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Koreshan lands dwindling

Unity Foundation gradually selling legacy

By ANDREA STETSON
News-Press staff writer

During the turn-of-the-century years when the Koreshan settlement thrived in south Lee County, the communal group owned 7,500 acres stretching from Estero to Fort Myers Beach to Hickory Island.

But when the Koreshan Unity Foundation — the organization entrusted to preserve the history of the settlement founded by Cyrus Teed — is finished wheeling, dealing and dragging a case through court, the Koreshans' land legacy will have dwindled to 15 acres.

By selling the land, the Unity hopes to ensure its existence forever. But at the same time, the sale of that

pristine land to developers has triggered concern by — and a legal dispute with — environmentalists.

"They would sell a piece of land here and there just to hang on financially, but now we can fund ourselves for perpetuity, which is our goal," said real-estate broker Andy DeSalvo, who is handling land deals for the Unity.

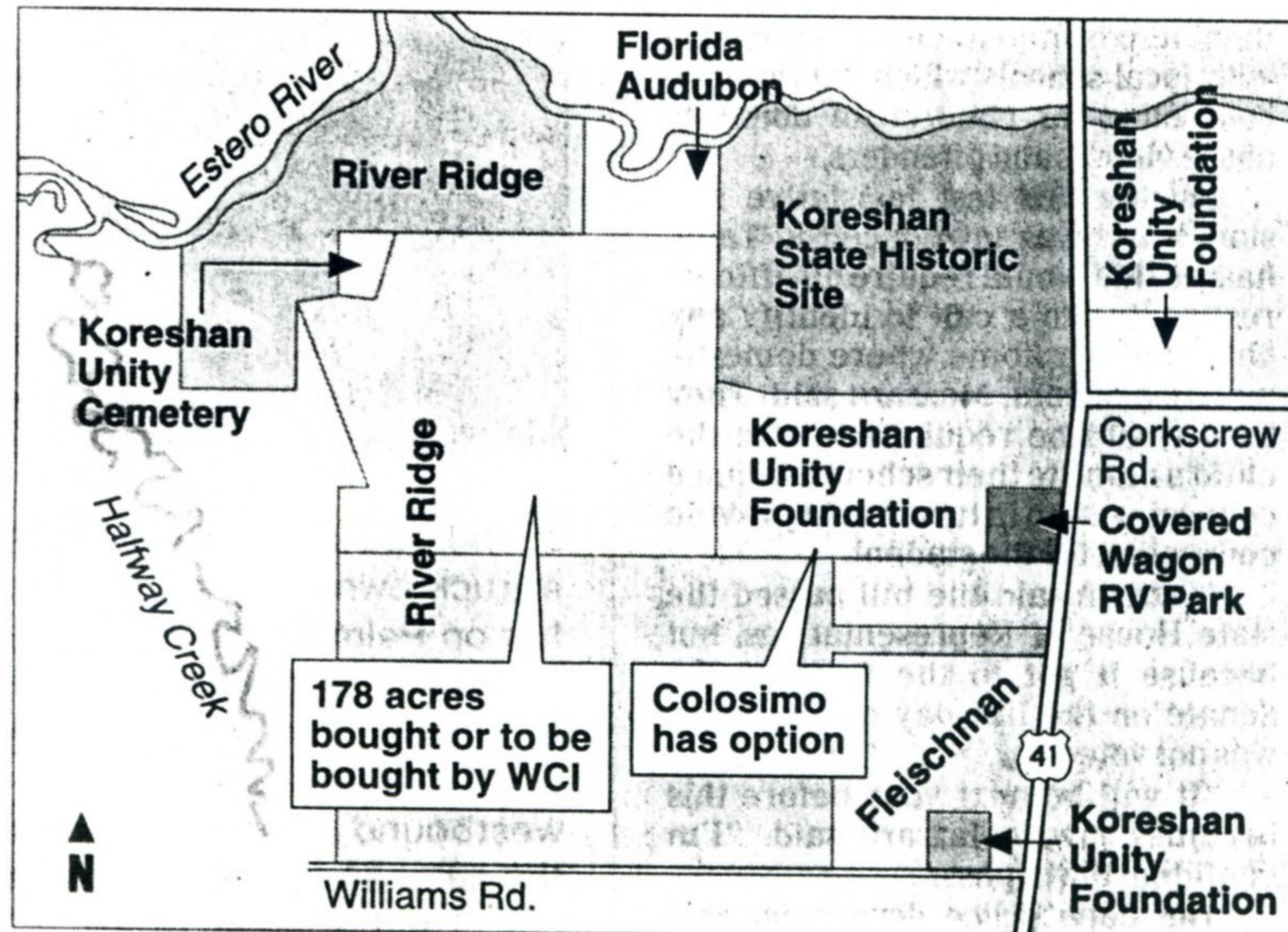
Purchasing tracts for about \$3 an acre, the original Koreshans built a land empire that spread across southern Lee. Little by little, the land was sold, sometimes for as little as \$10 an acre.

In 1961, the Unity gave the state 305 acres to preserve in its natural condition. Six years later, that land became the Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero.

According to 1994 records, the 270 acres of property owned at that time by the Koreshan Unity was valued at \$5.65 million. The last chunks of available land now are under contract to WCI Communities and Jim Colosimo Inc.

Since 1993, WCI — formerly Westinghouse — has purchased about 12 acres each year to add to its River Ridge development in Estero. WCI will buy another 12 acres in October. When the deals are complete in about two years, WCI will own 178 acres of Unity land for its planned community of almost 1,500 units.

Another 76 acres are under contract to Colosimo, but that purchase



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HISTORY AT A PRICE: Lorraine Norman, granddaughter of professor Ulysses Morrow, an early Koreshan settler, views displays at the Koreshan Unity Museum in Estero. In order to preserve the history of the turn-of-the-century commune that once owned much of the land in south Lee County, the Koreshan Unity Foundation is selling off all but a small chunk of acreage to financially secure itself.

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depends on the outcome of a trial scheduled to begin Dec. 3. The hitch is an environmental group that wants a development restriction on the land enforced.

After months of mediation with the Nature Conservancy — a nonprofit group that works to protect natural lands — the Unity's legal counsel said negotiations ended abruptly last week and the Koreshan group's only option is to take the Conservancy to court.

Strings attached

The legal mess dates back to 1966, when the Koreshan Unity gave the Conservancy the land to study and research melaleuca trees. When the Conservancy failed to use the land for that purpose, the property was returned to Unity ownership in 1978 — with a restriction. The land would remain a nature preserve to be used only for scientific, educational and aesthetic purposes.

That clause gives the land little sale value, DeSalvo said.

"Since they (Colosimo) are in the business to buy and develop land, I would assume it would be of no value to them if they can't develop it," he said.

Employees at Jim Colosimo Inc. referred all calls to DeSalvo.

For the past six months, attorneys from the Unity and Conservancy

have been trying to reach a settlement, without success.

"We have invested a great deal of time trying to mediate, and the Nature Conservancy was not willing to do that," said Kelley Geraghty, attorney with the Fort Myers firm of Cummings and Lockwood, which represents the Unity. "As a result, it appears they are not operating in good faith."

Nature Conservancy staff attorney Geoff Rich said he couldn't say much about the case, but did contest Geraghty's allegation. "The Nature Conservancy always negotiates in good faith and we hope to continue to negotiate with them."

In addition to the land under contract to WCI and Colosimo is a 10-acre tract with its own legal hassle. Attorneys are trying to untangle a web of owners since the land was deeded to many Koreshan descendants. DeSalvo said eventually that land also will be sold, leaving the Unity with only the 15 acres that surround its library on the northeast corner of Corkscrew Road and U.S. 41.

Selling to survive

The Nature Conservancy isn't alone in its concern about the land sell-off necessitated by the Koreshan Unity's property-rich, cash-poor situation.

"As a person who lives in the community, I would like to see it stay

with the Koreshan Unity in its natural state because it's a valuable natural ecosystem," said Dorothy McNeill, president of the Estero Conservancy. "I think it's a sad commentary that it has to be sold."

But Koreshan Unity officials say they have no choice.

Their troubles began in 1989, when an Internal Revenue Service audit showed the Unity had not complied with a non-profit law requiring them to donate 5 percent of unused assets. At the time, Unity officials claimed they didn't realize land counted as an unused asset.

Three years later, the foundation had squared things with the IRS, but at one point in 1993, Unity officials said they only had enough money to operate for another three months. Dwindling outside donations became another problem.

"A lot of people think we're just rolling in gold," said Sean Milks, Koreshan Unity operations officer. "Deep-pocket givers and donors just aren't there anymore."

Unity president Jo Bigelow said it's up to the foundation to preserve the history of the Koreshan commune since none of the people who first settled on the banks of the Estero River in the late 1800s are alive today.

Bigelow said the money from land sales will be put into a trust earning 12 to 14 percent interest annually.

"It will fund us for perpetuity," she said.