

Koreshan Unity

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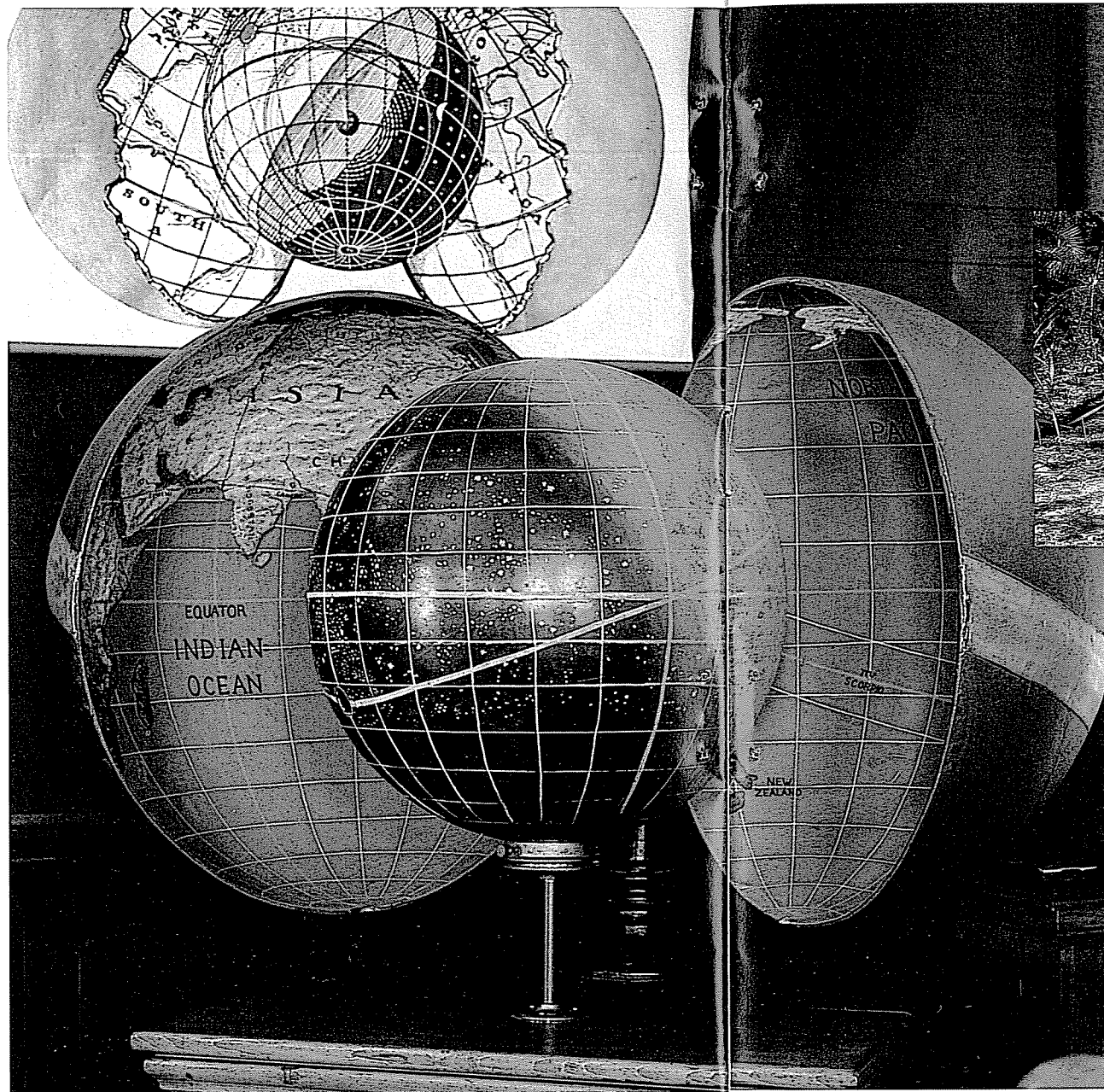
"It is the purpose of the Koreshan Unity to inaugurate the construction of a great city," proclaimed Dr. Cyrus Teed upon his arrival in Estero, near Fort Myers, in 1894. It was just one of many grand promises made to a small group of men and women who followed him from Chicago. His city would have, as its foundation, "an industrial system, destined by revolution—not riotous, but peaceable, to extend throughout the world . . ."

Teed's utopian Florida community was planned to accommodate nine million people in six square miles of bug-infested wilderness. Numbering only in the hundreds, the Koreshan Unity fell far short of expectations. The closest Teed came to an industrial system was a powerful diesel generator and an adjacent tool shed. Today, a few pieces of the Koreshan Unity settlement, fifteen or so large and small buildings, still stand as part of the Koreshan State Historic Site, a fragment of a grand utopian scheme.

Teed, who took the name Koresh (Hebrew for "shepherd"), had what he termed an illumination as early as 1869, unfolding a spiritual idea that became known as the Koreshan Unity. He and his few followers were very committed to a type of Christianity fashioned from early religious and social ideas. *Koreshanity* was similar to religions practiced in communities established by Shakers, Mormons and Harmonists. Celibacy and communal property were the two primary requirements for life in the settlement. In exchange for these sacrifices, those who joined were promised security—both financial and personal—and an ordered, but fulfilled, life.

The settlement offered educational opportunities for all members, including studies in medicine, history, music and a Koreshan version of science known as Cosmogony. Art Hall, which still stands today, was the site for most of the schooling, theatrical productions, lectures and musical events. An elevated stage inside exhibits a primitive wooden drum set, with "Koreshan Unity Orchestra" lettered in faded black type. Along the walls is an extensive collection of framed oil paintings, including several images of early Florida. Most of the work is that of Douglas Teed,

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son of Cyrus, though paintings by other members of the Koreshan Unity hang among them.

Art Hall also contains a large, quaint model that interprets Cosmogony, the Koreshan concept of the universe. A hollow globe, split open with the earth's surface traced along its inner lining, holds an internal sun-centered universe, complete with moon and countless stars.

Before Art Hall was constructed in 1905, Bamboo Landing (hedged with bamboo cuttings taken originally from the Edison estate just north of Estero) was the primary entrance for boat passengers who came by way of the Estero River. Formal concerts were performed here, as well as a water pageant which was part of the annual Solar Festival. The festival is still celebrated in October each year.



Bamboo Landing funneled visitors toward the Founder's House, also called the Teed House and Children's School. Although displaying a very plain Shaker-like exterior, the home's Victorian interior, as seen in early photographs, contained a busy mix of rugs, furniture and decorations. It is the oldest remaining building at the Koreshan site and has been restored to its 1896 appearance.

A short walk from the Founder's House is the two-story Planetary Court, with large wrap-around porches on both levels.

At the turn of the century, when the women's suffrage movement was still in its infancy, Teed embraced the idea of equality by appointing a governing council of seven women (Sisters of the Planetary Court) who had ultimate say in settlement policy. Each of the council members occupied a separate room.

(Top left) This quaint "Cosmogony" model was used by Koreshan Unity members to explain their place in the universe. (Top right) The Bamboo Landing was the first glimpse of Cyrus Teed's utopian community when visitors arrived by boat via the Estero River. (Bottom left) A powerful Fairbanks Morse diesel engine provided enough power to light 1,000 light bulbs and numerous small machines at the settlement. (Bottom right) A serene light fills the Planetary Court where the settlement's governing council of women met.

Spartan furnishings, wooden-backed chairs and a square oak table furnish the Planetary Court council meeting room, where day-to-day community business was conducted.

Even though well-populated areas of Florida were already electrified by the 1920s, isolated parts of the state, like Estero, lagged behind. To advance their move into the twentieth century, the Koreshan Unity purchased a Fairbanks Morse diesel engine that operated from 1925 to 1946. Teed promoted conservation by ringing a bell at 10 p.m. every evening as a warning that power would be turned off for the day. The huge generator supplied enough electricity for 1,000 fifty-watt bulbs and small machines scattered throughout settlement buildings.

In 1946, the generator became obsolete and was sold to a Venice icehouse (its last known address). Recently, Koreshan Historic Site volunteer Jim Purcell found an identical Morse generator that, years earlier, had been put out to pasture near LaBelle. Purcell and others hope to see the incredible half-ton flywheel spin on its axle, filling the Electric Generator Building with whirring sounds, just as it would have long ago.

By 1961, the Koreshan Unity had dwindled to just four people. Of those four, Mrs. Hedwig Michel was the last to live at the site. She spearheaded the donation of 305 acres of settlement holdings to the State of Florida. As a result, the public is now able to re-live Cyrus Teed's utopia, where his followers dreamed and worked and where seven Sisters of the Planetary Court ruled. ■

To Learn More

The Koreshan State Historic Site is located about fifteen miles south of Fort Myers. Turn right off U.S. Highway 41 onto Corkscrew Road to the park entrance. The park is open to the public every day of the year from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. For further information, call (813) 992-0311.

