

Scientology's future remains a mystery

By DALE MAHARIDGE
McClatchy News Service

SACRAMENTO — A hot wind blows through the masts of the \$565,000 clipper ship "docked" on a rocky plateau in the middle of the Southern California desert. Downhill, a car nears a gate guarded by young men in brown shirts.

As if with the snap of unseen fingers, members of the elite Sea Org pour from buildings around the ship with cameras in hand, furiously taking photos of the visitors.

The Church of Scientology always has been suspicious of outsiders.

But these days, outsiders don't pose the only threat. Greed, lies, and power struggles have crippled Scientology to the point where it may be dying, say former leaders, members and critics.

The church of Scientology, founded in the 1950s by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, grew to be one of the richest and most prominent of the new religions by the mid-1970s. It was built not on a belief in God, but on self-awareness and increasing human potential.

Although the church maintains that it is stronger than ever with a membership of 6 million, former top officials say the beginning of the end of Scientology began in 1982 after a coup by youthful Sea Org leaders.

Hubbard's former theological second-in-command, David Mayo, told McClatchy Newspapers in his first interview with an American newspaper that these new leaders are "facists." He said, "The whole splinter movement is against the behavior of the current management."

According to former insiders and church documents, whole branches have split away, income has dramatically fallen, and members have left in droves — to the point where one former leader says there are only 30,000 remaining.

• Many say collapse is now inevitable because the church was built on a lie — a "front for making money," said Marvin Price, the former head of the Stockton mission and a Sacramento businessman. Hubbard's own letters prove this lie, former church archivist Gerry Armstrong charged in Los Angeles Superior Court recently.

• Some say the church scuttled itself from the start by issuing

Ex-members: Hubbard empire is collapsing amid lies, greed

directives condoning bribery, blackmail and covert activities, which were carried out in the 1970s.

• Other dissidents say the church will perish because it got too money-hungry. The cost for Scientology courses and therapy has risen from \$40 an hour in the 1970s to \$307 an hour, effective last week in Sacramento. Hubbard, in a 1972 directive, established the policy in capital letters: "MAKE MONEY . . . MAKE MONEY . . . MAKE MORE MONEY."

• And much of that money — tens of millions of dollars, according to church critics and former members — has vanished into a myriad of domestic investments and foreign bank accounts.

• The church says it is a religion, and the Internal Revenue Service agrees. The IRS, however, has ruled that the Church of Scientology of California, Inc. is not tax-exempt, which could cripple it financially. A ruling on the church appeal of that decision is expected any day.

If it loses the tax ruling, Scientology will "just shift over" to

While Gorgon said worldwide membership is 6 million, a statement issued in 1983 by Hubbard himself, however, said membership was 2 million.

Nelson, a former top church official, said membership in the peak years never was more than 100,000. Today it's probably between 30,000 and 40,000, he said.

That figure may be high, according to the Center For Personal Achievement, a former Scientology mission in Stockton. Center spokesman Alan Jones said he conducted a phone survey of all Scientology churches in the country last year and found there were no more than 6,600 people actively taking courses.

In addition to Stockton, other major missions that broke away included Riverside and Palo Alto, which quit seven weeks ago. Fresno, and South Lake Tahoe are mere remnants of what they used to be, said Price.

"There has never been such an all-out assault against Hubbard,"

The complexity is compounded because each individual church is incorporated separately, and there is a maze of subchapters.

a new corporation to avoid losing its non-profit status, Armstrong said.

And in his first American interview, John Nelson told McClatchy Newspapers that such plans were in the works when he was a member of Hubbard's inner circle.

Whatever the reason for the continuing breakup, numerous people have fled the church. Some have quit altogether, but others have started 40 new churches worldwide, offering the similar courses and therapy, at lower prices.

The dissidents, called "squirrels," made up a tiny portion of the total church membership — "one-thousandth of 1 percent. Their only intention is to make money," said Scientology spokeswoman Kathy Gorgon.

said Michael Flynn, a Boston attorney who has made a career out of legal battles with the church. "You're dealing with a bunker mentality. They are in deep trouble."

Scientology had its beginning in 1950, when Hubbard published his best-selling book, "Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health."

A secretive religion that promised to save the world soon was born.

Why the mystery? The man who could answer that question — Hubbard — has been a recluse since 1976. And Cmdr. David Miscavige, 24, considered by defectors such as Armstrong and Nelson to be one of Scientology's top leaders, declined to be interviewed for this story.

After Hubbard dropped from public view, the elite Sea Org began to take control of church operations,

according to many former top church officials.

Hubbard formally transferred control of the church to leaders of the Sea Org in 1982, according to a church document. Miscavige is Scientology's link to Hubbard, Armstrong said.

The Sea Org was named after the time in the early 1970s that Hubbard ruled Scientology from a 300-foot-yacht called the Apollo as he sailed around the world. Many Sea Org leaders were the children who grew up on the boat and ran errands for Hubbard.

"Before we came along and did this overhaul, you couldn't tell whether you were dealing with a 7-Eleven store or Church of Scientology . . . because the purpose expressed in the corporate papers was purely commercial," said church Warrant Officer Lyman Spurlock. The quote is in a church transcript of a 1982 San Francisco conference of church mission holders.

Just a few months before this meeting, Spurlock was named principal officer in a new corporation called the "Church of Spiritual Technology." If anything "hostile" threatens Scientology, all trademarks are to be sold for \$100 to this new church, according to a church document.

Flynn said the church could declare bankruptcy if it lost the IRS tax case, then reopen for business as the Church of Spiritual Technology.

Spurlock also said at the October meeting that the new structure of the church would make Scientology "impregnable, especially as regards to the IRS."

"The current management has decided to use more and more force," said Mayo, Hubbard's former second-in-command until he resigned and/or was thrown out last year. Mayo says he resigned and the church says he was expelled.

Mayo's 8,000 member Advanced Ability Center in Santa Barbara is the largest of the spinoff groups, and is staffed by what used to be the leaders of Scientology. "There are 200 years of experience here," said Nelson, who works there. Before joining the splinter movement, Nelson admitted to federal investigators that he carried out a covert operation to entrap a judge for the church.

Scientology not only is losing people, but money. Financial records published by the church showed that in early 1982 the church's worldwide missions were earning up to \$789,000 a week. By the end of 1982, after the Sea Org coup and the mission holders' conference, that dropped to \$273,000 in the last week records were released.



Associated Press

A secretive religion that promised to save the world . . . was born. Why the mystery? The man who could answer that question — L. Ron Hubbard — has been a recluse since 1976.

Gorgon said the church does good things, such as fighting for religious freedom, and that it has disclosed government cover-ups under the Freedom of Information Act.

Although Price remains a member of the board at the new center in Stockton, he said, "I can't even say I support Scientology now. I will 'fess up to my mistakes. There was something wrong in what we belonged in. We tried to make the church saner, to reform it from within. But it was a front for making money. I was naive."

Hubbard still has control of the church and its money, said Armstrong. The nerve center is in Riverside County, where the ship in the desert is located, said Bent Corydon, the head of the Riverside mission.

Armstrong was assigned by the church to gather material for a book on the life of Hubbard. In the course of his research, he came across

numerous personal letters to his wives, parents, and business correspondence.

In an affidavit, Armstrong said, "I collected thousands of pages of documents, many of which are in the personal handwriting of L. Ron Hubbard, and which prove that Mr. Hubbard had continually misrepresented himself, his accomplishments, qualifications, credentials, and physical and mental health history."

Armstrong said he never intended to take the documents for any other reason than the biography.

The church demanded the documents returned, and sued Armstrong to get them back. The 15,000 pages of documents have been ordered sealed by the court, pending a decision in the case.

Said Armstrong, "If it becomes known he [Hubbard] lied, there will be countless fraud complaints. If those documents come out, it will be the end of Scientology."

Estimates of the mother church's assets run as high as \$300 million, but it is probably more like \$110 million, said Nelson.

Former church inner-circle member Nelson said a lot of the money had been shipped overseas. "You will never find where the money is going."

Gorgon said Hubbard does not get money from the church, other than from book royalties. Hubbard resigned from the church in 1966 and is listed as an adviser.

The complexity is compounded because each individual church is incorporated separately, and there are a maze of subchapters. Missions were franchises, much like fast-food