

Holy City: Riker's roadside attraction nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains



That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series. The second part will run in next Thursday's edition.

One of the greatest promoters of all time was William Edward Riker, who never let pass an opportunity for theatrics, preaching or just plain bamboozling the public to his way of thinking.

Riker was a comparatively little-known fanatic who described himself as "The Emancipator." He claimed that California "Is a white man's home" and declared he had the solution for the "World's Perfect Government." He founded Holy City in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1919 under the doctrine of the "Perfect Christian Divine Science." Some wag said he "must have named it that because it was neither Christian, divine nor scientific, and if improved what could it have been originally?"

There were other "religious" leaders around at that time such as George Baker, who, also in 1919, founded the Peace Mission Movement and took on the name of Father Divine. Also of the same period was Aimee Semple McPherson, born in 1890, who settled in Los Angeles in 1918. She had many followers of her preaching and healing movement, which was called the International Church of the Four Square Gospel (her vision of heaven with four walls).

Riker, compared to his contemporaries, was a small fish in a big pond, though he attracted attention wherever he went and with whatever he did. Born on Feb. 17, 1873 in Oakdale, when he was 19 he left for San Francisco, where he was to hold down a number of various jobs. He also became fascinated with spiritualism and began delving into mystical and religious subjects. Soon he was preaching his "divine" message on street corners and in assembly halls — everywhere and anywhere that people would listen to him. Many did, especially women, who were drawn to this young and good-looking messiah.

Riker was married twice and when he married Lucille Jensen in 1914, there was no record of his having divorced his first two wives; one had produced a son, Francois. Lucille was to become known as "Mother" Riker. At the headquarters for the "Divine Way" in the 600 block of Hayes Street in San Francisco, such businesses as a cobbler's shop transfer and storage company, printer's shop and general store were thriving and supporting Riker's quest for becoming the "Great Emancipator." Monies were being set aside into the acquisition of the future Holy City in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where Riker had visited earlier.

"Father" Riker and "Mother" Lucille purchased land south of Los Gatos from Julia and Cyrus Hoult consisting of 30.25 acres for the sum of \$10 in July of 1919. This land bordered on the old San Jose-Santa Cruz road and was soon to be dubbed Holy City by "Father" Riker. Riker had gathered together 11 "disciples" in San Francisco who came to Holy City and, soon, hastily built shacks for these men were erected. The Rikers settled into a two-story house atop a knoll above the newly formed "religious cult" community which was now about 30 strong. The inhabitants were separated from their spouses

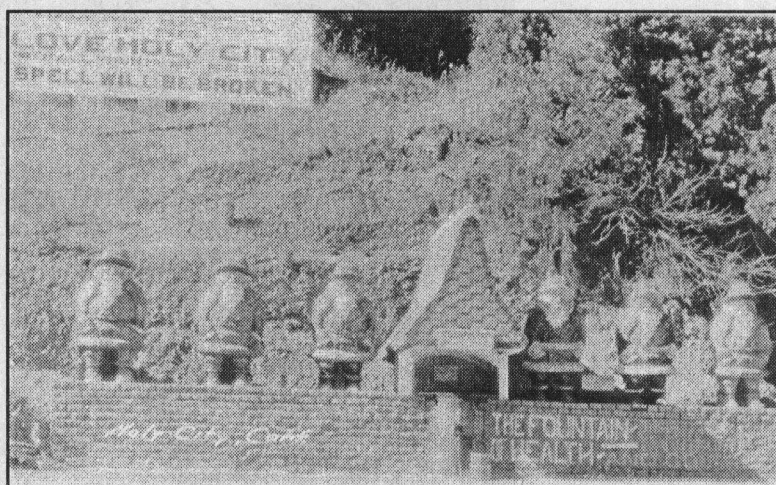


Courtesy of Betty Lewis

"Father" and "Mother" Riker.

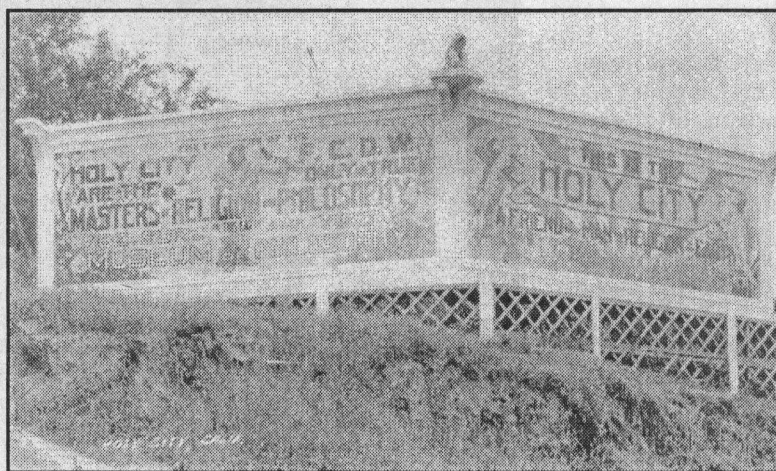
In its heyday, Holy City was a fascinating stop for travelers on the old road with its circus-like atmosphere. They were confronted with signs, placards, loud music and Riker himself preaching his "perfect" philosophy to anyone who would listen — or, even if they didn't listen.

One of the pamphlets published told of the various businesses that Holy City was engaged in: "Garage, Super Service Station, Restaurant and Soda Stand, Auditorium, Dance Ballroom, Lecture Hall, Motion Pictures, Notary Public, Zoo, Grocery Store, General Store, Butcher Shop, Printers, Free 18-seat Comfort Stations and radio station KFQU." Over the doorway to the dance hall was a sign that proclaimed: "Agreeable dancing is as near heaven as any mortal will



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

Santa Claus statues at Holy City from a post card.



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

The Holy City sign circa 1930s.

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At this new "Jerusalem," disciples turned over all their worldly possessions to "Father" Riker, who proclaimed that his new kingdom was being built right over the other Jerusalem on the other side of the world. Riker published many pamphlets spouting his fanatical ideas and biased opinions such as his "philosophy that the white man and the Jewish race were supreme while the Negro and Orientals were the inferior races."

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During the 1920s, the Watsonville Cowboy Wranglers, a small group of musicians, appeared on the King City Radio Station. KFQU had been licensed in 1924 but was to be shut down in 1931 by the Federal Radio Commission, saying: "The commission held the station was not operated in the public interest and had frequently deviated from its assigned frequency." The people living near Holy City complained about Riker's ravings and bigoted talks on the radio programs.



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The Holy City sign circa 1930s.

In its heyday, Holy City was a fascinating stop for travelers on the old road with its circus-like atmosphere. They were confronted with signs, placards, loud music and Riker himself preaching his "perfect" philosophy to anyone who would listen — or, even if they didn't listen. You could eat, drink, gas your car or look at the penny peep shows, which were housed in miniature steepled churches and offered "temptations" such as the crudely made legs of "Queen Elizabeth of Egypt!" There was also a row of nine wooden Santa Claus statues along the side of the road on a low wall. There was a fountain in the middle labeled "The fountain of health" with a sign saying, "This water for sick people only!"

In November of 1931, the late Howard Sheerin, reporter for the

Register-Pajaronian, attended a meeting of the "Fill-the-Hole Club," an organization of news writers of the Monterey Bay area, at Holy City. The Rikers were the hospital hosts of the evening and Fred McPherson, managing editor of the Santa Cruz Sentinel, was the toastmaster. The Rikers were teetotalers, so the punch bowl held a very bland offering and someone left the affair and returned to spike the punch. Needless to say, the Rikers were soon on their way home! The "Fill-the-Hole Club" comes from when advertisements are inserted into a newspaper, the leftover space is called the "hole" and a reporter's job is to "fill-the-hole."

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