

1934

The Camellia Pageant

1962

MEMORIES OF A CAMPUS
TRADITION STILL LINGER

CAMELLIA QUEENS
REIGN ONCE MORE

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP GOULD

As the sun set one evening in December, some former coeds began arriving at Angelle Hall. They were dressed to the nines, their hair perfectly coiffured, their makeup just so. • The fragrance of their intermingled perfumes wafted through the air on the still-warm Southern night. Across St. Mary Boulevard, hundreds of tiny white lights on the grounds of the Alumni Center winked as dusk gave way to night. • For the Camellia Queens and their maids, who reunited 37 years after the last Camellia Pageant was held, it was a night to remember. •



“This is a part of my life I had almost forgotten, but it came back so vividly. It reminded me of all the friends I had and it brought back memories of being a student, walking around campus,” Beverly D’Augereau Broussard of Abbeville, La., who was chosen Camellia Queen in 1960, said in an interview weeks later.

The first Camellia Queen, Myrtis McCutchan D’Aquin, was crowned in 1934 during a 15-minute ceremony on the steps of the original Martin Hall on Southwestern Louisiana Institute’s campus.

According to a report kept in UL Lafayette’s archives, McCutchan wore a “simple robe of white.”

“The long train, as well as the robe, was beautifully embroidered in a design of camellias. The maids’ dresses were fashioned as near-like the camellia as possible—the skirt representing the full white petals and the waist, the green leaves,” it states.

Selecting a Camellia Queen was the brainchild of Joel Lafayette Fletcher, then dean of SLI’s



College of Agriculture. He had wanted to add some excitement and glamour to the Mid-Winter Fair, which he had created in 1927 to promote livestock and agricultural production in the southern region. Several years later, he expanded it to include promotion of camellias

as a commercial flower crop.

SLI’s student body chose the first Camellia Queen and her court. (Later, only male students could vote.) The event became a popular tradition and a program of folk dancing was added. Audiences grew and in 1941, SLI’s symphony orchestra and chorus took part. A camellia show, sponsored by the Louisiana Camellia Society, followed the pageant.

Over the years, the event blossomed into a lavish musical and dance production that drew thousands of spectators.

“Over Four Thousand Cram In to Witness Spectacle of Beauty that is ’47 Camellia Pageant,” a newspaper headline trumpeted. The subhead below added: “Must turn hundreds away at door as every foot of audience space is filled.”

Mabel Patterson Leito, who was queen that year, attended the December reunion at Angelle Hall.

“It was almost like being queen that night in 1947. It was very special. It made me feel like a queen all over again. I think it’s so wonderful that some of the early

CAMELLIA QUEENS WHO REUNITED ARE, FROM LEFT: BELLA NICKERSON ABRAMSON, 1935; LILLIAN SPILLMAN PRAY-SHIPES, 1943; BETTY ANGERS FLEMING, 1944; MARY MARGARET OLIVIER CHADDERON, 1945; MABEL PATTERSON LEITO, 1947; ELIZABETH TRAHAN CHAMPAGNE, 1948; PETESY MOUTON HERNANDEZ, 1949; MARGARETTE PRUDHOMME LOUIS, 1940; CLARA HOLLY HURST, 1942; PATSY HENRY LAROSE, 1951; BEVERLY D’AUGEREAU BROUSSARD, 1960.





**ELIZABETH TRAHAN CHAMPAGNE,
THE 1948 CAMELLIA PAGEANT QUEEN,
GREET'S FRIENDS AT ANGELLE HALL.**

"THIS IS A PART OF MY LIFE I HAD ALMOST FORGOTTEN, BUT IT CAME BACK SO VIVIDLY. IT REMINDED ME OF ALL THE FRIENDS I HAD AND IT BROUGHT BACK MEMORIES OF BEING A STUDENT, WALKING AROUND CAMPUS,"

BEVERLY D'AUGEREAU BROUSSARD

queens were there. It was an honor meeting them. We share a sisterhood bond."

A total of 15 queens and 19 maids gathered that night to be treated to a vaudeville-style production entitled "Anything Goes". It was presented by UL Lafayette's Performing Arts Department and the UL Lafayette Sounds, a choral group.

According to a 1946 newspaper account, "the biggest event in a college girl's life is to be chosen queen of the Camellia Pageant."

It was a big event for Marie Cailliet, too. In 1941, the home economics professor was put in charge of designing and sewing costumes. It was a job she kept for 20 more years.

Records saved in the UL Lafayette archives include detailed sketches of costume designs, along with swatches of fabric, invoices for material used in the productions, and original scripts.

A newspaper article in 1947 described Cailliet's responsibilities, which included producing 40 costumes "from scratch" for the 1945 pageant.

CAMELLIA QUEENS

1934	Myrtis McCutchan D'Aquin
1935	Bella Nickerson Abramson
1936	Stephanie Durand Landry
1937	Irene Armentor Earnest
1938	Marie Orgeron Johnson
1939	Rita Motty Stevenson
1940	Margarette Prudhomme Louis
1941	Rita Mae Ristroph Labry
1942	Clara Holly Hurst
1943	Lillian Spillman Pray-Shipes
1944	Betty Angers Fleming
1945	Mary Margaret Olivier Chadderon
1946	Margorie Raspberry
1947	Mabel Patterson Leito
1948	Elizabeth Trahan Champagne
1949	Petesy Mouton Hernandez
1950	Beverly Moncla Griffin
1951	Patsy Henry Larose
1952	Wanda Scoggins Moss
1953	Janelle Roy Scobee
1954	Alice Stafford Robertson
1955	Gail Dugal
1956	Donna Hamic Riordan
1957	Shirley Estes Bourque
1958	Janell Guilbeau Broussard
1959	No pageant held
1960	Beverly D'Augereau Broussard
1961	Barbara Morein Mire
1962	Elizabeth Lymon Boyd

"There is one big job that remains to be done the day of the pageant: Affixing 750 to 1,000 camellias on the girls' costumes and in their bouquets," it notes.

Stages erected for the pageant were also elaborate. With a theme of "Camellias Around the World," the setting for the 1949 show included "two airplane hangars, a control tower and a huge tail section of an airliner."

During that pageant, Fletcher told the audience that the Camellia Pageant



LEFT: 1944 QUEEN, BETTY ANGERS FLEMING,
RIGHT: 1954 QUEEN, ALICE STAFFORD ROBERTSON

“typifies the ideal of Southwestern Louisiana Institute in the field of education—the combination of the beautiful with the useful, the cultural with the practical. That is the Southwestern way.” He had been named president of SLI in 1940.

Newspaper accounts observed that when the first Camellia Pageant was held in 1934, the flower “was an almost unknown and unnoticed plant in this area. During 1948, nearly one quarter of a million dollars of new income came into this immediate section from the sale of nursery stock and flowers—an industry which has been largely developed by these same leaders of the Camellia Pageant and Flower Show.”

In the 1950s, the grandeur of the pageant continued. So did Cailliet’s work preparing spectacular costumes. “About 500 yards of fabric—almost the length of two city blocks—are needed to costume the singers, dancers and other entertainers in the 1950 pageant,” reported the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. “Of this amount, 340 yards are going to make skirts for the 24 girls in the two ballet numbers.”

The 1950 pageant was the first to be held in the new Blackham Coliseum,

which was formally dedicated during the Mid-Winter Fair.

By the late Fifties, the Camellia Pageant was still popular. Two performances were held that year, which each drew 8,500 spectators.

But by the early 1960s, it had become an expensive production for a school that was grappling with soaring enrollment and the needs of an institution that had achieved university status.

The final pageant was held in 1962, thanks to a prominent Lafayette businessman. “There will be a Camellia Pageant at the University of Southwestern Louisiana because of the generosity of one of Lafayette’s leading citizens,” *The Advertiser* reported. “. . . Frem Boustany, president of Evangeline Maid Bakery, in Lafayette, has presented a \$1,500 check to USL President Joel Fletcher to finance presentation of the pageant. Without such a contribution, it would have been necessary to cancel the 28th annual Camellia Pageant because of lack of funds.”

There was no such savior in 1963. So, Elizabeth Lymon Boyd was the last Camellia Queen.

For Beverly D’Augereau Broussard of Abbeville, the 1960 Camellia Queen, the December reunion at UL Lafayette brought back a flood of memories and emotions.

“I didn’t want to go home. I wanted to stay and be a queen all over again. I felt like a queen not just that night, but for the next couple of days.”



MEMBERS OF THE PERFORMING ARTS DANCE PROGRAM PRESENT “THE WALTZ OF THE CAMELIAS” FOR FORMER QUEENS AND MAIDS