

NEWS

LIVING SANTA CRUZ COUNTY'S ACTIVE OLDER ADULTS

OCTOBER 11, 1984



SHUTTERBUG

CARL RYSER refuses to retire and get rusty. Read about his "mysterious" job; story below.

What's My Line?

Mystery Employment

by Sam Mitchell

Retirement and 86-year-old Carl Ryser mix about as well as oil and water. The former farmer, insurance salesman, and advertising salesman has retired three times, and three times he has returned to work.

When at age 76 he heard about a job opening at the world-famous Mystery Spot, Ryser packed up his golf clubs and filled out an application. And for the past eight years, the energetic tourguide has spent two days a week climbing steep hills, scaling walls, swinging an 18-pound weight, and even hanging by his hands from a doorframe — all to illustrate Mother Nature's shennigans at the famous spot just outside of town

dable and they know how to work."

Ryser said that he was the only senior there eight years ago, but Prather has been hiring only seniors for the last three years. Although Ryser stressed time and time again that he was *not* saying anything negative about the work habits of young people, he wanted to promote the work habits of seniors.

"[My boss] has been very happy because seniors are dependable," said Ryser. "Another thing is that they're honest. Bruce has been hiring seniors for three or four years now. He's satisfied, and that's it."

Ryser said that jobs at the Mystery Spot are perfectly suited for older folks. "[This job] works out great for senior citizens," said Ryser. "Where else

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could you work for two days a week? The average person over 65 years old doesn't want to, as the old saying goes, 'keep your nose over the grindstone five days a week.'

It's a lot more than good hours that keeps the energetic 86-year-old coming to work. He says that meeting people — his way to avoid getting 'rusty' — is the major attraction to the job. This year alone, he's met people from 60 different countries — Switzerland, France, India, Israel, Australia... ("We get a lot of people from Australia.")

But the most common nationality of Mystery Spot tourists (besides American) is Japanese. "The Japanese are our biggest trade," said Ryser. Last Tuesday (when *The News* visited the Mystery Spot), Ryser said that 100 Japanese tourists — many of them honeymooners — had already taken the tour of the magnetically twisted hillside that's been the subject of several Japanese television documentaries. Hey, Japan has its Mt. Fuji for American tourists, and America has its Mystery Spot for Japanese tourists.

Of the hundreds of people who come tramping through the redwood-shrouded Mystery Spot, Ryser's favorites — regardless of nationality — are children. "I really think that children from ages seven to 14 enjoy it more than the adults," said Ryser, who has a great-grandson that is nine years old. "Children have an open mind. I always make children a part of it. It's really a pleasure to work with children."

There is one kind of person that Ryser could live without on his tours — critics. "A lot of adults will come in, and they're just critics," said Ryser. "They say, 'This is a hoax.' I don't spend too much time with a critic. If you spend too much time with a critic, it



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makes it boring for everybody."

Sometimes, though, critics can be a source of amusement. "I had some Japs come up here who spent about \$50 making some forms [to disprove the effect]," recalled Ryser. "They were determined to figure it out." As far as he knows, they never did.

Ryser said that even Albert Einstein has tried to explain the force that tilts everyone to the Southwest, but Ryser admits the theory is over his head. Another scientist from San Francisco spent a lot of time at the spot and concluded that there is a pocket of carbon dioxide gas seeping out from under the ground.

After eight years of leading tours through the place, Ryser has given up trying to figure out what force is there

that skews compass needles and makes people appear to shrink and grow several inches in a matter of seconds. Although he figures "some of it is optical illusion," he says there can't be a full explanation for what he sees every day.

"My personal 'theory' is this: I don't solve the mystery, I just show it. If you've got an open mind, you can see it, you can feel it. It's there. It's a mystery. It's really one-third mystery, two-thirds recreation."

When Ryser says he shows people the mystery, he isn't kidding. At one point during the half-hour tour, Ryser "climbs" the walls of the tumble-down building on the

hillside that looks like a lopsided covered bridge. Other times he can be found walking backward or leaning backward at a seemingly impossible angle. To drive the point home about how the strange force pulls objects to the Southwest, Ryser even does a pull-up on a doorframe and lets the force "pull" his legs forward. More of a feat for a gymnast than for someone in his mid-eighties, but the spry Ryser takes it all in a day's work.

There are occasions when the sometimes-strenuous job does get to Ryser. After eight years of guiding tours, it gets to be "a job." Gazing at the steep hill, Ryser said "You get tired. You go up there seven or eight times a day, you do get tired. And since I've been working up here, I've had to give up golf."

But the good points of the job heavily outweigh the bad. For one thing, Ryser (whose wife is also 86), enjoys the extra spending money the job adds to his Social Security checks. "It pays the rent. It's a supplement, that's what it is. If it weren't for Social Security, I'd have to work more. [The cost of living] is vicious. Inflation just went up too high." (Ryser remembers buying a 20-acre farm near San Jose with an orchard and two homes for \$13,000 in 1924.)

Ironically, Ryser still has to pay Social Security out of his wages, but he's happy to do it — just as he's happy to come to work. In the eight years he's worked there, the only day (including Christmas) he's seen tourists turned away was during the Flood of '82 when the parking lot was eight inches under water. And, at 86, he has no immediate plans to retire for the fourth time in his life.

"If I don't retire soon, I won't be around anymore," laughed Ryser. "I've used most of my life up. I just take it from day to day. As long as I enjoy it, I'll stay with it; when I no longer enjoy it, I'll quit."