



Irene Rashid reacts as Jim Yarnes waves a sword in a play recounting the Koreshans' first century. Foundation members and friends celebrated the Koreshans' 100th anniversary Saturday during the annual Solar Festival in Estero. Photos by Lance Murphey

AC-0021 (BK-000146)

100 years of Koreshan Unity

Foundation marks group's milestone at Solar Festival

By **TSANI 'BEAR' YONAH**
Columnist/Staff Writer

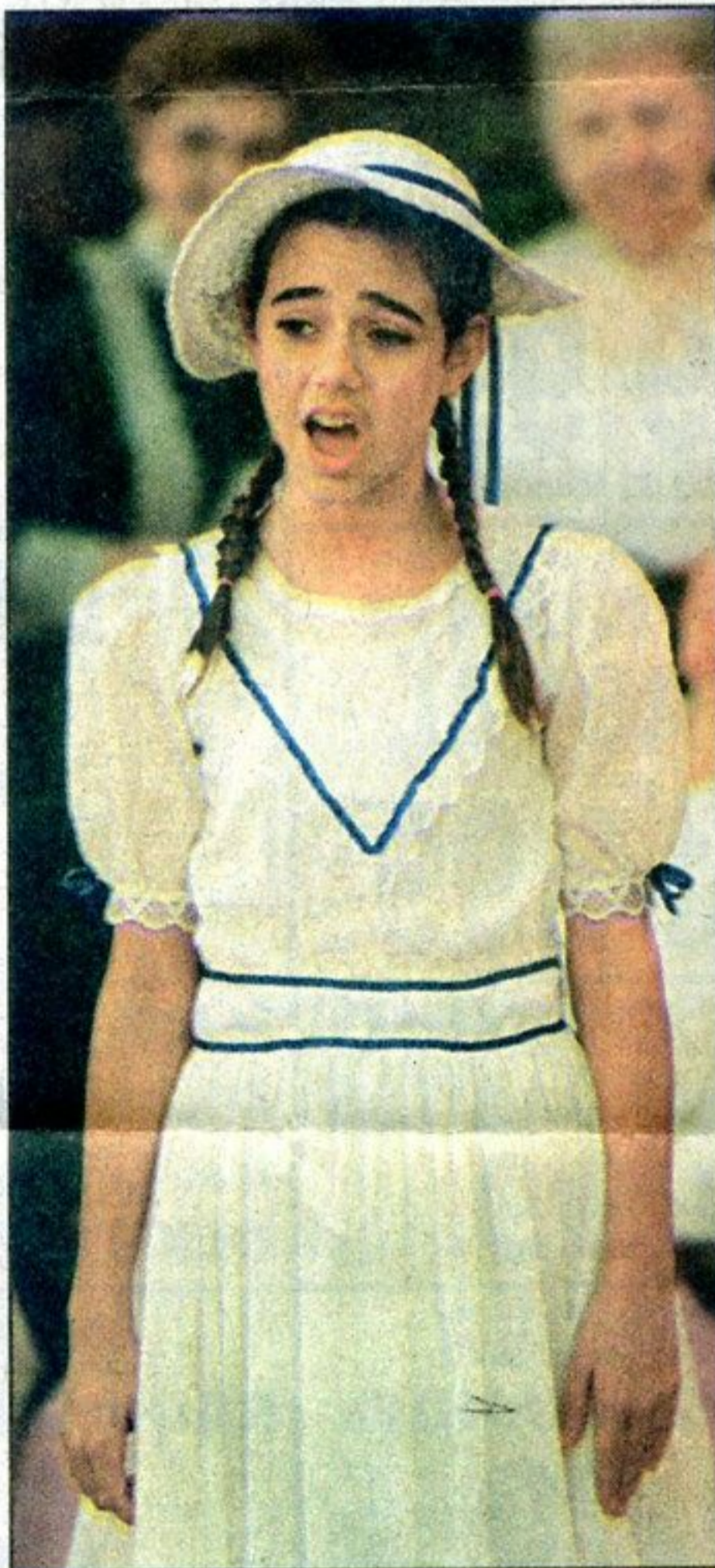
The Koreshan Unity Foundation Inc. celebrated the 100th anniversary of Koreshan Unity Saturday during the annual Solar Festival at its world headquarters in Estero.

The Solar Festival is held each year in observance of the birthday of Dr. Cyrus Teed, founder of the Koreshan cult, who brought his followers to Estero in 1894 to establish what he intended to be the "New Jerusalem" of the world.

Highlighting this year's festival was the unveiling of a photograph of Fedelia Rowe Teed, wife of Dr. Teed. It was long believed that no image of Teed's wife existed. However, a faded tin daguerreotype was recently discovered among Teed's papers and possessions in the foundation's archives. The old picture was restored and rephotographed to reveal the face of the lovely young woman whom Teed married in 1858, when she was 16.

In observance of the important anniversary, members of the foundation's staff, actors and volunteers performed a pageant, written by Pat Pastorino, of Fort Myers. The pageant re-enacted the founding of Koreshan Unity, the arrival of the pioneer members in Estero, and the hardships they endured for several years in their new homeland. Later, as more members arrived, the land was cleared, homes and dormitories built and life became easier and more rewarding.

Performing in the pageant were: Jo



Maxine Wood sings during a dramatization of the Koreshans' history.

Bigelow, foundation president; Sean Milks; Sara Rea; Lorraine Norman; Edith Braithwaite; Charlotte Harper;



A portrait of Fedelia Teed, the wife of Koreshan founder Cyrus Teed, was recently discovered among the archives at the Koreshan Unity Foundation.

Brigid Fraker; Maxine Woods; Lynn Yarnes; Jim Yarnes; Steve Posterino; Tom Organiszak; Jeanette Statler; Charlene Staton and Irene Raschid. Pianist was Barbara Atkins, and the pageant was narrated by Pat Pastorino.

Cyrus Teed was born near Moravia, N.Y. in 1839, and married Fedelia Rose in 1858, at the age of 19. Raised in a Baptist family, it was discovered that young Cyrus had an unusually powerful and persuasive oratorical voice, and he was encouraged to become a Baptist minister. Instead, he trained as a

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medical doctor, and served in the Union Army Medical Corps during the Civil War.

By the end of the war, he had become discouraged at the inability of medical science to adequately treat and cure the thousands of wounded and sick soldiers who were victims of the conflict, and after returning home, he virtually abandoned medicine and began experimenting with alchemy, seeking alternative methods of healing.

It was while working in his lab that he had what he called an "illumination," claiming to have been visited in a vision by an angel who revealed to him the "secrets of the universe."

Among those revelations was the theory that the surface of the world we know is actually on the *inside* of the globe, and the sun and planets and all the universe is actually the core of the Earth. Teed claimed later to have proved this theory mathematically, and offered a reward of \$100,000 to anyone who could disprove it. There were no takers.

He said the angel also told him that God is both male and female, father and mother, and that women were equally as capable and intelligent as men in every respect.

Teed began traveling around the country expounding his new ideas, and while he gained followers, especially among women who were attracted by his belief in the equality of the sexes, his medical practice suffered drastically. Many people simply thought he was crazy and refused to be treated by him.

As time went by, Teed came to the conclusion that Christians should return to the simplicity of earlier times, and he conceived of life in a commune, where work, pleasures and profits were equally shared and all property was equally owned. Teed said the angel had told him that God periodically sent prophets into the world to instruct man and interpret the

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Bible to him according to that age, and he was told that Cyrus, son of Jesse, would be such a prophet. Teed saw that he fulfilled those particular requirements and, searching the Old Testament, he adopted the name Koresh, which was the Hebrew translation of Cyrus. His followers became known as Koreshans.

While Koresh was undoubtedly a charismatic leader, he apparently never aspired to be the spiritual leader of his people. He claimed to be a prophet, sent to explain and instruct them in the new way of life, but continually affirmed that their relationship with God was strictly up to the individual.

Koresh first established an enclave of followers at Moravia, N.Y., but after encountering much opposition to his ideas in Northern cities, he believed he should search in the South for a location for his New Jerusalem. In 1894, he brought several followers to Estero to settle on land donated to him by Gustav Damkohler, a German immigrant who homesteaded there in 1882. Those first Koreshans encountered a jungle-like virgin wilderness, filled with wild animals, snakes, nearly impenetrable vegetation and billions of mosquitoes. Yet they persisted, and as more and more converts came to Estero, they built a healthy and

prosperous community. Eventually, Koresh believed, his New Jerusalem would contain more than 10 million people and be a city equal to New York or Paris. Unfortunately, one of his precepts was that of celibacy among his followers, and with no children being born...and none was ever born at the Estero commune...instead of increasing, his dream world began to die.

Koresh's wife Fedelia, who was his second cousin, never came to Estero. While she and her family supported his ideas, she became ill with tuberculosis and was a virtual invalid for many years before she died in 1885. After his death, the Koreshan Unity began falling apart, although some of his followers continued to live on the property for many years until they gradually died away.

In 1940, Hedwig Michel, of Frankfort, Germany, fled that country in the face of Hitler's persecution of the Jews. She had heard of Koreshan Unity and, although she arrived in America almost penniless, she was invited to join those members who survived. She became the final guiding light of Koreshan Unity and it was through her efforts that in 1961, the foundation donated more than 300 acres of the property to the State of Florida, to become a state park, with the provision that the Koreshan ideals and settlement be preserved in perpetuity.

Koresh died in December 1908 at the age of 69, and, believing that he would return from the dead and lead them to Heaven as he had often promised, his followers kept his unembalmed body lying in state for four days until the County Board of Health demanded that they bury it. He was buried in a tomb on the south end of Fort Myers Beach, on property owned by the Koreshans.

During the hurricane of 1926, Koresh's tomb was destroyed and nothing remained until, sometime later, the concrete cover of the tomb was found. It had washed ashore and was buried in the sand until waves later uncovered it. Carved into the concrete slab were the words, "Cyrus, Shepherd, Stone of Israel."

True to his promise, Koresh had returned.