

## Crumbling Holy City awaits a new dawn

**A former commune near Los Gatos is on the market again with hopes of a permanent, fruitful transformation**

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Holy City is about to be born again.

The former commune in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Los Gatos is a far cry from its days as a cult redoubt founded in 1919 by charlatan and white supremacist William Riker. The former necktie salesman used guile and his followers' money to build his own hamlet -- complete with a radio station, gas pumps, general store and post office -- astride the old highway linking Santa Cruz and San Francisco.



Little is left of those efforts except a fading storefront housing a glass-blowing shop, a drafty art studio and yellowed newspaper clippings with headlines like: " 'A lot of skullduggery': A former neighbor recalls Holy City."

Riker's quaint white home still stands across the street a short distance from the crumbled remains of the radio station. Even the post office, which used to be popular with Christmas card senders who wanted a Holy City postmark, closed more than two decades ago.

But Holy City -- 142 acres of woodland hills, grassy clearings, even a creek -- is up for sale. The asking price: \$11 million.

"I know it has a colorful past, but no matter how colorful the past was, the future could be very bright," said Jim Miller, the real estate agent shopping the property for the three current owners, who bought it about 40 years ago.

"I'm optimistic about the property selling, to hopefully the right buyer," Miller said. "It will be a great little piece of preserved history."

The property has been on the market for a month. Miller said he has fielded calls from a rabbi considering making it a youth summer camp, a group of families looking to build an eco-lodge retreat center, developers interested in building single-family homes and someone considering turning the property into a vineyard.

Holy City is not the first hamlet to go up for sale in California, but it may be the most expensive.

In late 2002, the tiny Humboldt County town of Bridgeville, population 20 or so, gained quick fame in cyberspace when its owner put the town up for bid on the online auction site eBay. The winning bid was \$1.77 million for Bridgeville's 82 acres, 10 houses, four cabins, a tractor, a cemetery, a mile of river frontage, some Quonset huts and a building leased to the U.S. Postal Service. But that bidder ultimately backed out, as did several others.

The next year, Amboy, a Mojave Desert outpost on the verge of becoming a ghost town, was put on eBay. The minimum bid: \$1.9 million. Nobody bought it. Finally, the town was sold to a restaurateur in April 2005 for \$425,000.

Holy City, in unincorporated Santa Clara County, combines a desirable location with natural beauty and more than a bit of history.

"It's unique," Lou Bermingham said last week while strolling the grounds. He pointed to fingers of fog creeping through the treetops, then strode into a ring of redwoods that forms a natural chapel.



"Isn't this just beautiful?" said Bermingham, a painter whose studio adjoining the Holy City Art Glass shop is one of the few signs of life in the former town. "I never get tired of this."

Holy City, ironically, never had a church. Riker would preach to his converts in the redwood grove, Bermingham said.

The artist knows all the Riker folklore, like the hit that the cult leader allegedly ordered on a follower he suspected of skimming bar profits.

"There's a lot of history here," Bermingham said.

Riker -- who styled himself "Father Riker" or "The Comforter" -- founded Holy City with about a dozen followers in 1919. He was a former palm reader once charged with bigamy in San Francisco who formulated an ideology called "the Perfect Divine Christian Way."

The belief system advocated racial segregation and white supremacy. It called for celibacy -- except for Riker, who married several times. Followers were encouraged to relinquish worldly possessions to Riker and, according to one document, meet weekly with the cult hierarchy to "keep touch with the vibrations effecting (sic) our cult, and for your protection."

Soon, Riker had developed a full-blown tourist stop near the crest of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Billboards called out, "Headquarters for the world's perfect government. Stop and investigate."

He incorporated the land, set up a radio station and attracted about 300 followers. Holy City was at its height in 1930s, and in 1938, Riker launched the first of four unsuccessful runs for governor.

But his downfall loomed. Riker was arrested in 1942 for writing letters to Adolf Hitler supporting his policies. He was not convicted. Then Highway 17 opened between Santa Cruz and San Jose, bypassing Holy City, which sank into decline.

In February 1961, the cult board removed Riker as its leader, saying his repeated runs for governor violated the cult's belief in separation of church and state.

Then mysterious fires destroyed most of the buildings in town. Bermingham heard it was disgruntled neighbors. Miller was told Riker set the blazes to collect the insurance money.

Three contractors bought the property in 1968 for about \$350,000, Miller said. As part of the deal, Riker, who was 95, was allowed to stay in his home until his death. The few remaining cult members living in shacks on the property were also allowed to remain for several years. Riker died in 1969.

The new owners evicted hippies who were squatting in the remaining cabins and got permits to turn the site into a recreation park with campgrounds, swimming pools and the like, Miller said.

"But they got busy doing their work for clients," Miller said. "Another few years went by, another few decades went by, and eventually they're in their early and mid-80s."

Even though the town is gone, the post office reduced to a sign hanging in the glass shop, Miller says Holy City will remain in some form.

"I think keeping the name is going to be an asset," Miller said. "This will always be Holy City."

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