

Catherine Anthony Ohnemus

# Dr. Cyrus Teed and the Koreshan Unity Movement

The Koreshan Unity Settlement on the grounds of Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero, Florida, is the remnant of a 19th-century post-Christian communistic utopian community founded by an eclectic physician named Cyrus Reed Teed.<sup>1</sup> Cyrus Teed was born in 1839 near Trout Creek, Delaware County, New York.<sup>2</sup> As Teed grew up, he was surrounded by religious revivalism. In fact, Upper New York State was so saturated with new religious movements, it became known as the “Burned-Over District.” In the United States, overall, there were more than 40 known communal societies by the end of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup>

However, the central justification for Teed’s leadership and view of life<sup>4</sup> came in 1869, in the form of a supposed mystical experience that Teed called his “divine illumination.” In his vision, he claimed to have seen God in the form of a beautiful woman who revealed to him the secrets of the universe and told him that “he would interpret the symbols of the Bible for the scientific age.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in 1891, Teed took on the pseudonym “Koresh” from the book of Isaiah 44:28, which states, “I am the Lord

. . . who says of Cyrus, ‘he is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose.’”<sup>6</sup> This was the basis upon which Teed formed the tenets of “Koreshan Universology.”

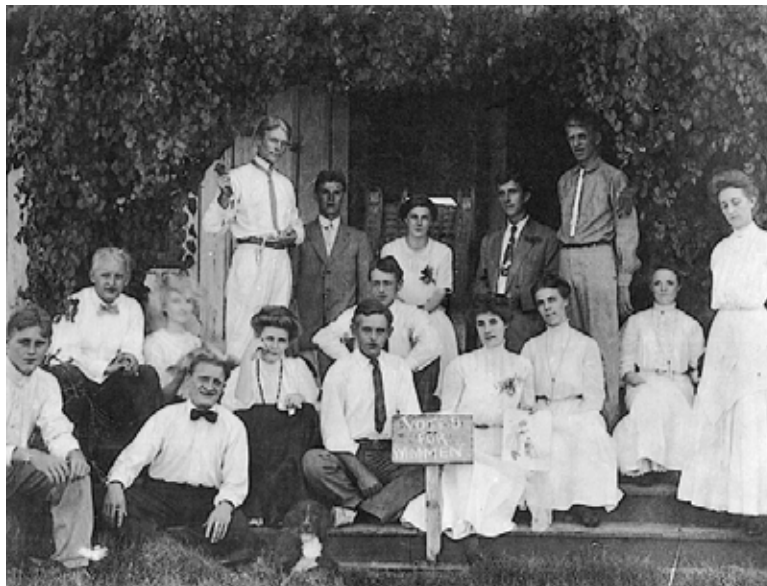
As a precursor to forming his own communal society, Teed joined the North Family of Shakers at Lebanon, New York, in 1878.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, he established the first Koreshan communal home in Moravia, New York. Over the next six years, due to continued financial troubles and religious persecution, the group

migrated to Syracuse, New York, and to New York City before finally settling in Chicago. It was there that Teed began to realize his dream. By 1892, at their communal home called “Beth Ophra,” the Koreshan Unity had grown to a membership of 110.

Even so, Teed had aspirations of building “The New Jerusalem” where he expected his following to grow to 10 million. He initially considered land in St. James City, Florida, but at \$150,000, the price was too high so Teed returned to Chicago, leaving behind some copies of a Koreshan magazine at the cable station. Ironically, a homesteader named Gustave Damkohler, who had 320 acres of land in Estero, Florida, happened upon the literature. Damkohler invited Teed, along with some of the prominent Koreshan women, to Estero and, eventually, transferred the title to the land in 1894.

Between 1904 and 1908, with a population of approximately 250 members, the Unity in Estero was at its height. The Koreshans were remarkably prolific—fashioning homes, businesses, and industries that allowed them to be a

*The Koreshans, men and women alike, were very active in the Suffrage Movement. Pictured here are “second generation” Koreshans. The spelling of women “wimmen” was commonly used during the suffrage movement.*





*Cyrus Reed Teed, founder of the Koreshan Unity, c.1900.*

self-sustaining community. They began by building a log house with a thatched roof shortly after their arrival in 1894, and an immense, three-story community dining hall two years later.<sup>8</sup> By this time, the Koreshans had their own sawmill, and the “Master’s House,” a home for Teed, followed shortly after the dining hall. Eventually, Koreshan enterprise was flourishing;<sup>9</sup> a boat works, steam laundry, printing house, concrete

works, post office, and general store were all located on the grounds. The “risin’ bread” baked in the Koreshan Bakery was sold in the general store and became a choice commodity of the local public. Also frequented by the public were the many plays and band concerts put on by members of the Unity in their “Art Hall” auditorium. Moreover, from 1916 until 1946, the Koreshans generated their own electricity to electrify the community and sold it as well to homes in the surrounding area.

Ironically, the mounting prosperity of the community inadvertently brought about its decline. In 1904, the Koreshans sought to incorporate the Unity and surrounding area into a city.<sup>10</sup> However, area landowners rejected the idea, fearing an increased tax burden. Nonetheless, in September 1904, a compromise was made, leaving the opposing landowners unincorporated while the Unity and some other adjacent lands, totaling 110 square miles (82 land and 28 water), became the town of “Estero.”

Estero’s incorporation entitled the town to county road tax funds. Compounded by the prejudicial views of the surrounding society toward the Koreshans’ communistic way of life, resentment began to emerge on the part of the neighboring city of Fort Myers which would lose money as a result of it being diverted to Estero. In addition, the Koreshans formed the Progressive Liberty Party to run against the area’s established Democrats in the election of 1906.<sup>11</sup> The above, fueled by a misunderstanding over a telephone conversation, finally resulted in an

altercation on October 13, 1906, between several Koreshan men, including Teed, and some citizens of Fort Myers, accompanied by the town marshal.<sup>12</sup> Soon after the fight, Teed’s health began to fail and it was generally accepted, at least among his followers, that his death, on December 22, 1908, could be attributed to the injuries he received in the brawl.<sup>13</sup>

One aspect of Teed’s 1869 “illumination” was that, upon physical death, he would re-incarnate and re-emerge immortal.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, in the days immediately following Teed’s death, the Koreshans awaited his resurrection. Moreover, members within the Koreshan Unity Settlement practiced celibacy and had been promised by Teed that they, too, would become immortal upon his resurrection.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, by the time Christmas Day had come and gone, hope turned to disappointment, and on December 27, the county health officer ordered that the body be interred.<sup>16</sup>

Disillusionment immediately took a toll on the Unity. Younger members began to leave<sup>17</sup> and, dividing into factions, “a power struggle ensued as to who would succeed Koresh as head of the Unity.”<sup>18</sup> Unpredictably, though, the supposed persistent faith<sup>19</sup> of about three-dozen members sustained the community, to an extent, for the next 30 years. In 1940, 35 elderly members remained.<sup>20</sup> It was at this time that a Jewish woman named Hedwig Michel, having just fled Nazi Germany, arrived at the Unity. Over the next two years, Michel proceeded to reorganize the Koreshan General Store, adding a restaurant, a Western Union office, and, across the street, a gas station. The Unity experienced a momentary renewal, but, with only four members left in 1960, Michel offered the 300-acre “utopia” to the State of Florida.<sup>21</sup>

The settlement became the Koreshan Unity Settlement Historic District when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. Eleven of the community’s buildings now remain within Koreshan State Historic Site, a unit of the Florida Park Service, and house a collection of approximately 5,000 artifacts. Half of the collection is state property and is fully cataloged. The other 2,500 objects were conveyed to the State of Florida by the College of Life Foundation—the nonprofit corporate successor of the Koreshan Unity—in 1998, on a probationary period of six years, and are anticipated to become part of the permanent collection in

Koreshan members during the "Geodectic Survey" on Naples Beach, Florida, that was performed between January and May 1897. The instrument called a "rectilinear" was built and the survey was performed in an attempt to prove the Koreshan belief that the Earth was concave.



2004. These objects are in the process of being cataloged. This author oversees the cataloging and care of the artifacts, along with the buildings, assisted by a part-time registrar and park ranger staff.

The "Founder's Home" and "Damkohler Cottage" on the site were restored in 1992 and 1994, respectively. The restoration of the "Planetary Court" and the "Art Hall" are slated to begin in December 2001. The restorations are funded through grants from the Florida Department of Historical Resources and are matched by the park's Citizen Support Organization. The park's official web site is located at <myflorida.com>, and a virtual tour of the site, along with additional information, can be found at <koreshanshs.tripod.com>.

#### Notes

- 1 Howard David Fine, *The Koreshan Unity: The Early New York Beginnings of a Utopian Community* (Unpublished), 1.
- 2 Peter Hicks, *Cyrus Teed* (Unpublished), 1.
- 3 Jane Hogg, Conversation with Catherine Ohnemus (March 10, 2001).
- 4 Howard David Fine, *The Koreshan Unity: The Early New York Beginnings of a Utopian Community* (Unpublished), 4.
- 5 Peter Hicks, *Cyrus Teed* (Unpublished), 2.
- 6 Howard David Fine, *The Koreshan Unity The Early New York Beginnings of a Utopian Community* (Unpublished), 4.
- 7 Peter Hicks, *Cyrus Teed* (Unpublished), 2.
- 8 Sara Weber Rea, *The Koreshan Story* (Estero, FL: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1994), 28-30.
- 9 Peter Hicks, *Cyrus Teed* (Unpublished), 6.

- 10 Sara Weber Rea, *The Koreshan Story* (Estero, FL: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1994), 50.
- 11 Elliott J. Mackle, Jr., *The Koreshan Unity in Florida: 1894-1910* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, 1971), 107.
- 12 Ibid., 116-119.
- 13 Ibid., 135-142.
- 14 Ibid., 142; Robert Lynn Rainard, *In the Name of Humanity: The Koreshan Unity* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 1974), 8.
- 15 Robert Lynn Rainard, *In the Name of Humanity: The Koreshan Unity* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 1974), 31.
- 16 Elliott J. Mackle, Jr., *The Koreshan Unity in Florida: 1894-1910* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, 1971), 145.
- 17 Robert Lynn Rainard, *In the Name of Humanity: The Koreshan Unity* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 1974), 88.
- 18 Sara Weber Rea, *The Koreshan Story* (Estero, FL: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1994), 58.
- 19 Robert Lynn Rainard, *In the Name of Humanity: The Koreshan Unity* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 1974), 89.
- 20 Sara Weber Rea, *The Koreshan Story* (Estero, FL: Guiding Star Publishing House, 1994), 68.
- 21 Ibid., 71; Robert Lynn Rainard, *In the Name of Humanity: The Koreshan Unity* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 1974), 92; Elliott J. Mackle, Jr., *The Koreshan Unity in Florida: 1894-1910* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, 1971), 163.

Catherine Anthony Ohnemus is Museum Education Program Specialist, Koreshan State Historic Site, Estero, Florida.

Photos courtesy Koreshan State Historic Site Archives.