

The end of an era marked by memories

By **MARIAN B. GODOWN**

News-Press Historical Columnist

Vesta Newcomb — the last survivor of the original Koreshan Unity settlers — lived most of her life in Estero. She remained in the small settlement founded in 1894 by mystic-minded Dr. Cyrus R. Teed for almost 80 of her 95 years, watching Florida develop from a raw frontier (where she once slept in a tent on the ground for almost a year) to the state which pioneered the space program.

Along the way, she kept up with the latest happenings and retained her wry sense of humor. At 90, after she took her first flight from Fort Myers to Miami and back, she asked, "How soon can we go again?"

Vesta was the last of Dr. Teed's original adherents, following him to the sultry Southwest Florida wilderness almost 85 years ago. Now, five years after her death, Vesta is being honored in a special way that would have pleased her.

Approximately 20 acres of unspoiled pine, palmetto and scrub oak woodland on the beautiful Estero River near the boat ramp in the Koreshan State Historic Site have been deeded to the Florida Audubon Society by George D. Boomer in memory of "Sister Vesta" Newcomb.

It will be known as the "Sister Vesta Newcomb Preserve" and will be retained in its natural state as a tribute to Miss Newcomb.

When Vesta died in May 1974, her death attracted scant attention. It was a busy time at the Unity. It was preparing to host the Spring Lunar Festival commemorating the birthday of Dr. Teed's helpmate, Mrs. Annie G. Ordway.

Vesta's two-paragraph death notice in the newspaper mentioned she did housekeeping at the Pioneer Place. But Lillian Newcomb,

dubbed Vesta by Dr. Teed, also had worked in a variety of interesting capacities during the eight decades she lived on the Unity grounds, 16 miles south of Fort Myers.

She was educated as a teacher. She had infinite patience with children and enjoyed teaching, both in Chicago and in Estero.

She also learned to operate the huge linotype machine and helped set copy for the Unity's official periodical, "The Flaming Sword," and the original Unity weekly newspaper, "American Eagle." She taught others to set type and assisted in the Unity printing plant until it was destroyed by fire in 1951.

Vesta performed nursing duties (later admitting she rebelled at this), directed the Unity Library and also helped her mother, "Sister Hattie," in running the dining room and kitchen.

Before the turn of the century, she worked at the Unity-operated sawmill at the southern tip of Estero Island during the sect's enthusiastic efforts to create the star-shaped community of "New Jerusalem" out of the Florida jungle.

To understand Vesta's life and times in Estero, you have to know something about the Koreshan's beliefs. In an age when Utopian communities were not novel, the Koreshans stood out. Their unique theory was that the earth is round and hollow and people lived inside it. They also advocated celibacy (men and women lived in separate dwellings) and communal living. Children of sect members were given to the Unity for their upbringing until they reached 18 for females and 21 for males.

The pioneer Koreshan settlers were energetic and dedicated to their eloquent and charismatic leader, Dr. Teed. They believed he

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was a prophet as of old. Dr. Teed called himself Koresh (Hebrew for Cyprus) and proclaimed he was the "New Messiah."

His followers worked hard. They cleared the land, constructed clusters of buildings, planted gardens of exotic plants, operated a bakery, general store, laundry, boatbuilding, woodworking and print and machine shops among other businesses. When newcomers joined the colony, they contributed all their possessions and their labor, in return for the necessities of life. When members left the cult, they could not regain their property.

Koreshans — who at one time numbered 200 strong in Lee County — also took time out for culture and fun. They boasted a school and a university, a brass band (with a "practice house" far out of earshot), a symphony orchestra, and performed pageants and plays, indoors in their Art Hall, and outdoors on a floating stage in a bend in the river.

The death of Dr. Teed in 1908 left the colony shaken to its foundations, and it dwindled. At the instigation of Hedwig Michel, present-day director of the historic settlement, 305 acres of the Unity's holdings were donated to the State of Florida. The Koreshan State Park

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(now known as the Koreshan State Historic Site) was dedicated a dozen years ago.

Today, some of the old frame structures still stand. The gable-roofed Art Hall has been restored to the way it looked during the sect's golden years from 1904 to 1907. Here, you can see some of the remnants of Dr. Teed's grandiose dream for a city once envisioned to house 8 million persons.

Dr. Teed's dream drew converts from Illinois, New York and other northern places to isolated Estero on the Florida frontier. Vesta was among the first to leave Chicago in 1894 to help lay the groundwork for the budding "Center of the

Universe" city.

She was only 15 years old, a tall and slender girl with long blonde hair, worn back from her forehead.

It took hardy souls to endure the week-long trek from Chicago. Wearing heavy Victorian-style clothes, the travelers had to change trains seven times before they reached the end of the line at Punta Gorda, then finish their trip by sailboat.

Several years ago, Vesta described the ordeal.

"We tacked with the wind this way and that way," Vesta explained, "and we were all sick." At Mound Key, she said, they were rowed in a towboat to Halfway

Creek where they pushed north through the bush carrying their belongings and a parrot in a cage.

"We finally reached an ox-team trail," Vesta continued, "turned south over a rustic bridge, and there we established our settlement." (At that time, sleepy Fort Myers was a cowtown with about 350 people.)

"We pitched our tents and slept for 10 months on the (sometimes muddy) ground," Vesta said. "We cooked and ate around a bonfire." Everyone did his share of the work.

During their first winter in the Sunshine State, the transplanted Northerners were in for a big surprise. Much to their disbelief, the mercury plunged to below

freezing on December 28, 1894. About five weeks later a more disastrous freeze killed tender young shoots of vegetation.

Vesta said that although afterwards the Unity grew to be self-supporting, at first "there were times we went hungry." One winter, she remembered, all they had to eat was peanuts.

Fish were plentiful. The Koreshans used a fireboat (a small boat with a fire in its prow which was pushed from behind by a steamer). According to Vesta, the mullet would jump toward the fame and land in the boat. "It was my job then to stand on the deck of the steamer, cook the mullet on a kerosene stove and serve it on slabs of bark to the hungry people."

After Vesta's death, Ernest Dunning, a history buff from Fort Myers, described his delightful visit with her in the Caloosa Quarterly published by the Southwest Florida Historical Society. "The women were all on this side of the creek," Vesta told Mr. Dunning, "and the men on the other side." Noting a foot bridge, Dunning asked if it was there in the old days. "Oh, no, no," Vesta answered quickly, with a sly twinkle in her bright blue-gray eyes. "There was a foot log."

A lover of the arts and music, Vesta also read up on current events and never missed the radio news and weather reports. When Dunning asked her if she still believed in the theory that we live inside the earth, she replied, "I did until the boys landed on the moon. When that happened, I knew it couldn't possibly be true."

Vesta adjusted easily to life in Florida, principally because of two "horribly cold winters" she spent in Chicago. In Lee County, her friendly nature and warm concern for others won her many friends. Today, learning of the memorial to Vesta, many who knew her are sharing their memories of her.

All remember how she loved to walk. Spry and alert even in her 90s, she didn't let the years slow her pace as she took her daily "constitutional."

Often, her friends recall, she carried a Brazilian pepper twig to ward off pesky mosquitoes. As she did not own a car or drive, she walked many miles delivering messages or items. Frequently on her walks she visited the ranger offices at the entrance to the state park along the Tamiami Trail in Estero.

Vesta's close friend, Miss E.G. Rugg of Iona, reminisced about how Vesta "could quote poetry and writings no end." She was jolly and witty, too, and delighted in downing a glass of beer and a hamburger, thinking it was "real naughty."

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Miss Rugg's friendship with Vesta started during Dr. Teed's lifetime when, as a four-year-old, she arrived at the Unity. She recalls that Vesta lived in the "sister's dormitory" above the bake shop when the rooms were closed off with sheets, and later lived alone in a cottage.

"Vesta was truly wonderful," another old friend, Irene Wyka (Mrs. Raymond C.) Holstlaw of Fort Myers, says. She did an awful lot of good for a lot of people. Although she had a sweet disposition, she was strict. "She wouldn't allow you to talk sassy, but she had the interests of the children at heart."

Vesta's roots in the Unity stretched back to another century and across a continent. Born on Nov. 19, 1878, near Stockton, Cal., "quite close to the big (redwood) trees," she was the daughter of Harriet and Martin Newcomb. Newcomb was an English schoolmaster who immigrated to Canada where he met and married her mother.

Because of her father's itchy foot, her parents moved from island to island in the Pacific before settling for a time in the Fiji Islands and in Hawaii, and later in California.

"My mother was an idealist with a religious turn-of-mind," Vesta revealed. When she heard of the Koreshan Unity, she took the family (her brother James was a year older) to "all those meetings" in San Francisco, where Dr. Teed had recently set up a branch. "We were about to be received into the Unity when my father, only 42, was killed in a train accident."

Advised by other sect members to carry on with her plans, Mrs. Newcomb took her children to the Unity in Chicago. Vesta left her mother and brother behind in the Windy City to "start out on this great adventure" — a new life in a strange, far-off land. Mrs. Newcomb and James came south four years later, Vesta said.

Vesta suffered from a heart condition. After a brief bout with pneumonia, she died April 5, 1974, in the Naples Community Hospital. She was buried in the Unity graveyard where almost half a century before her mother was buried.

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With the death of the last member of the original Koreshan Unity settlers, an era in Southwest Florida has ended. As the Unity gets ready to open a new headquarters building and research library across the Tamiami Trail on Corkscrew Road in Estero, oldtimers say it seems fitting that this memorable Koreshan pioneer should be remembered with a gift that symbolizes her long devotion to the Unity.

A gift of history to residents of Florida

By MARIAN B. GODOWN
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When 15-year-old Vesta Newcomb packed her bags in 1894 and left Chicago for the Southwest Florida wilderness to help build the city of "New Jerusalem," the scenic Estero River was at the end of nowhere.

Today, frosting on part of the untouched south side of that fascinating river where Miss Newcomb swam as a girl, is the newly acquired Vesta Newcomb Preserve. It is named in memory of Miss Newcomb, the last of the original Koreshan Unity settlers, whose love for nature was almost lifelong.

The 20-acre tract, just west of the boat ramp in the Koreshan State Historic Site, was recently deeded to the Florida Audubon Society by importer George D. Boomer of New York City and Estero. Basically, a wildlife sanctuary, it will be retained in its natural state and used for the purpose of research and teaching. Already busloads of pupils have studied the variety of plants and trees in the preserve.

At the request of the Florida Audubon Society, environmentalist Bill Hammond, former head of the Audubon Society of Southwest Florida, and current president Charles Foster took an inventory of the undeveloped riverfront woodland. They were aided by Charles Lee, vice-president of conservation for Florida Audubon and Craig Hartman, biologist at the Lee County Nature Center.

They found that the property, which runs one-eighth of a mile long, contains original upland very suitable for wildlife habitat. Sixty percent of the tract is pure Pine forest, with the rest Palmetto and Scrub Oak, according to Foster. There's natural upland and lowland, including a marsh near the river and a fringe of Mangroves. The acreage also includes "pioneer trees" such as Camphor, stands of tall Bamboo, and large moss-draped Live Oaks, Needle Grass and Leather Ferns.

Exotic (imported) plants grow around the remnants of an old homestead where Georgine Boomer, mother of George Boomer, lived for many years. Dock pilings along the curving and historic river speak of the time the Estero was the lifeline of the fledgling Koreshan Unity colony, founded by Dr. Cyrus R. Teed.

Twelve-foot-high river banks line a portion of the northern boundary. This area — ideal for gopher tortoises — will be used in experiments to help the burrowing gopher tortoise make a comeback.

There used to be a colony here, Hammond says, but it was poached out. Although not endangered, the edible gopher is declining very fast. Plans call for releasing gopher tortoises with high school students assisting in the project.

The land in the sanctuary was owned originally by the Unity. It was acquired by Mrs. Boomer (once a member of the Unity) over half a century ago.

It is said that history doesn't linger long in this century. But, through a gift of unspoiled land next to the state park in Estero, another bit of Florida history is being preserved — in the name of a modest woman pioneer.



All that remains of Sister Vesta's home with the Unity settlers, above. At right, a 26-year-old Vesta Newcomb in photo taken in 1905.