

Capitola

A time of change

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- - The Rispin Years, 1919 - 1920

by Phil Walker

Henry Allen Rispin descended upon Capitola like a summer storm. Personally shy and quiet; his ideas and plans were a striking contrast, and once committed to them there was no turning back. It was a storm that flashed brightly and briefly.

The sale of oil wells in Colorado was rumored to have yielded him over three million dollars. Whatever he did bring to Capitola was spent mostly within a period of two years; 1919 and 1920; and although he held on valiantly until 1928, rentals of cottages, tent city, concessions and property sales did not bring in enough to keep him from financial disaster. In Capitola he envisioned a second Venice; and since his connections were in San Francisco, he hired a well-known San Francisco architect named McRae to redesign the little city, half-hidden in a cup of Monterey bay.

By the summer of 1920 most of the down-town streets had been paved, the cement all mixed in an awkward machine that was pulled along with the work. Cement and gravel were stock-piled at intervals along the route of paving, and loads of gravel for the cement pavement were hauled from Soquel Creek by men, mules, and wagons. Loading was by hand, one shovelfull at a time, but wagon beds were emptied easily by turning on edge loose two by four floorboards.

Even an incomplete list of the buildings moved is impressive. The clubhouse that stood on the east bank of the creek next to the bridge was moved to the southwest corner of Capitola and San Jose avenues, and there converted from a billiard room into a restaurant. Lumber from the original bathhouse along the river (just south of the clubhouse) was hauled to Wharf road and used in forming for the Rispin mansion (see photos). The skating rink with the maple floor was moved from its location on Capitola avenue to a position on San Jose avenue, a distance of over 100 feet. At its new location it was reached by a curved drive and set off with formal gardens, and an impressive arched entrance. The facade was stuccoed, and it became

water bath rooms, shooting gallery, movie theatre were torn down and the lumber used on other projects. (Except for one building, the entire concession block was destroyed by fire in 1933). Houses elsewhere in the city which were considered substantial but in wrong locations were moved farther back from the beach, and other houses judged "shacks" were torn down entirely.

So much activity stimulated other activity. Peterson and West, the garage owners, purchased the unused Knight's Opera House on Park street in Santa Cruz, and after pulling it apart board by board, hauled it to Capitola and rebuilt it on California avenue behind their new garage. With its "headboard" front the building was a classic of its kind and stood until the middle 1950's when both it and the main garage were condemned and torn down.

A section of beach, somewhat triangular in form, was usurped when the Esplanade was re-aligned and paved. Widest opposite San Jose avenue and tapering as it approached Monterey avenue at one end, and the bridge at the other, the total area of beach taken by the road amounted to about an acre. This action has lead more than one old timer to comment, "He ruined the town". Reasons for changing the Esplanade were both economic and aesthetic. The desire to create a graceful curve in the road rather than a straight line from the hotel to the bridge might be considered aesthetic, but most reasons were economic. Lots thus made in front of the row of six "look-alike" houses still standing were to be used for the construction of four sixteen room apartments at \$15,000 apiece. These apartment houses were never constructed, and in time the lots were purchased by the owners of the same houses to insure the permanency of their view.

The seawall, by engineering estimates, was a brilliant piece of work. Harry Hooper praises the design's effectiveness and the engineering

skill that produced a wall strong enough to withstand waveshocks for over 45 years. Architect McRae worked his magic and must have been proud of it.

Capitola's picturesque fishing village at the entrance to the wharf, setting for a least one William S. Hart movie, was completely demolished, and the land graded, and marked off into lots; although in 1924 or soon thereafter the portion east of Wharf road was developed under multiple ownership as a single unit: The Venetian Court. The builders of this fine complex observed the flavor that Rispin wished to impart to the town. Young old-timers remember their comment at the time it was built, "It won't last". But, the Venetian Court has lasted, over 45 years.

Rispin's plan to rebuild the wooden bridge over Soquel Creek and construct a bluff entrance to the hotel did not materialize but the long stairway of native stone to the top of depot hill did, and can still be seen next to the present one of concrete. Extensive work was done to improve the water supply and the sanitation system.

No history of the rispin years would be complete without making a few observations that might explain his failure. The fact that he made poor investments elsewhere has been covered in a previous article as was the reality that he often spent money foolishly. But other forces were at work, these in addition to the overwhelming and obvious fact that too much of the work of moving buildings, paving streets, etc. did not directly produce income. These were factors that Rispin did not observe and could not control. The automobile, economical, convenient, practical, was creating new horizons for the American public. People were going farther, faster and more often. Better roads and more roads meant more places to go. Capitola was only one of these places. Rispin's tragedy was, inevitably, everyman's tragedy who reaches too far for too much.

(Editor's Note: The Rispin mansion was given a 45-day reprieve from the wrecker's ball by Capitola councilman, who gave the mansion's current owners until then to come up with a suitable plan for making improvement demanded by the city. See story on Page 3.)

it was reached by a curved drive and set off with formal gardens, and an impressive arched entrance. The facade was stuccoed, and it became Capitola's famous ballroom, The Hawaiian Gardens. Two buildings between the bandstand and the bathhouse were moved across the street and turned around to face the ocean. One became a candy store. Peterson and West's Garage on the Esplanade was torn down and a new garage built at the corner of Capitola and Stockton avenues.

Rispin's plan was to have the entire block bounded by Capitola and San Jose avenues, and the Esplanade, reserved for concessions, and to leave the beach front free of any buildings. Two exceptions were made to this rule: the bandstand and the bath house, the bandstand because it was already a landmark and the obvious and proper place for a Sunday concert, and the bathhouse because it was needed by bathers as a place to change clothes. The new bathhouse was built in 1920 next to the bridge. It became the nucleus of the building now occupying the site and presently undergoing sandblasting and remodeling. The merry-go-round, shade frames, hot

itola councilman, who gave the mansion's current owners until then to come up with a suitable plan for making improvement demanded by the city. See story on Page 3.)



STAIRWAY TO MANSION--One of the many entrances to the Rispin mansion can be seen above, depicting the care that went into designing the building--Photo courtesy of the Mid-County Historical Society.



ENGULFED IN GREENERY -- Today, the old Rispin mansion on Capitola's Wharf road, is buried in a sea of greenery, as can be seen in this view from one of the windows--Photo courtesy of the Mid-County Historical Society.