

Origins of the Estero Post Office

Nearly 600 people signed the register at Estero Post Office on Monday, while about 400 other patrons skipped the formalities as postal authorities and members of local pioneer families were celebrating the 100th anniversary of the opening of a postal facility in this historic community.

The beginning of Estero's post office on March 26, 1895, can be traced to arrival in 1894 of the first Koreshans from Chicago.

Led by Dr. Cyrus R. Teed, the religious and educational group arrived in the community on Jan. 22 of that year to establish what he envisioned would become the "new Jerusalem on the banks of the Estero River."

Dr. Teed, who took the name of Koresh — the Biblical name for Cyrus — headed the religious and educational community until his death in 1908.

In 1961, then-President Hedwig Michel persuaded her board of directors to deed some 305 acres of Koreshan-owned land to the state, including the present State Historic Site on U.S. 41, Mound Key, and acreage north and south of the mouth of the Estero River.

Realizing their community lacked a post office, the ever-farsighted Koreshans applied to the U.S. Postal Department in December 1894 for a facility. It first was planned for the end of Fort Myers Beach (Estero Island), which the Koreshans owned in those early years.

The mail would be delivered by boat, which back then was the customary mode of transportation when the road between Estero and Fort Myers was just a dirt trail. The Tamiami Trail — U.S. 41 — was not paved until 1928.

When it was realized the mail could be more directly transported by train, the application was changed to Estero. This delayed the opening date from January to March 26, 1895, said

current Postmaster Larry Ellis.

Housed in the front of the Koreshan Unity General Store, the first post office was headed by George Hunt, a member of the Koreshan Unity.

In 1905, the post office located in a building next to the



Kay Smith

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Estero River on the west side of what now is U.S. 41. On Dec. 4, 1924, it moved into a new building, which was destroyed by fire on Jan. 4, 1938.

The post office was moved back inside the Koreshan Unity store, with post office boxes placed outside the building. A new post office later was built on the south side of the store. Today, the small building is used as a recreation room for park rangers at the State Historic Site.

In the mid-1960s, the post office was moved to a storefront in San Carlos Park, but retained its Estero name.

Through the diligent work of Hedwig, who died in 1982, and current Koreshan Unity Foundation President Jo Bigelow, the post office was returned to Estero in August 1983, where it was built on land previously owned by Koreshan Unity.

From 1920-1923, Carl Luettich, father of Evelyn Horne, an Estero pioneer and an employee of the

Koreshan Unity for many years, carried the mail three days a week to Punta Rassa, Black Island (today's Lovers Key), and San Carlos Point. Later, Allen Andrews, editor of the Koreshan newspaper, *The American Eagle*, carried the mail by boats, named "The Victoria," and "The Cracker Boy."

Antonio Fernandez, the maternal grandfather of Henrietta Luettich Davenport, brought the mail to the post office by car from the Seaboard Coastline Railroad depot at the crossing on East Broadway. Henrietta, who became officer in charge of the post office, later served as a clerk until her retirement in the mid-1970s. Antonio also was the great-great maternal grandfather of Kay McCullers, a present day clerk at the post office.

In addition to Henrietta, past heads of the post office were: Ada Price, sisters Rosa Gilbert and Anna Lewis, whose home still stands on the east side of U.S. 41 on land owned by the Koreshan Unity Foundation; Marie Fisher, the last Koreshan member to be postmaster; Docia Anderson, Ralph Marshall, Eileen Davis, officer-in-charge; Charles Block, Kay McCullers OIC; William Slevin, and James Derringer, OIC.

In December 1992, Larry Ellis, former postmaster in St. James City, was named Estero postmaster.

Additional historical facts about Estero and the Koreshans are available at the Koreshan Unity College of Life on Corkscrew Road. The college, library and museum is open seven days a week. Call 992-2184.