

This article is - 1994- The Commercial Appeal

The Commercial Appeal

Questions repeatedly bring Fifth Amendment from Alamo

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A federal prosecutor Thursday accused Tony Alamo of having as many as seven wives at a time, beating teenage followers to assert his authority and directing an arson to collect insurance. Alamo, on the witness stand for the third day, repeatedly invoked the Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination as he was drilled by Justice Department lawyer Christopher Belcher.

``You coerced several (women) into marrying you by saying you had a message from God that something very bad would happen if they didn't marry you?,' ' Belcher asked.

Alamo took the Fifth Amendment on that question, as he did when Belcher inquired if it was true that Alamo had threatened to throw the parents of one young woman out of the church unless they gave permission for their daughter to marry him.

Alamo is charged in federal court with falsifying his income tax return for 1985 and willfully failing to file for the years 1986, 1987 and 1988. U.S. Dist. Judge Jon McCalla allowed prosecutors to probe Alamo's personal life, including his marital status, to counter testimony Alamo gave earlier about his good deeds.

During his cross-examination Thursday, Belcher produced records to show that Alamo was still married to a Birgitta Gyllenhamer when he married Elizabeth Caldwell.

Alamo said he may still have been married to Caldwell when he was married in a church ceremony to a third woman, Elena Williams. ``It's possible . . . I don't recall. In my mind I was divorced.''

Asked whether he has had up to seven wives at a time in the last two years, Alamo again reached for the Fifth Amendment.

When Belcher asked whether he followed state laws on bigamy, Alamo invoked the Fifth Amendment at the advice of attorney Jeffrey Dickstein.

Alamo denied the child beating and arson accusations.

He said he did not direct the beating of a 14-year-old girl on Valentine's Day in 1984. The girl, Belcher said, was hit more than 100 times with a board.

Alamo denied laughing when an adult member told him ``the board was still smoking'' after the alleged beating of another youth.

