

# For sale: Holy City (it was neither)

SLUMBERING CULT CAMP MAY RISE AGAIN

By Julia Prodis Sulek  
Mercury News

Little is left of Holy City these days but legends and lore about the oddball cult whose members pumped gas, preached white supremacy and sold "holy water" to tourists in a hollow off Highway 17 in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

For the first time in decades, though, there are dreams about its future.

Holy City is for sale.

One hundred forty acres; \$11 million.

The three men in their 80s who have owned it for nearly 40 years, including contractors Leo Pellicciotti and Harry Belicitti of Saratoga, have put it on the market.

It's a place commuters to Silicon Valley and beachgoers to Santa Cruz bypass every day, perhaps without even knowing it. The only clue from Highway 17 is a little blue sign with its name in white letters at the Redwood Estates turnoff.

A narrow, winding road lined with overgrown brush leads down a hill a half-mile off the highway to all that remains of the once-thriving commune — the old white farmhouse with green shutters once owned by necktie salesman-turned-cult leader, William E. Riker, and the ornate but abandoned single-

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## Online Extra

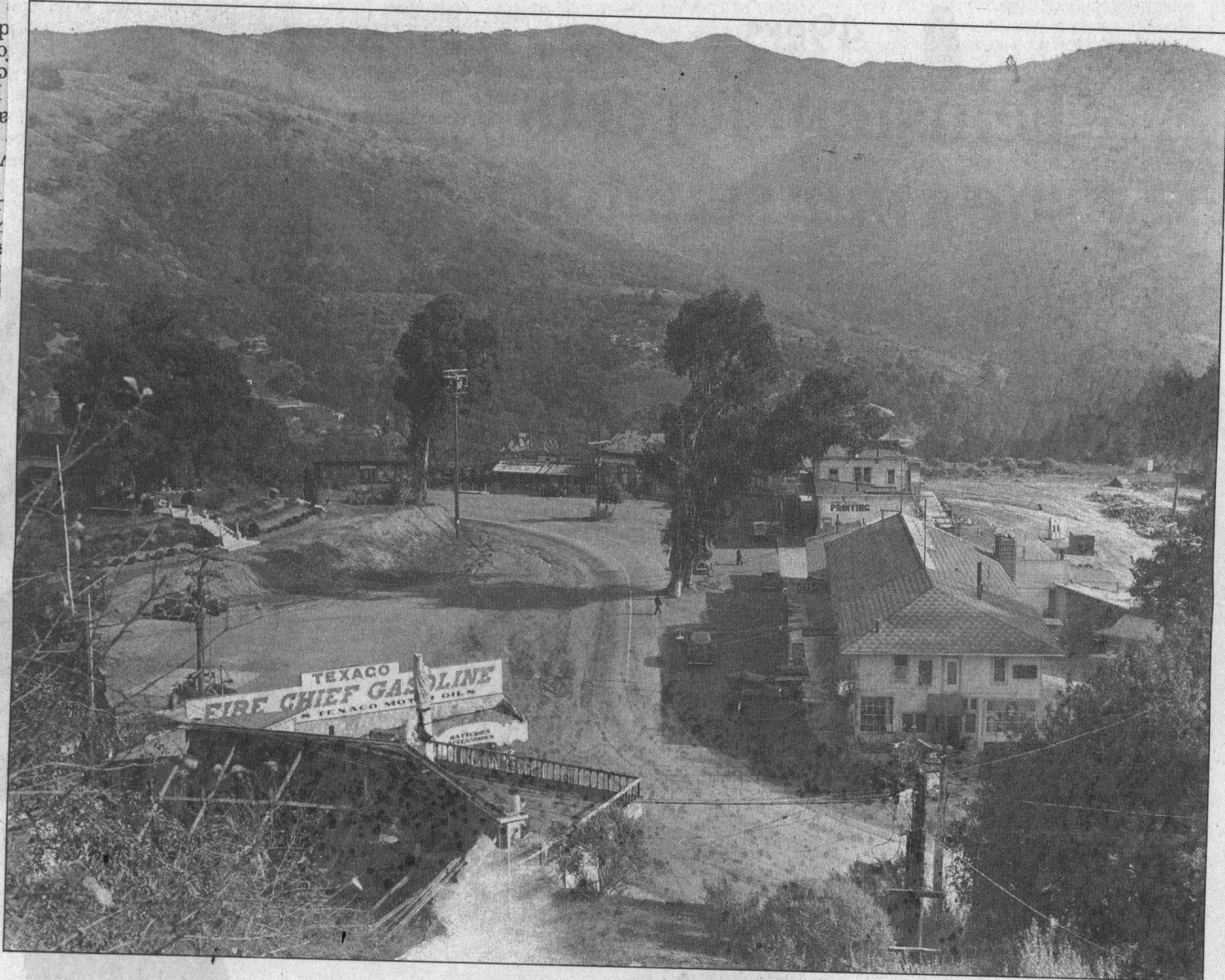
See a video from Holy City at [www.mercurynewsphoto.com](http://www.mercurynewsphoto.com)

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17A

## HOLY CITY | Former commune site goes on market for \$11 million



**THEN:** A 1938 photo shows Holy City during its heyday as the home of "Father" William T. Riker, whose house is at upper left.

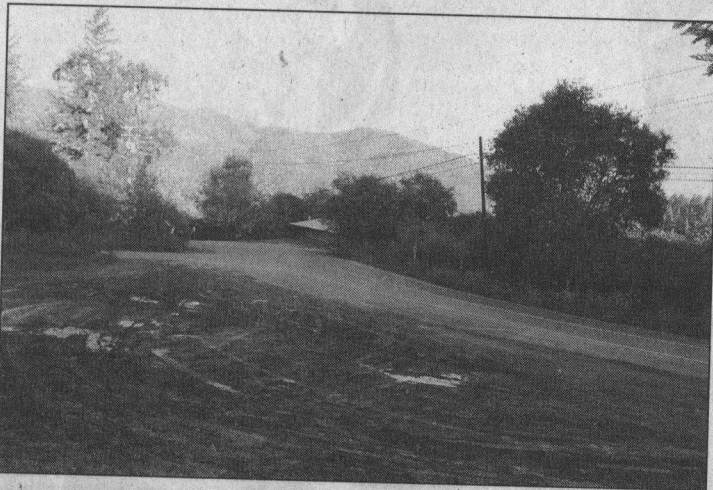
MERCURY HERALD ARCHIVES

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truck firehouse. A low-slung commercial building houses Tom Stanton's Holy City Art Glass studio, where he has blown glass ornaments, pumpkins and "Holy Roller" marbles for 30 years.

Out front, there's a bus stop. And although a bus often passes, Stanton has never seen anyone get on or off.

But that could change. The real estate agent who is listing the land, Jim E. Miller from Re/Max Valley Properties, envisions the possibilities: a winery, a housing development, a family compound, a religious



tore down nearly all the cabins, making way for what they hoped would be a recreational park, where visitors would pay to enjoy swimming pools, tennis courts and picnic areas. Although the project received a permit, the owners "lost interest," Pellicciotti said.

"I would like to see it preserved," he said of the property, "not a bunch of houses or development." He would like to see it become a park. Designated a "hillside" zone, the property has 10 parcels and no more than one house could be built on each parcel, according to the Santa Clara County



But that could change. The real estate agent who is listing the land, Jim E. Miller from Re/Max Valley Properties, envisions the possibilities: a winery, a housing development, a family compound, a religious retreat. The property in unincorporated Santa Clara County includes expanses of flat terrain, creeks, waterfalls, valleys and cliffs.

"We've got power, water and roads," said Miller, who works out of the Meridian Avenue office in San Jose. "We're only lacking sewer."

In its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, Holy City was quite the attraction. A roadside billboard, now long gone, once welcomed newcomers with this: "William E. Riker: The only man who can save California from going plum (*sic*) to hell. I hold the solution!"

Riker founded Holy City in 1919 and over the years drew 300 disciples who turned over their savings and worked for him in exchange for room and board. He ran for governor four times.

"He was kind of a con artist," said Leo Pellicciotti, 84. "He just had all these people there working and they did make a lot of money."

Riker built up a little village straddling the old Santa Cruz Highway. Then, it was the only route between San Jose and Santa Cruz. Some of the wooden facades, including a barber shop, post office, print shop, radio station and zoo, were cartoonish, painted white with murals of angels.

"See us if you're contemplating marriage, suicide or crime," a billboard entering town read.

But Holy City seemed more roadside attraction than religious experiment. The front of one shop was lined with eight-



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

**NOW:** Tom Stanton's Holy City Art Glass studio, in photo at top, is about all that's left of Holy City. A redwood grove hosts a small shrine to the Virgin Mary, above, where Stanton places flowers.

foot-tall plastic Santas, year-round.

Riker's campaign for governor advocated white supremacy and so did a message written across the top of one of his buildings: "The gentile white man is the king of the entire world."

Over the years, Riker was charged with numerous crimes, including bigamy, fraud, tax evasion, murder and sedition — the last for writing fan mail to Adolf Hitler. He got off each time. He was defended once by famous San Francisco lawyer Melvin Belli, whom Riker tried to pay with "a seat in my kingdom in heaven." Belli got his money.

When Highway 17 was built in 1940, business dropped off and so did Riker's disciples. By the 1950s, a string of suspicious fires destroyed some of Holy

City's main buildings. Riker brought in a partner, a Hollywood music agent, but their relationship soured and ultimately, in 1968, Pellicciotti and his partners bought it — for something less than a half-million dollars.

As part of the sale, they agreed to let Riker stay in the old farmhouse and the remaining eight residents to stay in cabins on the property for a number of years.

Of Riker's followers, Pellicciotti said, "They were just, I don't know — they were wanderers."

At the same time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, hippies were squatting in some of the abandoned buildings on the property.

Within a decade, they were all gone. Riker died at age 96 in 1969. And the new owners

development. He would like to see it become a park. Designated a "hillside" zone, the property has 10 parcels and no more than one house could be built on each parcel, according to the Santa Clara County planning department. A winery or retreat would require special county approval.

Stanton, who has rented the 1960s-era building for his glass blowing business since 1976, says the number of visitors to Holy City dropped off dramatically when the post office closed in 1979, and Santa Clara Valley residents could no longer have their Christmas cards stamped with Holy City postmarks.

Despite the town's name, no church was ever built in Holy City.

Instead, the only thing holy seems to be a cathedral of towering redwood trees growing in a circle behind Stanton's shop. The exposed root balls in the sunken grove form a natural shrine, where statues of the Virgin Mary stand.

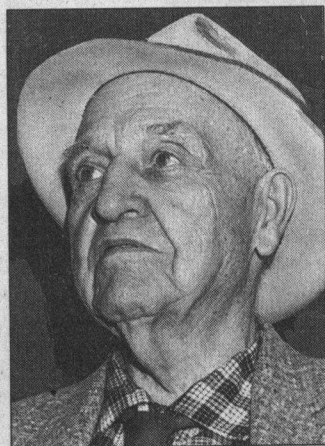
Members of a motorcycle club ride through now and then, holding meetings there. So does a group of nuns from Los Gatos who stop in and say the rosary. Each month, when Stanton knows they are coming, he picks fresh wildflowers and puts them in vases in the shrine. He tidies up, too, propping up any prayer cards that were nudged away by deer.

To Stanton, Holy City, with all its wacky wonder, is still a special place.

"I'm surprised a UFO hasn't landed here," he said. "Every possible thing has happened here."

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## Holy City: a charlatan's paradise?



"Father" William T. Riker ran for governor four times — on a white supremacist platform.

Source: Mercury News archive photograph

### Humble beginnings

**1919:** William T. Riker, a necktie salesman turned cult leader, purchases first 30 of 180 acres that will become Holy City, home to a following of disciples who work for him in exchange for room and board.

**1930s:** Riker's flock of disciples grows to 300 and he completes his small village, including a gas station, restaurant, radio station and print shop.

**1940:** Highway 17 built, bypassing Holy City by a half-mile. The number of tourists and Riker disciples begins to dwindle.

**1942:** U.S. government files sedition charges against Riker after he wrote fan mail to Adolf Hitler and

encouraged a group of U.S. soldiers to lay down their arms and join his "peace colony."

### City is sold

**1957:** Riker sells Holy City to Hollywood music agent Maurice Kline, but continues to live in the farmhouse. Suspicious fires destroy several Holy City buildings.

**1960:** A group of Santa Clara Valley investors, including Earl Pellegrini, buys Holy City. Riker and remaining disciples allowed to stay.

**1967:** Three local paving contractors, including Pellegrini, as well as Harry Bellicitti Sr. and Leo Pellicciotti, buy what's left of Holy City, including numerous cabins, for less than \$500,000.

**1967-69:** New owners evict hippies who have been squatting in the cabins, tear down dilapidated buildings and make plans for a recreational park, which is never built.

### Off to kingdom of heaven

**1969:** Riker dies at age 96, after converting to Catholicism three years earlier.

**1976:** Tom Stanton rents space for his glass-blowing business in last remaining commercial building, erected in the 1960s.

**2006:** Holy City, including 140 remaining acres, goes on sale for \$11 million.

JULIA PRODIS-SULEK and KARL KAHLER — MERCURY NEWS