



Volunteer Mimi Straub, right, shows the Juny family of Reutlingen, Germany, a collection of post cards Monday in the Art Hall at Koreshan State Historic Site. Straub volunteers about 8 hours per week. Photo by Dan Wagner

Volunteers vital to Koreshan Historic Site

By **DAN YOUNT**
Staff Writer

The volunteer force at Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero is so vital to maintaining and operating that early Southwest Florida settlement that park manager Larry Fooks says, "we could not make it without them."

The Koreshan volunteer force numbers from 35 to 40 individuals during the winter months. Three or four local, year-around residents help the ranger staff of 10 keep operations going during the summer months.

Volunteers are the backbone of Koreshan Unity Alliance Inc. the official citizen support organization for Koreshan Historic Site. Their mission is to assist in the restoration, and enhancement and interpretation of the park facilities which features Koreshan Unity Historic Settlement, the Mound Key State Archaeological Site, and the Koreshan State Park Campground.

The site encompasses one of Southwest Florida's earliest settlements. Dr. Cyrus Teed brought his group of educated and talented believers to Estero in 1894 to establish a utopian community. The settlement reached a

peak of about 200 people before declining after Teed's death in 1908.

Today's volunteers come from all over the United States and Canada, Fooks said. In return for their work, the state provides a campsite and some other amenities such as training when it's available, hats and T-shirts and recognition pins.

Some volunteers are assigned camping locations inside the park campgrounds, and about 10 spots in the abandoned adjacent Estero River RV Park were available for volunteers to

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park their trailers last year.

Many of the same volunteers return to the historic site each winter. New ones are recruited by rangers who work the campsites, or they hear about the opportunity for free camping in exchange for work at other Florida parks. Volunteerism is promoted in a state parks guide which also includes an application for interested parties.

"The volunteers are like a bunch of busy bees around here," Fooks said. "There is a camaraderie among them, a desire to help each other, and a sense of self-achievement that is really rewarding to see."

He notes that the site's 10 full-time employees are charged with managing a 60-site campground, canoe rentals, boat ramp, prescribed burning and exotic plant removal, Mound Key State Archaeological Site, a portion of the Estero River which is an Outstanding Florida River, and a National Historic District encompassing the physical remains of a turn of the century communal settlement.

"These facilities and unusual objects present the park staff with equally interesting and unusual challenges which they simply do not have time to tackle," Fooks said.

"Such tasks as cataloguing manuscripts, presenting living history enactments, researching the history of the settlement, the detailed maintenance and restoration of objects, buildings and other structures takes huge amounts of time and effort. All of these needs require people with diverse knowledge, talents and skills. The park needed grant writers, researchers, docents or tour guides, campground hosts, landscapers, costumers, exhibit builders, carpenters, interpreters, data entry people and event coordinators, among other jobs."

Others have worked in the ranger station, raked paths, assisted with the burning of underbrush,

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manager

planted trees, washed windows, mowed the grass, captured and transported injured wildlife to care facilities, led guided canoe tours and run errands.

Specifically, volunteer Earl Hay built a miniature rectilinear exhibit to demonstrate the Koreshan's belief in Cellular Cosmogony, the theory we live on the inside of the Earth.

George Parks and Ed Ratliff rebuilt several of the New Store windows which were badly deteriorated.

Jim Purcell located a Fairbanks Morse diesel engine similar to the one installed in the settlement in 1925 to generate electricity and arranged to bring it to the park to replace the original one which had deteriorated.

Dean Stitz has worked to obtain conservators who will restore and stabilize some of the original musical instruments, and is organizing Koreshan concerts.

More than 10,000 volunteer hours were donated to the park last year, and their efforts have secured well over \$20,000 in funding and equipment during the same period. Special site events staged by the volunteers attracted more than 5,000 additional visitors to the park in 1994.

Visitor comment cards, Fooks said, constantly reflect the positive impressions the volunteers have made on campers and day visitors. "Koreshan volunteers have made the park a place the community can be proud of," he said.