

THE ULTIMATE INSIDERS

COURTESY OF THE KORESHAN STATE HISTORIC SITE



THE KORESHANS' CRUMBLING UTOPIA IN ESTERO COULD ONLY HAVE BEEN MADE IN AMERICA. **BY DANIEL LINDLEY**

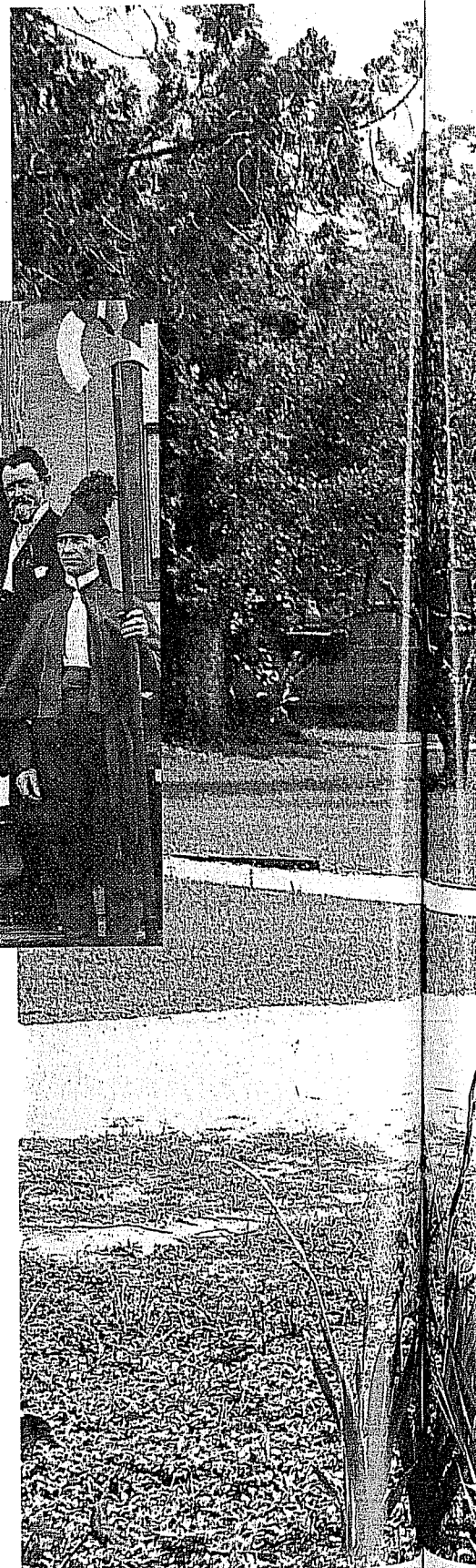
JUST WEST OF U.S. 41, THE KORESHAN State Historic Site holds the 11 structures that remain of the 50 that once made up the religious cult's settlement in Estero. The Koreshan faith is as gone as most of the buildings, but as you drive down the bucolic roads nearby, you can see what attracted the weird cult late in the 19th century: a lush if harsh landscape, and the Estero River, a source of food, freshwater and easy travel in those days.

Few people now know much about the Koreshans, although some have a vague idea of the cult's tenets—that, led by a charismatic leader who called himself Koresh, a band of about 200 true believers came to Southwest Florida to plant their new religion

composed of odd bits of beliefs: socialism, celibacy, feminism, astrology, numerology, immortality and the bizarre notion that the Earth was hollow and that the human race lived on its inner crust. (Thus one of the group's favorite mottoes: "We live inside.")

Many have wondered at the Koreshans' oddball ideas, of course. But their strange story has made me wonder more about why Americans, especially well-educated and well-off ones such as the Koreshans, so often fall for outlandish cults: the People's Temple of California and Guyana, for instance, or the Branch Davidians of Waco.

Jon Robinson, the state park's new manager, and Pete Hicks, a ranger who has led tours there for 13 years, gave me





PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM FREEMAN

Cyrus R. Teed, known as Koresh (opposite page, hat in hand, with some of his followers), ran his bizarre sect from the Founder's House, above, built in Estero in 1896.

the outline of the Koreshan saga. Cyrus Teed, the founder of the clan, was born in 1839 in upstate New York—throughout the 19th century a hotbed of religious fervor and a nursery of utopian communities. After fighting for the Union in the Civil War, Teed returned north and earned an M.D. at the Institute of Eclectic Medicine in New York City, where he studied a sort of alternative herbal medicine.

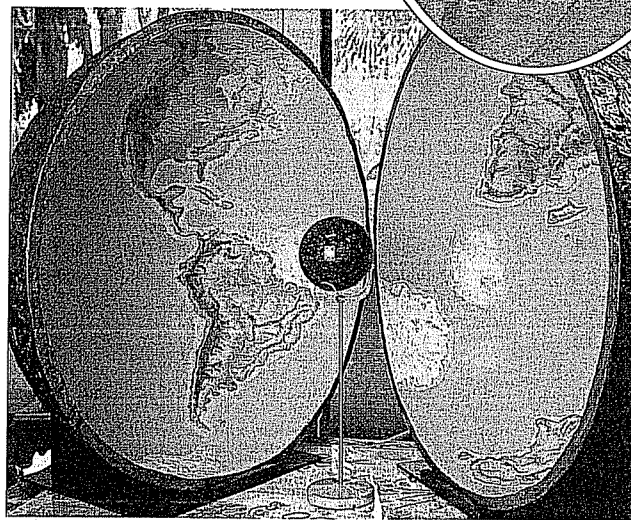
Teed's practice won few clients, and he took it on the road as he struggled to support a wife and child. One night in 1869 in Utica, N.Y., Teed claimed, he slipped into a "gently oscillating ocean of magnetic and spiritual ecstasy" that led to a "divine illumination." An apparition of a lovely blonde in a gold-and-purple robe revealed to him the new religion he was to preach. As its leader, Teed began calling himself Koresh—the Hebrew name for Cyrus, in this case Cyrus the Great, the Persian king called upon in the Book of Isaiah to deliver the Jews from Babylonian captivity and return them to Jerusalem. Teed declared that as the modern Koresh he would create a New Jerusalem in the United States.

At first the going was slow. The pint-sized prophet—Koresh stood about five-foot-six—was harried from town to town. With family and a few acolytes in tow, he continued to develop his religious ideas and to scratch out a living with his medical practice. He joined the Shakers and visited other celibate religious societies, like the New Harmonists in Economy, Penn. He speculated unsuccessfully in the mop business.

Teed's fortunes improved in 1886, however, after he delivered a rousing speech in Chicago before the National Association of Mental Science. Soon he moved into a communal compound called Beth Ophrah with a growing band of believers. Many were women, attracted in part by the group's feminist

leanings. A committee known as the Seven Sisters ran the budding Koreshan commune (under the Master's benevolent hand, of course); Teed named Annie Ordway of Boston the group's first titular head. She took the name of Victoria Gratia, the Pre-Eminent.

But the sect's bizarre beliefs continued to disturb neighbors. Several prominent Chicago men filed alienation-of-affection lawsuits after their wives took up with Koresh's cult and yielded their property to the com-



Artifacts on display at the College of Life include a portrait of Teed in later life and a hollow globe showing the Koreshan notion of the universe inside the Earth.

mune, as was required of all converts. "Our enemies, with tongue and pen, have defamed our reputation for purity of life and righteous intent," Sister Berthaldine Boomer complained in the Koreshan house organ, *The Flaming Sword* (motto: "The Monthly Magazine of Positive Progress"). Koresh decided to flee his persecutors again, setting his sights this time on Southwest Florida—sparsely inhabited in the 1890s, with plenty of privacy and cheap land.

The writer Elliott J. Mackle Jr. has noted that "it was later to be maintained that Estero had been 'scientifically located' at the 'vitellus of the

great Cosmogonic Egg"—the hollow Earth that Teed and his followers later attempted to prove existed through experiments conducted on the beach in Naples (recorded in Teed's *The Cellular Cosmogony, or, The*

Earth a Concave Sphere, a tome that remains incomprehensible to this day). But "one account states that he became interested in Lee County through the efforts of a local real-estate broker, and another, probably more reliable, that he heard of it by chance," Mackle added.

IN JANUARY 1894, TEED and a small party of Koreshan women—his wife was by now estranged, sickly and back in upstate New York—paid their first visit to Estero, staying with Gustav Damkohler, an immigrant who had built a small, thatch-roofed cabin by the river. Koresh soon talked the doughty German into converting to Koreshanity, which meant that the pioneer had to turn over his 305 acres to the sect. Declaring that his New Jerusalem would one day boast 10 million residents, Teed issued a prediction: "Like a thousand World's Fair cities, Estero will manifest one great panorama of architectural beauty, one great system of orderly activity, where every obstruction to the free motion of every human orb in its circle of progress will be removed."

Soon a vanguard of the faithful was clearing land and raising crude structures, all the while fighting swarms of mosquitoes in stifling heat. After the nucleus of the New Jerusalem had formed, the rest of the Chicago contingent completed the exodus, shipping 20 freight-car loads of belongings to Punta Gorda, down the coast and up the Estero River by barge. The

The Planetary Court, built in 1903 to house the sect's governing female council, has been faithfully restored; this beautiful staircase leads to four of the Seven Sisters' bedrooms upstairs.

industrious group built a sawmill, boatworks, a publishing house, extensive gardens, and a variety of residences and other buildings, one of which became Lee County's biggest.

Though most of the settlement's structures have been lost to fire, heat, humidity and insects over the years, the state has undertaken a multimillion-dollar project to renovate some of those that remain: the rambling, pine building where Teed lived, called the Founder's House and built in 1896; the Planetary Court, a two-story structure finished in 1903, with eight bedrooms and a sumptuous interior where the Seven Sisters resided and deliberated; and the Art Hall, built about 1905, where the Koreshans hung paintings (including gloomy oils by Koresh's son, the artist Douglas Arthur Teed), staged plays and performed concerts. The cult brought the first orchestra to Southwest Florida, and gave the fron-

tier its first real taste of higher culture—not only for the enjoyment of the Koreshans, though they were far from a dour sect; but also to attract outsiders for conversion.

Hicks and Robinson gave me reams of information on the state's planned renovations along with cost projections (high), funding projections (low), artifacts (many) and plans (ambitious) to invite the public to use the Art Hall once the theater is fully restored (the Art Hall project, with about \$400,000 spent so far, is half done and bogged down in the state's budget squeeze). But the men could shed little light on the American susceptibility to outlandish cults. "Maybe it was a reaction to the Civil War and the bloodletting," Hicks offered.

It's usually stakeholders who care enough about something to take the trouble to save it, and Fort Myers lawyer Bill Grace is certainly a stake-

holder in the Koreshan saga. In the 1890s, his great-grandparents John and Mary Grier ventured from their Iowa farm to the Koreshan compound in Chicago. As leader of the not-for-profit group called the Koreshan Unity Alliance, Grace has been a major catalyst in rescuing the state's decrepit Koreshan buildings. He's raised funds, gathered volunteers and prodded state officials.

"Apparently John Grier was somebody who was searching for something," Grace said of his great-grandfather. After falling under Teed's spell in Illinois, the Griers moved to Estero. John lived in the men's dormitory, Mary in the women's and their five sons and one daughter—Ada, Grace's grandmother—in the children's quarters, where they were looked after by a kindly Koreshan sister named Vesta Newcomb. Although many written accounts describe the colony as a

The socially active Koreshans staged numerous events, including this lunar festival, to entertain sect members and draw in outsiders.



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turn-of-the-century Eden, Grace's grandmother remembered a harsh life. "They were hungry a lot of the time," the lawyer said. "The food was scarce. They had mullet, chickpeas, turnips, and more chickpeas." An outbreak of cholera killed several settlers.

But the greatest disillusion were all too human. The communal lodgings in the women's residence, with its mud-packed floors, thatched roof and lumpy bunk beds, were far more spartan than the comfortably cluttered Victorian luxury that Teed and the Seven Sisters enjoyed in the Founder's House and the Planetary Court. Grace recalled his grandmother Ada saying that her mother "was very unhappy because they had to surrender everything they had to Teed. My great-grandmother cried all the time because Victoria Gratia was walking around in her dresses and her jewelry. There was a lot of talk about equality, but some were more equal than others—like Orwell's pigs."

For the rest of her life, Ada never spoke of the group's religious aspects. Nor did she mention that her husband had been a Koreshan. After the couple left the sect to marry, John became a businessman in Fort Myers, where, Grace said, "it wasn't politically correct to be a Koreshan." The couple never returned to visit the Estero

commune, although Sister Vesta did call upon them in Fort Myers from time to time. "She was very quiet and looked like a scrawny old Cracker lady," Grace recalled.

Even though renovation efforts have slowed recently, Grace said he hoped that a private benefactor might someday make it possible for re-enactors to bring the historic site alive again, a modest version of Williamsburg in Virginia or Deerfield Village in Massachusetts, perhaps. "It depresses me that we go to all this effort to restore these buildings like the Founder's House and it just sits there," he said.

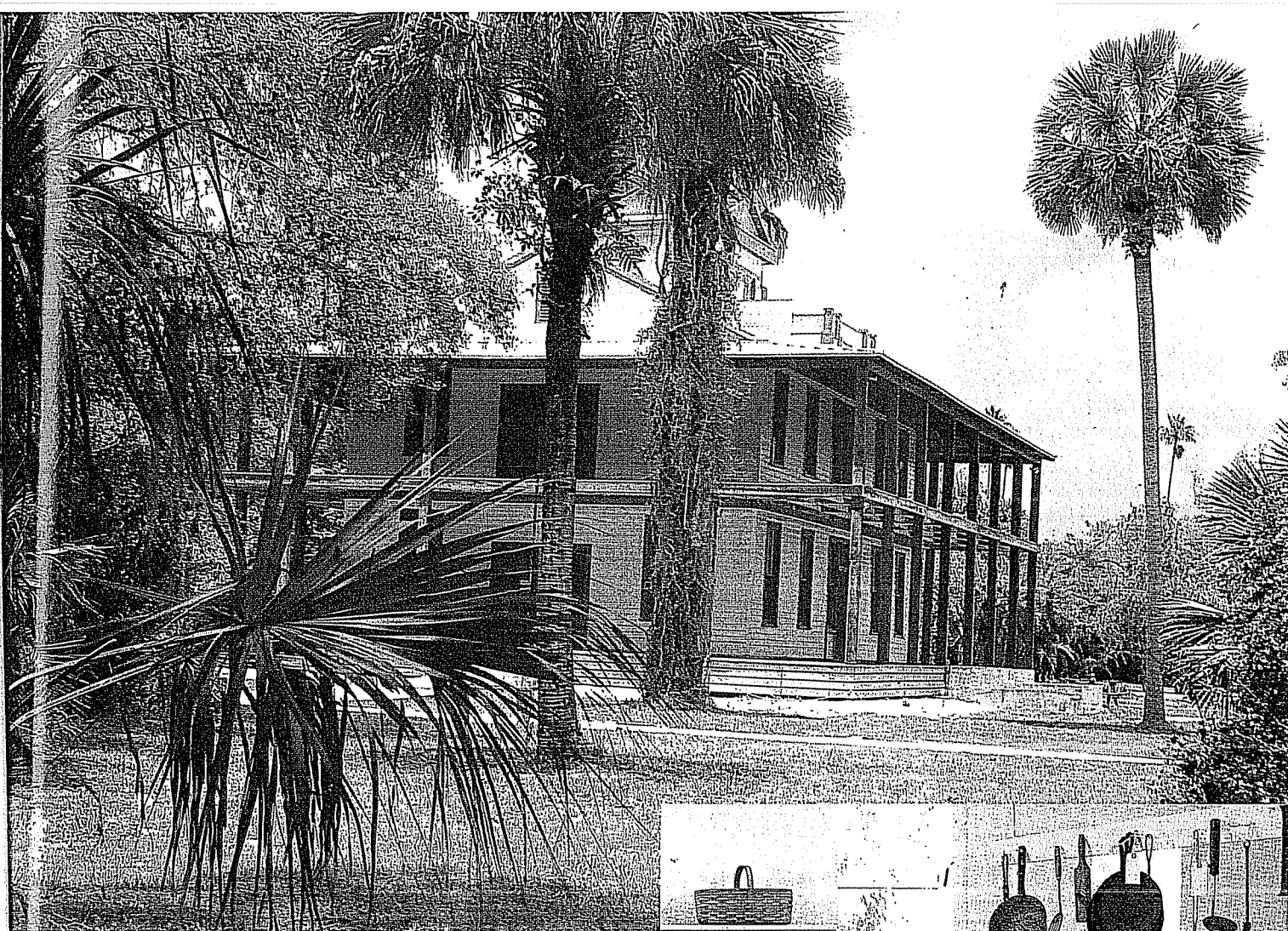
Before I left Grace's office, I asked him why so many seemingly intelligent followers flock to cults like Teed's. "They're unhappy and their intellect lets them explore other alternatives," Grace suggested. That still didn't explain the source of Teed's charisma, I said. "Well, the doctrine was celibacy, but the history of charismatic leaders such as Teed is of promiscuity," he said. "When you look at the Planetary Court, you see eight outside doors, one to each bedroom. It's a bit of an unusual feature for a residential structure, is it not?"

Merely for ventilation, perhaps? "A window would have done as well," the lawyer replied with a laugh. "And Teed would have been more dignified

going through a door than through a window." Grace shook his head and sighed. "The crazy Koreshans," he said. "They're all charlatans."

IN 1904, TEED MADE THE FATAL mistake of stepping into Lee County politics. He formed his own town in Estero, siphoning tax dollars away from Lee. As animosity grew, he challenged the entrenched Democratic machine in Fort Myers with a crusading newspaper called *The American Eagle* (motto: "Exponent of Purity in Politics"). Following increasingly bitter political salvos between the warring camps, a mob attacked Teed and a band of his followers in Fort Myers. Teed thereafter sank into declining health, and died on Dec. 22, 1908.

Some Koreshans considered the date between the winter solstice and Christmas a hopeful sign, for the Master had long predicted he would rise again. They placed the fallen leader's body in a metal bathtub in anticipation of his resurrection. Bill Grace's grandmother was led in with a group of Koreshan children for a look a few days after Teed's demise; Koresh's rotting flesh was a mere phase in the mysterious process of his revival, it was explained to the children. Although the hoped-for event never arrived, a



county health official soon did. The Koreshans buried Teed's body at Fort Myers Beach, much of which they owned in those days. When vandals began looting the crypt, a guard was installed there. But even the sentry couldn't keep the crypt and Teed's remains from washing into the Gulf during a hurricane in the 1920s.

Although Teed styled himself a socialist, he had taken the precaution before his death of incorporating the cult along the lines of Standard Oil of New Jersey. As head of the College of Life Foundation, a not-for-profit, Charles Dauray is the eighth leader of the Koreshan corporation, now a wholly secular enterprise but with roots going back to Victoria Gratia. The corporate headquarters occupies an inconspicuous corner across the highway from the state historic site. Shaped like a chambered nautilus, a symbol for eternity, the building contains a little museum full of Koreshan

After a \$500,000 renovation, the Planetary Court, above, has regained its 1920s appearance; at right, the Koreshan bakery, still remembered by some old-timers for the delicious bread once produced there.



artifacts: thousands of books, letters and diaries, rooms heavy with dark Victorian furniture, antique photos of Koreshans at work and play, kinetoscopes and other gadgets given the Koreshans by Thomas Edison, palm-frond whisks the Koreshans used to ward off mosquitoes.

Following Teed's death, Dauray told me, members drifted away. The Pre-Eminent was one of the first to go.

After losing a struggle to lead the group, to James H. Bubbett, Victoria Gratia married a wealthy doctor and moved to St. Petersburg. Over the years, the remaining cultists withered in body and number. They eked out a living by selling honey from their apiary and bread from their bakery and by running a dry-goods store on the sparsely traveled highway.

Within a few decades, only a handful

of elderly Koreshans remained. In 1940, Hedwig Michel arrived and breathed a bit of life into the failing commune; at 50, she was a comparative youngster. A refugee from Nazi Germany, she had been principal of a school for Jewish girls there and had learned of the Koreshans from a teacher who believed that he was the reincarnation of Koresh and that the Earth was hollow. The last person ever to convert to Koreshanity, Michel faced mounting costs and meager revenues. In 1961, she donated 305 acres of Koreshan land, along with its crumbling buildings, to the state—the basis of the historic site.

Soon she was feuding with state officials about the buildings and artifacts. She accused the state of neglecting the Koreshans' physical legacy; some people meanwhile suspected her of attempting to hoard Koreshan artifacts. The disagreement led her to construct the nautilus-shaped foundation building across the highway in 1978, although she continued to live in the park. Over the years, Michel and her helpers moved artifacts back and forth across the road, between public park and private foundation. Assets commingled and separated. "Hedwig was a master of obfuscation," lawyer Grace said.

After Michel's death in 1982 (she's buried outside the Planetary Court), the foundation continued to dispose of real estate. In 1993, for instance, it got \$5 million for 176 acres later subdivided into the residential development called Pelican Sound. Recently, the foundation has been buying property with a view to developing it.

The deals have raised some opposition, and the long-simmering controversy over artifacts hasn't ended. Members of the foundation have quarreled about how to share its historic documents with the public and the park. Grace and a number of others left the foundation's board in 1999

when Dauray took over, claiming that the foundation was too interested in buying and selling real estate and not interested enough in cataloging and making available to the public its large archive of books, letters and diaries. Dauray, who has justified the foundation's real-estate deals as a way to ensure its long-term health, told me that he plans to work more closely with the state and will eventually open



The Koreshans generated their own electricity and maintained their machinery in shops that still stand at the site.

the foundation's archive, perhaps via the Internet. Recently, the three main players in the Koreshan legacy—the state, Grace's group of volunteers, and the College of Life Foundation—have indeed been making friendlier murmurs of cooperation. Given the cult's disputatious history, however, one still has to wonder.

I asked Dauray at the end of our talk why Teed's ambitious plans had failed. "I like to use the example of a satellite," he replied. "A satellite is lifted by a rocket until it reaches sufficient speed that it overcomes gravity. The Koreshans almost reached that point, but not quite. It started to be drawn down into the basic natures of people. They didn't have the driving force to overcome the lesser angels of envy, greed, lack of discipline, and all of the things that have a tendency to lessen us."

Why the blind faith of Teed's followers in the first place? Dauray couldn't explain; he could only describe Teed's charisma as powerful enough to create the love that attracted flocks of converts; and the hatred that doomed him.

Before I left, Sarah Bergquist, executive administrative assistant, gave me a tour of the museum. "It's amazing how a few pounds and facial hair will change the look of a man," she said as

we studied a series of photos tracing Teed's progress over the years from lean, whiskered youth to paunchy, smooth-shaven middle age. "But his eyes are always pretty wild." Past Teed's headstone, recovered on Fort Myers Beach after the hurricane, past a display case containing a silk tie and white vest and solid-gold eagle talon stickpin that had belonged to the Master, Bergquist showed me a life cast of Teed's hand. "He was a fairly small man, but that's

a big hand," she said. "The life cast of the right hand symbolizes power over your enemies."

WHAT DID I LEARN from the preposterous mishmash of Koreshanity? That the ancient American longing for purity and getting away leads to strange places. That if you're going to set up a new religion, celibacy isn't the best way to perpetuate it. That if you're thinking about another name, avoid Koresh: It worked no better for Cyrus Teed of Estero than it did for Vernon Howell (David Koresh) of Waco. That most of us go through life hoping that others will think the best of us; but it is at least as likely that they will think the worst, even of those who don the mantle of righteousness. That it's wise to question assumptions, especially your own. That, bad though the status quo may be, the alternatives are usually worse. And that the Koreshans faced the same fate that all insiders ultimately do. ♣