

# 'Growing up' Koreshan elicits bittersweet memories

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The dress Irene Holstlaw still loves and remembers was made of chartreuse voile, trimmed with lace and covered with embroidered daisies.

For a young girl who loved clothes, it transformed her into "such a pretty girl" the day she wore it.

But for Holstlaw, who turns 80 this month, the dress means much more.

For her, it is a symbol of what her life was like as a part of a mostly forgotten - and, she thinks, much misunderstood - religious community. The dress was a gift to her, offered by a kind older woman after Holstlaw tearfully said she had nothing to wear to a party - and no mother to make her a dress.

The Koreshan Unity founded a settlement on the Estero River in 1894 and Holstlaw, along with her siblings, are among the very few people still living who were part of the religious community.

Since 1967, the Koreshan Unity's settlement has been state property and visitors to the historical site can walk through the now-empty grounds and buildings.

For Holstlaw, however, her occasional visits to the state site are a stroll through the long-ago days of her childhood, when she spent eight years as a charge of the Koreshans.

Back in 1920, she was one of the five Wyka children - along with her three brothers and younger sister - sent to live at the Koreshan community after their mother died.

Her father sent them after meeting a Koreshan supporter in St. Louis but never joined them himself.

Memories of her early days there evoke a mix of emotions.

When she looked out the window of her room after arriving at the community, stunned by the beautiful greenery, she wondered aloud if she were in heaven.

"Everything was so beautiful. It was just breathtaking," she said.

But she also remembers her new caretakers washing her long hair in kerosene, then cutting it because she had picked up lice on the trip down. Now, she has one old picture of herself with long hair at about age seven - her "before" picture - to contrast with her "after" pictures with cropped hair.

"They cut it clear off and I haven't gotten over it since," she said. "It was so traumatic."

However, despite the sadness that surrounds some of her recollections, Holstlaw says almost all of her memories of growing up in the now-defunct religious community are happy ones.

Although she and her siblings traveled to the community without any parents to take care of them, Holstlaw said she felt well-loved.

"We didn't have a mother - but we had 60 mothers," she said.

Her childhood was far from idle. Like other members of the community, she worked at everything from washing dishes to baking bread to run-



PHOTO BY CAROLINE NYSTEN

**Fort Myers resident Irene Holstlaw recalls happy days as a child in the Koreshan Unity community which is now a part of local history.**

ning errands for the Koreshans' secretary.

And, as a member during what she considers the community's prime, she also attended the Koreshan school.

"We had wonderful teachers and I'd say an eighth grade education there was equivalent to a high school education anywhere else," she said.

A big part of her life were the cultural activities the community treasured. She performed in more plays and dance recitals than she can remember, Holstlaw said.

Her face peeks out from an often-worn flower costume in some of her old Koreshan photographs. She remembers one special performance in particular.

One day she was chosen to make the announcement at the beginning of a dance performance for a famous visitor because her guardians thought her voice would be loud enough to penetrate the near-deafness of their honored audience member - Thomas Edison.

Although she doubts her announcement (or her dance) made much of an impression on the local celebrity, Holstlaw later gave her twin sons the middle name "Edison" to commemorate the event. Her sons, however, were less than fond of the unusual middle name, she said.

It was piano practice that finally led Holstlaw out of the Koreshan community.

When she was supposed to be laboring at the piano in the art hall, Holstlaw began stealing away to

the edge of the property to visit with a local girl. There, along the side of Highway 41, the two girls would talk until the friend's brother came to pick her up.

Soon, the brother asked Holstlaw out and she snuck away to see him.

Finally, at age 15, she ran away from the Koreshans to marry that young man she had met.

"I guess they understood," she said. "I think they felt it was inevitable but I didn't know what I was doing from nothing."

Suddenly leaving a secluded community where most adults were celibate and whose religious beliefs included the theory that they lived on the inside of a hollow earth was a rude awakening for Holstlaw.

"After I got married, I learned real fast. I learned...there were cruel people. I spent more of my time crying."

Now, back in Fort Myers, her reunions with a few of the people she knew from her 1920s stay with the Koreshans - mostly the younger relatives of Koreshan members - have prompted happy recollections that bring tears to her eyes when she talks about them.

Looking back, she says, her Koreshan family was "just too good to be true."

Flipping through her albums full of photos and postcards from the community, she adds, "If there's nothing else I'm grateful for, I'm glad I'm around to tell people what they were really like."