

## Holy City was anything but

### “Father” Riker’s fabled utopian colony in the Santa Cruz Mountains was built on racism and misogyny

By Geoffrey Dunn

**W**

With its madcap placards, penny peep shows and a row of kitschy Santa Claus statues flanking a “Fountain of Youth,” Holy City, nestled along the Old Los Gatos-Santa Cruz Highway near what is now Redwood Estates, provided a bizarre and titillating spectacle for those traveling through the Santa Cruz Mountains in the decades spanning the two world wars.

Founded by “Father” William E. Riker in 1919, Holy City was one of numerous utopian colonies that sprang up in California in the early decades of the last century — and it lasted longer than most. It wasn’t until 1966, when Riker joined the Catholic Church at the age of 93, that his vainglorious experiment in self-government ended in ignominy.

An eccentric, charismatic figure, Riker claimed to have invented the “World’s Perfect Government.” In reality, his colony was founded on racism and hatred. He proclaimed “the gentle white man is king of the

entire world” and viewed blacks and Asians as “inferior creatures,” vowing to “keep them in their place.”

Riker’s racism was actually not that far from the mainstream of California’s xenopho-

**Holy City, nestled along the Old Los Gatos-Santa Cruz Highway near what is now Redwood Estates, provided a bizarre and titillating spectacle.**

bic politics at the time. During the mid-1920s, Ku Klux Klan klaverns formed throughout the region. Anti-Japanese movements were followed by those directed at Filipinos and Mexicans. By 1930, politicians from both major parties were running on “Keep California White” slates. Indeed, Riker ran unsuccessfully

for governor of California four times between 1939 and 1950.

**B**orn in the Central Valley in 1873, Riker set out on his own for San Francisco at the age of 19. Never establishing a trade, he took a series of odd jobs and began dabbling in spirituality and faith healing. During his twenties, he took to standing on street corners, preaching his “divine message” and proclaiming himself the “new messiah.”

By the end of World War I, San Francisco authorities were closing in on Riker (who by then was married to his third wife, “Mother Lucille”), and he decided to move his roughly three-dozen followers to the wilds of the Santa Cruz Mountains, where he purchased

(Above) View of Holy City in its heyday in the early 1930s. It was a primary road stop on the old Los Gatos-Santa Cruz Highway.

Photos: Geoffrey Dunn Collection.



nearly 200 acres of hillside property and commenced with building his colony of the "Perfect Christian Divine Way."

Within a few years, Holy City boasted some 200 residents—the vast majority of them men—not to mention a highly profitable service station, dance hall, restaurant, ice cream parlor, commercial radio station, bakery, airport and print shop.

In 1928, Riker, still married to "Mother Lucille," became involved with the notorious Evelyn Rosencrantz, twice an inmate at San Quentin. Rosencrantz, a dark beauty with dreams of becoming an aviator, was soon selected by Riker to star in a film he intended to produce in Hollywood called *The Perfect Woman*.

But Riker developed cold feet about the project and Rosencrantz's various ambitions. She sued him for \$500,000 for breach of promise. The suit was later dismissed, but not before Rosencrantz had publicly charged Riker with bigamy and even murder.

Riker was always one step ahead of the law. In 1942, the FBI charged him with sedition after he wrote letters of admiration to Adolph Hitler. In a celebrated trial in San Francisco, Riker was defended by the young Melvin Belli, who convinced the jury to acquit his eccentric client.

The onset of World War II marked the decline of Holy City, as the completion of Highway 17 bypassed Riker's once lucrative gas station and auto repair shop. By the time Riker sold Holy City in the 1960s, the colony had dwindled to a handful of aging followers.

Riker was often dubbed the "free love king" by California newspapers, but there was an undercurrent of forced sexuality at Holy City, as Riker was later accused of demanding that female members sleep with him and other male converts throughout his tenure.

Connie Kidwell, who lived nearby Holy City in the 1940s, remembered Riker as a "treacherous old guy. The women, if they wanted to be 'divine,' had to stay with Father Riker." Then, she recalled, they would be passed on to other men for a week at a time.

Converting to Catholicism in 1966 Riker claimed "to have been living a celibate life for the last ten years." He died three years later at the age of 97. He is buried in an unmarked grave at the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Santa Cruz.

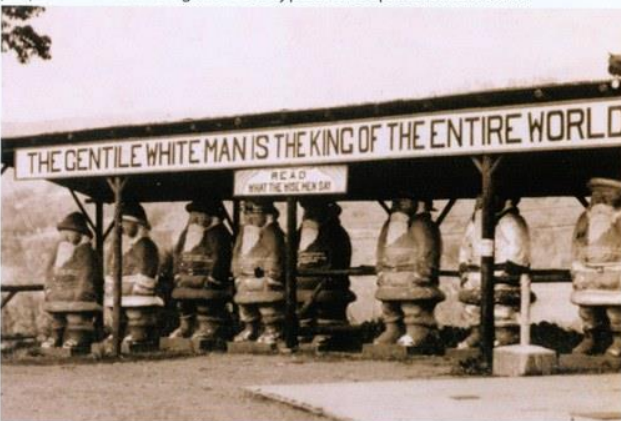
*Santa Cruz filmmaker Geoffrey Dunn has written and co-directed nine films, including *Dollar a Day*, *Ten Cents a Dance*; *Chinese Gold*; *Mi Vida*; *Miss...or Myth?*; *Maddalena Z*; and *Calypso Dreams*. He is the author of *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart*.*



Campaign sign announcing: "Father Riker: The Only Man Who Can Save California from Going Plum to Hell."



A rare interior view of one of Riker's buildings. His ornate design and preponderance of slogans were typical of Depression Era cults.



A row of kitschy Santa Claus statues welcome visitors to Holy City.

Photo Courtesy Elizabeth McKeon