

Police visits 'terrified' child

Son testifies he was questioned repeatedly about commune

By GORDON DELANEY
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Kentville

Michael Dawson lived in fear that he would be taken away from his father, friends and community and placed in a foster home, as he had been for 44 days in the fall of 1987.

The 14-year-old son of Edward Dawson said Wednesday in Nova Scotia Supreme Court that he was "terrified" whenever police or social workers visited the Myrtle Tree Farm commune where he lived at the time.

He was testifying on the second day of Mr. Dawson's retrial on charges of child abduction, laid in 1994 after he was arrested by FBI agents at another religious commune in Santa Cruz, Calif.

"I remember when I was four, they took me away for 44 days," the teenager said about events 10 years ago. It was in September, 1987 that police and social work-

ers arrived at the religious community and took Michael from his father.

The child was placed in foster care and subjected to repeated interviews by doctors and psychiatrists concerning the community's religious beliefs. He was also questioned about daily life within the fundamentalist Christian group, where members lived together in a farming community.

"I was taken to a lot of people who asked me questions about what it was like in the community," Michael testified before Justice John M. Davison and an eight-man, four-woman jury. "They asked me what I ate. They asked me pretty much everything."

Mr. Dawson, who is defending himself, argued that the events in 1987, when Michael was taken away from him by police and social workers, led him to leave the country with his son in 1992. Mr. Dawson was charged with

child abuse 10 years ago after complaints that the commune members subjected children to corporal punishment.

The charges were later dismissed, and the case resulted in changes to Nova Scotia child-care legislation, making it more difficult to remove children from their natural parents.

But the case had a long-lasting effect, Mr. Dawson argued, saying he became afraid when police, a lawyer, social workers and the boy's mother, Judy Seymour, arrived at the farm in March, 1992.

Ms. Seymour, who had been living in Montreal until that time, had just applied for court custody of Michael and notice was being served on Mr. Dawson concerning an upcoming court case.

Through several testy exchanges with Mr. Dawson, Ms. Seymour testified that she had signed an agreement giving custody of the child to Mr. Dawson in

1986 because she was "a very unhappy woman."

But she later put her life in order and moved to Nova Scotia in 1992 to seek a "normal relationship with my son," she said.

In other testimony, RCMP Const. Wendell Marchison said he had conducted regular routine surveillance of the religious community, watching members come and go from a residence nearby. He said he was watching for missing children that had been reported by a woman in Manitoba. They were never found at the Waterville farm.

Const. Marchison and Cpl. Vernon Fraser testified that they had always been treated with hospitality by members of the commune.

Crown Attorney Darrell Carmichael rested his case Wednesday.

Mr. Dawson said in his opening statement he plans to show that his motive for going to California was to protect his son from imminent harm.

No abuse seen at sect's farm, court told

By GORDON DELANEY
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Kentville

There was no evidence of child abuse at the former Myrtle Tree Farm religious commune in Waterville, several witnesses testified in Nova Scotia Supreme Court here Thursday.

Investigations by the Kings County Branch of Family and Children Services, and the subsequent removal of a four-year-old child for six weeks, failed to uncover any evidence of abuse, agency workers, police and community members told the court.

The evidence was presented during the third day of Edward Dawson's retrial on a charge of child abduction. Mr. Dawson was a member of the Myrtle Tree Farm community in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The community, which practices strict Christian beliefs and ran a communal farm in Waterville, has since moved to Winnipeg, where its members operate a number of businesses.

Mr. Dawson, 43, was charged with abduction in 1994 after he was arrested by FBI agents with his son in another commune in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Crown Attorney Darrell Carmi-

chael is arguing that Mr. Dawson fled the country with his son to deprive the boy's mother, Judy Seymour, of Montreal, of custody.

But Mr. Dawson is arguing before Justice John M. Davison and an eight-man, four-woman jury that the boy had been in his custody for years and that he left the country because he feared further harm to his son, Michael.

The boy had been taken from him and placed in foster care for six weeks in 1987 because of allegations of child abuse against Mr. Dawson.

The charges were later dropped, and Family and Children's Services was criticized by the courts for its actions in removing the boy from his home.

On Thursday, former agency director Barry Costello testified that there was suspicion of abuse, but evidence was never found. He said although there was no physical evidence, Michael was kept from his father because "we were not satisfied that there was no abuse."

Social worker Sylvia Skerry testified that evidence of abuse was never found. She said the boy was kept and further investigations were conducted to determine if there was any emotional abuse.

Members of the religious community testified that continued interference by police and social workers at the Myrtle Tree Farm was disruptive and destroyed the peace of the community.

"It was very disconcerting to us," David Saylor said of the repeated police surveillance and searches of the Waterville home. "We became very nervous about what was going to happen next."

He also testified that when Michael was returned to his father, the boy seemed disturbed, would cry a lot and had trouble

sleeping.

Mr. Dawson is arguing that a handful of "overzealous individuals" wanted to undermine the community's religious beliefs.

Sandra Jardine, a high school teacher and neighbor of the Waterville community, testified that its members were always friendly, peaceful and hard-working. She added that the children were educated in the commune with a program supervised and approved by the province and the local school board.

The trial continues today.