

REDFORD CATALOG SOLD ITEMS

MADE BY CULT CHILDREN

UNPAID KIDS MADE FURNITURE

By [Jeane MacIntosh](#)

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A catalog company owned by Robert Redford unwittingly sold products made by a firm that uses unpaid child laborers – all members of a controversial upstate cult – to make some of its products.

The children are part of Twelve Tribes, a racist, isolationist religious group that believes in beating kids with resin-dipped rods to discipline them.

From a young age, the kids work alongside parents in its various cottage industries.

Twelve Tribes – whose teachings say blacks were meant to be servants and homosexuals are “disobedient” – recently began migrating from New England to New York, settling in several small towns, including the Catskills hamlet of Coxsackie, where it has refurbished an old riverfront factory to make Common Wealth wood furniture, some of which has been sold through Sundance catalog.

Launched by Redford in 1989, the eco-friendly Sundance sells clothing, organic products, hand-crafted furniture and jewelry.

Sundance has sold Common Wealth furniture since 1999, but only recently learned of its potentially illegal work practices – and cult ties – after cosmetics giant Estée Lauder quit doing business with another Twelve Tribes offshoot amid questions about the age of its workers.

Twelve Tribes denies it violates labor laws.

“Yes, our children help their parents, but you don’t have children in there being a backbone of industry or working in a factory or anything like that,” said Jean Swantko, the group’s spokeswoman. “One of the reasons we went into cottage industries [was] so we would have small family-run businesses with parents and children working together.”

A Sundance spokesman said the products accounted for “a very small fraction” of Sundance’s overall business, estimated by industry watchers at less than \$5 million.

The only Common Wealth-made item slated for sale in Sundance’s upcoming catalog has been pulled.

“We are as surprised and distressed as everyone else to learn about this and are taking steps to immediately address the issue and sever ties with this group,” a Sundance spokesman said.

With few exceptions, children under 14 are prohibited from working, according to New York’s stringent labor laws. Children under 16 can’t work on a factory floor. For Twelve Tribes, young kids in the workplace are allegedly common.

Former member and upstate resident Laurie Marrano Johnson, who wrested her two sons from the group in 1997 after their father hid them within Twelve Tribes for eight years, said by the time her kids were 6, “they were working in candle and soap factories, and the leather works. It was considered ‘occupational training.’”

Abduction charges against the children’s father, Stephen Wootten, which had been dismissed by a Vermont court, were reportedly reinstated last year by Vermont’s Supreme Court.

In a statement, Twelve Tribes defended its practices: “Like any family-owned business, the children help the parents. We believe in this and make no apology. We believe it is the best environment for the children to be occupied with their parents.”

Twelve Tribes hawks its homespun wares through various businesses, including Common Wealth, Tribal Trading, which makes candles, and Common Sense, which makes natural products – none of which disclose its cult ties, say those who’ve done business with them.

Like all Sundance vendors, Common Wealth was required to sign papers affirming compliance with state and local laws and regulations. “The documents specifically mention child labor laws,” the Sundance spokesman said.

In February, msnbc.com reported Estée Lauder had severed long-term ties with Common Sense.

An inspection reportedly turned up minors working in the group's Cambridge, N.Y., factory, which made Estée Lauder's Origins Dead Sea Salt scrub and Step Lively foot cream.

"Our auditors became concerned that Common Sense was not in full compliance with respect to its employment practices," an Origins spokesperson told The Post. "After a prompt review of facts, when Common Sense couldn't give us a satisfactory explanation, we terminated our contract."

All-American outfitter L.L. Bean and Trader Joe's, a popular national grocery store chain, also have done business with the sect.

L.L. Bean had sold Twelve Tribes' natural soap in its stores and a home catalog, but no longer does, said a spokesman. Sources outside the company said customers alerted L.L. Bean to the product's cult ties. Trader Joe's stopped selling Tribal Trading beeswax candles, but was unaware of the Twelve Tribes connection. "Their product was just too expensive," said a company exec.

Twelve Tribes – which is also known as The Messianic Communities – was founded in the early 1970s by Elbert Eugene Spriggs.

In the group, children obey parents, blacks obey whites, women obey men – and everyone obeys Yoneq.

"They take truly nice people, and start them down a very dangerous path," said Robert Pardon, executive director of the New England Institute of Religious Research, who has studied Twelve Tribes for nearly a decade.

"They're psychologically beaten up – there's no room for flexibility. You do what you're told."

When confronted with the characterizations of Twelve Tribes as a cult, Swantko said, "How are we any different from nuns who give up worldly goods and follow the pope?"

Cult members give up their possessions and money to the group and get room and board in exchange for work in the group's cottage industries. There are 2,500 members in the U.S. (with five New York communities) and overseas.

Members usually live together in one large house. Spriggs, meanwhile, jets between homes in Brazil, France and the United States, checking on the flock that finances his heavenly crusade.

Twelve Tribes has black members, some of whom are elders or leaders, but former members say those members are expected to respect Yoneq's teaching that they are subservient.

"Racial integration is not legislated here, but results as the natural outcome of human beings living at peace with God," the group said in a statement.

"Spend time in the evenings with us together singing old-time black spirituals around the piano and it may be difficult to label us racist."

"Gene Spriggs is the ultimate hustler, and Estée Lauder and Sundance bought into that hustle," said Rick Ross, a top cult expert and intervention specialist. "Spriggs' success was based, almost from the start, on free labor." Sources say Lauder helped Common Sense get a \$500,000, five-year, interest-free loan in 1998 to expand its Origins facility. (Lauder confirms a loan, but declined to discuss specifics.) A former member says Origins was "very intimately" involved in the construction.

Origins' spokesperson said the company did make regular trips to the factory and insisted, "until the incident in February, they had passed all our inspections and signed all the necessary paperwork affirming they were abiding by employment standards."

On a recent schoolday afternoon in Coxsackie, young boys milled around with their fathers at the Common Wealth furniture factory at the end of a block of old riverfront buildings bought by Twelve Tribes in 1998. In Cambridge, children as young as 5 would cart boxes or hand materials to their parents working the Origins assembly line and teenagers worked alongside adults, according to a former worker, one of three sources who witnessed kids in that factory on separate occasions.

During a "push" – when a company needs a lot of product by a certain date – everyone is called into service, kids and parents alike. Twelve Tribes' controversial child-rearing methods have resulted in a number of child-abuse charges over the years, all of which have been thrown out, many due to "lack of evidence."

Spriggs believes children should be beaten from infancy to instill discipline. Swantko, the group's spokeswoman, told The Post:

“Parents in the Twelve Tribes communities spank their children in love according to the Word of God. An undisciplined child is an unloved child, and an unloved child is an abused child. Members of the Twelve Tribes do not practice or condone abuse or neglect of children. . . . Time and time again, the parents of the Twelve Tribes have been exonerated of child-abuse claims throughout the world.”

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