

Behind The wall

H. Allen Rispin, the Rispin Mansion and the Lost Rispin Photos

[Editor's Note: Over the span of decades, the earliest known photos of the Rispin Mansion lay resting in a small black-covered binder, a portfolio bought from Smart and Wilton in San Francisco sometime in either the late 1920s or early 1930s.

These pictures reveal what had been an obscured portrait of the home that Henry Rispin built along the banks of Soquel Creek.

The following story about the history of the Rispin Mansion, based on the research of Carolyn Swift and Peggy Kirby, represents the most complete depiction of the Rispin family that has been published to date.

Many of the details are revealed for the first time. The photograph of Henry Allen Rispin also makes its debut. Up to now, only a few had ever seen this man who once owned all of Capitola, and then lost everything.

The Mid-County Post is also pleased to introduce photographs taken of the mansion's exterior and interior while Rispin was a resident in the house. These pictures illustrate the tastes and lifestyle of the family, and more important, will help guide both the restoration and landscaping projects that may be underway in the next few years.

The photographs of the mansion were provided by Jim and Barbara Redding of Capitola, owners of the historic landmarks building at the corner of Capitola and Monterey Avenues, a building that was once the site of Rispin's Capitola office.

The Reddings and The Mid-County Post are donating the original pictures and acid-free storage materials for the long term preservation to the Capitola Historical Museum, with hopes that a new phase of the mansion's life can now begin.]

by Carolyn Swift

Suffering a stroke in early April of 1947, Henry Allen Rispin hung on at the county hospital in San Francisco for six days before he died.

Capitola's former emperor was then placed in an unmarked grave at Olivet Memorial Park.

Nobody was there to mourn him. Few people in Capitola were even aware that he was dead, or cared. But everybody remembered.

They thought of him every time they drove past the mansion on the hill, the place that President Calvin Coolidge had once been offered as a summer home.

The mansion stands today on Wharf Road above Capitola's historic village, as empty and broken as the life of its builder when he died. Today

it's owned by the city, a 70 year-old memorial and a cryptic puzzle in Capitola's past.

The house was an enigma from the beginning; locals said there would be moss growing on the doorknobs before long if anyone tried to build where Rispin did. It was damp and the brush was overgrown.

People here first heard of Rispin in 1918, when he bought a tract of land from G.D. Hull, an agent for the family of Capitola's founder, the late F.A. Hihn.

Described as a Canadian and a capitalist from San Francisco and Denver, Rispin then began serious negotiations that ended in July, 1919, with a major purchase from Hihn Company heirs Katherine Cope Henderson, Agnes Younger, Harriet Hihn and A.S. Jansen.

What Rispin bought was Hihn's pride and joy, the 160-room Hotel Capitola, as well as all the concessions of the waterfront; the cottage city; Capitola Wharf; 120 lots east of the hotel; 30 acres along the creek plus another 200 acres in Soquel, soon to be developed as the Monterey Bay Golf and



Henry Allen Rispin (photo courtesy of P. Kirby)

Country Club.

"Mr. Rispin is not a stranger to the community in which he is now intending to invest large sums, having been connected with C.E. Canfield some years ago in the subdividing of Capitola Heights and he has since personally purchased other property along the heights overlooking the west bank of Soquel Creek,

near Capitola, and is about to erect a beautiful home on one of the sites along the bluff," read an item in the *Watsonville Pajaronian*.

Peggy Kirby, a longtime researcher of the family, believes H. Allen Rispin grew wealthy through his marriage to heiress Annette Winfield Blake. It was the Blakes who advanced him into the oil busi-



Rispin's library had glass enclosed cases, a richly patterned carpet and ornately carved table.

ness and coached his early success.

Kirby traced the couple together back as far as 1902, when they are listed as residents of San Francisco. He was then thirty; she was twenty-one. By the time they contemplated the move to Capitola, Rispin was a purported millionaire nudging fifty, with a son enrolled in a private military boarding school.

By then, the Blake influence was less obvious; most of the Capitola lands were purchased in Rispin's name, although several titles are listed under as well under Annette's. Management for both fell under supervision of his Bay Head Land Company.

Designed by a San Francisco architect, the 22-room, 9,000 square foot mansion cost \$250,000, equipped with the latest plumbing but modest in furnishings, given the size of the family's estate.

Among those who toured the home after its completion were the high school peers of Alan Winfield (Rip), the son, who had been transferred from the military school and graduated from Santa Cruz High School in 1921. Even though a newcomer, Rip was active in sports and popular with his classmates.

One quality he seemed to share most in common with his parents was a reserved shyness.

Capitolians saw little of the Rispins. They were known to

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Bedrooms were small but amply furnished. Shreds of the wallpaper can still be seen in some rooms.

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entertain socialites from the San Francisco Bay area, but gave out few local invitations. The mogul himself was best glimpsed as he passed by in a chauffeured black limousine, an automobile he was sometimes known to drive himself.

People here were confused, no doubt, by the family's dual residency in San Francisco.

Kirby discovered the family listed in the San Francisco City Directory as residents at a suite in the Fairmont Hotel from 1918 to 1924, and at a house on Jones Street from 1925-29. The parents were registered voters (Republicans) in Santa Cruz County

only in 1924 through 1926 and in 1928.

What awed Capitola as a palatial mansion was actually a second home more than a primary residence. It was home for Rispin when he supervised the business of Capitola-by-the-Sea, and a magnificent retreat for family and guests.

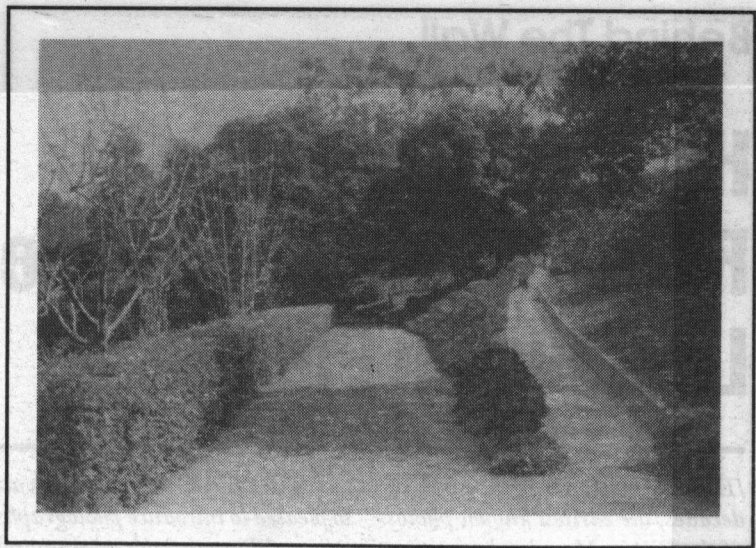
The mansion's status as a second home was underscored by an invitation made to President Coolidge in April, 1927. The proposal that the President use the Rispin mansion as a summer resort was made with H. Allen's consent, but it was issued in behalf of Santa Cruz County. The actual offer was made in Washington, D.C., by Fred D. McPherson of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.

"Please extend to H. Allen Rispin of Capitola by-the-Sea, the thanks of the President for his cordial offer of a summer home," replied Everett Sanders, the president's secretary.

Coolidge didn't come, of course, and it was perhaps just as well, because Rispin was flirting with hard times. His own Waterloo was close at hand.

"It's my impression that Rispin was a very private man, and yet a speculator who had built a house of cards that he kept up for a long time," said Kirby. "Eventually, he just couldn't do it anymore."

Capitola as a community was up to its rafters in trouble anyway. E.V. Woodhouse, a native of Queensland, Australia, bought the hotel and waterfront from Rispin in



Concrete paths and driveways intersected. The road was just wide enough for a 1920s limousine.

1924. He pumped \$50,000 into the hotel (and added an elevator), then realigned the Esplanade at the cost of another \$50,000. But nearly all

his new concessions washed to sea the next year, in February, 1926, when storm waves smashed across what so recently had been the beach.



The multiple levels of the mansion and grounds made the mansion appear larger.

About this same time, Capitola's reputation was tarnished by nightly arrests for "possession of intoxicating alcohol." The word was out that Capitola was the place to come for pint flask whiskey during Prohibition.

"Sheriff Sinnott and his deputies and Judge Younger are attempting to cooperate in putting a stop to rowdyism and promiscuous drinking on the streets of Capitola," read a news item on July 23, 1928.

Rispin promised to help the village but was slow to do

so; instead, he pumped the last of his financial energy into the Monterey Bay Golf and Country Club, completed in 1928.

All in all, the help he gave Capitola was sporadic and conditional. After state legislation was passed in 1927 that would allow creation of a police protection district, Rispin agreed to serve as a Capitola Police Commissioner. In the spring of 1928, he negotiated with Coast Counties Gas and Electric Company to provide gas, an announcement that

was "met with enthusiasm" by the community.

Another long awaited pledge was to give Capitola its first paved streets (but then Head Land Company charged 12.5 cents a square foot when the task was done).

Kirby found that Rispin was borrowing heavily against his Capitola properties in the mid-1920s, and soon, the absolute worst became known. Bay Head Land Company properties were turned over to the Frank Meline Auction Com-

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The fireplace, the windows and a portion of stairway are all that's left to identify this room.

RISPIN

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pany, which sent out 15 tons of literature promoting the sale of all of Capitola that either Woodhouse or the heirs of Hihn didn't own, including Rispin's house and his cherished golf course.

The ten-day event began August 16, 1929. This was less than three months before the stock market crash and start of the Depression, and less than five months from the burning of Hotel Capitola.

The advertisement alone must have been a great humiliation for Henry Rispin. His home and the golf course were scheduled to go on the auction block at 2:30 p.m., August 22 and 23.

For the public, it all looked like a good deal. People bidding on Capitola's residential lots could acquire title for just one-quarter the bid price and the rest in monthly payments over three years, with seven percent interest.

"The successful bidder on

any lot has the privilege of buying as many unsold lots next to it at the same price as he desires," the brochure promised. "Probably never before in the history of the entire San Francisco Bay District has such a gigantic and stupendous sale ever been attempted... This is not a fairy story, but a final smashing wind-up to convert all of the property to cash in ten days."

Those who bought lots near the golf course could get a free membership in the country club. The Meline Company also boasted of one lot to be given away free along with \$1,000 in presents (the raffle tickets were made available only to white adults).

Some of the items, "works of art, chests of silver, silver dishes, bric-a-brac and literally hundreds of useful souvenirs to numerous to mention" may have come from the Rispin household.

On that Friday night, auctioneer Miles Allen gave an impressive speech on coastal his-



The bricks still surround this patio's central planter, but the nearby aviary where Rispin kept his tiny quail is long gone.

tory and the beauty of Capitola by-the-Sea.

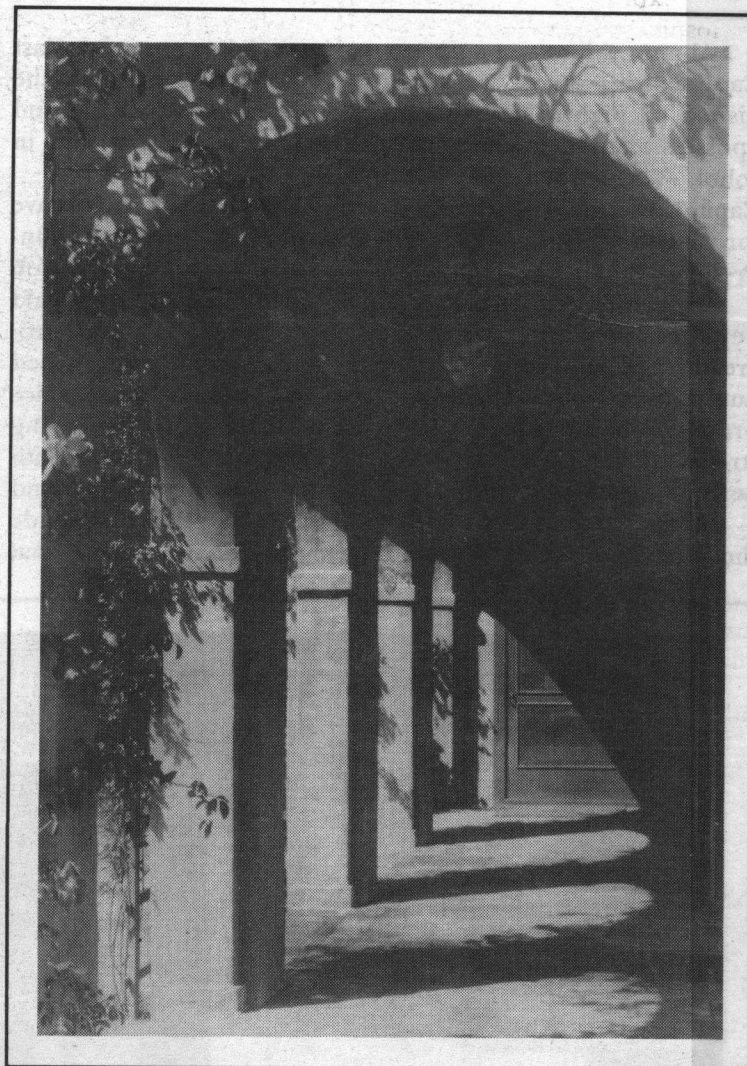
The actual details of the auction are unclear. The Meline Company filed an attachment for \$7,963.70 against Bay Head Land Company, probably to cover its fees.

The Blanchard Company, mortgage holders, foreclosed a year later on the mansion, the general Capitola property and golf course. The Rispin name remained in Capitola phone directory until 1931. The man himself resurfaced in Chicago briefly in 1932, and then disappeared.

By this time, the stories about the Rispins were repeated often as people attempted to understand what had happened. Rispin had a liquor cellar with a sliding door, and a secret compartment behind a sliding bookcase. Perhaps he was a bootlegger, or an alcoholic. Certainly, the chauffeur and other staff were suspect.

"Researching the family, I eventually became more interested in Annette and Alan than Rispin himself," said Kirby. "She had come from a well-to-do family, and had married with a certain expectation. It didn't happen the way it was supposed to. Alan was an all-around American boy, a good athlete, who died while living in poverty at the Watsonville YMCA. To me, they were the victims, the shadow people behind Rispin."

Noel Patterson, who managed the lands of Frederick Hihn, said he saw Rispin in



The front entry was designed to enhance the Mediterranean architectural design.

Santa Cruz only once in the 1930s, when the former millionaire asked him for enough cash for a meal.

Annette Rispin was estranged from her husband at the time of her death, August 29, 1941, at a relative's home in San Jose. She died of a cerebral embolism at the age of 59 years. She was living on

29th Avenue in San Francisco, in a house that's still standing. Kirby described the dwelling as "a frame house, not at all fancy."

The mother's ashes were sent to Alan, then a resident at Imola, the site of Napa State Hospital.

Although only in his mid-forties, Alan was next to die.



Master bedroom featured its own bath.

He expired in Watsonville Hospital on January 18, 1946, after a two-day series of epileptic seizures without consciousness. His father signed the death certificate.

Perhaps it was then that Rispin made his one trip back to the mansion on Wharf Road. It had been sold at a price of \$90,000 to St. Joseph's Monastery and been home for the Sisters of Poor Clares since 1941. When he returned, it was to inquire about the small quail that had lived in an aviary on the patio out back.

The nuns told him they didn't eat meat, and he was satisfied. He asked for nothing else. □



Central livingroom of the Rispin mansion adapted easily to the needs of the Order of Poor Clares.



Walkways surrounded the lawn and fountain pond.

LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING

Renovation Plans for Rispin Mansion Still in the Making

by Carolyn Swift

Capitola's Rispin mansion looks a lot bigger from the outside than it does from the vantage point of one of the home's small rooms.

Inside it looks puny, and barren, it's chambers numerous but exceedingly modest in size. Once there were 22 rooms but now that many are hard to identify. Most of the impressive features like the intricate wood wall panels, hanging chandeliers and carved banisters are long gone. Only the bathtubs remain, only because they were too heavy and too hard to take away.

What is left is covered with graffiti, tagged by vandals during decades of disregard.

The Spanish-Mission-Colonial-Mediterranean style structure covers nearly 10,000 feet with four

levels and two wings. It sits on a slope with two stories on the west side and four on the east, facing Soquel Creek. The place has six flues and only five fireplaces; the sixth flue goes to one of those mysterious rooms in the basement, where there's no fireplace but some meandering pipes and a thick sliding door (supporting the old rumor that Rispin or a member of his staff was engaged in bootlegging during Prohibition).

People who don't know where the mansion is usually recognize it when told: It's that empty building on Wharf Road, near Shadowbrook, behind the big thick wall.

There's a fence and a caretaker there to remind folks they aren't allowed close enough to take a peek inside. A lot of work needs to be done before that can happen. Now, missing floor boards and partially torn away walls make sightseeing unsafe.

The building's outside is what's called "monolithic concrete" with plaster finish. The roof is a hip and gable construction with Spanish tile. Even after 70 years — with nearly 50 of them in

neglect — the old home is structurally sound.

"We've had engineers come and they've tested it," confirmed Capitola City Planner Susan Westman. "It meets the standards."

While it looks like a decrepit shell, the mansion can be restored. And people in the community are beginning to talk about how.

"There was an original group interested in the mansion, they had looked at various uses for it," Westman explained. "That group had formed prior to the city's purchase of the property, and since there was no way then to provide any parking, their ideas were sort of set aside."

Now the city owns the lot across the street, which could provide parking for both a library and the Rispin mansion. A new complication, however, is the American Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines that must be followed for buildings using state and federal moneys.

"That's going to have an impact on what areas of the mansion can be used for the public," she con-

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RENOVATION

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tinued. "Anything you open up for the public will have to be accessible. Unfortunately, with the way the house is designed, because of all the different levels, that's going to create some complications. They can all be solved, but they are going to be expensive solutions."

If the Capitola City Council sets the mansion's restoration as a goal for the future, an investment plan may be set up to try and get it restored and reopened.

But the community that prodded the city to buy the structure may have to get actively involved in its preservation. Attracting suffi-

cient interest to back the mansion's restoration means letting the public get a closer look.

So, restoring the grounds may be the first in a series of steps toward a whole new life for a home that's been abused but not defeated.

Community experts, school horticulture programs, gardening enthusiasts and energetic workers could perhaps devise a restoration plan based on the old photographs of how the gardens looked in the days of Rispin and the convent of Poor Clares.

The job won't be an easy one, Westman agreed, but it's a beginning. □

New Restoration Committee Forming

The Capitola City Council gave its consent October 14 to a suggestion from City Councilmember Margaret Fabrizio that a citizen's committee be established to begin working toward restoration of the Rispin Mansion.

Fabrizio is now trying to reach those who were active on a previous committee to

see if they are interested in resuming involvement.

An organizational meeting scheduled Nov. 16 is open to everyone interested in seeing the Rispin mansion refurbished and the grounds opened to the public. The meeting will be held at 5:30 p.m. in the Capitola City Hall community room. □