

DAYTRIPPER

Teed's new world order in Estero

By Michael Warren
Special to the Star-Banner

If the dream of Dr. Cyrus Teed had come true, the capital of the world would be located just south of Fort Myers.

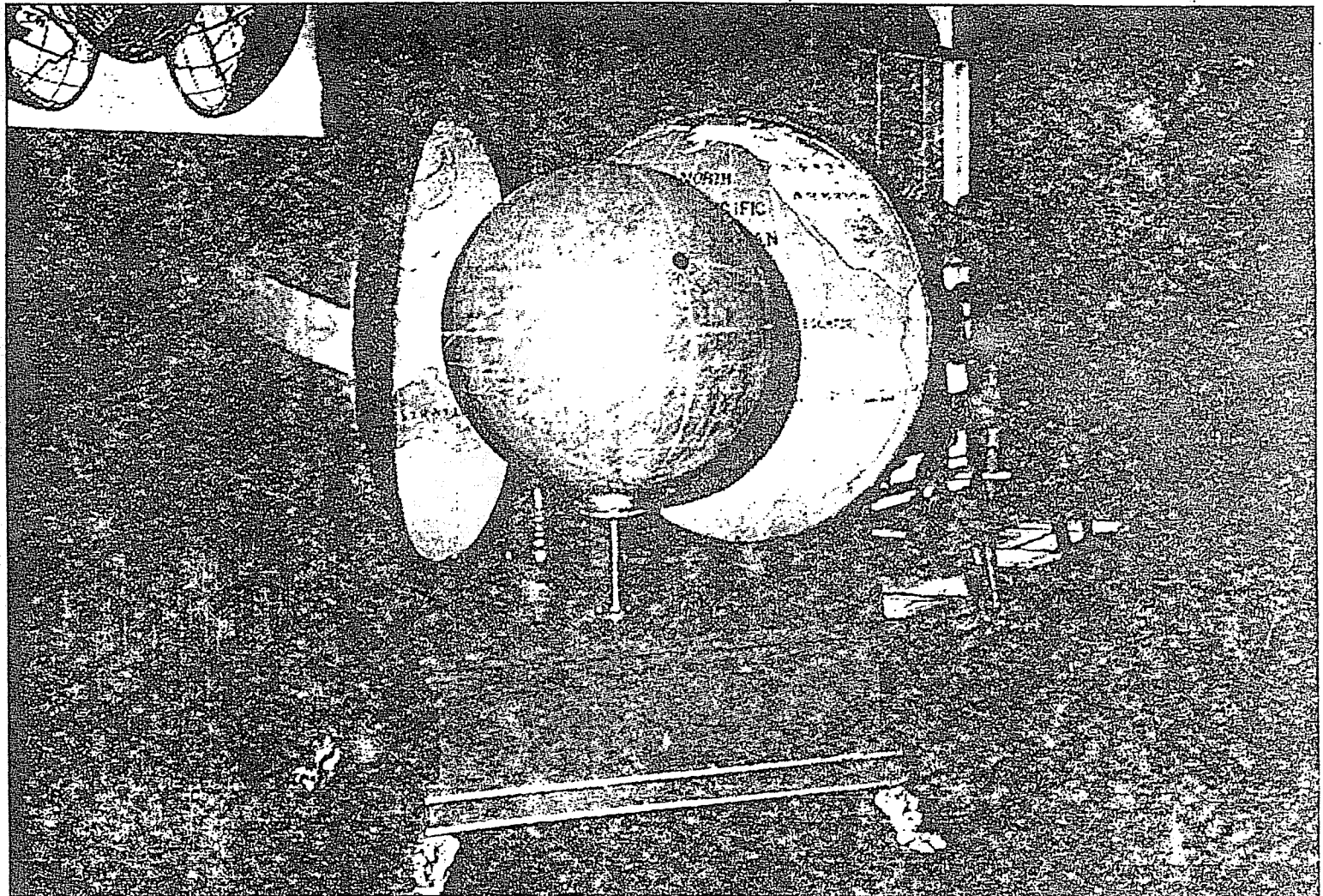
A century after that effort, the fascinating remains of Teed's failed utopia are preserved at the Koreshan State Historic Site.

The story began in 1869 when Teed, a 30-year-old Chicago physician, had a revelation that he was the Messiah. He changed his name to Koresh (the Hebrew form of "Cyrus"), and in 1894, he led his wealthy followers to the muggy wilderness of Estero where they founded a commune called the Koreshan Unity.

"They wanted to recreate the Garden of Eden, and they knew they couldn't do it in Chicago," said Chet Perry, a volunteer docent. Estero was supposed to become the New Jerusalem with a population of 10 million.

During the turn of the century, more than 200 people made their home here. For a while, Teed's vision appeared to be coming true: From the bug-infested swamps, the Koreshans had carved out a thriving, independent community.

Manicured gardens lined carefully planned streets. A bakery produced up to 600 fresh loaves a day. Recreational oppor-



The world as seen by the late Cyrus Teed at the Koreshan State Historical Site. Below: The site itself.

Photos by Michael Warren/Special to the Star Banner

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tunities included tennis, baseball and boating. Arts and crafts flourished.

A printing shop produced a weekly newspaper. A power plant provided electricity.

In the evenings, the community enjoyed classical music and Shakespearean dramas in their elegant Art Hall. Fine oil paintings by community members decorated the walls.

The sciences also flourished here, or at least Teed's own peculiar brand of science called "cellular cosmogony" did. Teed believed that the earth was a hollow orb containing continents and oceans on the inside. The sun, moon and stars were reflections in the ball of gas that comprised the earth's core.

"Supposedly, Hitler was also intrigued by this thought," Perry said. "He thought if he built a powerful enough telescope he could see FDR over in the White House and watch what he was doing there."

In addition to his contributions to science, Teed founded Koreshanity, a religion which was to supersede Christianity. Many of the women became followers because Teed taught equality of the sexes and races well in advance of the rest of the country.

Koreshanity also taught celibacy. Men and women lived

separately, and children were raised communally. "He thought the act of celibacy would create immortality," Perry said. "Of course, it shot holes in that theory when he died."

Teed died three days before Christmas in 1908. His followers propped him up in a tin bath on the Art Hall stage, assuming he would resurrect himself after the customary three days and nights.

Several days after Christmas, the Koreshans still remained hopeful. "Finally, the county health inspector said they had to do something," Perry said.

So the Koreshans placed Teed's body in a mausoleum by the beach. "They still thought he'd come back. He was just being stubborn," Perry said. "They kept a 24-hour vigil at the mausoleum so somebody would be there to greet him."

The Koreshans didn't abandon hope of their leader's return until 13 years later, when Cyrus Teed's body was washed to sea by a hurricane.

During the Great Depression, the community sold off the larger portion of its 7,500 acres. Advances in science, two world wars and the effects of celibacy gradually took their toll on the Koreshan Unity. In 1962, two members who remained deeded the land to the state.

If you go

What: Koreshan State Historic Site

Where: Estero, Florida. Fifteen miles south of Fort Myers on U.S. 41. From Interstate 75, take Exit 19 (Corkscrew Rd.) west.

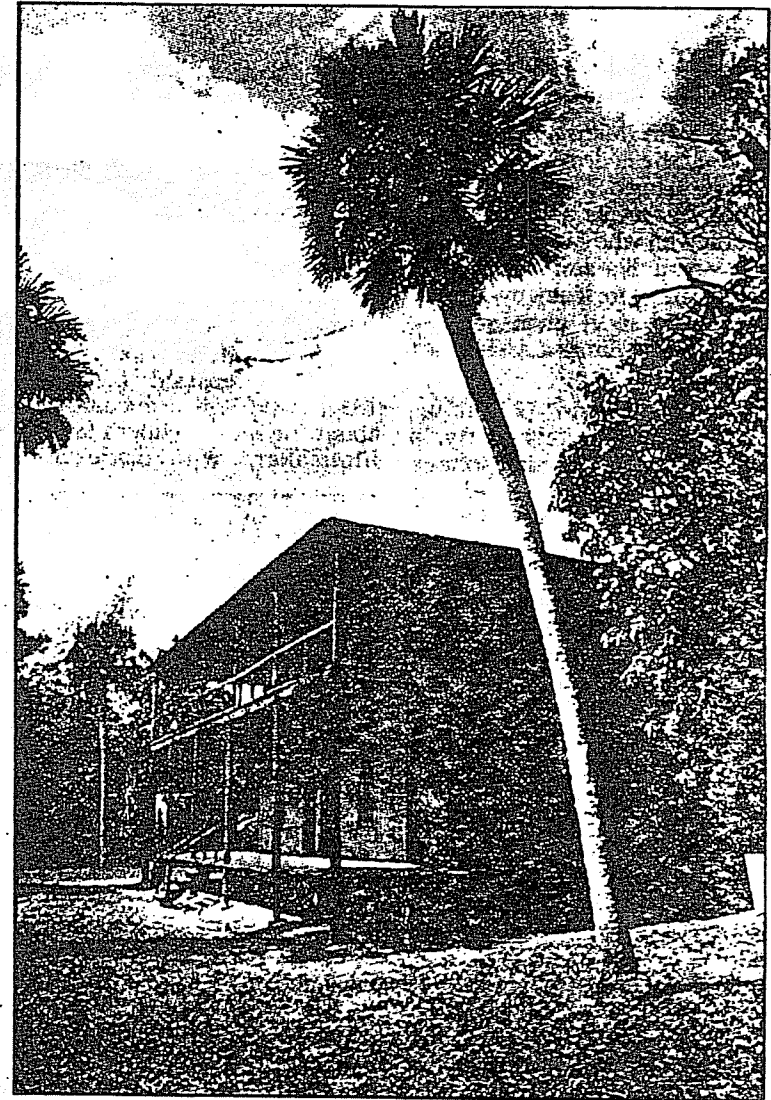
When: Open 8 a.m. till sunset.

Tours: Ranger-led tours are held on weekends at 1:30, and cost \$1. Tours during the week can be arranged by appointment, but call at least one week in advance.

Events: April 8 is the Lunar Festival Holiday, which commemorates the birthday of Annie Ordway, Teed's female counterpart.

Fees: \$3.25 per vehicle. Canoes cost \$3 per hour or \$15 per day. Campsites are \$16 a night through April, and \$10 a night from May through November.

Information: (813) 992-0311.



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