Gulfshore Life®

THE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA OCTOBER 1995

BK 000140
AC-0019
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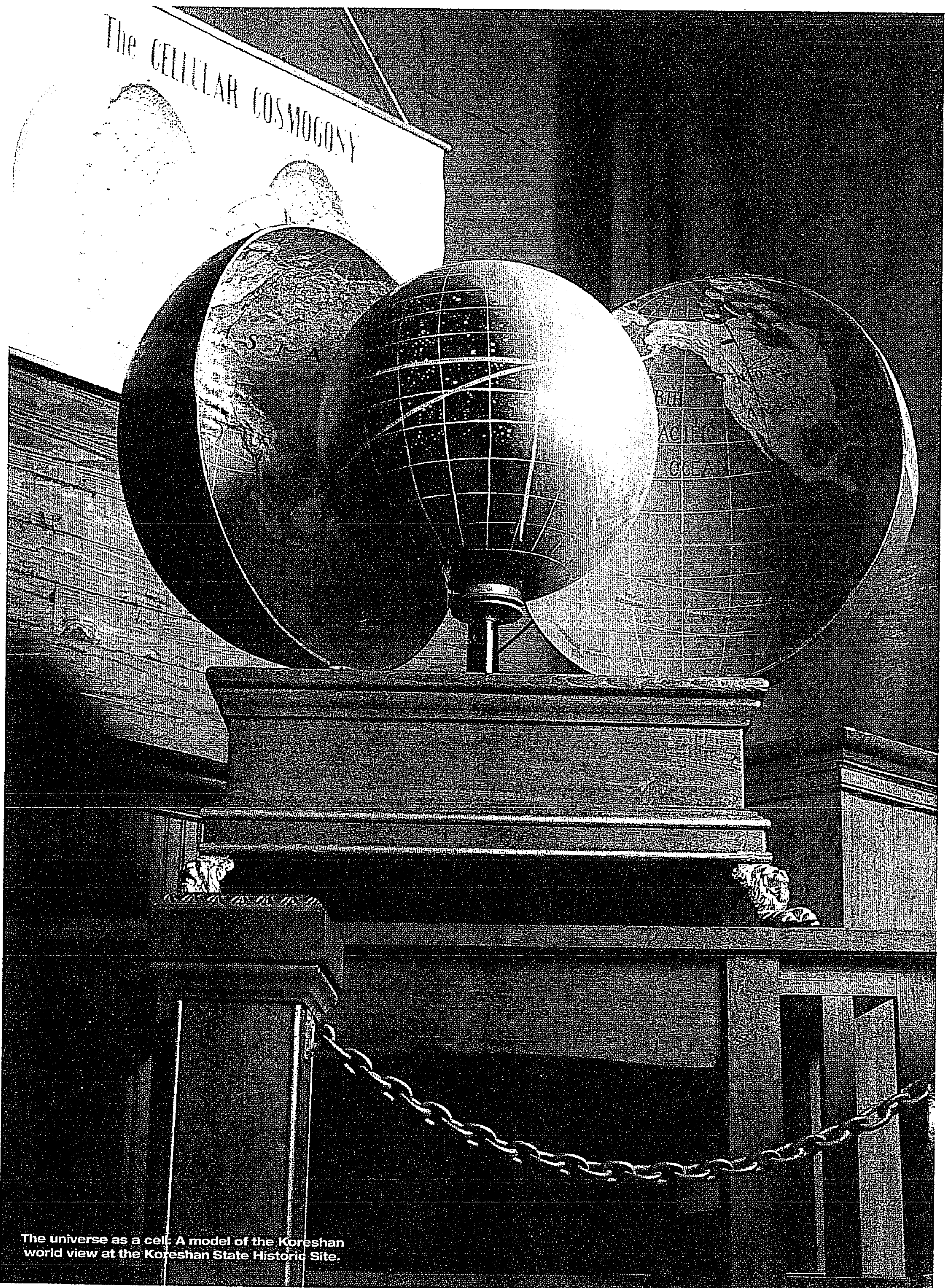
EVERGLADES

Children's Book Explores the River of Grass

THE KORESHANS

Sheltering the Legacy



The universe as a cell: A model of the Koreshan world view at the Koreshan State Historic Site.

We Live Inside

By Shawn Holiday and Kathy Becker
Photography by Mitch Gorshin

The remains of Estero's turn-of-the century Koreshan cult are divided—literally. So are their keepers.

On one side of U.S. 41 is the 305-acre Historic Site, run by the state. It houses almost all of the Koreshan buildings. On the other is the Koreshan Unity Foundation, headed by a strong-willed octogenarian. It houses most of the written and pictorial record of the Koreshans.

Each side has a critical piece of the legacy; the state has the skeleton; the foundation has the heart. But neither side has control of the body.

At risk: the future of one of Southwest Florida's most curious, compelling—and largely unknown—pieces of history.

Dr. Cyrus R. Teed spellbound his followers with his hypnotic brown eyes and promises of utopia.

With eloquent lectures about a mother/father god, a "scientifically" proven hollow earth and the healing powers of the mind, Teed, who re-named himself Koresh, enthralled his disciples. They followed him to the wilds of Florida in the late 1800s to build the New Jerusalem, an idyllic city that would house 10 million people of all races living in total harmony. Their motto was based on their cellular view of the universe: "We live inside."

The Koreshans were among the first to discover this section of paradise. They carved out a thriving, self-sustaining community with about 200 people, its own power plant, saw mill, boatyard, general store, newspaper, post office, bakery and laundry on the banks of the Estero River—the first planned development in Southwest Florida. Their children's education was steeped in the arts and humanities, and they brought the first symphony orchestra to the area. The group was not that different from other communal societies like the Shakers and similar to other such movements that formed as a response to societal events at the turn of the century. But the Koreshans also brought strange, new ideas about science, economics, relations between the sexes and the very nature of the universe.

The Koreshans are all gone now, but the surviving buildings and artifacts provide an astonishing look at the cult. This legacy also shows the lives of turn-of-the-century pioneers; the surviving buildings, photos, letters, furniture and artifacts are unmatched in this state.

Yet the Koreshan story is known to only a few scholars, volunteers, and any visitors to the collection of aging buildings who are curious enough to read the few available brochures. Since the time of Teed, the organization's identity has been shaped by a series of strong personalities. Today, that identity resides with Jo Bigelow, president of the Koreshan Unity Foundation since 1982.

Like a matriarch who fiercely guards her beloved family's history, Bigelow zealously manages her portion of the remnants of the once-vast Koreshan holdings.

She inherited a perilous financial situation and a tradition of selling land to keep the group solvent and the members fed. When she took over, 200,000 acres in Honduras and 22,000 acres in Titusville were long gone, and so were many of the effects, most of the buildings and all of the Koreshans. Bigelow's predecessor had given 305 acres to the state, which designated it an historic site. That left the spirited former newspaper features editor with a vast and decaying collection of rare artifacts, a little bit of land and virtually no income. Bigelow is currently the Koreshan Unity's last chance at resurrection.

But not everyone agrees she has been the best steward of the Unity, arguing that she has left historically significant artifacts and message moldering—both figuratively and literally. And Bigelow has resisted numerous offers from scholars, archaeologists and others willing to help her.

"It was the only commune basically in the Southeast United States," says Patti Bartlett, director at the Matheson Historical Center in Gainesville and former director of the Fort Myers Historical Museum. "It's almost like Camelot. The Koreshan Unity is frankly my favorite place in the state just because it's such a marvelous place, and they had such wonderful ideas."

In fact, the Koreshan site is considered to be the most significant com-

munal settlement in Florida, which is why the Communal Studies Association is bringing its 22nd annual conference to the site—and to the South—for the first time, and the academic spotlight will be on the Koreshans. Dr. Lyn Rainard, who has studied the Koreshans for more than two decades, is coordinating the conference, sponsored by the state historic site and the Koreshan Unity Foundation.

Rainard says the Koreshans are interesting because "while turn-of-the-century people were struggling with the apparent conflicts between science and religion, Teed offered reassurance that the two were in absolute harmony.

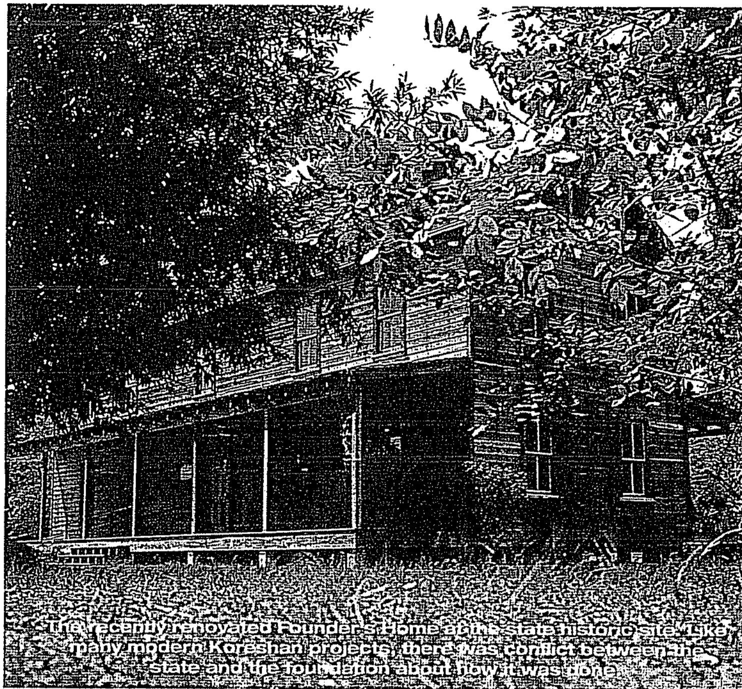
"The good doctor was a veritable barometer of American fears, concerns and hopes. From the perspective of what the Unity can tell us about turn-of-the-century America, I believe the community to be one of the more important utopian experiments of its age."

The conference comes at a time when Bigelow's Koreshan Unity Foundation, a private, non-profit body incorporated in 1903 as the sole heir to the commune, is at a crossroads. In 1993, the foundation had to sell off enough land to come up with $400,000 to satisfy a neglected IRS requirement to reinvest a percentage of its assets. Since most of those assets are land, land had to be sold to raise the cash. The IRS allowed the foundation to use the money to make repairs on the museum building.

Another large parcel of land that includes the cemetery where many Koreshans are buried was sold to a developer. It was the last large chunk of land the Unity had. Bigelow says the sale will provide a desperately needed endowment to fund the foundation, which until now has survived with little income. Although the museum is open to the public, few people visit it, and no admission is charged. There are just 25 foundation members.

Strife on the board has caused several defections, adding to the intrigue surrounding this defunct, celibate cult—often persecuted and always misunderstood—despite its profound impact on Estero and Southwest Florida.

It takes time to learn about this group of intellectuals who sacrificed for the promise of paradise in the wilderness of Florida. It also takes time to understand Bigelow, whose zeal for the Koreshan legacy seems personal, despite no connections to the Koreshans other than a rocky friendship with the last Koreshan—her predecessor, Hedwig Michel.



The recently renovated Founder's Home at the state historic site. Like many modern Koreshan projects, there was conflict between the state and the foundation about how it was done.

Bigelow's suspicion of outsiders is a Koreshan tradition. Teed renamed himself Koresh, Hebrew for Cyrus, the Persian King who allowed the Jews to return to Palestine. He made his first attempts to establish communes in the Northeast, but drew ridicule from newspapers and outspoken critics. However, he found a receptive audience in Chicago in 1886. There, he started a communal home, published tracts, papers and newsletters, recruited people around the country and tried to unify other communes. Despite his attempts to win converts in other places, only the Chicago sect was thriving, and even there controversy followed. Beginning in 1894, Teed took the group to execute its grand plan on the banks of the Estero River, 20 miles south of a tiny cow town called Fort Myers.

After enjoying more than a decade of success at their new commune and healthy commercial relations with their neighbors, their serenity was shattered in 1906. Teed's challenge to the ruling Democratic Party in that year's local elections made him unpopular, especially with Phillip Issacs, a judge, shopkeeper and publisher of the *Fort Myers Press*. The paper ran vitriolic editorials against Teed and scandalous accounts—including charges that Teed stole other men's wives—printed years earlier by the *Chicago Times*.

The animosity ended in a public scuffle between Teed, the mayor, the local marshal and others on October 13, 1906. Accounts vary as to who threw the first punch, but Teed was hurt and some said those injuries contributed to his death more than two years later.

Teed's movement was injured as well. The following year, the homesteader who deeded to the Koreshans his land in Estero said he was duped and sued them to get it back. Member recruits weren't keeping up with defections. The death of Teed in December 1908 eventually proved fatal for the commune.

Without Teed's strong leadership, his group began to splinter. The first female president of the Koreshan Unity, Annie Ordway, was caught in a power struggle and soon left with a group of dissenters. Another president and son of founding members, Allen Andrews, unsuccessfully sued the group in 1947. Buildings deteriorated and burned, personal effects disappeared, and land was sold to

sustain the group.

The remaining Koreshans floundered for decades until a German Jew escaping the Nazis arrived at the commune in 1940. Hedwig Michel had read Teed's treatise, *Cellular Cosmogony*, while in Germany and was fascinated. She became a member and was elected the Unity's second female president in 1960, a post she held until her death in 1982 at 90.

Following Teed's example of strong leadership and control, Michel resumed publication of the Unity's newsletter, *The American Eagle*, built a library to house records and orchestrated the donation of 305 acres to the state. Her last achievement was allowing the widening of U.S. 41 between the historic sites, preventing a huge detour and winning the admiration of her neighbors. After Michel died, Bigelow, who had befriended and worked with Michel, was elected president and became the next nucleus of the Koreshan cell.

Koreshanity then and now: current leader Jo Bigelow and a portrait of Cyrus Teed, the founder of the movement that bears his adopted name.

What drives this widow with intense eyes is the belief that she knows what's best for the Koreshan legacy. She's not only responsible for preserving the artifacts, but feels she's left with the daunting task of interpreting the words and works of a brilliant, yet much-misunderstood man. She believes those on the outside can't appreciate Teed's magnetism. Others who work with his legacy seem as mesmerized by his words as those who heard him speak; employees at the foundation library refer to themselves as "we" when they talk about the Koreshans. They are fiercely loyal to Bigelow, often deferring questions to her or asking for permission to answer.

Certainly, Bigelow has had successes as president—she built a fireproof vault for the archives, hosts two festivals a year and prints a bi-annual newsletter that goes to about 500. With an annual salary of only $6,000, people aren't clamoring for her job. However, all but a few of those who *have* offered to help have been rebuffed.

Despite the availability of free professional assistance and money through grants, the extensive letters, diaries, photographs and personal effects in Bigelow's charge have never been professionally catalogued. Access to documents is regularly denied. Some artifacts are tied with string or stored in battered cardboard boxes and department store bags—conditions professional archivists say will hasten deterioration. Although her staff maintains it can find anything in the vault, a rare picture of Teed's wife recently turned up that no one at the foundation knew was there. Corners of crumbling documents and photographs litter the floor of the vault. Recent donations to the museum are mixed in with original artifacts, blurring the distinctions of what is original Koreshan property.

"My major concern is the Koreshan heritage is not being preserved in a professional manner," says Fort Myers attorney Bill Grace. His grandmother, Ada Case, was a Koreshan, and Grace served on the foundation board for several years but quit last year after many confrontations with Bigelow. "I was astonished at the unprofessional manner in which the meetings were held and the lack of information that was being provided to the board members. Old brilliant me—I was going to educate them and persuade them. Wrong."

Ironically, Grace was introduced to the board by Bigelow. He had performed legal services for the Koreshan foundation as well as personally for Bigelow before the two had a falling out. Grace has a keen interest in historic preservation and serves on local boards, including the Koreshan Unity Alliance (a support organization for the state historic site) and the Lee Trust for Historic Preservation. While a board member, he sent copies of statutes to other board members informing them of their legal duties, but says he was ignored.

"I was hoping to be understanding. I said, 'Let's make some changes. I will help you,' " Grace says. "I did go to the board but nothing happened. There was never any discussion or decision or any sort of democratic process."

Bigelow says her relationship deteriorated with Grace, even though she had hoped he would be her successor, because he demanded to take over. She says he never offered a plan for the future, which was what she wanted.

"He came in and told me I might as well get out because he was going to come in and run it," Bigelow says. "I said, 'Bill, you don't know enough about it.' "

Bigelow says Grace wanted to turn the Unity's property over to the state, which she says would have been a terrible mistake. "No one just trained at state department of recreation has the understanding of how to preserve and promote (the Koreshan legacy).

It's necessary that the Koreshan Unity Foundation take a protective stance for the best interpretation and long-term interests of these unusual people," she says.

But Grace was not the only board member who had problems with the way the foundation was run.

"I had similar concerns over Jo's performance, her attitude and lack of the use of the board," said Dr. William Danenburg, a Koreshan board member for 20 years before leaving several years ago. "As with many people that get caught up with movements and organizations, they eventually feel they own it. It was a one-woman show."

Grace says he worked to get state archivists and others to work for free, but was turned down by Bigelow and the board. Grace brought three would-be members to the board willing to pay the $100 membership fee: Susan Grace, Gloria Sajgo, and Annette Snapp. Susan Grace has served like her husband on historic boards, Sajgo works for Lee County and with the state on historic preservation and Snapp has a master's degree in applied anthropology and works for the Lee County Planning Department. Still, the board voted down the members at a time when money was tight and volunteers were few.

"They were working for the state," Bigelow says. "They're not working for us. We're not the state; we're an independent corporation."

Even though Michel arranged to donate land and buildings that the foundation could no longer maintain in order to preserve the heritage, Bigelow's relationship with the people at the state historic site is tenuous at best. Both sides agree it is paramount to work together, since the state has the buildings and the foundation has the documents and artifacts.

State employees say it has been difficult to get information from the Unity. "That was our biggest frustration," said Valinda Subic, former manager at the Koreshan State Historic Site, now working at Stephen Foster State Folk Culture Center. "We requested photographs; they would look and get back to us. It depended."

Cataloguing and preserving artifacts is not particularly expensive or difficult. When the state site received a number of original letters by Koreshans, including Teed, staff immediately preserved them in acid-free materials. It's a tedious process, but only cost around $500, Subic says. The letters gave them a greater understanding of the commune and its people, something they couldn't get from the foundation.

"I've offered to volunteer over there and help (Bigelow) but that didn't work out," said Jane Hogg, a professional historian who works part time at the state site. "I knew that there was some feelings between her and the state, and I was on the wrong side of the road."

To be sure, historic preservation is still an emerging art. Some argue that doing nothing is preferable to taking actions that might later prove disastrous. And the government is not always the best keeper of historical property. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that thousands of artifacts have been stolen from the Gettysburg National Military Park. John Ringling's home at the popular public museum and estate in Sarasota owned by Florida Division of Parks is undergoing a multi-million dollar renovation after years of neglect.

Even state officials admit they have not been the best managers of their part of the Koreshan legacy, because of budget cuts and lack of expertise. "We don't have museum conditions," says Jeanne Parks, the assistant park manager at the site. "To do it ideally and correctly, we don't have the staff and time. We have pieces that need conserving. We're learning too."

Hogg did manage to get a peek into the fireproof vault at the foundation where the most important documents of the foundation are kept. They were sitting in open air, but she was relieved to find that the pre-1900-era paper had stabilized and wasn't in immediate danger of deteriorating.

"They need to be taken care of and historically, they need to be brought to light," Hogg says. "They are very unique records. Potentially it could be a great insight as to life in Southwest Florida at that time. Nobody knows what's there."

But Bigelow says part of her responsibility is to make sure the information on the Koreshans is disseminated properly, and to the proper people.

"The archives belong to the foundation which is a private corporation," she says. "We are within our rights. I don't have to open them to anyone. I'm not trying to build it so that I'll have hordes of people in here. I don't think I've ever met anyone who is intentionally evil, but I've met a lot of people who felt they were good that I didn't think so."

Bigelow has a history of hiring loyal friends and family members, which made her hiring of Sean Milks, the former Naples dockmaster who was convicted of taking a bribe, puzzling. It was another decision that divided board members. But both Bigelow and Milks say he has proved himself trustworthy.

"Sean is the best thing that ever happened to us," Bigelow says. "He is the one who has been behind everything that's been done here, because I can not do it myself."

Although he has no professional training as a historian, archivist or renovator, Milks was hired to preserve and restore Koreshan materials, including furniture, Teed's son's paintings and documents.

He has started clearing the Koreshan land, is working on a project with the state to make a video using old photographs, and has worked on fund-raising. Although Bigelow does not say he is the heir apparent, she defers more and more to him on questions of Koreshan beliefs.

Milks is already steeped in knowledge of the Unity and speaks with typical Koreshan protectiveness.

"The communal system was a personal system and we'd like to keep it that way," he says. "We feel that by continuing to grow and doing our job...that we will attract the individual and the attention we want to attract.

"We're not here to protect the archives and protect the heritage so someone could misinterpret it."

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Top: A Koreshan pageant circa 1905 on the shores of the Estero River.
Bottom: The Koreshan Unity Orchestra, circa 1900.

We live inside: Koreshan Unity Foundation President Jo Bigelow surrounded by Koreshan artifacts at the museum and library.

Bigelow's resistance to financial help and donated assistance is characteristic of her proud self-reliance.

"Jo's philosophy is that asking for help is like hat-in-hand," said Howard Hujsa, attorney for the foundation. "She won't ask for help. When I talked to her about grants, she took umbrage."

Bigelow is not eager to detail the foundation's current financial picture, either, saying only that she's working with professional advisors to make sure it is funded in perpetuity.

"We are using the remnants of what they put together to put a financial base under the foundation, which will survive in their memory," she says.

The practice of selling land to maintain the foundation did not start with Bigelow. At one time, the Koreshans owned much of Estero Island, most of Mound Key and other barrier islands—a total of 7,500 acres in Lee County alone. Now, all that is left is the 15-acre parcel where the foundation building sits.

The latest land deals in the works could bring several million dollars to the foundation. One of Grace's primary concerns was that the money be invested and spent wisely, especially since the land is the last of the significant Koreshan real estate assets.

Hujsa says financial prudence is the goal of the foundation. The land that was sold was not of historical significance. "The foundation's goal is historic preservation," he says. "Their purpose is not to have vast real estate holdings."

Bigelow says she wants to make sure the foundation is secure before retiring. "When I get it to where I can turn it over to somebody and have somebody who really feels as responsible as I do, I'll retire. But I need to be sure that they feel the same way that I do about it."

Board member Gerard Wertkin says that Bigelow is the best person to secure the future of the foundation.

"There is no question, Jo is the driving force," says Wertkin, director of the American Museum of Folk Art in New York. "But I think it's all been for the good. It's not like you've had all these people lining up to do this task. She's a woman of great force and personal power, but still a woman on her own. If it weren't for her, the likelihood for loss is tremendous."

In the mean time, those interested in the Koreshans have had to piece things together from other sources. Historian Rainard, who is planning to write a book, has studied materials at Rollins College, the Library of Congress, and the extensive collection in Sabbath Day Lake, ME, a Shaker settlement. (Teed had relationships with several cults and Michel had followed up years later by donating books and material). But Rainard's access to records at the foundation has been limited. He understands the burden of preserving and interpreting the documents of an active organization, and he has a cordial, albeit distant, relationship with Bigelow and Milks, who are helping with the conference.

However Rainard wants access to more information about the Koreshans.

"They've always been fearful of how these ideas might be presented," he says. "I've been working on this for a number of years, and I'm fairly certain I'll publish the book without them. I'd rather not." ■

What the Koreshans Believed

One autumn day in 1889, former doctor Cyrus Teed had a vision. God appeared to him and revealed the structure of the universe and the divine plan for humanity.

Everything is cellular, God told Teed, from the minute cells that make up living things to the huge cell that is the universe. Rather than an expansive space, Teed was told that the universe is a finite, hollow cellular sphere, with all life existing on the inner skin and the sun and planets suspended within the sphere. (In later years, Teed and his followers used a device he called a rectilineator to "prove" this notion, which he called the *Cellular Cosmogony*, in an experiment on Naples beach.)

Although this seems a bit bizarre now, at the turn of the century, this image was comforting, Koreshan scholar Gerard Wertkin, director of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York has said. Technology was complicating life, the economy was faltering and there was growing industrial and social unrest, hence the appeal of Koresh's ideas. "We're all comfortably inside this great, sheltering egg and nothing is ever lost," Wertkin said in a 1991 interview. "We all have our places and our function."

God also revealed to Teed that He was both male and female. Based on this revelation, women were included in Teed's community as equals. Teed was also told that people should live in communal cooperation. So when Teed founded the Koreshan Unity and started building his New Jerusalem on the banks of the Estero River, he put these principles and others into practice.

Culture and education were highly valued; the settlers dragged into the wilderness two grand pianos and enough musical instruments for a symphony orchestra. This was a major logistical challenge—everything had to be packed into boxcars in Chicago, shipped to Punta Gorda, then loaded onto boats and floated down to Estero. The Koreshans also transported the contents of a library and much heavy furniture in this way.

The social structure of Teed's group can be compared to that of the Catholic Church. As in the Catholic Church, Koreshanity had more than one order. And like priests, monks and nuns, one Koreshan order—the Communal Order—was celibate. But the Associative and Investigative orders were free to marry and have children. Although celibacy is often blamed for finishing off the Koreshans, it was actually the death of the sect's visionary and charismatic leader, Teed, that brought about the group's decline.