

**TALES OF  
SOUTH  
FLORIDA  
AND THE  
TEN THOUSAND  
ISLANDS**  
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As Illustrated by the Author

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## THE KORESHAN UNITY AT ESTERO

**D**OCTOR CYRUS R. TEED, the founder of the Koreshan Unity, was an undersized, clean shaven man when he appeared in Lee County, Florida, for the first time. People who knew him remembered that his restless eyes burned like living coals, and others mentioned that he seemed to exert a strange, mesmerizing influence on those whom he wished to impress---especially women.

Some people claimed that he was a religious fraud; some looked upon him as a fanatic; still others thought him to be but a step or two below God. Whatever he was, he had the ability to cause some people to part with all their worldly possessions and give them into his keeping. He also caused husbands and wives to part, and separated children from their parents. In the Unity all men were known as "brothers", and all women were "sisters". Even the children were taught to call their own mothers and fathers by the titles of "brother" or "sister".

Cyrus Teed was born in Delaware County, New York, on October 18, 1839. He was a staunch Baptist for many years, and studied medicine with an uncle who was a doctor. During the Civil War he served in a medical company, and sometime during these years he invented a form of religion that was different--even unique. In 1870 he claimed to have "discovered" this strange new faith by divine guidance. He called this new theory, Cellular Cosmogony, and he wrote and published pamphlets in attempting to explain his unusual ideas. Most people, aside from his hard core of followers, called the Doctor's theories a scientific mish-mash of misinformation.

Dr. Teed preached that the earth is a hollow sphere, some 7,000 miles in diameter, and that the sun, moon, stars, lakes, oceans and land masses, as well as we, the people, all are on the inside of the globe. He claimed to have proved his theory on the beach at Naples by the process on linearity, but as you may suspect, he failed to convince anyone but a few of his followers.

The Doctor founded what he called The College Of Life in Chicago in 1886, and began to call himself "Koresh", the Hebrew form of the name, Cyrus. His followers signed over all their worldly goods to him, and men and women were required to give up husbands or wives---as well as children---when they joined his colony. He preached celibacy, and kept the sexes apart.

As converts came into the organization, the quarters in the Washington Heights section of Chicago became inadequate. Besides the winters were cold,

and the famous Chicago stockyards were somewhat of a problem when the hot winds of summer blew in the wrong direction.

In 1892 Dr. Teed returned from a recruiting trip to California, and brought back more converts, more cash (\$60,000 in cash or real estate), and, he claimed, a new message from the Lord. He told his followers that it was the Divine wish that a new colony be established in Florida. In short order the Doctor left for the Sunshine State to select land suitable for the establishment of the new community to be known as New Jerusalem.

Dr. Teed, in some manner or other, found his way to the banks of the small but tropical Estero River in Lee County. Once there he probably noted the trees in the woods, and the fish in the stream, and muttered to himself, "Eureka! I have found it!"

In any case he met Gustav Damkohler, a German homesteader who had acquired 320 acres on the shores of the Estero River. According to Gustave's son, Captain E.E. Damkohler, the elder Damkohler thought he was selling 20 acres of his land to the Doctor, but he either failed to read---or understand---the papers he signed. When the deal was finally closed the German settler found that he had deeded away all of his 320 acres for the price he had quoted for only 20 acres.

In January of 1894 thirty Koreshans arrived at Estero to clear some of the land, and to build dormitories for the men and women who were to follow. Cottages were built to house the children. As others arrived more trees were sawed into lumber, and more buildings were constructed. In time there was a general store, post office, a saw mill, boat building shops, a mess hall, a printing plant, and many other structures, including an 'art hall' for meetings and entertainments.

At the height of growth there were about 300 members living at the Estero colony, and it was quite a lively place. Dr. Teed had a yacht of sorts--he called it a barge---and he often took a few members of the colony on trips around Estero Bay. According to early residents of Estero, who were not members of the Unity, the lady members of these boating parties were known as "Queens", and were showered with extra favors. It was reported at the time that "a good time was had by all".

New Jerusalem prospered for a time. The Doctor went on lecture tours, and came home with cash and converts. It was a thriving colony for a few years, and then Dr. Teed had to go and spoil the good life he had been leading as lord and master over his subjects. He died suddenly on December 22, 1908. There were some who thought he should have at least waited until after the 25th so as not to spoil Christmas for the inmates. But die he did, and he left many an end untied. The Unity was never the same after the Doctor departed for parts unknown---as you shall see.

The good people of the Unity did not hurry to plant the Doctor's mortal remains beneath the sod, with toes up in a good Christian manner. Instead they decked him with flowers, and gave him a place of honor in the main hall. They took turns in sitting around, waiting for him to come back in even greater glory, as he had always promised he would. It is reported that the

patience of the Koreshan membership was greater than that of the County authorities. The Lee County Medical Officer of that time, a Dr. Hanson, was sent to Estero to investigate. He braved the ever growing odor of death, and demanded that the late Dr. Teed be buried immediately.

The Koreshans had been keeping the body in a bathtub surrounded by ice, according to the stories told by some of the members in later years, and so they loaded the tub and the dear departed on a boat and went down the river to Estero Bay. They crossed the bay to Koreshan owned land on the southern end of Estero Island, and there held funeral services. The body of Dr. Teed was placed under a cement slab, there to remain forever---unless something happened. It did. A vicious hurricane struck the region on September 18, 1926. The entire end of the island was washed away, including Teed's tomb.

Several days after the storm I was with a party on an inspection trip of the island. While we were standing beside Little Carlos Pass, looking over the water where Dr. Teed's tomb had been, the wag of the party spread his arms wide in the direction of the bay.

"Any of you fellows remember Dr. Cyrus Teed?" he queried. "Well, that's him all over."

So much for history. There were still about a hundred members of the Unity left when I arrived on the scene. They were all good and dedicated people, and many of them became my friends. I used to buy at their store, patronize their barber and marine ways, and for many years I had all my business printing done in their printing house.

My brother-in-law had known Dr. Teed, and most of the members of the Koreshan Unity in his boyhood, and he told me much about the Koreshan Unity and it's members before I ever set foot in Florida. By the time of my arrival on the scene many Koreshans had died, some had left for various reasons, and most of the children---as they grew up---wanted a life which offered a mate, children of their own, and the ownership of property. Hence they left the Unity to make their own way in the outside world.

Over the years the membership grew gradually smaller, for there was no one left with the ability to make new converts like the old Doctor had done for so many years. Slowly the Unity withered on the vine. The grounds, once kept like a park, grew up in weeds, and many of the services were abandoned. The many buildings began to deteriorate from age and lack of repair. The printing house burned down, and dissension broke out among the few remaining members. Two of the leading members died, and one went to an asylum. In time there were but three or four members left, and some outside help was needed to keep things going.

Today most of the Koreshan lands have been given to the State for park purposes. The Koreshans were good and sincere people, but the hard facts of life were against the success of the enterprise. A leader like Dr. Teed is not available upon call, and it takes a person of his spellbinding abilities to bring in a constant number of new converts to keep a celibate society supplied with new members.