

## Miss America showing her age



Ann Simonton, a former Miss Teen Covina, is arrested by San Diego police as she leads a protest during the 1986 Miss California Pageant.

### Protests, scandals strain popularity of beauty pageants

By John Flinn  
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

Miss America turns 67 next month, and there are unmistakable signs she is getting a bit long in the tooth.

Her pearly white smile is tight at the edges as she shows the strain of the roughest year for beauty pageants since the first teary-eyed winner glided down the runway in 1921.

Scandals, protests and dissension have become as common as peroxide and high heels at the thousands of local and state pageants that funnel would-be beauty queens into the Miss America pageant and other national contests.

"People are finally beginning to realize that beauty pageants are dinosaurs, and the time has come for them to be extinct," said Ann Simonton, a former Miss Teen Covina and Sports Illustrated swimsuit-issue cover model turned arch-feminist.

Consider these developments:

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- The San Mateo County Fair Dream Girl pageant, scheduled for Aug. 9, has had to be postponed because only five of the county's 20 cities were willing to field contestants.

- Alison Moreno, Miss Teen California, was yanked from the recent Miss Teen USA pageant after other contestants reported she had checked out of her hotel room to spend time with her boyfriend.

- The first Miss Oakland pageant in eight years turned sour recently when the promoter failed to live through with promised prizes to sponsor winner Lisa-Elaine Block in the Miss California-USA pageant. Radio station KSOL and Summit Labs chipped in to send her the statewide contest.

- Deaf viewers of the televised Wisconsin pageant did a boycott at a closed-captioned message that promised, in vulgar terms, to improve breasts and buttocks. A male employee of station WISC, which aired the show, was suspended for the prank.

- An uproar followed the appointment of a plastic surgeon as sultan to the Miss San Diego pageant. "I can't turn a couch into a chair," announced Dr. Stephan Grifflin, but nothing has shaken the beauty pageant's pedestal quite like the scandal at the Miss California contest a few weeks ago, when Miss Santa

Barbara, Michelle Anderson, turned out

to be an undercover feminist protesting the pageant.

The 21-year-old UC-Santa Cruz student, who spent 18 months and \$5,000 training for her mission, pulled from her bra a banner reading "Pageants Hurt All Women" on live television.

"Beauty pageants promote eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia," said Anderson, who is writing a book about her experience.

"They also lower women's self-esteem, because women are always trying to compare themselves to an unreal ideal of femininity. Women are mutilating themselves with plastic surgery and other tricks of the trade to look like the ideal Barbie Doll." Anderson's high-profile hoax was the latest blow to the pageant from a well-organized group of Santa Cruz feminists who have dedicated themselves to making life as difficult as possible for the Miss California organizers.

They hounded the pageant out of Santa Cruz three years ago by pouring blood on the sidewalk outside the auditorium and parading in dresses made of bologna to symbolize that women are treated like meat. When the contest moved to San Diego, they followed it there, vestigative journalist.

"She came in intending fully to embarrass us and promote herself. She lied her way in and she lied her way out," he said. "But she didn't come away with one shred of evidence to discredit us, other than the personal biases she went in with."

"What she is saying to you and me as males is that it's wrong to be attracted to women who are pretty,

who have good figures and who groom well. I think she's barking up the wrong tree.

"I resent this woman holding us up to public ridicule for our point of view," Arnhyrn said. "We have given out over \$500,000 in scholarships to women in recent years. What has she or Ann Simonton ever done for women?"

He added that interest in the Miss California pageant has been holding steady in recent years. In fact, he said, he expects the publicity from the brouhaha to boost entries by 25 percent next year.

But Anderson's message apparently is being heard in San Mateo County, where interest in the county fair's "Dream Girl" pageant has fallen dramatically, according to Jaime Rupert, the fair's director of special events.

"I think we got stuck in the backlash of the Miss California thing," said Rupert, herself a former Dream Girl. "There's so much negative publicity that pageants have gotten an image problem."

This year just three cities — Burlingame, San Mateo and Daly City — held beauty pageants to nominate Dream Girl hopefuls. Half Moon Bay and Millbrae selected their contestants without holding pageants.

The contest has been postponed until February and its organizers are searching for a new name.

"The name 'Dream Girl' was appropriate in 1953, when it started, but we want to get into something that emphasizes the scholarship angle," Rupert said.

The Miss America pageant, the grand dame of national beauty con-

tests, is also showing its age. Launched in 1921 by Atlantic City merchants as a way to prolong the summer season, it is now struggling to regain its audience after losing nearly one-third of its television viewers from 1974 to 1983.

But in many parts of the country, beauty pageants remain a fixture of life — particularly in the so-called "Pageant Belt" from Texas to Alabama, which overlaps the Bible Belt. Last year roughly 80,000 women participated in the 1,500 beauty contests affiliated with the Miss America pageant.

Those contests represent just a drop in the beauty bucket. Pageantry magazine estimates that 750,000 beauty contests are held nationwide each year, including county fairs, high school homecomings and industry contests such as the National Pork Industry Queen pageant.

Suddenly, the communist world is foisting tiaras onto the heads of rosy-cheeked young comrades. The People's Republic of China recently held its first beauty pageant, and a Miss Moscow has been anointed in the Soviet Union.

And new big-buck, made-for-television pageants continue to sprout in the United States, such as the Miss Hawaiian Tropic International Pageant, which is short on wholesomeness or scholarships and long on fabulous babes in bikinis.

Pageant organizers remain hopeful that it will take more than a Michelle Anderson to sour the American public on beauty contests.

"The greatest spectator sport in America is not football or baseball," said former Miss America pageant Chairman Albert Marks Jr. "It's watching pretty girls, and that won't change."

