

- Jan. 14: Hole in the Head event. HSSR members only. Sonoma County Museum 5:30pm  
Feb. 25: Ethnic neighborhoods panel discussion. Gaye LeBaron, moderator. 6 pm, Sixth Street Playhouse

*(limited seating at Sixth Street Playhouse)*  
HSSR is a 501 (c) (3) public charity Tax ID 46-2740806

## Ripley...Believe It or Not!

by Steve Hart

*Ed. Note: Steve Hart, a Press Democrat reporter and SRHS alumnus, wrote the following that first appeared in the SRHS Foundation Newsletter. Reprinted with permission.*

He is Santa Rosa High School's most famous alumnus, although he was forced to drop out a few months before graduation in 1908.

Robert L. Ripley founded an entertainment empire that now includes 85 attractions in 11 countries, television programs in 70 countries and the world's longest running cartoon feature, Ripley's Believe It or Not!

It might not have happened without the encouragement of a legendary SRHS English teacher, Miss Frances O'Meara. Ripley was a struggling student who was often punished for doodling in class. But Miss O'Meara saw artistic talent in his drawings and started him on a path to fame and fortune. Ripley never forgot Santa Rosa or Miss O'Meara. The globetrotting celebrity sent her souvenirs of his travels and long-stemmed roses on the golden anniversary of her teaching career.

He was born LeRoy Robert Ripley in a small wood-frame house on Orchard Street in Santa Rosa in 1890. He attended nearby Lewis Grammar School but didn't stand out. In fact, other kids teased for his large face, crooked teeth and funny ears. He changed his name and began drawing in grammar school, but his artistic points didn't win him any points with his teachers. They called it a distraction and boxed his ears, classmates later recalled.

He started at the old SRHS campus on Humboldt Street and finally found an outlet for his cartooning. That's when he entered the classroom of Miss O'Meara. She started teaching at SRHS in the 1880s and was known as a disciplinarian, despite her tiny stature. She demanded much from her pupils but took great interest in them, former students remembered. Miss O'Meara soon realized Ripley had a unique talent and put him to work drawing for the school newspaper and yearbook. His cartoons made him popular with fellow students, who gave him the nickname "Rip." But cartooning didn't leave him much time for school work, and he barely earned a C average in his classes.

Miss O'Meara decided to let him make illustrations of the classic literature she assigned, instead of writing essays. She

praised Ripley's detailed scenes from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Tennyson's "Idylls of the King. He started getting A's in English.

He also excelled on the school's baseball team. But Ripley's education suffered when his father died and he had to go to work. He dropped out of school in 1908, but was still honored at that year's graduation ceremony.

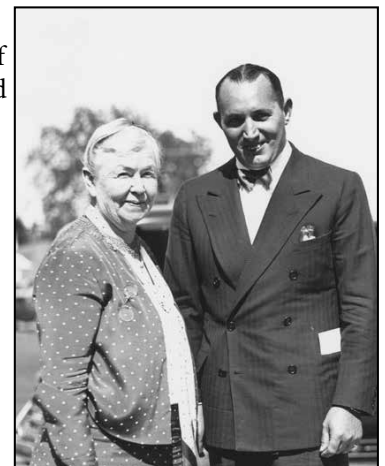
Ripley took his cartoons to Herbert Slater, the state senator and Press Democrat columnist, who suggested he try his luck at one of the San Francisco dailies. He soon found work as a sports illustrator at the San Francisco Examiner.

He later moved to the New York World, where he came up with the idea for Believe It or Not! On a slow news day in 1918, Ripley found himself out of ideas for his daily sports cartoon. So he illustrated a random assortment of offbeat facts about sports and called it Believe It or Not! The feature was so popular that he would produce it for the next 30 years. Ripley traveled the world to find strange stories, odd facts and bizarre objects to entertain his millions of readers.

He also published submissions from his fans, including a boy named Charles Schulz, who in 1937 sent him a cartoon of his unusual dog, Spike, who liked to eat pins, tacks and other sharp objects.

Ripley employed a team of researchers, fact-checkers and artists to produce the daily feature. He amazed readers with an endless stream of strange-but-true items: a two-headed calf, shrunken heads, a car made of wood, the world's ugliest woman, an albino giraffe, a human pincushion and a man who could only walk backward.

Ripley also cultivated an outlandish personal image. He wore Asian robes, kept a pet boa constrictor and owned a Chinese junk.



*Frances O'Meara and Robert Ripley as she retired from 50 years of teaching. Santa Rosa High School Museum*

*...continued on next page*

# President's Message

by Mike Grace, HSSR President



It seems like yesterday that I wrote the first column as president with a new board and an unwritten script for 2014. My main goal then was to get the HSSR off the ground and into the public's eye. After kicking around ideas, we decided to schedule some talks that would present local history, talk that would be fun for us and for the public.

As you know, the talks led in September at the Sixth Street Playhouse when Gaye LeBaron talked about Santa Rosa "quirky history." More than 120 people attended the very successful free admission event.

The second talk, moderated by Gaye LeBaron, featured Doug Bosco and Pete Golis. It too was a success and a talk we hope to present again to continue to explore local politics past and present.

In addition, the HSSR staged Santa Rosa's first Historical Hunt. About 100 participants, from 8 to 80 years old agreed the hunt was a learning experience and an enjoyable way to spend a morning. I hope the HSSR will continue the hunt next year because it is a great way to involve Santa Rosans in the history of their town.

The HSSR calendar for 2015 includes an evening at the Sonoma County Museum on January 14 with a presentation of the current Hole in the Head exhibit. This will be a free, open to HSSR members only. The Society will provide appetizers, beer and wine. This evening

...Ripley, continued from page 1

He launched a successful radio show in the early 1930s. Ripley soon was making \$1 million a year and hobnobbing with celebrities at his Long Island estate. By the 1940s Believe It or Not! was so popular that Ripley was getting more mail than the U.S. president. Newsreels showed him safari in a pith helmet and knickers, dancing with an African tribe and loading camels with memorabilia. In 1936, newspapers named him the most popular man in America. He was a multimedia pioneer, adapting Believe It or Not! to books, museums (he called them "Odditoriums") and later to television.

But he never forgot Miss O'Meara or his Santa Rosa roots. When high school classmates visited New York, he'd host them at his mansion and give them tours of his vast collections. In 1932, he returned triumphantly to SRHS and spoke to a standing room crowd at the new high school's auditorium. He called his old English teacher to the stage, where he gave Miss O'Meara a kiss and presented her with a jade and gold necklace that he's collected in his Asia travels.

Miss O'Meara had saved Ripley's early drawings, but they were destroyed in the 1921 fire that burned the Humboldt Street campus. Ripley continued his friendship with his teacher, bringing her to New York for an appearance on his radio program. When she retired from SRHS in 1939 after 50 years of teaching, Ripley sent roses and a congratulatory telegram.

She became ill a few months later. "May God be good and grant you another 50 years to spread love and kindness and wisdom among us," Ripley said in a get-well note. He signed

will be the third free of charge event that HSSR has provided as it strives to continue the mission of involving the community in Santa Rosa history.

Next up will be another historical talk on February 25 at the Sixth Street Playhouse. HSSR board member Nick Tipon is currently busy developing a panel discussion of Santa Rosa's ethnic neighborhoods and their role in SR history. Gaye LeBaron will moderate the discussion. Information on this talk and the evening at the museum will be forthcoming soon via email and other methods.

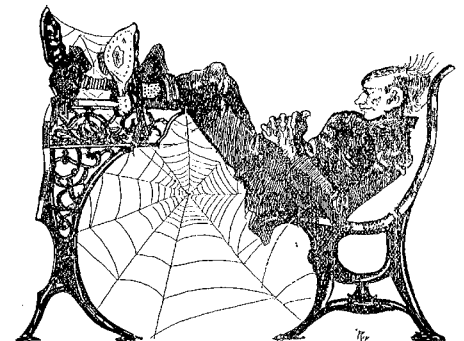
The HSSR continues to pursue opportunities at the Sonoma County Museum. I am working with the museum staff to fulfill the task of creating a Santa Rosa Room there. Much work lies ahead, but if an acceptable place for space is available and if financing results, I believe the HSSR will have more credibility and "legs" for the future. I also believe the HSSR will have reached an important goal, one that will cement it in the fabric of the community.

We at the HSSR have achieved successes the past year and have big plans for the coming one. The Society continues to work with the City on plans to celebrate the coming Sesquicentennial and to refine the data base to better communicate with members. The past year has been full of growth, and we look forward to the challenges the coming year will bring. We will count on your support, and I look forward to 2015 being a great year for you and the Society.

it "Believe It or Not! Ripley who still loves his teacher." Miss O'Meara died in 1940.

Ripley died of a heart attack in 1949, shortly after launching Believe It or Not! in a brand-new medium called television. His body was returned to Santa Rosa, where he's buried next to his parents in the Odd Fellows cemetery on Franklin Avenue.

Today, Ripley's entertainment empire is part of a Canadian conglomerate with \$7.3 billion in annual sales and 34,000 employees. Ripley Entertainment includes "Odditoriums," aquariums, haunted houses, wax museums, resorts, golf courses, arcades and other attractions.



Ripley sleeping student cartoon  
1909 SRHS Echo

**Visit the HSSR web page!**

**[www.historicalsocietysantarosa.org](http://www.historicalsocietysantarosa.org)**

**Find us on Facebook and YouTube**

# Annex Offers Research Tools

by Katherine Reinhart

The Sonoma County Library's local history and genealogy collection is a community resource of immense value that was first established as the Santa Rosa Central Library's California Room. In 1998, the collection, commonly referred to as the "Annex," was moved to its present site in a separate building adjacent to the Central Library.

In 2002 the Sonoma County Library Commission, the governing board of the county-wide library system, adopted a new mission statement of the local history and genealogy division and renamed it the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library. Services, resources and technologies continue to grow to meet the demands of library patrons.

Some of the resources available include:

- One-on-one instruction in historical genealogy research
- Over 40,000 photographs
- Access to many of Sonoma County's earliest court, naturalization and tax records
- Santa Rosa and other county newspapers on microfilm from 1857
- Wide range of newspaper clipping files and historic maps
- California Indian Library Collection

- On-line access to HeritageQuest, Ancestry.com, Genealogy Bank and San Francisco Chronicle, 1865-1922
- Select California city directories and voter registration records
- Indexes to local cemetery, marriage, birth, death and other vital data
- Yearbooks for Santa Rosa Junior College and several local schools



*Volunteer Jo Markwyn assists student researchers  
Sonoma County Library Annex*

Those who use the Sonoma County History and Genealogy Library range from students to realtors, to individuals interested in researching the history of their families and homes, to journalists and environmental planners, videographers, authors, archaeologists, geologists and others.

The Library, located at 211 E Street, is open Wednesday 10 am to 8 pm, Thursday and Friday 10 am to 6 pm, and Saturday 10 am to 4 pm. Feel free to drop by or telephone or send an email with your questions.

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## Some Santa Rosa Datum

The first fire department in Santa Rosa was formed in 1858. While volunteer, it nevertheless is an indicator of movement toward organized settlement and away from frontier life.

Santa Rosa opened its first public school in 1859, just two years after formal recognition as a city.

A significant first and last occurred in 1889 when Anabel McCaughey Stuart became Santa Rosa's first woman doctor and when Julio Carrillo, son of Dona Maria Carrillo died.

In 1897 brothers Frank and Joseph Grace purchased the Metzger Brewery, and the family operated it until 1966. The noon and five o'clock whistle kept the town aware of the time of day.

The horses that pulled Santa Rosa street railway cars were put to pasture in 1905 when the cars were converted to electricity.

1920 saw Ernie Nevers, later to star at Stanford and in the early years of the National Football League, lead Santa Rosa High School to the championship football game of the North Coast Section of the California Interscholastic Federation. SRHS lost that game to Berkeley High School, but the team was a vast improvement over the 1919 season when it lost every game.

Santa Rosa hired its first motorcycle policeman in 1920.

On Fourth and Wilson Streets in 1927 the Petaluma and Santa Rosa Railroad mission-style stucco depot opened for business. In later years the building was home to Trombetta Liquor Distributors. Today it houses Chevy's Restaurant.

In 1928 George Trombley formed the Santa Rosa Symphony. He conducted the group for 30 years. For many years the group held its practices in the Elks Club, upstairs over Hardisty's on the corner of Fourth and B Streets.

While pursuing a career in professional sports after starring in football and basketball at Santa Rosa High and in four sports at Stanford University, Ernie Nevers helped the semi-pro Santa Rosa Boncrushers win three straight state championships—1928 to 1930.

Floyd Bailey became the first president of SRJC in 1934. He would serve in that position until 1957.

In 1940 the legendary Melvin "Dutch" Flohr became Santa Rosa's Chief of Police. He retired in 1974.

Have you eaten Mexican fare at Chelino's on Fourth Street? The building started life as Quinley's Drive-In restaurant and was built by Hugh Coddling in 1947. It became Gordon's and was a highly popular place for Santa Rosa's teenagers during the hot rodding 1950s and 60s.

In 1948 long time major league baseball pitching star Vernon Law was a part of the farm team fielded in Santa Rosa's Doyle Park by the National League Pittsburg Pirates. Crooner Bing Crosby owned a percentage of the Pirates and paid a visit to the Santa Rosa team.

A fourlane, surface-level highway through Santa Rosa opened for traffic in 1949. The hotly contested route divided Santa Rosa in half.

# Young Historian Wins the Hunt

by Lee Torliatt

*Ed. Note: The following, written by Lee Torliatt, first appeared in the Sonoma County Historian. Reprinted with permission.*

A large group of history hunters went out in search of famous Santa Rosa history spots on a Saturday morning in September. More than 80 people showed up at the starting point, the Sonoma County Museum, seeking the \$50 prize offered by the Historical Society of Santa Rosa, headed by President Mike Grace.

The idea was to get a list of clues at the museum and then seek out the sites, located mostly in west Santa Rosa. Volunteers handed out site cards to participants. The first person to return to the museum with all 12 historical site cards would be champion.

The winner turned out to be young A.J. Siedentopf, age 6. With the help of his dad Andre, he did a splendid job against tough competition.

A.J. attends Kawana School where he learns about history and other basics from his teacher Nikki Lesard.

Second place went to Ray Johnson, a member of the board of the Sonoma County Historical Society. Beverly West was 3rd and Cecelia Johnson 4th.

The locations included The Sonoma County Museum (not hard to find since it was the starting point), The Hunt Brothers Cannery, the Hotel La Rose (built in the early 20th century and still operating in Railroad Square), Old Courthouse Square, the Empire Building (with its massive clock tower), Rosenberg's Department Store (now Barnes and Noble), the Lee Brothers Building in Railroad Square, the Exchange Bank, the Grace Brothers Brewery (a haven for thirsty folks which is now the Hyatt Hotel), the distinctive DeTurk Round Barn (now a gathering place for many events, including weddings), and St. Rose Cathedral, which survived the 1906 earthquake but is currently closed until adequate funds can be found to improve quake safety.

\$25 Individual membership

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\$40 Household Membership

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Amount Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

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Additional Donation Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

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