

"SCARED TOO LONG," TIM REITERMAN, SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER,  
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## People's Temple and a father's grief

*"I just can't understand how my son, bright as he was, could be taken in by a thing like this. It must be like cancer; it grows slowly and takes a long time to come to a head."*

By Tim Reiterman

After 40 years of photographing news and sports events for the Associated Press, Robert "Sammy" Houston was speaking out for the first time as a private citizen.

He was speaking out because he was outraged and wounded by the way People's Temple treated his son before he died beneath the wheels of a freight train.

He was speaking out because his dead son's two daughters were sent on a "vacation" to New York and wound up at the church's agricultural mission in Guyana — without their mother.

He was speaking out because he didn't have much speaking time left. Doctors cut out his cancer-choked voice box just a few days later.

"I'm tired of being scared," the 59-year-old photographer rasped, his voice cracking. "I've been scared too long. I might lose my voice and everything else — so I gotta say it now. And I can't say it in a soft tone."

Until now, the wiry little Texan said he has treaded softly around People's Temple for fear his granddaughters would be taken far away from him, for fear he would become estranged from their mother, who still is a church member.

The high-pitched, chattering voice that was so familiar around the dugouts and sidelines of Bay Area ballparks had never before asked the agonizing questions aloud: What prompted his only son, Robert Houston, Jr., to work two jobs and turn over \$2,000 a month to the church? How did his son, a probation officer moonlighting as a railroad worker, end up crushed on the tracks? Are his granddaughters in Guyana of their own free will — and can they get decent medical care, education and love?

Bob Houston's ex-wife, Phyllis, says she is happy her daughters are in Guyana and is convinced their life there is healthy and beneficial. "I last heard from them about a week ago and they said they really like it there," she said in a telephone interview from temple attorney Charles Garry's office in San Francisco. "There also is a condition that if they don't like it there, they can come back."

Phyllis said she had no recollection of Bob Houston being boxed, beaten or berated by anyone in the temple, as reported by several former members. "As far as I know, he was a highly regarded member," she said.

Garry said he recently visited the temple mission in Guyana and found it to be a paradise with good food, housing, education and medical care. He said he saw no evidence of any physical punishment and added that it was prohibited by the temple. "If I had any children, I wouldn't hesitate to send them there," Garry said.

Still, interviews with Bob Houston's family, his widow and friends paint a less than idyllic picture of his involvement with the controversial temple headed by the Rev. Jim Jones.

The terrible incongruity of Bob Houston's death materializes on the pages of the family photo album. Pictures of proud parents — Sam and Nadyne Houston — and a bright, studious son the other kids called the "little professor." School work with A's and B's scrawled by teachers over the years. A photo of an Eagle Scout playing taps at the dedication of a Panipala cemetery where he would be buried. A newspaper clipping of a school band member shaking hands with John Kennedy.

A smiling young man in glasses standing before the Campanile at the University of California at Berkeley. A baton-flourishing stu-

dent director of the UC marching band. A young married man working his way through school and supporting two baby daughters.

That was Robert Hascue Houston Jr., born March 13, 1943, in Dallas, a descendant of the great Texas general. A gentle fellow who wouldn't fish with a barbed hook; an accomplished musician who was more interested in helping people than being famous.

In 1969, Bob Houston and his wife and first love, Phyllis, joined People's Temple, and became disciples of Jones, the church's charismatic leader. His parents were surprised that their well-educated son, who had belonged to the Methodist and Presbyterian churches at various times, would be attracted to a faith healer. But they were more than dismayed when two years passed without a visit from their son's family.

"The first time we talked, I ridiculed the faith cures and pulling the cancers out," Sammy said.

"I wasn't critical of him or what he was doing with the church," he added. "In fact, I was proud of him. I believe we raised him to be a good boy. I admired what he did and was almost envious of what he did to help his fellow man."

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By 1970 Bob and Phyllis were members of the People's Temple board in Redwood Valley in Mendocino County. Bob liked his work as medical therapist, but he found it less fulfilling because he felt he was helping people, but he couldn't stomach a later job as a Xerox salesman.

When Joyce Shaw, an A student from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, attended her first temple meeting in May 1970, Bob Houston was somewhat conspicuous. First, he was visible as a band member at the revival-like meet-

ings. Second, he was one of the few well educated intellectuals in the congregation.

By 1972 Houston's marriage was getting so rocky that it was the subject of at least one "catharsis," or criticism session. (Shaw says Jones told the couple they could each have relations with other members, but Phyllis Houston says Jones encouraged them to stay together for the sake of the children.) Nonetheless, Bob and Joyce spent more and more time together, working long hours on a church publication called "The Living Word." Then their relationship was discouraged.

"In the beginning of 1973 through December, I was working full time in the church publication office," Shaw said recently. "Bob was working for Xerox full time and putting in another 40 to 60 hours doing photography for the church. He also was continuing to play in the band. And he drove the temple bus on trips to San Francisco and Los Angeles. He got three or four hours sleep at the most and was running himself ragged like the rest of us."

In December 1973, Joyce Shaw and Bob Houston were summoned to a meeting of the planning commission, the temple's governing board, and were asked by Jones to marry so they could work as a missionary team.

"Bob and I went off and talked about it," Shaw recalled. "Jones didn't want people in love or with deep feelings to get married; he wanted people married to tie them to the church. But Bob and I decided we'd go ahead and do it."

"We were compatible intellectually and ideologically. I really cared about him."

The divorce of Phyllis and Bob Houston was finalized in September 1974. Then Joyce and Bob brought their marriage papers to Jones. "He

signed them," Joyce said. "And as we were walking away," he said, "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." Then he laughed. To him it was a joke. "I don't think we even had time to go to a movie."

Their honeymoon suite was a 220-square-foot studio apartment in San Francisco. The couple lived there for a few months before moving to a larger house. They worked two jobs each to defray half their rent and they worked two jobs each to defray the other half.

About six weeks after their marriage, the newlyweds were called in the middle of the night by a high-ranking church member and asked to provide a home to a boy who had been in trouble with Ukiah authorities.

One extra person was no problem, but Shaw says Houston's children were assigned to live with him. "We had no more room," Shaw said. "We rented a big three-story frame house with a garden in back on San Bruno Avenue."

The commune started out with seven children, but soon the total reached 24, most of whom were children living two or three to a room. For a while, it was remarkably harmonious. The Houstons made sure the children received good medical and dental care and fed and clothed them.

"Most of them came to us in rags, so I spent hours mending and we went shopping at used clothes stores," Shaw said. "If any of the kids got in trouble at school, Bob went over to talk to the teachers and we did individual tutoring at the house. Four or five of the children were taking music lessons at school. We bought musical instruments for two of them, and Bob would coach them at home."

The couple took the children on birthday outings to drive-in movies, the beach, Chinatown and

ice skating, and they had all they could eat — though the food bill averaged 60 cents a day per person.

Despite his ardor as a worker, Bob Houston was a black sheep in Jones' flock, someone whose intellectualism was mocked, someone reportedly ridiculed by Jones for falling asleep at all-night meetings and branded a "narcoleptic" despite a brutal schedule.

On at least a couple of occasions, his widow recalled, Houston was disciplined in front of his children and the congregation for untimely dozing or showing "male chauvinistic tendencies." His punishment was being boxed by a larger man until Jones saw fit to stop the beating. "In one he got a shiner and was embarrassed," Shaw said. "They bent him to a pulp. He understood the unwritten rule that you weren't supposed to fight back. Jim was sitting up there laughing. It was apparent that Jim was threatened by Bob's intellectualism and education. Jim took special delight in seeing him beaten."

Temple members were urged to turn in on each other for various offenses. Shaw wrote a letter to Jones in 1978 about the last time he was beaten.

How to structure the commune operation. The temple decided that Bob was a destructive influence and, contrary to his wife's intentions, was made to work full time on rebuilding the temple's burned-out San Francisco church. He worked 18 hours a day, living in the church for the sake of convenience.

Bob Houston returned to the church and, as a disciplined and penitent member, he sat in the front row at services, standing and waving his hands to show he had the "spirit."

"He looked on himself as a responsible adult," former church member Gary Lambrev said. "But he was laughed at everywhere,

even at home. He was the traditional beating boy. Everyone tore into him. He was terrorized."

According to former members, Jones had declared open season on Houston, branding him "house-geoise" for expressing intellectual thoughts in front of poorly educated members of the congregation. "Jim Jones was down on him for not talking earthy," recalled Jeanne Mills, an ex-member who ran church publications. "Bob talked on a higher plane, using big words and intellectual concepts. Even the kids were urged to use foul language, but I don't remember Bob ever swearing."

Friends said the scrappy and sometimes argumentative Houston was at the same time a good soldier and faithful to his own intellectual curiosity. In fact, his ability to ask probing questions of Jones and to argue with fellow members got him into trouble more than once.

"Bob believed Jim Jones wanted people to think creatively but this was the last thing Jim Jones wanted," Lambrev said. "Bob was interested in learning and would get up and ask questions — about things like the movement in Portugal and Communist countries in Western Europe."

Bob Houston — a man dedicated to remedying inequalities — realized he could make more money than less-educated temple members. So he felt it was his duty to work two jobs — days as a counselor at Youth Guidance Center and nights as a switchman in the Southern Pacific rail yards.

"At one point in 1976, he alone was turning over \$2,000 a month to the church," according to his widow, Joyce Shaw. "The church of it was that was one of the things that got him on the board. He never would have taken any of those jobs in terms of fulfilling himself."

"He really thought the temple was a worthwhile organization. He was very entrenched in socialist ideology, and he believed that doing his work would help his daughters and other children find themselves in a better world."

While the private Bob Houston would confide love for his parents, the public Bob Houston infrequently saw them in their neatly conventional San Bruno suburban home. While the private Bob Houston's devotion and love for his daughters was total, the public Bob Houston showed them no favoritism. While the private Bob Houston had a good relationship with his wife, the public Bob Houston had scraps with her.

In January 1976, Jones initiated a rule that commune members had to eat at the temple headquarters on Geary Street to save money.

Rather than shuttling two dozen commune members from Potrero Hill to dinner each day, the temple rented a flat on Sutter Street nearer the church.

Still, long dinner lines, an empty refrigerator and eat-and-run meals eroded the commune's unity. In a planning commission meeting — Houston's first as a member of that elite group — he stood up and backed his wife when she complained about bad nutrition in the temple's high carbohydrate diet. "Bob was intractable," Joyce said. "If he made up his mind, he could not be swayed."

On July 16, 1976, Joyce bought a bus ticket and left in the middle of the night, convinced that the household was breaking up and the temple was a destructive force. "If you leave, it will hurt a lot of people," Bob told her in a phone conversation the next day.

On Oct. 2, 1976, Joyce Shaw called her husband to wish him a

happy second anniversary and to tell him she wasn't returning to the church.

"There was no disharmony between us, but you're either in the church or out," she said. "It wasn't possible for him to go to church and me to stay away like in other churches. I knew that as a principled person he would realize what was going on and would get out."

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In the small hours of Oct. 5, 1978, there was a knock at Sammy and Nadyne Houston's door. It was one of Sam's golf partners, Ben Rhoten, a railroad worker.

"Sam, I got something to tell you," he began.

Robert Houston Jr., 33, was found mangled along the tracks at Sixth and 16th streets. His light was left on the brake wheel of a flatcar, his glove on the coupler.

After her husband was buried, Joyce Shaw made one of the most difficult decisions of her life. She wrote her in-laws letters telling them what People's Temple was all about — about the control exercised over members, about the false admissions and blank pieces of paper members were required to sign — and about the pressure to avoid all non-members, including relatives.

Then the elder Houstons could better understand why they seldom

were visited, why they were discouraged from taking their granddaughters on shopping outings, why they were required to give presents to all the commune children if they wanted to treat their granddaughters, why their former daughter-in-law and grandchildren did not sit with them at the funeral.

"When I heard about Bobby Jr. getting boxed, I was sick," Nadyne said. "I could not believe in the one person who was so kind and gentle."

After their son's death, the Houstons saw much more of their granddaughters — Patty, 14, and Judy, 13 — but the girls and their mother often were accompanied by a temple chaperone.

And then, in August, the Houstons were told their granddaughters were going on a temple vacation to New York. Less than a month later, the girls were sending letters from the temple's agricultural mission in Guyana.

While his wife is concerned about the physical hazards of jungle life and their granddaughters' emotional and educational well-being, Sammy said, "They are there without their mother. I'm worried there are people there who don't want to be there and shouldn't be there for physical or other reasons. I have hopes my granddaughters will get out of there, and I believe they want to get out."

## Temple investigations bogged down

While the Rev. Jim Jones remains in Guyana with no immediate plans to return, several investigations into People's Temple activities continue without tangible results.

"Jim Jones wants to return very badly," said temple attorney Charles Garry. "He's happy there, but he's the kind of person who wants to be involved. He can't come back here for reasons I can't disclose at this time."