

Karen T. Borchers/MediaNews

Tom Stanton stands in front of a religious drawing inside his glass studio. Holy City, a near ghost town off Highway 17, is up for sale, all 150 acres, for \$11 million. Tom Stanton rents one of the last surviving buildings, where he has a glass-blowing business.

# Holy City on the market again

By JUDY PETERSON  
MEDIANEWS

For sale: 140 acres of pristine real estate located in the hills above Los Gatos. Asking price \$11 million. The ad is a fake, but the fact that Holy City is for sale is true.

Realtor Chuck Nunnally of Alain Pinel says, "There are anywhere from six to nine parcels of raw land that are spectacular. Some are huge."

## HOLY CITY

This is the second time in a year Holy City's owners have tried to sell the property.

"It was listed for six or seven months, but the sale fell through," Nunnally said.

Now practically a ghost town, Holy City was once a bustling community founded in 1919 by the controversial "Father" William Riker.

Today, Riker's home is rented out, and the Holy City Art Glass Studio occupies a 3/4-acre plot. That's all that's left of the old community. Even so, studio owner Tom Stanton says, "It's not lonely up here at all. I get people stopping by all the time. The Dalí Lama came by here once."

Last year, Hollywood star Courtney Cox and her husband David Arquette hired Stanton to help them scout locations for the movie "Tripper."

"We had a great time," Stanton said.

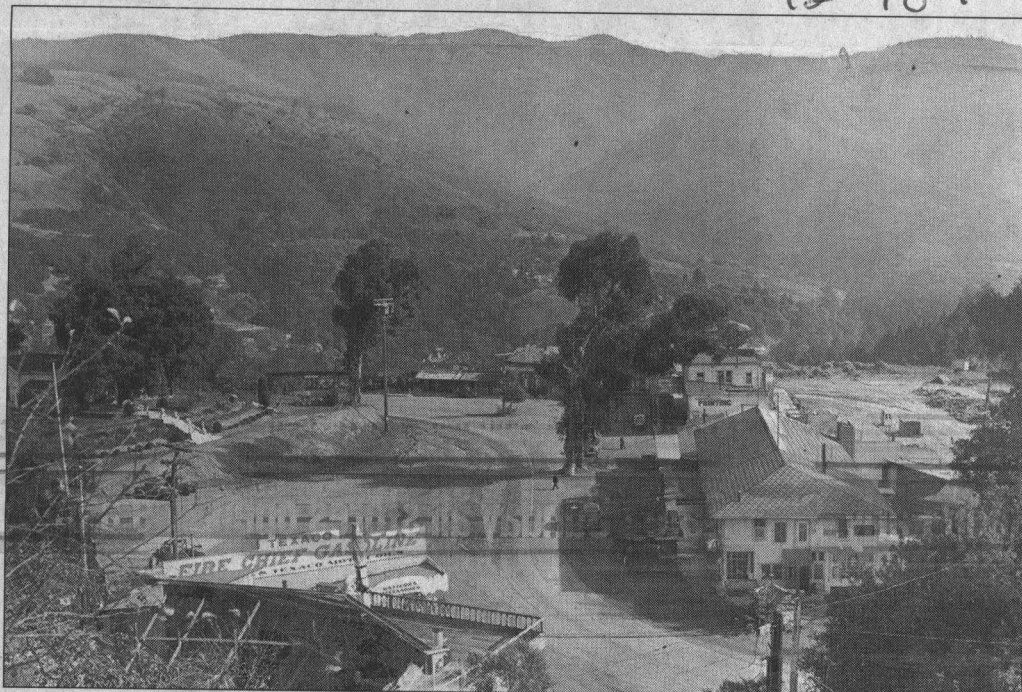
Stanton, who has become an expert on all things Holy City, says Riker was a "full-on nutcase." In her book "Holy City: Riker's Roadside Attractions," historian Betty Lewis describes Riker as a bigamist, a con man and a Nazi sympathizer. He was also the leader of a religious cult called the Perfect Christian Divine Way.

All that aside, Riker built a little city that was a popular stopping-off spot on the Old Santa Cruz Highway between San Jose and Santa Cruz.

There were many reasons to stop. In its heyday, the 1920s and '30s, Holy City offered travelers food and drink, free "public comfort stations," a barber shop, cobbler, full-service gas station and a zoo.

There was also a post office. During the Christmas holidays, people would mail their cards and packages from Holy City just to get the postmark. The post office closed in 1986.

Holy City was also known for the row of Santa Claus statues that graced the entrance to what Lewis describes as a "strange place."



MediaNews file

Holy City, seat of the 'world's perfect government,' is shown Jan. 3, 1938. The home of Father William E. Riker, founder of Holy City, is at the upper left of the photo.

According to Lewis and Stanton, Holy City started to decline in 1940 when Highway 17 bypassed the roadside attraction.

"I call it the Bates Motel syndrome," Stanton said. "Riker had a motel up there, but it was always empty after Highway 17 opened. The traffic went somewhere else."

To make matters worse, gasoline rationing took effect in 1942, sending Holy City into a downward spiral.

Between 1957 and 1959, much of Holy City was leveled by a series of fires. Arson was suspected but never proved.

The current owners purchased Holy City in 1960. At the time, Leo Pellicciotti and his partners wanted to turn it into a park.

"It was going to be a picnic park like Blackberry Farm," he said. "We got the thing all ready to go, and we put a fence around it for the entrance."

They decided to paint the fence purple.

"The neighbors went out of their gourd. They thought we were going to have a hippie encampment."

Pellicciotti said the neighbors protested to the Santa Clara County Planning Commission, causing him and his partners to lose their enthusiasm for the project.

"I wish we would have done it," he said. "I think we would have had a real nice thing there. It's a beautiful place."

Pellicciotti says the Holy City development comes under the Williamson Act, which means some homes can be built if the rest of the land is reserved for agricultural or open space uses. In exchange, the owners get lower property tax bills.

"If somebody buys it, they'll find out what they can do," Pellicciotti concluded. "I think Los Gatos should buy it for a park."