

PICKUP

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 ⇒ A Travel Newsletter
 inviting African Americans
 to the Great Outdoors

& GO!

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Pickup & GO! is published by experienced camper/travelers, with you specifically in mind. Our Great American Outdoor Odyssey has carried us around the country, to a myriad inviting places!

The Continental United States is one of the most breathtaking, mystical places on Earth.

We saw it all for the price of many tanks of gasoline, some camping equipment and an occasional motel room.

Why dream of a great adventure when you could be having one? Let *Pickup & GO!* show you how!

Florida's mystic side

By Audrey Wright Peterman

A secluded settlement on the banks of the Estero River in Southwest Florida is one of the most unique places we have visited in the entire country. We have marveled at the awesome beauty and immense size of places such as the Grand Canyon. That's famous across the world. But a lot fewer people know about the Koreshan State Historic Site, where we experienced a living tableau combining nature's peace and simplicity with the relics of a society from this very century, which has since disappeared from the face of the earth.

The site, 16 miles south of Fort Myers and 2 miles west of I-75, was the home of the Koreshans in the 1890s. An unusual group of people, they were convinced that the earth is shaped like a sphere, and that all life takes place inside that sphere — literally, along the inside.

Before you decide they were kooks, let me tell you they were highly educated, affluent, cultured people who embarked upon a great experiment to create the perfect society.

Thomas Edison reportedly spent a good deal of time with them, talking, experimenting in their botanical gardens and puttering in their well-equipped machine shops.

Today, the site is beautifully kept up by the Florida Park Service. The buildings still stand, the exquisite pictures they painted still hang on

Please see KORESHANS, Page 4.

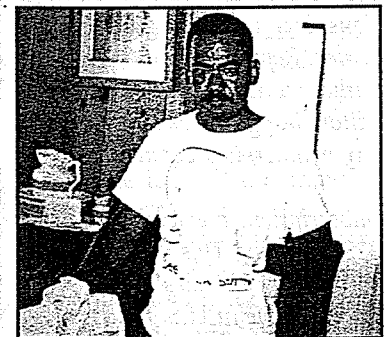
Visionary had his own views about racism

The Koreshans' vision of the world was so different from the prevailing views of the time, that I was intrigued to find out their stance on racism.

Fortunately, on our second visit to the site, we met Curator Juan Rodriguez working at cataloging some of the artifacts in the Planetary Court.

Mind you, it was a Sunday and his day off, no less, but he cheerfully shared with us some information which would have taken

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Curator Juan Rodriguez delighted us with his stories.

Koreshans believed we live inside earth

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the walls, the botanical gardens of rare, exotic trees still flourish, the instruments from their orchestra still wait to be played. But the last Koreshan died in 1982.

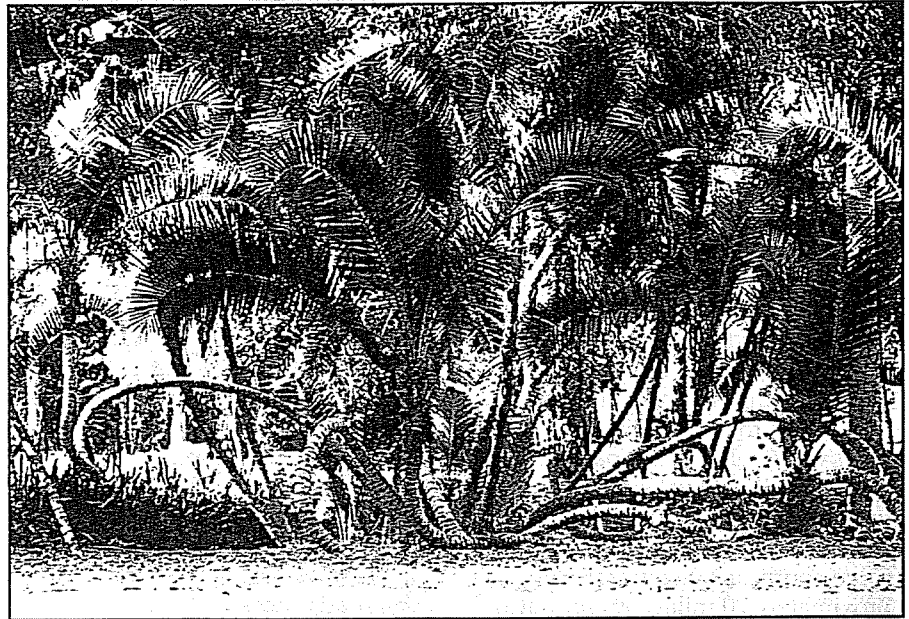
Hedwig Michel, a German woman who was a member of the Hollow Earth Society in her native country, was so excited when she learned about the Koreshans that she came to America to join them, and spent the rest of her life at the settlement. She died still convinced that we live inside the earth.

The admonition on her headstone gives you an idea of the caliber of people these were:

"Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

The Koreshan story begins with Cyrus Reed Teed, a New York doctor who told people he went into a trance one night and was visited by an entity who gave him the answers to life's great mysteries. He changed his name to Koresh, Hebrew for his first name, Cyrus. He was so captivated by his vision that he devoted himself to practicing it, and won a number of converts, many of them doctors, lawyers, artists and musicians.

They believed in living by the Golden Rule, that property should belong to everyone, that men and women were equal, that their leadership should be celibate, and that peo-



The intricate spread of this graceful palm practically invites you to sit quietly and reflect upon life and time.

ple should live in harmony and love.

Of course, they also believed we live inside the earth, and the instrument Koresh used to establish that theory, something called a Rectilineator, is still on display today. Reportedly, he offered a \$10,000 prize to anyone who could prove his theory wrong. There were no takers.

Teed and his converts gathered first in Chicago. In 1894, they came to Florida to create the New Jerusalem. Looking for the perfect

place where they could establish a settlement big enough to accommodate potentially 10 million, they traveled by train to Punta Gorda. They decided upon Estero, FL, which, incidentally, was named by Teed. A convert gave them 300 acres in the ideal location. The banks of the river would make it easy to accommodate trade and transport huge numbers of people.

These northerners, many of whom had never set foot off the pavement, came to the wilderness and confronted swamps and mosquitoes, snakes and alligators. Yet, in fewer than 10 years, they had carved out a city that supplied all their needs (and some of the surrounding communities), had a power plant, a bakery, a printery, an Art Hall for concerts and dances — and a reputation.

The Koreshans were unpopular in their adopted community, not so much because of their unusual beliefs about the universe, but because of their beliefs about equality.

"The seven managing women — called the Seven Planets — ran all of the stores and businesses," said Lucille Dale, a volunteer who works in the Art Hall. I was lucky, I caught

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Koresh had his own solution

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us considerably more time to dig up on our own.

For example, in an 1892 article from the magazine, *The Flaming Sword*, Koresh stated:

"The African race is of a common origin with the white, and the final solution of the colored question will be through infiltration. The colored people are a progressive people and have always evinced a thirst for knowledge.

"When absorbed by the whites, they will carry a potency with them that will improve the blood of the people with whom they are blended.

"This is the inevitable destiny of the colored race, and while such infiltration will not be effected at present, yet it is insidiously progressing and will be consummated much sooner than the majority of people may suppose. ..."

In an era when race was the great divide in America, Koresh was clearly ahead of his time.

It's instructive that more than a century later, we are still grappling with the issue.

Group wasn't popular with community at large

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her early on a Saturday morning, and had her to myself for an hour before the next visitor showed up.

"People in those days did not believe in doing business with women, so the Koreshan men had to do all the transactions with the men from the area. Then they would turn the proceeds over to the women."

Politically, she says, the Koreshans, even though the group never grew to more than 250 at any time, still represented a big voting bloc when the surrounding community had only 300 people. Koresh had some difficulty with the politicians.

In the Art Hall, I was fascinated by a huge painting called "The New Jerusalem," created from Koresh's plans.

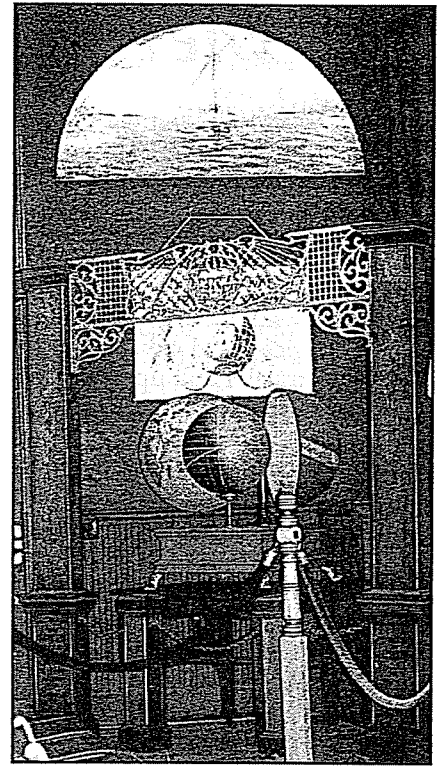
Among his specifications: streets 400 feet wide, with three levels, the bottom level for heavy traffic such as trains, the second for lighter-weight loads and the top level for pedestrians; underground utilities; sewage to be carted away underground 30 miles, composted, then brought back to the site as fertilizer.

But while he planned the ultimate city, Koresh and his followers continued to build for their needs. You can see the beauty and harmony of their work in the light, airy halls; in the pleasing grounds where the trails invite you down to the most delightful area of all — the Bamboo Landing.

Today, families canoe happily down the sleepy river, but not so long ago the scene resounded with the drama of plays the Koreshans staged on the landing, and the laughter of the audience from boats on the water.

The grounds boast gracious, exquisite palms, monkey fiddler trees, and a myriad thickets from which birds tantalized Fränk's camera. Standing quietly for a moment beside a road, I was stunned to see a beautiful pair of bob whites emerge from the underbrush, turn their head right and left, as if checking the traffic, then disappear into the thicket on the other side.

Koresh died in 1908. Obviously, his dream for the New Jerusalem, with its 10 million residents living



The open globe in the Art Hall shows the Koreshans' concept of the earth, with all life on the inside of the sphere, and a ball of gases inside containing the sun, other planets and stars.

in harmony, did not materialize. After his death, the group didn't grow, and eventually divisions arose and many of them left.

Visiting Koreshan like stepping into a time warp

There are so many intriguing aspects to the Koreshan experience. It's a little like stepping into a time warp. It seems so foreign and yet is a part of the very recent past.

In fact, I am told the granddaughter of a Koreshan still helps in the nearby Koreshan Unity Foundation.

Twelve of the original 50 buildings are still standing. In 10, many of their artifacts are preserved, as if their owner will return at any moment.

The Koreshans were completely self-supporting, were great mariners, built and repaired boats. They had printing presses and published a newspaper and a magazine. They had a lumber mill, and were paid in kind for their services. They established a post office, and built a gen-

erator that supplied the town of Estero with electricity until the 1950s.

They grew, fished for or baked their own food, and sold the surplus to travelers along the nearby Tamiami Trail. They made their own shoes and clothes. The settlement's public concerts, art shows, pageants, lectures and stage plays attracted people from all over.

Thomas Edison was fascinated by these resourceful pioneers who had brought culture to the backwoods. He is said to have spent many hours at their concerts and plays.

The Koreshan way of life was so serene, many of them lived well into their 90s. Annie Ordway, known as Victoria Gratia, was one of America's first feminists. She was also co-

leader, and later president, of the Koreshans. Koresh designated her birthday, April 10, as the date of the Lunar Festival, and his birthday, Oct. 18, as the date of the Solar Festival. Both holidays are still observed, with festivals on the Saturday closest to each date.

At one time, the Koreshans owned more than 7,000 acres, and had more land overseas.

In the 1960s, Hedwig Michel and three remaining members of the group deeded the 300 acres on which the settlement stands to the state, in exchange for its preservation.

Although there were Koreshan groups in Washington, Oregon and California, the Estero site is the only one with such splendid relics.