

CONFLICT INSIDE THE EARTH: THE KORESHAN UNITY IN LEE COUNTY

• by R. Lyn Rainard

Conditions in Lee County returned to normal after the start of the new year, 1909. The excitement of the previous two weeks had subsided as the members of the Koreshan Unity, a small religious community in the southern-most region of the county, came to recognize that their spiritual leader would not rise from the dead. Both local and state newspapers had scoffed at the expectations of the group. All doubters knew that Cyrus Reed Teed would not be resurrected Christmas Day, three days after his death. But the faith that had first bound the Koreshans to Teed in Chicago and led them to the remote southwest coast of Florida had also convinced them of the inevitability of his resurrection. His failure to appear on the appointed day marked the beginning of the group's long, slow demise.'

During the previous decade the Koreshan Unity had been growing by fits and starts, and their growth had brought the Utopians increasingly into conflict with the people of Lee County. The strife resulted from the threat posed by their growing political influence, rather than from antagonism over religious doctrine. When the Utopians tried to exert their influence on county politics, the leaders of Fort Myers, the county seat, acted to protect their power. Both Koreshan political power and community growth had hinged on its charismatic leader; with his death the community lost hope of building a new city which would rival all others. And once Koreshan growth had been stopped, conflict with Fort Myers ended.

The leader of the Koreshan Unity, Cyrus Reed Teed, was born in 1839, in western New York. His family hoped he would enter the ministry, but he never seemed interested in fulfilling those hopes. Following service in the Union Army he completed his education at the Eclectic Medical College of New York. A school specializing in root and herb medical cures.

With his wife and young son Teed then traveled to Utica, New York, to establish a medical practice. There, unsatisfied with saving lives alone. Teed spent long nights searching for the "Philosopher's Stone" once sought by medieval alchemists. One night during his research he "discovered" the secret of transmuting base metals into gold. With the discovery came a visit from the "only and highest Majesty ... the Father and Son." who appeared in the form of a goddess, dressed in a gown of purple and gold, her long "golden tresses of profusely luxuriant growth over her shoulders." She unfolded the secrets of the universe to Teed and explained his role in ushering in the millennium.²

Following his "illumination," Teed began zealously administering to the souls of his patients, but his efforts went unrewarded. His patients rejected his religion and then deserted him. Moving across the "Burned Over District" of western New York, birthplace of a number of evangelical sects, he searched for adherents. His early labors brought few followers but much notoriety. I? When New York proved unresponsive to his proselytizing.

Teed, or Koresh as he now preferred to be called, began looking for a community more interested in his teachings. His search was brief. In 1886 he accepted an invitation to address the National Association of Mental Science in Chicago, Illinois.

Considerable excitement swept through the audience as he spoke. At the conclusion of his presentation, the members of the Association unanimously elected

Teed their new president and turned the future of the organization over to him. Having at last found a following, he reorganized the group to reflect his own beliefs.³

Teed left New York because of his failure to attract followers. Ironically, success drove him from his home in Chicago. Chicago papers described him as dressed in a black Prince Edward coat that hung to his knees and "immaculate linen" glistening with "unusual luster amid its somber surroundings." But the papers noted suspiciously that this "smooth shaven man of fifty-four, whose brown, restless eyes glow and burn like live coals," had a strange hold on women. Of the one hundred ten followers living at Beth-Ophra, a spacious old mansion which served as the community's Chicago home, three-fourths were women. Teed's ability to attract women to his religion led to fierce opposition in the city. Once that opposition became insurmountable, he began a search for a new home.⁴

Initially Teed tried to unite his followers with an already established Utopian group. However, the impossibility of solving economic and ideological problems, as well as determining who would lead the group, forced the Koreshans to look for their own site. Leading the search, Teed announced that "the point where the bitellus of the alchemico-organic cosmos specifically determines" would be the new home for his religious organization. Teed turned to the Divine Being who had appeared to him in his earlier mystical experience to discover the location of that spot. Each night Teed and his inner court, made up of three women, asked for guidance to their new home. The next morning they would follow the revelations of the previous night. The long journey led the cortege to Punta Rassa, Florida, a small settlement at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River, approximately one hundred thirty miles south of Tampa and twenty miles down river from Fort Myers.⁵

In 1894, at Punta Rassa, the Koreshans met an elderly German named Gustave Damkohler and his son Elwin, both returning home from a Christmas visit to Fort Myers. Damkohler, who had settled in Florida in the early 1880s, had lost his wife and all but one child to the dangers of pioneer life. He was a lonely old man who eagerly welcomed any companionship, and after a brief conversation with the travelers, he invited the Koreshans to his homestead on the Estero River, a short trip down the coast. Teed was immediately impressed with Damkohler's homestead. He concluded that the search for a new home had ended in success.

The Estero is a small meandering river which empties into the gulf of Mexico. When the Koreshans arrived, only a few hardy settlers lived along the river banks. A sparsely inhabited wilderness, the area offered the seclusion needed for the growth of Utopian dreams and the realization of Koreshan plans. Land could be purchased from the few settlers of the area or acquired in the form of homesteads from the state. However, the first Koreshan land, about three hundred acres, came as a gift from the old German. Damkohler gladly gave all of his land to the Koreshans. He could hardly contain his excitement on hearing from them that his land would become the "greatest commercial thoroughfare of the world" and the central distribution center for world-wide commerce.⁸

The Koreshans had sparked Damkohler's imagination by picturing a community with three-hundred-yard-wide avenues and his own home specially located in the middle of the New Jerusalem. He anxiously awaited the throng of people the Utopians had promised. But when his dream of a great house went unfulfilled, he demanded the return of his land. The Koreshans, though, had no intention of giving up their new home and beginning the search anew. The old man then filed a civil suit to reclaim his property.⁷

A year earlier the Koreshans had been sued for the return of other property. But Damkohler's suit proved unique. The suit went beyond arguments relating to the land grant and suggested that because of their religious beliefs the Koreshans were not the sort of people wanted in Lee County. Pages of *The •Flaming Sword*, the journal in which Teed had discussed his cosmogony, were submitted as evidence.⁸

By submitting the unusual Koreshan beliefs for examination, Damkohler hoped to stir public sentiment against Teed. The German was not mistaken in thinking that the Koreshans' beliefs would attract attention. Teed's central concept, cellular cosmogony, suggested that the earth is a hollow sphere, and that the sphere encompasses the entire universe. Man lives on the inside rather than the outside of the earth. The sun, a huge electro-magnet at the center of the universe, first sends positive energy to the walls of the earth. Night and day result from the rotation of the sun. When the dark side of the sun appears, the negative energy is drawn back to the sun. The entire system was self-perpetuating. Anxious to prove the validity of this scheme of things, Teed's followers conducted an experiment on beaches south of the Estero. They ran a straight line down the beach with a device they called a rectilineator. When the line reached the beach's edge they sighted it across the water to a Unity sloop. The experiment concluded when the two ends of the line rather than its center met the earth. Their experiment proved that man lives inside a hollow earth, or so they believed.⁹

Their theory was bound to cause some astonishment, yet to the Koreshans, it, seemed indisputably logical. The source of all earthly life, the sun, perpetuated itself. The source of all spiritual life. God, followed the same natural laws which She had created. Just as the sun radiated energy to the earth, the Goddess sent messengers to the earth. The messengers. Adam, Enoch, Noah. Moses, Elijah. and Jesus, were each successively more perfect representations of the son of God. When the seventh messenger appeared, the Goddess would return, and the son and Goddess would become one. The energy sent to the earth would return to its source. The joining of the Goddess and Her son would usher in the millennium. Few needed to ask the identity of the seventh messenger or the proximity of the millennium. Koresh waited in Lee County.¹⁰

Damkohler hoped his revelations of Teed's beliefs would lead to the Koreshans' expulsion. But the issues which motivated men to action in Lee County were political issues. The county simply did not feel threatened by the small band of religious zealots or their astonishing beliefs. As long as Koreshan membership remained small and Teed avoided involvement in county politics, no one raised objection to the unusual religion. The year following the Damkohler suit a second and even more shrill attack on the Koreshans and their religion also failed to arouse county hostility towards the Koreshans.

The second attack was made by Editha Lolita. Lolita was a most unbelievable character. She claimed to be the Countess Landsfeldt. and Baroness Rosenthal, daughter of Ludwig I of Bavaria and Lola Montez, god child of Pius IX, divorced wife of General Diss Debar, widow of two other men, bride of James Dutton Jackson, and the self-proclaimed successor to the priestess of occultism, Madame Blavatsky. She planned to establish a Utopian community in Lee County, where her husband claimed to own several thousand acres of land. Her followers in the "Order of the Crystal Sea" would be model citizens and they would win salvation and immortality by living, most appropriately, on a diet of fruit and nuts. Lolita claimed to be horror struck on learning of Teed's presence in Lee County, and she immediately launched a campaign to drive the Koreshans out. Day after day she reported to the Fort Myers Press stories of Teed's allegedly sordid past. Her

newspaper blitz failed to excite the county, just as Damkohler's efforts had failed, because people did not feel threatened by Teed's strange ideas. Besides, both Lolita and Damkohler overlooked the good-will Teed had assiduously cultivated during his few short years in the county."

When Teed first reached Lee County he actively sought close ties with the people of Fort Myers, eighteen miles to the Koreshan community's north. Teed wanted to avoid the troubles encountered in Chicago. On several occasions he visited the city to speak about his religious views. In long lectures which held "the attention and interest of his hearers," Teed took a most unusual position for a man anxiously awaiting the end of the world. He assured the townspeople that although the world seemed in turmoil. "I take it that we are not undergo-ing the three woes predicted in Revelation." He avoided playing the prophet of doom among potential friends even though the millennium was to arrive dur-ing his lifetime. Teed also sent other goodwill ambassadors into the city. His efforts to win the confidence of the residents of Fort Myers proved quite suc-cessful. The Fort Myers Press reported that a group of Koreshans on a week-end visit were "all intelligent, well-educated and pleasant people whom it is a pleasure to meet and to talk to." The newspaper complimented the group still further, saying, "they are all workers and will make their part of the county a veritable paradise on earth, if intelligent work will accomplish it."¹²

Not only Teed but the other Koreshans cultivated community support. They opened their doors to visitors and encouraged them to come often. One reporter stated that he had been treated to a "meal of four or five courses, the fare of which was bountiful and sumtous [sic]." Then, to assure all of Lee County of the good intentions of the Koreshans, he added, "as regards their neighborly qualities I have never known a people more highly praised by their neighbors than they." Two years later the Koreshans were continuing their efforts. In order to accommodate the editor of the Fort Myers Press, the Koreshans delayed the beginning of a Sunday religious service several hours while he made the arduous journey from the county seat. Following the ceremony, the editor admitted that he could not agree with the Koreshans' theology. But, he declared that "their religious views are personal affair[^]. amendable only to God. It has nothing to do with their making good citizens." The "quiet, self-supporting law-abiding people, of more than average in- telligence," should be allowed to build their paradise unmolested, he argued. It would be hard to imagine how Teed's efforts to win goodwill could have been more successful. Damkohler and Lolita had failed to turn the people of Lee County against the Koreshans not only because of Teed's success at winning local respect, but also because religious differences were not a divisive issue.¹³

The Koreshans did not restrict their efforts to winning friends. They also made great strides in building their new city in the Florida mangroves. "The grounds around the buildings are tastefully laid out, with broad walks, or- namental shade trees, and tropical plants," wrote the Fort Myers Press editor after his Sunday visit. "The river banks have been walled up. on the front of the park, and a succession of terraces rise one above the other, planted with palms and shade trees."¹⁴

The Koreshans planned to build a city far greater than the Arcadia the editor imagined himself to have visited. They planned to construct the New Jerusalem, the new world capital. To build it they needed land and control over the land. When they failed to convince people to donate land. they pur- chased it. A city charter proved more difficult

to

obtain. In 1904 the Fort Myers Press reported that "the Koreshan Unity has taken legal steps ... for laying out and building the 'City of New Jerusalem,' and has posted legal notices at the Estero post office, that on the first day of September, ... a meeting of the citizens will be held for the purpose of incorporating a city to contain twelve miles of territory, and elect officers." The first steps to the fulfillment of the Koreshan dream had been taken. After obtaining their charter the Koreshans could begin to lay the groundwork for the great city which would serve as the capital of the world during the millennium. However, the community failed to anticipate the opposition that would arise. Efforts to incorporate led to the first serious conflict with Lee County residents.¹⁵

Of the seventy-five square miles of territory to be included in the city boundaries, only ten square miles belonged to the Koreshans. Of the roughly seventy registered voters in the area, fewer than a dozen were non-Koreshans. Taking into account the well-known requirement of the Koreshan constitution that all members had to act as a unit, the non-Koreshans recognized they would be powerless in the new city. Taxation and all other powers of government would be beyond their reach. The land they had cultivated for years could then be swallowed up by the great avenues Teed had planned. With this in mind, the non-Koreshans quickly began a campaign either to stop the incorporation or win exclusion from the city. Koreshan leaders struggled clumsily to halt the defection of the self-proclaimed anti-Koreshans. They viewed the participation of non-Koreshans as essential and they diligently worked to win their support. Koreshan leaders promised the opposition ordinances in keeping with state and federal laws and freedom from taxation. In addition, schools, colleges, and libraries planned for the city would be free to all residents. However, the Koreshans warned that access to the Estero River might be denied those who voted against incorporation. City streets, parks and other privileges might also be included in the ban. Finally, they announced that if their plans were thwarted, a Koreshan boycott would be "severely felt by the opposition." Teed had no intention of seeing his grand design halted.¹⁶

Although some talked of solving the disagreement with powder and bullets, both sides satisfied their anger by pouring letters into the Fort Myers Press. Letters from the anti-Koreshans occasionally condemned Koreshan religious beliefs. Nevertheless, when they announced their reasons for seeking exclusion from the city, their arguments were purely political. They did not believe Koreshan promises about no taxation, and they did not want to live in a city where their votes would not count. The anti-Koreshans seemed in a most desperate situation. Incorporation required the affirmative votes of only twenty-five residents — a requirement easily met by the Koreshans. The only way to stop incorporation, or at least win exclusion from the new city, was to bring county-wide pressure on Teed's group. Slowly support for the anti-Koreshans began to build — support which the Koreshans could not ignore. When the day arrived for the incorporation, the anti-Koreshans won their demand for being excluded from the city, and the Koreshans had lost their first serious conflict with secular society. Nevertheless, local affairs quickly re-turned to normal. Teed's community had survived a brush with the inhabitants of the county, and once again returned its attention to religious affairs. Some must have wondered, however, if the tiny religious community could survive a major conflict.¹⁷

During the Democratic primary election of 1906, the Koreshans became embroiled in a controversy which destroyed their Utopian dreams. The election ought to have been

typical of all others across the South. No one needed to wait for the general election to learn who would be elevated to office. The Democratic Party primary, in fact if not in law, elected county officials. The Lee County election began that way. The county Democratic Executive Committee nominated its candidates and staged a primary election. Teed perhaps single time had arrived to test his strength and show some political independence refused to support one of the committee's choices for state representative. Furthermore, he pledged his votes to the rest of the county and state ticket, but claimed the right to follow his conscience on the congressional ticket. The Executive Committee could not accept Teed's insubordination.¹⁸

In the past Teed had proclaimed his intention to bring "thousands to Florida" and make "every vote count in Florida and Lee County." The county Democratic leaders feared that he had at last made a bid to rival the committee in party leadership. They acted swiftly to prevent his gaining any influence on the party. The committee threw out the forty-six Koreshan votes on the grounds that the members of the Koreshan Unity were not legally entitled to vote "under the call made by the Executive Committee. They could not be members of the Koreshan Unity were not proper members of the Democratic Party Two years earlier, when the Koreshans supported Philip Isaacs, chairman of the Democratic Executive Committee and editor of the Fort Myers Press, in the race for county judge, there had been no question of their position in the party. But having challenged the committee's rule, they were out. In order to weaken further the Koreshans, Isaacs denied them continued use of the Fort Myers Press."⁹

The Koreshans responded by creating their own newspaper and party organization. During the first week of June a new paper appeared heralding the birth of a political party. The American Eagle, as the Koreshans named their paper, caustically struck out at the Democratic Executive Committee for alleged undemocratic actions and gross corruption. Good government could be obtained, claimed the American Eagle, by supporting the Progressive Liberty Party. The new party promised to rid the county of corruption and bring progressive reform to government.²⁰

The leaders of the Democratic Party hotly objected to the charges of corruption which the American Eagle hurled against them. The Democrats unequivocally rejected every claim of "the wealdmgs of Koreshamty laboring under the hypnotic or other influence of the great Koresh the great prime Counsenor- of Koreshan Universiology and Humbuggerly" They denied being owned by land speculators, and to prove their innocence they offered to open the county tax books to all interested persons.²¹

As the 1906 general election drew near, the county leaders urged the people to vote "It is your duty," they declared, "to go to the polls in November and record your vote against this Koreshan humbug. There is no other issue before the people. The question is shall this Koreshan Unity control and shape the policies of the people of Lee County or shall the people manage their affairs in the interest of Lee County and not the Koreshan Unity." The Fort Myers Press, which had once defended the Koreshans' right to their own religious views, now attacked them. But the attack on Koreshanity was politically motivated. Except in campaign rhetoric, religion never entered into the conflict.²²

As charges flew between the two groups, emotions grew heated. Teed, fearing an attack on his life, never traveled without the company of several male followers. He hoped that this precaution would ward off any potential assailants. But it did not. Two weeks before the general election, Teed's fears were realized. Walking through the streets of Fort Myers, Teed noticed one of his followers in a loud argument. W. Ross Wallace, a

Progressive Liberty Party candidate in the upcoming election, and a Lee County citizen named Sellers had attracted a large crowd with their shouting. Shortly after Teed arrived on the scene the argument changed from a shouting match to a street brawl. The near-riot ended when the Fort Myers marshal severely beat Teed and then dragged him off to jail. Townspeople, eager to blame the Koreshans, insisted that the fight resulted from Teed's meddling in the affairs of others. The Koreshans, on the other hand, claimed that the assailant had been paid to attack their leader. They insisted that R. A. Henderson had offered five dollars to whomever would thrash Teed. If such were the case, the Koreshans were a remarkably forgiving group. Two weeks later they cast all of their votes in the race for county treasurer for Henderson. Whatever problem triggered the fight, its underlying cause was the animosity created when the Koreshans offered the first serious competition the Democrats had ever encountered.²³

Following the incident Teed intensified his criticism of Fort Myers, and he demanded that Marshal Sanchez be removed from office. He warned of the "CONSEQUENCES [FOR] FORT MYERS AS A WINTER RESORT" if his demand was not met. Sarcastically, the editor of the Fort Myers Press pleaded,

*Have-pitty [sic] on us. O'Koresh! Do not wreck vengeance on a poor, defenseless people. We beseech the[e], oh thou Most Gracious Humbug of the Universe, have mercy!*²⁴

The Koreshans had little reason to be disappointed in the election. Out of the county's eighteen precincts the Progressive Liberty Party carried three, and it received support throughout the county. In no single race did the new party win a majority, but in every contest it did win more votes than the Republican Party by a two to one margin. Considering the length of time the party had been organized, it proved remarkably successful. Although the Koreshans were unable to capture any offices, they offered the county Democrats surprisingly stiff competition. In the closest race, five votes separated the Democratic and Liberty Party candidates. The Progressive Liberty Party commanded two hundred fifty votes, of which only one-fifth were Koreshan.²⁵

Under different circumstances the future of the new party and the Koreshan Unity would have been bright. However, the future began to look bleak, as Teed's health faltered. The Koreshans claimed that the beating Teed had suffered at the hands of the town marshal had shattered several nerves in his shoulder, an injury from which he never fully recovered. Whether his health deteriorated from the beating in the streets of Fort Myers, or from advancing age — he was sixty-seven — the results were the same. In failing health, Teed died on December 22, 1908.

The Koreshan Unity did not pass from existence immediately' after the death of its leader. But its numbers dwindled and never again did the Unity find itself at the center of a county controversy. The conflict between the people of the county and the religious community had centered on political differences. Religious differences, great though they were, were never of sufficient importance to cause any conflict. After Teed's death, the Unity never had an active membership large enough to challenge Fort Myers' dominance of county politics. As a result, county leaders never again felt threatened by the communitarians at Estero. Following Teed's death, the Koreshan Unity faded into obscurity, and the Utopian dream was over.

NOTES

1. Tampa Morning Tribune, 25 December 1908, p. 1; Fort Myers Press, 24 December 1908, p.1.
2. Fort Myers Press, 31 December 1908, p. 4; George Frederick Tuttle, The Descendants of William and Elizabeth Tuttle (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle and Company, 1883), pp. 255-257; Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed], The Illumination of Koresh: Marvelous Experience of the Great Alchemist at Utica, New York (Esterro, Florida: Guiding Star Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 12-13. The Koreshans believed God was both a man and a goddess joined in the body of a woman.
3. American Eagle, August 1973, p. 1, September 1974, p. 1; Laurence W. Bubbett, Biographical sketch of Dr. Cyrus Reed Teed (Koresh) (Esterro, Florida: Guiding Star Publishing House, n.d.), p. 2; Cyrus R. Teed, Metaphysics (Chicago: World's College of Lite, hand dated, 11 June 1887), p. 4.
4. Fort Myers Press, 1 July 1897, p. 1, 26 April 1894, p. 4, 8 December 1898, p. 1; New York Times, 10 June 1892, p. 6.
5. The Flaming Sword, May 1932, p. 3; G. W. Gatewood, On Florida's Coconut Coast (Punta Gorda, Florida: Herald Publishing Company, 1944), p. 136.
6. Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed] and E. B. Webster, The Koreshan Unity: Cooperative (Esterro, Florida: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1907), pp. 20-21.
7. E[linor] E. Damkohler, Esterro, Florida: Memoirs of the First Settler (Fort Myers Beach, Florida: Island Press, 1967), p. 23.
8. Danielson v. The Koreshan Unity, 159 Lee Co. (1896); Damkohler v. The Koreshan Unity, 59 Lee Co. 211 (1897).
9. Koresh [Cyrus R. Teed] and U. G. Morrow, Cellular Cosmogony (Chicago: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1898); Fort Myers Press, 22 July 1897, p. 1, 22 June 1897, p. 4, 22 April 1897, p. 1.
10. Koresh (Cyrus R. Teed), The Immortal Manhood (Chicago: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1902); S. J. Sargent, Fort Myers Press, 12 December 1895, p. 2. For a fuller discussion of the Koreshan religious beliefs see, Robert Lyn Rainard, "In the Name of Humanity: The Koreshan Unity" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1974), pp. 38-55.
11. Fort Myers Press, 24 November 1898, p. 1, 1 December 1898, p. 1, 15 December 1898, supplement, p. 1, 19 January 1899, p. 1, 12. Ibid., 3 May 1894, p. 1, 28 June 1894, p. 4, 29 December 1894, p. 1, 13. Ibid., 3 May 1894, p. 1, 12 December 1895, p. 1, 14. Ibid., 3 May 1894, p. 1, 15. Ibid., 4 August 1904, p. 1, 16. Ibid., 1 September 1904, p. 4, 25 August 1904, p. 1, 11 August 1904, p. 1.
12. [Cyrus R. Teed] The Constitution of the Koreshan Unity (Chicago: Guiding Star Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 3, 15; Fort Myers Press, 25 August 1904, p. 4.
13. Fort Myers Press, 1 September 1904, p. 4, 25 August 1904, p. 1.
14. "Proceedings of the County Democratic Committee." Fort Myers Press, 24 May 1906, p. 1, 17 May 1906, p. 4.
15. Ibid., 23 January 1902, p. 1, 24 May 1906, p. 1.
16. American Eagle, 7 June 1906, p. 3, 6 June 1906, p. 1.
17. Fort Myers Press, 11 October 1906, p. 4.
18. Ibid., 4 October 1906, p. 4.
19. Ibid., 18 October 1906, p. 3, 8 November 1906, p. 1; American Eagle, 25 October 1906, p. 1.
20. Fort Myers Press, 1 November 1906, p. 1, 25 October 1906, p. 1.
21. Ibid., 8 November 1906, p. 1.