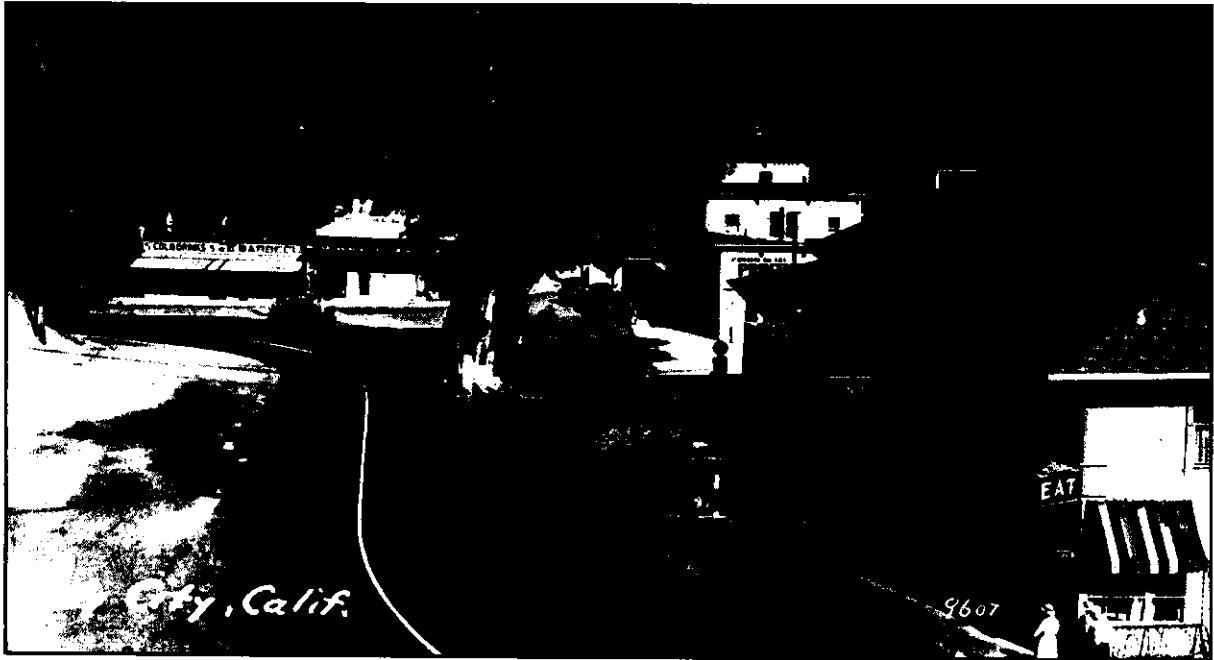




Strange Religion - William Riker's Holy City

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Preface

Five years ago, quiet by accident, I stumbled across an area of Santa Clara county known as Holy City. Considered a very real town that can be found on several maps of California its location, just off Highway 17, is near the Redwood Estates.

There isn't much to see: a few buildings, old and crumbling, lots of trees, patches of land covered with dense shrubbery and a bus stop. More importantly there are no people in Holy City. As a one-time religious retreat, for the faithful followers of the Perfect Christian Divine Way, everyone who ever lived in the community has been dead and buried for quite some time.

What piqued my interest about Holy City was, that while driving through it, I thought it was just another bend in the road for motorists who were coming from or going to somewhere else. I had no idea it was an actual town. How could I? How could anybody? There's nothing there to give any indication that it was once a thriving religious cult.

As a native of Santa Clara Valley I have always been interested in its history and its people. As a writer and researcher I often stumble across some hidden gem that I find fascinating. That is precisely what happened with Holy City. For the past five years I have amassed a great deal of information that spans its nearly 60-year history, way too much for an essay. So I condensed it. The rest of the story can be found in a book I am currently writing.

This essay takes a look at the man who built Holy City and the people who lived there. Their story may not be well known to the many who live in Santa Clara Valley today, but how and where they chose to live is an important part of the rich and diverse history of our valley.

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Introduction

Utopian communities have always held a unique position in California's historic past probably because, to some extent, they were generally tolerated and, on some level, socially accepted. More importantly California has always been the kind of place that could offer these types of distinctive societies a climate that was agreeable, a location that was affordable and a public who, for the most part, decidedly left them alone.

In the early fall of 1919 there came to the Santa Clara Valley thirty-eight members of a religious sect known as the Perfect Christian Divine Way along with their founder, "Father" William E. Riker, whose sole mission was to build a city where none had stood before. Theirs was to become a Holy City – "The Holiest of Cities on Earth."

Claiming that he had received a communiqué from God as to where he was to build this sacred township, Riker settled on a location five miles south of Los Gatos near the Summit in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Created primarily to function as a utopian sanctuary and a quiet refuge, for the thirty-eight to practice their religious faith, it was to also serve as "Headquarters for the World's Perfect Government."

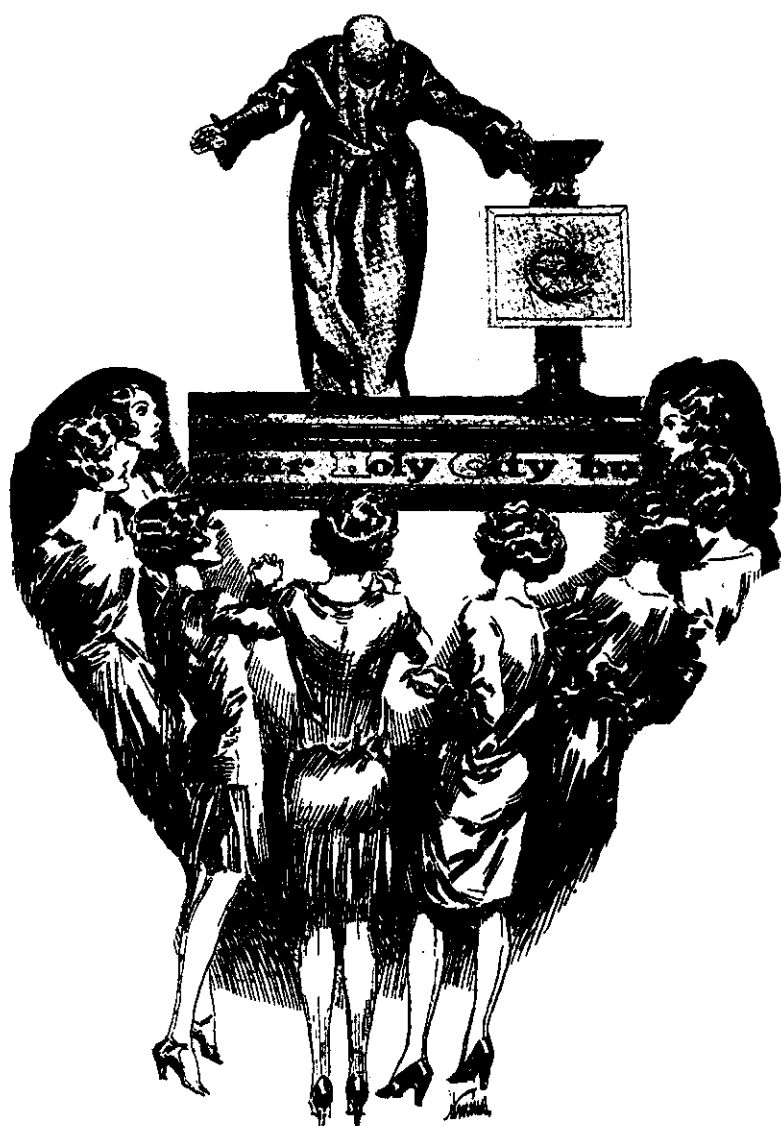
To the curious and confused, and almost everyone else who was familiar with the tiny mountainside retreat, Holy City was an enigma. What started out as a spiritual retreat slowly evolved into an amusement park. Along its downtown corridor, which also served as the main access road for hundreds of motorists traveling between Los Gatos and Santa Cruz, Riker had put into place every conceivable, profit making enterprise known to benefit anyone driving through town. His goal was to get them to stop, stay awhile, spend some money, and then be on their way. But to give them a reason to return, Riker added a few novelty attractions to the mix. Evangelical peep shows, holy spring water, a museum of philosophy, two restaurants, a zoo and a gas station were just some of the enticements.

In time the public grew to love Holy City because it was eccentric, new and exciting. Newspapers headlined stories coming out of the mountainside retreat because they were oftentimes outrageous and almost always never dull. The state of California, however, had tried for years to shut down Riker and his holy citizenry without much success. It wasn't until State Highway 17 was put into place, giving motorists the option of bypassing Riker's colony altogether, that Holy City began its long, slow and steady decline.

Considered, at the time, to be one of the strangest religious cults to have ever been assembled in the state of California, by a man, whose religious calling and political career helped spotlight Holy City to a worldwide audience, today the town exists only in the minds of historians. There are very few left to tell

why Holy City was ever there in the first place. Although its physicality remains the same, its abandonment on the landscape will certainly leave curiosity seekers wanting to know more about what actually took place there so many years ago.

This essay will outline the life of William Riker: flamboyant, scandalous, controversial and, without a doubt, considered one of Santa Clara Valley's more notorious citizens. His story has become a notable part of this valley's history as well as Holy City - the town where it all took place.



In the Beginning

William Edward Riker, born February 17, 1873, never did anything, in his life, without first having a well thought out plan. As the second child, and oldest son, of Alpha and Daniel Riker's six children, William could best be described as a narcissist with a sense of entitlement, a complainer and a loner. Reflecting upon his childhood finally made him admit, "I always was an outcast and other small children would not play with me. They always picked on me. I just couldn't get along with anybody."¹ It was for that reason he kept mostly to himself. Outside of his immediate family, William interacted with very few people.

Industrious and hardworking, Daniel and Alpha Riker raised their children to be the same. They came to California from different parts of the country: he from Indiana, she from Missouri. After a brief courtship they married and settled down in the small farming community of Oakdale, located in California's Central Valley. Although Daniel wasn't a farmer by trade he did manage to find work offloading wagons for local businessmen. It was Alpha's job to bear his children and run the household.

As soon as gold was discovered in the nearby Sierra Foothills Oakdale's days as a small, non-descript, enclave ended, evolving instead into a bustling township. When the Stockton & Visalia Railroad Company made Oakdale a regular stop on its rail lines, it quickly became a full-fledged community with downtown merchants offering the finest goods and services, to any found in Stockton or Modesto.

William lived in Oakdale for the first eight years of his life. After that his parents decided to move away from the area, hoping Daniel could find a better paying job. Packing up all their belongings, and saying good-bye to family and friends, the Riker's traveled 150 miles up north to the town of Oroville, located in Butte County.

Alpha's first order of business was to enroll her children in the local elementary school, where William would be entering the third grade. By the time fall rolled around, when he was to return for the fourth, he would be a no show. His parents had informed their son, that instead of attending school every day, he would have to work. They desperately needed the extra income to help support the family. Riker always admitted his family was poor and that there was never much to eat. He later justified his lack of formal education by saying, "I didn't go beyond the third grade – didn't care for school or church. I got the idea that all I needed to know was in my soul. The brain should be the disciple of the soul and be guided by it."²

Being away from the classroom didn't deter William from learning, all that he could, by reading.

At the age of twelve he found two subjects in particular fascinating: mysticism and physic phenomena. By reading as many books he could find on either topic, he hoped to someday become an expert in both, learning how to predict the future.

By the time he turned sixteen, several defining moments would occur in William's life. First he would discover that he never wanted to be responsible financially, or otherwise, for another living soul, except for his own and, as far as he was concerned, only his needs and wants were all that mattered. Still interested in learning how to predict the future, it was doubtful that William, or any other member of the Riker household, could have foreseen the tragic events that faced the family.

When the summer of 1890 rolled around, it began much like any other. The days were long and hot and Alpha tried her best to keep the children busy and out of trouble. The first few weeks, of the season, had been uneventful. By mid-July things would take a turn for the worse.

Without any warning, William's older sister, Ada Jane, began to suffer from severe stomach cramps. Doctors were baffled as to what could be the cause of her illness. Any and all attempts to heal her failed. After weeks of suffering she succumbed to her death on August 27, at the age of nineteen. Five days later, Daniel Riker, who had been diagnosed with Bright's disease, a form of kidney failure, also died. Inconsolable at the loss of her husband and daughter, Alpha expected William, being the oldest male, to take charge of the family, making sure they always had food on the table and a roof over their heads.

Working sometimes up to twelve hours a day, repairing wagons and doing simple carpentry, William resented the hand that fate had dealt him. As sad as he was at his father's passing, he didn't think it was fair that he got stuck doing all the work. Vowing that if he ever got chance to get out of Oroville he would take it.

That opportunity came soon after Alpha Riker remarried. Several months after Daniel's passing, she met local business owner, John Page Shaw. The two saw a lot of each other in the following months and were married within a year's time. Of that union, Alpha bore Shaw a son, Lee Allen. Tragically the child would be dead before his second birthday, dying on the exact date as her first husband, Daniel.

After the marriage vows had been exchanged between Alpha and her new husband, William Riker was more than convinced that John Page Shaw could take over as head of the household. Riker, now eighteen, had a better idea in mind for his future and was eager to get started.

A Religious Calling

William Riker had always wanted to be somebody. More importantly he mostly wanted to be somebody, in San Francisco. He was positive that endless opportunities awaited him there - opportunities that could make him rich and famous. But with little or no money, to his name, Riker refused to arrive at his destination with empty pockets, just to be considered one of the working class poor who were continuously pouring into the city. He wanted to arrive in style, but in order to do that he would first have to come up with a plan.

Riker thought it best if he headed to the gold fields of northern California before going to San Francisco. He set a time frame of twelve months to work where he could and save as much money as possible. Traveling from one camp to the next Riker took any odd jobs that he could find, including helping minors with their claims and repairing equipment. Keeping a close count of his money he would know when the time was right to take the train to San Francisco.

Arriving a little past 2 p.m. on what had started out as another overcast day in the fall of 1892, nineteen-year old William Riker was filled with excitement and anticipation. Taking in the sounds and sights of San Francisco, the young man made his way to a rooming house to inquire about a comfortable and affordable place to rent. Next on his agenda was to find gainful employment that paid top dollar.

Riker's first job, as a door-to-door salesman, selling neckties to residents who lived in posh, high-class neighborhoods, didn't go well. Quitting after three months and never admitting that he didn't have the ability to sell, Riker felt it had to have been the inferior quality of the merchandise that sealed his fate.

His next try at employment came when he was hired as a waiter in a luncheonette. He had told the proprietor he had lots of experience waiting tables; a statement he knew to be a lie. His only reason for saying it was that the job guaranteed one good meal a day.

It became painfully obvious after his first day that he didn't have the kind experience required for such a job. But the owner took a liking to Riker and gave him a week to prove himself worthy of the position. Riker took the challenge and succeeded. His boss offered the young man a full-time position, but Riker declined. His sights were set on something bigger – a place where he was guaranteed to make more money.

The Palace Hotel stood as a beacon for the resident rich of San Francisco and for the many tourists who flocked to the city to vacation in a cooler climate. Applying for a job as a waiter, this time he was being truthful when Riker informed the manager that he did in fact have the experience needed for such a job. His

goal was to work for a while before moving on to bigger and better things.

Six years later, Riker found himself still serving the same food, to the same crowd of people. Felling stuck, he knew his only chance of getting out and getting ahead was to come up with a sure-fire money making idea. Naturally, he thought the best way to have a guaranteed source of income was to go into business for himself.

On his way to becoming an entrepreneur, Riker decided to take some time and travel to Los Angeles to visit some relatives. He also wanted to figure out what line of work he should pursue. While he was there he met and married Marene Acron, a native of Colorado Springs.

Riker found it easy to talk to Marene and she understood completely what he was trying to say, when he talked to her about politics and religion. Impressed with the way her husband used his mind, Riker finally admitted to Marene that he possessed the gift to foresee the future. Taking that as a sign, Marene encouraged her husband to become a professional clairvoyant. The couple stayed in southern California to put together a plan for William to become “Swami Riker.” Eventually they moved back to the Bay Area and took an apartment in downtown Oakland.

Salinger’s Department store, located at the southwest corner of 11th and Washington, ran a series of ads in the *Oakland Tribune*, beginning February 13, 1904. Touted as “The House that Saves You Money,”³ the display ad listed various items for sale.

As informative as the ad was, that’s not what necessarily grabbed the reader’s attention. Rather it was what was written near the top in bold black lettering: “Swammi (sic) Riker – The wonderful Hindu fortune teller and palmist. He will tell your fortune free of charge. Mysterious and wonderful.”⁴

To bring some authenticity to the character he was playing, Riker grew a thick, black beard and wore a white turban on his head. Sitting under a tent, in the rear parking lot, hundreds of Salinger’s customers waited in a long line just for the opportunity of having Swami Riker predict their future. Salinger’s declared the gimmick a success, boasting an increase in sales. Well on his way to becoming a master of his own destiny Riker, no doubt, wanted to take it one step further.

Returning to San Francisco in 1905, Riker rented office space at 1035 Market Street. He had business cards printed with: “Professor Riker – Divine Healer and Prophet.” Setting out his shingle, Riker got a few inquiries. One incident in particular was well documented in an article published in the *Oakland Tribune*. Riker’s unorthodox practice of making house calls to “cure” his clients of their ailments, landed him in hot water once it was revealed that his methods were less than professional.

Trying to defend his position, Riker explained that he had been asked to call upon Mrs. James Coffin, 37 Van Ness, to see about her health. Already under a doctor's care, Riker convinced the frail, young housewife that she should throw out all her medication and let him have a crack at healing her. She agreed.

Placing his hands on the woman, Riker told her that only he had "the golden key to the kingdom of health, happiness and divine wisdom."⁵ After some time had passed Riker informed his client that he would need to return to complete his treatment and they scheduled a follow-up appointment for the next day.

Ringling the doorbell to the Coffin's home, Riker was taken off guard when Mr. Coffin answered the door. Enraged that his wife had engaged in Riker's help, Mr. Coffin told the "divine healer," that he ought to call the police and report his lewd behavior. Mrs. Coffin had told her husband that as part of Riker's treatment he kissed her more than once. Riker defended his actions stating that he had done a lot to heal Mrs. Coffin and would have cured her, if given a second chance.

"I do not claim to be a divine healer," said Professor Riker. "You can heal as well as I, if you only make a study of it. It is only the power of suggestion and it is practiced by rubbing your hands upon the breast and back of a person and kissing her on the forehead."⁶

Objecting to the way Riker treated his wife, Coffin admitted that he would rather have seen his wife sick than have another man kiss her, even on the forehead. Riker felt that Mr. Coffin was jealous of him and without merit. "I am a married man and my business demands that I lead a pure and holy life."⁷

Once the press got wind of the incident, they published all the scandalous details on the front page of the paper. With his reputation tarnished, Riker felt he could no longer be taken seriously as "Professor" Riker and not wanting to return as "Swami" Riker, he would have to look elsewhere to use his gifts in a manner that would give him the greatest exposure.

Walking home late one afternoon, Riker passed a nicely dressed gentleman who was speaking to a small crowd of onlookers. He was discussing their future as it related to their faith in God. Riker stopped to observe the man and noticed that members of the crowd were handing him money. Greedily accepting every dollar and handful of coins that he could carry, the man shouted out the Lord's name, telling the crowd that they had been saved in the eyes of Jesus. Riker couldn't believe it. How preposterous for that man to take hard earned money just to promise salvation. Or was it? Riker wondered. Noting that the man was clutching a handful of bills, Riker suddenly had an idea. He would transform himself into a street corner cleric, and teach others about his own philosophy while, at the same time, demonstrate his ability to heal the sick and

suffering.

At first Marene fully supported her husband's new venture and the two left the Bay Area to travel to cities large and small throughout the West. They had been on the road for months, arriving in Colorado Springs in 1906. Spending a few days standing at various street corners, Riker told his wife it was time to move on. Marene informed Riker that he would have to go on without her. Her reasons, she told him were two-fold. First, she was too homesick to leave her family and second she wanted out of the marriage. Traveling from place to place had taken its toll on her and she was no longer impressed with her husband's "talents."

Riker left Colorado, heading back to California, alone. Feeling a bit defeated he nevertheless tried to stay focused. He did not want anyone or anything to stand in his way of success. Traveling within the state of California, by the early fall of 1907, Riker made a stop in Pasadena.

Standing under a makeshift tent, Riker spoke to a crowd, trying his best to convince them that they must adhere to his philosophy of the Improved Christian Divine Science, or risk the chance of ever getting into Heaven. "As the Comforter sent by God to solve all of mankind's problems, the only way to get to Heaven is through me."⁸

One person, standing in the crowd, listening intently to Riker, was Bessie Zetty. The small mousy-brown haired, dark-eyed girl, was amazed at Riker's religious zeal. Looking at him in awe and wonderment, Bessie clung to his every word. Making her way to the front of the crowd she hoped he would notice her. He did. As the crowd began to disperse she waited until Riker was alone before going up to him and introducing herself.

Smitten by her idolatry of him, Riker asked her to dinner so they could get to know one another better. After a few months Bessie told Riker she loved him. Standing before a Justice of the Peace, inside a Pasadena courthouse, on December 12, 1907, Bessie Zetty became Mrs. William Riker. The newly wedded couple enjoyed a brief honeymoon before heading back to Oakland to live in a cramped, one-room apartment located downtown.

A month into their marriage, Bessie informed her husband that she was expecting a child. Riker felt that was her doing and insisted she take care of all the details. He didn't like the idea of being saddled with a child and the responsibility that came with it. The timing wasn't right especially after finding moderate success as a street cleric.

On September 17, 1908, Bessie Riker gave birth to William Riker's son and namesake. Calling

the child Willis, she made sure her son was well taken care of and more importantly felt wanted and loved. Riker, on the other hand, didn't express an opinion one-way or the other. It's not that he didn't have feelings for the boy; rather he just wanted to make sure nothing stood in the way of his career.

When Willis turned four-months old, an ugly confrontation between the first Mrs. Riker (Marene) and the second Mrs. Riker (Bessie) lead Riker to flee Oakland. Marene told Bessie that Riker was still legally married to her and threatened to expose him as a bigamist. Fearing for the safety of her child Bessie went to the authorities, informing them about the situation. Asking for help the police informed the young mother that it was out of their jurisdiction since she had married her husband in Los Angeles.

When the press got hold of story, they exposed Riker as a bigamist. Several articles printed in the *Oakland Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle* made the front page. Readers, appalled to learn about such outlandish behavior, couldn't get enough of the hometown drama.

Months after the story broke, Riker returned to Bessie and their son. In time things quieted down and the Riker's went about their business. Realizing that his reputation had been battered by the scandal, Riker thought the time was right to take his "act" on the road. Packing up their belongings, the three left the Bay Area.

On and off, over the next five years, the Riker's traveled throughout the United States. When the family reached Dallas, Bessie had had enough. She told her husband she was leaving him and their son.

With Willis by his side, Riker wasn't necessarily crazy taking full responsibility of raising the child alone. But he was pleasantly surprised to find out that when he was with the young boy, passersby took notice and would stop to listen to what he was telling them.

Working diligently to spread the word of his own brand of philosophy: The Improved Christian Divine Science, Riker went from one street corner to the next with the hopes of gaining a following of his own. His mission was to gather together enough members, have them settle down in one spot, where he could lead them to salvation.

United We Stand

Irvin B. Fisher was the first disciple to officially join William Riker's social experiment. That was back in June of 1913. Riker had been standing on a street corner in downtown Indianapolis, when Fisher just happened to walk by. He stopped to listen to what Riker was saying, to the small crowd that had gathered around.

Riker's philosophy, at the time, was based solely on his own religious and political ideologies. None of it really made sense, but to Irvin B. Fisher, William Riker was the answer to his prayers. After hearing Riker speak, Fisher claimed it was as he "was being born into an entirely new world and right then and there decided that he would follow this man and this true philosophy to the end of the world if necessary."⁹

After Indiana, the two men headed for Minneapolis. As was his usual practice, before his arrival, Riker would place small ads in local papers to advertise the time and place the public could meet with him. "Perfect Christian Divine Science services will be held tomorrow evening at 7:45 at 421 North Illinois Street. The subject will be 'Transfiguration and How It Is Done.' W. E. Riker will preside."¹⁰ Riker gave no explanation as to why he felt it necessary to rename his religious doctrine.

For several nights Riker stood at predominantly busy street corners. On one of those nights Lucille Jensen happened to walk by. Just like Fisher, she too, decided to stop and listen. The native Nebraskan was instantly taken with Riker. So desperate was Lucille to talk to Riker that she decided to go on a hunger strike until she could meet with the "man of God" personally.

Riker went to Lucille. After a few months, the two fell in love and were married in 1914. Lucille Riker could best be described as the calm in William Riker's stormy life. Faithful loyal and positively the only person who could tell Riker about his shortcomings, Lucille would be the third and final Mrs. William Riker. On their way back to San Francisco, they were able to convince a few more people to join them in their quest to create their own utopian society.

The house on Hayes Street was so noisy that neighbors were getting suspicious as to what was really going on inside. People were coming in and out at all hours of the day and night; muffled sounds of hammers and saws could be heard from the street. The police were called on several occasions as neighbors complained.

Several people lived inside the residence: William Riker, his wife Lucille, Irvin B. Fisher, Steven Rozum, and other members of the Perfect Christian Divine Science. This was their home, and a place of worship. It was also headquarters to the many enterprises that Riker had started as a way of making money

to help support his religious body. There was a print shop and a trucking business. All proceeds went into a community account with Riker in charge of all disbursements. Unhappy with their living conditions, Riker felt the time was right to move on.

In the fall of 1918 Riker was able to purchase thirty acres of land near the Summit in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Proceeds came from the San Francisco based businesses and newly recruited members. Anyone who joined the cult was expected to give up their worldly possessions and their income. Title to the land Riker had purchased was kept in his name, to keep matters simple. But it was understood that the real owners of Holy City, including Riker, were the disciples themselves.

Riker stated his reasons for building Holy City. Besides the fact that he claimed God had instructed him to, he also said it was a place where anyone could come and live in peace. "The idea was simple. Simply come to Holy City and bring your dough. Then you can stop worrying about life and taxes and traffic tickets and your money, too. Just eat and sleep and do a little work when you feel like it. Let the "Comforter" do all the worrying."¹¹

Riker got plenty of people to join his cult. Most were disenfranchised and down-on-their luck individuals who needed a place to live, even if it was under the tutelage of a religious extremist. Riker expected every member to work and in exchange they would be given free room and board. As a bonus, Riker would instill in them his great religious philosophy. Simply stated, Riker believed that the white race was supreme, over all others, and as such they should be the rulers of the universe. Whether his followers believed in it or not, they at least had the pleasure of living in a mountainside retreat – free of charge. Filing articles of incorporation, with the state of California, Riker officially changed the name of his philosophy to the Perfect Christian Divine Way.

From one end to the other, Holy City's downtown business district was cluttered with ornate and elaborate signs, printed with slogans eulogizing the faith's doctrine. Idioms were printed on billboards, on the sides of buildings, in printed literature and on the stomachs of life-sized statues of Santa Claus. Everywhere a person turned they were bombarded with the canons of the Perfect Christian Divine Way.

Businesses inside the religious compound included: a fully equipped garage and service station that filled tanks with gas and overheated radiators with special holy water. A restaurant advertised homemade fried chicken with fresh baked apple pie. There were two soda stands, a dance hall, a hotel, an eighteen-seat comfort station (restrooms) an observatory and a zoo. Ironically the only building missing was a church.

Along with the signs and gingerbread style buildings, Riker strategically placed ten life-size Santa

Claus statues throughout the compound. Rumored to have been stolen from a department store in San Francisco, after the Christmas holiday, it appeared that Santa had become the patron saint of Holy City. Riker's only comment about the display of statues, "Santa Claus is generous with gifts. Everybody should be generous with money, if they have it. We are generous with ideas. There's an idea written on everyone of our wise old men."¹²

Across the stomach of each life-size figure, Riker had inscribed such questionable and ambiguous sayings as: "Holy City is the Comforter for all mankind. If you are contemplating marriage, suicide or crime see us first," or "Dispel the idea that you are different from God or the other fellow when sifted down."¹³

As news of the town spread quickly throughout the valley, hundreds of curious sightseers jammed the winding, two-lane, highway just to see for themselves what was reported to be a "love cult."

Many in the area became familiar with Riker and Holy City by what they read in the newspaper. In 1923, former cult members had asked the courts to intervene claiming that the Riker's were mistreating children. After a trial was held in Superior Court, in San Jose, all the charges against the Riker's were dropped due to lack of insufficient evidence.

Other scandals connected to Riker involved Mrs. Evelyn Rosencrantz. Acting as Riker's personal secretary Rosencrantz told authorities that she witnessed Riker murdering a woman while they were down in southern California, on business. Thoroughly investigating the allegations, the Los Angeles police department never filed charges against Riker.

Rosencrantz, on the other hand, was sent to San Quentin State Prison. She was the first person to be sentenced to life, under California's habitual criminal act. Rosencrantz, it seems, had written a series of bad checks. Similar to today's three strikes you're out law – Rosencrantz died while in prison.

What the state of California failed to do, getting rid of William Riker, the federal government stepped in to give it a try. Indicted on six counts of treason, for sending letters to Hitler and telling soldiers from Moffett Field that they were fighting for the wrong side, Riker stood trial in San Francisco. He was sixty-eight years old. Facing prison time if found guilty, the religious leader hired Melvin Belli as his defense attorney.

Belli's strategy was to make the jury feel sorry for his client. His closing arguments were so moving that even Riker was moved to tears. Belli characterized his client as "pitiful and pathetic." Guilty of many things, Belli said, Riker wasn't guilty of treason.

Acquitted by a jury of his peers, Riker went on to sue Belli for slander, stating in his complaint that

the attorney called him “pitiful and pathetic.” A judge dismissed the claim and Belli filed a countersuit to collect his fees.

With tourism on the decline, Riker in a desperate attempt to boost Holy City’s revenue was constantly thinking of new ways to keep the public interested in his mountainside retreat. One idea was to: “Rebuild the colony into a single tower, made into the form of a beautiful woman sitting on top of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The tower-woman would be as large as the Colossus of Rhodes with twelve elevators inside.”¹⁴ Riker’s plan never came to fruition. He was losing his hold on Holy City and the city itself was beginning to show its age.

Judgment Day

“Father” William E. Riker officially lost control of Holy City, and its residents, in 1956. That was right after he had invited, former Hollywood movie director, Maurice Kline to come to his religious retreat. Riker wanted Kline to become Holy City’s new Jewish Messiah and to encourage others to visit Holy City, bringing with them lots of money so Riker could rebuild his crumbling township.

Ever since the state put in Highway 17, Riker had lost a lot of revenue. The number of cars passing through town dwindled to a mere one hundred a month. There used to be that many, driving through, every weekend.

Giving Kline one-half ownership of Holy City, Riker expected a lot in return. His immediate plans included: building a private railroad, an outdoor amphitheater and installing a man-made lake. Pamphlets were printed to announce Holy City’s return, with the world’s “Comforter” and a new “Jewish Messiah.”

Having already received half ownership from Riker, Kline persuaded the rest of the aging disciples to sell the other half. The asking price: \$64,000. Each disciple, along with Riker would be paid \$1000.00 a year over the next eight years in food, lodging and medical care. Not much of a deal considering that that was what they were already getting that for free anyway. So without any money technically exchanging hands, Kline owned Holy City outright. And for the surviving members they had lost their only investment for future earnings.

After realizing what kind of deal they had made, they all felt swindled. They blamed Riker for selling half ownership in the first place. Repeatedly, Riker had told them for years “their Holy City would never be sold.”¹⁵

Irvin Fisher filed a lawsuit against Riker on July 22, 1957, claiming that he had no right to sell any portion of Holy City since it belonged to all the residents living there. Fisher had asked to court to compel Riker and Kline to turn over an accounting of all the funds received before and after the reported sale. Fisher also stated that that Riker’s role was to act as a trustee for the cult’s membership. Other disciples, Joe Albert and Winifred Allington, also filed similar lawsuits against Riker.

The day after Fisher filed suit, a deed of trust was recorded in San Jose, granting Kline, his “whole and separate property,” all 180 acres of Holy City. Riker quickly filed a countersuit trying to regain ownership. In his complaint Riker stated that Kline had fraudulently misrepresented himself, and had no intentions of ever rebuilding Holy City. Riker’s own son, Willis, told the court that his father was insane and, as such, the deal should be voided. The court disagreed and Kline retained title to Holy City.

But then something strange happened. Beginning in the summer of 1957 a series of fires were set in and around Holy City, destroying several buildings downtown. Kline immediately went about collecting the insurance money with the promise to rebuilt the retreat to its original glory. What Riker failed to tell Kline, before the sale was finalized, was that there was no insurance. The town, growing sparse with residents and lack of tourists, was now battered by burnt out structures.

The end had officially come to Holy City. Riker, no longer the king of his own castle, retreated into his home. The remaining seven met their demise at various times, in the years that followed.

Well into his nineties, and with his right leg paralyzed from a stroke William Riker spent most of his remaining days inside the white, two-story Victorian that sat perched atop a grassy-knoll overlooking Holy City. He would sit behind the wooden desk, waiting for someone to drop by.

Inside his temple-like living room, the décor was eclectic and mismatched, sort of like Holy City, in a way. On the walls he had framed photographs of “Mother” Lucille, his beloved wife, and an issue of *Life* magazine with Yvette Mimeux on the cover. Riker admitted that someone had stolen his picture of Hitler. It had been hanging next to the one of Abraham Lincoln.

The top of his desk, cluttered with various and assorted sundries, included dolls, a toy piano and globes in an assortment of sizes. “I had a crown once, but someone took that too.”¹⁶ He explained that all the items were props he used to help him teach his divine theories about the true causes of good and evil. “Christ sent the comforter that’s me to explain all things.”¹⁷

Always confident that someday a Messiah would come and breathe new life into Holy City, no one ever did. On December 3, 1969 William Riker died. He was 96 years old. Living the last three months of his life inside ward 87 of Agnews State Hospital, Riker would never know that within a year’s time all of his disciples would be dead, and the town, in which they lived would fade into history.

William Riker created the Perfect Christian Divine Way and Holy City, as a place where to showcase his religious and political ideologies. Like so many other religious cults, this one was created in the mind of a man who claimed that he was sent by God to solve the world’s problems. For the better part of fifty-years his presence in Santa Clara valley added a bit of colorful commentary and the legacy of his town, although abandoned, still exists just off Highway 17.

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