

Riker's roadside attraction in the Santa Cruz Mountains RP 4-5-87



That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis

One of the greatest promoters of all time was William Edward Riker, who never let pass an opportunity for theatrics, preaching or just plain bamboozling the public to his way of thinking. Riker was a comparatively little known fanatic who described himself as "The Emancipator." He claimed that California "Is a white man's home: and declared he had the solution for the 'World's Perfect Government.'" He founded Holy City in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1919 under the doctrine of the "Perfect Christian Divine Science." Some wag said he "must have named it that because it was neither Christian, divine nor scientific."

There were other "religious" leaders around at that time such as George Baker who, also in 1919, founded the Peace Mission Movement and took on the name of Father Divine. Also of the same period was Aimee Semple McPherson, born in 1890, who settled in Los Angeles in 1918. She had many followers of her preaching and healing movement, which was called the International Church of the Four Square Gospel (her vision of heaven with four walls).

Riker, compared to his contemporaries, was a small fish in a big pond, though he attracted attention wherever he went and whatever he did. Born on Feb. 17, 1873, in Oakdale. When he was 19, Riker left for San Francisco, where he was to hold down a number of various jobs. He also became fascinated with spiritualism and began delving into mystical and religious subjects. Soon he was preaching his "divine" message on street corners and in assembly halls — ev-



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

Wooden Santa Claus statues are seen along the side of the road in Holy City.

erywhere and anywhere people would listen to him. Many did — especially women who were drawn to this young and good-looking messiah.

Riker had been married twice and when he married Lucille Jensen in 1914, there was no record of his having divorced his first two wives; one who had produced a son, Francois. Lucille was to become known as "Mother" Riker. At the headquarters for the "Divine Way" on the 600 block of Hayes Street in San Francisco, such businesses as a cobbler's shop transfer and storage company, printer's shop and general store were thriving and supporting Riker's quest for becoming the "Great Emancipator." Monies were being set aside into the acquisition of the future Holy City in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where Riker had visited ear-

lier.

Father Riker and Mother Lucille purchased land south of Los Gatos from Julia and Cyrus Hoult — which consisted of 30.25 acres for the sum of \$10 in July of 1919. This land bordered on the old San Jose-Santa Cruz road and was soon to be dubbed Holy City by Father Riker. Riker had gathered together 11 "disciples" in San Francisco who came to Holy City and, soon, hastily built shacks for these men were constructed. The Rikers settled into a two-story house atop a knoll above the newly formed "religious cult" community now about 30 strong. The inhabitants were separated from their spouses (what few there were) and, needless to say, no children were ever born at Holy City!

At this new "Jerusalem," disciples turned over all their worldly

possessions to Father Riker, who proclaimed that his New Kingdom was being built right over the other Jerusalem on the other side of the world. Riker published many pamphlets spouting his fanatical ideas and biased opinions such as his "philosophy that the white man and the Jewish race were supreme while the Negro and Orientals were the inferior races."

One of the pamphlets published told of the various businesses that Holy City was engaged in: garage, Super Service Station, restaurant and soda stand, auditorium, dance ballroom, lecture hall, motion pictures, notary public, zoo, grocery store, general store, butcher shop, printers, Free 18 seat Comfort Stations and radio station KFQU. Over the doorway to the dance hall was a sign that proclaimed: "Agreeable dancing is as near heaven as any

mortal will ever get."

During the 1920s, the Watsonville Cowboy Wranglers, a small group of musicians, appeared on the King City Radio Station. KFQU had been licensed in 1924 but was to be shut down in 1931 by the Federal Radio Commission saying: "The Commission held the station was not operated in the public interest and had frequently deviated from its assigned frequency." The people living near Holy City complained about Riker's ravings and bigoted talks on the radio programs!

In its heyday, Holy City was a fascinating stop for travelers on the old road with its circus-like atmosphere. They were confronted with signs, placards, loud music and Riker himself preaching his "perfect" philosophy to anyone who would listen — or, even if they didn't listen. You could eat, drink, put gas in your car or look at the penny peep shows, which were housed in miniature steepled churches. There was also a row of nine wooden Santa Claus statues along the side of the road on a low wall. There was a fountain in the middle labeled: "The fountain of health" with a sign saying "This water for sick people only!"

In November of 1931 the late Howard Sheerin, reporter for the Register-Pajaronian; attended a meeting of the "Fill-the-Hole Club," an organization of news writers of the Monterey Bay area, at Holy City.

The Fill-the-Hole Club comes from when advertisements are inserted into a newspaper, the left-over space is called the "hole" and a reporter's job is to "fill-the-hole."

The Rikers were the hospital hosts of the evening and Fred McPherson, managing editor of the Santa Cruz Sentinel, was the toastmaster. The Rikers were teetotalers so the punch bowl held a very bland offering and someone left the affair and returned to spike the punch. Needless to say, the Rikers were soon on their way home!

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