

Too Much Makeup, Too Much Skin: Pageant Protests Go Back to 1924

By Ross Eric Gibson

Today the Miss California Pageant emphasizes its scholarship program, countering protesters who call the pageant a cotillion of debutants, wearing too much makeup and showing too much skin.

Some of those same complaints were lodged against the Miss California Pageant when it originated in Santa Cruz in 1924. It drew considerable opposition over the indecency of girls wearing too much makeup and showing too much skin. Back then, makeup was for shady women, yet movie glamour was starting to popularize it for the masses. Women's bathing suits were the all-covering leotard/bloomer/skirt-and-cap. In 1922, women in Chicago were arrested for indecent exposure for donning swimwear equal to men's tanktop suits. Two years later, these same suits worn in Santa Cruz made the Miss California Pageant the benchmark of the liberated woman.

When boardwalk founder Fred Swanton first proposed the pageant to the chamber of commerce, it was regarded as a way to link Santa Cruz to Atlantic City's publicity machine, and tie in to their high-profile annual Miss America Pageant, which had started in 1921. Miss Santa Cruz was selected in May at the St. George Hotel's ballroom and Palm Court. The Miss California Pageant followed in June. Several thousand flags lined Pacific Avenue, Beach Street and in front of the Casa Del Rey. Laurel Grove Campground, at Pacific, Laurel and Front streets, became the Court of Blossoms, where an assembly lawn bordered with 50,000 gladioluses faced a stage overlooking a lily pond. Here the parade began, going up Front to the Plaza, then down Pacific back to Laurel Grove.

Miss Santa Cruz, Mary Black, wore a peacock gown made for the Paris Opera. Police blocked a car driven by sheeted Ku Klux Klansmen from San Jose, but they pushed back into the parade later on. The contestants then modeled sportswear at the Court of the Blossoms, overturning the notion that any sport producing perspiration was unladylike. Cooper Street became Mardi Gras Square, with jazz dancing 'til midnight drawing complaints that the contestants were becoming wild-living "flappers."

The pageant featured successful women as judges, representing expanding female opportunities. Judges included diving champion Annette Kellerman; Lois Webber, the first female film director; and once-local film star Helen Ferguson, among others. Comedian Anne Seymore provided entertainment as part of an Orpheum Circuit vaudeville show at the New Santa Cruz Theatre.

Alameda's Faye Lamphier was crowned Miss California, only to have William Randolph Hearst denounce her in the San Francisco Examiner as a phony, asking how she could be a bathing beauty without knowing how to swim. Undaunted, Lamphier went to Atlantic City, but did not win.

Afterward, Trenton, N.J., dropped out of the competition, saying the grueling week-long schedule of events left contestants unable to enjoy the experience.

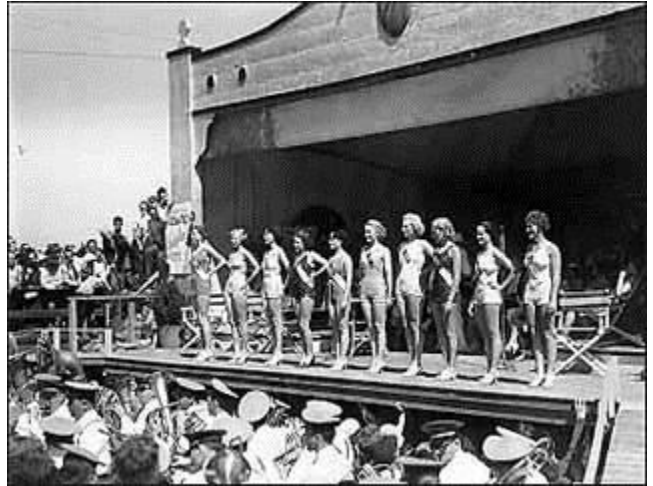
Watsonville also refused further participation locally, calling the Miss California Pageant a waste of money. With local opposition on moral grounds, Santa Cruz was uncertain that it wanted to continue the pageant. But the chamber of commerce was ecstatic, calling the pageant the greatest publicity boon the city ever had, not only bringing business to town during the event but encouraging return visits thereafter.

The contest was revamped the following year to greater public approval. A three-mile-long parade on Pacific and Front streets took two hours to pass, with floats of grand design from sponsors around the state. Stunt fliers overhead wrote "Santa Cruz" in the sky and dropped whistling fireworks. People parked as far as Capitola, then trolleyed into town. Faye Lamphier was again crowned Miss California, as one coronation song put it:

*" . . . There she stands in virginal array
the model here of womanhood today.
From among the finest all around
Miss California, you are found!"*

This time Lamphier did become Miss America, and in President Coolidge's private rail car, she rode to New York for a ticker-tape parade. Afterward, she starred in the movie "American Venus," filmed in Atlantic City.

After feminist protests, the pageant left Santa Cruz in 1990 [sic] for San Diego, where it has been the scene of protests.
[Correction: the last pageant held in Santa Cruz was in 1985;
"The pageant made its debut in San Diego on Monday after a 62-year run in Santa Cruz." Santa Cruz Sentinel. June 18, 1986. p.1. RAP-ed.]



Some of the Contestants in the 1937 or 1938 Pageant

Sources

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