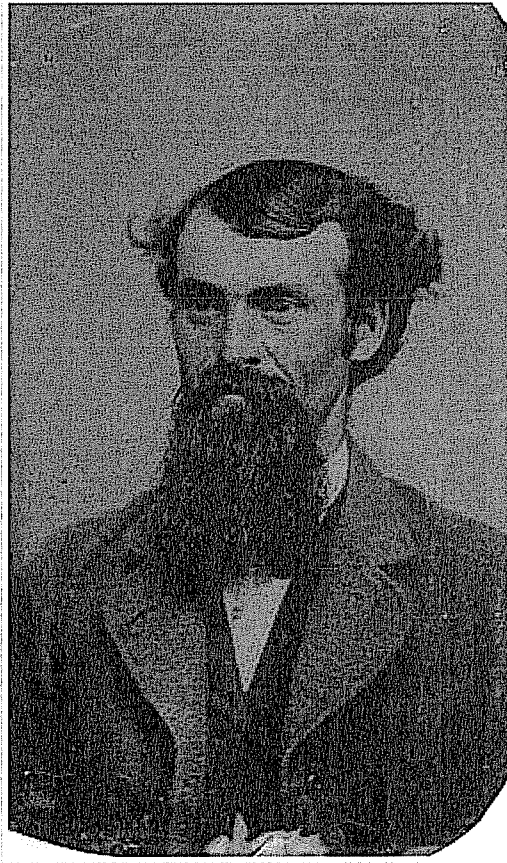


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Sunday Favorites: The World Within

by MERAB-MICHAL FAVORITE • JAN. 6, 2013



Charles Teed was the founder of the Koreshan Unity who led his people to Florida to form a New Jerusalem.

When **Dr. Cyrus Teed** purchased 305 acres of land in **Estero, Fla.**, he envisioned a thriving city of 10 million people, all of them one day worshipping him as an immortal Christ-like figure.

His theory, called “cellular cosmogony”, detailed a planet earth that was turned inside out, and at its center, were the sun and the universe. Teed tried for years in New York and Chicago to grow his burgeoning religion, but instead found only minimal success.

Women were especially drawn to Teed and his beliefs not because of his philosophies but because they were treated as equals in an era of gender inequality.

Nearly 75 percent of his followers were women. Their connection to Teed caused uproars at home, and husbands often sued Teed for “alienation of affection” when their wives left to join the society.

Tired of both societal and legal roadblocks, Teed decided to lead his flock

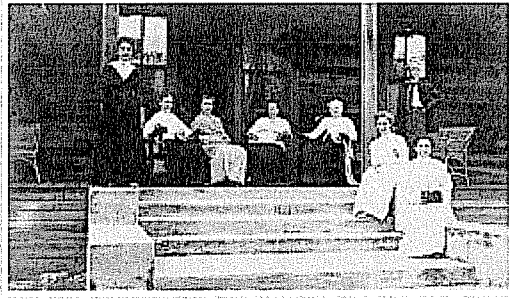
south in 1880, to start building a “New Jerusalem” in the wilds of southwest Florida, a land that was far from tamed.

Educated and financially stable, the roughly 200 people that followed Teed to Florida were trading in a life of comfort for a life of hard labor; the first two years were spent clearing the acreage, they slept in tents in the mud, fought snakes and survived one winter on only peanuts.

Called the “**Koreshan Unity**”, the community began to grow and Teed’s people developed some of the earliest businesses and industry in the area. They operated a printing facility, sawmill, bakery, and cement works. They also opened the first school in the community, where non-Koreshans were taught along side those children brought up under Teed’s principles.

But, the Koreshans were not accepted by their neighbors in Fort Myers, namely because the community’s leadership roles were filled by seven women, called “The Planetary Court”. The Planetary Court acted as a defacto city council for the community, making key decisions while helping Teed fulfill his vision. But, they needed male counterparts to act in their stead while in the public eye.

When members of the Koreshan Unity began running for public office, the townspeople responded with violence. In 1908 Teed was involved in an altercation with the Marshall of Ft. Myers; he was pistol-whipped and suffered injuries from which he never recovered.



Seven women served leadership roles in the sect; they were known as the Sisters of the Planetary Court.

After his death Dec. 12, 1908, his followers believed that he would rise from the grave and left his body in a bathtub for a week, hoping for his return. Children were brought to Teed's corpse and told that his rotting flesh was actually a sign of "new life beginning"

The health examiner eventually demanded the burial of Teed's body, but the Koreshans firmly believed their leader would return. His body was placed in a mausoleum near Gulf of Mexico. A guard was stationed at the gravesite with access to a rowboat to offer protection when he came back to life.

Unfortunately, a hurricane would eventually wash the body and the grave out to sea, and Teed's mythical return never happened.

The remaining Koreshans clung to some of Teed's ideas and continued to be a vital part of the community, but transitioned from politics to arts education. For the first time, neighbors were invited to theatrical plays and musical performances, which had never before been seen by some of the pioneer families.



The Koreshans were great believers in the arts and would often put on plays and invite neighbors to watch.

The compositions caught the eye of **Thomas Edison** and Henry Ford, both winter residents of Ft. Myers, who visited the community regularly. The Koreshans purchased one of Edison's first generators, a technology that was snubbed by other residents, thus making the Koreshan Unity some of the first residents in the area with electricity. The Koreshans bartered with the inventor over several years. Even now, a bamboo forest thrives on the acreage, after Edison traded bamboo seeds for some of their services.

As the years passed and the membership declined, the society eventually fell into disarray. In the 1960s only four survivors remained, and they eventually deeded property to the state of Florida, turning it into a park where some of the original Koreshan buildings still exist.

The last member of the Koreshan Unity, Hedwig Mitchell, died in 1982. It was reported that she believed in Teed's cellular cosmogony theory until **Neil Armstrong** walked on the moon, but she never stopped believing in Teed's vision for a better society.

Teed hoped to "redeem humanity" with his beliefs, but in the end he only inspired a few hundred people. His legacy is debatable, but for people like Mitchell, who were raised in the sect, it was all she knew. When asked about being the last Koreshan, Mitchell would later say, "There is no last ... we shall continue," and she was right because we're still talking and writing about the Koreshan Unity.

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