

'A lot of skulduggery'

A former neighbor recalls Holy City

By JOHN McNICHOLAS
Sentinel staff writer

3-31-91

"THERE WAS a lot of skulduggery that went on up there," said Connie Kidwell, who used to live off Greenwood Drive near Holy City. "I went to a couple of Father Riker's meetings and was at his very last meeting at Holy City. He was a fat man, and he'd sit up there and burp, with a little beanie on his head."

Kidwell, 71, lives in Campbell. She talked with many Holy City residents, she said, followers of cult leader William E. Riker who established his Holy Land in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1919.

"He was a lecherous old guy. All the ladies had to sleep with Father Riker first," Kidwell said. "I talked to one woman, she and her husband got in a fight, and she went to stay at Holy City."

"A woman there offered her a room," Kidwell recounted, "and told her, 'Now, if someone comes into the room at night, don't worry, it'll just be the Father.' Well, she barred the door with a dresser or something. She didn't want anything to do with that."

"I didn't think he was a good-looking man; he might have been when he was young. But he was nothing much to look at."

"The women, to be divine, they had to stay with Father Riker. And then they'd pick one woman, and for one week, if any of the men wanted a woman, she'd be the one."

"This one gal, the men just hated it when it was her week, because she was just so nasty," Kidwell said.

Riker "offered people a place to stay in the Depression," Kidwell said. "It was quite a thriving community at one time, a communistic kind of thing. They put all their money in one pot. They had a print shop, a barber shop, a bottling plant, a bar, a gas station and garage. They had a garden, and a community place to eat."

Not all that food came from the garden, Kidwell said. "They used to rustle cattle. They just stole it."

Kidwell said she used to buy gas and get her car fixed in Holy City, and used the post office there. "I knew a lot of the people. They weren't dummies. They were just ordinary people."

Kidwell even alleged that people who

disagreed with Riker or caused trouble "just up and disappeared."

She said she had a brush with the darker side of Holy City.

"I heard that Father Riker was going to have a Sunday meeting, and I thought, 'Boy, he hasn't had a meeting for a long time, I think I'll go.'"

"Well, I'd heard from one person that if you said your husband or wife wouldn't go along with things, he'd say, 'Don't worry about it. We'll take care of them and use the insurance money to rebuild Holy City.'"

"So I told him, 'Father Riker, I really like what you say, but I don't know if my husband will go along with this.'"

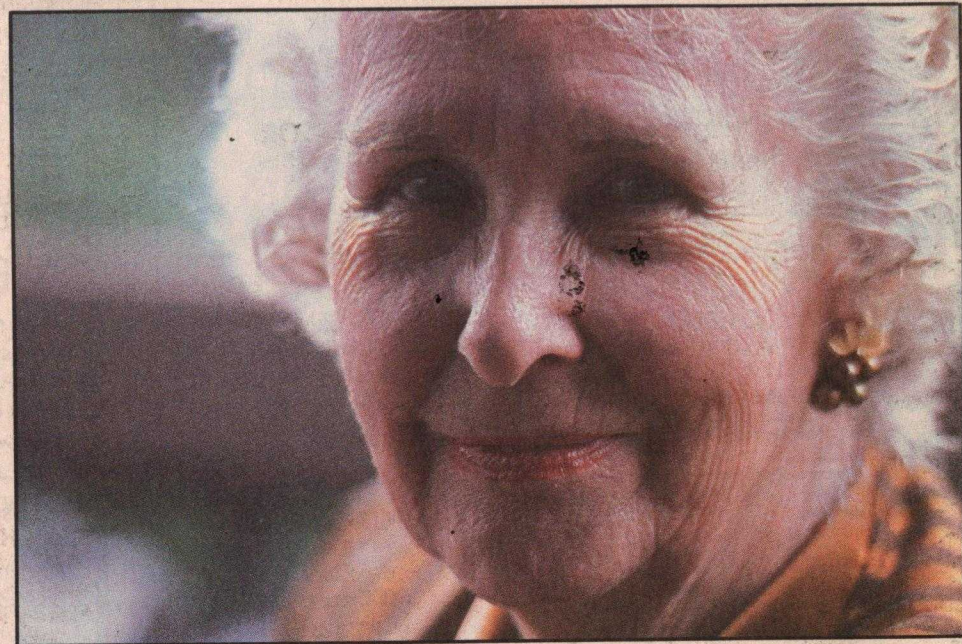
"He said, 'Don't worry; we'll take care of him and use the insurance money to rebuild Holy City.'"

What did Riker preach at the meetings she attended?

"By golly, it didn't make any sense whatever."

"My brother and I went to another meeting, before that last one — I wouldn't go alone. And Father Riker had stuff just all over the place: dolls' heads, walnut shells, clam shells."

"I said, 'Father Riker, what happens



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Connie Kidwell says Father Riker 'was a lecherous old guy.'

after you die?' He said, 'Let's go back and start from this,' and he'd pick up a walnut shell, and start talking about the walnut shell, and he never did answer my question."

"He'd say nothing you did was wrong because you were a part of God, and the Jews were going to rebuild Holy City, and that was about it."

She wasn't impressed.

"I got this story from a man who knew

Father Riker very well, an old crony of his. This man said that Father Riker, when he was a young fellow, he and two other men wanted to start a fake religion. They were going to start it up, and put that in a safe deposit box and open it after 10 years to show it was a fake."

"The other two backed out," she said, "but he went off to find out how to start a religion. He just got started, and he had the gift of gab."