sense of humor, and lightheartedly chuckled at the nicknames bestowed on his fellow freedom fighters on social media. Wes liked #Yeehawdists, although #YallQaeda was good, too.

But it didn’t take much for him to begin sounding a lot like the paranoid posts on right-wing message boards.

“The feds have psych-ops, and they’re using that to try and scare us,” Wes said. “They figure if they can get us to start shooting, they can send in a drone or drop commandos from high altitudes.”

In fact, the Bundys’ seizure of the federal building acted like a Bat-Signal for a host of anti-federal government militants. These militants have ties to rebellion, secession and, in some cases to criminal activity.

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—Ryan Bundy

In 2014, Cliven Bundy, who owes more than $1 million to the federal government, beat the U.S. Bureau of Land Management into submission in a dispute over grazing rights by calling militias and “patriots” to his Nevada ranch.

With the help of snipers and other armed militants who flocked to his aid, Bundy watched the federal government back down without a shot being fired.

Bundy’s sons Ammon and Ryan decided to repeat that standoff when they heard the story of two Harney County ranchers, Dwight Hammond Jr. and Steven Hammond, whom a judge handed mandatory minimum sentences for setting fires on federal land.

Ammon Bundy arrived in Harney County in mid-December, and seized the headquarters of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge on Jan. 2.

The demands of this group are clear, and completely unrealistic.

They want Dwight and Steven Hammond released from Terminal Island federal prison in Los Angeles.

They want all federal lands in the West transferred to the respective states.

They want the creation of a “super” sheriff office, someone at the local level who can harbor ranchers and others from federal officials without repercussion. Such a person, they say, could have saved the Hammonds.

And then, they want to go back to their wives and children.

“We won’t go to jail,” Ryan Bundy said. “It’s not going to happen.”

JOHN SEPULVADO.
In 1980, bird-watching visitors to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge complained that the cows were destroying critical wildlife habitat. So Nancy and Denzel Ferguson, the husband-and-wife naturalist team who lived just down the road from the sanctuary headquarters, started a letter-writing campaign to draw attention to grazing abuses. They got some cattle off the refuge, but ranchers were furious. The Fergusons received telephone death threats on many nights. A group of ranchers threw them out of a local dance in the early ’80s.

That night, a caller told Nancy that “a bunch of us guys are coming over to get you.” She politely asked who was calling. “Dwight Hamm—” she recalls the caller stammered, before being drowned out by other voices in the background.

Dwight Hammond Jr., the same rancher whose prison sentence for arson sparked the militants’ recent takeover of the refuge’s headquarters, had been one of the people whom Nancy says pushed the Fergusons out of the dance. (Hammond and his son Steven Hammond are in federal prison. Larry Matasar, the Hammonds’ attorney, declined to comment.)

The claims of the armed men now occupying the federal building in Harney County would be all too familiar to Denzel Ferguson. After earning a Ph.D. from Oregon State University in zoology, he spent a quarter-century fighting to protect public lands from ranchers who thought they had a right to use them however they pleased.

For an aging group of Western natural history buffs, Malheur will be forever linked to Denzel and Nancy Ferguson. For most of the 1970s, the Fergusons ran the Malheur Field Station, an environmental education outpost housed in a former Job Corps center at the edge of the sanctuary.

Twenty-two colleges and universities funded the station, which offered summer classes for budding biologists, botanists and birders. Nancy and Denzel lived at the station as resident faculty, while visiting students bunked in nearby dormitories. The beer-soaked parties held in the drab, tin-sided building called the Greasewood Room were legendary among baby boom-era college kids.

But the Fergusons were serious about protecting the southeastern corner of Oregon they called home. Their time at Malheur exposed them to the environmental degradation caused by a century of unrestricted cattle grazing.

Much of the refuge land was devoted to either grazing or growing hay, and the wildlife supposedly protected in this special place was often killed by farm machinery or displaced by cattle. More than 400 miles of barbed-wire fence snaked across the refuge, and the Fergusons often found the desiccated remains of deer and other animals caught in the jagged strands.

The Fergusons’ outspoken criticism of what they called “hooved locusts” on the refuge and other sensitive public lands took a toll. After a decade of running the field station, they left in 1982 and moved to rural Grant County. Nancy and Denzel wrote Sacred Cows at the Public Trough, the first book to challenge the myth of the Western rancher and seriously question a century of unrestrained grazing on public land. Denzel Ferguson ran for Congress as a Democrat in 1992 but lost to incumbent U.S. Rep. Bob Smith (R-Ore.) in the mostly Republican 2nd District. Ferguson called Smith “a tax-supported beef lobbyist” for his efforts to keep grazing fees down, and quipped, “I hold no grazing permits on public land, so you will only have to pay me once.”

The Fergusons’ book details how “welfare ranchers” profit from federal subsidies and public spending. The current standoff is about money, too; federal officials say the Bundy family owes $1 million in unpaid grazing fees, and the Hammonds have a history of running cattle on public land illegally.

Denzel died in 1998, to the very end ranting about the cows tearing up the landscape he loved. Nancy still lives in Eastern Oregon. She says Denzel wouldn’t be surprised by the militants now holding the refuge hostage: “It’s just like what he’d seen before.”

And for the protesters’ claims about returning the land to the original owners? “He’d laugh at them,” she says, “and he’d say, ‘Let’s give it back to the Paiutes.’”