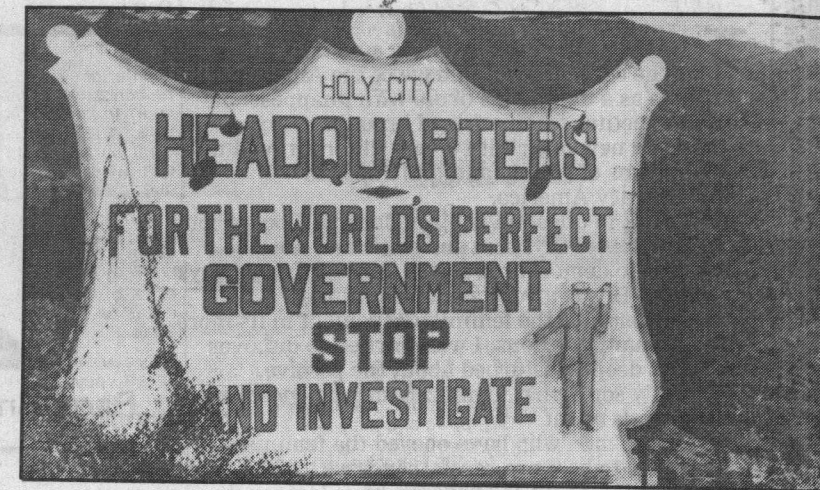


Holy City



'Father' William Riker's dream crumbled away

By BETTY LEWIS
Special to the Sentinel

"I came into this world to introduce a New World within our present world. It will be a new world of Supreme Law and Order, harmoniously working. It is also known as the Jew and Gentile New World." — "Father" William Riker.

WILLIAM E. "FATHER" Riker never passed up an opportunity for theatrics, preaching or just plain bamboozling the public.

Considering today's world of religious madmen, media crackpots and extremist cults, 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 near what is now Redwood Estates in the Santa Cruz mountains in 1919, under the doctrine of the "Perfect Christian Divine Science."

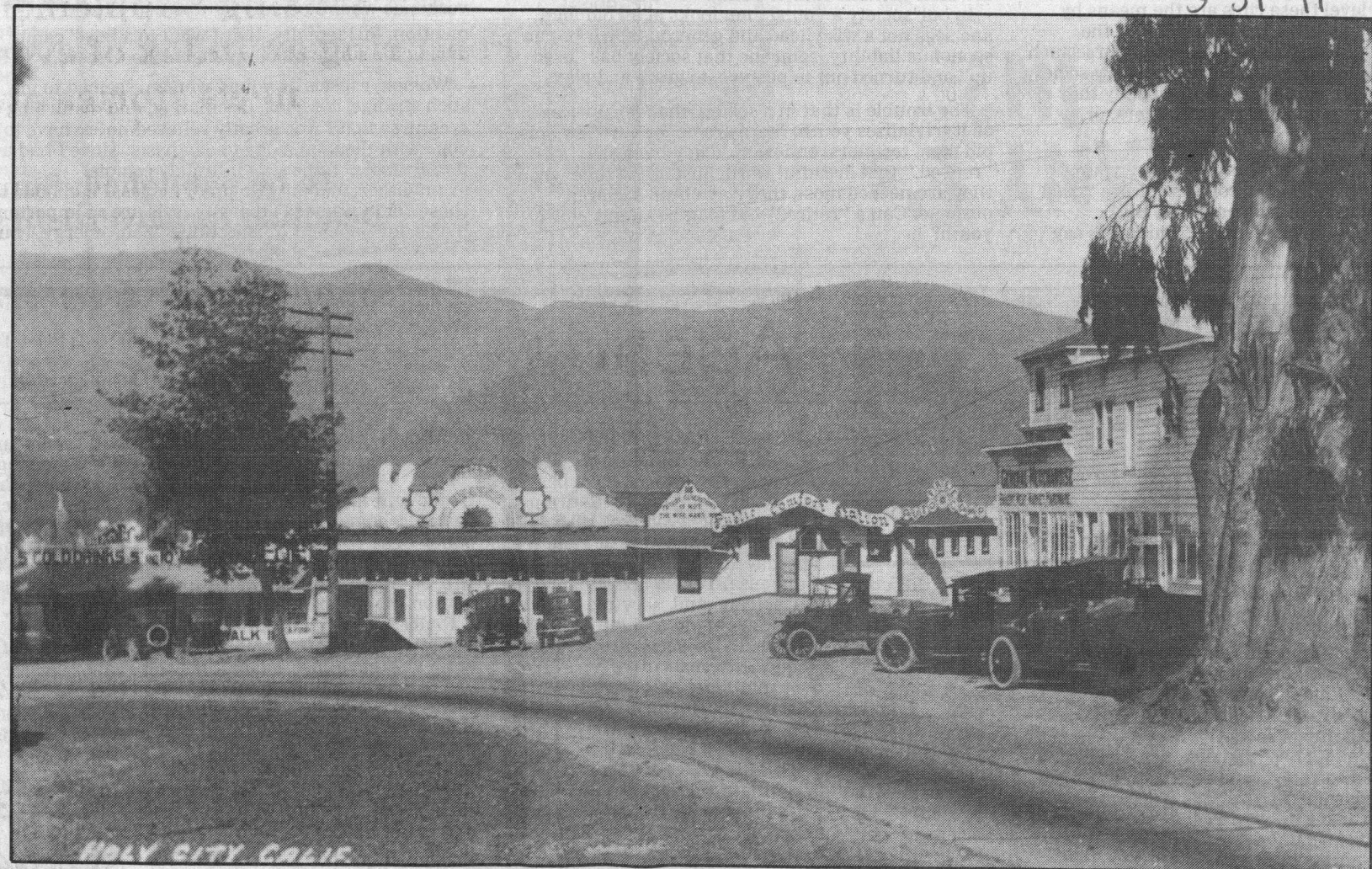
IN ITS HEYDAY, Holy City was a fascinating stop for travelers on the old Santa Cruz-San Jose road. They were confronted with signs, placards, loud music and then Riker himself.

You could eat, drink, gas your car or for penny, look at the peep shows housed in miniature steeped churches, or "temptations" such as the crudely made legs of Queen Elizabeth of Egypt — whoever she was.

Compared to his contemporaries Father Devine and Aimee Semple McPherson, Riker was a small fish in the big pond of religious crackpots. But he attracted attention wherever he went and whatever he did.

He was born Feb. 17, 1873, in Oakdale. His family soon moved to Oroville where he abandoned school while in the fourth grade. When William was 17, his father died, and the teen-age boy became head of the household which included his mother, three sisters, a brother.

Two years later, his mother remarried, and Riker left for greener pastures in San Francisco. There he



A sign on the old San Jose-Santa Cruz road welcomed visitors to Holy City, left, where they could pay a penny to see peep shows and 'temptations' housed in miniature churches, below.

held several jobs, became fascinated with spiritualism and began to delve into...



'Father' William Riker
The 'King of all Wise Men'

subjects.

SOON HE was preaching his "divine" message on street corners and in assembly halls — anywhere people would listen. Many did — especially women, who were drawn to this young and good-looking "messiah."

His message promised his listeners a state free from "graft, crime, poverty and labor troubles." He promised much and delivered little.

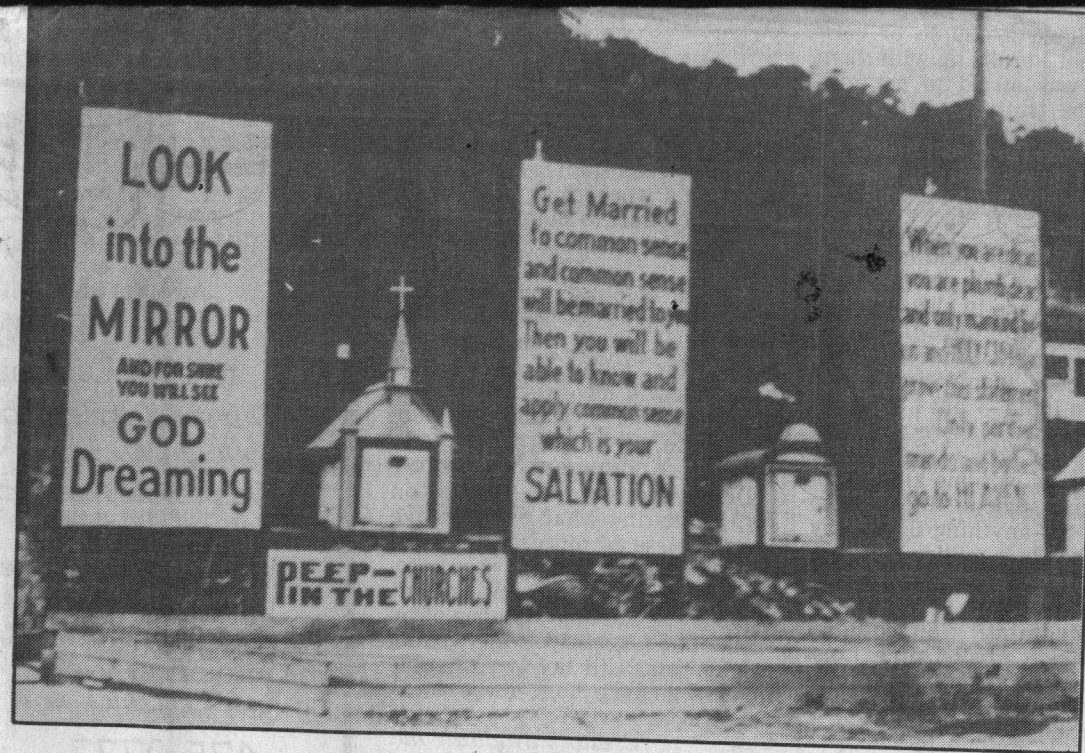
Riker moved up and down the West Coast, and while in Colorado Springs, he married a woman by the name of Marene. While married to her, he married Bessie Zetty in December 1907, and with her had a son (Francois Villon Riker) in Oakland on Sept. 15, 1909.

From the San Francisco Chronicle: "Fearing the abduction of her 4-month-old child at the hands of the father who deceived her ... by marrying her without obtaining a legal separation from his first wife (Marene), Bessie Zetty Riker appealed to the police for protection against W.E. Riker, a so-called divine healer, who is believed to be in Redding, Shasta County. ..." In 1914 in Omaha, Neb., Riker married Lucille Jensen, later to be known as "Mother" Riker. It's unclear from the records if or when he divorced his first wives.

BACK in San Francisco, he and Lucille gathered 11 "disciples," and all lived at 674 Hayes St. These were mostly down-and-out men who were looking for a leader. They were given room and board but no pay. Any worldly goods they had went to Riker. A cobbler's shop, print shop, transfer and storage and a general store were begun.

In September 1918, Riker, I.B. Fisher and Anna Schramm, secretary, incorporated The Christian Divine Way. Later, "Way" was changed to "Science."

The Rikers bought 30.25 acres of land south of Los Gatos for \$10 from Julia and Cyrus Holt in 1919. The



Photos from Betty Lewis collection

land bordered the old San Jose-Santa Cruz road and was soon to be dubbed "Holy City" by Riker. His drayage business was soon dragging material — much of it left from the 1906 earthquake and the Panama Pacific Exposition — from San Francisco to Holy City.

"Disciples" built shacks for themselves. The men and women (very few) lived separately. No children were reported born at Holy City.

A two-story house was built for the Rikers atop a

knoll overlooking the new "kingdom" — where now about 30 lived and worked.

MANY PEOPLE who traveled the old road remember the row of Santa Claus statues that lined one side of the street. When Riker was asked why, he said "Santa Claus is generous. Everybody should be generous with money, if they have it. We are generous with ideas."

Please see **HOLY CITY** — D3

up."

five hours a week with their little bro-

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Holy City

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And was he ever. He spouted philosophy on the subjects of women, government, ethnic groups and life in general to anyone who would listen. The small settlement sported a radio station, service station, restaurant, dance hall, lecture hall, zoo, general store, ice cream parlor, butcher shop, bakery, barber shop, printer and an airport.

There was a garage to house Riker's Cadillacs, for which he had a penchant. He was caught speeding on many occasions, and once hit a pedestrian.

Riker produced and sold pamphlets and postcards, most of them crude and in bad taste.

Some pamphlets backed his four unsuccessful tries for governor, in 1939, 1942, 1946, 1950.

RIKER WAS in and out of trouble with the law, but never convicted. From the San Francisco Chronicle, Oct. 18, 1921: "For more than three years the cult has been the object of investigation by the police, the state board of charities and corrections and the Department of Justice, but the nature of the complaints has until the present time left the investigators handicapped in taking any legal action against its practices."

Evelyn Rosencrantz of Los Angeles sued Riker for breach of promise in 1928; she claimed he had promised to star her in a movie. The case was dropped.

The FBI brought Riker to trial in 1942 for sedition.

He had been writing letters to Hitler and others. He eventually hired San Francisco attorney Melvin Belli for the sum of \$7,500; \$2,500 to be paid up front and the balance of \$5,000 at the end of the trial, according to an autobiography by Belli.

Riker was acquitted, but when Belli tried to collect the balance 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." Belli had to sue for the money, and won in May of 1943.

THE NEW Highway 17 was opened in 1940; gas rationing went into effect Dec. 1, 1942, and Holy City started its decline.

"Mother" Lucille, his wife for more than 30 years, died in 1950. In 1956 Riker acquired a partner — motion picture executive Maurice Kline — who was proclaimed the new "Jewish Messiah" of Holy City. He also became the owner of half of Holy City thanks to the Father's largess (which he later regretted).

On the night of June 17, 1957, a large hall at Holy City was reduced to rubble by fire. Later that same year, Kline purchased the other half of the now-180 acres for \$64,000.

Kline razed a number of the buildings in 1959. Later that year, another fire nearly leveled the rest of Holy City. In 1960, the property was purchased by the H.C. Development Co. of San Jose, with plans to de-

velop the property. Holy City was on its way to becoming a ghost town.

Riker, self-proclaimed "King of all Wise Men," left his "New Jerusalem" in 1966 when he joined the Catholic church at age 93.

"I've spent the last 40 or 50 years in great meditation," a Santa Cruz Sentinel story quoted him as saying at the time. He had a "vision regarding Catholic nuns," he said, and "it dawned on me they were the spiritual wives of the Savior."

"Virtually all my great endeavors of the past have led to this. I am going to work to bring back all Christian people into the Catholic church," he said.

He died Dec. 3, 1969 at Agnews State Hospital and was buried at the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Santa Cruz. He was 96 years old.

Driving down the curving road into Holy City from the Redwood Estates exit on Highway 17, you would find little left of this once flourishing "circus/carnival" town, a few tumble-down wooden buildings, an empty post-office building and several decaying walls — a far cry from when Holy City was at its zenith, and Father Riker was urging people to come to his "perfect kingdom."

Watsonville resident Betty Lewis's research was sponsored by a research grant from the Sourissequ Academy at San Jose State University, a society for studying local history.