

## Seige of the Alamos.

by Chet Flippo

© COPYRIGHT Time Inc. 1983

In a darkened prayer room inside a sprawling mansion atop a remote, guarded ridge in rural Arkansas rests a coffin. Inside the coffin rests the embalmed body of Susan Alamo, patiently awaiting resurrection. The cult leader has been dead more than a year. Encouraged by Susan's husband, Tony, her followers kneel by the coffin in two-hour shifts, 24 hours a day, every day, to pray for Susan's return.

Life can get weird when you're a member of the Tony and Susan Alamo Christian Foundation, a dangerous and secretive religious group accused of everything from assault to salavery to creating zombies. For these people, praying to raise the dead is just another day at the office.

The sleepy intersection where dusty U.S. 71 meets Interstate 40 northeast of Fort Smith, Ark. seems an unlikely spot for a self-proclaimed messiah to encamp, but it has its points. It's almost impossible to spend a dollar here in Alma or up the road in Dyer without that dollar going straight into the coffers of the Alamo Foundation. From the Alamo DX gas station to the local Western Union to the Alamo Restaurant, the foundation has owned as many as 29 businesses in Alma (pop. 2,755). And it owns many more around the country, from a candy distributorship to the flashy clothing store in Nashville that outfits many country stars.

Tony's big secret: All these businesses are staffed by free labor--Alamo followers, who consider themselves "volunteers," doing God's work. There are several hundred hard-core Alamoites around the country, who devote their lives to enriching the foundation with their labor and to nonstop "witnessing"--that is, handing out Tony's paranoid screeds and trying to convert nonbelievers. Tony claims he saves "tens of thousands of souls a month." His message is an old one: His is the only true church and his followers are only true believers. He talks to God but not to this magazine.

His followers subsist on a diet of grim sermons and hard work, while Tony travels by Cadillac limo from his mansion (with heart-shaped pool) in the Arkansas compound to luxurious homes in Saugus, Calif. and Nashville. He fancies himself a country-gospel star and records on his own label.

The tax-exempt Alamo Foundation has real estate and other holdings worth at least \$25 million, exclusive of cash--though Tony claims that the only thing in the world he owns is the master tape of an unreleased Beatles album, given to him, he says, by drummer Pete Best.

An Alamo defector, who served as the foundation's purchasing agent (and has asked for anonymity in his new life), calls the organization's bank accounts "bottomless" and tells how he used to order furs for Susan Alamo, leather suits for Tony, diamonds, Cadillacs, custom boots and shirts by the dozen. He would air-freight health foods from L.A. to Tony and Susan in Arkansas, while cult members sometimes ate supermarket-rejected spoiled food.

The history of the foundation is in many ways a history of '60s movements and how they grew. Though the foundation now has a shadowy prominence in religion's underworld, it seemed like a legitimate street ministry on Hollywood's seamy Sunset Strip in that drug-drenched decade and, according to Tony, even was praised by then Governor Reagan. But what was once a children's crusade is now a covert operation. Tony will not venture off the compound without bodyguards and his dark glasses. Though he claims he wears them because of glaucoma, most eye doctors say dark glasses have no effect on glaucoma.

Susan, the cult's founder, died on April 8, 1982, felled by a cancer she had claimed would be healed by prayer. Susan was the foundation's spark, the divinely chosen "handmaiden of god," who would make a miracle, curing herself, thus focusing attention on the foundation. Then she and Tony would lead a glorious world crusade. (She and Tony secretly--and unsuccessfully--tried to convert Elvis Presley, which would have been another kind of miracle.) Susan's death shook the faith of her followers. This, says an insider, is why Tony preaches resurrection: "As long as Tony has Susan's body, he has her power."

Tony has raised the foundation's profile since her death. He recruited some 150 cult members to elect his candidate Mayor of Dyer. (The FBI gave up an election fraud investigation, in part because its star witness, an Alamo follower,

## Seige of the Alamos.

recanted his testimony and disappeared, apparently back into the foundation.) Tony bought full-page ads in newspapers from New York to Los Angeles to print his rambling manifestos, attacks on the IRS, the Supreme Court, ERA (he has referred to women as "house pigs"), homosexuals, the media and the Department of Labor, which won a lawsuit against the foundation for nonpayment of wages to volunteers.

Last Summer Alamoites round the country began actively recruiting unwed mothers, mostly young and poor, to come to Arkansas as part of Tony's antiabortion campaign. This was, and is, the offer: "We will pay for the delivery of the child and will raise the child until he or she is an adult, educate the child and pay all expenses until fully grown." The psychic costs are not mentioned. The child would be raised by the foundation, perhaps to be adopted by a foundation couple. Or the mother could become a volunteer and work--for nothing, of course. Or she could leave. If she did, she might be able to reclaim her child in one to five years if she "finds a good husband and a happy family life," Tony has said.

Tony's baby project soon attracted unwanted attention. In one very tense confrontation, his gate guards turned away Arkansas social services officials who were seeking to examine the foundation's child-care facilities. After the standoff, the officials returned with a court order and marched into the Dyer compound with state police. They found a child-care center with no children in it-- and a very uncooperative Tony. "At first the state police captain said he would only send in officers in bulletproof vests," said Arkansas Assistant Attorney General Robert Waldrum, who went in with the police. "It's a remote, secret place up there. There's only one way in and one way out. Tony has guards everywhere--tough, don't-shit-with-me guys. They will not reply to anyone unless Tony nods. No one talks except Tony. Tony had said there were at least 70 children. There were none. We found 17 little beds and four cribs and two potty chairs and one commode. The only heat was from a wood-burning 55-gallon drum. We believe the women were to have their babies in Memphis. Then they would come to Alma to be proselytized and sent to work. The mother gives the child to Tony. At first we thought it might be a black market adoption racket. Now we think he's raising workers."

The notion of a cadre of cultists indoctrinated from infancy is a chilling one. The baby harvest is just beginning to set off alarms in state agencies around the country, though so far little has been done. It is impossible to determine how many unwed mothers have accepted Tony's offer. (It takes a court order to penetrate an Alamo compound, and people have a way of disappearing before an order is executed.) Furthermore, the foundation recruits young runaways, who are less likely to be traceable. Waldrum has good reason to complain that he can't find out anything about the Alamoites.

One reason for the foundation's apparent immunity from federal and state laws is its aggressive withdrawal from the world. Volunteers cannot talk to outsiders except to witness to them. All outsiders are seen as agents of Satan, especially parents who try to see their children. Some parents have been involved in violent confrontations with volunteers wielding clubs and pipes. Three volunteers who had been ordered returned to their parents by a judge were spirited out of state by a cult member in 1977. Another tactic is to chant all night outside a parent's motel room. Out in rural Arkansas, a swarm of angry chanters can be very unsettling. And authorities, especially in the South, where any kind of religion still has a cachet, are slow to move against religious groups.

In 1970 the foundation seemed a true hippie Salvation Army when it threw out its lifeline to Judy Shapiro. She was perfect foundation fodder: confused daughter rebelling against Jewish parents living in the exclusive Brentwood section of Los Angeles. "I was a wild runaway," says Judy, now 33. She would eventually lose 11 years, two children and a husband to the Alamos.

When Judy Shapiro came to them, Tony and Susan had been running their foundation in Hollywood for just over a year. Their backgrounds are hazy. Tony was born to a Jewish family Sept. 20, 1934 in Joplin, Mo. as Bernie Lazar Hoffman. After heading West, he dropped out of school and later served three months in a California jail on a weapons violation. He called himself Marcus Abad before changing his name to Tony Alamo because, he said, "the Italians were all making it as crooners at the time." Soon he met Susan Lipowitz, a platinum blonde who was married to a small-time Los Angeles hood, Sol Lipowitz. Susan--born Edith Opal Horn in either Arkansas or Missouri in the '20s--was picking up and feeding hippies and druggies in Hollywood. In 1966 she and Tony were wed once in Tijuana and twice in Las Vegas to be "triple sure," Tony said.

Neither was an ordained minister. Susan later said that their mission consisted of "going out into the streets and walking up to drug addicts and hippies and saying, 'Why are you destroying your mind, your soul and your body?' We found that they were like sponges, they were ready to make that decision [for religion]."

## Seige of the Alamos.

Judy Shapiro was drawn by "the friendly people," the lure of a new life, by what she now calls the "seduction syndrome." "Saved" in Hollywood in 1970, she moved to the Alamo compound in Saugus, outside L.A., in 1971. Looking back, she now realizes she was brainwashed by several well-known methods: sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, constant ranting about foundation enemies, isolation from society, and forced labor.

"We were taught," she says, "that anyone outside the foundation was cast out from God, that anyone who left was lost. We were taught that our families were of Satan." Like many other cultists, Judy shunned her perplexed family and called them devils. She became, she says, a "robot for God." She was told, and believed, that parents would turn volunteers over to deprogrammers, who would rape the women and turn the men into homosexuals. She unquestioningly worked long hours in the foundation kitchen preparing meals, and she rolled out in the middle of the night with everyone else to pray during Susan's illness. To augment these prayers, volunteers would sometimes fast up to seven days at Tony's request. Even these sacrifices were not enough. "We could rule the world if you people weren't letting us down," Tony would say when Susan was ill.

From the time she was a Baby Christian (a newcomer), Judy was almost never left alone. The Devil snatched lone persons, Susan preached. Privacy was nonexistent. Judy married cult member Danny Shapiro in 1975 on Tony's birthday. The marriage was arranged by Susan. Single men and women could not speak to each other in the foundation. "I met Danny on our wedding night, really," Judy says. "I hardly knew him. Our first kiss was our wedding kiss." This did not ensure eternal bliss. To further complicate matters--and, Judy suspects, to maintain total control--couples sometimes were separated to work in different towns. Susan also decided who would have how many children.

In the mid-'70s Tony and Susan began buying land and shifting operations to Arkansas. California agencies began inspecting the facilities and the press suddenly began turning up embarrassing stories. Susan's own daughter fled the foundation, charging that Tony and Susan were lining their pockets by fleecing their flock. She had helped organize the foundation "to give Tony and my mother an income," Susan's daughter said. Susan said her daughter was mentally disturbed. There were other ugly incidents, such as the savage beating of a volunteer's mother by her own daughter and Susan's top woman lieutenant. That case was settled out of court when the victim was paid an undisclosed amount. Parental visits to the foundation became cause for alarm.

In 1977 Judy Shapiro followed the Alamos from Saugus to Alma. Judy believed Susan's prophecies that California was about to fall into the ocean. "We were made to feel that Arkansas was the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey," says Judy. "I was a little disappointed."

By then the Alamo autocracy had become a dictatorship. Judy and her husband finally got a house, with moldy carpets, no phone and a kitchen they couldn't use because all cult members had to eat in the foundation cafeteria. The couple usually had no money--each was lucky to get a \$5-a-week allowance before Tony's fines for rule-breaking were imposed--and no way to get to town. Judy was allowed to turn on the heat for only 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening, even when the temperature dropped below freezing. The foundation owned model houses, but Tony reserved these for media tours.

Then there were the "Ask" memos. For everything from underwear to a hospital visit for an appendectomy, associates had to submit a written request. While Susan was alive, women had to submit their "Ask Susies" to her. Now every plea is an "Ask Tony." One defector says that dental care was not covered by the "Ask" plan. When his toothaches became so bad they were obviously beyond prayer, he went as a charity case to a hospital's emergency room, where the tooth was pulled. Judy Shapiro says she had no dental care for nine years. Early in her first pregnancy she began spotting badly, and it took the better part of a day for her to get to a hospital.

A former volunteer says that one of his duties was the dump cult members who became insane at the nearest county hospital's psychiatric ward. "Take him to the zoo" was Tony's direction. The volunteer remembers one man who worked on the foundation's pig farm and who started going around on all fours, grunting. It was not until he demanded to be castrated that Tony sent him to the Zoo.

There were "alerts" when Tony or Susan predicted imminent enemy attack. The siege mentality never let up: The enemy was everywhere. When they heard the news about Jonestown, Tony explained that the tragedy was a Communist plot, designed to discredit groups like their own. Judy soon learned to put herself "on report" to Tony before others did so: It

## Seige of the Alamos.

was the Christian duty of all cultists to watch each other. There were scores of infractions, including not getting trading stamps when buying gas at non-Alamo stations, being motionless one minute or more while in the prayer room, and picking up cigarette butts off the street while witnessing. (People with no income couldn't buy cigarettes.) Infractions were the basis for frequent "rebuke sessions" in which Tony or Susan would censure and ostracize offenders, who might also draw hard labor. Cult members who managed to collect their \$5-a-week allowance often lost it in payment of fines. Once Tony got so carried away he fined a follower \$1 million for walking on the imperial Alamo lawn.

There were no books allowed that had not been approved by the Alamos, no newspapers, no private phones, no idle chatter, no Top 40 radio, no movies (though some films made by the John Birch Society were shown), no pets, no laughter, no vacations. Judy's trips to town were to vote for candidates of Alamo's choosing.

Judy's marriage foundered last year, and she was close to a nervous breakdown. Her husband later admitted in a custody proceeding that he struck her. He also criticized her handling of the children, Abigail, now 6, and Joanna, 5. "Abigail was not doing well in school," Judy says. "She's hyperactive. I was blamed for that. Other women would discipline her. My husband told me to leave. He said, 'Susie says to Ask Judy if she'll leave.'"

Judy says she wrote to Danny several times and got no answer. She called him and asked if she could return. "He said, 'You could, but the kids are better off without you.'" Judy won legal custody of her daughters, but it was an empty victory, since Danny Disappeared, taking the two girls with him. Though there are federal and state warrants out for Danny's arrest, he and the girls are still missing. Tony told Judy he had no idea where they were.

For someone who gave so much to the foundation, Judy seems in good shape as she drives to Santa Monica to her new church--and new life--on a sunny

Sunday. But there are scars. She visibly

flinches every time she sees a Chevy Blazer on the street ("That's what they drove in the foundaton"). She still--after more than a decade of being ordered about 24 hours a day--has trouble making decisions. She is taking vocational courses to try to enter the job market, but the 11-year gap in her life is not easily filled.

"I know now that I went into the cult because I was seeking a family. I feel really cheated," Judy says heatedly. "I was willing to die for the cause of that group. They taught us to be ready to die. I put 11 years in. Now I have no husband and no children. I turned against my mother and said terrible things about her. I put Tony and Susan first, and they betrayed me. Now I'm going to get my children back."

As she was speaking, a few miles away at Dodger Stadium, Alamo volunteers were fanning out in the parking lot and sticking Tony's give-us-your-babies leaflets on car windshields. Three thousand miles to the east, Alamo volunteers were doing the same at Yankee Stadium. And there were others in between.