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Alan Winfield Rispin as team captain at his private military school, shortly before transfer to Santa Cruz High. (Rispin is front, 3rd from left, holding football.)

RISPIN: The Myth & The Mystery

by Carolyn Swift

For years the Rispin mansion, veiled by a faded green gate and pocked cement wall, has begged attention from all who come near.

"Beware of Dog"... "Death is Here!"—the graffiti did little to put off the curious. Hippies, treasure hunters, transients, kids, historians and would-be developers have all hypothesized about the Wharf Road estate and the elusive Rispins of Capitola-by-the-Sea.

Riddles heighten the mansion's allure. What we don't know about Rispin is more enticing than what's been discovered as fact.

What about that sliding bookcase and those weird pipes in the basement? Was Rispin responsible for the bottles of rum found on local beaches during Prohibition? And what became of his money? Where did the Rispins go when they went away?

Questions like these have

been asked over and over. Now, for the first time, some of them will be answered.

The *Mid-County Post*, local historian Peggy Kirby and myself, are planning a publication to be released within a year. Included will be details to unravel the mystery once and for all.

Peggy Kirby is a good part of the reason. Ten years ago, she was one of the young students fond of snooping through the mansion and former convent of Poor Clares. Infected by its despair, she set out to find record of the estate's first inhabitants.

What she learned through research and her local history classes taught her the depth of this particular puzzle.

Only a handful of residents remembered Henry Rispin at all, not to mention his son, Alan Winfield, or wife, Annette. All had simply vanished into the Great Depres-

sion, surfacing only briefly in poverty before disappearing forever.

Today Kirby is dusting off some of her initial work and renewing her enthusiasm for additional clues. What she knows already surpasses all that has ever been written about the family.

She has seen, for instance, what Henry looked like, and has numerous photos of Alan at various stages of boyhood. She knows how the elder Rispin got his money, and when and where he died. All of this is new information.

Kirby's first leads to the Rispin mystery came through her own ties to a pioneering Santa Cruz family, the Steeles of Ano Nuevo and through her grandmother, Bernice Taylor, who still lives in the family home where she was born in 1905.

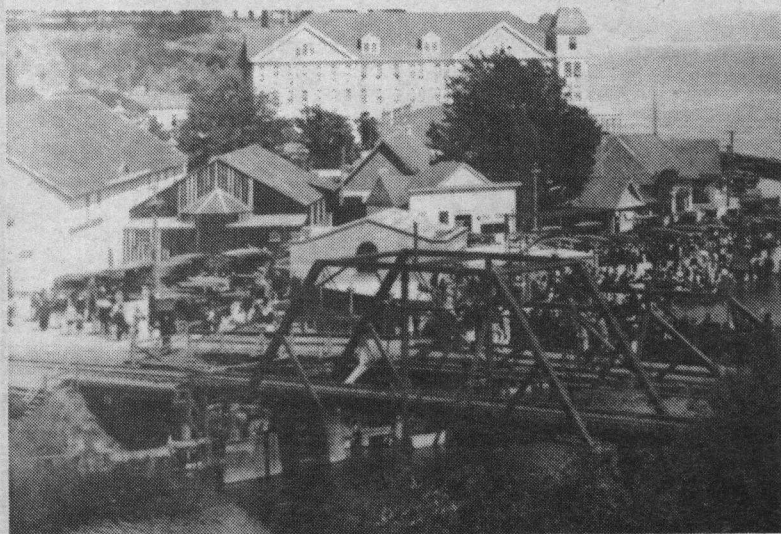
Mrs. Taylor happened to be a classmate of Alan "Rip" Rispin the year he transferred to Santa Cruz High School. Even though Rip was a mid-year entrant, he graced the yearbook pages devoted to spring sports and drama. He was popular.

"He was known as the life of the party," said Kirby, "but on the other hand, nobody really knew him. Alan was shy."

The younger Rispin was taken from military boarding school to join his parents in 1921, once the 22-room, \$250,000 Capitola mansion was completed.

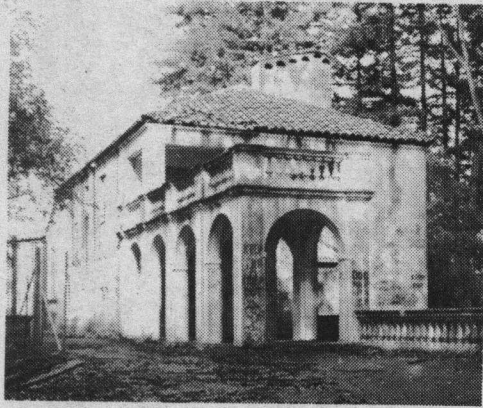
How did the Rispins come to own all of Capitola?

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Capitola of the Rispin era, 1920s.

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Rispin mansion.

In 1919, this was still "Camp Capitola," the resort founded by Frederick Hihn in 1869. Hihn died in 1913, and this part of the estate was inherited by his daughter Katherine Cope Henderson. She allowed the enterprises to be sold through an intermediary. Rispin made his first purchase from a man named G.D. Hull in 1918, and did not buy Capitola directly from the Hihns.

A native of Canada, Henry Rispin grew wealthy through his marriage to heir-

ess Annette Winfield Blake. She introduced him to the oil business where he was speculative and successful.

He was a middle-aged man of 47 years by the time he decided to buy Capitola and move here from Colorado.

"One of the curious things is the way the property was listed," said Kirby. "At first, everything is in Anette's name; later, Henry had it transferred to his own."

For ten years, Rispin controlled nearly all of Capitola's livelihood.

He had the resort, the streets, the water works, electric light utilities, the beach, part of Depot Hill and 200 acres of what is now Monterey Heights, in addition to the eight acres of his own home estate (including a turnaround in the garage and a pedestrian bridge across the creek.)

Locals had rising hopes. Rispin inspired the resort to blossom from a summer campground to a modern 1920s-style configuration of weekend tourist attractions, family amusements and bungalow cottages.

Henry promised to usher the tiny vacation spot into a new era, with community life "on the up-and-up."

The new mansion was grandiose, looming on the hill—plenty big enough for company. But Capitolans were seldom invited. Most of the Rispin business connections were centered in San Francisco, and villagers rarely saw either Henry or Annette (who remains, to this day, the most elusive of all.)

Rispin took many risks, expanded rapidly, and gave Capitola a taste of the speculator's dream; it was a taste that soon turned bitter.

In the early '20s, E.V. "Teddy" Woodhouse, manager of the Capitola Hotel, inherited \$1 million from his father in Australia, and promptly bought the hotel and nearby structures. He paid Rispin another \$50,000 for 340,000 feet of ocean front, and within five years built up a row of new enterprises on the Esplanade.

Woodhouse, who was visible in his contributions to Capitola, was frequently mistaken by locals for the man who owned the rest of the resort.

The most popular is Henry's drinking problem, and his tendency to disappear for days without explanation (or perhaps even memory) of where he had been.



Monterey Bay Golf and Country Club was opened by Rispin in late 1920s. Today it is Monterey Bay Heights subdivision in Soquel, still sporting "Polo Fairway" and "Golf" drives, among others.

People tended to credit Rispin for improvements accomplished by Woodhouse. Henry, in fact, was careful not to give the local community too much.

Dutifully once a year, Rispin's Bay Head Land Company fenced off the streets to traffic, protecting their private ownership. Once, in a promise to deed the streets to Capitola, Bay Head at the same time demanded payment of 12.5 cents a square foot for the paving.

Kirby has discovered there were many rumors about the Rispins during their tenure as liege lords for Capitola.

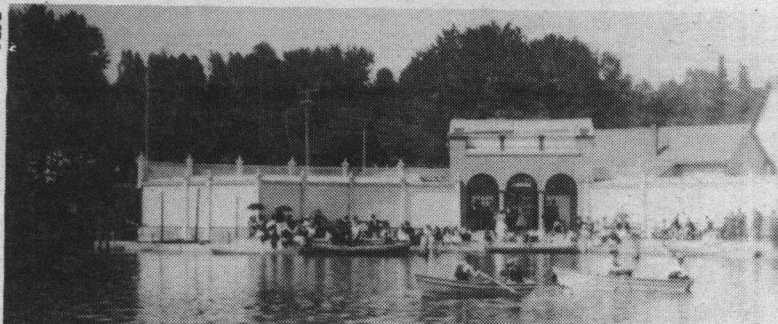
Henry was a recluse, living distant from others, cloistered in his mansion.

One woman remembers that Henry was not good company alone, while others believed his chauffeur, Lloyd, was the bootlegger that used the mansion's "secret passages."

Meanwhile, Teddy Woodhouse continued to serve as overseer of much of the resort. Capitola was still seasonal; it is very doubtful that major criminal activity occurred here (or that Al Capone was ever a visitor—this is a rumor that probably did not happen.)

In the mid-1920s, things

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Woodhouse bathhouse, built 1925, was destroyed by high tides of 1926.

looked pretty good. Woodhouse pushed for a year-round season when the Esplanade was finished in 1925, although the next year, his hopes were literally dashed to the ground.

The fierce storm and high tides in the winter of 1926 pounded the shoreline and smashed every building from the bandstand to the bathhouse.

It took nearly everything Woodhouse had left to rebuild.

Nobody knows exactly how Rispin lost his fortune. It may have been poor investments of Bay Head Land Company, or Rispin's personal

mismanagement. In any case, bankruptcy was fairly apparent (although denied) in July of 1929.

On Friday night, August 16, 1929, Miles Allen stood outside a huge tent at Capitola beach. Allen and his employers, the Frank Meline Company of Los Angeles, had sent out 15 tons of literature to advertise sale of the entire resort. Potential buyers, enticed by special "inducements" were brought in by hired coach and given the best accommodations.

The press played it safe, parroting details of the new release:

"The disposition of Capitola-by-the-Sea by the Bay Head Land Company does not mean the company is going out of business," read the article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "It has other properties in various parts of the state, particularly in San Jose. It merely means it will retire from the Capitola field and in so doing will sell the greater part of the resort."

In advance, the papers said Capitola's sale was so big it was a "monster action" attracting thousands for the greater part of the week.

Up on the block were 1,500 residential and business lots, a fishing wharf, the band-

stand concessions not owned by Woodhouse, and Rispin's personal estate.

In addition, the auction plucked the unsullied turf of the 18-hole golf course, which was recently completed next to the town of Soquel. Estimated value of the package was more than \$2 million.

The first night of the auction, the air buzzed with Allen's sales talk. He began with the tracing of settlement and speculation from the coast inward to the state's interior.

"San Francisco, San Diego, Santa Barbara and other cities are examples of this being true," quoted journalist Laura Rawson, "so why not Santa Cruz and Capitola? The beautiful location of Capitola, the pressure of the population and the popularity of the location will greatly increase during the coming five years and the value of the land in proportion."

The Great Depression was coming. Whatever the intent of the auction, it apparently failed to work. Papers had little to say once the event was over. And, several years later, efforts were still being made to dispose of both the mansion and golf course.

Santa Cruz County was less and less happy with Rispin and the Bay Head

Land Company.

Kirby has learned that Alan stuck with his father, although Annette left Henry sometime after the Capitola bankruptcy.

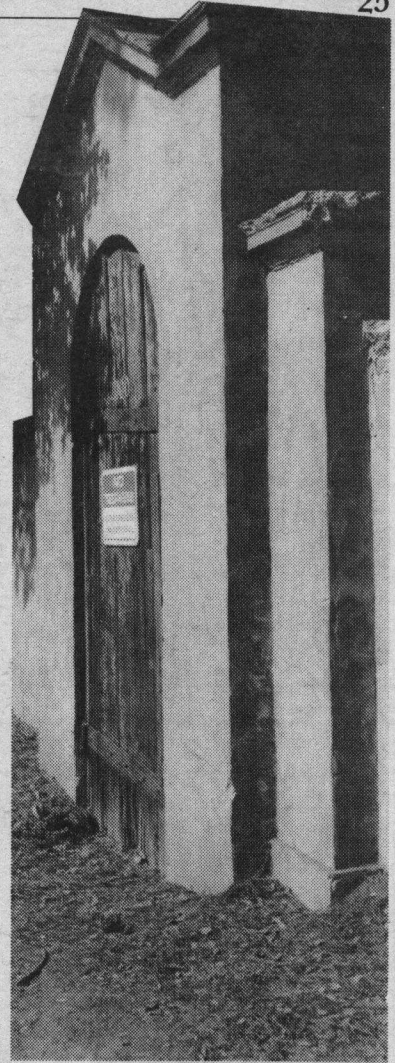
Soon, all development of Capitola Village idled to a dead stop. The Capitola Hotel burned down in late December of 1929.

Throughout the mid-1930s, the more lavish of Capitola's amenities, such as the Capitola Yacht Club (on the wharf) and the Hawaiian Gardens Night Club, also became victims of fire. Both burned in 1933.

The crowds that still came had little money, but they did come, and somehow Capitola survived. Henry and Alan weren't so lucky. Alan died a relatively young man, apparently of epilepsy. Within a year of his son's demise, Henry, age 74, also succumbed.

If Henry and Alan had driven past their old home in the mid-40s (which they may have done, on occasion), both would have witnessed its transition to a convent for the Order of Poor Clares.

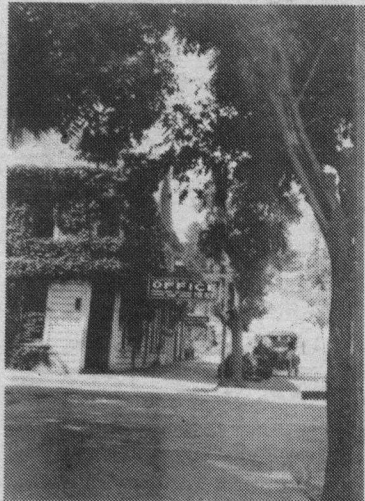
In its own way, the convent served to preserve the mystery, the reclusiveness, the secrets and the sadness of Henry A. Rispin and his family. □



Behind the wall on Wharf Road stands the Rispin Mansion, but as the sign reads No Trespassing, beware since the city hires an around the clock caretaker for the grounds.

Emil Edgren, Courtesy: Capitola Museum

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Hihn's superintendent's building was used by Rispin in 1920s. Sign advertises bungalow cottages at Capitola-by-the-Sea.