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## Officials Describe 'Cult Rituals' in Child Abuse Case

### Photos of Youngsters Seized At D.C. Warehouse, Probers Say

Authorities investigating the alleged abuse of six children found with two men in a Tallahassee, Fla., park discovered material yesterday in the Washington area that they say points to a 1960's style commune called the Finders, described in a court document as a "cult" that allegedly conducted "brainwashing" and used children "in rituals."

D. C. police, who searched a Northeast Washington warehouse linked to the group removed large plastic bags filled with color slides, photographs and photographic contact sheets. Some photos visible through a bag carried from the warehouse at 1307 Fourth St. NE were wallet-sized pictures of children, similar to school photos, and some were of naked children.

D.C. police sources said some of the items seized yesterday showed pictures of children engaged in what appeared to be "cult rituals."

Officials of the U.S. Customs Service, called in to aid in the investigation, said that the material seized yesterday includes photos showing children involved in bloodletting ceremonies of animals and one photograph of a child in chains.

Customs officials said they were looking into whether a child pornography operation was being conducted.

According to court documents, computers and software were seized from the warehouse, from a Glover Park apartment building and from a van that was recovered in Tallahassee along with the children. Yesterday's disclosures about the mysterious group grew out of an investigation that was set in motion Wednesday by an anonymous call to Tallahassee police about two "well-dressed men" who were "supervising" six dishevelled children in a neighborhood park. The men were arrested and charged with child abuse, according to Tallahassee police.

Their links to the D.C. area have led authorities into a far-reaching investigation that includes the Finders - a group of about 40 people that court documents allege is led by a man named Marion Pettie - and their various homes, including the duplex apartment building in Glover Park, the Northeast Washington warehouse and a 90 acre farm in rural Madison County, Va.

Tallahassee police, who arrested and charged men identified as Douglas E. Ammerman and Michael Houlihan with child abuse, contacted D.C. police Thursday in an attempt to establish the identities of the children.

They learned that D.C. police had heard of the Finders group, according to Tallahassee police spokesman Scott Hunt. No other member of the group had been located last night, police sources said.

According to U.S. District Court records in Washington, a confidential police source had previously told

authorities that the Finders were "a cult" that conducted "brainwashing" techniques at the warehouse and the Glover Park duplex at 3918 20W. St. NW. This source told of being recruited by the Finders with promises of "financial reward and sexual gratification" and of being invited by one member to "explore" satanism with them, according to the documents.

According to the affidavit the source told authorities that children were used in "rituals" by the members, and though the source had never witnessed abuse of the children, the source said the children's grandparents feared for their safety.

On Dec. 15, a D.C. police detective observed a clearing in the area of the 3900 block W. St. NW where "several round stones had been gathered" near a circle, as well as evidence that people had gathered there, according to the document, which stated that "this practice is sometimes used in satanic rituals."

Armed with that information and the report from Tallahassee police of the allegedly abused children, D.C. police sought search warrants for the Glover Park residence and the warehouse.

Meanwhile, authorities in Florida attempted to learn more about the six small children, described by a police spokesman as "hungry and..pretty pathetic" who had set the investigation in motion.

The children, identified in a court document only by the first names of Honeybee, John Franklin, Bee Bee, Max and Mary, were described as "dirty unkept, hungry, disturbed and agitated" They had been living in the rear of the van for some time, the document said. Yesterday, police spokesman Hunt said one of the children, a 6 yr. old girl "showed signs of sexual abuse" but that an examination by a local doctor showed none of the children as being ill.

Five of the children were uncommunicative, according to police, and none seemed to recognize objects such as typewriters and staplers. However, the oldest was able to give investigators some information. She said that the two men "were their teachers," according to Hunt. She was not sure where they had been recently or where they were going. But until recently, they had been living in the District in "a house with other children and adults." They lived mainly on a diet of raw fruit and vegetables, she said.

The girl told the police that while they were in the District, the children received instruction from "a man they called a Game Caller or a Game Leader," according to Hunt.

According to the D.C. court document, a Tallahassee police investigator identified this man as Marion Pettie, who the confidential police source "also identified as the Stroller, leader of this 'cult.'"

The children have been placed in emergency shelters in Tallahassee, according to Merrill Moody of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. He said officials were trying to identify them.

Neighbors of the W Street house last night identified the photographs of two of the children as residents of the house. Before their arrests in the park, Ammerman and Houlihan had told police that they were teachers from Washington "transporting these children to Mexico and a school for brilliant children," according to Hunt. When police asked the men where the children's mothers were they said they were being weaned from their mothers.

Yesterday, U.S. Attorney Joseph E. diGenova said that authorities were investigating "the crime of kidnapping" but that the investigation "is not limited to that as the evidence evolves."

George Wisnowsky, spokesman for the FBI in Jacksonville, said the FBI was "checking the transportation of children across state lines for immoral purposes or kidnapping."

Authorities in Florida, who searched the van, found 20 floppy computer discs and a device Hunt said could be used to hook into a computer in another location by telephone. He said D.C. police have obtained evidence that a computer linked to the group received a call from Tallahassee late this week.

Meanwhile, authorities in Washington were busy searching the warehouse and the Glover Park residence, side-by-side brick apartment buildings that, according to neighbors, stood out in the neighborhood because of a hot tub and satellite dish on the roof. Only women and children lived there, though men visited regularly, according to neighbors.

One woman from the neighborhood said the children from the house were "easy to spot because they were so dirty," adding that adults with them "seemed not to care." She said the group from the house reminded her of "leftover hippies." But another neighbor, college professor John Matthews, who said he had lived at 3918 W St. for a short time while looking for an apartment, said the residents were "a close-knit group" of feminists who liked to help people and were not a cult. "The neighborhood talks about them because of their life style," Matthews said.

The Fourth Street warehouse, which authorities said also was used as a residence, had windows that were boarded shut. One wall was covered with a huge map of the world, lit by floodlights. Upstairs, mattresses were flung on the floors of various rooms.

Staff writers Joseph E. Bouchard, Ed Bruske, Mary Thonton, John Harris and Linda Wheeler contributed to this report.

## **CULT LINK SEEN IN CASE OF UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN**

By JON NORDHEIMER, Special to the New York Times  
Published: February 7, 1987

The authorities in several states today sought to identify six children who the police said were apparently taken from their parents by two Washington, D.C., men and enlisted in what some have described as a bizarre cult of devil worshipers.

Known to one another by such names as "Benjamin Franklin," "John Paul Pope" and "Honeybee," the children were taken into protective custody Thursday by the police in Tallahassee, Fla., after they were found, unwashed and hungry, in a city park. The children, two girls and four boys ranging in age from 2 to 7 years, were with two men driving a van with Virginia license plates.

Acting on information supplied by detectives in Tallahassee, the police in Washington today searched a house and a warehouse in the northwest section of the District of Columbia, seizing photographs and

other documents that one source described as "consistent with a satanic cult," including a photograph of a mutilated animal. No Clues to Their Identities

Questions about how the band of children materialized in Florida has police baffled. Some officials have said the case resembled something more like a Pied Piper story than a tale of the occult.

Some of the children told investigators they had not seen their parents since Christmas and had been traveling with the men since then. Other children said that one of the men, Michael Houlihan, 28 years old, was their father, but Mr. Houlihan denied it without providing any clues to their identities.

Mr. Houlihan and the other man, Douglas Edward Ammerman, 27, were arrested on charges of aggravated child abuse.

The children found with them Thursday were insect-bitten and apparently had not bathed in weeks, the police said. Five were apparently in good health, but one child, a 7-year-old girl, showed signs of sexual abuse, according to investigators. The children were placed in shelters until the authorities could determine more about their background. Men Said They Were Teachers

Investigators in Tallahassee at first reported the suspects told them they were headed for Mexico in the van to start a school for brilliant children. Today, however, the police discounted that story and said they had information that Mr. Houlihan might have been headed for Bradenton on Florida's Gulf Coast south of Tampa, where he was reported to have relatives.

Both men, who were described as articulate and well-dressed, identified themselves as teachers of the children.

The Federal authorities, meanwhile, were asked to assist with the investigation and help identify the children. Fingerprints Being Obtained

A check of reports of missing children in the Washington area did not turn up any hard leads, investigators said, and photographs of the children and their fingerprints were being obtained to circulate across the nation.

"As far as we're concerned, this goes from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico," said Scott Hunt, a spokesman for the Tallahassee Police Department.

Evidence obtained in the searches today in Washington "revealed that the organization is probably headquarters for some type of satanic cult," Mr. Hunt said. "Adults are encouraged to join this group and one of the stipulations of joining this group is that they give up the rights of their children."

Police sources in Washington said the trail of the men led to a rural Virginia community in Madison County, about two hours southwest of the nation's capital, apparently a lead provided by documents found today. "It may turn out to be one property, it may turn out to be more," said Lieut. M. G. Millner of the Virginia state police who added that the police would to check the area soon. Computer Programs Seized

In the searches, police officers seized large boxes of documents, records and equipment, including computer programming material.

Twenty-seven computer storage disks were also found, along with rotting food, in the blue 1980 Dodge van driven by the suspects when they were taken into custody in Tallahassee with the children.

Witnesses there told investigators that they saw two other men and children in a second van make contact with the first group in the park. The witnesses said they drove away before the police arrived.

Children Rewarded With Food

The children told investigators in Tallahassee that they had been on the road for weeks, camping out at night. The older children reported that they were rewarded with food for doing "good things" but that the nature of what was expected was not described.

Their daily ration of food consisted of oranges, bananas and raw potatoes, they told the police.

Based on information provided by the children, they were tentatively identified as Mary Houlihan, 7 years old; Max Livingstone, 6; Honeybee Evans, 3; Benjamin Franklin, 3; John Paul Pope Houlihan, 2, and B.B., a 2-year-old boy.

### **Fla. Child-abuse Case May Be Linked To Cult**

Posted: February 07, 1987 | Philadelphia Inquirer

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Two men found in a van with six dirty, bewildered children have been charged with child abuse and might belong to a "satanic" cult, a police spokesman said yesterday.

And in Washington, D.C., a raid on a warehouse linked to the cult has led investigators to look into whether a child-pornography operation was being conducted.

Tallahassee detectives were trying to determine the identities of the children. A couple in Washington had contacted police, saying they were the grandparents of one of the children, said Tallahassee police spokesman Scott Hunt.

Hunt also said one of the children showed signs of sexual abuse. The children, ages 2 to 6, are in the custody of Florida health authorities.

The men, who identified themselves as Michael Houlihan and Doug Ammerman, were arrested in a city park Wednesday after an anonymous caller told police of two well-dressed men watching over six "filthy" children. Hunt said the children obviously had not bathed in days and told police they had not eaten in 24 hours. They were covered with scratches and insect bites, he said.

Hunt said police did not believe the names the men gave were correct. A check of the Virginia license plate on their van showed it belonged to a man matching Houlihan's description, but with a different name, he said.

Hunt said he also believed the names the children gave - such as "Benjamin Franklin," "Honey Bee" and "John Paul Pope" - were false names given them by Houlihan and Ammerman.

Investigators also said the children seemed unfamiliar with everyday items such as telephones and staplers.

The children showed no fear of the men, Hunt said, and behaved as if they had been with them for a long time. One, a 6-year-old girl, told police that another child - a 2-year-old boy - was her brother, and

that Houlihan was their father. Houlihan, however, vehemently denied being related to any of the children, Hunt said.

Both men were being held in the Leon County Jail after failing to post \$100,000 bond.

District of Columbia authorities said materials discovered in yesterday's warehouse raid there point to a 1960s-style commune called the Finders, described in a court document as a "cult" that allegedly conducted "brainwashing" and used children "in rituals."

The Washington Post reported that police removed from the warehouse large plastic bags filled with color slides, photographs and photographic contact sheets. Some photos visible through a bag, as it was carried from the warehouse, were of children; some were wallet-sized, similar to school pictures, and some were of naked children, the Post reported.

District police sources told the Post that some of the items seized were pictures of children engaged in what appeared to be "cult rituals." Officials of the U.S. Customs Service, called in to aid in the investigation, said the material includes photos showing children involved in bloodletting ceremonies of animals and one photograph of a child in chains.

Local officials, the FBI and Customs officials were looking into the possible relationship between the cult and the Tallahassee incident.

## **Threats Force Move**

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla., Feb. 7 (AP) - The six children were moved from a shelter after officials there received telephone calls threatening to the children, the police said today.**

**The children were moved to a site that was undisclosed and were being protected by armed guards after a half-dozen threats were telephoned Friday night to a temporary shelter in Tallahassee, according to a police spokesman, Scott Hunt.**

Mr. Hunt said the Finders cult might have been accustomed to selling or smuggling the children of its members out of the country.

The two men found with the children at a playground remained in the Leon County Jail today, charged with one count each of felony child abuse and held in lieu of \$100,000 bond each.

The children, who had not been bathed in several days when they were found, had insect bites and had not been fed in more than a day. Investigators said the children appeared to be ignorant of such daily conveniences as hot water and electricity.

## INQUIRY SPREADS ON 6 CHILDREN AND CULT

By RICHARD HALLORAN, *Special to the New York Times*

Published: February 8, 1987

Police officials here said today that six disheveled children found in Tallahassee, Fla., might be the offspring of members of a little-known cult, but the officials said they had not ruled out the possibility of kidnapping.

Police officials in Tallahassee said today that the children were moved from a shelter because of telephoned threats received there, The Associated Press reported.

Capt. William White 3d, a spokesman for the District of Columbia Police Department, said, "At this point, it appears that those children are the children of members of this group." He was referring to members of a cult known as the Finders, who have occupied at least two buildings here.

But Captain White added, "We haven't ruled out any possibilities." **He declined to speculate on what the possibilities might be but other police officials said they included kidnapping or some type of international market for children.**

The children, two girls and four boys 2 to 7 years old, were discovered in a Tallahassee playground on Thursday. Two men, Douglas Edward Zimmerman, 27 years old, and Michael Houlihan, 28, were arrested in the case and charged with child abuse.

Subsequently, the police here obtained warrants to search a house in Northwest Washington and a warehouse in Northeast Washington, both believed to have been occupied by the Finders. Captain White said they had seized boxes of records, documents and computer programs.

"We have a very long, tedious process of reviewing this material ahead of us," the captain said.

Detectives in the investigation said the review would require the weekend at least. **The detectives said that they had begun to doubt that child pornography was involved. However, he said that the evidence indicated that children were involved in rituals.** They declined to comment on reports that the Finders were worshipers of the devil.

According to the A.P., the authorities have received a memorandum from a man who said he owns the Washington house asserting that the children were on a vacation trip in Florida with the approval of their mothers. A spokesman for Joseph diGenova, the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia, declined to comment on the memo, the A.P. said. Search Also Made in Virginia

**In neighboring Virginia, the authorities said they had completed their part in the investigation by searching five places in Madison County where members of the group were said to have occupied farms and homes.**

**Lieut. J. P. Henries of the Madison County Sheriff's Office said, "No obvious new evidence of criminal activity was found."**

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has also been called into the case. Police officials here suggested

that whatever legal action might arise from the case would be in Federal rather than in local courts because it appeared that the children had been transported across state lines in possible violation of Federal laws.

Captain White said the district police had been unable to identify the children or their parents. "We're trying to find the parents," he said.

Captain White said that other people who might be related to the children were also being sought, but he declined to give details.

The Police Department spokesman said no further arrests were expected.

## **2 Cult Children Show Signs Of Sex Abuse**

February 09, 1987 | By Janet Cawley, Chicago Tribune.

WASHINGTON — At least two of six disheveled children found in a Tallahassee, Fla., park and believed to be the offspring of members of a Washington-based cult had been sexually abused, police said Sunday.

Scott Hunt, spokesman for the Tallahassee Police Department, said a report written by a doctor who examined the children after they were discovered Wednesday in the custody of two men said, "more than one showed evidence of sexual abuse." Hunt said he could not comment on how many children showed signs of abuse, what sex they are or how recent or extensive the abuse was.

Previously, police had said only one child, a 6-year-old girl, showed signs of sexual abuse.

The children, four boys and two girls ranging in age from 2 to 6, currently are in "police protective custody," Hunt said, after "calls threatening the children's safety" were made to the emergency shelters where the youngsters had been taken at first.

Hunt said police now are operating on the theory that the youngsters were offspring of members of the Finders, a communal group that lived in two adjoining houses on the northern edge of Washington's fashionable Georgetown neighborhood.

"There is no evidence of kidnaping at this point," Hunt said.

The two men with the children when they were picked up, Douglas Edward Ammerman, 27, and Michael Houlihan, 28, have been charged with child abuse and are being held in the Leon County, Fla., jail in lieu of \$100,000 bond each. Hunt said they are "linked" to the Finders.

Hunt said the children were dirty, disoriented and covered with insect bites when police found them following an anonymous telephone tip. He said the youngsters did not know where they had been or where they were headed, although one did volunteer they had stayed in some camp grounds as they traveled the highways in a blue van. Hunt said police were looking for a second, white van containing two men and two children that was believed to be accompanying the first one.

Hunt said Ammerman and Houlihan originally told police they were taking the youngsters to a school for



brilliant children in Mexico. Since their initial statement, he said, the two "invoked their constitutional right to remain silent."

Following the men's arrest, Washington police searched the home where several Finders members lived as well as a warehouse linked to the group and removed several bags of evidence reportedly containing photographs, computer records and other documents. On Saturday, Virginia police raided a farm about 100 miles southwest of Washington also linked to the Finders.

Police have refused to comment on reports that the Finders, which apparently evolved from a 1960s-type commune, may have been involved in some kind of ritual practices. The number of adults involved also was unclear and their whereabouts are unknown.

The FBI in Tallahassee said it had entered the case "in an attempt to determine if there was any violation of federal statutes" such as kidnapping or child abuse, a spokesman said.

Meanwhile, in Washington, mothers who remembered the youngsters from neighborhood playgrounds described them as poorly dressed, poorly supervised and never playing with other children.

"They never had any toys," said one woman who observed them at an elementary school playground. "They played with leaves and sticks. I never saw them when they weren't filthy."

The woman, who asked that her name not be used, said two to four children usually were in the custody of a woman "who was there but wasn't there. She'd be reading a book or a newspaper but never supervising the kids. They'd just wander."

One woman who took her child to the Finders home on several occasions over the last year for babysitting said the members were well spoken and "not foolish, rich hippies." But she also described them as generally looking "like something out of Charles Addams, like something the cat dragged in."

#### POLICE SAY UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN IN FLORIDA ARE NOT VICTIMS OF CULT

By PHILIP SHENON, Special to the New York Times  
Published: February 10, 1987

Local police officials announced here today that six children found last week in Florida had apparently not been kidnapped and that there was no evidence to show that the secretive group that has been raising them is a cult involved in child abuse.

**The statement from the Metropolitan Police Department conflicted with accounts from the police in Tallahassee, Fla., where the children were found, unwashed and hungry, last week. Officials there said this morning that at least two of the children had signs of sexual abuse.**

But late today, the Police Chief in Washington, **Maurice T. Turner Jr.**, said at a news conference that there was no evidence of criminal activity by the communal group known as The Finders. However, he said the investigation would continue.

## Two Men Were Arrested

Chief Turner's announcement was another confusing twist in the investigation that began last Wednesday when the children and two men were found in a Tallahassee park. According to the Tallahassee police, the children could not identify themselves and said the two men were teachers. The men were arrested and charged with child abuse.

Law-enforcement officials suggested that Chief Turner was attempting to end recent speculation that the group was involved in satanic rituals at a Washington home.

After the children were found last week, the police searched the home and a warehouse in the northwest section of Washington, and seized photographs and documents that one source in Florida originally said were "consistent with a satanic cult." Statements by Finders Spokesman

The Washington police said that the children, two girls and four boys who ranged in age from 2 to 7 years, were apparently the offspring of members of the Finders, **which the police said was a secretive group in which the sexes are separated and children are raised communally. Acknowledging that the group's practices were unusual, the officials said it had not engaged in criminal practices.**

Robert Gardner Terrell, a spokesman for the Finders, said his group had cooperated with the police and that the mothers of the children had spoken with the authorities, according to an Associated Press report.

**Mr. Terrell, who appeared at a news conference wearing a mask bearing President Reagan's image, said the organization's first priority was getting the children back.**

"We've been in constant contact with the authorities," he said. "It hasn't been on the basis of interrogation. It's been in terms of cooperation. Sooner or later we knew people in Tallahassee would recognize their mistake."

## Photographs of Goats

Officials confirmed that photographs found in buildings used by the Finders showed children watching goats being slaughtered. But they indicated that the activity was not illegal, nor did it suggest pornography.

"There was apparently the killing of goats and some type of blood," Chief Turner said, adding that it appeared the children did not participate in the killing. Other police officials suggested that the goats were actually butchered for meat, not for some sort of satanic animal sacrifice.

"A photograph can paint 1,001 pictures," Chief Turner said.

"The life style of the so-called Finders organization may differ from the societal norm," he added, "but so far, the Metropolitan Police Department has not uncovered any evidence of criminal wrongdoing by members of the group.

"At this point the Metropolitan Police Department has not found any materials among the seized documents or records that would initially corroborate allegations made by an informant that the

organization is a cult and that its activities involve satanic rituals.

#### Documents Being Reviewed

"However, we are still involved in an extensive and detailed review process of the documents and records seized," he added.

**Asked if the group was dangerous, Chief Turner replied: "I don't really believe so. If they are a danger, from what I an see, they would be a danger to themselves."**

Chief Turner said he had no evidence that any of the children had been molested and referred questions about physical abuse to the Florida officials.

Officials say the Finders apparently is a remnant of a 1960's counterculture movement created by Marion Pettie, a charismatic leader who urged his followers to study a doctrine that stressed self-exploration and futurism.

#### Children Allowed to Travel

"Apparently it's an organization that started in the late 60's," Chief Turner said. "If you went back to that point in time there were a lot of communes and a lot of hippies, and I think it was a way of life for them. From that way of life it has escalated to what we have today as the Finders."

Members of the group, the police said, apparently permitted their children to travel to Florida for a time while they remained behind to work.

**The two men arrested in the case were identified as Douglas Ammerman, 27 years old, and James M. Holwell 23.** They were charged with aggravated child neglect, a misdemeanor, and held on \$100,000 bond.

#### Interviews Next Step For Finders Children

February 10, 1987 | By Donna Blanton and Anne Groer of The Sentinel Staff

TALLAHASSEE — Investigators from several law enforcement agencies Monday were preparing to interview six children about their relationships with two men who were arrested in a park here last week and charged with child abuse.

"We need to know what they know," said Tallahassee Police Department spokesman Scott Hunt.

The men, who remained in the Leon County jail, are believed to be part of a group called the Finders that is based in Washington, D.C. Police at first had described the Finders as a satanic cult. On Monday, however, police said they were unsure of the nature of the group and were referring to it only as an

organization.

"The lifestyle of the so-called Finders organization may differ from the societal norm, but so far the Metropolitan Police Department has not uncovered any evidence of criminal wrongdoing by members of the group," Washington, D.C., police Chief Maurice Turner said.

He added, however, that documents and records seized last week still are being reviewed.

Robert Gardner Terrell, a spokesman for the Finders group, said Monday that the children's mothers "are here in Washington. There already have been conversations" with police, he said.

Terrell said the organization's first priority is getting the children back.

Terrell spoke at a small press conference at the group's warehouse, sitting with his back to cameras with a Ronald Reagan mask on the back of his head.

In a television interview, Terrell identified himself as Genghis K. Plato. "We play a lot of games so we can experience leaders from the past," he said.

A member of the Finders group in Washington, who spoke on condition his name not be used, identified the four boys and two girls in custody in Tallahassee as Mary Arico, 7; her brother John Paul Arico, 2; Max Burns, 6; Benjamin Franklin Knauth, 4; Honeybee Evans, 3; and Bebe Said, 2.

FBI agents in Washington Monday interviewed Kristin Knauth, a woman associated with the group. She is said to be the mother of Benjamin.

The children were placed in protective custody last Wednesday after they were found dirty, hungry and covered with scratches and insect bites in the company of the well-dressed men in a park near downtown.

The children were moved to a secret location over the weekend after telephone calls threatening their lives were made to a shelter where they were housed temporarily. Police do not know who made the calls.

Police said physical examinations showed at least one of the children, who at first were uncommunicative, had been sexually abused.

Investigators and officials with the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services spent the weekend making sure the children were comfortable instead of asking questions, Hunt said.

Hunt wouldn't say if the children had been moved more than once or if they were all together. The interviews will begin soon and could last several days, he said.

It was unclear whether the children would be questioned by officials with the Tallahassee Police Department, the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, D.C. or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Representatives of all those agencies were in Tallahassee Monday working on the case.

The two men who were arrested, Douglas Ammerman, 27, and Michael Houlihan, 28, invoked their right to remain silent. Each man has been charged with one count of child abuse and is being held on \$100,000 bail. The charges stem from neglect not sexual abuse.

A memorandum delivered to police and media organizations Sunday by a man identifying himself as Terrell said the parents of the children were members of the Finders and had given permission for them to be in the custody of the two men. He said the group never has been involved in child abuse.

Hundreds of people have contacted the Tallahassee Police Department claiming to be related to the children or offering to adopt them, Hunt said. All of the calls are being investigated, Hunt said, but he wouldn't comment on whether any have produced information about the children's identities.

Police had referred to the Finders as a cult after Washington police on Friday said they found photographs of naked children, children engaged in "cult rituals" involving bloodletting of animals and one child in chains during a search of a Finders warehouse.

On Monday, Tallahassee police backpedaled on the satanism connection and the description of the Finders as a cult.

"We're not still firmly 100 percent convinced of that," Hunt said. "We refer to it as an organization."

The Finders is an organization headed by Marion Pettie, a retired Air Force master sergeant. The group adheres to a system of complex beliefs. It apparently is a Washington commune that grew out of the human potential movement of the 1970s.

Virginia state police said Monday that they found goat skins and a goat's head in their search of the Finders' rural lands over the weekend.

In an affidavit supporting the search, Virginia authorities included photographs showing three white-robed Finders men and several children dismembering two goats. The photographs were in a scrapbook entitled "The Execution of Henrietta and Igor." In one picture, a crying child looked at a decapitated goat. Another photo was captioned "Ben finds Henrietta's Womb." Three pictures showed children playing with goat fetuses.

Carl Shapley, a Washington educator who said he worked closely with Finders leader Marion Pettie over the past year, said the group's ceremonies involved the slaughter of goats, but he warned against associating such activities with satanism or pagan rites.

6 Kids Still An Enigma For Police Expert Says Communal Influence Is Evident

February 11, 1987 | By Maya Bell , Sentinel Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — A child abuse expert who interviewed six children found in a local park last week said

Tuesday that they have characteristics similar to youngsters who have been institutionalized for a long time.

Nauman Greenberg, a psychiatrist brought in from Illinois by Health and Rehabilitative Services Secretary Greg Coler, said the four boys and two girls, ranging in age from 2 to 7, are very verbal, friendly and are happy with whoever takes an interest in them.

He said they do not react to strangers as normal children would and apparently have lost the capacity to have one-on-one relationships.

"Some are very clingy. They seem very desperately trying to re-establish some kind of affection," Greenberg said.

A noted child abuse expert from Chicago's Illinois Masonic Medical Center, Greenberg said he talked with the children individually and in pairs for four hours.

Investigators from the FBI and the Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., police departments also questioned the children under Greenberg's supervision.

Greenberg said it appears the children come from some kind of communal environment where survival and self-reliance are emphasized. They have a hierarchal pecking order and the oldest boy acts as the "controller." The psychiatrist said the children apparently are following the "controlling, domineering, autocratic" lifestyles of their parents.

He said they refer to each other as siblings and have obviously known each other for a long time.

The children are believed to be part of a Washington-based organization called the Finders. Police initially identified the group as a satanic cult but have since backed off from that description. They now describe it as an alternative lifestyle organization.

While Greenberg said the youngsters are withdrawn and isolated, he could not say whether their behavior was chronic or whether they are responding to new surroundings.

HRS was awarded temporary custody of the children last week and is keeping them in an undisclosed location while counselors reconstruct their history and evaluate their needs.

Describing the investigation as "a long and extended can of worms," Coler said he expected the interview and evaluation process to take some time.

Under state law, HRS must report back to the judge who awarded temporary custody within 21 days.

Although Tallahassee police have said that one or more of the children have been sexually abused, John Awad, HRS district administrator for the Tallahassee area, said sexual abuse has been neither substantiated nor disproved.

Earlier Tuesday, Tallahassee police said they were perplexed and frustrated by the fact that nobody has claimed or identified the youngsters.

"If it had been my child I would have been standing in front of the Tallahassee Police Department with every document I could have got my hands on to prove it was my child," police spokesman Scott Hunt said.

Hunt formally appealed to Finders member R. Gardner Terrell to contact the police department directly instead of communicating through the media as he has been.

Hunt said Terrell told the FBI in Washington Monday night that he would have the children's parents contact Tallahassee police.

Later, the department received two calls from people who said they were parents of two of the children. Both callers said they would call back Tuesday morning but never did, Hunt said.

"This has probably gone far enough. We need to know who the parents of these children are. He alleges that he knows," Hunt said.

Terrell's name was affixed to a memorandum delivered to the press and the Washington and Tallahassee police on Sunday.

The memo said the parents of the children were members of the Finders and had given permission for them to be in the custody of the two men.

A member of the Finders in Washington identified the four boys and two girls as Mary Arico, 7; John Paul Arico, 2; Max Burns, 6; Benjamin Franklin Knauth, 4; Honeybee Evans, 3; and Bebe Said, 2.

The mystery began last Wednesday after Tallahassee police received an anonymous tip about a suspicious entourage at Myers Park, which is not far from downtown.

Police found the six children -- bug-bitten, tattered and hungry -- playing near a blue van in the company of two men dressed in jackets and ties.

The men were arrested and charged with six counts of misdemeanor child abuse. Hunt said charges were based on the fact that the children did not appear to be well cared for.

The men, who identified themselves as Douglas Ammerman, 27, and Michael Houlihan, 28, are being held in the Leon County Jail in lieu of \$100,000 bail.

Finders Mothers To Claim Children Spokeswoman Says Satanism Reports Frightened Members

February 12, 1987 | By Maya Bell and Anne Groer of The Sentinel Staff

A spokeswoman for the mothers of six children being held in protective custody in a secret location said

Wednesday that the women will go to Tallahassee soon to claim their children.

Finders member Diane Sherwood said in Washington, D.C., that the women waited for almost a week before deciding to go to Tallahassee because they were "scared to death" amid allegations that they were satanists and kidnappers.

"There was an instinctive reaction. We all wanted to rush there immediately. We were all scared. We were all frightened," Sherwood said.

Sherwood, who is not the mother of any of the children being held, spoke to reporters outside the group's communal home in northwest Washington. She said the children's mothers have been talking to the FBI and are now ready to enter "phase two," which is getting their children back.

She identified the mothers as Judith Evans, mother of Honey Bee, 3; Carolyn Said, whose son is B.B., 2; Paula Arico, mother of Mary, 7, and John Paul, 2; Kristin Knauth, mother of Benjamin, 4; and Patricia Livingston, mother of Max, 6.

Sherwood's press conference followed two separate court hearings Wednesday in Tallahassee involving the children and the two men charged with abusing them.

In Leon County Court, Judge George Reynolds entered not guilty pleas for Douglas Ammerman, 27, and Michael Holwell, 28, who is also known as Michael Houlihan. The judge also appointed the public defender's office to represent both men.

Ammerman and Holwell are each being held in lieu of \$100,000 bail on misdemeanor charges of child abuse. They were arrested last week after Tallahassee police received an anonymous tip about a suspicious entourage in Myers Park. Police found the six children -- bug-bitten, tattered and hungry -- in the company of Ammerman and Holwell, who were both well-dressed.

The men and children subsequently were linked to the Finders. Authorities originally characterized the Washington, D.C.-based commune as a satanic cult after they uncovered photographs of naked children and children engaged in the slaughter of goats during a search of a Finders warehouse. Police have since backed off that description and have been referring to the group simply as an organization.

A member of the Finders contacted in Washington who refused to give his name accused police and the media of launching a "slander campaign." He conceded that his group lives differently than most other people but he said there is a reasonable explanation for everything.

"The police are playing games for the press," the man said. "They can't stand up and tell the truth because then they'd have to admit they made a big mistake."

Sherwood said the Finders have been reluctant to come forward since the arrest of two members because they "don't like to fight."

"We don't like attorneys. We don't like courts of law. We like to be invisible," she said. "We didn't know how to handle this."



In Leon Circuit Court, Judge Victor Cawthon, who sits on the juvenile bench, held a hearing on the status of the children. He ordered that the four boys and two girls ranging in age from 2 to 7 remain in the custody of the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services for now.

The juvenile court hearing was held in response to a petition filed by HRS asking that the children be declared dependents of the state. The petition is routine in cases of alleged abuse or neglect and a final decision will depend on the evidence and testimony presented at a March 9 hearing.

Under normal circumstances, Wednesday's juvenile court hearing would have provided parents an opportunity to admit to or deny the dependency petition. But, because the parents have yet to claim their children, Cawthon left open the opportunity for them to object to the petition later.

In county court, Ammerman and Holwell initially refused a court-appointed lawyer, saying they have a private attorney but have been unsuccessful at contacting him. Reynolds, noting the exposure and complexity of the case, insisted on appointing a public defender "out of an abundance of caution."

Michael Minerva, the assistant public defender, immediately asked the judge to consider a reduction in bond. Reynolds said he would do that when evidence on the men's background and ties to the community is available.

### **High Bond Defended in Mystery Children Case**

February 12, 1987 | United Press International

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — The \$100,000 bond for two members of the group called Finders, who are facing misdemeanor child abuse charges, is justified by the mystery surrounding the case and six children found with the men, a prosecutor said Wednesday.

The men, Douglas Edward Ammerman and Michael James Holwell, also known as Michael Houlihan, were arraigned on one count each of child abuse. Houlihan was also arraigned on a single misdemeanor count of resisting arrest without violence.

Public defender Michael Minerva asked Leon County Judge George Reynolds III to reduce their bonds, but Reynolds said a special hearing is required on that issue.

'An Unusual Case'

"It may be an unusually high bond, but it's an unusual case," state attorney C. L. Fordham said. "The bond is based more on the questions than the answers. We still don't know who the kids belong to."

Reynolds entered pleas of not guilty for both men and said they would receive a jury trial. They will remain in jail pending trial. No court date was set.

Police arrested the men on Feb. 4 after an anonymous caller said they had accompanied the children in

a Tallahassee playground. The children range in age from 2 to 7 years old.

### Children Dirty, Hungry

The children were dirty, bug-bitten and hungry when found. Ammerman and Holwell told police they were taking the youngsters to a school in Mexico for bright children and refused to answer further questions.

The men have since been linked to the Finders, a mysterious communal group in rural Virginia.

The FBI said it was close to wrapping up parts of its investigation of the Finders. Agents interviewed several women who said they are mothers of the children.

The children remained in custody of the Health and Rehabilitative Services Department and were being interviewed by a psychiatrist.

### Finders Face Battle For Kids Women Must Prove Fitness To Raise Children

February 13, 1987 | By Maya Bell , Sentinel Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Five Finders women who say they are the mothers of six children found in a park here last week may have a tough time getting the youngsters back.

State authorities say the women, who were headed to Tallahassee on Thursday to claim the children, will have to prove not only that they are the legal guardians of the children but also that they are fit to raise them.

"That is a question," said Connie Ruggles, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. "We will contact our counterparts where these children live and ask them to do a home study. It's a routine thing we do in thousands of cases to find out what the home environment is like."

Ruggles said the fact that the children were being raised in a communal lifestyle will not necessarily weigh against the women.

"Just because you have a different lifestyle doesn't mean you can't be a good parent. That will not prejudice the case," she said.

However, preliminary interviews with the four boys and two girls ranging in age from 2 to 7 have raised serious concerns among child experts about whether the children should be returned to the communal group.

Dr. Nahman Greenberg, an Illinois child abuse expert brought to Florida by HRS Secretary Greg Coler,

said he was "perplexed and worried" about how the adults are treating the children.

"As best as I can tell there are serious questions about how child- oriented and child-concerned the community is," Greenberg said.

"The children are subject to a great deal of privation. They are not being given what they need."

Greenberg said he would have a better idea next week on what he will recommend to the judge who eventually will decide what to do with the children.

Meanwhile, FBI agents in Florida officially backed off their initial belief that the children were used in some sort of sexual exploitation, prostitution or pornography network.

"The Jacksonville division of the FBI has developed no information and has received no information to indicate a violation of federal law," Special Agent Jimmie Whitaker said Thursday.

After the children were found, Whitaker obtained a warrant from a federal magistrate to search the van that brought the children to Florida from Washington, D.C. In an affidavit attached to the search warrant and released Thursday, Whitaker said he believed the van would contain evidence of "sexual exploitation of children," "the interstate transportation of materials involving the sexual exploitation of children" and "the interstate transportation of a woman or girl for the purposes of prostitution, debauchery or other immoral purposes."

According to an inventory of the contents of the van, nothing earth- shattering was uncovered. The contents included a portable computer, a dictionary, a picture of a child, a passport and "releases" for the children. Whitaker would not elaborate but said the releases "to some extent" gave permission for the children to be in Florida.

The agent said the FBI now is assuming the role of liaison to the Tallahassee Police Department and would not take part in resolving the custody dispute except to verify out-of-state leads and documents, such as birth certificates.

The agent said the FBI now is assuming the role of liaison to the Tallahassee Police Department and would not take part in resolving the custody dispute except to verify out-of-state leads and documents, such as birth certificates.

HRS has filed a petition in juvenile court asking that the children be declared dependents of the state. A ruling on the petition, which is routine in cases of alleged child abuse and neglect, will depend on evidence and testimony presented at a March 9 hearing.

Leon Circuit Judge Victor Cawthon, who sits on the juvenile court bench, has left open the opportunity for parents of the children to object to the petition.

Cawthon awarded HRS temporary custody of the children Feb. 5, one day after police received an anonymous tip about a suspicious entourage at Myers Park, near downtown Tallahassee. Police found the six children playing next to a blue van in the company of two well-dressed men.

The men, identified as Douglas Ammerman, 27, and Michael Holwell, 28, were arrested and charged with one misdemeanor count of child abuse each. Holwell also was charged with resisting arrest without violence.

Each is being held in the Leon County Jail on \$100,000 bail. Tentative trial dates have been set for March 30 for Holwell and March 31 for Ammerman. After the arrest, the two men and six children were linked to the Finders, a Washington, D.C., communal organization whose members are professionals who say they believe in rearing children with "lots of freedom."

Authorities originally characterized the Finders as a satanic cult after they found pictures of naked children and children engaged in the slaughter of goats during a search of a Finders warehouse.

Authorities since have backed off that description and are referring to the group simply as an organization.

Diane Sherwood, a Finders spokeswoman, said the mothers of the children waited almost a week before deciding to claim their children because they were "scared to death" about the allegations of satanism and pornography.

Sherwood would not say when the women would arrive in the state capital. They were somewhere between Washington and Florida "resting and strategizing" late Thursday, she said.

#### Authorities Want More Facts Before Finders Visit Children

February 17, 1987 | By Anne Groer of The Sentinel Staff

TALLAHASSEE — Five members of the controversial Finders communal group presented identification and evidence of their parental fitness to Florida authorities Monday, but were barred from visiting the six children taken into state custody Feb. 5.

Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services officials said they were pleased by the women's cooperation but would continue to deny visitation rights "for a while yet," according to department spokeswoman Connie Ruggless.

Ruggless said the women must convince officials that they are the children's mothers and that it is "appropriate" for the children to see them.

"All of this is very standard," said Ruggless.

The children, who range in age from 2 to 7, were found hungry, dirty and bug-bitten in Myers Park with two well-dressed male Finders, with whom they had been traveling in a van for several weeks.

Both James M. Holwell, 23, and Douglas Ammerman, 27, were arrested on misdemeanor child abuse charges, and remain in the Leon County Jail with bail set at \$100,000. Holwell was also charged with resisting arrest without violence.

Since arriving from Washington, D.C., on Friday, the women have said they will do whatever is necessary to regain custody of the four boys and two girls, even if it means not seeing them for a while.

"They have expressed willingness to work cooperatively with us for the welfare of the children and we welcome their cooperation," said HRS secretary Greg Coler, in a statement released Monday.

Department officials said visitation rights also hinge on the results of the psychological tests being conducted on the children and the "home study" to test the suitability of the commune where the youngsters live with up to 20 men and women in Washington.

The department also wants the women's lawyer to file a formal objection to the court order that has made the children temporary wards of the state, Ruggles said.

But Tallahassee attorney Paula Walborsky, who represents all five women, said they did not want to go to court unless it were absolutely necessary because "they are trying to be as straightforward and non-adversarial as they can."

"They feel there have been so many authorities already involved that a great deal of information that would have come out in a court proceeding is already out," Walborsky said.

Walborsky acknowledged that the women "have chosen some very idiosyncratic forms of living.

"This isn't Beaver Cleaver's mom," Walborsky said. "There are some things different, but these are children who are loved. They grew up in an extended family where they were loved."

The women, who said they gave permission for their children to travel with the men are: Kristin Knauth, 26; Carolyn Said, 28; Judy Evans, 31; Paula Arico, 33; and Pat Livingstone, 43.

They live in Washington and work as free-lance editors, writers and computer operators, and often leave the children in the care of the men in the commune, which maintains two apartment buildings in Washington and two farms in rural Virginia.

The children are being held in protective custody near Tallahassee, where they have been interviewed and tested by several mental health and child abuse experts.

Despite the enormous publicity surrounding the Finders, which included initial police reports of possible "satanic cult" or child pornography activities, the women have depicted themselves as loving, devoted mothers and largely misunderstood.

"We want the same thing every other parent wants for their kids -- to be healthy, happy, to find themselves, and we really are not that different from anyone else in that ultimate goal," Said explained.

Walborsky noted that "it's not the way Middle America does things but I can say here I think it's also sad

that just because men were with the children that brings them under scrutiny. They were trying to show that men are nurturing, they can be good care-takers, and men can let kids get grubby."

## Bond Reduced For Finders Members

February 19, 1987 | By Maya Bell, Sentinel Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — A judge reduced the bond Wednesday for two members of a Washington-based communal group who are charged with child abuse in connection with six unkempt youngsters found in a park here two weeks ago.

James Michael Holwell, 23, and Douglas Ammerman, 27, had not posted the \$20,000 bond set by Leon County Judge George Reynolds by late Wednesday. Reynolds reduced the bond from \$100,000 after a two-hour hearing in which the parents of both men and the mothers of three of the children testified.

Meanwhile, four of the mothers of the youngsters may see their children today. Circuit Judge Victor Cawthon authorized the supervised visitation in a confidential hearing held Tuesday.

Paula Arico, the mother of two children being held in protective custody, said she and three other women hoped to visit their children today. During a shopping trip earlier this week they loaded up on water colors, trucks and books to take the youngsters.

One of the mothers, Kristin Knauth, was allowed to see her son Tuesday night because she had to return to Washington to answer a subpoena issued by the FBI, Arico said.

The five women, two men, and six children belong to a secretive communal organization whose members share in rearing all the children. Police initially said the group, known as the Finders, was a satanic cult but backed off that description when they failed to turn up supporting evidence.

The men were arrested Feb. 4 after Tallahassee police received an anonymous tip that six dirty and tattered children were in the company of two well-dressed men in a local park.

When police arrived at the park, Holwell and Ammerman told them they were taking the children to a school in Mexico and then refused to answer any more questions.

A day later, the state was awarded temporary custody of the children, who range in age from 2 to 7.

At the bond hearing, prosecutor C.L. Fordham objected to any bond reduction, saying the defendants "had a powerful incentive" to follow through with their stated plan of heading to Mexico.

Fordham told the judge, "We don't even have an extradition treaty with Mexico. They could just sit

there on the other side of the border thumbing their noses at us the rest of their lives."

Assistant Public Defender Mike Minerva conceded that his clients "may not be the most orthodox people in the world" but he said it wasn't a crime to be different. Nor was it a crime, he said, to let children get dirty when they've been playing in a park. He argued that the state's case was flimsy and the men should be released on their word to return for trial.

Arico and Pat Livingstone, who said she is the mother of one of the boys, testified that Ammerman and Holwell had permission to take their children on an extended trip and return to the Washington area in March.

Both said they had complete confidence in the men's ability to care for the children.

Without ties to the community or the posting of property, Reynolds said he could not release the men on their own recognizance.

#### Judge Returns 5 Finders Kids To Mothers

February 28, 1987 | By Maya Bell, Sentinel Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — A judge on Friday ordered five children who were found disheveled and dirty in a park here about three weeks ago to be returned to their mothers until permanent custody is decided next week.

In a confidential hearing, Leon Circuit Judge Victor Cawthon ruled that there was no reason to continue his order placing the children in protective custody. A hearing has been scheduled for March 6 to determine whether the children can be returned to their mothers permanently.

In the meantime, the four women and the five children must remain in the Tallahassee area under supervision of the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. The children have been in HRS custody since Feb. 5. They were expected to be reunited with their mothers sometime Friday, said Assistant State Attorney C.L. Fordham.

A sixth youngster will continue to be held because his mother had to return to Washington.

Cawthon closed the hearing to the media but afterward Fordham said the judge found no reason to continue holding the children. The women declined comment.

Police found the four boys and two girls, ages 2 to 7, in the company of two men at a park. The group aroused suspicion because the children were dirty, ragged and bug-bitten and the men were dressed in jackets and ties.

The men, James Michael Holwell, 23, and Douglas Ammerman, 27, initially said they were taking the

youngsters to a school for brilliant children in Mexico but refused to say anything else. Both were arrested and charged with misdemeanor child abuse. They are in the Leon County Jail on \$20,000 bond.

Fordham, the prosecutor handling the case, said he was one of many officials to object to returning the children to their mothers.

"There are still too many things we don't know. I think it's premature to return the children until we determine whether their environment and lifestyle may be detrimental," he said.

The men, women and children are part of a secretive Washington communal organization called the Finders. They say they believe in personal freedom and in sharing in the responsibility of rearing children.

Police initially linked the group to satanic rituals and child pornography but quickly backed off that description because they lacked evidence. Most officials now say the group merely has chosen an alternative lifestyle, not an illegal one.

#### Finders Moving To Florida 'Signs And Symbols' Beckon, Member Says

March 3, 1987 | By Maya Bell, Sentinel Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — The Finders, beckoned by "signs and symbols," have moved from Washington, D.C., to Tallahassee where two of their members are in jail and six of their children are under state supervision.

Leader Robert G. Terrell announced the communal group's relocation plans Monday after summoning reporters to Myers Park where the two members were arrested Feb. 4 and the bedraggled children were taken into custody.

Terrell said the members are looking for work and are willing to donate half of their earnings to local charities.

Finders has 19 adult members; six of the men have already arrived, he said. "We try to follow signs and symbols as much as possible," Terrell said. "Tallahassee gave us a sign that they wanted us to be here. They wanted some of us so the rest of us came."

Terrell was referring to James Michael Holwell, 23, and Douglas Ammerman, 27, who were arrested and charged with misdemeanor child abuse. They are being held in the Leon County Jail on \$20,000 bail.

The two girls and four boys, ranging in age from 2 to 7, were held in a secret shelter home under protective state custody until Friday when a judge ordered the youngsters temporarily returned to their mothers. Permanent custody is to be decided at a juvenile court trial scheduled to begin Friday. While Terrell insisted the group's move to Florida was not intended to lobby the judge nor lend support to the men in jail, he made it clear that he hopes the group can earn the goodwill of the community.



"We want to find people who can use our services," he said. "We would continue to be here as long as people would like us to be here."

He said the group put "for sale" signs in front of its Washington properties and is looking for office space, housing and clients in Leon County who need the services of people with a vast array of skills.

"We're open to anything. Anything legal," he said, while slicing and eating a raw turnip. "We have a wide variety of skills within the organization -- office skills, computer skills, financial planning skills. We're organization consultants, tax consultants, financial consultants."

Terrell, who wore a coat and tie and sported a handlebar mustache characteristic of Finders men, said he is a Certified Public Accountant and former Internal Revenue Service appeal officer.

He said some Finders members were meeting with the attorney representing the jailed men but would not contact other authorities. He said he intended to use the media to get his message across.

"We hope you'll let them know," Terrell told reporters. "We were accused in the media. We have to be acquitted in the media."

Shortly after the arrest of Ammerman and Holwell, the Finders were linked to satanic rituals and child pornography. Police even obtained search warrants for Finders property in Virginia, where they dug trenches looking for bodies. Authorities, however, turned up no evidence of wrongdoing and now refer to the group only as an alternative lifestyle.

Terrell, who calls himself Genghis K. Plato, gently mocked the media's role in the Finders' ordeal by heaping the picnic table at Myers Park with raw potatoes, as well as grapefruits, apples, oranges and peanuts.

The potatoes, Terrell said, were a tribute to a false newspaper story that said the children ate nothing but raw potatoes and fresh vegetables.

## **2 In Finders Remain Jailed**

### **Leader Offers Bail**

March 4, 1987|United Press International

TALLAHASSEE -- Two members of the Finders communal organization remained in jail Tuesday, two days after the group's leader announced plans to relocate to Tallahassee and said he would post bond for the two if they request it.

Finders leader Robert Gardner Terrell told reporters on Monday the group had placed homes and property in the Washington D.C. area up for sale and planned to move to Florida's capital city. Terrell said eight male and four female members of the group were already there, and that the rest of the 26-member group would soon follow.

Terrell made his announcement in the same city park where Michael Holwell and Douglas Ammerman were arrested on Feb. 4 when they could not explain to police officers the dirty appearance of the six children with them, or say where the children's parents were. Holwell and Ammerman were charged with child abuse and are being held in the Leon County jail under bond of \$20,000 each.

The six children, aged 2 to 7, were given over to the care of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative services. Five of the children are now living with their mothers in Tallahassee, but remain in HRS legal custody pending a permanent custody hearing on Mar. 9.

Terrell said the group would post bond for Ammerman and Holwell if the two men request it. Terrell said the men had not asked for such aid, and jail officials confirmed Tuesday the two were still in custody.

Terrell said the group considered their members' legal problems a sign they should relocate to Tallahassee. "We still like Tallahassee," Terrell said. "We want to make ourselves useful to Tallahasseeans in a way they would like for us to."

Terrell said members of the group would seek work where they could use their various professional skills, including computer programming, financial and tax consulting and other office-related skills. He said the group would donate one-half of its earnings to charity.

### 3 Finders Kids Back With Moms Judge Will Decide On Other 3 -- Communal Group Breaks Up

March 12, 1987 | By Maya Bell , Sentinel Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — In what was labeled a victory for the "right to be different," a judge ruled Wednesday that three of six children who belong to the Finders counterculture group should be returned to their mothers with no strings attached.

The other three children were found to be dependents of the state, a ruling that defense attorney Paula Walborsky said is unlikely to result in the loss of custody for the mothers. She expects the state will monitor how the parents raise the three children, with emphasis on their education. A hearing later this month will decide that matter.

"I feel their right to be different has been vindicated," she said. "Let me tell you, their lifestyle is crazy and I couldn't personally raise my kids the way they do, but there were some strong constitutional issues here and I argued them."

Hours after the ruling, the leader of the Finders announced that its experiment with "group work" had failed and the organization was dismantling after about 17 years of communal living.

"This is farewell from the Finders. We're breaking up," said Robert G. Terrell, a pint-sized man with a handlebar mustache who prefers to call himself Genghis K. Plato. "You won't be hearing from the

Finders again until Hong Kong is being run by the Chinese and the Panama Canal is being managed by the Panamanians -- in other words at least until the year 2000."

Terrell refused to answer questions of reporters from select media he invited to a hastily called news conference. He said because the group no longer existed he could not speak for them. "That's it," he said before walking out of the Florida Press Center. "See you in the 21st century."

The six children, dirty and bug-bitten, were seen Feb. 4 playing in a Tallahassee park in the company of two well-dressed men. The men, James Michael Holwell, 23, and Douglas Ammerman, 27, were arrested on misdemeanor charges of child abuse and are being held in the Leon County Jail awaiting trial this month.

The plight of the children gained national attention when police linked them to the Finders and characterized the group as a satanic cult that peddled child pornography. However, police found no evidence of wrongdoing and quickly backed off that description, referring to the group as simply an alternative lifestyle community that believed in freedom, fun and communal child-rearing. That lifestyle, Walborsky said, was the focal point of the four-day hearing that culminated in Wednesday's ruling by Leon Circuit Judge Victor Cawthon. The judge ruled on a petition filed by the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. The petition, routine in all cases of alleged child abuse, neglect or abandonment, sought to have the children declared dependents of the state.

Once children are found to be dependent, a judge has several options. He can put them in a foster home; he can sever parental ties and allow the children to be put up for adoption; or he can order that the parents be supervised by the state.

The latter option is the most common because HRS' mandate is to try to keep families together, not break them up. HRS is expected to recommend a supervision plan for the three children ruled dependent later this month.

Why the judge ruled the way he did, finding half of the children dependent and half not, is open to conjecture and Walborsky's interpretation. That is because the hearing was closed to the media and, with the exception of Walborsky, everyone in the proceeding refused to comment, citing rules of confidentiality.

Walborsky, who was in the awkward position of representing clients who like neither lawyers nor the legal system, was reluctant to speak for all five of the mothers because she represented only three of them. Two of the mothers, Kristin Knauth and Pat Livingston, unexpectedly announced on the first day of the hearing last week that they no longer wanted Walborsky to represent them. Terrell said in an interview earlier this week that the two women choose to take the "Gandhi path," referring to former Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi's practice of passive resistance. Terrell would not say whether disagreement over legal representation contributed to the Finders' split.

Walborsky said the judge found Knauth's son, Ben, 3, and Livingston's son, Max, 4, to be dependents of the state. The judge also found one of Paula Arico's two children, Mary, 7, to be dependent.

Walborsky said she "would like to think" that her representation of three of the women was largely responsible for the judge denying HRS' petition on behalf of three of the children. She said there was no evidence presented on behalf of Knauth's and Livingston's sons.

However, she indicated that the judge's major concern was how the children were being educated, not whether their mothers had a lawyer. None of the children were in school.

Walborsky, a family law specialist, said she was hampered throughout the hearing by her clients' reluctance to cooperate. For example, they refused to let Walborsky use testimony from child experts to counter a state psychologist and psychiatrist who said the children's lifestyle was harmful to their development.

Instead, Walborsky said she based her case on "strong constitutional issues." She told the court that the state has no right to interfere with personal parental decisions unless it can be proved that children are suffering harm that can be directly linked to the parents.

She said there was no evidence that the children were being harmed by their parents' choice of lifestyle. Neither was there evidence that the children had been sexually abused as police had speculated.

"I don't think their lifestyle is abusive or neglectful. It's different, there's no question about that, but who has the magic formula for kids turning out right?" Walborsky said. "Look at how many parents are consistent in their child rearing and how different their children turn out."