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Dreamers, schemers paved over Florida

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Herald Staff Writer

The messiah arrived 100 years ago, an eccentric visionary and, in his own way, a typical Floridian.

Cyrus R. Teed came to Florida to build "New Jerusalem," a utopian community founded on unorthodox principles. Communal property. Celibacy. The belief that the Earth is a hollow sphere with the sun and stars inside.

"The city will be constructed on the most magnificent scale, without the use of so-called money," a pamphlet advertised in 1895. "These things can be done easily when once the people know

THE FANTASY STATE

■ The cast of characters who played a hand in the development of modern Florida seem to have stepped out of the pages of an epic novel. **Graphic, 10A.**

the force of cooperation and united life."

While the settlement by the Estero River never housed more than 200 souls, those celibate socialists stand in the mainstream of Florida's 150-year past. They imagined an ambitious future here — then staked their fortunes on that vision.

Like Walt Disney and the Magic Kingdom. Henry Flagler and Palm Beach. Robert Davis and the Panhandle resort of Seaside.

And in South Florida: Julia Tuttle and Miami, Carl Fisher and Miami Beach, George Merrick and Coral Gables. Thousands of other immigrants, lesser known, have aspired to similar grandeur.

"People have always come to Florida for new worlds to conquer," said Samuel Proctor, a Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Florida. "It has projected the

PLEASE SEE DEVELOPERS, 4A

Dreamers, schemers sold Florida as utopia

Rush to develop causes chronic growing pains

DEVELOPERS, FROM 1A

image of a frontier, and people come here to accept the challenge of the frontier. Why? Maybe they felt they could get away with almost anything."

That optimism may be fading. A 1994 poll by the Institute for Public Opinion Research at Florida International University showed that fewer than one in four Floridians believe Florida will be a better place to live in during the next five years.

And last year, Gov. Lawton Chiles created the 42-member Commission for a Sustainable South Florida, a name which, if nothing else, suggests that Florida society can't be sustained into the future.

No one knows what lies ahead, but a look at how people in decades past imagined Florida's future provides a few clues to the shape of the debate.

■ Some saw big money in outlandish land-development propositions.

■ Some saw the possibility of founding a community based on unusual ideals.

■ And some, long before Greenpeace or Superfund sites, saw the possibility of environmental catastrophe.

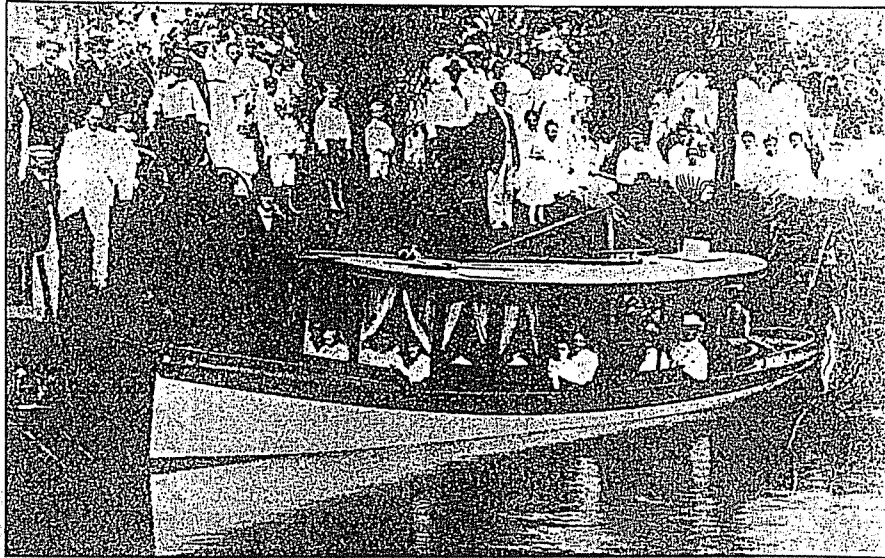
"I long for an island in the sea far away from the subdivider where one's work can go on peacefully and safely. I am now practically surrounded by subdivisions — so-called developments — and shall have to sell and trek, I fear... I am longing now for the real tropics and the trees, birds and fruits!... What will become of my Dear Old Peninsula?"

The complaint has a contemporary ring. But those words of environmental gloom were written March 23, 1926. Hugh Taylor Birch, a wealthy, reclusive botanist, was despairing over his Florida home, Fort Lauderdale, which was then a fraction of its current size. (Birch later donated 180 acres to be kept as a public park, which is named for him.)

He was not alone in despair. In 1929, naturalist John Kunkel Small wrote in his book *Eden to Sahara, Florida's Tragedy* that "the future of North America's most prolific paradise seems to spell DESERT."

And three years later, naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson would finish his book, *Florida Wild Life*, with a prediction: "Looking back to the days when South Florida was a beautiful wilderness filled with magnificent wildlife and then contemplating the wreck of today, is enough to sicken the heart of a lover of nature, yes, even of any sensible person who has a true valuation of the useful and beautiful. If things go on here as they have in the past few years this can only end in the destruction of all that is lovely and of value that nature has bestowed on us."

As extreme as those predictions seem — and as old as they are — many environmentalists today would vouch for



File photo

RIVER CRUISER: The Koreshan sect, which never numbered more than 200 people, posed for this picture next to one of their communal boats on the Estero River in Lee County. The site is now part of a state park.

their validity.

"The views of those historical figures were legitimate for their time," said Charles Lee, senior vice president of the Florida Audubon Society. "Just look at it statistically: The number of wading birds in South Florida is only 10 percent of what it was at the turn of the century."

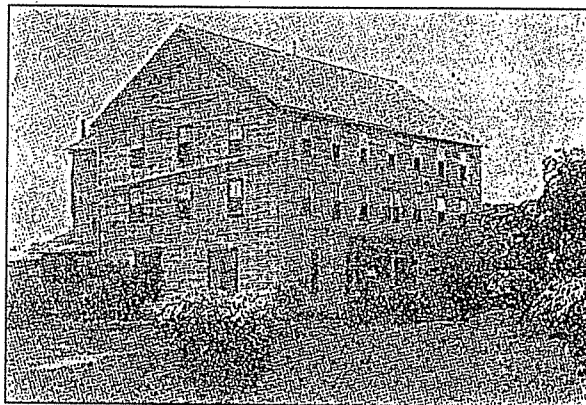
Not everyone, however, foresees environmental catastrophe. Even some members of the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida, betting on the adoption of land and water reforms, forecast a hopeful future that seems as improbable as those of other Florida dreamers.

Despite signs of worldwide environmental crisis, executive director Bonnie Kranzer predicts: "Fifty years from now we will have an environment that will be in better condition than it is today."

The predictions of environmental apocalypse did little then, as they do little today, to slow the flow of newcomers. The pitch of Florida developers, a group that envisioned a far different future, appealed too strongly. They called it America's Riviera. Or tropical paradise. Or in the case of Opa-locka, the romantic setting of the Arabian Nights. It is never too clear which of the fabled Florida swamp builders believed in these dreamy visions — or whether this was mere advertising.

"Northern skeptics continue to burst into uproarious laughter over the prophecies of the Miamians," said *The Saturday Evening Post* in February 1926.

"Where," they inquire between their spasms of merriment — "where do you think the million people are going to come from? How are they going to live when they get there? ... None of these



File photo

THINKING BIG: A century ago, a utopian sect ate its communal meals in this wooden dining hall, which at the time was the largest building in Florida's Lee County.

questions disconcerts a true Miamian."

Still, at least a few Floridians have considered the future, and the notion of an ideal community, as earnestly as Cyrus Teed and the Koreshans.

George Merrick developed Coral Gables as a "master suburb," and while in one year he would spend as much as \$3 million on advertising, his interest in development extended beyond sales.

He envisioned a marvelous city where the layout was both logical and beautiful, and where the architecture

held timeless appeal.

"Beautiful now and for all time," read a 1925 newspaper advertisement for the incipient city.

He has succeeded — at least to date. Architects from around the world study and admire Coral Gables still.

"George Merrick was an idealist — the man wrote poetry," said Ellen Ugucioni, Coral Gables historical preservation director. "He imagined a place in which people could live in a world of both utility and beauty. And he built it."

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Coral Gables preservationist

The idea of building an entire town still holds appeal. Last year, Disney began building a place it calls Celebration, their re-creation of a small town. Just how close those 8,000 homes will come to the widely advertised ideal of a "hometown" remains to be seen.

The utopian aspirations continue. At least one contemporary Florida community aims earnestly for an ideal as much as it does for profit. The Panhandle resort of Seaside, by developer Robert Davis with Miami architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, re-creates the look, layout and front porches of seashore towns from decades past.

"It's an idea that somewhere in our collective pasts is a model for living that is superior to what we are using now," Davis said.

Whether the past is an appropriate model for the future remains the focus of debate. Dutch architect and author Rem Koolhaas, for example, predicts that rapid — and untamable — growth in places like Florida will turn any hometown pretensions into a quaint joke.

"What makes this experience disconcerting and [for architects] humiliating is the city's defiant persistence and apparent vigor, in spite of the collective failure of all agencies that act on it or try to influence it," he has written. City planners "are like chess players who lose to computers. A perverse automatic pilot constantly outwits all attempts at capturing the city," exhausts all ambitions of its definition."

Among some of Florida's dreamers, such pessimism would stand as heresy. Merrick, Davis and Teed all saw in Florida the potential of building from scratch a city, the possibility of building their city, based on ideals far different from those of contemporaries. And even Teed was able to build a place whose meaning extended beyond his lifetime.

In November 1961, the land was turned over to the state. It is now a park featuring restored Koreshan buildings. Teed had died 53 years earlier, on Dec. 22, 1908, and in many ways his death was as strange as his life.

Some of his followers thought he would be resurrected three days later, on Christmas. They sat his body up in a tin bathtub and waited. "When, on the chosen day he failed to arise, Lee County health officers ordered him buried."

"Like some others, Teed saw the great potential of Florida," said Peter Hicks, park ranger at Koreshan State Park. "They were going to build the new holy city out of nothing."