

# The American Venus

Fay Lanphier's controversial  
career as Miss America

By Geoffrey Dunn  
Photos from Geoffrey Dunn Collection;  
photos enhanced by Barry Brown

Many will recall the tumultuous controversies surrounding the Miss California Beauty Pageant in Santa Cruz during the late 1970s and 1980s, when the pageant was both literally and figuratively driven out of town by feminist protesters.

In fact, the pageant was contentious in Santa Cruz long before, dating back to its inaugural years of 1924 and 1925, when scandals and legal entanglements garnered national headlines. At the center of those storms was a young—and ambitious—19-year-old from Alameda, Fay Lanphier, who would win several crowns in a matter of two years, including Miss Alameda, Miss California twice, and, ultimately, Miss America, all amid slander, lawsuits and innuendo.

Lanphier may have been widely recognized as America's "greatest beauty" and the "perfect woman," but the picture painted of her in the national press, and the various pageants in which she triumphed, was not a pretty one.

Fay Lanphier when she was Miss  
California in 1925 at the Santa  
Cruz Beach Boardwalk.



Miss California, Fay Lanphier, left, and Miss Santa Cruz, Yetta Haber, atop the Hotel McAlpin in New York City on Aug. 28, 1925. This was taken just prior to Lanphier winning the title of Miss America.

The first "Atlantic City Pageant," as it was then called, was held in 1921, as a means to extend the tourist season beyond the Labor Day weekend. By 1924, Santa Cruz had entered the beauty contest fray, with local hotel proprietors viewing the pageant as an opportunity for ushering in the summer tourist season and providing Santa Cruz's beachside attractions with statewide and national publicity.

In June of that year, Lanphier won the first Miss California crown by a unanimous vote. Although she won representing Alameda, because the statewide contest was held here, she actually went to Atlantic City as Miss Santa Cruz. She placed third in the national competition — and vowed to return in 1925 as a winner.

#### A woman of ambition

Born in Mendocino County in December 1905, Lanphier was the eldest of six children. The family later moved to Alameda, and by the time she was a teenager, her father had died, leaving young Fay and her mother to raise and support the family.

Lanphier saved up money to attend business college, but when the opportunity of fame and publicity presented itself in Santa Cruz, she jumped at the chance. Her deep passion was to secure a career in the movies, and in December 1924, she signed a contract with Max Graf to appear in series of shorts that were to be produced on the San Francisco Peninsula.

The following June, Lanphier once again dominated the competition in Santa Cruz, but this time it was decided that she would represent California in Atlantic City, where she became the first Miss America to have represented an entire state at the national finals.

But getting there created a ruckus. Through her manager Louis

Jacobs, Lanphier had made arrangements — and, more importantly, had secured payments — to travel on a steamship through the Panama Canal and up the Eastern Seaboard to Atlantic City.

A schedule of her arrivals in various ports was published internationally (and more appearance fees secured), much to the chagrin of Miss America pageant officials. They had made arrangements for Lanphier to arrive in Atlantic City by train, with appearance fees going to the pageant, and after threats and counter-threats — all garnering front-page headlines — the pageant officials won out.

"Fay Must Ride in Choo Choo Cars, Not in Boat!" exclaimed a headline in the "Santa Cruz Evening News."

Lanphier was not to be deterred. She stormed to the title of Miss America on a 12-3 vote, and was immediately cast opposite Louise Brooks and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in Paramount Pictures' "The American Venus," a rather risqué account of a beauty pageant that included nudity (although not by Lanphier) and "adult situations."

#### Not taken lying down

But Lanphier had trouble keeping out of the fray. Her manager Jacobs sued her for back fees; she charged a potential California gubernatorial candidate with political extortion; the previous Miss America, Ruth Malcomson, characterized her as a "professional" and refused to participate in any future competitions with her; and a nude statuette unveiled by a pageant judge looked suspiciously like Lanphier, provoking public outrage.

Then a real bomb dropped. Barnard MacFadden of the "New York Graphic" published a series of articles which claimed that not only had the Miss America pageant been fixed for Lanphier, but that the Santa

## replay



Fay Lanphier in 1925 and 1929 in double-photo image sent out by United Press International illustrating the difference between Lanphier as a beauty queen and as a housewife.

Cruz pageant had been fixed, too. The series was published in 86 newspapers across the country.

Lanphier and pageant officials quickly sued MacFadden for libel, and eventually secured a retraction, but the damage had been done. Paramount dropped Lanphier's contract, and there was a taint to her royalty.

Always a tough cookie, Lanphier made the most of her newfound notoriety. She scheduled a 16-week dancing tour on her way back to California, during which she made an astounding \$50,000 on the eve of the Great Depression, but her career in films and as a beauty queen was over.

Lanphier eventually married her high school sweetheart, Winfield Daniels, and raised two daughters in the East Bay. She died of complications from viral pneumonia in 1959, at the age of 53. ☹

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