

The Poly Royal Beauty Pageant at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo:
How Queens Reigned Over their Empire

Anna Johnson

History 303

Dr. Morris

History Department

College of Liberal Arts

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California

Winter, 2016

I. Introduction

The year was 1952, and the newly crowned Geraldine Cox took her first steps as Poly Royal Queen across the stage.¹ Her coronation marked the eighteenth year California Polytechnic State University elected one woman, who reflected the character and dynamic of everything the campus had to offer, to “reign” over the activities of their annual Open House.² Open House had been held annually at Cal Poly since 1902, but in 1933 Julian McPhee had a grander vision of what it could contribute to students and the surrounding community: a fully-fledged “country fair on campus” that the west coast had never seen before.³ Perspective students would have more interaction with the campus’s agriculture programs and a better sense of how Cal Poly prepared them for their future endeavors. Open House, thereafter referred to as “Poly Royal,” attracted the attention McPhee was looking for. The *San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram*’s front page raved about the hundreds of visitors from nearby counties Poly Royal brought to town.⁴ The following year, 1934, was when the very first Poly Royal Queen was crowned, a tradition that would remain until Poly Royal’s discontinuation in 1989.⁵

The fifties in particular saw a massive influx in beauty pageant popularity around the world.⁶ And with their semi-autonomous lives during World War II coming to an end, women were returning to their more traditional gender roles. Beauty pageants became an important component of this, whether consciously or not, because they stunted the unique form of feminism

¹ Soquel Filice, “When Poly Was Royal: Queens on Campus,” *Special Collections and Archives*, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://goo.gl/eMMHxq>.

² Filice, “When Poly Was Royal.”

³ Kennedy Library, n.a. “Poly Royal,” *Special Collections and Archives*, accessed January 22, 2016, <http://goo.gl/oDSMZm>.

⁴ “Poly Royal.”

⁵ “Poly Royal.”

⁶ Jennifer Holt, “The Ideal Women,” *The Ideal Women*. (n.d.), accessed February 2, 2016. goo.gl/8ehU4O.

that was bred from the wartime effort from growing any further.⁷ Cable broadcasting in the 1950s and the affordability of in-home televisions aided, with a record breaking 27 million viewers tuning in for the first ever broadcasted Miss America Pageant in 1954.⁸ The beauty pageant postwar craze and more admirable in the public eye than ever before. Thus in the year 1952, Geraldine Cox understood how much recognition would accompany her title as Poly Royal Queen. Hailing from Santa Barbara City College, she was chosen from contestants throughout the entire state to “rule over the all-male student body” at Cal Poly.⁹ Because Cal Poly had been controversially denying the enrollment of women since 1930,¹⁰ this meant that her nomination, as an outsider of the San Luis Obispo, drew the attention of even larger audiences statewide.

This paper will do two things. Firstly, it will analyze the post-war culture, its attitude towards women, and how it affected the Poly Royal Queen Pageant during the 1950s, whether it be in the construction of the pageant itself or the duties of Queens following their coronation. Secondly, it will compare the pageant years of the early fifties, when non-students were elected as Queen, to the years following the readmission of women in 1956. Both will show how the portrayal of these pageant contestants eventually became inconsistent with Poly Royal’s original intentions as an event and Cal Poly’s mission as a university. Once women were readmitted, “home grown” Queens allowed for much more influential and accurate representation of the campus during Poly Royal. Eventually, this change in leadership helped challenge the post war attitude of women on Poly’s campus.

⁷ Holt, “The Ideal Women.”

⁸ Amy Lind and Stephanie Brzuzy, *Battleground: Women, Gender and Sexuality* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), p. 32.

⁹ *El Rodeo* (San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1952), p. 153

¹⁰ Kennedy Library, “Highlights in the History of Cal Poly.” *Special Collections and Archives*, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://goo.gl/36VcyO>.

II. Historiography of Campus Beauty Pageants in the Post-War Culture

Few decades can own to having defined gender norms as much as those following World War II. While some historical events on the global scale lead to new modern ideals for class, gender, and race, a lot can elicit the opposite reaction—a desire to control, simplify, and reign in any intricacies that might complicate what could be a perfect conservative way of living. Such was the attitude that erupted and eventually dominated the post-war culture of the 1950s. Years of exhaustion and domestic fear lead to a collective yearning to regain any form of control and security. For women, it meant the reintroduction of gender domestication. The concept of “the ideal woman”—one who devoted herself to promoting healthy family values and evoked a certain poise and manner of reserve—resurfaced stronger than ever before, directly in response to what most gender historians (like Jennifer Holt) believe to be an unexpected case of economic independence.¹¹ The wartime decrease in available male bodies for American industrial work provided an obvious and understandable dilemma for many companies, and the solution of a women workforce may have seemed more outrageous had it not been for the justification of a national war effort. But the return of the men from their military duty caused clear social dissonance for gender norms. Yes, many women surpassed their stereotype to undoubtedly become valued members of society. But whereas the full integration or merger of one gender’s norms into another can prove daunting, subordinating women back to traditional roles underneath men is a convenient familiarity. It was this regression to oppressive gender roles for women and its consequent long-lasting social cues that led historians like Holt to label it one of the most dangerous

¹¹ Holt, “The Ideal Women.”

in our nation's history because of its longevity.¹² Its effects on the construction and conceptualization of “the ideal women” would remain entrenched in many establishments for generations to come, notably within female beauty pageants.

While famously broadcasted and recognized pageants such as Miss America widely contribute to the understanding of post war gender reconstruction, many historians overlook the stronger implications of smaller collegiate level ones. The more intimate nature of these pageants within smaller communities arguably bestows them with a greater influence over young women, most having only just graduating high school. It is for this reason that their historiography is key to understanding post war gender norms and how they actually play out in real life scenarios. Karen Tice, historian of collegiate-level pageantry, emphasizes that the 1950s pageant protocol was strictly designed to enhance the desirability of women to men in particular. Focus centered on their charm, sexual appeal, and what was considered “proper taste.” All of these factors ultimately added up to form the only desirable solution: marriageability.¹³ In some cases, like that of the University of Kentucky, this effort to educate women for careers as wives extended beyond the realm of extracurricular pageantry. Non-competing women students were prompted to attend marriage eligibility conferences, charm schools, and workshops on hospitality. Even dating bureaus, where females had the opportunity to practice their newly acquired skills on men, arose as legitimate campus sponsored events.¹⁴ Undeniably, the effects of collegiate pageants during the post war era were strongly woven into campus life as a whole. Wherever a campus pageant existed, its significance was unmistakable in reinforcing traditional gender roles for the institution in its entirety. For Cal Poly, with its all male student body—integrating the Queen Contest into

¹² Holt, “The Ideal Women.”

¹³ Karen W. Tice, *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 52.

¹⁴ Tice, *Queens of Academe*, p. 54.

Poly Royal was an uncanny example of this, and their desire to establish such a contest sheds light on how important conservatism and female subordination was during this time period.

III. Poly Royal and the “Foreign” Queens

The introduction of a Queen Contest came merely a short year after the first Poly Royal commenced in 1933, and would not seem so unusual a proposition had it not been that the campus had been denying the admission of women students for four years. The lack of a female student body meant that if the desire for a woman representative was so strong, the administration had to resort to other means to achieve this. Thus, from its initial years, Poly Royal’s process for selecting its Queen required assistance from the outside. Jane Horton, Poly Royal’s first Queen, began a long trend of non-student rulers. A native to San Luis Obispo, Horton’s election was highly representative of the community surrounding Cal Poly, even though she herself never attended.¹⁵ However, it began a long trend of disconnect between the “elected officials” who reigned over Poly Royal and the values the campus was trying to promote. From the beginning, it was questionable if a non-student was truly the best face for Cal Poly’s most anticipated and highest attended school event of the year.¹⁶

The following years of the Queen Contest continued in this fashion of electing non-student Queens all the way into the pageant years of the fifties, when Queens and her court were most commonly chosen from neighboring universities rather than from the female population of San Luis Obispo. The choice between a representative of the town or the collegiate community

¹⁵ Cal Poly, *1935 Poly Royal Program* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1935), p. 17.

¹⁶ *El Rodeo* (San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1935).

eventually won out in favor of the latter, and each year a new school was to be chosen for the reaping of the Queen and her Princesses. At the height of beauty pageant craze during post-war culture, the Poly Royal Committee elected a series of women unaffiliated with the campus or the surrounding community. The 1950 Queen, Lois Butcher, was photographed next to male electrical engineering students while pointing at a piece of machinery composed of various wires and



FIGURE 1. 1952 QUEEN GERALDINE COX HANDING A WRENCH TO MALE ENGINEERING STUDENTS (FILICE. “WHEN POLY

knobs. The caption read how she was “not the least bit baffled” by the men teaching her about potentials, flows, and electron currents despite her lack of experience on the subject.¹⁷ Two years later, Geraldine Cox, a speech major from Santa Barbara City College, became the most publicized and photographed Queen in Poly Royal’s history. In one such picture (Figure 1), she aids Cal Poly’s

aeronautical engineers by handing them a wrench.¹⁸ To the attendees of Poly Royal in the fifties, Butcher and Cox’s portrayal in the photographs might not have seemed untoward because the post war attitude of women called for this kind of appearance and view of women at the time. Her presence portrayed the engineers as more masculine. This gender subordination, and touch of stereotypical womanly ignorance, was norm. Because this mentality dominated pageant culture across the country, Poly Royal Queens became more a means of reflecting female domestication as a whole than authentically representing the campus itself. Tice reflects in her studies that the eras in which Queens were merely photographed performing various tasks were actually intentional in

¹⁷ Cal Poly, *1950 Poly Royal Program* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1950), p. 4.

¹⁸ Filice, “When Poly Was Royal.”

reflecting post war attitudes. In her examples from various southern collegiate pageants, she concludes that although many Queens were excessively captured on camera, few were actually given the means to speak publicly to the press regarding campus issues or concerns.¹⁹ The women of those generations, although elected to be campus representatives, were meant to be ornate and silenced figures. Such explains why Cal Poly may have not been troubled by the thought of a Queen unaffiliated with its agriculture and engineering practices presiding over Poly Royal and its festivities. If she was merely a means of attracting public attention by her appearance only, as Tice suggests from her studies, then perhaps her ignorance was not an issue. Perhaps it was somewhat encouraged.

IV. Poly Royal and “Home Grown” Queens

With any powerful cultural movement, there is always a catalytic event or group that challenges it. And while some changes like these can occur on monumental levels, it is less rare for them to occur on smaller, more local ones. In the specific case of Cal Poly and its social trends on campus, the post war reflection of women and their subordinate roles to men was eventually challenged. Whether or not it was dismantled complete is another, more daunting argument to prove. It does, however, seem that more modern ideas were being applied to the traditional gender norms previously mentioned. And while they may have been reconstructed in various different ways, it was the readmission of women students in 1957 that strongly emphasized a need to reevaluate campus values with regards to women. The 1956 *El Rodeo* yearbook opened with a dedication to the women student body, eloquently reaffirming that the campus belonged to

¹⁹ Tice, *Queens of Academe*, p. 5.

them just as much as the men.²⁰ The Associated Students admitted in their 1956-1957 *Mustang Handbook* of Cal Poly's weakness of diversity by stating in their mission statement that the campus was in need of fresh female ideas and perspectives.²¹ A desire for change was well established and outspoken. Subsequently, women returned to campus to study alongside men.

Poly Royal, still one of the most widely attended fairs in the state at the time, also chose the same year to follow the administration's lead and incorporate its own women students within the actual events. In what was labeled as Poly Royal's first "home grown" Queen, Val DeGeus dominated community publicity unlike ever before. Whereas previous outsider Queens like Butcher and Cox looked out of place in their photo-ops as they point to random parts of machinery, De Geus had hands-on experience within the agriculture department, posing with a horse or plucking eggs from a chicken hut. In one such, she is actually milking a cow from the agriculture department (Figure



FIGURE 2. 1957 "HOME GROWN" QUEEN VAL DE-GEUS MILKING A COW

2).²² That year, Poly Royal also crowned its first "home grown" Rodeo Sweetheart, Janice Seago. Her featured photograph captured her by her horse, clad in a flannel shirt, a cowboy hat, and boots.²³ Although these could still be regarded as the same kind of publicity photo-ops from the previous years, a notable change begins to develop in their content in that women are starting to be reflected as productive members on campus again with their contributions enjoyed alongside

²⁰ *El Rodeo* (San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1956), p.1.

²¹ *Mustang Handbook* (San Luis Obispo: Associated Students of Cal Poly, 1957), p. 2.

²² *SLO Telegram Tribune (Poly Royal Edition)*, April 25, 1957, p. 6.

²³ *SLO Telegram Tribune (Poly Royal Edition)*, April 25, 1957, p. 1.

men rather than in their absence. They also depict a certain sense of authenticity compared to the years of the “foreign” Queens. As integrated, experienced, and legitimate students of Cal Poly, these women had a genuine understanding of the campus and than values it promoted.

As for the actual construction of the pageant, the rules had been drastically altered. Official minutes from the Poly Royal Board Meeting for the 1957 pageant stated that the new criteria required the Queen to be an unmarried, full-time student of Cal Poly. Nearly a decade later, the official *1966 Poly Royal Executive Board Year-End Report* became the first to completely outline the pageants process, rules, and regulations for the future generation to come. It outlined even more demands that would ensure Poly’s next Queen was the best symbol for promoting the school’s message across the state. The Queen now had to be of senior standing and within the top half of her class academically.²⁴ As to why she was required to be unmarried is interpretable. Many historians could argue that simply being single implies gender autonomy or respect for female independence. However, it may be more arguable to conclude that this too was intentional for the purposes of inflicting conservative gender norms. A married woman would rightfully be subject to her husband, and for that reason would be incompatible as “ruler”.

In terms of the actual construction of the pageant

and how to determine a winner, appearance and poise were awarded points. However, there was

a question and response portion that allowed judges to

**FIGURE 3. 1967 QUEEN TEE
CARTER SHAKES HANDS WITH
GOV. RONALD REAGAN (FELICE.**

question the contestants on their particular opinions.²⁵

Attached at the end of the report was the contestants’

questionnaire, which was to be filled out prior to their question and answer segment. In addition

²⁴ Ellison, William B, *Poly Royal Executive Board Year-End Report* (San Luis Obispo: Poly Royal Executive Board, 1966), p. 3.

²⁵ Ellison, *Year-End Report*, p. 5-6.



to basic information, the questionnaire prompted the women to answer questions on their career goals, future plans, and campus involvement.²⁶ All of these changes, although existing within one campus pageant, reflected a bigger shift in gender perceptions on campus. Whereas less than a decade earlier they were

totally alienated, women at Poly were now encouraged to reach their full academic and social capacity and were even publicized throughout the state as respectable and influential figures. At its proudest moment, the Poly Royal Queen Contest and its new modern structure led to a publicity event grander than one it had ever seen before. Tee Carter, the 1967 Queen and Cal Poly student, gained so much public praise and recognition for her achievements in academics and leadership that the office of Governor Ronald Reagan secured her an interview to help promote Poly Royal and discuss the missions of Cal Poly's various programs (Figure 3).²⁷ It marked a true turn around from a long tradition of unrepresentative Queens who could not accurately align with the campus's character. Now that she was "home grown" and a full time student, she was truly the best example of Poly royalty. It was no longer enough to simply be an ornament. Tice, attributing this same type of transformation to the end of the restraining gender norms of the fifties and the rise of feminist ideas in the late sixties, concludes that these refashioned pageants began to promote protocols that reflected genuine self-improvement and responsibilities rather than adhering to particular demanding standards. All modern pageants since then exhibit all or some form of these ideas, leaving traces of progressivism.²⁸

²⁶ Ellison, *Year-End Report*, p. 5-6.

²⁷ Filice, "When Poly Was Royal."

²⁸ Tice, *Queens of Academe*, p. 5.

In cases where modern day pageants inhibit individuality expressed by contestants, the reaction is often the opposite of what would be expected in the fifties post war culture. Tice's own attendance of the 2002 Georgetown "Belle of the Blue" pageant verified this theory, when the director of student affairs was forced to resign after she physically dragged a contestant off stage during dress rehearsal in response to what she believed was an inappropriate talent segment. The student, who performed a gymnastics and lassoing act, was adored by the crowd for her original spin on the competition. Her poise, however, was questionable in the eyes of the director. After being scolded and labeled "unladylike", the campus reacted quite negatively.²⁹ The controversies of pageants and what they say about a woman's role in society still exist today, and most would agree that pageantry of any kind represses women back into their subordinate roles under men. However, it does seem that not all individuals who partake in pageantry, whether by judging, contending or watching, have any intention of allowing our us to revert back to those times. In other words, the proper restructuring of these pageants can lead to powerful examples of modern feminism and means of overcoming gender oppression.

V. Conclusion

Interestingly enough, the Queen contest originally designed by Cal Poly to promote their to showcase their male agriculture and engineering programs grew into the biggest opposition against the school's sexist trends of female subordination. The invention of a Queen—a complete political and social representative of the campus during Poly Royal—meant choosing between preserving traditional gender norms for the sake of ornamental entrainment, or transforming her

²⁹ Tice, *Queens of Academe*, p. 4.

role into something greater. As an institution that was fighting to promote agricultural and engineering practices throughout the state and competing against other schools in the process of doing so, Poly Royal was an influential factor that gave Cal Poly an edge. The event, and especially those designated to officially promote it, encouraged a communal effort. This change in thought is what reformed the Poly Royal Queen into a transformative representative, one who shifted traditional gender norms and took her place alongside men to proudly serve her campus. Had women never been allowed readmission, perhaps this post-war ideal would have gone unchallenged for the decades following.

Bibliography

El Rodeo. San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1934.

El Rodeo. San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1935.

El Rodeo. San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1952.

El Rodeo. San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1956.

- El Rodeo*. San Luis Obispo: Student Body of the California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, Polytechnic Print Shop, 1957.
- Ellison, William B. *Poly Royal Executive Board Year-End Report*. San Luis Obispo: Poly Royal Executive Board, 1966.
- Filice, Soqual. "When Poly Was Royal: Queens on Campus." *Special Collections and Archives*. Web, accessed January 20, 2016. lib.calpoly.edu. <http://goo.gl/eMMHxq>.
- Holt, Jennifer. "The Ideal Woman." *The Ideal Women*. n.d. Web, accessed February 2, 2016. <https://goo.gl/8ehU4O>.
- Kennedy Library. "Highlights in the History of Cal Poly." *Special Collections and Archives*. Web, accessed February 2016. <http://goo.gl/36VcyO>.
- Kennedy Library. "Poly Royal." *Special Collections and Archives*. Web, accessed January 2016. <http://goo.gl/oDSMZm>.
- Lind Amy and Stephanie Brzuzy. *Battleground: Women, Gender and Sexuality*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008.
- Cal Poly. *1935 Poly Royal Program*. San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1935.
- Cal Poly. *1950 Poly Royal Program*. San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1950.
- SLO Telegram Tribune (Poly Royal Edition)*. April 25, 1957.
- Tice, Karen W. *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.