

Teen Queen: Rites of passage or sexist scam?

by Jim Hunger

It all started with a letter from a former student of mine asking whether I had been the one to nominate her for the "Miss American Co-Ed" competition. Theresa, my high school sophomore friend, guessed that I might have done it, I suppose because the contest was publicized as a competition to select from among many the epitome of feminine adolescent development and achievement, and teachers are supposed to be concerned with this area of consideration.

ing silence e m forster the life to
utgrowing the pain gale wil
narotta the politics of homos
erbst the story she could not tel
jnch the swashbuckler lisa all
octurnes for the king of naph
edith barrington trying to be ar
un to own too jan robbins sile
wentek two xmas carols dana
ood times bad times joel red
interson oranges are not the
rother tongue jane rule the
rmistead maupin tales of the c

She seemed very excited about the whole deal.

When I told her I wasn't her anonymous sponsor, I was careful not to include any personal commentary about pageants of this kind. She needed to learn for herself, I felt. It would be a growing experience. I promised to attend the event and provide any support I could.

A couple months later, Theresa informed me that her father would be unable to attend the event and serve as her escort since it was planting season for spud farmers. She asked me if I would be willing to provide that service. I wrote back that I'd be honored. How could I refuse? After being enthusiastic about her participation, I could hardly decide that it was now beneath my own dignity to get involved. Since the contest required that escorts be members of the family and the Chins are Chinese Americans, I was listed as Theresa's godfather.

The events of the weekend began with a call from Theresa and Mrs. Chin on Thursday afternoon announcing their arrival. We arranged to meet over dinner in the Hilton, where the contest was being staged, to solidify plans. It was the first of a number of meals I was to be their gracious guest at, usually making feeble attempts to return their hospitality, never with any success, but never trying that hard, either. Theresa presented me with a shirt as an expression of her gratitude for my participation in this major milestone in her life. I was embarrassed, especially since I knew Theresa's birthday had occurred recently, but I hadn't acknowledged it.

The primary ceremony, in which my services were needed, was to take place on Saturday, but there were also talent and gown competitions on Friday. Also, Mrs. Chin had brought two 35 mm. cameras, and still wanted to buy a zoom lens. Theresa had told her that I was a wonderful photographer, so she asked me if I would help her immortalize the weekend. I agreed, though arranging a time to get the lens was going to be a problem.

On Friday morning Mrs. Chin and I managed to acquire the lens, but I had to cut short my student conference hours. That evening, after another meal in the lobby restaurant of the Hilton, Mrs. Chin and I puzzled over the new state of the art camera and zoom lens she expected me to operate with finesse. Then, in a basement ballroom, we watched as Theresa and her fellow combatants presented samples of their talent.

The first part of the competition was speech. All of the girls who couldn't come up with some other talent to display competed in this event. The speeches only had to be two minutes long, on the rather trite topic, "America's youth: pride of the present; hope for the future," but some of the speakers were lost several sentences into their presentation. As an erstwhile speech teacher, I felt a special sympathy for the speaker. Still, they'd known about this competition for over half a year, so the ineptness of the vast majority of them was surprising.

Fortunately, Theresa had begun to take piano lessons about a year before, so she was able to perform a fairly decent rendition of the simple but eloquent "Moonlight Sonata." Only a few of the girls seemed to have attained this level of proficiency in their chosen area of talent exhibition. Many stumbled through high school dance routines choreographed for full team performances, sometimes to rock songs with themes that clashed with that of the contest. Others whined off-key song lyrics to scratchy, muffled, instrumental tapes.

The more I saw, the more curious I became about how this pageant was generating money. Competitions of this kind involve titles which are owned and conferred by individuals who hope to make a profit from the pageant and the subsequent activities of the title holders. With some discreet digging I learned that sponsors for each girl had to put up \$300 for the girl's room and board for the weekend, at least half of which was profit, I figured.

Slick finish booklets were also sold, as well as advertising in the booklets. Only two rather versatile officials appeared to be running the show, so perhaps these sources of revenue were sufficient to make the venture worthwhile. The Hilton, McDonald's, and other businesses benefitting from the brouhaha were obviously subsidizing the event in various ways, so expenses were kept at a minimum.

And if these sources had become apparent with only a few moments reflection, undoubtedly there were other profitable twists and schemes to the operation. After all, these young ladies were the adolescent royalty of our superficially classless but ever-aspiring American society, where any girl can be a princess for a price, and nothing is too good for baby. Besides, this was only the Oregon state competition; the stakes were bound to be higher in the regional and national pageants.

I had to beg off after the talent competition, thus missing the ball gown strut. I had an eight o'clock class the next morning, and was worried about the amount of time this ordeal was sucking up. Girls who earlier had completed their efforts in the talent event had begun to appear in doorways, rustling clouds of diaphanous fluff waiting for their turn to float across the stage.

The gown promenade is perhaps the most important feature of a beauty pageant. It represents the ritual enshrinement of femininity in gorgeous fetters, satins and silks that elevate as they enslave. But I'd been grossed out enough for the night. The talent imbroglio had left my senses feeling a bit scorched at the nerve ends, and I wasn't sure I could get through the gown event without letting fly a few cynical remarks.

On Saturday I had to attend a rehearsal at four and then dinner with Mrs. Chin and the two family friends from Klamath country who had actually sponsored Theresa in the contest. The climactic event of the pageant would

take place that night, and we had to figure out how to deal with limited reserved seating space and my inability to take pictures while actively participating in the ceremonies. Amid exotic dishes speckled with unfamiliar fungi and pigeon eggs, we plotted quick switches and seating plans.

Theresa showed admirable aplomb that night. She seemed not to take the phony glamor and publicity hype too seriously, and was prepared for the likelihood that she wouldn't be the winner. Everyone was piously intoning about the experience she was getting from being involved in the pageant, the qualities she was demonstrating or developing from her participation.

I echoed these enthusiastic sentiments and clicked pictures like a cub reporter on first assignment. I even froze a gleaming, ivory grin on my face as I escorted my little princess across the stage and the emcee announced her favorite living American, that glitzy queen of queens and anti-Christ of education and progressive thinking, Ronald Reagan.

Following a final confused, assembly-line photography session, the pageant was over. Theresa wasn't even in the final 25, but she didn't appear surprised by this. With her un-

revealing, long-sleeved gown and somewhat reserved demeanor, she didn't present much of a threat to the sleeker, more serious competitors. While her adult entourage milled around her blathering about the valuable experience she was involved in and what an admirable young lady she was showing herself to be, Theresa was diplomatic and sedately cheerful.

Was it a worthwhile experience? She did get up in front of a large group of strange people and perform adequately. She got a chance to step outside of her isolated, rural Klamath County existence and eat and sleep and dance around and get silly with girls from all over the state. She was presented with the opportunity to critically evaluate her own personal development with that of other girls from a diversity of environments.

Were Theresa's periodic sidelong glances due to embarrassment, an awakening of feminist sensitivity to her compromising situation? Or were they merely shyness, adolescent awkwardness? As her friend and former teacher, I am ever the optimist. But considering her selection of her favorite American, I can't help but wonder.

**co·op·er·a·tive/
la:** it's an adjective
b: it's a noun 2: it's
something special
for 60,000,000
people from
coast to coast



Open to All—
**Food
Front
COOPERATIVE
GROCERY**

Whole Foods, Real Groceries,
Natural Treats, Fresh Produce

Open 7 days, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

2675 NW Thurman 222-5658
TRI-MET BUS 53

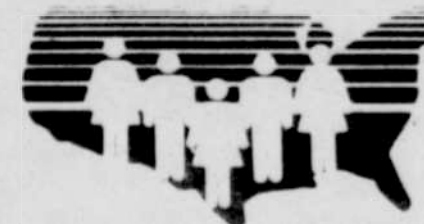
That something special means 40,000 member-owned cooperatives throughout the United States devoted to serving their members and communities in every way imaginable.

For example, there are cooperatives for electric and telephone service, housing, food, furniture, insurance, farm marketing and farm supply, credit unions and farm credit, health and day care.

The cooperative way of conducting business has proven over and over again to be both a highly efficient and extremely economical way to provide services and goods. That's why co-ops come in every size and kind and are found in the city, the suburbs and rural America.

No matter whether you think of cooperative as a noun or an adjective, it means the same thing — people working together to meet common needs to benefit their entire communities.

COOPERATIVES



BUILDING A BETTER AMERICA
... and a BETTER WORLD