

The Mrs. America Pageant: From Beauty Contest to Homemaking Olympics

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Abstract

This paper reviews about twenty years in the history of the Mrs. America Pageant and examines how it was initiated as a beauty contest like the Miss America Pageant but later transformed into a professionalized contest on the “good old-fashioned wifely arts” as well as on pulchritude. This close look at the formation and transformation of the contest for married women reveals connections between American standards of beauty, consumerism, and the commodification of female domesticity during the postwar period.

Keywords: Mrs. America Pageant, Miss America Pageant, Beauty Contest, Domesticity, Palisade Amusement Park, Asbury Park, Ellinor Village, Bert Nevins

“And the winner is....” The convention hall in Ellinor Village, Florida, became silent. It was April 24, 1954, and the audience was about to find out who would become a new American icon. The speaker finally announced: “Mrs. Missouri! The new Mrs. America!” Wanda Jennings from St. Louis was the winner. With a startled expression on her face, she said that she could “hardly believe she won the national title.”² She shed tears. Happy tears, tiara and evening gown were not unusual in the final moments of beauty contests but having the winner’s husband rush onto the stage and bestow a “Victory Kiss” was unique to the Mrs. America Pageant. Indeed, Mrs. Jennings, the mother of an eight-year-old son, was the winner of a contest open only to married women.

Jennings was a green-eyed, honey blond and reported to be “5 feet 9 1/2 inches in height, 135 pounds in weight” and to have “a 36-inch bust, 25-inch waist and 36-inch hips.”³ Her measurements, especially her matching bust and hip figures, were what even Miss America contestants would aspire to have. According to Frank Deford, “the average Miss America contestants measured about 34-25 1/2-36” but ideal figures for Miss America were 36-24-36 or 35-23-35.⁴ Jennings was indisputably “striking enough to be a United States glamour queen” as the *New York Times* described her.⁵ Yet, she was more than a glamour queen of America. Her physical beauty and glamour were not the only reasons why she won the contest. She was also said to be the “most outstanding homemaker in the nation,” according to a promotional book titled *Mrs. America: Homemaker’s Guide*, which was published right after her winning of the title in April.⁶

What made Jennings the most outstanding homemaker? What was its meaning and what were the criteria for selecting the winner? This paper will examine how the Mrs. America Pageant was initiated as a beauty contest and later transformed into a professionalized contest on the “good old-fashioned wifely arts” as well as on pulchritude.⁷ A close look at the formation and transformation of this contest for married women will reveal how it reflected American culture and society in the postwar period.

1. The Beginning of the Mrs. America Pageant as a Beauty Contest

The Mrs. America Pageant had its beginning as a part of the Palisade Amusement Park attractions in 1938. Bert Nevins, one of the top publicists of the day, was hired by the owners of the park to ensure enough press, which led him to mastermind a beauty contest for married women as a “publicity stunt” for the park as he later told the *New Yorker*.⁸

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The park was located in Fort Lee on the New Jersey Palisades overlooking the Hudson River just across from midtown Manhattan. It began as a trolley park in 1898 and developed into a popular amusement park.

When Irving and Jack Rosenthal brothers bought the park in 1935, however, it was losing \$80,000 a year. “People in the business thought we were nuts,” Irving later said.⁹ The Rosentals worked hard to turn the park into a profitable enterprise. One of their efforts was to hire a publicist for better publicity. The person employed was Bert Nevins. Nevins had previously handled public relations for Coney Island’s Luna Park and had been in charge of the New Jersey State Fair publicity and advertising.¹⁰ Thus he knew what was needed and should be done for promoting an amusement park. In 1937, the Rosentals appointed the Bert Nevins Publicity Offices to handle advertising and publicity promotions for the coming season.¹¹

1938 was a special year for Palisades Amusement Park. The advertising campaign that announced the opening of its 1938 season was “the biggest in the resort’s twenty-six year history.”¹² It utilized all New York and Northern New Jersey newspapers, outdoor billboards, electric signs and car cards. Nevins doubled the advertising appropriation in 1939 and doubled it again the next year.¹³ He explained at a convention of operators of amusement parks, pools and beaches in 1939 that such a heavy focus on advertising for the park was an “attempt to counteract” the New York World’s Fair.¹⁴ But conventional advertising was only one of his current endeavors.

Nevins generated different kinds of press coverage for the Park in 1938. One was a dating service attraction where men and women were matched up. The dating service was free but some critics condemned it as a “Slave Market.”¹⁵ Nevins was even arrested along with several other park employees for operating this so-called “immoral” attraction. The park defended the show as “an entirely human interest attraction” and a Bergen County Grand Jury agreed, clearing the park and all of the people arrested of any wrongdoing.¹⁶ It was a successful publicity stunt, since any publicity was good publicity. For Nevins, it was better since he got free press coverage from the incident.

Another publicity stunt Nevins organized was a less controversial attraction: a beauty contest for married women. His motive was to prolong tourist traffic beyond Labor Day. It was the very same as that of the Miss America Pageant which had been founded in 1921 as an attempt to extend the tourism season beyond Labor Day in nearby Atlantic City, a popular summer beach resort. The Miss America Pageant was the very first national beauty contest and became the largest, the most prestigious, competitive, and well-known pageant in the United States.¹⁷ While Palisades Park did not have a beach as Atlantic City did, its convenient location for Manhattan and New Jersey dwellers meant it could pull in large crowds with good attractions. Still, another beauty contest for single girls in New Jersey would probably not draw much interest since the Miss America contest had been established quite a reputation already— despite a few years of discontinuation in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁸

The Miss America committee unwittingly offered a good opening for Bert Nevins in 1938. It was the first year that the committee set a stricter rule. Now the contestants for the Miss America Pageant had to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight, and never married, divorced, or had a marriage annulled. When the Miss America contest eliminated any possibility of married women participating, Nevins got an idea for his park. Why should married women be barred from the pageant? What about a pageant for married women only? He had just been married and realized that married women had the same aspiration for admiration as single women did: “I had just got married myself—my wife was in publicity, too—so the idea was natural enough.”¹⁹ He even invited his wife, Marion, to be the first entrant (though she declined the offer).²⁰ His idea was that anyone could be a crowned beauty, including married women. The contest was an immediate success, bringing a huge crowd and their enthusiastic responses, as shown in a photograph of the 1941 event in Palisades Park. The contest was mainly about a bathing suit parade, which provided a good attraction for the park. Aside from attracting overly excited male audiences to the park’s contest, Nevins’ idea was that anybody should have an opportunity to enter to become a crowned beauty. After the success of the Mrs.

America Pageant, he also concocted the “Eyeglass-wearing Beauty Pageant” in 1941 for the park.²¹ Nevins made Palisades Amusement Park famous for “its beauty contests for every type of female imaginable,” and his idea continued into the 1960s with pageants like Little Miss America, Miss Teenage America, Miss Polish America and Miss Fat America.²² The catchphrase of the Mrs. America Pageant was, indeed, “It Could Be You!” Any married woman could be a Mrs. America!²³ The idea was not absolutely new. The term “Mrs. America,” often teamed with “Mr. America,” had previously been used to refer to a typical married woman. Mr. and Mrs.

America represented common American citizens, as exemplified by the two wax dolls sent to Japan by Mayor La Guardia of New York as “Messengers of Good-Will” in 1935.²⁴ These life-sized dolls, named “Mr. and Mrs. America,” were dressed as a typical young American couple. They represented “the average American tourist couple.”²⁵

When the dolls arrived in Japan, they were greeted by Japanese children clad in kimonos, and the Japanese Tourist Bureau arranged their tour around Japan.²⁶ This highly publicized event was intended to present a representative image of American couples to the people of Japan. La Guardia's idea in selecting an image of the emblematic American woman foreshadowed the coming of the Mrs. America Pageant.

A 1937 film by RKO, initially titled “Missus America,” also predicted the emergence of the Mrs. America contest. This time, comically. The film was a satire on the innumerable contests in cooking, jingle-writings, etc. in which American housewives constantly were participating. More specifically, it was about a contest to select “America's Perfect Housewife.”²⁷ Featuring Helen Broderick, Victor Moore and Ann Shirley, the movie deals with a wife who is so busy spending every spare moment entering contests that her domestic duties take second place, much to the discomfort of her browbeaten husband, who is left with all the housework. The movie reveals that it is actually the husband's expert housekeeping that led to her selection as the sectional winner in a competition for “America's Perfect Housewife” sponsored by “Happy Noodles,” a noodle manufacturing company. The woman's henpecked husband did practically all the work for which she is honored. During the finals in Atlantic City, where contestants' husbands are taken along, he becomes increasingly annoyed at how his wife exploits him. At dinner he makes a ridiculous travesty out of the contest. Happy Noodles, fearing that the whole thing will blow up in its corporate face, awards his wife the title and a \$10,000 for being the Perfect Housewife.²⁸

The film's release title was changed to “Meet the Missus.” The wife in the film was referred as the Missus, not as Missus America. Only a genuinely perfect housewife was entitled to be called Mrs. America. And the heroine of the movie is far from perfect, as she connives to get the title at the sacrifice of her husband. The scenes where she is able to make him do her work bordered on the sadistic. The film in fact was described as “pure sadism” in the *New York Times*, while another critic noted that it was a “gleeful and pithy travesty on Miss America contests.”²⁹ The film is not about beauty queens in their late teens but it does question the value of selecting one woman as a national ideal and the power-relations behind the contest. As cultural historian Kimberly A. Hamlin argues, beauty pageants are “about power.”³⁰ The film characterizes the contest as a power struggle between man and wife; between two American institutions, the small town family and corporations that sponsor the contest; and between the concept of ideal womanhood and reality. Moreover, the film provides an opportunity to think about what a contest to select America's perfect housewife should be.

When Bert Nevins launched the Mrs. America Pageant in 1938, he was initially emulating the Miss America Pageant. Mrs. America was selected for her beauty alone. The only requirement to compete in the contest was a marriage license. Most entrants in the first year's competition were models, show girls and dancing instructors. The winner was Mrs. Margaret Chamberlain, a model. She had modeled for department stores like Bloomingdale's in Ohio and won a beauty pageant at a Cleveland fair before she entered the Mrs. America Pageant.³¹ A publicity photograph taken after she won the title proves that the contest was searching for a wedded version of Miss America. Chamberlain is shown here in a bathing suit and high heels with her “Mrs. America” banner. Without her banner, she could be mistaken for a winner of the national beauty contest for single girls, since her poise is almost identical to that of the 1938 Miss America, Marilyn Meseke, who was also from Ohio.³² Both of them show confidence in their appearance; Chamberlain highlights her waistline by putting her hands around it and Meseke assumes a classical contrapposto pose. They are bathing beauties with “perfect proportions, movie-star looks and scanty costume.”³³

Miss America was not required to exhibit talent at that time, and neither was Mrs. America. Nobody knew, or cared whether Mrs. America “could fry an egg or wash out a pair of socks.”³⁴ Mrs. America was really not much different from Miss America.

2. The Transformation of the Mrs. America Pageant

It was only after the war that the contest reshaped itself to select the perfect housewife rather than the reigning beauty who happened to be married. The experience of World War II instigated the transformation of the contest. Wartime conditions caused widespread changes in American life, and Mrs. America was not exception. Perfect bodily proportions were not enough to satisfy the needs of the United States at war.

She had to become a head of household, while her husband went to war. She had to support the war effort on home front. On the one hand, she temporarily took over “men’s jobs” exemplified by Rosie the Riveter. On the other hand, she was asked to run her family “with care,” as seen in a 1942 propaganda poster by U.S. Department of Agriculture, entitled “Mrs. America buys food with care.” It shows how a Mrs. America exhibits wise consumer behavior during the war in the form of comic strips where she studies, reads, makes notes, and then shops.

Through planning what to buy in advance, comparing prices, and checking her purchase before use, she performs her duty as homemaker in a professional manner. At the bottom of the image, the phrase, “Wise buying helps win the war” reveals the purpose of such a careful spending pattern: patriotism.³⁵

Through the poster, the government promoted well-planned consumer behavior as a part of war effort and urged American women to be like this Mrs. America. And they did. When wastefulness and extravagance were discouraged and frugality was encouraged as a patriotic act during the war, the buying habits of housewives changed radically. A national survey completed by the Home Makers Guild of America, a consumer research organization, showed that “84.8 per cent of the housewives polled changed their buying habits in food products, while 86 per cent changed their habits in buying meat.”³⁶ In pre-war days, 20 per cent chose their food store because of the location, and 29.1 per cent because of better prices, but in 1943, the most important consideration was “whether the store has a better selection of goods.”³⁷ The quality of the products became a determining factor in selecting a store. In the midst of shortages and rationing, the homemakers of America would go to more distant stores in order to get food of better quality.

Realizing what had been asked of American women during the war, Nevins must have felt his pageant for the postwar period should be different. His first action was to set up Mrs. America, Inc. in 1945 and he became its president. It was an effort to make the contest a nationwide event, independent from Palisades Amusement Park. Until 1945, the contest was held at a local level, despite its grandiose name, and most entrants were from sections of New Jersey, Connecticut, upper New York State, Pennsylvania, and Delaware.³⁸ His decision to separate the pageant from the park came after a devastating fire. There had been periodic fires at the park but the worst one broke out in 1944. It destroyed most of the buildings, killing seven people and injuring one hundred and fifty. The estimated loss was more than one million dollars.³⁹

Because of the fire, the contest was not held that year and Mrs. America, Inc. began to search for a new place to host the pageant and new sponsors who would support the event financially. Although the park was later rebuilt with new attractions and promotions that drew even bigger crowds, Nevins wanted to expand his contest beyond a local venue. First, he made a deal with Lever Brothers, an important manufacturer of domestic cleaning products in 1945. The deal required the newly selected Mrs. America of 1945 be on tour to appear at fashion shows as part of their department-store promotion for Lux.⁴⁰ The deal lasted only for a year as Lever Brothers dropped their fashion shows in the next year. Nevins persisted to find a tie with a “Mississippi cotton concern.”⁴¹ This new connection led to the 1946 coronation of Mrs. America in an unlikely place for a beauty pageant: a football field just before the University of Mississippi-Mississippi State football game.

Despite some difficulties in the first three years after break-up with Palisades Park, Nevins eventually found a location that could host the contest in 1948.⁴² It was Asbury Park in New Jersey, which had been looking for a post-Labor Day attraction along the lines of the Miss America pageant at Atlantic City. With a new permanent location, the real change was happening. In addition to having the mayor of Asbury Park the pageant’s honorary chairman to strengthen the bond with the city, Nevins made extra efforts to promote the contest nationwide.

First, he invited celebrities to act as judges in the contest. Among the best known stars invited were Harry Conover, model expert, and his wife, Candy Jones; artist Russell Patterson; comedian Jack Pearl of Baron Munchausen radio fame; singer Vic Damone, and Paula Lawrence, Broadway stage star.⁴³ Next was television. The winner of the contest was scheduled to be on air, for an interview with “We the People” radio and television shows.⁴⁴ The final stages of the contest were even televised and the 1949 contest, more significantly, by the American Broadcasting Company network for two days.⁴⁵ With the change of its location and growing media coverage, the pageant sought to differentiate itself from its counterpart in Atlantic City—to be more than a beauty contest. The pageant was promoted as a search for the “best looking and best homemaker among America’s married women.”⁴⁶

Its prizes that included not only a \$1000 fur coat, a diamond ring and a jewel watch but also such home appliance as an “electronic combination laundry and dishwasher,” a refrigerator, an automatic ironer and furniture were frequently mentioned in media as a token that the contest was indeed concerning housewives.⁴⁷ The award items themselves clarified they were intended for a homemaker.

Such a focus on the domestic side of the contest seems to have been a reaction to the Home Makers Guild of America's version of Mrs. America. Right after the war, the guild conducted another survey on the food store preferences of the housewife. It assembled its findings on such questions as ‘when and where do you buy most of your groceries’ and put them into a film, *Mrs. America Speaks on Modern Store Service*.

Founded by Owens-Illinois Glass Company, the guild was “to determine housewives’ opinions of new products, designs and homemaking problems,” and thus was composed of approximately 4,000 women consultants selected to represent a cross-section of the American buying public.⁴⁸ According to the report in the film, 77.1 per cent of the housewives preferred to shop for groceries, meats, beverages and household products in one store instead of visiting a number of stores for different items, indicating the postwar popularization of supermarkets.⁴⁹

In order to publicize its film, the Guild selected its own “Mrs. America” among their consultants. She was Mrs. George Lucas, twenty-eight years old with two children from Lafayette, Indiana. She was selected not for her beauty but because she represented all American housewives. She was characterized as “the guild’s typical American housewife,” who stood for those women in the survey.⁵⁰ She was invited to New York City to attend the premier of the movie, and she was said to dislike commercially quick-frozen foods, with the exception of frozen peas.⁵¹ She was a real married woman concerned about real food and cooking.

By 1948, Mrs. America, Inc. and its president, Bert Nevins, began to look for married beauties who could also cook and sew when they settled down in Asbury Park. The final winner would be selected “on the basis of her ability as a housewife and homemaker, as well as her personal charm.”⁵² This new requirement of dexterity in domestic tasks in order to be Mrs. America paralleled the normative definition of American housewife in the postwar period. When married women became homebound after the end of war as G.I.s were returning home, their role as housewives became professionalized. Based on their war experience as Rosie the Riveter and wise patriotic consumer, they were now armed with professional minds that geared towards home management. The Mrs. America contest provided a new ground to show off their professionalism by turning its attention to the domestic world of cooking and cleaning from its previous focus exclusively on physical beauty. Nevins even declared in 1950: “It’s not a beauty contest.”⁵³ He argued that the contest was to select “the Nation’s Most Beautiful Married Woman and Perfect Housewife,” since it was based on both these attributes—beauty and perfect household management.⁵⁴

Indeed, when the Mrs. America contest final was staged on the boardwalk in Asbury Park before the thousands of spectators, with the crowning of the winner in Convention Hall, the event was divided into two parts: beauty and domestic attributes.⁵⁵ The judges were also divided into two groups: celebrities who determined the winner on her pulchritude and home economics specialists who examined each contestant’s ability in homemaking chores.⁵⁶ In order to highlight the domestic side of Mrs. America, it was announced that the winner would officially open the New Jersey State fair at Trenton and make daily appearance in the domestic arts building, presenting some of her recipes.⁵⁷ Mrs. America was to match the prize winning jams and preserves. While Miss America, often considered to be the ideal single girl in America, was selected on beauty alone, Mrs. America now had to possess more than beauty in order to be the ideal housewife. She had to have professional knowledge of household skills.

Yet the method to determine contestants’ knowledge on domestic work was rather trivial in the beginning. The 1948 contestants had to submit their macaroni recipes to the judges before the contest. During the contest, they had to display one item they had sewed or knitted themselves and then answer one “home-making quiz.”⁵⁸ The question was on macaroni.⁵⁹ That was all. Following were evening gown and bathing suit parades. They were the highlights of the event. As a photograph of all the Mrs. America finalists in bathing suits that decorated the front page of a local newspaper indicates, the climax of the pageant remained to be a bathing suit gala. In fact, the winner of the 1948 contest was a “shapely, 21-year old, blonde Philadelphia model, who was married only two and a half months ago.”⁶⁰ It was proven that her five years of modeling experience with training at the Barbizon Modeling School in New York benefited more to win the title than years of married life.

This was soon to be changed for the criteria for home-making abilities were strengthened each year. In 1949, the final judging was expanded to involve quizzes on bed-making, diapering, sewing, cooking and a number of other housewifely chores as well as doughnut recipes. It was even claimed that 50 percent would be on the wifely work.⁶¹ For the 1950 contest, the finalists had to give a public demonstration of their cooking ability for the first time, in addition to sweeping floors and displaying samples of their crocheting.⁶² They were required to actually cook some articles of food at eight ranges in varied colors installed on the stage.⁶³ That year, the winner of the cooking session was named Mrs. America, indicating that now cooking became a crucial factor than beauty.⁶⁴ The next year, the rule was finalized that judging should be based 50 percent on homemaking ability and 50 percent on beauty.⁶⁵ It became official that only a competent homemaker can be crowned Mrs. America. When Mrs. Penny Duncan won the title that year, her bread and cheese casserole recipe might well be regarded as a “token of her home-making ability.”⁶⁶ In 1952, contenders for the title were asked to do more than cooking.

They were required to demonstrate their ability to sew, peel apples, polish floors, cook and even “put diapers on baby-size dolls.”⁶⁷ The idea was that perfect housewives should be more than good cooks. They should be good at all sorts of household chores.

While any woman over twenty-one who was married and living with her husband could enter the Mrs. America Pageant, more requirements were beginning to be placed. Along with a marriage certificate, each entrant had to submit a recent full-length photograph of herself, a copy of her favorite recipe and a completed official questionnaire.⁶⁸ On the questionnaire, entrants had to answer questions such as “how many years they’ve been crocheting” or asked to give a “novel way of using a broomcorn broom in housecleaning.”⁶⁹

Still the bathing suit competition, a symbolic statement that beauty could be measured in the most revealing costume, continued. Contestants paraded in street attire, evening gowns and bathing suits and everybody knew the bathing suit parade was the very highlight of the event. Presenting candidates for America’s perfect housewife still required a moment of sexual titillation, despite the growing focus on homemaking skills in the competition. Even when cooking abilities of regional finalists were examined, they were in bathing suits. Seven finalists in the Mrs. New Jersey Contest in Palisades Park would stand in front of all the male celebrity judges in formal attire including musician and actor Bobby Sherwood and radio commentator Galen Drake of New York.⁷⁰ Even when the women were waiting to hear the winner of the baking competition, their bodies were assessed by the judges some of whom had nothing to do with baking. At least to the contest committee and judges, baking skills and bathing suits went hand in hand.

Therefore, beauty remained a crucial factor in determining America’s model housewife, despite Nevins’s claim that “Mrs. America doesn’t have to be a raving beauty.”⁷¹ Although contestants were judged 50 percent on homemaking and 50 percent on beauty, the winner was still described in number and color. When Mrs. Evelyn Schenk of Irvington, New Jersey was declared to be the winner in 1952, she was still identified by her measurements: 5 feet 5 1/2 inches in height, 118 pounds in weight, brown hair and eyes.⁷² Although she proved herself to be the best among the contestants in cooking, sewing, cleaning and putting diapers, her identity was best understood not in terms of what she did best but in terms of how she looked.

3. The Shaping of the Mrs. America Pageant as a Homemaking Tourney

An even greater transformation took place in 1954 when the Mrs. America contest moved again from New Jersey to Florida.⁷³ Announcing the relocation, Nevins said that “the format of future contests would stress homemaking ability rather than physical beauty.”⁷⁴ The combination of beauty and homemaking competition gradually evolved into a “homemaking tourney—the Olympics in homemaking, [the] only one of its kind in the world,” as Nevins proudly declared in his history of the Mrs. America Pageant.⁷⁵ The Olympics in homemaking developed out of his dream of producing a Mrs. American program on radio or television, “so that Mrs. America can work out of her own home, chatting about this and that, and excusing herself to her audience while she goes out to the kitchen to look at the stove.”⁷⁶ Although his goal was never realized, he did manage to find a small town where women could work out of their homes and compete for the title without being separated from their families.

In 1954, Ellinor Village, the self-styled “world’s largest family resort” with 650 cottages located right on the ocean in Ormond Beach area of Florida, became the new home for the event.⁷⁷ The resort set aside about fifty of its housekeeping bungalows along one street, which it renamed Mrs. America Drive.⁷⁸

Each contestant would be assigned a bungalow for her family so that she could bring her husband and children along and continue normal daily activities there. Visitors were permitted to see how well she could perform the most commonplace household tasks, while the judges would scrutinize them. Teams of judges would make surprise visits to every house. They would stop in to make a complete “tour of inspection” to test each contestant’s housekeeping.⁷⁹ Keeping her home neat and attractive and her kitchen spotless in a timely manner was fundamental to win the title, as contestants were photographed in their immaculate kitchens, doing clean-up jobs.⁸⁰ Each house was stocked with the same foods—the same brands of food and the same cooking utensils.⁸¹ Using the same tools and supplies, each woman competed in the baking contest and the meal planning one. For the sewing contest, women would sit down behind their portable sewing machines and display their ability using the same article of clothing, while for the ironing contest, they showed how well they could press their husband’s wardrobe and their own clothes within given time.⁸²

Being tested was not only how the contestants did each task but also how well they managed to do all the tasks, since each session was graded and put together to total the final grades. Efficiency and management now became important to be a chosen Mrs. America. The Wrights’ concept of a housewife-engineer was somehow employed in the contest. Russel Wright, who pioneered modern household wares in the early- and mid- twentieth century, was concerned with a postwar lifestyle, especially women’s daily routine in the house. With his wife Mary, he wrote *Guide to Easier Living* in 1950, a “blend of manifesto and helpful hints,” or a contribution to “America’s do-it-yourself modern movement.”⁸³ Realizing that a “rural housewife spends an average of almost 61 hours a week at her household tasks and a big city housewife about 80 hours,” the Wrights endorsed “comfort, ease, and spontaneity” in the American home and instructed their readers how to reduce housework and increase leisure through efficient design and management.⁸⁴ Devoting a chapter to the “Housewife-Engineer,” the authors believed people could achieve “work simplification” through the time and motion study, if they consider home a “small industry” and every housewife its “production engineer.”⁸⁵ To them, housework was not unskilled labor but the subject of scientific study. Similarly, the Mrs. America contest by the mid-1950s promoted housework as something scientific that could be measured systematically. By arranging each contestant’s residence, tools, and supplies in the very same way, the contest committee staged a scientific test ground for housewife-engineers to select the best one. As Mary and Russel Wright discussed in detail about how to use appliances, organize a cleaning closet, and plan daily and weekly schedules of floor mopping, window washing, and bed-making, the so-called home-making Olympics in Ellinor Village was testing their contestants on the very same subjects.⁸⁶

All participants in the national contest were the winners of the state finals. At the regional finals too, each of the contestants had to demonstrate her prowess as a homemaker. In the 1958 Mrs. Minnesota contest, for example, there were 720 statewide entries. Only twelve Minnesota housewives were named as regional finalists and competed for the title.⁸⁷ The competition was held for one day and it was an abbreviated version of the national finals with fewer categories. The contestants would “take part in a good grooming contest, table-setting test and cooking examination.”⁸⁸ Unlike the earlier 1953 Mrs. New Jersey contest, where judges were all male, the Mrs. Minnesota finals had female judges. And they were professionals: a women’s editor of *the St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press*, a local TV personality, a home economist for *the Minneapolis Tribune*, and a director of a model agency.⁸⁹ They were the experts in determining the best person in household tasks. Judges to determine who had the best feminine measurements were no longer needed. No more images of bathing beauties were widely circulated. Now regional finals became somewhat similar to that of a state fair contest in cooking where housewives with jams and preserves were vying for blue ribbons. Contestants in regional finals were triumphantly shown in cooking, washing, or sewing in publicity photos.⁹⁰

Betty Bach, a participant in the Mrs. Minnesota Contest of 1958, was one of them. A local newspaper ran a story of Bach as a “Mrs. Minnesota” finalist. Its focus was not her physical measurements but rather her apple pudding and the favorite menu of her family.⁹¹ She won the title, thanks to her apple pudding. Another local newspaper, while celebrating the winner, featured a photo of the new Queen Minnesota in exhibition kitchen of Builders Show.⁹² Bach was pictured exclusively in a domestic setting, never in a swimsuit but in an apron. Showing Mrs. Minnesota in working mode reinforced the idea that it was a hard-won victory and not an easy triumph based on physical beauty. The 1958 contest was her second try; she had been a runner-up to Mrs. Minnesota the previous year. She told the press that she had taken a “self-improvement course for this year’s contest,” and had baked a lot of bread and made a lot of pies in order to improve her skills.⁹³ It paid off and she headed to the national finals in Florida.

Determining Mrs. America was more complicated than selecting the state winners. The 1958 national final contest was held from May 1 through 13. During the period, each state winner had to demonstrate her homemaking skills not only in sewing, ironing, cleaning, baking and cooking, but also in planning menus, tinting and dyeing tablecloths, setting tables, and writing about music education. As the contest period extended, a number of sessions were added to be more comprehensive in testing the finalists.

Judges for the Mrs. America Pageant were all women except for Eddie Senz, who had been head of the Make-up Department at Twentieth Century Fox. Among the judges were four of the “nation’s outstanding home economists” and three “noted authorities on personal attractiveness, charm and poise.”⁹⁴ The home economists would judge the women at all of the homemaking events and the other three judges were to evaluate them during their interviews in front of a microphone. All judging was done on the “Olympic point scoring system.”⁹⁵

Nevins’ proud characterization of the contest of the Olympics in homemaking was partly due to its scientific grading method. The four home economists would give contenders points for homemaking categories and, based on the points, they would select fifteen out of the forty nine contestants; then all seven judges would choose six from the remaining fifteen. Finally the three beauty authorities would judge the last six finalists, determining the third place, second place and the new Mrs. America.⁹⁶

The structure and rules of the competition reinforced that the emphasis was on homemaking, not just beauty. Any beauty without “the all around homemaking ability” could be eliminated in the first round.⁹⁷ As a film on the event claimed, the Mrs. America Pageant was a “World Series of Homemaking,” although they were still looking for “personal attraction, charm and poise.”⁹⁸ Proficiency in one particular homemaking category did not ensure the title either. Proficiency in every category was required. What made a perfect housewife was neither her excellent cooking talent alone nor her impeccably clean home. She had to be good at everything. What the judges were looking for was “the best All-Around Homemaker.”⁹⁹ A good example is Wanda Jennings, Mrs. America of 1955. She did not win any of the special proficiency awards for housework, but judges considered her the “best all-around homemaker in the group because she was high on the list in all qualifications.”¹⁰⁰ The professionalism that was required for housewives in the contest was not about exceptional dexterity in a single domestic task but about their ability to perform the various works in a cohesive and consistent manner.

The notion of housewives as professionals was found in a short entry for the contest booklet by W.W. Selzer, chairman of American Gas Association, a major sponsor of the contest. He wrote that sponsoring the Mrs. America contest was an “opportunity to focus attention on homemaking as a career, so often eclipsed by other outside-the-home professions.”¹⁰¹ He claimed that the contest was a way of giving American homemakers the recognition they deserved. This recognition shown by the sponsors was about more than celebrating women’s contributions to their families and the nation. It was related to the growing prominence of Home Economic courses in high school and college curricula in the postwar period.¹⁰² Declaring homemaking is a job, more significantly, a good, important, and enjoyable job, home economists of the 1950s developed the discipline and taught public in order to professionalize housework. One of their research fields was about how to apply scientific management to home-making. Believing that domestic work required professionalism and thus a scientific approach would reduce any possible frustration or unhappiness housewives faced, these scholars provided such methods as how to plan a budget and spend, how to work effectively with “motion-mindedness,” how to store tools, food, and clothes, stressing general principles of work simplification.¹⁰³ Now, the Wrights’ suggestions became the very subject of academia; housework was elevated even to enter the Ivory Tower; and the Mrs. America Pageant was celebrating the professionalism of housewives.

4. Commercialism of the Mrs. America Pageant

The Mrs. America contest’s effort to exalt housework was, on the other hand, tied with commercial interests. Nevins actively cultivated profitable relationships with manufacturing companies. Mrs. America, Inc. even ran advertising series to get sponsors: “Now Available for Endorsements: Mrs. America, the Nation’s Most Beautiful Married Woman and Perfect Housewife.”¹⁰⁴ In addition to endorsements, the pageant was also seeking any events where its winner could appear personally as a publicity stunt: “Available for personal appearances at Home Shows, Supermarkets, Trade Expositions, etc.”¹⁰⁵ It hired a press agent just to supervise such business connections. He was appointed director of merchandising for the new “Mrs. America” supermarket merchandising plan in order to coordinate “tie-ups between grocery product manufacturers and supermarkets throughout the country.”¹⁰⁶ The relationship with certain manufacturers developed into something more than endorsements and appearances. It literally determined the contents of the contest since categories and awards were created for the sponsors.

First, the questionnaire that each entrant had to fill out was designed in conjunction with the sponsors. These questions were not arbitrarily chosen. A crocheting question was asked because among the pageant's national sponsors was a company that made crocheting thread. The question of how to use a broomcorn broom was related to the National Broom Manufacturers Association, while a cooking question was linked to the "Chambers Gas Range people."¹⁰⁷ From the very moment women filled out the form to enter the contest, they encountered the names of its sponsors whose products were largely domestic.

These kinds of close ties with the sponsors became more apparent as the procedures to select the winner became more sophisticated. For example, when Roseport Frozen Farm Products, Inc. of Altoona, Pennsylvania participated in the 1952 "Mrs. America" contest, all finalists were required to participate in a special cooking contest using Roseport Quick Frozen Fryers, and also to submit favorite recipes for the fryers.¹⁰⁸

Six years later, this had become a consistent phenomenon: the sewing contest was sponsored by the Singer Sewing Machine, the yeast-raised baking event by Gas Appliance Manufacturers Association, and the Music Education and Appreciation Essay by Thomas Organ.¹⁰⁹ Those who won in these categories would be awarded a product made by its sponsor. The winner of the national title also received the products from the sponsors. In 1958 these included a new 1957 De Soto Fireflite four-door sedan, a refrigerator, an automatic gas range with Robertshaw controls, complete cabinets by American Kitchen, a washing machine and a dryer, a chest of sterling silver from the Gorham, a complete line of Proctor Appliances and a John Wood automatic gas water heater.¹¹⁰ By sponsoring the prizes, the companies got good publicity since their names were mentioned whenever the winner and the contest were covered in the press.

The winners of the state titles were given similar prizes. The local contests were run by newspapers, radio stations, or amusement parks, and they were strictly commercial as well. Mrs. Minnesota of 1958 was crowned during the opening day of the Builders Show. The partnership was useful for the contest and the Builders Show: those who would have an interest in seeing the perfect housewife in Minnesota would also have an interest in the products that were exhibited in the show, and vice versa. The Builders Show was an event that hosted more than 400 exhibits of home furnishings, building materials and gardening tools, and the winner of the Mrs. Minnesota title was planned to appear for cooking school classes at the show. The winner was awarded a Singer sewing machine, a copper finish Caloric ultramatic gas range with double oven, rotisserie and four burners, a complete set of West Bend aluminum cooking utensils, an engraved silver meat tray from Wilson Meat Products Co. and a year's supply of Toni good grooming products.¹¹¹

The sponsors for the national finals also sponsored the state-level contest, provided such prizes for the promotion of their products, and ran advertising campaigns featuring the winner. When Mrs. Bach was selected Mrs. Minnesota, she instantly appeared in advertising sections of local newspapers. "I've Always Preferred Gas for Cooking... It's So Dependable!" she claimed in an advertisement.¹¹² Her skill for cooking was certified as the best in the state, perhaps because she had relied on the dependability of gas cooking, as the ad said. Those who wanted to cook like Bach should think about using gas.

The activities of the winners were also commercially motivated. Mrs. America, Inc. applied for registration of "Mrs. America" as a trademark for sales promotions of goods and services of subscribers to proprietor's services, through the medium of regional and national contests, and the name Mrs. America began to be protected by the U.S. Patent Office in the 1950s.¹¹³ Mrs. America, Inc. owned the trademark on the title, and each year they loaned it to the winner for her reigning year. She could profit from her title—she would get modeling fees when Nevins lined up endorsements for her—and she also would get fees for personal appearances. For example, the 1949 winner probably made between \$12,000 and \$15,000 from touring state fairs and homemaking shows and modeling. As Nevins proudly stated, he had arranged her testimonials for Simmons beds and mattresses and for the Kresge stores' hosiery, and made contracts with "Exquisite Form Brassieres, June Patton dresses, and some other irons in the fire."¹¹⁴ The advertising contracts the winners received were often with the sponsors of the contest and products for the home such as Tappan Gas Range, Fleischmann's Active Dry Yeast, and Aunt Jemima.

In an advertisement for Culligan Soft Water, Helen Giesse, Mrs. America of 1959, appears with her crown telling how she enjoys all the pure soft water she needs throughout her home: "everything washed in soft water is so much fresher, cleaner and fluffier. I'm just crazy about it."¹¹⁵ The advertisement also implies its product will help maintain a happy family, as she declares that "best of all, housework goes faster with soft water, and gives me more time to spend with my family."¹¹⁶

It features a photograph of the Giesses with three adorable children sitting on their parents' laps, expressing happiness and contentment. It is because their perfect mother is spending more time with them. In order to achieve the same domestic bliss, people could just call a nearby Culligan dealer. It was not really her personal attractiveness that this ad was highlighting but rather her expertise as a homemaker.

Because the selling point was Mrs. America's image as domestic diva, Nevins did not "press any Mrs. America to do anything that would interfere with her home life."¹¹⁷ The pageant organizers knew that their success relied on the celebration of housework and praise of the homemakers of America as pillars of the nation. If Mrs. America were to tour around the country without taking care of her own household, she would no longer be Mrs. America, but just another wife obsessed with contests such as the wife ridiculed in *Meet the Missus*. Since he was interested in the commercial profits of the pageant, Nevins did not want to risk its image. In his statement to the finalists of the 1959 contest, he writes, "whoever is chosen Mrs. America has family obligations, [and] the Mrs.

America Committee makes certain that Mrs. America is never away from her home for too long a time, and that when she is, should she have young children, a baby sitter is provided for her."¹¹⁸ The commercially-driven pageant took an appearance of a spokesperson of family values.

5. The Ideal Images and Realities of Mrs. America

As the contest came to focus on who was the best in providing good food and a clean environment for her family, the image of the pageant also became family-oriented. Not only would the winner get a victory kiss from her husband in front of the whole audience, but every contestant had a chance to introduce her husband and children to the promotional brochure and film that recorded the proceedings of the contest.¹¹⁹ The photographs of the winners became formulaic. The focus was her family and images of a happily married couple with children dominated.

A 1958 article that introduced the newly elected Mrs. America, Helen Giesse, was titled, "Mrs. America Shares Her Crown with Billy, 8, Susan, 5, Bobby, 1, and her ad man husband, William Giesse."¹²⁰ Her family was considered in many ways typical of all the fine young families represented in the contest: a white, college-educated couple with three children, living in a Cleveland suburb. They would often gather together for a barbecue, and a photo shows them in their garden: Mr. Giesse is grilling franks and Mrs. Giesse is setting up the table with a caption that reads "Mother may be a prize-winning cook but when it comes to grilling franks for a barbecue the men take over." The image assimilates popular *Saturday Evening Post* covers of suburban families, especially the one by Ben Kimberly Prins, where father with a pipe is doing his barbecue job surrounded by dogs and puppies while mother is serving the guests in the back. The photograph of the Giesses shows that the family was living the magazine's cover image, only minus the humor. The idea behind it was also that the crown of Mrs. Giesse was to be shared with her family since her identity as "Mrs." was determined by her relationship to her husband and children.

Mrs. America perpetuated the ideal of womanhood and family values. Since her ability as a housewife and homemaker was proved to be the best in the nation, her relationship with her husband may well be just as perfect. Incredible pies and cakes and clean house would make her husband love her more. The first Mrs. America was selected only based on beauty, but even then it was explained that she was "still happily married to the same husband" because she could do housework "exceedingly well."¹²¹

Yet a picture-perfect wife does not mean that her family is always picture-perfect. While Mrs. America supposedly represented the ideal housewife, Mrs. America was not necessarily a happy one. Janice Pollock, winner of the 1947 Mrs. America title, declined a six-month tour of the country as part of her reward in order not to leave her family.¹²² She was reported to prefer "hearth and home to the title and tour of Mrs. America."¹²³ It was revealed, however, her decision was not voluntary. When Pollock called her husband to tell him the great news after winning the title, her husband, Marion S. Pollock, was "in an ornery mood," and told his wife to get her winning combination home and "stop showing off in Jackson."¹²⁴ This 24-year-old mother of four had no choice but to pack her bag. She took a plane for her home in Columbus, Ohio, weeping openly. Although she had edged 19 other wives out of the title of Mrs. America, she could not edge out her own husband. A few days later her husband announced that his wife's abdication was entirely her own idea and indicated that she would probably make the tour after all. The fact that she did not make this announcement about her own decision only confirms the suspicion that the decision was not hers but his. A reporter also hinted at it by stating that "it was clear that Mr. Pollock's husbandly heat had cooled."¹²⁵ But the pageant committee decided not to go with the Pollocks, for their conflict tainted the image of how Mrs. America should lead her domestic life.

The runner-up from South Carolina was crowned queen of the country's married women before a football crowd in Mississippi.¹²⁶ The whole incident shows that even Mrs. America had to submit to her husband's patriarchal will and temper. The smile on Janice Pollock's face in a publicity photo with her husband and their four young children at home could be read as an ideal image, not a genuine expression of happiness. After the incident, the contest required all the contestants and their husbands to sign an agreement that could prevent similar disputes.¹²⁷

Another incident revealed the reality Mrs. America faced when the 1949 Mrs. America, Frances Cloyed, sued for divorce. The tall, blond mother of three children appeared at the New Jersey State Fair and elsewhere, representing the model married woman, but just five months after her crowning as Mrs. America, she filed suit for divorce.¹²⁸ She was "charging extreme cruelty," because her mechanic husband, Arthur T. Cloyd Jr. "lied, gambled and mistreated her physically," as she testified.¹²⁹ The excellence as a housewife and homemaker that had made her Mrs. America could not guarantee a happy family. Her looks, poise, cooking and baking skills could not prevent domestic violence.

The transformation of the Mrs. America pageant from a bathing-beauty show into serious home economics tournament provides a showcase of how the postwar period imposed certain normative ideals of womanhood on married women. When the judges of the Mrs. America Contest were no longer looking for a woman of perfect physical proportions, they were not abandoning the concept of the ideal woman. They were including more requisites to be one. She had to be an outstanding wife, cook, homemaker and general pillar of the community. Helen Giesse, who had been working while her husband finished his education, was staying home when she won the title. Still, she was busy with teaching a Sunday School class, helping out with the Cub Scouts and being part of the League of Women Voters and the Parent-Teacher group at her son's school, in addition to all of the housework. When a working mother was chosen Mrs. America, the image she had to present to the nation and to the world was no different. Ramona Deitemeyer, the 1955 Mrs. America, who worked as assistant manager of the Elkhorn Lodge, as secretary to politicians, and other jobs, recalled in an interview that she had wanted to "convince other homemakers their career is the most important in the world" during her travels as Mrs. America.¹³⁰ When she was hostess on the KOLN-TV show, "Right Around Home," she arranged to be home from work before her child returned from school, because she thought her career as homemaker was more significant.

The apron replaced the bikini in the Mrs. America Pageant. The kitchen range replaced the swimming pool. The idea became to find the ideal wife and homemaker, not the hollow beauty. Nevins told a reporter: "we want her to be more than a doll. We want her to be a real woman."¹³¹ Wanda Jennings was a real woman. During her tour in Europe as the 1954 Mrs. America, she met Mrs. Britain, Mrs. Gwen Evershed, whose Yorkshire pudding and jelly cakes had won baking contests all over England. Jennings revealed to Evershed that Mrs. America's life was no different from that of Mrs. Britain. There was transatlantic similarity between their lives. As Mrs. Britain declared, "there is very little difference in our lives," the women discovered their commonality in their social activities as well as daily schedules involving cleaning, baking and cooking.¹³² They were real women whom any married women could identify with.

Jennings clearly understood social norms and normative womanhood of the 1950s. Although she was working as a "chemist for an oil company in St. Louis," her profession was not highlighted in the contest.¹³³ Nobody paid any attention to the jobs of working mothers who entered the contest. What was important was how long they had been crocheting. Jennings knew what kind of personality she had to present in the contest selecting Mrs. America in 1955. When she was chosen Mrs. America, "she headed for the kitchen of the Mrs. America cottage to prepare lunch for her husband and son, Mike, as they settled down for a two-week vacation."¹³⁴ She was not a beauty queen to be waited on hand and foot. She was Mrs. America whose honors included making lunch for her family. As she declared in a victory statement, she was "still a housewife."¹³⁵

²*Mrs. America: Homemaker's Guide* (Hartford, Connecticut: Witkower Press, 1954), 30A.

³ "I'm Still a Housewife," *New Mrs. America Says*, *New York Times*, April 26, 1954.

⁴ Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 67-68.

⁵ Nan Robertson, "Mrs. Britain Met by Mrs. America," *New York Times*, November 30, 1954.

⁶*Mrs. America: Homemaker's Guide*, 31A.

⁷ "Mrs. America," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, November 9, 1950.

- ⁸ “Mrs. America.” *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19.
- ⁹ Vince Gargiulo, *Palisades Amusement Park: A Century of Fond Memories* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 49.
- ¹⁰ Gargiulo, 50; News and Notes of the Advertising World, *New York Times*, July 19, 1937.
- ¹¹ News and Notes of the Advertising World, *New York Times*, April 19, 1937.
- ¹² “Resort to Use All Local Papers,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1938.
- ¹³ Advertising News and Notes, *New York Times*, March 25, 1939; “More Ads for Palisades Park,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1940.
- ¹⁴ “Ads Urged for World’s Fair,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1939.
- ¹⁵ Gargiulo, 55.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹⁷ Deford, 110-116; Kimberly A. Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants, 1921-1927,” in *There She Is, Miss America: the Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant*, eds. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29.
- ¹⁸ “25 Years of Miss America,” *Life* (September 1946), 59.
- ¹⁹ “Mrs. America.” *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19. Their engagement was announced in Engagements, *New York Times*, July 29, 1936.
- ²⁰ “Bert Nevins, 56, Press Agent, Dies,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1966.
- ²¹ Gargiulo, 55.
- ²² Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1976), 112. For a list of competitions at Palisades Park, see Gargiulo, 91. By 1947, Aetna Advertising Agency handled the advertising for Palisades Amusement Park. See Advertising News and Notes, *New York Times*, April 4, 1947.
- ²³ *Mrs. America: Homemaker’s Guide*, 31A.
- ²⁴ “Famous Pair Sail for Tour of Japan,” *New York Times*, June 9, 1935.
- ²⁵ “Mr. and Mrs. America Arrive in Japan,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1935; “City Dolls Return with Many Gifts,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1935.
- ²⁶ “Mr. and Mrs. America Arrive in Japan,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1935.
- ²⁷ “Missus America,” *Motion Picture Herald* (April 10, 1937), 49.
- ²⁸ News from Hollywood, *New York Times*, March 20, 1937; “Missus America,” *Hollywood Reporter* (March 22, 1937), 10; “Missus America,” *Hollywood Reporter* (April 5, 1937), 6; “Missus America,” *Motion Picture Herald* (April 10, 1937), 49; “Meet the Missus’ Funfest,” *Hollywood Reporter* (May 22, 1937), 3; “Meet the Missus,” *Motion Picture Herald* (May 29, 1937), 46; “Meet the Missus,” *Film Daily* (May 25, 1937), 6.
- ²⁹ Frank S. Nugent, The Annual Semi-Annual Report, *New York Times*, July 4, 1937; “Meet the Missus’ Funfest,” *Hollywood Reporter* (May 22, 1937), 3.
- ³⁰ Hamlin, 46.
- ³¹ Amy L. Edwards, “Margaret Chamberlain Turned Modeling into 1938 Beauty Title,” *Orlando Sentinel*, July 19, 2002.
- ³² “25 Years of Miss America,” *Life* (September 1946), 61.
- ³³ “What Happened to Mrs. America’s Bathing Suit?” *Woman’s Home Companion* (January 1957), 10.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ “Mrs. America buys food with care,” One-sheet poster, 1942, Poster Collection, E448.14.a26, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
- ³⁶ Advertising News and Notes, *New York Times*, October 14, 1943.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Gargiulo, 55.
- ³⁹ Patricia Alex, “Echoes of Palisades Amusement Park, Opened 1898, Closed Sept. 12, 1971,” *Record*, September 8, 1991.
- ⁴⁰ “Mrs. America.” *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*; “Crowned ‘Mrs. America,’” *New York Times*, November 24, 1946.
- ⁴² The contest was not held in 1944 and 1947. *Mrs. America Pageant Booklet*, 1958, 38. Minnesota Historical Society Library Collection, St. Paul.
- ⁴³ “Stage, Radio Stars to Judge Mrs. America Contest Here,” *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 1, 1948; “Fair Will Star Mrs. America,” *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 5, 1948.
- ⁴⁴ “Mrs. America To Be on Air,” *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 8, 1948.
- ⁴⁵ “Rivals Arrive in City Today,” *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 10, 1948; “ABC-TV to Cover Judging of ‘Mrs. America’ Contest in Asbury Park Sept. 10-11,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1949. The Miss America Pageant was first broadcasted in 1954. For more information, see Deford, 193.
- ⁴⁶ “Mrs. America Title Winner to Receive \$5,000 in Prizes,” *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 11, 1948.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; “Competent Competitor,” *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 9, 1948.
- ⁴⁸ “Mrs. America’ Here,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1946; “Polling All Housewives,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1946.

- ⁴⁹ Advertising News and Notes, *New York Times*, February 28, 1946.
- ⁵⁰ Jane Nickerson, "News of Food: Marketing Habits of Housewives Told in a Survey of Home Makers Guild," *New York Times*, January 23, 1946.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² "ABC-TV to Cover Judging of 'Mrs. America' Contest in Asbury Park Sept. 10-11," *New York Times*, August 12, 1949.
- ⁵³ "Mrs. America." *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ "Mrs. America Contest," *New York Times*, September 12, 1948.
- ⁵⁶ Among the judges of the contestants' domestic ability included Helen Larzelere, head of the domestic department of the New Jersey State Fair, the "Mystery Chef" heard regularly on a major network, and Howard Fox, fashion stylist for I. J. Fox. "Stage, Radio Stars to Judge Mrs. America Contest Here," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 1, 1948.
- ⁵⁷ "Fair Will Star Mrs. America," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 5, 1948; "Mrs. America To Be On Air," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 8, 1948.
- ⁵⁸ "Rivals Arrive In City Today," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 10, 1948.
- ⁵⁹ "Mrs. America To Be Chosen In City Today," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 12, 1948.
- ⁶⁰ "Blonde Philadelphia Bride Wins Mrs. America Title Before 3,000," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 13, 1948.
- ⁶¹ "Mrs. America Judging Starts Here Tonight," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 10, 1949.
- ⁶² "Johnstown Matron Made 'Mrs.' America," *New York Times*, September 11, 1950.
- ⁶³ "Finalists Parade Today in Mrs. America Event," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 9, 1950.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ "Homemaker Ability Counts Half at Mrs. America Event," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 8, 1951; "Mrs. America To Be Chosen This Afternoon," *Asbury Park Evening Press*, September 9, 1951.
- ⁶⁶ "Mrs. America' Is Chosen," *New York Times*, September 10, 1951.
- ⁶⁷ "Mrs. America Chosen," *New York Times*, September 8, 1952.
- ⁶⁸ "12 Vie For Mrs. Minnesota Title" (March 13, 1958), Mrs. Minnesota Betty Bach file, Sound and Visual Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
- ⁶⁹ "Mrs. America." *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19.
- ⁷⁰ Photography Collection. Library of Congress.
- ⁷¹ "Mrs. America." *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ It moved from Asbury Park, New Jersey to Ellinor Village, Florida in 1954, and to Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1957.
- ⁷⁴ "Mrs. America Contest Will Move From Jersey to Florida," *New York Times*, September 3, 1953.
- ⁷⁵ Bert Nevins, "Greetings from the Mrs. America Committee," *Mrs. America Pageant* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Mrs. America, Inc., 1958), 6. Mrs. Minnesota Betty Bach file, Sound and Visual Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
- ⁷⁶ "Mrs. America." *New Yorker*, (September 30, 1950), 19.
- ⁷⁷ *Mrs. America: Homemaker's Guide*, 4A.
- ⁷⁸ C.E. Wright, "Around Daytona: Beach Resorts on the Atlantic Prepare for Busiest Season of the Year," *New York Times*, April 10, 1955.
- ⁷⁹ *Mrs. America: Homemaker's Guide*, 8A.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 22A-23A.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11A.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 20A; 14A.
- ⁸³ William J. Hennessey, *Russel Wright: American Designer* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 53; Donald Albrecht, "From Hollywood to Walden Pond: Stage Sets for American Living," in *Russel Wright: Creating American Lifestyle*, ed. Elizabeth Johnson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 110.
- ⁸⁴ Mary and Russel Wright, *Guide to Easier Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 1.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 125-154. Missing in the contest was the Wrights' preaching of how to express ideas of democracy and individualism in modern American homes through sharing the burden of housework. Since the contest was intended for married women, not married couples, the focus was solely on women's work rather than on sharing housework.
- ⁸⁷ "12 Vie For Mrs. Minnesota Title" (March 13, 1958), Mrs. Minnesota Betty Bach file, Sound and Visual Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
- ⁸⁸ "Mrs. Minnesota To Be Crowned Saturday," *St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press*, March 11, 1958.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

- ⁹⁰ “Candidates to Be Judged on Skills,” Mrs. Minnesota Betty Bach file, Sound and Visual Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
- ⁹¹ “Columbia Heights Woman ‘Mrs. Minnesota’ Finalist,” *Columbia Heights (MN) Record*, March 13, 1958.
- ⁹² “Mrs. Minnesota,” *Minneapolis Star*, March 19, 1958.
- ⁹³ “Mrs. Minnesota Gets Kiss,” *St. Cloud (MN) Daily Times*, March 17, 1958.
- ⁹⁴ Mary Mark Sturm, director of Bureau of Home Economics, Chicago Public Schools, Irene E. McDermott, director of Home Economics Education, Pittsburgh Public Schools, Dorothy Sinz, food editor of the Dallas Times Herald, Florence LaGanke Harris, head of the home economics department of the Cleveland Press, M. Francis Henry, editor of Textiles, Clothing and Grooming of What’s New in Home Economics, the national magazine of home economics, Louise Morgan, TV commentator for women.
- ⁹⁵ “How the Judging is Done,” *Mrs. America Pageant* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Mrs. America, Inc., 1958), 11.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁸ *The Mrs. America Story*, videotape, Minnesota Historical Society Library Collection, St. Paul.
- ⁹⁹ “How the Judging is Done,” 11.
- ¹⁰⁰ “‘I’m Still a Housewife,’ New Mrs. America Says,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1954.
- ¹⁰¹ W.W. Selzer, “Greetings,” *Mrs. America Pageant* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Mrs. America, Inc., 1958), 4.
- ¹⁰² For the history and the leaders in home economics’ effort to defend the field’s intellectual rigor and social importance, see Margaret W. Rossiter, “The Men Move In: Home Economics, 1950-70,” in *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, eds. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 96-117. Male counterpart can be do-it-yourself fad which kept men close to home and made them do painting and wallpapering. For more information on this, see Steven M. Gelber, “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing, and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity,” in *Family and Society in American History*, eds. Joseph M. Hawes and Elizabeth I. Nybakken (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 268-304.
- ¹⁰³ Lillian M. Gilbreth, Orpha Mae Thomas, and Eleanor Clymer, *Management in the Home: Happier Living Through Saving Time and Energy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1954), 3-4; 59.
- ¹⁰⁴ Advertisement for Mrs. America, Inc. *New York Times*, September 9, 1948; Advertisement for Mrs. America, Inc. *New York Times*, September 13, 1948.
- ¹⁰⁵ Advertisement for Mrs. America, Inc. *New York Times*, September 2, 1952; Advertisement for Mrs. America, Inc. *New York Times*, September 3, 1952.
- ¹⁰⁶ Advertising and Marketing, *New York Times*, June 25, 1953.
- ¹⁰⁷ “Mrs. America.” *New Yorker* (September 30, 1950), 19.
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