

The Rise and Fall of Holy City

By John V. Young

Holy City, on the old Santa Cruz Highway a little north of the Summit, was a Johnny-come-lately to the ranks of ghost towns of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and is the only one that still looks like a movie version of a ghost town, lacking only tumbleweeds and a deserted saloon. Saloons it never had.

Here the perambulating post office of Patchen came to rest under a new name—after being resurrected in 1927. The town was flourishing when the "Ghost Towns" series was published, but died a few years later when another highway realignment left it high and dry .

Holy City was founded in 1918 by William E. "Father" Riker, a persistent candidate for governor, who advocated, among other things, white supremacy, communal living, and total abstinence. He gathered about him a small colony of followers, mostly elderly, who shared his views and were willing to share their meager savings as well.

Soon a gaggle of flimsy wooden structures embellished with garish signs sprang up on both sides of the highway to lure passing tourists to buy gasoline, food, souvenirs and the like. It was a welcome resting place for motorists with boiling radiators stuck in the bumper-to-bumper traffic that often jammed the highway on a weekend.

Proclaiming that it was "headquarters for the world's most perfect government" (namely, Father Riker in person), Holy City soon acquired a weekly newspaper, a radio station, a restaurant, a service station, and rest rooms. Riker also ran a mineral water business on the side.

But when Highway 17 by-passed Holy City in 1940, it declined rapidly. A few tumbledown buildings on one side of the old highway face the still-active post office in an abandoned store on the other side, but that is all that remains of the once-thriving highway stop today.

According to Historic Spots in California, Riker stayed on into the 1960s and surprised everyone by joining the Catholic Church at the age of 93.

Sources

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