

From the Genealogy database:

HUDDLESTUN (RIN: 831). **Coleene ACUFF** (RIN: 830), daughter of [Elbert ACUFF and Una Mary OWEN](#), .

THE EFFECT OF THE KORESHAN UNITY ON ONE FAMILY

by Coleene Acuff:

History of the Acuff family -- presented to the Historical Society; February 10, 1984, Hall of Fifty States.

....."William Sylvanus Acuff and his wife Mary Magdalene Talley Acuff had a homestead on the Texas plains near a place called Albin. They had two daughters and four sons then. Their closest neighbors were miles away. It was a lonely life, but they were together.

In a paper from Chicago, William Acuff, my grandfather, read about a utopian community being established in Florida. He wrote for more literature. He was convinced it would be good for him and his family--a better way of life. I do not know how much he believed in the teachings of Koresh--Cyrus Teed. They sold their homestead and stock, outfitted a covered wagon, and left Texas with as many belongings as they could put in the wagon with the six children, ranging in age from about twelve or thirteen years old to about two or three years old. Their wagon was pulled by a team of oxen, and they had two milk cows attached to the rear of the wagon. My father told me these things. He was their oldest son.

When they reached New Orleans, they sold the wagon, oxen, and cows and boarded a boat that sailed them as far as Tampa, Florida.

The Koreshan Unity had sent a boat to Tampa to get them and other families who were joining the community. They reached Estero in the fall of 1898 or 1899*. They had had a long, rough trip. When they reached the Koreshan community, any money and possessions that they had was turned over to the community. The family was divided--the men to the men's house and the women to the women's house. The children were separated from their parents, and the boys were separated from the girls. The houses were rather primitive, and they needed more buildings. The houses had no screens or ceilings, and the insects were very bad. The roofs were thatched with palm and palmetto fronds.

My Grandmother Acuff's last child was born about six or seven months after they reached Estero. We believe that was in the summer of 1899 or 1900. The baby was named Arthur Vincent.

My grandfather worked helping build dormitories and numerous buildings needed to serve the community to make their community as self-contained as possible.

My grandfather was a farmer and eventually was housed in a small frame house on Mound Key to farm vegetable gardens and plant fruit trees. There were other men assigned to Mound Key, too. Mound Key is about six miles down river from Estero.

The children were Maude (twelve), my father Elbert (ten), Fannie (nine), Roy (eight), Rupert (six), Eustace (three), and Arthur, who was born there in the community.

Everyone big enough to do anything had to work. Even the little ones had to help weed the gardens. Work was required.

The women did the cooking, washing, and ironing for the whole community. It was done in the primitive way--before washing and drying machinery. They had sewing machines set up in the dining hall, and some of the women were assigned only to sewing. Others worked in the bakery or in the gardens raising food.

Many people with good educations were there. Some taught in the school, and there was a press for publishing the papers and literature.

The men were assigned to whatever duties needed to be done--clearing land, sawmill duties, farming, stock care, or whatever jobs there were. There was plenty of wild game for awhile--and whatever they could raise in abundance, but the weather was not always conducive to good crops.

My father's oldest sister, Maude, died in the early 1900's from overwork and not enough food and care. His other sister, Fannie, had a nervous breakdown in her teens, and she was sent to Chattahoochee--where she died.

My grandmother had taught her older children to read, write, and do arithmetic while they were still living in Texas. At the Koreshan Unity, there was some schooling given to the children of the community, but not good basic 3R's; an orchestra was also organized there. My father, in his early teens, ran away from the "unity" with some other older boys. They camped in the woods and were befriended by some of the Estero pioneer homesteaders. There were also some Indians that at some time or other helped these boys with food and shelter. My father told me that when they could not get enough game, they stole chickens and vegetables from the Koreshan Unity. They helped other boys get away, too. On one of these trips back into the "community," they took Roy--the brother five years younger than my dad. (See Elbert and Roy Acuff Notes)

Two of his brothers spent several more years there, and Arthur spent all his young years there. When World War I came along, many of the boys joined the armed services. Roy joined the Navy, developed polio, married, and settled in Jacksonville. He used to visit us in Fort Myers, and we would look up the other uncles. By then they were living in little communities in Lee County.

By the way, two of my uncles were in the group of kids standing around with the elders waiting for Koresh (Cyrus Teed) to rise from the dead. This was in December of 1908. On the fourth day, the Health Department of Lee County made the Koreshans bury their leader. My father used to tell us unsavory stories about that death and the three or four day wait. Many of the believers really thought Koresh would "rise" as Jesus had.

When the youngest child, Arthur, was old enough to sit up--six to eight months--my grandmother wanted to gather her family and leave the Unity. She only managed to take Baby Arthur with her to Fort Myers. She worked as a cook in a small downtown restaurant. As long as Arthur was content to stay near her in his box in the kitchen, she would get by, but when he started walking, she had to take him back to the Koreshan Unity in Estero so that he could be cared for. She divorced my grandfather. It was an almost unheard of thing to do.

She met and married a man by the name of Mayfield. Mayfield was a deputy sheriff. He was in an altercation with an influential Fort Myers man and killed him in self-defense. Law and order was of a more primitive kind, and Mayfield and my grandmother left Fort Myers and moved to Texas. She was not allowed to take any of her children, and she never had any more of her own.

My father was in the army in World War I. While he was stationed near Montgomery, Alabama, he married Una Mary Owen. After he was discharged from service, they went to Texas to see his mother and his stepfather. He and my mother took trains then to Tampa and Fort Myers. When they came to Fort Myers, they lived with the Loftin's on Loftin Island. The little island in the river--the little island between the two bridges. Daddy worked on a dredge for Mr. Loftin. He also worked on steamers on the river--fished in the summers, and finally built his own boats to take tourists fishing in the winter. He was always reading and trying to make up for his lack of schooling. I was very proud of him!

I have read that the Koreshans gave their children--and others outside the Unity--schooling. I know that my Dad played the trombone while he was in service. He had learned the basics at the Unity.

My uncles who were educated from the earliest years in the Koreshan Community had very little basic training in the 3R's. The older Acuff children had been taught the 3R's by their mother while they were still in Texas. My youngest uncle seemed to get the best education there (at the Unity) of any of his brothers. The older the child was when he went there, the harder for him to enter a communal type of living.

Those last three boys were too young for World War I and too old for World War II except for Arthur--the youngest. He had managed to get enough schooling that he could enter the Florida Sanitarium in Orlando and get his nurse's training. In World War II, he was a medical corpsman and was on two different aircraft carriers which were sunk. He survived and is now living in California with his wife, not far from his children and grandchildren.

The only other surviving brother lives in North Fort Myers in a little cottage near Interstate 75. He is 85 to 87 and cannot hear enough to have a conversation with, and he is also very shy. He always felt that he had been at a disadvantage by having been raised at the Koreshan Unity. I remember visiting him at his fish camp when I was a teenager. He had bought a lot of books to try to educate himself. He had books on grammar, Spanish, algebra, and geometry. He never married, and he used to tell me how much he wished he could have been raised in a family instead of a whole community. Somehow these brothers managed to stay in touch with each other.

In the 20's my grandfather was discovered to have tuberculosis. They had several small houses off from the rest of the community. He was put off in one of these cottages--not much more than shacks. Food was brought to him twice a day. He was not able to get around much and was not able to keep his cottage clean. My mother and father used to go down to see him on Sunday afternoons and take him food and clean night shirts. They would scrub and clean his little house. He did not get good care. Sometimes a doctor would look in on him. Once his house caught fire from a faulty flu. He had some burns and steadily got worse. I can remember crossing a ditch on a little wooden footbridge to get to him. He died in 1927 and was buried in a cemetery that washed away the next year in a big hurricane. It was the same hurricane that also washed away Teed's body.

The Koreshans may have had some big ideas and ideals and were an important part of settling Lee County, but the family of William Acuff was split and impoverished. My father would talk about the Koreshan Unity with great pain. Sometimes he would not even answer our questions. It was a sad history to him.

I can remember several very big buildings being down there while I was a child. I visited the grounds about a year ago and was quite surprised to see so few buildings there. I used to hear about the papers that were printed, but they were not allowed in our home. I looked for the small cottage where my grandfather died. It was gone, too. When I see some of the plantings, I wonder if they were planted by my grandfather or uncles. I liked to look at the river and imagine the boats that used to land there. I remember names my dad would mention--Leuttich, Morrow, and some of his boyhood friends.

I wonder if in this room there are others who came to this area from a father or grandfather going to the Koreshan Unity.

(*If Arthur Acuff was born in July 1901 (Social Security Death Index) then the Acuff family probably arrived in Estero in the fall of 1900.)--Joyce Nelle Ratliff, Feb 2000)

Coleene Acuff Huddlestun
Presented to the Historical Society,
February 10, 1984, Hall of Fifty States