

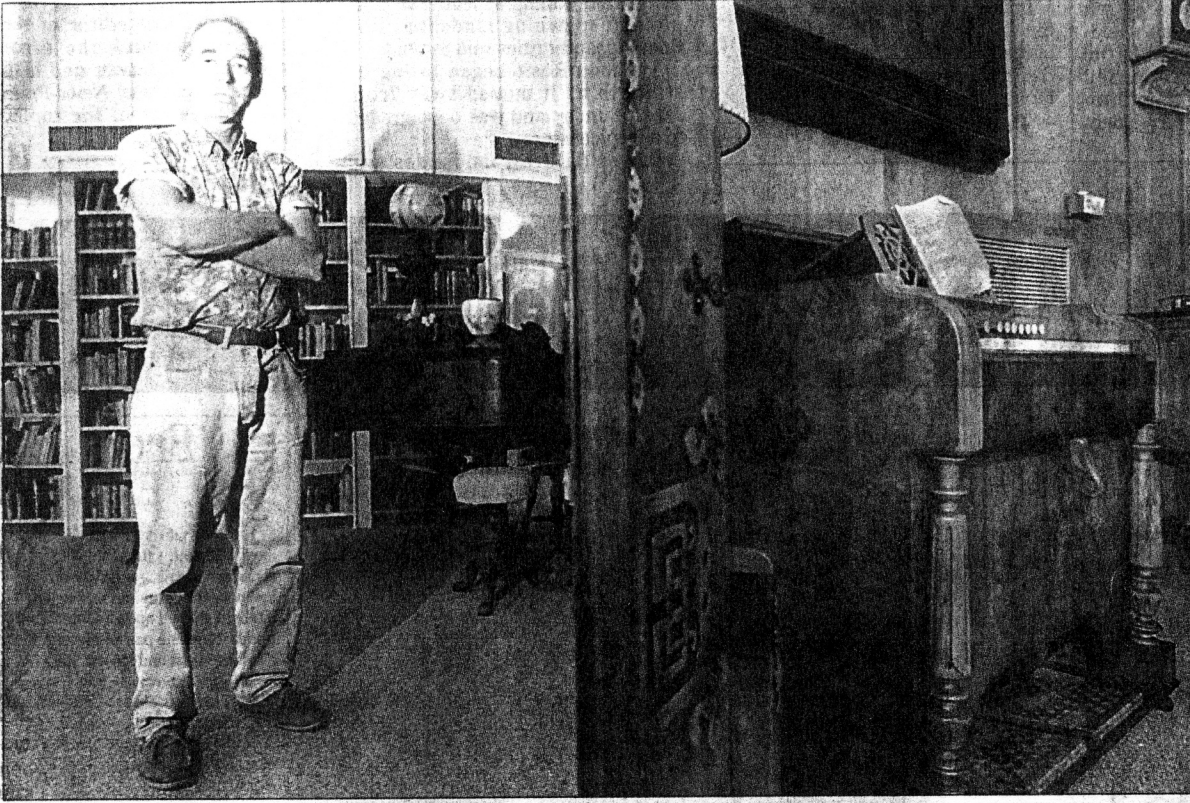
Charity starves Koreshan history



EXTRA:
Unkept promises

Inside

- Foundation fails to answer many questions. / 5A
- Cemetery will get needed cleaning. / 5A
- Koreshan leadership needs new steward. / 22A



JOSE MENDEZ/News-Press

CRIMINAL PAST: Sean Milks, a Koreshan Unity Foundation official, was convicted in 1991 of soliciting bribes while employed by the city of Naples.

Prosperous Unity Foundation shortchanges preservation

By **LEE MELSEK**
News-Press staff writer

The money keeps rolling in — hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time.

The beneficiary is Lee County's tiny Koreshan Unity Foundation, a secretive group making bold promises but delivering little.

The foundation claims its purpose is to preserve and promote the history of the Koreshan people, a cult that thrived briefly on the banks of the Estero River near Bonita Springs between 1894 and 1908.

A News-Press investigation found the foundation has little left to preserve, doesn't advertise itself and hasn't fulfilled goals to rebuild Koreshan buildings and dramatize the way the pioneering sect members lived.

The bulk of the Koreshan artifacts and buildings have been in state hands for 36 years. The

Koreshans' once vast land empire covering more than 11 square miles has dwindled to 109 acres.

Between 1993 and 1996, foundation income was at least \$1.1 million, almost all of it from the sale of property, land sale records and federal income tax reports show.

But the foundation spent only \$4,750 in 1994 and 1995 on its two primary Koreshan educational programs — festivals in October and April.

Meanwhile, the payroll rose 218 percent between 1993 and 1995. Foundation President Jo Bigelow's own raise amounted to a 400 percent increase — from \$6,000 a year to \$30,000 a year. She refused to disclose the salaries of her staff, and the individual salaries aren't listed on the foundation's IRS reports.

The nonprofit, charitable foundation is run by Bigelow, an 82-

See **CHARITY** / 5A

WHO OWNS WHAT

- Koreshan State Park includes all the original Koreshan buildings and 156 acres of land.
- Koreshan Unity Foundation owns about 100 acres of land, a small museum and headquarters, and a cemetery.
- WCI Communities Inc. is adjacent to Koreshan State Park. The company's property includes 176 acres. The Koreshan cemetery is within the WCI land.

CHARITY: Goals for educational programs, building projects fall through

From Page 1A

year-old former newspaper columnist and editor and her right-hand man, Sean Milks, 52, who served time in jail for soliciting bribes in Naples.

Milks' role at the foundation is fuzzy. Bigelow refuses to say how much he is paid.

He calls himself the "operations officer."

Bigelow says he's in charge of maintenance and beautification." Bigelow introduces him as "Dr. Milks," a title he picked up through the mail from a New Orleans correspondence course at LaSalle University. The school is not accredited.

Bigelow is vague about what she's doing with the huge sums of money flowing into the bank accounts of the foundation, which was down to its last \$20,000 only four years ago.

The money is from the 1993 sale of 176 acres of foundation land to a developer, WCI Communities Inc. The foundation will receive a total of \$5.1 million when the land is paid off in 1998.

"I'm trying to preserve the memory of the Koreshans," Bigelow said.

Despite the millions of dollars pouring into the foundation, none of Bigelow's goals to expand Koreshan educational programs and proceed with building projects has been accomplished.

Asked when they would become reality, Bigelow was vague. "I won't give a timetable," she said.

Salaries get fatter

But former foundation board member Bill Grace, a Fort Myers attorney, called the foundation "a sham" when he resigned in 1994. He said Bigelow stymied all of his attempts to get help from professional historians and provide educational programs on Koreshan history.

While the flow of money hasn't been used to demonstrate much of the Koreshan lifestyle, it has improved the lifestyles of foundation employees. They get raises in 1995.

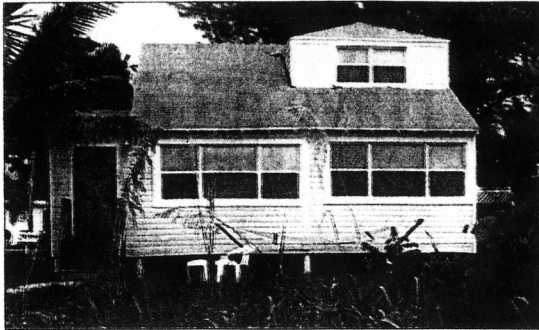
Bigelow's attorney, Cathy Reiman of Naples, told a Lee County circuit judge earlier this year during a case involving another land sale that Bigelow earns "a meager salary. She does this as a labor of love rather than for financial gain."

Bigelow's \$30,000 salary wasn't mentioned during the court case.

While salaries were increased and shutters were bought for the museum, a cemetery controlled by the foundation containing the remains of some of the Koreshans' most important leaders is unkempt, the graves almost completely overgrown by brush. Only eight of the 57 graves can be found.

Much of the remainder of Koreshan furniture is in Bigelow's home. Milks lives rent-free in the foundation's Gulf-front house on Fort Myers Beach even though the foundation's board voted in 1993 to use the house for charitable purposes.

Asked what his living in the house



MARC BEAUDIN/News-Press

FOUNDATION PROPERTY: The foundation owns this Gulf-front home on Fort Myers Beach. Employee Sean Milks has been living at the residence rent free.

rent free has to do with the property's charitable purpose, Milks said, "You ask some tough questions."

Bigelow repeatedly refused to reveal the foundation's federal tax returns, which are public record because of the organization's nonprofit tax status as a charity.

Only after the foundation attorney, Joe Cox of Naples, later told Bigelow she had to provide those records were they given to the News-Press.

"We are trying to use the money for the benefit of the memory of the Koreshans," Bigelow said. But she provides few details of how that is being accomplished. Some money, she said, also was spent on a new roof for the tiny museum and to repave the small parking lot. She spent \$32,000 building a small outdoor stage behind the museum where she said she wants to present concerts.

Another \$100,000 was invested in stocks, she said.

Bigelow said she didn't remember how much this year's operating budget is. In April, while testifying in a Lee County courtroom, Bigelow said last year's foundation budget was \$250,000.

Bigelow's testimony came during a lawsuit over her attempts to sell 76 more acres of foundation land to Naples Realtor Jim Colosimo for \$3.3 million.

The Nature Conservancy, which deeded the land to the foundation in 1978, stopped the sale because of a deed restriction that doesn't allow the foundation to sell the land. A judge ruled the property cannot be sold but the foundation is appealing that decision.

Bigelow also testified during the trial that as of last October her organization had collected \$1.3 million from WCI. She said she spent most of that money improving the small foundation museum and paying nearly \$1 million for 8.5 acres near the museum last year.

Bigelow said last week she doesn't know what the foundation will do with that land.

Grace, who has served on historic

preservation boards statewide, said the foundation does nothing to preserve or promote Koreshan history and its role in settling the state.

"Assets have been diverted to the private use of at least one officer and director," Graca wrote in his resignation letter.

Grace said he was referring to Milks living rent free in the foundation's Gulf-front house and Bigelow putting Koreshan furniture in her home and barn.

Bigelow said the furniture has been in her home for years because there isn't enough room in the foundation museum. She said someday the foundation may make enough room to display it but she won't say for certain if or when that will be.

Bigelow, whose only tie to the Koreshans is watching over some of their belongings, believes in keeping state historians, and all other state officials, out of her organization's business.

State shows interest

The state has tried for years, records show, to persuade Bigelow to give it ownership of the Koreshan furniture. Bigelow refuses, claiming she's not sure the state can take good care of it.

Steve Martin, an official with the state Bureau of Natural and Cultural Resources, said Friday he thought he was close to an agreement with Bigelow to have the furniture donated to the state.

Martin said he also would like to assess the Koreshan furniture in Bigelow's home to determine its historic significance.

Milks' background is etched in Naples criminal files. He was convicted in 1991 of soliciting bribes as Naples' dockmaster.

Prosecutors proved Milks asked two boat owners for money in exchange for giving them boat slips at city-owned docks. In one case, he solicited \$15,000 from a boat owner. He asked another boatowner for \$1,000.

Milks claimed he was kidding



BENJAMIN RUSNAK/News-Press

when he asked for the money. He was sent to jail for six months.

Milks began visiting the foundation museum regularly before his conviction and offered to restore some art and furniture, although he admits he has no training in historic restoration.

Bigelow refused to say what Milks is paid. "That's no one's business," she said.

The foundation headquarters and museum Milks maintains has nothing to do with the Koreshans. It was built by the foundation years after the last of the original Koreshans died in 1974.

Bigelow let Milks move into the Fort Myers Beach house, rent-free, shortly after the money from the land sale began rolling in. The value of the two-story home is assessed at \$453,000, according to county records. The nonprofit foundation is exempt from county property taxes. The house previously earned as much as \$2,000 a month in rent, foundation records show.

Promises not kept

The foundation's headquarters is nestled on the east side of U.S. Highway 41 and Corkscrew Road in Estero. There are eight employees, some of whom are part time, walls full of paintings by Koreshan leader Cyrus Teed's son and a tax-free status as a nonprofit organization. There's a donation jar on a table for visitors.

Bigelow appoints the board and the number of directors has varied over the years. In addition to Bigelow, there are four other board members today, none of whom could be reached for comment.

There were 16 general members of the foundation in 1994. Bigelow refused to say how many general members there are today.

The foundation is the successor of the Pioneer Educational Foundation Inc. a company started by Teed and his followers. Bigelow and her board changed the name in 1998.

Teed was a surgeon, visionary, spellbinder and possibly one of Florida's earliest land wheeler dealers. His clan ended up owning more than 7,500 acres by the time he died in December 1908.

Today, only about 100 of the original 7,500 acres are left. The original Koreshans sold some. Bigelow and her predecessors in the foundation sold the rest.

In August 1993, the foundation had \$20,000 left in its treasury and was paying about \$5,000 a month in expenses. It owed attorneys \$21,000, foundation records show.

Two months later, the land was sold and the first check for \$250,000 rejuvenated the foundation's bank account.

Since then, it's received another \$600,000, and will get another \$315,000 in October. After that, there's still more than \$4 million coming through 1998.

A history of disputes

Minutes of board meetings show former foundation trustee Grace repeatedly tried to persuade Bigelow and the board to let state experts and others help the foundation create professional archives and properly restore artifacts. Bigelow consistently rebuffed those attempts.

Bigelow claims Grace was trying to take over the foundation. He tried to bring in new members. She said she worried they would vote her out of office.

After she refused to let Grace's wife and two other women join the foundation, Bigelow got the rules changed. Instead of foundation mem-

UNFULFILLED PLANS

At various times since becoming president of the Koreshan Unity Foundation in 1982, Jo Bigelow has outlined bold plans to promote the sect's history once her organization could afford it. They include:

- Building a college
- Starting a publishing house
- Building the New Jerusalem, which was Teed's name for Estero
- Getting all the Koreshan descendants together as a separate body
- Gathering Koreshan philosophy into a book
- Restoring the burned Koreshan publishing house and Rustic Tea Garden
- Opening a marina like the one the Koreshans ran

None of these things has been done.

THE MONEY FLOW

The money the Koreshan Unity Foundation is receiving from WCI Communities Inc. through 1998 for the sale of 176 acres of land:

- Oct. 1993 - \$275,000
- Oct. 1994 - \$285,000
- Oct. 1995 - \$295,000
- Oct. 1996 - \$305,000
- Oct. 1997 - \$315,000
- Oct. 1998 - \$3.645 million.
- Total: \$5.1 million.

SOURCE: 1993 purchase agreement between WCI Communities and Koreshan Unity Foundation.

bers electing the board, she now appoints the board members.

"That was for protection," she said. "There are people who want me out."

Grace, whose grandmother was a Koreshan and lived in the Estero settlement, denies he was trying to take over the foundation.

"My interest in participating in the foundation was based on my interest in preservation and interpretation of the heritage of the Koreshans," he said. "I felt we could bring some professionalism to the organization and bring in experts to deal with the archives and preservation of the cemetery."

Grace said he worries that Bigelow's continuing attempts to sell more foundation land eventually will spell doom for what is left of the foundation.

"When everything is sold and the money is spent there will be nothing left to preserve." Grace said.



Cemetery alive with overgrowth

Developer plans to help clean it up

By LEE MELSEK
News-Press staff writer

Ignored for decades near the brown, moody waters of the Estero River, a sacred and significant piece of Lee County history has been left to crumble and soon will be surrounded by development.

Beneath the gnarled earth in a quiet forest of palmettos, scrub oak and pine lie the remains of 57 of Southwest Florida's early settlers. Mildewed tombstones identify some. Rotted wooden crosses reveal other graves, but not the identities of those buried there.

Now, the cemetery, which began in 1931, is about to be swept into the modern age, surrounded by a huge golf course development now under way by WCI Communities Inc.

The Koreshan Unity Foundation, which owns the cemetery, has ignored it for decades.

Foundation officials appear uneasy talking about the cemetery that's supposed to be in their care.

"Do you have relatives buried there? Why are you so interested in that old bone yard?" foundation official Sean Milks asked a reporter who wanted to know why the cemetery was abandoned.

The graves embrace the remains of Koreshans, 250 pioneering settlers who followed New York surgeon Cyrus Teed to the land beside the Estero River in 1894. Together, they carved a thriving, cultured commune out of Southwest Florida jungle.

They took their name from the Hebrew word Koresh, which means the anointed one. Teed took the name Koresh and named his flock Koreshans.

The Koreshans created Florida's first symphony orchestra. They authored books and articles on science, religion and poetry. They built businesses — sawmills, machine shops, a store, a marina — and fed themselves from their crops and the river. They came from as far west as California, as

far north as New York.

Down a dirt path 1.3 miles from the graves, some of the group's buildings still stand in the Koreshan State Park on U.S. Highway 41 in Estero.

WCI bought the land surrounding the cemetery from the foundation in 1993 for \$5.1 million. But the plots still are in the hands of the foundation.

The four-acre plot is the resting place of some of the Koreshan settlement's most important leaders. Five of the seven women in the Koreshan governing hierarchy are buried there, including close Teed adviser Etta Silverfriend.

Civil war soldier John Sargent of the 168th Illinois infantry is buried there. So is printer and musician Ella Graham and teacher and writer Eleanor Castle.

Frank Lewis, one of the men who built U.S. 41 through the Everglades from Fort Myers to Miami, is there, too.

When the Koreshans incorporated the hamlet of Estero in 1904, Henry Silverfriend was town clerk for two years until the county dissolved the town. He's also buried there.

The last original Koreshan, Vesta Newcomb, was buried there in 1974. Teed's not there. When he died in 1908, his body was placed in a bathtub on the south end of Fort Myers Beach. His followers waited for him to arise. When he didn't, a county health inspector made them build a concrete tomb around his body. A hurricane in 1921 destroyed the tomb and swept Teed to sea.

WCI Senior Vice-President Jerry Schmoyer said he told foundation President Jo Bigelow his firm would help clean up the cemetery. Scrub oaks and palmetto shrubs have overtaken the plots. A dirt path covers some graves.

Although the development will be gated, Schmoyer said relatives of the people buried there will be given access to the graves.

Bigelow said it was her under-

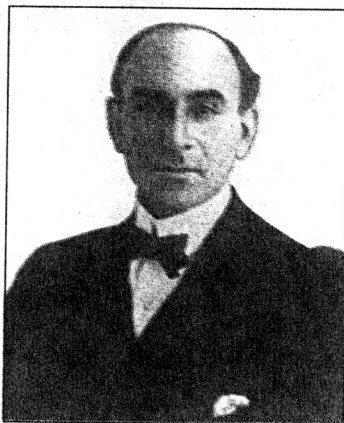
Settlers buried in cemetery



Etta Silverfriend was a close adviser to Koreshan leader Cyrus Teed.



Vesta Newcomb was the last original Koreshan to die in 1974.



Henry Silverfriend served as town clerk when the Koreshans incorporated Estero.



Bertha Boomer, whom Koreshan leader Cyrus Teed put in charge of the Koreshan settlement's domestic affairs.

standing the general public would be given access. Schmoyer said that won't happen.

Bigelow said she plans to round up the 47 descendants of Koreshans and get them to plan what to do with the cemetery. They are scattered all over the globe.

Bigelow has talked in the past about cleaning up the cemetery, foundation records show, but that hasn't been done.

In 1993, Bigelow told her board the money that was about to come from WCI for the property surrounding the cemetery would be

used to take care of the graves. The money has been coming in for four years but the cemetery hasn't been touched.

A year later, Bigelow told her board she planned to fence off the cemetery property and beautify it. That never happened.

"We'll make it an attractive area," Schmoyer promised last week. "If my relatives were buried there I certainly would want it looking nice."

Foundation offers public few answers

By LEE MELSEK
News-Press staff writer

For decades, the Koreshan Unity Foundation's purpose has been clearly set forth in its mission statement: to preserve the history of the Koreshan people and teach the public about them.

But the foundation provides few answers to the public on Koreshan history.

The Koreshans, a collection of teachers, writers, artists, business people and Civil War veterans, founded the tiny hamlet of Estero in 1894 and thrived there until their leader's death in 1908.

The Koreshans and their community are viewed by some historians not only as one of Florida's most significant communal colonies but also one of the most significant in the southeastern United States.

But a reporter who visited the tiny Koreshan Unity Foundation's headquarters and museum in Estero this month got few answers to questions about the cult and its leader, Cyrus Teed.

The reporter asked a tour guide 10 questions about the Koreshans and Teed. The guide couldn't answer any of them.

She knew little about the paintings on the wall, which are the work of Teed's son, Douglas Arthur Teed, or whether any of the artist's relatives were still alive. She also didn't know whether Cyrus Teed practiced the celibacy he demanded from members of the settlement's inner circle while one of the group's leading women lived in Teed's house.

Foundation President Jo Bigelow also couldn't answer some of the questions. The foundation squirrels away much of what it has left from the commune. Koreshan furniture is in Bigelow's home. Many other artifacts are in a vault and in other locations Bigelow refused to identify.

Asked why the furniture isn't in the

museum for public display, Bigelow said, "who cares about that?"

About all the foundation's museum offers the public are books badly in need of binding, paintings by Arthur Teed, who lived in Europe, and an old typewriter used by Cyrus Teed.

The public can find out a lot more about the cult by visiting the separate state historic site across U.S. 41 than they can learn at the foundation's museum.

Most of the significant Koreshan artifacts, including the remains of the settlement, their tools, photos and musical instruments, were given to the state by the foundation in 1961.



BIGELOW

At the Koreshan State Historic Site, 50,000 visitors a year tour the old Koreshan art hall, the founder's home and other buildings and listen to a video history of the once-thriving community and its leader, Teed.

From within the art hall, the Koreshans created what might have been Florida's first symphony orchestra by the turn of the century.

About 250 Koreshans once lived in the settlement and surrounding areas of Estero and Fort Myers Beach. Deeply religious, they welcomed black people into the group while the rest of Lee County remained segregated.

Koreshan women held key settlement positions and the children were educated in Koreshan schools. The Koreshans produced two newspapers, one dealing with religious matters and the other with political issues. They even created their own political party.

The group began breaking up in 1908 after Teed's death. Some went north to Tampa. Others scattered throughout Lee County.

Opinion

NEWS-PRESS

A Gannett Newspaper

2442 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Fort Myers, FL 33901-3987

335-0200

Publisher: Fritz Jacobi Executive editor: Terry Eberle Managing editor: Vickie Kilgore Editorial page editor: Gail Pastula

New stewards needed to preserve Koreshan legacy

If the legacy of the Koreshans continues in the hands of the Koreshan Unity Foundation, it will be as neglected and forgotten as the tiny cemetery that has been entrusted all these years to the foundation's care.

The surviving Koreshan Unity Foundation, a nonprofit group that solicits public donations and claims to be the steward of the Koreshan culture, says its mission is to preserve and promote the history of the Koreshan people.

However, the board of the foundation, which has little left to preserve and doesn't advertise what it does have, is tightly controlled by a dominating president who can't or won't

answer most questions about the charitable foundation.

Instead of education, the mission of the foundation seems to be the auction of its acreage to developers for golf courses, strip shopping centers, condominiums and homesites.



After years of complaining that the foundation lacked the money to promote the historic Koreshan role in Southwest Florida, hundreds of thousands of dollars from land sales now are plumping up the founda-

tion's coffers.

Still, Jo Bigelow, the head of the foundation, has done little but make basic repairs to its holdings and give generous raises and perks to staff.

Indeed, from the comments made in today's front page report, Bigelow and her second-in-command, ex-con Sean Milks, don't seem to have much interest in the few Koreshan holdings and artifacts that are left.

The cemetery, which contains the remains of many of the Koreshan leaders, is an overgrown mess.

Whatever this foundation — a public charity that survives because taxpayers subsidize its non-profit status — has been doing with its newfound wealth is anyone's guess

because the foundation certainly isn't talking.

Fortunately for those who do care about the Koreshans, most of their buildings and artifacts have been in state hands for the past 36 years.

The state does a far better job than the foundation of staging and promoting activities — attended by thousands each year — as well as maintaining the site of its Koreshan State Park, despite budget cuts.

Little reason exists for continuing the Koreshan Unity Foundation. It should turn over the remainder of its land and its few artifacts to the state, including the Koreshan furniture Bigelow keeps in her own home.

The state actually is eager to have

the last few artifacts put in its care.

A trust fund, perhaps administered through a group such as the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, should be established for the profits from the sale of the Koreshan lands.

The interest earned on the principal would go to the state with the restriction that the money be used for the preservation and promotion of the history of the Koreshans.

Stipulations on the use of the money should include paying for the expertise of professional curator who could handle museum-quality restorations, maintenance of the buildings and artifacts as well as the promotion of the site as a tourist attraction.

If the Koreshan money is invested

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Give remaining holdings, artifacts to the state
- Put land sales profits in trust
- Disband the Koreshan Unity Foundation

and used wisely, this bit of Southwest Florida history will not fade, and the legacy of these interesting people and their unique community can be assured.