Uncovering the Past: Novice Researcher Seeks Miss PNE Winners

By Susan Pegram.

“You’ll pop the buttons right off your chest when you view this year’s gleaming testimony to Western prowess!” – (Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections Reference, North West History, “The PNE: Your Big Date in ‘48”. Promotional pamphlet)

There are more than a few golden nuggets in the many meters of the Pacific National Exhibition’s record group at the Vancouver Archives and in the PNE material in the Vancouver Public Library’s Special Collections, which I’d consulted last summer in order to find something to write about to celebrate the PNE’s 100th anniversary. I have always been interested in the cultural phenomena of beauty pageants and country fairs and I wanted to discover the list of the girls who won the title of “Miss PNE” from 1948-1991.

The search begins

Not having found a complete list of the winners in the books and pamphlets written about the PNE, and being daunted by the thought of the many hours I would spend looking at the primary material at the archives in order to find it, I contacted the PNE office again, where I’d first got permission to view the records.

I asked if the PNE office had themselves compiled a complete list of Miss PNE winners. If they did, they didn’t have it handy, so I considered consulting InfoAction, the fee-based research service at the VPL. InfoAction would have been quick – two days wait for an estimated two to three hour search – but I decided on a non-fee based approach after all.

A more seasoned researcher, whirring through the reels of microfilm recording the society pages of The Vancouver Sun some fifty years ago, might not have noted what I, searching at a comparative snail’s pace, would note as great material for future stories. By doing the work myself, I encountered many interesting headlines as well as amusing ads and pictures, including that of a former fellow Vancouverite, Hollywood’s “Most Beautiful Women” of 1948, Yvonne De Carlo.

The search is successful

But, as luck would have it, I was saved by one of the Special Collections staff at the library through a suggestion to contact the PNE office again, this time targeting the Community Relations Department. I got a prompt response, and a list generated from recent documents was emailed to me for free! Thus, I was able to abandon a dalliance down memory lane that might have been too many pleasant hours long, looking through the VPL microfilm. Many thanks to the Central Library and the PNE office!

This time I was lucky because the information I wanted was already compiled and available directly through the still-existing company that produced it, but I concluded that even an answer to what seems like a simple question often cannot be found online and in books.

The preservation of such primary research material as microfilm of daily newspapers, old letters and photos is important, as it can sometimes be the only source of needed information. Research using this hard copy is free, but its digitized counterpart might in the future be subject to fee-based use. As well, computer literacy may not be for everyone; older researchers, who make the most use of historical materials, often prefer the real thing – handling the very letters, photos and ephemera touched by the history-makers themselves. Some are critical of the digital access experience, saying that what we will gain in quantity of access we will lose in quality. Let’s hope that print advocacy remains relevant for more than children’s literature and art books.

The winners

Below is the list of the forty-three Miss PNEs (presented by year, name, and district represented), hometown queens who competed in a contest that went out with the demise of BC’s rural-based economy. Maybe you’ll find the name of your mother, sister or daughter here and recall her happiest day!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Margie Brain</td>
<td>Prince Rupert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Marjorie Hildebrand</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Del Cahoun</td>
<td>Burnaby</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1951  Inez McLeod  Victoria
1952  Joan Nagle  Penticton
1953  Lynn Adcock  Vernon
1954  Nancy Hansen  Burnaby
1955  Glenda Sjoberg  Nanaimo
1956  Joan Greenwood  Langley
1957  Carol Lucas  Burnaby
1958  Sharon Durham  Port Moody
1959  Anna Finlayson  Vancouver
1960  Barbara Wolsey  Vernon
1961  Carol Kish  Abbotsford
1962  Diane Davidson  Vernon
1963  Linda Douma  Sidney
1964  Fyne Rutherford  Penticton
1965  Lene Graaten  Parksville
1966  Judy Collyer  New Westminster
1967  Nina Hamilton  Cariboo
1968  Janet Bowes  Powell River
1969  Patsy McPhee  New Westminster
1970  Heather Kettleson  Nelson
1971  Judy Stewart  Penticton
1972  Regina Helgason  Surrey
1973  Jeanette Warmerdam  Abbotsford

1974  Brenda Hinds  Squamish
1975  Cheryl MacKinnon  Vancouver
1976  Leanne Moore  Abbotsford
1977  Anne Grimm  Penticton
1978  Sandy Blackburn  Kamloops
1979  Gloria Macarenko  Prince Rupert
1980  Kathryn Kokoszka  Mission
1981  Tracy Wheeler  North Vancouver
1982  Devi Brar  Langley
1983  Sandy Friesen  Abbotsford-Matsqui
1984  Janine Norgaard  Victoria
1985  Laura Leard  Delta
1986  Donna Furlani  White Rock
1987  Laura Phelps  Kelowna
1988  Beatrice Jones  Revelstoke
1989  Christine Weber  Delta
1990  Tanya Bittner  Abbotsford-Matsqui
1991  Kim Van De Perre  Coquitlam

Susan Pegram received her Master of Archival Science from UBC in 2002 and has been a contributor to the Archives Association of BC newsletter.