

The Holy City of Father Riker

by Sarah Weston

Holy City

In the 1920s and '30s, near the summit of the old two-lane Santa Cruz Highway, travelers often stopped at a peculiar landmark. Nine wooden Santa Claus statues perched impassively in a row, like oversized lawn gnomes or Chinese terra cotta warriors. Many of the curious hurried on quickly upon reading the explanatory sign which declared "The White Man Is the World's Santa Claus," or another which proclaimed "Holy City — Headquarters for the World's Perfect Government."

Holy City was a quirky, ethereal little community, the brainchild and masterwork of one William E. Riker. Riker, aka "Father" Riker, "the Emancipator" or "the Comforter," was a self-professed showman with a fourth grade education who proudly declared he'd read no more than three books in his life.

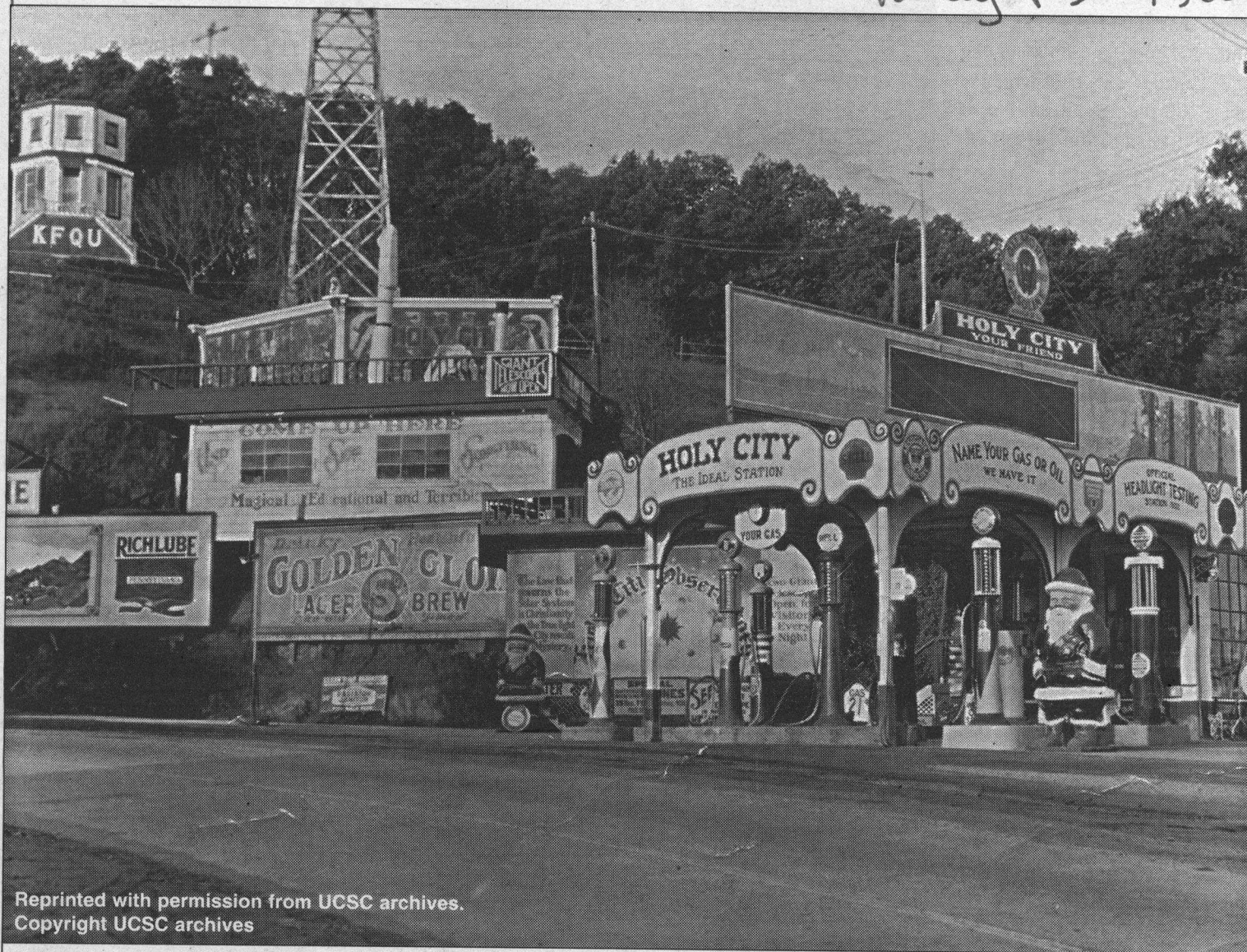
Riker was the founder of a doctrine called the Perfect Christian Divine Way, and Holy City, the earthly kingdom he built for himself and his little band of followers.

Riker preached a muddled, frequently incoherent jumble of born-again mysticism, white supremacy, celibacy and temperance. His religious epiphany came during an exile in Canada, where he had fled to escape bigamy charges.

An Early Calling

Riker had always been interested in spiritualism, and as a young man had made his living as a palmist and a mind reader.

He returned to the United States as a street corner preacher, accumulating a handful of disciples with whom he came to San Francisco. Together they began to fill their communal coffers by printing, storage, shoemaking and, not least, acceding to Riker's demands that they turn over all their possessions to him.



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In 1919, Riker purchased 30 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains for the sum of \$10. He bought left-over materials from the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915 — along with those collected from demo companies after the 1906 earthquake — and began to build Holy City.

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The zoo, which claimed to be "The World's Most Exotic Collection of Animals," contained mostly cats and dogs, one spray-painted bobcat, and a

donated monkey who was too ill-tempered to be kept by its owner.

Not a Church in Sight

Everywhere around Holy City were signs and billboards with such invocations as "See Us If You're Contemplating Marriage, Suicide or Crime," "Agreeable Dancing Is As Near Heaven As Any Mortal Will Ever Get" and "The Only True Masters of Religion and Philosophy."

Conspicuously absent, however, was anything resembling a church. While Riker embossed an image of Jesus on his checks, he relied on inner vision rather than scripture to fuel his rantings. He would often drive around town in one of his red, white and blue

Cadillacs, loudspeaker on top blaring his jeremiads.

He also churned out various pamphlets in the same vein, some of which were illustrated by a follower who later moved on, appropriately enough, to *Mad* magazine.

Riker was certainly grandiose to the point of lunacy. On his wall, next to portraits of Washington and Lincoln, were others of Hitler and Marilyn Monroe.

He built a movie studio and airport at Holy City; however neither was ever used. He sold "holy water" for car radiators as well as real estate on the moon. Penny peep shows, in the form of miniature churches,

showed the legs of "Queen Elizabeth of Egypt."

The Immoral Father

Holy City was never regarded by motorists or the press as anything but an entertaining sideshow, nor did it attract many more committed converts than the original dozen. At its peak it had around 300 members, but this was at the height of the Depression and many were transients who would work for a meal.

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FATHER RIKER

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required women disciples to come to his own bed. He required his faithful to live in the humblest of shacks while he himself lived in a comfortable home and earned as much as \$100,000 per year.

A perennial darling of the newspapers, Riker frequently generated headlines such as this one from 1928 — “Cult King’s Wife Raids Love Nest.”

But there were other, darker headlines, such as “Cult Children Tortured” and “New Witness Accuses Holy City Leader of Strangling His Ex-Wife.”

Riker was accused of attempting murder more than once, though never prosecuted. His personal aide was attacked on the grounds of Holy City one New Year’s Day and shot five times, the previous evening’s take of \$170 stolen from him. The man claimed years later the attack was at Riker’s instigation.



Accused of sedition, Riker was represented by a young Melvin Belli.

Riker’s own son, who had left the cult, was also attacked and savagely beaten in an attempt to reclaim him to the fold.

However, Riker’s major legal woes came at the hands of the U.S. government.

The U.S. vs. Riker

Understandably enough, the IRS proved reluctant to classify his roadside carnival a church. Then in 1942 he was accused of

sedition. Riker had written adoring letters to Hitler, and in his pamphlets called him “a second Martin Luther.” With a young Melvin Belli, no stranger to showmanship himself, as his attorney, Riker beat the charge.

But when Belli went to collect his fee, Riker responded “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 sued to collect anyway.

The completion of Highway 17 spelled the end of Riker’s earthly kingdom.

Always ambivalent about Jews, he sold it to a musical director he called the new “Jewish Messiah.” In 1957 and 1959, two fires razed virtually all of Holy City. Riker drew suspicion, but no action was ever taken against him.

The old charlatan had one last trick. In 1966, at the age of 94 and crippled by a stroke, he converted to Catholicism. Riker died

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three years later at Agnews State Hospital where, according to the *San Francisco Examiner*, he had been sent “because of his extreme age and inability to get along with anyone in private rest homes.”

Who Was the “Real” Riker?

It’s tempting, even irresistible, to wonder who the “real” William Riker was. Melvin Belli, Riker’s lawyer, consistently referred to

his own client as a “crackpot” and the “screwiest of screwballs.” For a man whose entire life was built on confabulation and bluster, there can be no satisfying answer.

Like all good con men, Riker believed his own pitch, and would continue his rants into empty air long after his audience had drifted away.

But there were episodes which, if no more representative than any others, are at least intelligible to those outside the fold.

Riker once made the Barnumesque statement “There are three kinds of people — those with dough, the intelligent ones and those without dough.”

And if one really wanted to know what Father Riker thought of the rest of the world, he needed only look about amongst the confusion of polemical signs which littered Holy City.

There, at the base of the hill where the radio station stood, was the biggest sign of all, the station’s call letters — KFQU. □