

Koreshan: More than just a state park and campground

By **MICHAEL WIDNER**
Special to the Banner

In 1961, when the Koreshan Unity donated land to the state of Florida for the development of the Koreshan State Park, it consisted only of what we now know as the Historic Site. It wasn't until 1965 that the state of Florida allotted funds for the development of a campground in the park. What began as 30 sites eventually grew to 60 sites. Over time, the camping facilities, boat ramp and other activities seemed to overshadow the historic nature of the park.

Don't get me wrong, camping, boating and outdoor activities are great, but the real heart of the Koreshan State Park is in the Historic Site. It seems that many visitors to the park always ask, "What do you have here?" and the park rangers, who are well-versed in the answer to that question, always try to convey the importance of the history of this place.

Another one of the persistent questions that park visitors have relates to the whole notion of communal living and the conviction that Koreshans held favoring a celibate lifestyle. Just as the park is more than camping, so too, Koreshans were more than celibates.

In the late 19th century there were numerous utopian communities in the United States. From the Shakers (from which the Koreshans modeled some of their beliefs) to the Rappites and from the Santificationists to the Brotherhood of the New Life, communal societies flourished. Perhaps in part because of the Industrial Revolution, work in this country was changing and new ideas and new technologies abounded. Many labor-saving devices were being invented, and people found more time for intellectual pursuits. As is the case today, there were extremes in everything. Many of the religious communities in this country believed that all of the upheaval in the world



KORESHAN CONNECTION

was a beginning of the end times. This was particularly true at the turn of the century. Nowadays, we look back and think that these people were crazy, but putting ourselves in the context of the time makes us realize that many of their beliefs were well-founded.

Even though the Koreshans had what we now consider odd beliefs, they were certainly an industrious lot. The Koreshans applied for and received numerous patents including a device that could twist wooden rods into a rope form. They made faux brownstone from cement. They brought the civilized world to the wilds of Estero through music and drama. Their belief in celibacy, although it now seems to loom larger than it was at the time, was something that they clung to as the ideal. Certainly, not all Koreshans were celibate. There were various levels of membership in the Unity and one of those allowed for marriage.

The Koreshans also believed in a communistic society. Long before the word communism took on a meaning associated with the evil empire and the Soviet Union, it meant living, working and sharing in "common." The Koreshans had an extensive set of rules and regulations, all of which were intended to help individuals be-

come part of the community, which in theory took priority over the individual.

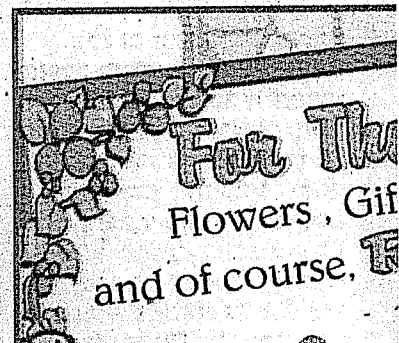
Koreshans also supported equality between the sexes. They saw God as being both male and female. They were also futurists who planned for a New Jerusalem in which eight to ten million people would live in a society powered by electromagnetic currents and without the need for money. With the rapid growth of this area, founder Cyrus Teed may have been right about 10 million people living here!

History has shown us that communal societies have a great deal of hardships to overcome and that most fail. The Koreshans were no exception. In a letter to one of his assistants in Estero, in 1897, Teed wrote, "Sustain the courage of the weak and overcome, so far as possible, the disaffection of those who can't or will not apprehend my work and the importance of trust in me."

Within 11 short years, Teed would be dead, and his movement would begin the long process of falling apart. With no charismatic figure to lead them, the Koreshans began to go their own ways. Eventually, they realized that the donation of their land to the state of Florida, for the establishment of a state park would be the only way to help sustain the memory of those early pioneers in Southwest Florida.

So the next time you pass the corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road, don't just think of camping and canoeing, think of those brave souls who believed in something larger than themselves.

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