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Koreshan photographs exhibited through new Internet site

By CHAD GILLIS, Staff Writer

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Mike Widner shuffles through hundreds of old photographs depicting the communal Koreshan settlement and the people who built and operated one of the country's most fascinating utopian societies.

After working with archive material for more than a decade, Widner doesn't have to wear protective gloves or remove pictures from protective casings. Thanks to a \$600 grant from the Koreshan Unity Alliance, Widner is flipping through the photos online.

"The idea was to have five or six or 10 pictures as an exhibit," said Widner, who also works as a librarian with the Collier County system. "But I found a way to put all of our images on the Web."

With nearly 600 black-and-white photos available online, as well as a few articles and journal-like entries, Widner's work allows people all over the world to access photos from one of this region's most intriguing historical legacies.

The site's address is <http://koreshan.mwweb.org> (no www prefix is needed) and has been operational for about three weeks.

The Internet archives gives local history buffs a chance to view photos from home. Traveling to the Koreshan State Historic Site at the corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road is no longer necessary to see some of the cult's most vivid images.

Widner hopes the site will also draw interest from Koreshan relatives scattered throughout the country. Many people from other regions of Florida and other states have already donated materials to the park for safe keeping.

"We have a list of about 20 people who have given us things, and I'm hoping we can find more of them and maybe put out a newsletter," Widner said. "It's amazing how you can make contact with people on the web."

The site is a relatively novel effort among Florida state parks. Most parks are geared toward outdoors recreation and scenic views. With several Koreshan buildings, artwork and other historic relics, Koreshan State Historic Site offers a different experience.

"The historic part with the archives is pretty unique to this park," Widner said. "We've taken a giant leap with this."

Members of the Estero Historical Society are thrilled with Widner's work. Being able to access odd photos and historical documents online provides history buffs with hours and hours of home entertainment.

The site also has a research benefit for scholars studying utopian society's that sprung up in this nation around the turn of the 20th century.

"I think it's marvelous," said historical society member Carol Andersen. "I can't believe all the pictures they've been able to put online. And the articles they included were very informative."

Andersen said the site will also give access to people living in other parts of the state or outside Florida to valuable and interesting historic relics. It will help a lot of people understand who the Koreshans were and what they achieved," Andersen said.



Photo by Erik Kellar

Mike Widner, an employee at Koreshan State Historic Site, works with the Koreshan archives and has made the catalogue of images and records available for the public via Internet.