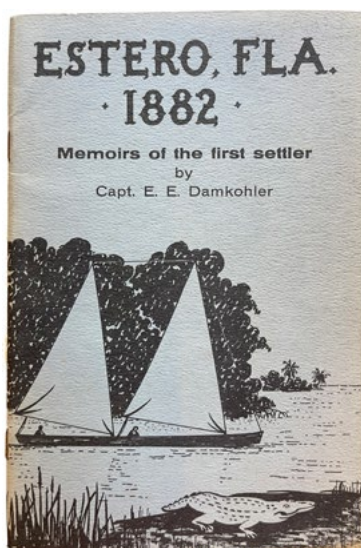


Elwin E. Damkohler's Account of the Koreshan Unity

Editor's Note: Lyn Millner's excellent history of the Koreshan Unity, *The Allure of Immortality: An American Cult, a Florida Swamp, and a Renegade Prophet*, made use of many heretofore inaccessible primary sources about the Koreshans. One of these was Elwin E. Damkohler's scarce pamphlet *Estero, Fla., 1882: Memoirs of the First Settler* (Fort Myers Beach, Florida: Island Press, 1967). As Millner recounts, Elwin and his father Gustave were convinced by Teed and the Koreshans to legally sign the title to their lands over to the community. Reprinted below are Elwin's bitter memories of the Koreshans, excerpted here from his extremely rare pamphlet.



Document

It was on the afternoon of January 4, 1894 that we arrived at Punta Rassa on our trip home. There we met Dr. Cyrus R. Teed, Mrs. A.G. Ordway, Mrs. L.M. Boomer and Mary Mills.

Father and Dr. Teed engaged in conversation about lands for a "New Jerusalem" that Dr. Teed had come from Chicago to Florida to found. They were in conversation until far into the night. Then they all decided to go to our Estero home.

We did not have enough food for four additional persons at our home. The next morning we went to the St. James food store on Pine Island. I was designated sailor to handle the boat.

While passing an oyster bar where many birds were feeding, Dr. Teed, founder of the Koreshan Unity, who claimed to be the second Christ, drew his pistol. He shot at the birds, two of which were wounded and crippled.

This act decided my future feelings for this man. Though he continued to try to win me over, he then and there lost any hypnotical, religious influence over me.

Father and mother had taught us never to kill or harm any animal or bird unless it was needed by us. Here, the would-be “second Christ” was shooting and crippling birds for fun. I felt this was a ridiculously impossible thing for the “saviour of mankind” to do.

We got the needed food at the Pine Island store and returned to Punta Rasa where we spent the night. Early the next morning, we started for our home at Estero Creek. When we arrived, we gave Dr. Teed and his women folk our house. Father and I slept in our little boat which was arranged with sleeping quarters.

While Dr. Teed was our guest, he showed us his plans for his New Jerusalem. He had a big, beautiful map showing the streets of his dream place. Father’s place was to be the center with streets running in all directions about like the streets from the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Teed pretended to be the saviour of mankind and the second Christ. He said that anyone who did as he directed and gave all he had to him and followed his teachings all of his life would receive eternal life.

This and many other things, he promised my father. He promised him lifetime care, schooling for me and care for me until I became of age at twenty-one.

The women pampered father and me. They made good progress with my father but not with me, because Dr. Teed could not hypnotize me. The more he influenced my father, the more I hated him.

After days of hypnotic influence, he got father to start writing a deed conveying 300 acres of our property, holding out 20 acres for me.

Dr. Teed’s handwriting was illegible. My father’s was almost perfect. So, Dr. Teed made father do all the writing of the deed papers. Yet he was not satisfied.

He told father that he could not get the full blessing of the Lord and the Koreshan religion unless he gave all his possessions to the Lord.

Teed’s hypnotic influence won. I, my father’s only living child, was disinherited. The remaining 20 acres were deeded to Dr. Cyrus R. Teed.

A few nights later, we were sleeping in our little boat. Suddenly, father came out of his hypnotic spell. He cried like a baby, realizing what he had done to me.

I was ready to do anything to get rid of Dr. Teed. But the women pampered father and me. We began to do what was necessary for our immediate livelihood. Food had to be produced for six persons. After father had given Dr. Cyrus R. Teed all of his land and property, he became a body slave to him and the Unity heads. After some time of this, he realized fully that he had been victimized by a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Under cover of a religious mantle of the unusual promises for father and me, such as the great city – New Jerusalem – he was going to build on father's land, Dr. Teed had completely hypnotized my father.

He tried to prove that we lived on the inside of the earth, while using his crooked religious influence. He was just as crooked there as in all his other "wonderful" claims.* **This "proof" is well described by Dr. Teed in his Cellular Cosmogony (The Koreshan Unity, Inc. 1951). Editor* Dr. Teed was a person who could not hold any legal property in his own name. That is the reason my father's property was made in trust to Mrs. Ordway and Mrs. Boomer for the Koreshan Unity. Dr. Teed, as director, got all the money. He gave his slaves just what he wanted to.

No one could do anything about it except leave without a penny. That is what some of the residents did. Quite a number died there. They were buried in the private cemetery of the Koreshan Unity with Dr. Teed's promise of immortal life.

Though I was but a boy of about 15, I had had so many practical experiences in so wide a range that the would-be saviour of mankind often came to me for help. I thought a great deal about his theory concerning cosmogony and the inhabitants living inside the earth.

One day I was bathing on the outside of Estero Island. When my eye was at water level I could see the Sanibel lighthouse, about three miles distant. I knew this lighthouse was about 90 feet high. As I elevated my eye above the water, the lighthouse came into sight. This proved to me that there was a bulge in the water between me and the lighthouse.

I made another practical demonstration to prove to myself that Dr. Teed's theory was all wrong. When the Coast Guard set three light stakes on the ship's channel from the entrance bar to Punta Rassa, a distance of about nine miles, the height of the first light was about ten feet above water level. The second light was the same height above the water. The third light had to be at least twice or three times as high above the water to line the three lights exactly.

This was another proof to me that we lived outside the earth. These lights enabled ships to stay in the channel on dark nights.

Dr. Teed made Mrs. Ordway the Queen of Koreshanity to carry out his orders. Father was put in charge of agriculture. It was his job to furnish

honey for all.

One day four men arrived. There was an immediate need for houses. The Queen sent the men to the nearby cypress swamps to get material and to split shakes from sawed blocks for the cypress roofs. One of the men was a doctor. The other three were intent on other subjects, so the house-building project was hampered.

A short time later, a Professor Lameroux came to Estero. He took over the supervision of agricultural activity. Father and the Professor could not agree on the best crops to plant, nor how to grow them. Father then turned the growing of vegetables over to the Professor. Soon, there were no vegetables for anyone to eat.

Father took care of the bees, producing honey for all, and some to spare.

By this time, a second arrival of people came from Beth Ophrah near South Chicago. A sailboat, sent to get groceries, was delayed by weather conditions.

Dr. Teed came to me and said, "Elwin, get us some fish for these people to eat." There were about fifty hungry ones there. I replied, "All right, but what have you to catch them with? There are no hooks, no nets. I can't catch them with my bare hands." He said, "Get the fish."

I remembered it was mullet-spawning time. I asked for two lanterns, two skiffs and a man for each boat. He said, "You are the captain, go get the fish."

So, with two lanterns, one helper and two skiffs, we went to the mouth of Estero Creek. We waited in the darkness of night for the incoming tide. When the tide was almost high, I knew the fish would be spawning in full action.

I had coached my helper to do just as I did. At the exact moment, we pushed the boats into the stream, jerked and swung out lanterns while knocking on our boats. The fish became frightened. Jumping in all directions, they filled our boats. To this day, I have a lump where one big mullet struck me in the hollow of my left arm.

We were home with the fish in a short time. Everyone who could, was cleaning mullet. And then, with some helpers, I went to gather swamp cabbage needed to supply us all. Several days later, the supply boat arrived.

Soon after this experience, the doctor bought the 5-ton sloop, the Ada, from the old boat builder, Mr. Smith at St. James. Robert Gilbert was made captain. I was general roustabout and helper. When Captain Gilbert quit, Dr. Teed put an old sea captain, Gus Faber, in charge of the sloop. I was made pilot.

One day the weather turned quite bad as we were returning from a

trip. The captain would not follow my instructions to stay in the channel. Knowing that he would put the boat on the sand bar and we would be smashed to pieces, I decided to take action.

I locked the captain in the cabin. I took charge of handling the boat myself, bringing it in safely. After docking, I let the captain out of the cabin.

This created quite a stir. It looked rather bad for a boy of my age to lock up my captain on the high seas. After some time, however, I was exonerated. Because I had saved the sloop *Ada*, I got a nice citation.

On another occasion, Dr. Teed and Queen Ordway came aboard the sloop to go to Punta Rassa. Sailing through San Carlos Pass, Captain Faber let the jib rope loose during a strong wind, causing it to make a loud slapping noise and the boat to vibrate.

The Queen and Dr. Teed, who were in the cabin, thought we were sinking. Dr. Teed came on deck wringing his hands and begging me to save them. This made another distinct impression on me, concerning this man.

If the would-be saviour of mankind begged me to save him just because the ship's captain had let a single rope on a sailboat get loose then it was about time for me to get out of the Koreshan hell.

Still later, Queen Ordway told Captain Faber to go after clams at Clam Pass, near Naples. So many clams were gathered that the boat was overloaded and sank during a squall on the way back. The crew got safely ashore but Capt. Faber decided to become a farmer. He took up a homestead on Black Rock I.

Dr. Teed bought a sawmill and had it installed on the easterly end of Estero Island. Mr. Bill Towles and Hugh Seneff drilled a well for a supply of fresh water. Many fine pitch-pine trees, growing on father's land, were cut. Rafts were made of the logs. These were towed to the mill.

The lumber produced was brought back from Estero Island to Estero to build houses. Father helped at the sawmill. I was cook, baker and helper on anything they got stuck on. I was constantly busy.

Dr. Teed had promised me schooling. When two years had elapsed and there was still no school, nor teacher, I renewed my requests. A boy about my own age was appointed to give me lessons in book learning.

This I resented because in all practical ways I was miles ahead of him in learning. I could not stand the humiliation of studying under this boy whom I considered somewhat less than intelligent.

By this time I had decided that I could not agree with the religious doctrines presented by Dr. Teed. I had proved to myself that we lived not on the inside of the earth, but on the outside. I believed that I could prove this to any sane person even though I could not read or write.

I was sure that the success of Dr. Teed's astronomical claims and his

equipment set up on the beach near Naples were doubtful. I believed that the majority of his statements were untrue, that most of the figures he used were misquoted. I was sure that almost anyone with a little common sense could prove his discrepancies.

Furthermore, the treatment of his members, and the religious services that were required to participate in, I felt were disgusting. I decided to ask my father to let me go to Fort Myers to get a job and go to school.

Father said, "Well, son, if you want to start out on your own, I will not stand in your way. I have made such a mess of our own home affairs, go with God's blessing."

I took a small bundle of clothing and some food and started out on the sandy trail for Fort Myers, some 16 miles distant.

I found that a Mr. A.A. Gardner was operating a guava canning plant there and asked for a job. I got it the day after my arrival.

Driving a grey horse around the neighborhood. I bought guavas for the canning plant. I also was a general helper. During this time, I also went to school. Miss Minnie and all the Gardners were especially good to me for they knew how Dr. Teed had beaten father and me out of our home at Estero. Miss Minnie helped me with my lessons and I lived with them. It was my new home for a long time.

When the canning season was over, the Gardners gave me a small piece of ground on which to raise my own vegetables. I decided to grow California bell peppers. I wrote to Atlanta, Ga. for seed and growing instructions. The Gardners gave me their used potash for fertilizer. I planned to send my first crop of peppers to market. When they were ready, I picked and wrapped them in brightly colored paper, and packed them in bushel boxes. Then I sent my crop via express, to New York City.

I anxiously awaited the money I would receive. When it did arrive, I was pleasantly surprised to find the returns considerably larger than I had anticipated.

Later, I learned that I was the first person to ship peppers out of Lee County. I netted some \$250 which I saved. Later I used this money to attend business college.

When the Gardners installed the first electric light plant, I helped with the installation. I operated it half a night while going to school. I was now 17 years old. I had only three more years to finish the remaining seven grades of school. This was in 1896.

Realizing my education predicament, I consulted my teacher. I asked her if she would let me pass each grade as fast as I could pass the examinations. She agreed. I studied night and day, at work or play, completing many lessons ahead of time. I completed the ninth grade

ahead of the other students.

About this time, my father started suit against Mrs. Bertha Boomer and Mrs. A.G. Ordway, as trustees for the Koreshan Unity, and Dr. Cyrus R. Teed. This was September 25, 1907.

The suit dragged along until 1908, when it wound up in a compromise. Father got half of the wild land. He had made a deal with an attorney, Louis Hendry, to give him half of whatever he could get back from the Koreshan Unity.

When the Unity offered to give him back one-half of the unimproved land, or nothing, father finally accepted the offer. Father was financially unable to continue his suit against the Koreshan Unity. That was why he decided to accept the compromise rather than nothing.

Father ended up with 80 acres of his original 320. He gave me 40 acres and I later sold his 40 for him for \$25 an acre. This \$1,000 helped him start anew at the age of 72.

Father worked about one year at the Koreshan Unity after I left. He had produced much honey for the residents. Those in control would not even give him clothes or food suitable for his physical condition. He was 72 years old when he took a small bundle of his possessions, some matches and a little food and started off for Fort Myers. He traveled along the same sandy trail I had taken previously.

I found father a place to stay. He did some jobs for Louis Hendry, the attorney who had handled his case. Both of us had to start life over again from scratch, after some 17 years.

When I finished my ninth grade course, I decided to take a bookkeeping course at the Georgia-Alabama Business College in Macon. I borrowed \$250 from Miss Minnie Gardner using my 40 acres of land as collateral and off to college I went. This was on the 20th day of May, 1899.

This little booklet covers the twenty-six years from 1882 to 1908. I left Fort Myers to pursue my education in Macon. The booklet's purpose is to preserve the earliest history of Estero, so named by my father Gustave G. Damkohler on April 10, 1882.

My father and I had lived in Estero and Fort Myers 17 years, one month and 17 days when we divided our trail of life. He returned to Missouri on May 20, 1899. I headed for business college in Georgia.

As I look back these 85 years, it seems that Estero Creek had more birds, more fish and more alligators than I had ever seen before or since, anywhere in the world!

Capt. E.E. Damkohler
Fort Myers, Florida
January 20, 1967