

CULT

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residents breathe easier when another of the wacko-triumvirate — Florida, California and Texas — commits a faux pas on the national scale. During the 2003 gubernatorial race in California, Floridians gave a statewide sigh of relief as Arnold Schwarzenegger waged a campaign against adult movie stars, sumo wrestlers, and Larry Flynt, hoping the debacle on the west coast would relieve the taint of humiliation still lingering from Florida's missteps in the 2000 presidential campaign.

It's true that Florida has committed its share of political screw-ups, but usually this state can bank on staying out of the crazy religion business. Texas has the handle on that front, with memories of David Koresh and his fiery showdown outside of Waco still burned into the national conscious. When the Feds busted another ultra-conservative polygamous sect dabbling in underage marriage this year, Floridians rolled their collective eyes, nodded knowingly, and thanked God it was Texas.

But 2008 marks the 100-year anniversary of the death of our own Koresh, and until his body washed away in the hurricane of 1921, believers still waited for the Florida-based messiah to rise from his tomb on Fort Myers Beach.

The leader

Like cult leaders from the current era, Cyrus Teed exuded a charisma that drew followers and raised funds. At one Midwest meeting, he brought in more than \$60,000 in donations (about \$1.2 million in today's dollars). When the early Koreshans were based in Chicago, Teed came to be called the "Chicago Christ," originally because he referred to himself as a shepherd tending his flock, but later because he claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. His philosophies were Christian-based, though most deviated from the Biblical faith. The bulk of Teed's creed originated in an "illumination" he experienced in 1869 at the age of 30. Working in his laboratory late at night, Teed slipped into a trance. A beautiful woman appeared before him haloed in purple and gold. Teed believed her to be an angel, and she spoke of universal truths that became the foundation for Teed's Koreshan beliefs. These included reincarnation, socialism and alchemy. She also spoke of the universe being a hollow sphere, with earth on the inside.

Preaching across the Northeast and Midwest, Teed ran his first base of operations out of Chicago. There, his flock grew to nearly 1,000 followers, many of whom were women. Contrary to the norms of his times (this was before the great women's suffrage movement of the early 1900s), Teed infused his teachings with an element of feminism. He spoke of a God equal parts



Founders House.

JIM MCLAUGHLIN/FLORIDA WEEKLY



Interior of Bakery.

JIM MCLAUGHLIN/FLORIDA WEEKLY

male and female and believed in the equity of men and women. His chief minister was a woman, the ruling court — the Seven Sisters — were all women, and, of course, a woman delivered his initial vision.

Against the backdrop of modern cults, it's hard not to take a cynical look at Teed's collection of female followers. After the Waco disaster, reports spoke of David Koresh's harem of young women, and cult leader Warren Jeffs is serving prison time for his abuse of power, including sanctioning polygamy. In Beth-Ophrah, the mansion in Estero, Teed placed the Seven Sisters in separate bedrooms on the ground floor and his own living quarters at an easily accessible point on the second. An 1896 article in the New York Times accused Teed of surrounding himself with "the most beautiful and adventurous" women of the colony.

Despite evidence suggesting otherwise, Teed advocated a strict doctrine of celibacy. Before moving his group to the wilds of south Florida, Teed spent time with the Shakers in New York. A progressive utopian community, the Shakers

were best known for their strict adherence to celibacy. The community eventually faded out of existence, victim to the pitfalls of a sexless lifestyle (namely lack of new members). Teed adopted the belief that celibacy was essential for spiritual cleansing and leading a sinless life. He also pulled evidence from his alchemical studies, saying that intercourse drained a person's life force.

The community

Laws governing intercourse aside, the Koreshan community south of Fort Myers projected an image of assiduous wholesomeness.

"They were a very industrious, hard-working people," said Mike Heare, park services specialist at the Koreshan site (now a state park).

When the group first arrived in 1894, they faced the usual hardships of a pioneering lifestyle: toil, hunger, disease. Members, mostly from well-off families in the Midwest, worked to clear land and build shelter in the thick scrub of

wild Florida. Their first houses were built around cypress logs and thatched with palm fronds. In 1895, a cold front swept through south Florida, dropping temperatures to 14 degrees and killing the community's citrus, mango, and avocado orchards. Literature promoting the Koreshan community promised "a pioneer life and sacrifice" as well as "some drudgery."

Despite hardships, the community thrived. New members joined. A sawmill, bakery and general store prospered. The sect acquired more land in the area.

In the tradition of shady Florida politics, though, the elections of 1906 ultimately wrought the group's decline. Cyrus Teed brought together Koreshans, Socialists, and Republicans to fight the entrenched power of the Lee County Democratic party. In October, a brawl erupted between the Koreshan candidate for county commissioner, the town marshal, a Fort Myers politician, and Cyrus Teed. Teed received blows to the head and face that would wear on his health and lead to his death two years later.

As with recent cults, the power of the Koreshan faith resided not in the strength of its doctrine but in the charisma of its leader. Teed prepared for his death by promising imminent return. Before he passed away in 1908, he gave specific instructions for the construction of a tomb and left orders that his body be placed in a zinc coffin. At the time of Teed's death, his followers kept guard over the body, expecting the self-proclaimed messiah to rise again. Rigor mortis set in and, later, decomposition. The vigil lasted until the Lee County health inspector demanded the body be interred.

Sect members placed Teed's body in a mausoleum on Fort Myers Beach. They stationed believers at the site in preparation for his return and left a row boat in case Teed resurrected while no one stood on duty.

Without Teed at the helm, the Koreshan community slowly disappeared. The last believer, a Jewish convert from Nazi Germany, passed away in 1982. Before her death, Hedwig Michel — known as the last Koreshan — turned over Koreshan land and buildings to the Florida state parks system. Today, the site stands as a historical relic and a monument to Florida's not-so-distant cult past. ■

If you go

- >>What: Koreshan State Historic Site
- >>Where: 3800 Corkscrew Road, U.S. 41 South of Alico, in Estero
- >>Hours: 8 a.m. until sundown, 365 days per year
- >>Admission: \$4 per car, up to 8 people; \$3 for single occupant; Guided tours available for \$2 per adult and \$1 per child. Overnight camping runs \$22 per night.
- >>Don't miss: Some of the park's special events that run January through March. Dutch oven bread baking and cast iron cooking top the list.

BLOOD

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donors as well as high school and college students. Blood donations usually pick up when the population swells and school is back in session, Hendrick said. Until then, the agency must use any creative measures to attract donors.

The Lee Memorial Blood Centers, which was created to supply Lee Memorial hospitals is giving free diagnostics on donated blood, gifts such as certificates for dinner and T-shirts. Aside from these incentives, the blood center is also making its bloodmobiles available at worksites for donors. And high schools that have blood drives can participate in

challenges with other high schools and win scholarships.

"We want to make it as convenient as possible for people," Hendrick said.

Blood facts

Hendrick and the agency's staff must work so hard to bring in donors because of numbers.

Five hundred people need to give blood each week to supply Lee Memorial's hospitals. And out of a group of donors only a percentage will be able to participate. For instance, in order for blood to be useable, the donor must not have traveled to certain parts of the world that carry malaria. Hendrick said they recently had a bloodmobile at the Clerk of Courts in Fort Myers. Though they had 52 donors only 42 of them could participate.

Routine procedures, including cancer care and heart surgery, deplete blood supplies. And unexpected calamities, such as multiple car crashes or gun shootings, tax the supplies even more.

"Every year there's more traumas coming in," Hendrick said.

In 2006, there were 1,976 traumas and in 2007, the numbers swelled to 2,177.

And in emergency cases, such as a shooting, there is no time to even blood type the victim, so patients are given transfusions with the universally acceptable O negative blood, Hendrick said.

One in 16 people have the universally acceptable blood.

Donors are needed for every blood type. Employers and organizations can arrange for bloodmobiles to come to their place of work. High schools can contact the blood center about schedul-

Requirements for donating blood:

- >>Must be at least 16 years old
- >>You must weigh at least 110 pounds.
- >>Donor must be healthy, i.e. you can't be anemic.

For more information, call the Lee Memorial Blood Centers at (239) 334-5333.

ing blood drives participating in challenges with other schools. And individuals can stop by any of the Lee Memorial Blood Centers to donate. ■