

Holy City: Riker's Roadside Attraction in the Santa Cruz Mountains — Part II

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That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis

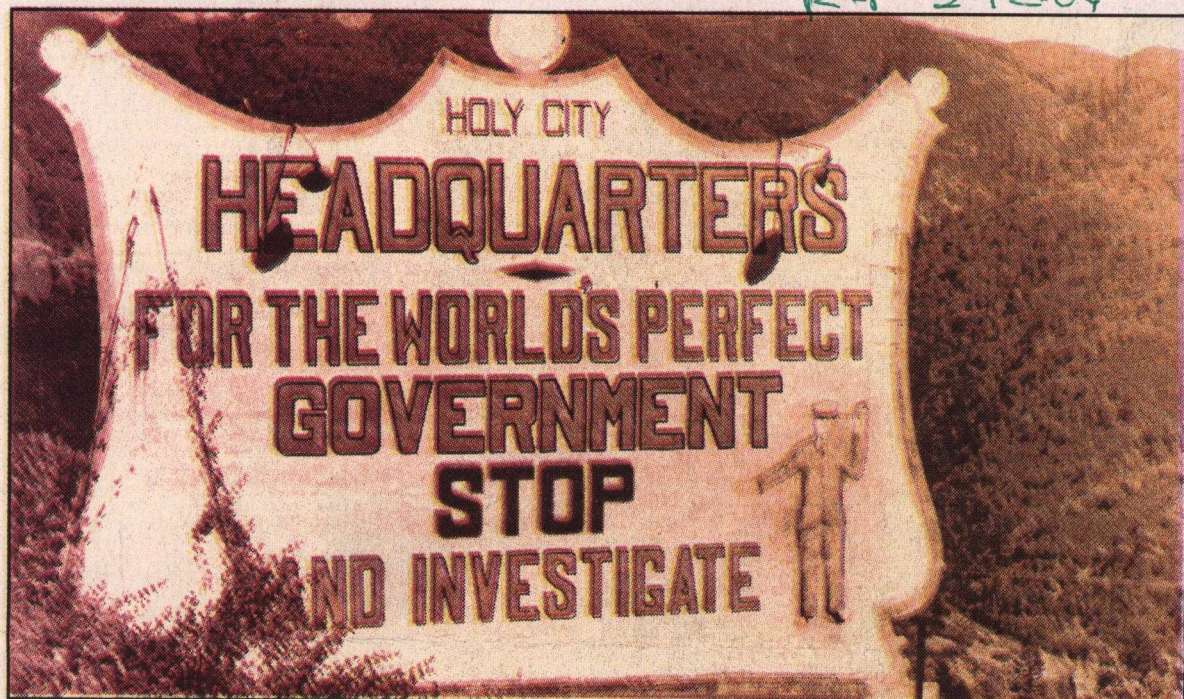
"Through his perfect form of government, crime, wars, strikes and depressions will be abolished. His system does everything without any trouble. Be sure and read all of his literature, where everything is explained in simple language, in nugget form." — from Father Riker's 1939 pamphlet when he was running for Governor of California.

Father Riker ran for Governor four times and, fortunately, lost by a landslide! The 20-page pamphlet entitled "The Emancipator" contained many illustrations, some very crude. One of the illustrators in the many pamphlets published at Holy City was Basil G. Wolverton, who later became an illustrator for "Mad" magazine.

On May 4, 1927, a post office had opened in Holy City with Father Riker as the first postmaster, naturally, and this was a favorite place for mail around Christmas. The post office closed down in 1986. Riker was in and out of trouble most of his life, usually with auto accidents, but bragged that he was never convicted. He liked large black Cadillacs and also had one painted red, white and blue. According to William Sheehy of San Jose, Riker would park in front of the post office and use a loud speaker to spout his own brand of philosophy trying to get people to join his sect in Holy City and join his "Happy Kingdom."

In 1942, the Federal Bureau of Investigation brought Father Riker to trial for sedition. He had been writing letters to Hitler and publishing very questionable pamphlets. He was charged with calling Adolph Hitler "a second Martin Luther," urging congressmen to make peace with the Axis, and distributing bigoted propaganda. He fired his first attorney and hired Melvin Belli of San Francisco for the sum of \$7,500, \$2,500 to be paid up front and the balance at the end of the trial.

Riker was acquitted and chastised. And when Belli tried to col-



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

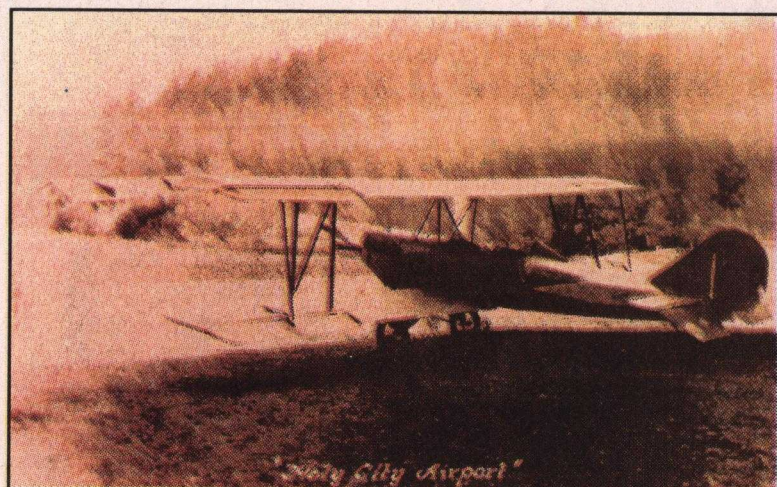
Holy City headquarters sign.

lect the balance of his fee, he was told "My son, I shall reward you with a seat in my Kingdom in Heaven and that is far more emolument than a paltry \$5,000, mere money." The attorney had to sue for the money and won in May of 1943.

In the Riker's home, on one wall there were pictures of Mother Lucille, Marilyn Monroe, George Washington, Adolph Hitler and Abraham Lincoln — quite a diverse collection! Started in the 1930s, Highway 17 opened officially from Santa Cruz to Los Gatos in 1940; America entered World War II in 1941 and on Dec. 1, 1942, gas rationing went into effect and Holy City began its downward slide.

Mother Lucille died in 1950, and, in 1956, Maurice Kline, a director from Hollywood, became Riker's partner. A year later, a fire swept through a large hall at Holy City. Soon after, Robert Clogher, involved with the National Nudist Council, wanted to make the area a nudist colony, but Riker tossed him out and Kline bought out Riker's interest in Holy City. In 1959, Kline had a number of the buildings, including the radio station and observatory, razed. Another fire swept through several of the remaining buildings in that same year. In 1960, the H.C. Development Company of San Jose purchased the area, which then covered 140 acres.

It was in 1969 that Father Will-



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

Holy City Airport.

iam Riker was sent to Agnew State Hospital because of his extreme age (96) and inability to get along with anyone in private rest homes. He died on Dec. 3 of that year. He, along with Mother Lucille and three women "disciples," are buried at the I.O.O.F. Cemetery in Santa Cruz; there are markers on the women's graves but none on Riker's. Nothing was heard of his son after the 1950s.

Now, Holy City is virtually a ghost town except for Stanton's Holy City Art Glass Company and Riker's old house, severely damaged in the 1989 earthquake. Holy City was often referred to as a religious cult but that was certainly a misnomer. Riker's "teachings" were more of his strange and

queer philosophy than anything else. A church was never built in Holy City. The "disciples" he had gathered around him were mostly all men; they received no pay, just room and board and did all the menial jobs around the property. And what was Riker doing? Taking in over \$100,000 a year in the organization's heyday but the money seemed to spill out just as quickly as it came in!

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The book "Holy City — Riker's Roadside Attraction in the Santa Cruz Mountains" (by Betty Lewis) is available at Crossroads Books, Watsonville.

Betty Lewis, a local historian, is a contributing columnist to the Register-Pajaronian.