

# 1986: Former Miss Capitola remembers when Santa Cruz was 'beautiful'

*History*  
**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following story about Minnie Perry Currier was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on July 7, 1986.

**By TOM LONG**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Minnie Perry Currier was born in Santa Cruz in 1906 and has lived in this area her entire life. In 1925, she was employed by H. Allen Rispin, the legendary oil tycoon. Rispin, at one point, owned most of Capitola, which he promoted as Capitola-On-The-Beach. Rispin dreamed of developing the

city into a "Riviera" of the West Coast.

When it was established that the Miss California Pageant was going to be in Santa Cruz in 1925, Rispin decided that Currier, then 19, should be Miss Capitola, even though she lived in Santa Cruz. During a recent conversation at her home, Currier recalled some of the events and people of the times.

First, she talked about Rispin.

"I don't think there was an ad in the paper. I probably just went to Capitola one day looking for employment and went into Mr. Rispin's office. Mr. Rispin interviewed me and said he could give me half a day's work. Then he fired the downstairs stenographer he had and kept me full time. I felt terrible about that.

"He was a very handsome man — medium height, medium build. He always wore a hat, glasses with no rims, and a dark business suit. And his black oxfords were always highly polished. He rode in a big black limousine and had a chauffeur that took him back and forth to San Francisco. And his wife was gorgeous.

"The first time I took dictation from him, he said, 'I don't care how long you take to finish these, but they must be perfect.' He was a very nice man and I believe all his employees liked him.

"I never knew how he made his millions on oil. I didn't know until someone was going to buy his mansion and it was in the newspaper. I also don't think any of his employees knew his name was Henry until then. In the paper it came out Hen-

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ry Rispin, but all his letters were signed H. Allen Rispin.

"The mansion was built in Capitola just a year or so before I went to work for him. His office was at the corner of Capitola and Bay avenues. His office was upstairs and I worked in the downstairs office. He had a most efficient private secretary and she lived in the apartment upstairs.

"I understand he was a millionaire twice. He would wind up broke, I was told, and was buried in San Francisco in Potters Field."

Then, Currier recalled how it came about that she was a beauty queen. She shared a precious memento of the experience, a photograph of her-

See 1986 on **PAGE A16**

# 1986

Continued from Page A13

self as Miss Capitola '25. The picture was carefully wrapped in tissue, then double-boxed for its trip to the newspaper office.

"Mr. Rispin came in the office one day and said to me, 'I want you to represent Capitola in the beauty contest.' At first I thought I was too shy to be in anything like that. People used to stare at me, not only men but women. They would tell me how beautiful I was. And it used to make me nervous as a cat.

"I guess you could say I was in the right place at the right time. I had no competition. I should have been Miss Santa Cruz, I lived in Santa Cruz. But I worked in Capitola, and since my boss wanted me to be Miss Capitola ...

"Capitola, when I represented it, was a beautiful little town and Mr. Rispin owned it all. I had a black limousine at my disposal for a week and a chauffeur dressed in black. For a week, I was treated like a queen.

"The girls in the Miss California pageant in those days were not made up. It was just natural. There was no talent competition, you just went out and that was that.

"One morning, we appeared in the Casino ballroom in our bathing suits. A lot of men were seated and each one of us had to walk around and smile and all. And that went terribly against the grain with me. After the pageant, one man said to me, 'I admire your shyness.' Some of them could go out there and really throw their chest out.

"Everything was done down on the beach and the Boardwalk. We were supposed to have paraded before 50,000 people at that time. Then, we all stood on the bandstand. Luther Burbank pinned the key to the city on my bathing suit, and I guess he pinned the key to the city on each contestant's bathing suit.

"After I had been in the pageant, people would come in Mr. Rispin's office and say, 'We want to see Miss Capitola,' and I would talk and laugh with them. A number of years after, I was in Santa Barbara and a young man saw me

and came over and said 'Hello, Miss Capitola.'"

She got a bit nostalgic as she remembered the Santa Cruz County of the 1920s, a place far different than it is today. Currier prefers the county of yesteryear.

"Capitola was so beautiful; younger people could never imagine what a beautiful place it was. There was the Hawaiian Gardens Dance Hall. It was gorgeous. They had two orchestras; one would play while the other took a break. And there was the Capitola Hotel, which burned down years ago.

"In Santa Cruz, there was the Hotel St. George, which was really beautiful back then. I used to work there as a stenographer. There was a nice coffee shop and restaurant next door to it, and every morning I had to type the menus for those places.

"Where the Bank of America building is now, there was a great big department store called the Mode. Three sisters operated it and I was the bookkeeper for one year. Whenever the hat salesman was going to be at the St. George Hotel, they would ask me to go model hats.

"There's been so many changes in Santa Cruz, and none of them are good, I'm sorry to say. It's bigger, there are more people. And it's an entirely different class of people. When I was young, we were well-mannered and dressed sensibly. We were people who just had common sense.

"They've done away with the beauty of Santa Cruz. Our San Lorenzo river was gorgeous; now look at it, it's an ugly thing. It's man-made and ugly, and that's sad. All the changes that I see make me feel sad because there's no improvement."

Currier married at the age of 21, just after leaving Rispin's employ. She married a man 20 years older than she. He died in 1936, and for 12 more years she carried on his business of growing calla lilies.

She later became an antique dealer, and helped out in the community as a counselor. Now she lives alone in Santa Cruz, home for all of her 80 years. She has five grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. She enjoys gardening. And she enjoys remembering the fact that she was the first Miss Capitola even though she lived in Santa Cruz.