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World turned inside out by Koreshans

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The handful of folks living in Naples in 1897 likely looked on bemused as an industrious crew spent three months toting long boards down the beach from the pier to Gordon Pass.

A century ago this week these visitors pronounced their efforts had led to an earth-shattering finding - that Christopher Columbus had it only half-right: The world is round, but we live inside it, not on its surface.

The experimenters were believers from the Koreshan commune of Estero who hauled their "Rectilineator" down the shore, sighting it along the horizon line, making meticulous measurements and calculations every foot of the way. When they pronounced their theory proven on May 8, 1897, the plank was 75 inches closer to the ground from the point where they started, demonstrating to them that the earth's surface rose up to meet them - or that it curved inward, not outward.

The experiment confirmed the "cellular cosmogony" theory which came to Koreshan founder and leader Dr. Cyrus Teed in 1869 as an "illumination" as he meditated. As told in his writings, Teed went into a trance and was visited by a beautiful woman who revealed cosmic truths to him, including a new way of looking at the universe. It's a hollow shell of layers of minerals and metals, with the earth, sun, moon, stars and all the planets inside, he said, and humanity lived on the inner surface.

By all accounts a charismatic, compelling speaker, Teed spread word of his vision which also included the beliefs that people should live in celibate communes, turning their worldly goods over to the group, and that women were equal to men. Followers flocked to Teed, who believed so strongly in his theory, he offered a reward to anyone who could disprove it; there were no takers.

Teed moved his group from New York City to Chicago and then in 1894 to Estero, where his followers called him "Koresh."

First on the Koreshans' agenda was taming the wilds along the Estero River and building a settlement that Teed named "New Jerusalem." The next bit of business was conducting an experiment to once and for all

prove cellular cosmogony.

The best place to do that, Teed decided, was along the beach. Naples was chosen because the pioneer Haldeman family agreed to let the Koreshans' Geodetic Survey team set up headquarters on property it owned at the foot of the Naples pier.

After several weeks of experimental sightings aboard ship in Naples Bay and in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Naples, the group began the survey in earnest, setting up the "Rectilineator" apparatus at the water's edge.

Built to Koreshan specifications by the Pullman Palace Car Co. (of railroad car fame) in Illinois, the contraption consisted of three 12-foot-long crossbars bars of mahogany that had been seasoned 12 years to make sure they were absolutely straight and true. There was a horizontal bar at either end of each crossmember, braced from corner to corner with steel tension rods. Survey team members moved the crossbars south along the beach leapfrog-style along strong support standards.

At the beginning of the experiment on March 18, 1897, the team established a starting point 128 inches from the base of the uprights. Three miles and nearly three months later, the 13-member team carefully keeping the crossbars moving along at horizon level, the bars had dropped to 53 inches, or a difference of 75 inches. Calculations based on that data proved to the Koreshan surveyors that the earth is indeed a sphere, but that people lived inside it.

The experiment drew at least 29 curious observers; they're listed by in "Cellular Cosmogony," a written account of the experiment. They included the Naples postmaster, T.R. Ehney, and other residents of the town, as well as folks from Marco and Estero (perhaps Koreshan commune members) and Louisville, Ky., hometown of the Haldeman clan. Research could turn up no written accounts of the visitors' opinion on the goings-on on the beach.

"But I think they felt that what the Koreshans was doing was valid," said Dr. Sean Milks of the nonprofit Koreshan Unity Foundation Inc., archivists for the now-defunct commune. "I don't think people like the Haldemans would have associated with the Koreshans if they thought they were lunatics," and nor, said Milks, would the likes of Thomas Edison and Henry, Ford, winter residents of Fort Myers who often visited the settlement in Estero.

The Koreshans started with 300 acres Koresh envisioned as a New Jerusalem of 10 million residents. The colony never became that big a metropolis, but it did attract as many as 300 settlers in its heyday just after the turn of the 20th century.

Rancor within the ranks drove many away after Koresh died in 1908, but not before Koreshans (no relationship to David Koresh's Branch Davidian cult of Waco, Texas) had built the most sophisticated society in untamed Southwest Florida. Before they died out in 1982, they had constructed 20 or more buildings, among them a publishing house and print shop, lumber mill, a store housing a post office, a performing hall, machine shop, a school, dormitories (including one where a

seven-woman council of leaders commune dwelled) and a bakery that produced almost 600 loaves of bread a day. The commune even established its own university.

"There is much more to this than someone theorizing that we're like ants running around on the inside of an orange rather than on the outside," said the Koreshan Foundation's Milks. "We're keepers of a legacy. The Koreshans were going for world change. They were crusaders to affect social change and they knew you didn't sit there and scream from a mountaintop. You acted; and they did."

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