

## Who Was That Guy?

By Fionna Perkins

In the lore of towns and in storybooks, he comes walking in or he's on horseback, alights from the last train, is rowed ashore from a ship weighing anchor or in rare instances drops from the sky in an odd vehicle, claiming to be from another planet. He is a man of myth and mystery, a traveler who stays a while, and miraculous things happen—rain falls on a parched land, a plague of grasshoppers is turned back, a glut of rats is piped into the river to drown. (But beware, if the piper isn't paid, he may return to beguile the children away.) Suddenly he's gone, and afterward the memories of him are varied and in time there's no memory at all or only sketchy recollections passed down.

Perhaps he was visiting the village of Point Arena the year of a record salmon run, the fall a sudden rain quenched a forest fire or the summer of heavy fog when a capsized fisherman made it back to land alive. The legacy of the only such man I know of is the Coast Community Library. That it exists is a kind of miracle.

John Rose was one of nine the afternoon of July 21, 1989, who gathered around an oval table in the social hall of St. Paul's Community Methodist Church to form a Friends of the Library group that had no library. The objective: start one to be a friend to.

Yet something must have happened beforehand to prompt a stroll down Main Street in Point Arena's Independence Day parade by the Reverend Dixie Jennings-Teats and Robert Doyle. They had smiled and waved at the spectators from bright-blue and hot-pink cardboard replicas of books entitled: Community Library.

I was agog: *Wow! Really? Where?*

Our first summer as coast locals in '63 – no bookstores, no Bookmobile, not even a Mendocino County Library system. To have a Bookmobile visit for a day, even if only twice a month, was a giant improvement. Still, it wasn't like having a library in one spot to poke around in at leisure, a place for saving and savoring the stories of now and of ages past.

When Bob Doyle called to invite my husband, Richard, and me to the July meeting, I was ready and took our check and a neighbor's who couldn't be there. The dues Bob mentioned, \$10 for an individual to join Friends of the Library or \$20 for a family, remain the same. We elected Dixie president, put our membership dues out on the table in checks and cash, amounting to \$100, and postponed finding someone willing to be treasurer. The Reverend Alyce Soden volunteered as secretary but soon had to withdraw to meet a book-revision deadline. I then volunteered as vice president on the mistaken theory that vice presidents didn't have much to do.

Our first difference arose over the kind of library it was to be. John wanted to charge a fee for lending the books. I envisioned a public library like the one I knew as a teen in a small Oregon town. Depression times, I couldn't have afforded a nickel a week—a month!—and it opened the world. Others hoped to build toward becoming a branch in the Mendocino County Library system, like Fort Bragg, Ukiah and Willits. When it was put to a vote, the majority decision was a free library open to everyone, the area of service from Stewart's Point to Elk. Twice later the issue of fees was raised by a new volunteer and twice defeated. Thus, our library that still didn't really exist became the first public one ever between Fort Bragg and Guerneville. But not the town's first library.

In January 1930 the Point Arena Civic Club approved as its purpose “Primarily to establish a library for Point Arena...” Membership was open to all adults and schoolchildren in the Point Arena Joint Union High School District, adult initiation fee \$1, monthly dues 25¢; juniors, no initiation fee, monthly dues 15¢; only women allowed to vote.

The club and its library were leveled in a fire in July 1946 that also took City Hall, the firehouse, Masonic Hall and the Presbyterian Church. The books saved, Jack Gillmore remembers, were taken for lending to the living room of the little house next door to Coast Community Library at 280 Main Street, now the Point Arena City Art gallery.

Two or three years prior to our meeting I’d been assured by a young woman boat builder that she and a friend planned to start a library the next year. I was curious if ours was it or connected. Whenever I asked John who was actually responsible for this one being even a small way along, he was noncommittal or changed the conversation to praise the work someone else was doing. In May of this year I talked with him by phone and asked him again. He’s 86 now, a heart condition limiting his adventures to traveling mind to mind via computer, and finally he told me the truth: “I guess you could say I did. Bob had tried and hadn’t had much luck.”

John Rose is a man not easily put off. He stands straight and spare six-and-a-half feet tall, a French-Scot mix, eyes dark and measuring, words spaced in a voice as dry as some parts of Idaho where he was herding cows till he heard the movies were paying \$10 a day for cowboys and headed for Hollywood. In World War II he was a Seabee in the South Pacific in a Navy construction battalion, after the war in construction in the Far East, in an import-export business and everywhere writing and exploring. He has opinions and no hesitancy in expressing them.

Just back from New Zealand in January ’86, he came north to visit Oz, the village at Manchester, to see if he wanted to live there, and stayed overnight in Point Arena. “Oz was not for me,” he said. “I went back to my hotel in the Bay Area and I kept thinking about Point Arena. It had some sort of mystical quality to it that appealed to me.” He returned, rented an apartment on Lake Street and stayed six years, reading, writing, studying, taking classes and working at the Senior Center. By January ’89 he was lonely for book conversation and tried to start a library and discussion group at the Senior Center.

“The building’s owned by the Druids,” he recalled. “They have a ritual when they need four corners. Every time we put a bookcase up, they took it down.” By then Dixie and Bob were involved, and the three went to the school to talk library- “nothing there.” Dixie said, “Let’s see if we can do it at the church.” With the approval of St. Paul’s trustees, that’s how Coast Community Library started, as a community outreach program.

So there we were with \$100 and some donated books.

Dixie recruited Elise Wainscott, a retired teacher and librarian, to start the work of indexing and cataloging. Bob recruited lumber for bookcases from Clark Beall at Gualala Building Supply. John recruited his neighbor, Toni Ryan, a teacher at Arena Elementary, as treasurer. And I with my receipt book was around recruiting money for memberships in Friends of the Library. Soon Diane Johnson was recruited to type.

There were afternoons, Elise remembers, when she and Dixie looked at each other and wondered if they would ever have any more volunteers to work with the books. Some stormy nights in the little schoolroom at the back of the church, when John was at a tailoring class, Dixie and Richard and I wondered when, if ever, more Friends might come to meetings to help decide what to do next.

John, Nancy Kay Webb and I were the first book review committee, but Nancy Kay had already scheduled a trip to Mexico. So John and I started, making up our rules as we went along: no stinky books (contagious), no underlined books (drives non-underliners crazy), no abridged books (they drive writers crazy). We disagreed on fiction. John had a poor opinion of all of it and would say, "We don't want this-just trash." and put it in the discard pile. Since we had no fiction to begin with, and I love stories, I'd retrieve the fiction he tossed.

In the years since, Nancy Kay has reviewed thousands of donated books, handled book sales and has done all the tasks required in moving a book from purchase or donation to the shelves for circulation. The first two or three years at 280 Main Street, she also paid the library's electric bill every month. She is an example, and there are many, of what it's taken and what's been given in time, talent and money to move the hopes and dreams of the nine that July day into the reality of the Coast Community Library that is today bursting its walls.

On a Sunday afternoon, November 5, 1989, a very small library opened at the rear of St. Paul's social hall. A surprise visitor was Henry Bates, the Mendocino County Library Director. With the new year, the search for larger quarters began. By mid-summer of '90, when it seemed hopeless, Warren Jones materialized like the mythical stranger and offered his newly purchased building rent-free for eight years. That began another phase. Through it all, John was available wherever needed, helping Bob and Richard build the first bookcases, tending contribution and membership recruiting tables on Earth Day '90 in front of Gillmore's store and at the Acorn Picnic, Fourth of July in Bower Park, serving on the library board and caring for the library grounds.

"I used to think about being in Point Arena," he said when we last talked, "that there had to be some reason I was there and decided it must be the library."

Before the library reopened in its new quarters on Feb. 16, 1991, John insisted on paying for a party for the volunteer workers who'd done the renovation. He served out his term on the board, gave his valuable six-year collection of books to the library he'd founded and moved away.

The nine around the table that July afternoon 10 years ago were Robert Doyle, the Reverend Dixie Jennings-Teats, Diane Johnson, Fionna and Richard Perkins Maria Romero and her young friend, John Rose and the Reverend Alyce Soden. The neighbor who'd wanted to help start a library with his membership check was and is Vernon McNamee.

If I have at last traced the one who first stepped out and said, "Well, let's just start our own library," we are still left with a mystery, the name of the young Latina woman Maria brought who couldn't speak English. Maria paid for her membership, and she, too, is a founder of the Friends of Coast Community Library.