

SwiftCurrents

New Stuff About Capitola Pioneer

by Carolyn Swift

Bio-R
For an oil man, H. Allen Rispin came from the right place — he was born August 26, 1872, in Petrolia, Ontario, the location of the only producing oil field in the Dominion of Canada. But the great power over his life was not only oil, as people have always believed.

Instead, it was the iron horse business of spikes and rails.

While the old, now city-owned, Rispin home rests alone in the shadows beside Wharf Road in Capitola awaiting the progress of on-going development discussions, the man who built it remains mostly a mystery. However, occasionally clues pop up to help complete the puzzle of the man and his mansion. Two articles have come to the Capitola Museum that contain some new insights.

But first, a fast wrap-up of what's already known about Mr. Rispin.

He came here about 1918 and began developing Capitola Heights before purchasing the entire resort from the heirs of Frederick Hihn in 1919. He then built a fabulous house with a quarter-million dollar price tag, and tried to convince wealthy San Franciscans to buy lots in Capitola and do the same. He over-specified and was going broke by 1928.

The Rispins — never seen much around Capitola — disappeared from view completely around the start of the Great Depression. His wife left him, and both H. Allen and his son, Alan, lived out the rest of their years poverty-stricken.

California Mutual Building and Loan Association, the corporation that held the deed of trust to the house, was liquidated in 1940. The mansion was sold to the St. Josephs Monastery and became home to the Order of Poor Clares, cloistered nuns who had previously resided in Oakland. A fire delayed remodeling of the mansion in 1941.

Shortly after the nuns settled in, Rispin made a brief final visit. Nothing more is known of him until he died six years later, and was buried in an unmarked grave at Olivet Memorial Park in Colma. He was 75 years old.

Because he once owned nearly all of Capitola and had wielded a powerful influence on the fortunes of this little community, people began to fabricate all



Left: H. Allen Rispin from book published in 1915. Right: Rispin Mansion circa 1924. Photo taken from opposite side of Soquel Creek. Home is now delapidated and owned by the city. Inset: Rispin bedroom. Circa 1924.

kinds of tales. They said, for instance, that Rispin was an alcoholic, a bootlegger with ties to organized crime. Most of the rumors began only after locals discovered his mansion had a hidden cellar, a vault behind a sliding bookcase, and a mysterious extra chimney flue. But none of the stories were ever confirmed.

Genuine accounts of Rispin's life are only slightly less titillating.

The first profile is included at the end of a 1915 volume entitled "Journalism in California" by John Young. The book chronicled the lives of influential San Franciscans of the time and was compiled from the archives of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Rispin and his photograph appear on page 315.

The narrative basically struts his role not only as vice-president of the Amity Oil Company, but as secretary of the Kernal Consolidated Oil Company and vice-president of the Mission Quarry Company.

Rispin is portrayed as a successful businessman on the rise, but his real life experience had its ups and downs from the very beginning. He was, for starters, an orphan.

Although the family traced its line back to the battle of Agincourt in the 14th century, Rispin's parents were natives of Britain and both died while he was an infant. H. Allen was youngest among six children left to the support of their eldest brother, 18-year-old W. E. Rispin. The

brother got a job working on the railroad and did not marry or start a family of his own until each of his young charges was grown and educated.

As the baby of the family, H. Allen was intensely aware of his brother's sacrifices. Seeking to free him from his obligations, the youngest Rispin quit school at age 14 and set out on his own. He got a job as assistant clerk in the passenger office of the Grand Trunk Railroad at Chatham, Ontario, and stayed there four years. At age 18, he moved to Chicago and became a clerk in the auditing offices of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad.

He traveled from there to New York, Tennessee and Kentucky, before heading to California. He got a job as manager of United Oil Producers, which merged in 1902 with Standard Oil. Rispin was an assistant manager of Rockefeller's fuel oil management division but stayed only a year before striking out on his own.

His real foothold in the oil business had been achieved in 1901 with his marriage to Annette Blake, daughter of Isaac E. Blake, California oil pioneer and, at one time, president of the United Oil Producers.

A second recently-discovered article about Rispin appears on the front page of a 1926 edition of the *Santa Cruz Evening News*. Neatly sandwiched between promotional

photos of the Santa Cruz coastline, is a headline that reads "Why H. Allen Rispin Came to Santa Cruz."

The big surprise here is that Rispin came to town a whole lot earlier than anyone had guessed. He evidently discovered Capitola the season after the 1906 earthquake and great San Francisco fire. He was very interested in the building of the Ocean Shore Railroad that was supposed to connect San Francisco to Santa Cruz, so he came here in the spring of 1907 looking to buy land along the proposed route.

Rispin told the *Evening News* reporter that he initially hesitated to build a summer home here because he was uncertain about "the expenditure of much money for a home on land which was bordered by the rubbish heaps of the little town." His first plan was to have his architect design a country "shack" in which he and his family could spend their vacations "roughing it" at Camp Capitola.

The story also implies that Rispin was at least a business acquaintance of Capitola's founder, Frederick Hihn.

"His curiosity had grown with his friends oft-repeated recitals of the wonders in and about Capitola," said the writer. "His expectations must have been abundantly realized for the recorders books show that during that year he purchased 84 acres from Henry Daubenbis, including the site upon which it was proposed to build the station for the

Ocean Shore Railroad in Capitola."

The Ocean Shore had already run into trouble about that time, so Rispin's first investment in Capitola would have been a bad one, had he been counting on it. The line was never completed.

He picked Capitola as the place to spend his summers, "selling lots, hunting, swimming, fishing, hiking and horseback riding," read the story in the *Evening News*.

Selling lots was obviously his favorite sport. This write-up about Rispin was really part of a newspaper promotion for the whole region, weaving a long narration about Capitola's sumptuous landscape around a few tiny kernels of actual fact.

Rispin left California in 1915 to take up residence in Denver, Colorado, dealing with business there and in Wyoming. He said the cold winters soon drove him back to California, and he came home ready to make a serious investment in Capitola.

"City water, gas, electricity, a modern sewer and lighting system, paving, one after another the improvements came and Capitola grew by leaps and bounds," the paper stated, estimating Capitola grew ten times in its population from 1920 to 1926.

Rispin had control of his resort for only a few years — less than 10 altogether. In 1915, Rispin had four brothers who each had one son, leaving a lineage which may someday write the final chapters of the Rispin legacy. □