

Can You Define Pulchritude?^{8/11/93}

Reviewing old issues of the Tribune, as I have been doing for the new Historical Society column Peek at The Past, does prove times have changed. I showed my daughter Joan the story about Miss Pacifica 1958. The headline was "Pat Smith, 35-22-35 Picked As 400 Cheer." Joan had to look up pulchritude in the dictionary, and she was appalled at publicizing a 16 year old's measurements in headlines. Most women Joan's age would be as appalled as she was. Miss Smith, described as a "long-legged 16-year-old Westmoor High School junior who measures 35-22-35" went on to win the county Dream Girl Pageant and participate in the Maid of California pageant at the California State Fair. The first Miss Pacifica, Jackie Willard, was actually named before incorporation. The event was a fund raiser to help pay for the campaign to become a city. Today that statistical headline describing Pat Smith wouldn't get by the feminists in any modern newsroom.

Over the past three decades pageants have found themselves on the defensive. Their response was to de-emphasize the physical, such as bathing suit competitions, and to emphasize brains, though an 18 year old version of Ruth Bader Ginsburg probably would not have stood a chance in any pageant I've ever seen or heard of. Lately they've been calling them scholarship pageants. I think the promoters are sincere, but old habits die hard. It is just as hard to sell young women competing on the basis of brains as it is to sell young men competing on the same basis. College football outdraws College Bowl 1000 to one.

I don't know where Pat Smith is these days, but it would be interesting to hear her views on the subject. She would now be in her early fifties. Would she want her daughter (if she has one) to participate in a pageant? Were the three pageants she participated in positive experiences, or does she look back and wish it had gone differently? It would also be useful to know how Maxine Jensen and Barbara Dominguez, the two runners-up who were pictured with her on the Coastside Tribune's front page, feel about their experience. They lost, but they participated. Do they wish they had never gotten involved? Or in retrospect, was it one of the great experiences of their lives? I can imagine both possibilities.

In the early days of Pacifica, when there was a kind of municipal inferiority complex, pageants did much to boost our own self-image. Thanks to hard work and skill by pageant directors and their talented volunteer associates, Pacifica gained much positive publicity. It was a way large segments of the community came together to accomplish something for the whole city. It was a way to transcend the divisiveness of Sharp Park versus Pedro Valley, Pacific Manor versus Vallemar.

The best current example of this kind of community effort is the Fog Fest. I still think pageants are a good idea, but I don't expect the fad to come around again in my lifetime. Their bad sides are too well known, and their accomplishments are currently under-appreciated.