

# Capitola Sunset

SUMMER 2020

CAPITOLA HISTORICAL MUSEUM

NEWS, EVENTS & INFORMATION

*Providing a future for our past.*

In May, we published a newsletter featuring personal glimpses from the board. It was only distributed electronically. To see it, search "Capitola Museum," click on "newsletters," and look for *Capitola Sunset SPECIAL EDITION 2020*.

## President's Message

By Niels Kisling

We hope this issue of Capitola Sunset finds you well. It's no secret that this has been a difficult year for all of us. Perhaps you can take comfort in knowing that many obstacles you are facing are common to all of us; social isolation, uncertainty for the future and loss of freedoms come to mind.

I would love to see all my friends and family in-person again, and I'd like to know what my world will be like next year, and I miss the freedom of going out in public, without restriction, anytime I want.

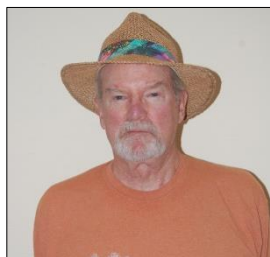
Your Capitola Museum Board struggles with these same issues, I'm sure, but we have not lost our desire to follow our path—our goal continues to be to *provide a future for our past*.

At our last board meeting I was a bit flat and uninspired from these months of isolation under quarantine. Emmy Mitchell-Lynn, our youngest board member, rallied and steered us to create a theme around this newsletter. Her words are more powerful than mine will ever be:

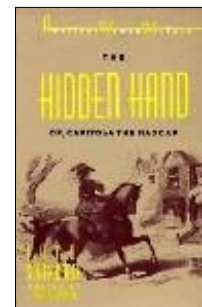
*"This August 18th marks the 100th anniversary of Women's Right to Vote in the United States. To honor this momentous occasion, for the summer edition of the newsletter we've selected a theme of "Women in Capitola's History and Community." This edition focuses on women's roles in the development and continuation of our town, and the lasting impact they've had on our community. It features articles by and about many prominent women who have contributed to Capitola's history and culture."*

Celebrating women's suffrage would not be proper without remembering that it took another 45 years for African Americans to be guaranteed their right to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was another huge step towards equality in America, but we all know there is still work to be done to make sure no one is left behind.

We also recognize the passing of Bob Anderson. Bob was a tireless museum volunteer and board member. He served the Capitola Historical Museum for eight years, and during that time he was our treasurer and volunteer coordinator, but mostly he simply served our community and the museum. Bob's hand usually went up first when we had an unfilled shift or needed help with any extra-curricular project or museum event. God bless you and your family, and thank you for your friendship Bob.



In closing, we hope you will enjoy this issue, and we hope you will never forget our city's namesake. Capitola Le Noir (A.K.A. Capitola Black) was a feisty character in the E.D.E.N. Southworth series and book, *The Hidden Hand*. Just like the heroes that you will read about here, Capitola loved adventure, thrived on danger and starred in sensational plots that some critics thought were too stimulating for delicate female readers. Those same delicate readers bought millions of books and many went on to make their own history, inspired by this feisty character. Her name, Capitola, lives on.



We honor the women of Capitola and, as I like to say, well-behaved women rarely make history. 🌹

## CAPITOLA MUSEUM CHARACTERS DON MASKS



You may have seen this recent post in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. Judy and Paul Parsons gave our trolley riders masks to keep them safe in this pandemic. Local artist, Frank Hill, created the trolley cut out and many other art projects for your museum.

The Capitola Historical Museum brings a much-needed light moment to a dark time as the faces on a display outside of their Capitola Avenue building don masks in the spirit of responsible behavior during the time of COVID-19.

## First Female Councilmembers

When Carin Mudgett was elected to the Capitola City Council in March, 1978, she was one of three newcomers to the council. The other first-timers were Jerry Clarke and Bob Garcia. Shop-owner Mudgett (now Carin Hanna) was heralded by the other council members, city staff, and media as Capitola's first female councilmember.

Nobody on the council (whose average age was 35) could remember a woman being on the council before. This came as a bit of a surprise to Ruth Gabrielson, who was elected in 1956. "I had four good years," she said in a 1978 interview. She even served a term as vice-mayor, but in 1960 lost a bid for another term. She said that back then the City annual budget was \$20,000. Prior to being elected, she volunteered with the Chamber of Commerce.

The *Sentinel* ran a story about the goof, which no doubt brought some chuckles. *The article about the oversight, however, had an oversight.* It did not mention that another woman, Peggy Slatter, was elected to the council two years before Gabrielson.

A professional swimming instructor, Slatter operated the Pleasure Point Plunge (a nearby swimming facility), and



she was president of the Chamber of Commerce. In the early 1950s she was also chief organizer of the popular Water Fantasy, held each fall in Soquel Creek Lagoon. There were choreographed swimming performances, swimming races, a nighttime water

ballet, and a boat parade. The fall event was the precursor to the Capitola Begonia Festival.

As in 1978, the three openings on the council in the 1954 election were taken by newcomers. W. D. White and Albert Meek won the other two seats. Two incumbents were defeated. Only 347 people cast ballots out of the 1,001 potential voters. White garnered 235 votes, Meek 230, and Slatter 203. "I sincerely hope that I can live up to the confidence that the voters have placed in me," she said. "It is my aim to help increase the popularity of Capitola and bring more people to the local beach. By working with the Chamber of Commerce and the council, I will put my efforts into this project."

Slatter resigned from the council after less than a year, but she should always be remembered as Capitola's first female councilmember and a major promoter of Capitola during the city's formative years. She later helped with the Begonia Festival and in 1962 served as president of the festival. She died in 1996. 🌸

## Edna Messini; Tale of a Gopher Hunter

*Longtime Capitola resident Edna Messini ran the Venetian Court Motel in the 1950s and 1960s. She also helped organize the annual Begonia Festivals. Edna had many unusual experiences, most involving drunken guests at the motel. But this story, told in her own words, is about her battle with gophers. Is it all true? You be the judge.*

We had gophers on the lawn by the hundreds. In fact, they would eat lettuce out of your hand. Everything we planted they pulled into their burrows. Unbelievable! We hated to dig up the lawn to catch them, so we tried strychnine on prunes. They loved them and thrived.

Being the daughter of a rancher, I was confident a trap would have to be used. We bought four wire traps, but to no avail. So I took a trip to the ranch to borrow a box trap. They learned to spring this without getting caught. Now the garden was even more full of burrows and mounds of dirt.

People passing by would give me advice such as fish heads (they just pushed these out to leave a very unpleasant odor) or moth balls (they ate them).

Carbon monoxide was next. Backing the car up with a hose, we went to work, but with so many burrows, the area looked like Yellowstone with its many steam spouts. Nothing happened. I became known as the lady of the gopher.

An elderly gentleman said, "use your box trap and put perfume on the back near the hole." What kind I asked, male or female? "Well," he answered, "if you don't know the sex of the gopher, and miss, change the perfume." At this point—and given the horrible condition of the yard—I had nothing to lose. So I took the advice of this "nut." To my surprise, it worked. It really worked! Within a week we were free of gophers. 🌸



The gopher was the arch enemy of disturbed grounds keeper Carl Spackler (Bill Murray) in the 1980 movie, *Caddyshack*. Spackler comically tried to kill it with plastic explosives, a rifle, and a high-pressure water hose without success. He never used the perfume technique. This gopher would have been long-gone if Edna Messini had been on the job.

# The Rispin Cup

By Frank Perry

She was only 14, with bobbed hair and a big grin, but Hilda Curtis was a powerhouse in the water. Born in Utah



in 1908, she came with her family to Alameda while still quite young. In those days, Alameda had a swimming club called the Neptune Club which trained young men and women for competitive swimming.

Swimming was very popular in the early 1920s, more so than today. Women had finally shed the bulky wool “bathing” suits of years past and could do some serious swimming. One popular race was across the Golden Gate.

In 1920, Henry Allen Rispin, as the new owner of Capitola, immediately sought to take advantage of the fad and use it to promote the town. He organized several aquatic events that summer. While some were purely for entertainment, others were A.A.U. sanctioned competitions, including the men’s and women’s one mile race. These drew swimmers from as far away as Southern California. That first year the mile course was along the shoreline, but it soon moved to Soquel Creek where a 220-yard course was established. Eight laps equaled a mile. “Capitola’s swimming course is held by international experts to be one of the finest in the world,” said one sports writer.

For Rispin, it was not enough that Capitola was host to the Pacific Coast one-mile championship for women, so he decided the winner would receive the “Rispin Cup.” A writer for the *San Francisco Examiner* described it as, “the biggest and most valuable swimming trophy ever offered on the Pacific Coast.”

The first to win the trophy (in 1920) was Florence Friesenhausen of the Young Ladies Institute in San Francisco. In 1921 and 1922 it was taken by Marie Curtis of the Los Angeles Athletic Club. Marie Curtis was expected to win again in 1923, but the other Curtis—Hilda Curtis—vowed to make sure that did not happen.

On Sunday afternoon, June 17, the swimmers leaped off the platform in the lagoon to begin the first lap up Soquel Creek. A huge crowd of people watched as the two favorites swam stroke for stroke the first three quarters of a mile. During the seventh lap, Hilda Curtis “electrified the crowd” with a sprint that put her five yards in the lead. In the final lap, with only forty yards to go, Marie Curtis began her sprint, nearly closing the gap. Suddenly,

she faltered. According to one account, she “fainted from fatigue.” After she sank twice, two of the race organizers jumped into the water, grabbed her, and pulled her to shore where she was resuscitated by physicians.

Hilda claimed the cup in what was described as one of the most spectacular finishes ever seen in Pacific Coast swimming. But for young Hilda, it must have been a bittersweet victory. It nearly cost her competitor her life. 🌸

## Rispin Centennial

Construction of the Rispin Mansion began in the fall of 1919 and was not completed until the spring of 1921. In honor of the mansion’s centennial, the Capitola Museum is collecting material on its history and putting together a special website. It will include a timeline, slide show, videos, quiz, building plans, and some rare photos never before made public. Curator Frank Perry is working on a detailed biography of Mr. Rispin, his family, and his major influence on Capitola during the 1920s. It draws upon earlier research by Carolyn Swift and others, along with new historical material that has come to light. The website will go online later this year. Watch for the announcement on the Museum’s website and Facebook page. 🌸



## Rispin Mansion’s Long, Strange Trip

By Niels Kisling

The sliding bookcase led to a small, dark pocket of mysterious space behind it. It was just one feature of the abandoned Rispin Mansion that called out to Capitola kids, beckoning them to come explore the forbidden attraction. In the 1970s it was almost a rite of passage to be able to say you had been inside the place. I most enjoyed being able to brag about being chased off the property by the ‘hippie’ caretakers and that I was fast enough to get away.

Fifty years later I have a feeling the caretakers let us get away—they didn’t really want to catch us. I’m sure they just wanted to satisfy their responsibility by chasing us off the property. Still, we returned time and again.

Talk around school told a tale about a great big, heavy door on hinges that lead into a concrete room. The room was painted white with smooth walls. The swinging door was also made of concrete and it had what appeared to be blood stains running down from it. Our pre-teen brains had us convinced that this had to be the place where people were taken to be killed for some unknown reason.

We did not want to accept the explanation from some that it was probably the cool room where chickens were slaughtered and perishables were kept cool in the days when refrigeration was rare. Either way we just had to see it for ourselves—another day, another chase.

The Rispin Mansion was last occupied by The Poor Clares, who moved out in 1956. The City of Capitola purchased the property in 1985, and a fire tore through the mansion and ruined the floors and roof structure in late 2009.

Kids today do not have the easy access that we did. The City of Capitola completed a historical preservation of the property in 2012. This preservation included cyclone fencing, security lighting, ventilation, seismic stabilization, a new roof, and exterior paint. With the project costing nearly \$650K, it was intended to preserve what is there in case a developer comes along in the future.



**BEFORE AND AFTER:** The Rispin Mansion in January 2010 (left) was a roofless, burned-out hulk of a building. The historical preservation, completed in 2012, keeps the structure stable for future development.

The Capitola City Council voted in favor of this preservation over what it would have cost to demolish the building. The plans going forward are to create a public park. Some of the work has already been completed to make the footpaths legal and conforming. The landscaping work is next, and this park will complement the new Capitola Library across the street. 🌸

## The Under-Told Story of Annette Rispin

By Emmy Mitchell-Lynn

If you have spent time exploring Capitola, odds are you are familiar with the historic Rispin Mansion. Hidden in the oaks and eucalyptus along the western bank of Soquel Creek on Wharf Road, the structure sits quietly, paying homage to the memory of Capitola as an up-and-coming town in the early 1900s. If you are a history buff, you may also know something about the man who built it, Henry Allen Rispin, and the influence he and his investments had in the development of Capitola as a residential town. Something you may be less aware of is the significant role his wife played in the success of any business ventures undertaken in the Rispin name; from holding stakes in the oil industry to procuring real estate, Mrs. Rispin made great contributions to the success of her husband, serving as both a partner in business, as well as a partner in life.

Born Annette Agnes Blake, and lovingly referred to as “Nettie” throughout her life, Annette Rispin was the second-to-youngest child of oil tycoon Isaac E. Blake and his wife, Agnes Maloney Blake. Originally settling and making a name for himself in Philadelphia, Isaac Blake moved his growing family West in the 1870s with the expansion of his oil company.



After founding the Continental Oil and Transportation Company in Utah in 1875 (currently known as Conoco), the Blakes continued to San Francisco, where Annette was born in 1881. Shortly after that, they retreated to Colorado for a few years before moving back to New York, where Annette spent most of her youth receiving a quality education and enjoying the perks of being an heiress.

Annette had a close relationship with her mother who passed away after a short duration of illness in the summer of 1899. Then-17-year-old Annette was reportedly quite distraught, and according to a letter written by her father, she grew close with her older brother, Winfield, who took her under his wing and ensured she was supported by friends in a pleasant environment as she coped with the loss of their mother. Their bond must have sustained, as Annette would eventually lend his name to her only son, Alan (sometimes incorrectly spelled Allen) Winfield Rispin.

In the years following the death of Mrs. Blake, a young Canadian by the name of Henry Allen Rispin began to take an interest in the oil industry. Lacking an education and likely recognizing the value of marrying into a wealthy family with established stakes in his industry, 28-year old Rispin set his sights on 19-year-old Annette. They were married in San Francisco on November 9, 1902, the same year he was made manager of the oil company overseen by Annette’s father. This is perhaps the first in a series of benefits Mr. Rispin would reap by marrying “the beautiful daughter of Isaac Blake,” as one newspaper called her.

Referred to in their *San Francisco Chronicle* wedding announcement as “a blonde of the fairest type” whose “sunny nature and sweet character have won her hosts of friends,” Annette was every bit as intelligent and business-savvy as she was pretty and well-liked. Previous articles state that her husband acquired all of his properties in his own name, but property records reveal that Annette was listed as the only female shareholder in the San Francisco based, Capitola Company, and in fact she had a few profitable acquisitions to her name as well.

Between the years of 1910-1920, Annette engaged in a series of real estate transactions, receiving gift deeds, and making purchases in her own name in order to acquire the entirety of lots 1-13 on Block "P" of the Capitola Heights neighborhood. Those lots were eventually transferred back into the name of the Capitola Company, and Annette went on to acquire and trade multiple acres of land in Ranchos Arroyo del Rodeo and Soquel, all in her own name. She was also credited by the *San Francisco Examiner* as having made "one of the most important transactions in real estate circles" through her \$125,000 solo purchase in 1920 of the property at the corner of Golden Gate Avenue and Octavia Street in San Francisco, where the popular Hamilton-Carhartt company produced overalls.

In addition to her business endeavors, Annette was an involved citizen both in San Francisco and Santa Cruz County. Records show she was eager to cast her vote in the election of 1920—she registered to vote in San Francisco as a Republican in 1920—just days after the ratification of the 19th Amendment gave women the national right to vote. It should be noted that women could vote in California starting in 1912, though federal records do not reflect whether Annette did so or not. She continued to vote in every subsequent election for the rest of her life. In 1923, she was cited as having donated \$25 to the Japanese Relief Fund, organized by the Santa Cruz Chapter of the Red Cross to provide support to the citizens of Japan following the Great Kanto Earthquake. Her donation stood out next to the other donation amounts listed between \$0.20-\$5.00, which reflected the uncommon amount of wealth she possessed.

The wake of the Great Depression presumably left the Rispins penniless. Sometime between 1927-1933, they unloaded all their properties in the area onto various real estate companies, getting back nowhere near the amount of money they had sunk into their projects. The remainder of their story only gets bleaker from there. It is believed that Annette and her husband separated as early as 1929 with her taking up residency in San Francisco and he in Denver. According to San Francisco directories, starting in 1933 Annette lived alone in a house on Geary Boulevard until 1941 when she died suddenly of a cerebral embolism while visiting family in San Jose. Her death certificate states that she was still married at the time of her death. She was 59 years old and was survived by a single son who passed away penniless six years later in Watsonville.

Like many other under-acknowledged people in history, the bits we know of Annette Rispin's story hold the promise of something much larger and more intricate than what has been written thus far. History is an ever-evolving study, and as we continue to uncover new information about our past, we hope to make new discoveries and connections pertaining to her fascinating life. 🌸

## Capitola's Female Leaders:

### Past, Present, and Future

By Kristen Petersen

In November 2016, I became the 6th woman in Capitola's history to be elected to City Council. My journey to



being elected to City Council. My journey to elected office began in 2014, when then Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan took me to lunch and asked me if I had ever considered running for City Council. At the time, I was still earning my undergraduate degree and questioned whether I was qualified to take on such responsibility. But the seed was planted and it grew

over the next two years as I became more involved in City activities and more confident in my roles on the Historical Museum Board of Trustees and as the City's representative to the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County. Two years later, that seed had fully taken root and I knew that I needed to run for City Council. Since being elected, I have been committed to encouraging other women to run for office and pursue positions of leadership in their own communities.

Throughout Capitola's history, there have been women serving in positions of leadership that have paved the way for women like me. The first woman elected to Capitola City Council was Peggy Slatter Matthews in 1954. Peggy was a championship swimmer who laid the foundation for the Begonia Festival and promised to bring recreation programs to Capitola. She served only one year on Council and faced many challenges in being the first woman elected to office in Capitola, including having her car vandalized. But during her time in office, she fulfilled her campaign promise to bring recreation programs to the City and showed other Capitola women what was possible.

The City at one point went decades without a woman on City Council. But Carin Mudgett (now Carin Hanna) changed that when she won her election in 1978. Prior to running for City Council, Carin served in positions of leadership as the President of the Chamber of Commerce and on the Begonia Festival Board. Today, her advice for women considering positions of leadership is "go for it!"

We have seen women leaders both on City Council and in community organizations throughout the years. Linda Smith served as a Capitola Planning Commissioner from 2009 to 2017, as the Museum Board President from 2005 to 2014, and she served as a Begonia Festival Board Officer from 2005 to 2013. Linda believes that there are many

ways to be involved in a community and that it is important to invest your time, energy, and skills in making the community a better place.

Vice Mayor Yvette Brooks became the 7th and most recent woman to serve on City Council following her successful election in 2018. Yvette was motivated to run by the women's movement and women leaders around her. In embracing her identity as a woman of color and a mother of a young child juggling the challenges of a full-time job and elected official duties, she advises women to trust themselves and be fearless in whatever they are working on. She adds, "You need to tell people what you want, otherwise no one will know what you aspire toward. And once we begin working together, supporting one another, collaborating, celebrating our accomplishments, we will begin to see equity in areas we never imagined. We will begin to fill voids, where our voices were never heard before."

As we move forward in creating the history of Capitola, I encourage all women with interest in positions of leadership to consider joining one of the City's Boards or Committees, volunteering with a local organization, or running for public office. Know that there will be other women here to support you as you write your chapter in Capitola's history. 🌸

## Sergeant Sarah Ryan's Evolving Journey

By Sarah Ryan



I have been on a 15-year journey so far as a police officer with the Capitola Police Department. Many people ask about the difference between policing as a female verses policing as a male. Based on my viewpoint I can clearly only come at this from my position. Early on in my professional journey I understood many brave, fierce

women have paved the way for me. I have chosen *not* to focus on my gender within the profession of law enforcement but instead to build my skill set as a person worthy of my position in the community I serve. This approach has proven to be natural and beneficial for me as I collaborate with my peers, develop myself as a leader and help to bring others along to someday take my place when it is time for me to start the next chapter of my life.

The challenges of law enforcement are fluid and changing with the climate of our communities. I have experienced the shift in challenges over the last decade and have learned the importance of keeping an open mind, open heart and staying "relevant." I am driven by my respect for human rights, the power of communities and the

selfish desire to have my children/family feel safe as they move through the world. I see each contact I make when I am "on duty" as being an opportunity to educate or learn. I have seen the impact my chosen profession has had on others and I do not take this responsibility lightly.

Women bring so much to the law enforcement profession just as diversity will. Our police departments should be made of up officers who represent the community we are serving in order to understand and partner effectively. I have had the pleasure of witnessing my profession evolve into an environment that supports wellness. We work through many challenges that stay with us in our minds and our ability to communicate openly about the challenges have made us stronger and better servants to the public.

I look forward to the next decade in law enforcement and hope to leave to the profession, and my agency, well equipped to develop and continue creating a safe atmosphere for all. 🌸

The Capitola Museum has recently received generous donations from:

**Al & Marian Carlson**  
**Calvin Cornwell**  
**Leslie Couvillion**  
**Rickey Feldner**  
**Lani Hall**  
**Brian & Sally Legakis**  
**Mary Jane McGranahan**  
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**David & Jeanne Macdonald**  
**Joan Gilbert Martin**  
**Jed & Helen Myall**  
**Paul Parsons**  
**Barbara Reding**

Recently, the following artifacts were generously donated to the Capitola Museum:

**Norman Poitevin—Hand-bound set of the *Twin Lakes Moon* newspaper, 1924**  
**Calvin B. Cornwell—Collection of photographs of Capitola**  
**Allen Canepa—Antique saw used in Capitola by the Canepa family**  
**Rosemary Abell—Autobiography of Elmer Cooksey**  
**Teresa Green—Material from Begonia Festival web site**

Capitola Sunset is published by:

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Email: [capitolamuseum@gmail.com](mailto:capitolamuseum@gmail.com)  
Telephone: 831-464-0322

Museum Hours: *Currently closed due to the pandemic*

Curator: Frank Perry

Board Members: Niels Kisling (President), David Peyton (Vice President), Pam Greeninger (Secretary), Brian Legakis (Treasurer), Emmy Mitchell-Lynn, Dean Walker and Gordon van Zuiden  
Museum Youth Board Member: Joshua Henshaw