

Editor in Chief
Charles Backfish

Associate Editor
Jennifer Anderson

Associate Editor
Joshua Ruff

Editor at Large
Wolf Schäfer

[HOME](#)

[ABOUT LIHJ](#)

[LIHJ BOARD](#)

[AUTHORS](#)

[RESOURCES](#)

[SEARCH](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

2012, Volume 23, Issue 1

Miss Sperry: Corporate Beauty Pageants and the Prizing of Femininity in Postwar America

Stephen R. Patnode

Abstract: This article examines a series of beauty pageants that Sperry Gyroscope (a large, Long Island-based manufacturer) sponsored during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Situating these corporate beauty contests in broader national (and international) competitions illuminates the vital role that these contests played in framing feminine roles for women and men in the workplace during the crucial post-war decades. Following the upheavals of World War II, managers and workers at Sperry re-segregated the workforce, categorizing some occupations as female and others as male. Beauty contests performed important cultural work in facilitating this shift smoothly by lionizing women that embodied domesticity, beauty, and cooperation.

Keywords: Sperry Gyroscope Corporation, Beauty Pageants, Labor Relations, Femininity, Long Island, Postwar America

¹ Beauty Pageants, Femininity, Labor Relations, Long Island, Postwar America, Sperry Gyroscope Corporation

² In December, 1958, the Sperry Gyroscope Corporation, a large defense contractor located on Long Island, presented Sandy Kuene, a female worker, with an award. No ordinary honor, human resources managers and employees recognized Kuene for winning the coveted title of “Miss Sperry” for 1958.^[1] Her prizes (described somewhat curiously as “gifts”) included a large oil painting of herself (figure 1). The awarding of an oil portrait as the first prize in a company beauty contest raises a number of questions. Why would the award represent her, as opposed to some other subject? Moreover, why would the award capture her likeness in paint, as opposed to a photograph or some other medium? Finally, why

was Kuene's award described as a "gift," rather than a prize? Far from a trite revisiting of outdated, sexist attitudes, puzzling through the answers to these questions provides a fresh glimpse into the myriad methods that large manufacturers like Sperry used to frame feminine roles for women and men in the American workplace during the crucial post-war decades. Following the upheavals of World War II, managers and workers at Sperry segregated the workforce, categorizing some occupations as female and others as male. Beauty contests performed important cultural work in facilitating the shift smoothly by lionizing women that embodied domesticity and attractiveness.



Figure 1: *The Sperry News*, 8 December 1958. Cradle of Aviation Museum Collection.

3 Though located on Long Island, Sperry fits within broader national developments that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. Developments tied to the latter stages of the Second Industrial Revolution shaped the company. The rise of mass markets, new technologies, and financial markets created a fertile space for manufacturing new products. In addition, the expansion of the federal government during the 1930s and the 1940s went hand-in-hand with a keen interest in acquiring new technologies such as aircraft and missiles. Elmer Ambrose Sperry created the Sperry Gyroscope Company in 1910 in order to develop and market gyroscope-based technologies for naval customers. Sperry's largest customer in the 1950s remained the US Navy.

4 In some ways, life for the typical Sperry worker embodied the dramatic demographic changes of the twentieth century. Sperry operated in Nassau County, which began the twentieth century as an economic satellite of New York City, still largely rural and with virtually nothing in the way of manufacturing jobs. In fact, Sperry played a pivotal role in transforming Nassau County (and Long Island more generally) from a bucolic home for farmers and urban commuters in the 1930s to an important epicenter of military and industrial production by the 1950s, increasingly independent economically from Manhattan and the other boroughs of New York City. [2] Initially established in Brooklyn, Sperry moved to Nassau County during World War II in order to take advantage of the greater space available. In this respect, Long Island exemplified many of the dramatic national trends taking place in the decades following WW II, such as suburbanization. Table 1 shows the

changing population of Nassau and Suffolk Counties between 1930 and 1960. Particularly noteworthy here is the dramatic doubling of the population from just under 949,000 in 1950 to almost two million by 1960. For this reason, Long Island is the perfect setting for a study of gender and labor relations. As the population expanded exponentially, government and business leaders carefully controlled who entered and thereby benefited from the new opportunities emerging on Long Island. Consequently, Long Island became a powerful hotbed for creating and reinforcing gender, racial, sexual, and class norms.

Table 1

Population of Nassau and Suffolk County (source: US Census)

Year	Nassau Population	Suffolk Population	Combined
1930	303,053	161,055	464,108
1940	406,748	197,355	604,103
1950	672,765	276,129	948,894
1960	1,300,171	666,784	1,966,955

5 The entrance of substantial numbers of women into the Sperry workforce during World War II created real challenges to traditional gender identities, both female and male. The complex representations of vibrant, independent women in Sperry’s corporate culture certainly contested the notion that ideal women should be homemakers. Employed for the first time in a range of traditionally male occupations, women nonetheless continued to struggle against fixed notions of the links between femininity and work. The oral history of Catherine O’Regan provides insight into the experiences of women during the war. O’Regan worked for the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation, a nearby defense manufacturer. During and immediately following World War II, O’Regan worked on the shop floor in the Hydraulics Department. She described her experience as “monotonous.”^[3] O’Regan’s job consisted of labeling “lines” (pipes that transported hydraulic fluid) with decals and then covering the decals with masking tape. O’Regan and her coworkers spent long hours applying these decals – ten hours Monday through Friday, and eight hours on Saturday. The job required little skill, which added to the monotony. In fact, every woman in the unit owned a set of tools prior to starting the job. In O’Regan’s words, “Most of us never used them again, except to loan [them] out.”^[4] Even though women trained to perform metal work, many fabled “Rosie the Riveters” like O’Regan actually found themselves treated as ancillary workers within the corporation. Despite setbacks like this, the dramatic impact of WW II on the workplace still posed a major challenge to traditional identity formation for the employees of these companies, undermining notions of gender, racial, and class identity.

6 Sperry’s ability to meet wartime production demands hinged on an exponential expansion of both their facilities and personnel. When the US entered the war, Sperry had a workforce of roughly 3,000. Like many manufacturers, Sperry underwent dramatic expansion during the war. The workforce increased tenfold, to a peak of more than 32,000 in 1943.^[5] By 1942, Sperry had outgrown its original site in Brooklyn and relocated to a new facility in Lake Success, Nassau County. Paid for by the federal government, this new production site set the stage for Sperry to become one of Long Island’s largest employers following the war.

7 Immediately following the war Sperry fired almost all of its women workers. Managers confined the few women who did survive the mass layoff to office spaces performing clerical duties. Indeed, this was a broader trend within the Long Island economy. Table 2 illustrates the number of women over the age of 14 working on Long Island in 1940 and 1950. While the overall number of working women increased, this reflected the broader population growth that took place. In 1950, the percentage of women over the age of 14 working outside the home remained unchanged from 1940. In other words, despite the frenzied hiring of WW II, women saw few permanent gains over the course of the decade. In contrast, table 3 demonstrates that the percentage of men over 14 working outside the home increased appreciably from 1940 to 1950.

Table 2

Long Island Females over 14 and Females over 14 in the Labor Force (Source: US Census)

Year	Nassau and Suffolk Females over 14	Nassau and Suffolk Females over 14 in Labor Force	Percentage of Females over 14 in Labor Force
1940	243,776	59,815	25
1950	368,391	93,408	25

Table 3

Long Island Males over 14 and Males over 14 in the Labor Force (Source: US Census)

Year	Nassau and Suffolk Males over 14	Nassau and Suffolk Males over 14 in Labor Force	Percentage of Males over 14 in Labor Force
1940	243,776	176,536	74
1950	346,533	273,787	79

8 The Korean War triggered another broad wave of hiring, which again included many women. Doris Rummel worked at Sperry from 1951-52, building radar tube assemblies on the shop floor. Unlike O'Regan, Rummel recalled enjoying the work. However, Rummel's experience mirrored O'Regan's in important respects. Like O'Regan during World War II, Rummel found herself working on the shop floor with a segregated group of women during the Korean War. Referring to the women workers, Rummel recounted, "And we weren't thought of much, you know what I'm saying? They didn't think we were vital to the whole thing."^[6] So even if Rummel found her tube assembly work more engaging than O'Regan's decal sticking, the corporate culture of Sperry clearly left women feeling like second-class workers.

9 Part of the gender backlash that took place after WW II involved redefining job categories along gendered lines. Reconstructing categories entailed eliminating many women and reorganizing the remaining women into ancillary positions within the workforce. The corollary to the definition of some jobs as female was that other positions were understood to be the provenance of male employees, a division that extended beyond the shop floor. Donald Riehl offered some fascinating observations about how employers gendered occupations after WW II and what this meant for identity formation in the office. He

worked for the Republic Aviation Corporation (another nearby defense contractor) from 1951-1964 with two years out for military service in Korea. As Riehl discussed his years working as an administrative assistant, he added:

It was a man's job. Women were clerks and secretaries. In those days there was a distinction between a secretary that did typing and filing and an administrative assistant who took care of personnel matters ... any kind of business administration tasks, financial planning, that sort of thing. [7]

- 10 Riehl's analysis provides keen insight into the way work roles transcribed gender identities. In the workplace culture of Long Island, an employee's occupation reinforced his or her sense of masculinity or femininity. The title "administrative assistant" reaffirmed a male employee's masculinity (as opposed to the feminine label "secretary"). Riehl was evidently uncomfortable with the perceived blurring of gender roles in the contemporary business world, and what that might have meant for his own sense of masculinity in the past.
- 11 In the much more heavily gendered workplace of the 1950s and 1960s, corporations like Sperry promoted and rewarded a particular kind of femininity. The company identified the preferred version of femininity (and masculinity) through depictions of women and men. In some ways, the objectification of women in Sperry's corporate culture was not novel. Prior to the creation of the Miss Sperry contest, female employees frequently posed for photographs in swimsuits or other poolside attire, which company publications then reproduced. These pictures rewarded women for embodying qualities of femininity that were shared with, or at least valued by, the community. In this context, community refers to a unified body of people with a set of shared interests. But the Miss Sperry contest, which the company featured as an annual event from 1957 into the early 1960s, represented something new. An incisive example of Sperry's prized femininity, this was the first occasion where male managers and workers lauded women for personifying particular personality traits, as well as physical characteristics. By awarding paintings and other prizes to female employees, the community of Sperry has left behind an anthropological record of the values that it wanted women to manifest. Above all, Sperry rewarded women who embodied physical beauty, sociable personality, and happy domesticity.
- 12 The timing of these contests represents a shift from one cultural project to another. The Miss Sperry pageants became popular in the late 1950s. However, Sperry had various other contests, beauty and otherwise, several years before this, during and immediately after WW II. Even though some of the earlier contests featured bathing suit photographs, they did not match the size, popularity, or emphasis on physical beauty of the Miss Sperry contest. Indeed, one earlier competition went so far as to urge, "This is NOT a beauty contest." [8] However, once the post-war transition of segregating women in the workplace was complete, a second set of contests emerged that focused on beauty by openly displaying photographs of female employees in bathing suits and other attire. [9] The later contests celebrated, reinforced, and rewarded women for embodying new cultural values of beauty, personality, and domesticity.

- 13 From humble beginnings, the Miss Sperry contest rapidly grew in popularity. Sperry maintained a well-developed human resources department that helped sponsor activities to foster good employee relations. Starting in 1957, Sperry's recreation department hosted an annual Sperry Variety Show, organized by the Sperry Choralaires. The first variety show contained a small, separate Miss Sperry contest. Following the success of the 1957 show, the employee newspaper, *The Sperry News*, reported that the next production would be even bigger and better. In addition, "The Sperry Beauty Contest will again be included in the show under our supervision, but this time it will be worked into the framework of the show."^[10] The presence of the company's management is evident ("under our supervision"), which indicates that this was something officially countenanced as part of the corporate culture.
- 14 The beauty contests quickly became very popular at Sperry. The second contest in 1958 featured twenty-three contestants from Sperry's Nassau County facilities alone and drew more than 5,500 votes (again, from employees based in Nassau County).^[11] In other words, roughly one-third of the employees cast a ballot for the competition. All told, "More than 7,000 votes were cast in this second annual election for the forty contestants who entered from Sperry's LI installations."^[12]
- 15 The presence of a Miss Sperry contest in the late 1950s should not come as a surprise. Beauty pageants reached the height of their popularity during this period.^[13] Each year, Americans witnessed (and voted for) hundreds of different "queens" of one type or another, from Miss America and Mrs. America all the way to Queen of the Speedboats and Miss Potato Chip.^[14] Recent scholarship provides fresh insight into the meaning of beauty pageants then and now.^[15] As Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje observe, pageants "showcase values, concepts, and behavior that exist at the center of a group's sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place."^[16] In the context of a larger culture of beauty pageants, the founders of Sperry's beauty contest eagerly expressed their own shared values. In fact, Gus Albert (Sperry's recreation supervisor) made the connection between Sperry's contest and other competitions quite explicit in a number of ways. When announcing the contest for Miss Sperry in 1958, Albert enthused, "Who knows, she may win the Miss America title?"^[17] Clearly, the larger beauty pageant culture of the time influenced contest organizers. This pageant culture emphasized broad themes like patriotism, respectability, femininity, beauty, and civility. The case of Sperry included a sense of local identity and pride as well.
- 16 Drawing upon the broader beauty culture of the late 1950s, the Miss Sperry competition self-consciously mimicked the "Miss Rheingold" pageants. Sponsored annually by the Rheingold Brewing Company, these beauty contests drew over 3,000 candidates per year by the late 1950s. When Rheingold's marketing campaign originated in 1939, the "Rheingold Girl" was selected without public input. In short order, the competition changed to a search for "Miss Rheingold" with a public election to decide the winner. One observer noted, "Ballot boxes were put in taverns and grocery stores, and, in a tradition as old as Boss Tweed, people could vote early and often and stuff the ballot box as full as a Christmas turkey."^[18] The Miss Rheingold competition enjoyed wild popularity, garnering the second-most votes of any election in the US, behind only Presidential elections.^[19] Inspired by the success of

“Miss Rheingold,” the opening of the “Miss Sperry of 1959” contest announced a new format, one that would “take on the ‘Miss Rheingold’ approach.” [20] What, exactly, did Miss Sperry organizers mean by the “Miss Rheingold approach?”

- 17 By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Miss Rheingold planners wanted to allay concerns regarding their contest’s respectability. In photo opportunities for major publications, the Miss Rheingold finalists did not appear in bathing suits, but rather routinely appeared in matching, stylish dresses. A profile from the *Saturday Evening Post* of the six finalists for 1963 almost lamented, “They were all smiling hard, and were dressed identically in girlish, unrevealing clothes provided by the brewery. As always there was nothing chic, glamorous or sexy about them.” [21] The move away from chic and sexy represented a deliberate calculation on the part of the competition’s chief organizer, company president Philip Liebmann. By emphasizing the civility of the contestants, he hoped to highlight the propriety of the competition. In an interview, he enthused, “Women realize that Miss Rheingold isn’t the sort who’d be a threat to them. People approve of her. We get enthusiastic letters from nuns and priests.” [22] Liebmann expressed concern with civility (Miss Rheingold is not a “threat”) and worried about alienating female consumers. In an attempt to stay away from offending women, the company also avoided featuring contestants in provocative clothing and/or poses. Indeed, Rheingold posed winners in ads that featured them in full ski snowsuits or long gardening pants. Hillie Merritt Mahoney, Miss Rheingold of 1956, wryly reminisced about the company’s absurd concern that she not be “associated with drinking and beer.” [23]
- 18 The move away from bathing suits represented a trend in American beauty pageants more generally. In writing about beauty contests (and Miss Rheingold in particular), *Newsweek* observed in 1961 that “Under the influence of industry – and much to the chagrin of many male oglers – most major beauty contests have long since abandoned their early roles as mere displayers of female flesh.” [24] Indeed, the holder of the Mrs. America title for 1958 famously responded to a photographer who asked her to lift her skirt, “I don’t pose for cheesecake, I bake it!” [25]
- 19 Organizers of Miss Sperry followed the lead of national competitions. Like many national competitions, previous Sperry pageants looked like swimsuit contests, frequently featuring entrants in two-piece bathing suits. Beginning in 1959, however, the competitions featured more “respectable” attire. In a departure from previous contests, the Miss Sperry competition now set contestants’ portraits “against familiar Long Island landmarks, emphasizing also the many historical and recreational advantages of the area.” [26] Like Rheingold, managers at Sperry recognized that this contest could be used as an effective marketing tool to promote the advantages of life on Long Island to current and prospective employees.
- 20 *The Sperry News* introduced the first contestant for 1959 (figure 2) with the caption, “Fashionable – the new picture style to be used for ‘Miss Sperry’ entrants”. [27] The accompanying photograph of Joan Gerbino (the runner-up for Miss Sperry 1958) was fashionable indeed. Gerbino posed in a dark dress and pearls, seated outside a large shopping mall. The editor explained, “Photos, for the first time, will be set against a panorama of historic and recreational L.I. landmarks.” While the

juxtaposition of this photograph and caption might provide the contemporary reader with a sense of cognitive dissonance (the shopping mall as historic and recreational landmark), it points to the importance that malls filled at the time as suburban areas like Long Island continued to expand dramatically. In fact, the shopping mall has received renewed interest from scholars in recent years. [28] The mall in question was Roosevelt Field, which was America's biggest mall when it opened in 1956. Despite the fact that Gerbino was a Sperry employee, picturing her in front of Roosevelt Field also framed the mall as a place of women's work.



Figure 2: *The Sperry News*, 27 October 1958. Cradle of Aviation Museum Collection.

- 21 The picture of Joan Gerbino indicated a second way in which Sperry organizers mimicked the "Rheingold approach." Miss Rheingold had typically been photographed in static, seated poses until 1959, when an experiment with different photographic equipment captured dynamic shots of Emily Banks (Miss Rheingold, 1960) dancing and singing on location at the famous La Concha hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In addition, Banks visited bowling alleys, the Fulton Fish Market in New York, and the top of a bulldozer in San Fernando for photo shoots as Miss Rheingold. [29]
- 22 Miss Sperry organizers tried to present a more respectable image in other ways while still retaining elements of earlier competitions. In something of a departure from the "Rheingold" element, the photograph directly above Joan Gerbino featured the current Miss Sperry in a bathing suit (figure 3). However, the bikinis of contests past were now gone. Instead, Sandy Kuene, Miss Sperry for 1958, wore a more conservative one-piece bathing suit. The reader learns that Kuene was "delighted with all-expense, week-end trip to the White Stallion Ranch, given as the top prize in the beauty contest." Kuene appeared next to Joy and George Kastner, the owners of the Ranch, who remained fully clothed.



Figure 3: *The Sperry News*, 27 October 1958. Cradle of Aviation Museum Collection.

23 Subsequent photographs of contestants in 1958 continued to combine mimicry of Rheingold's respectable dresses with reputable one-piece bathing suits. A large photo spread of the winners from the previous year's competition featured two of them in original evening gowns designed by a local artist (figure 4). However, other photographs (figure 5) make it clear that the swimsuit competition remained an integral part of the pageant itself, even if the winners later posed in high fashion. Some photographs literally combined the elements of high and low culture. A subsequent profile of three contestants featured a photograph of them in a local park. One posed in a dress, but the other two wore bathing suits.^[30]





Figures 4 and 5: *The Sperry News*, 27 April 1959. Cradle of Aviation Museum Collection.

- 24 Local affairs such as Miss Sperry and national competitions like Miss Rheingold also reflected a deep concern with civility and other qualities related to women's personalities. One profile of the latter contest dwelled on the similarities between the Rheingold competition and the presidential contest, emphasizing civility. Regarding Miss Rheingold contestants, "Like Presidential candidates, they're expected to admire each other, and, unlike, Presidential candidates, it seems they usually do. What makes them still more unlike Presidential candidates is the fact that they eat together, sleep together, go to the movies together in their spare time, wear identical dresses, share a chaperone, and enjoy sitting around late at night talking shop and eating brownies." [31] Far from a threat, the company presented Miss Rheingold as an affable girl-next-door, suitable to be any woman's new best friend.
- 25 The Sperry community prized the values of civility and girliness, too. One report about Pat Algozine, the Miss Sperry winner from 1957, related, "But she remembers most of all the girls in the contest." Algozine gushed, "They were all just wonderful ... one of them kissed me in all the excitement ... we all tried to help and encourage each other." [32] Indeed, contest organizers carefully photographed all of the finalists together after the winner was crowned (figure 6). The emphasis on civility fits within broader trends in American culture during the twentieth century. Cultural historians such as Warren Susman have observed that the mass society of the twentieth century produced a shift (measured through self-help literature and other evidence) in individual consciousness from "character" to "personality." [33] Gender also played an important role in the transition from character to personality. Cultural productions like beauty pageants encouraged women like Algozine to display personability and friendliness, even in the face of competition for valuable prizes and cherished honorifics.



Figure 6: *The Sperry News*, 30 June 1958. Cradle of Aviation Museum Collection.

26 Algozine also illustrated one of the significant differences between Miss Sperry and other national contests. In order to ensure they remained “respectable,” many beauty contests incorporated marriage clauses into their rules, which specified the intended marital status of their contestants.^[34] When competitions like Miss America insisted on judging single women, they also asserted an idealized division of marital labor. In contrast, the Miss Sperry contests were open to any female employee, regardless of whether they were married. In fact, when Sperry’s competition was first announced in January 1958, it was presented as a competition for the “Miss or Mrs. Sperry” contest.^[35] In the case of other pageants, most notably the Miss America and Mrs. America contests, the marital status of the contestants mattered a great deal. Each competition presented and rewarded different conceptions of femininity. Miss America freely emphasized physical beauty, retaining a swimsuit competition throughout the period.

27 The organizers of Mrs. America, on the other hand, looked for a woman who was an outstanding wife, cook, homemaker, and, as *Woman’s Home Companion* put it, a “general pillar of the community.”^[36] In other words, the competition looked to reward excellent workers in a particular setting. *Woman’s Home Companion* observed that since the inception of the Mrs. America contest, Americans had seen “The evolution of a top national contest, stressing the ideal in woman, from a bathing-beauty show into a serious home economics tournament.” This represented a change in the values that the Mrs. America pageant prized in its female contestants. The Mrs. America contest was founded in 1938 by Bert Nevins as a way for the Palisades Amusement Park in New Jersey to compete with the Miss America contest in nearby Atlantic City. The founding premise was that married women could be just as attractive and appealing as single ones, and as such Mrs. America looked much like any other beauty pageant from the time. But during World War II, this began to change. The contestants were increasingly not professional models, and domesticity began to feature prominently in the contest. The Mrs. America of 1949, Betty McAllister, was the first one hailed as “the nation’s most typical homemaker.” Again, it is worth noting that this shift in the Mrs. America pageant coincided with the larger cultural redefinitions of femininity examined here.

28 In fact, rather than choosing between the Miss America or Mrs. America rule on marital status, Miss Sperry combined them. Like the “Mrs. America” contests, the organizers of the Miss Sperry pageant openly

lionized domesticity. The announcement of the official opening of the contest for 1958 also featured a profile of the previous year's winner, Pat Algozine. Algozine had gotten married in the intervening year since winning the competition, and was now Mrs. Bill Brown.[37] The editors continued, "That's reversing the romantic trend somewhat, becoming a 'Miss' in June and a 'Mrs.' on the coldest weekend in January." However, the article tacitly approved Algozine's new status as Mrs. Brown. "The little routines of married life are beginning to form after two months." Married life seemed to agree with her. As importantly, in an endorsement of one of the central components of domesticity, "She's a good cook, which leaves her husband still wondering when he's going to get his first burned meal." One of the accompanying photographs (figure 7) depicted Algozine arranging h'ordeuvres in her living room, presumably entertaining the photographer and other guests. Algozine's Miss Sperry profile praised her because she embodied the best of both of the major national beauty contests – Miss America and Mrs. America. Single when she won the award, Algozine achieved a veritable coup-de-grace by getting married. With one candidate, the Sperry community found an ideal woman that combined the qualities of both the Miss and Mrs. America contests. Algozine embodied the kind of civility, domesticity, and beauty that this community valued most from women.



Figure 7: *The Sperry News*, 24 February 1958. Cradle of Aviation Museum Collection.

- 29 In addition to gender, the Miss Sperry contests left behind an important record on the role of race in identity formation and labor relations at workplaces like Sperry. Whiteness stands out as one of the core shared values in these competitions, and certainly a central part of the idealized identity for these community members.[38] Quite simply, most of the models featured in the pages of publications by Sperry were white. This included all of the models for Miss Sperry.
- 30 In presenting homogeneous pictures of white workers, Sperry publications were representative of large manufacturers on Long Island more generally during this period. For example, the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation and Republic Aviation Corporation both had very active photography clubs that sponsored multiple contests every year. The photographers were typically men, and they would often enter

pictures of their friends or family members in either bathing suits or formal evening wear (this included fiancés, wives, teenage daughters, and sometimes even the teenage daughters of co-workers).[39] Almost all of these women were white. More than once, the *Republic Aviation News* featured female employees posing at the beach, performing public service announcements about the hazards of over-exposure to the sun and urging Racers to don sunscreen.[40] Again, these employee-models were white. The preponderance of white personnel in the pages of these publications is representative of the workforce, which was also predominantly white during the 1950s.[41]

31 The emphasis on whiteness extended to surrounding communities as well. Indeed, Long Island was one of the epicenters of segregated housing in the wake of WW II.[42] Racial homogeneity was important for members of the middle-class, white community that increasingly moved to the suburbs of Long Island during the 1950s and 1960s. Interestingly, images of black workers (male and female) did appear occasionally in the pages of company publications, even if they did not participate in the beauty pageants.

32 However, the pattern of whiteness in beauty pageants was already being challenged in some nationally visible quarters, including the Miss Rheingold competition itself. One profile of the Miss Rheingold competition reported that 800 contestants had entered, “including a number of Negro models, three of whom lasted until the final eliminations.”[43] At the local level, as the post-war period went on, exceptions to the racial homogeneity of the models and contestants began to appear, too. The *Republic Aviation News* of 6 July 1962 included a photograph of Lorraine Daniels, a young, black Republic employee. A typist for the company, Daniels had placed among the top twenty in a “Miss Beaux Arts” contest held by the Urban League of Greater New York. The purpose of this contest was to determine “the most photogenic women in metropolitan New York area.”[44] The brief caption informed the reader that Daniels was married and the mother of two children. As a reward, “Lorraine received a \$1,000 full-year charm course and has been asked to model.” Again, as with the Mrs. America contest, we see a subtle emphasis on work and labor issues. The editors indicated modeling was as an appropriate arena for women’s work. The example of Daniels provides an interesting connection with larger cultural trends that were underway during this period.[45] In particular, this was representative of the beginning acceptance of African-American women as attractive in broader U.S. culture.[46]

33 As the post-war period developed, the communities under examination here found a number of ways to reward women for embracing traditional identities. The answer to the opening question of why Sperry managers described Sandy Kuene’s award as a “gift” now becomes clear. A gift suggests a reward, or something given as compensation for worthy behavior (as opposed to a prize, which would be awarded for merit). The Sperry community rewarded women for embodying (or at least, publicly displaying) femininity, which in this case referred to being domestic and civil. In addition, of course, women were expected to look good doing this, in either a respectable bathing suit or dress. The affirmation of traditional femininity within Sperry’s corporate culture during the late 1950s and early 1960s also fits well with the reassertion of traditional versions of masculinity taking place during the same period. Through cultural productions such as beauty pageants,

employers like Sperry Gyroscope rearranged identities within the workplace, reinforcing the privilege of male workers and minimizing the needs of female workers.

Notes

- [1] "Beauty Queen Receives Gift," *The Sperry News* 15, no 17 (8 December 1958), 3.
- [2] For an overview of the role that industrial production for the military played in the growth of Nassau County, see Geoffrey Rossano, "Suburbia Armed: Nassau County Development and the Rise of the Aerospace Industry, 1909-60," in Roger W. Lotchin, ed., *The Martial Metropolis: US Cities in War and Peace* (New York: Praeger, 1984): 61-88.
- [3] Catherine O'Regan, personal interview with author, 10 July 2003. Prior to going to work for Grumman, O'Regan had a high school education. She took some college courses as well, but most of her training at Grumman came on the job or through special educational programs the company organized.
- [4] Catherine O'Regan, "My work at Grumman: 1942-47," personal memoir, in possession of author. O'Regan received the tools upon completing her training program. Prior to going to work for Grumman, O'Regan took some college courses, but most of her training at Grumman came on the job or through special educational programs the company organized.
- [5] Hagley Museum and Library, Accession 1915, Box 53, folder 16, "Census of Personnel, 1944-54," and Preston Bassett, "Sperry's Forty Years in Progress of Science," *Sperryscope* 12, no. 2, 21.
- [6] Doris Rummel, personal interview with author, 13 May 2008.
- [7] Donald Riehl, personal interview with author, 9 July 2003.
- [8] "Miss Victory Contest Begins Today," *The Sperry News* 1, no 13 (16 October 1942), 1. For a fuller discussion of these earlier contests, see Stephen R. Patnode, "'Keep it Under Your Hat': Safety Campaigns and Fashion in the World War II Factory," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no3 (2012): 231-243.
- [9] This was visible as a broader trend within US popular culture, too. Maureen Honey notes a similar transition in advertising following the war. She begins her analysis of advertising images during WW II by lamenting what came after, as images of Lucille Ball and Marilyn Monroe replaced Rosie the Riveter. These later stars "embodied a childlike sexuality and comic naiveté that were far removed from the images of competence in wage work so recently highlighted by women's entry into war production." See Maureen Honey, "Remembering Rosie: Advertising Images of Women in World War II", in Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons, ed., *The Home-Front War: World War II and American Society* (Westport: Greenwood, 1995): 83-106.
- [10] Gus Albert, "In Albert's Alley," *The Sperry News* 15, no 2 (3 February 1958), 6.
- [11] "Record Vote Decides Finalists in 2nd 'Miss Sperry' Contest" *The Sperry News* 14, no 7 (19 May 1958): 5.
- [12] The figure of 7,000 included 1,500 employees from locations outside of Nassau County.
- [13] For an excellent overview of the most popular beauty pageant, Miss America, see Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, "The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (summer 2000): 105-126.
- [14] Gay Talese, "Survey and Study of Our 'Queens'," *New York Times Magazine* 27

October 1957: 28, 56, 58.

[15] Noteworthy studies include Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty: A Social History Through Two Centuries of the American Idea, Ideal, and Image of the Beautiful Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); and Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, ed., *There She is, Miss America: the Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Banet-Weiser closes her book with a fascinating challenge to feminist theory and the way feminists critique beauty pageants. Contemporary pageants have appropriated feminist rhetoric, and candidates now present themselves as strong, independent women who are competing for the opportunities provided by pageants. Banet-Weiser spins this into a larger reconsideration of the very concept of "agency" as individual achievement.

[16] Colleen Ballerino Cohen and Richard Wilk, with Beverly Stoeltje, "Introduction", 3, in Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, ed., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[17] Gus Albert, "In Albert's Alley," *The Sperry News* 15, no 1 (13 January 1958), 10.

[18] Robert Alden, "Advertising: Beer Queen Needs a Bit of Hop," *New York Times*, 10 April 1960: 10.

[19] As the *New Yorker* observed, "In 1956, the vote totalled just over twenty-three million; this year it promises to be even bigger." See "Strenuous," *New Yorker* 33 (21 September 1957): 35-36.

[20] "Sperry Beauty Contest On – New Rules Set," *The Sperry News* 15, no. 15 (27 October 1958): 12.

[21] David L. Goodrich, "Will the Real Miss Rheingold Stand Out?" *Saturday Evening Post* 236, no. 40 (16 November 1963): 48, 51.

[22] "Will the Real Miss Rheingold Stand Out?"

[23] Jim O'Grady, "City Lore: Demure Beauties of Old," *New York Times* (23 February 2003).

[24] "Prettiest Businessmen Ever ... Turn Beauty Into Booty," *Newsweek* 58 (18 September 1961): 88-89.

[25] Roul Tunley, "What Happened to Mrs. America's Bathing Suit?" *Woman's Home Companion* 84 (January 1957): 10-11.

[26] "Sperry Beauty Contest On," 12.

[27] "Sperry Beauty Contest On," 12.

[28] For example, see Lizabeth Cohen, "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996): 1050-1082 and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

[29] See Alden, "Advertising: Beer Queen Needs a Bit of Hop."

[30] See "Three Miss Sperry Entries Lend Charm to Early Spring," *The Sperry News* 16, no. 6 (27 April 1959): 8.

[31] "Strenuous," *New Yorker*, 35-36.

[32] "Miss Sperry Contest Opens," *The Sperry News* 15, no. 3 (24 February 1958): 8.

[33] The seminal essay on this remains Warren Susman, "Personality and the

Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

[34] The creators of the Miss America pageant forgot to include a marriage clause in their original set of rules. This resulted in a series of imbroglios during the 1920s involving a number of contestants who were either married, had children, or were otherwise unfit for the title “Miss America.” See Watson and Martin, “The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One,” 107-108.

[35] Gus Albert, “In Albert’s Alley,” *The Sperry News* 15, no. 1 (13 January 1958): 10.

[36] Roul Tunley, “What Happened to Mrs. America’s Bathing Suit?” *Woman’s Home Companion* 84 (January 1957): 10-11.

[37] “Miss Sperry Contest Opens,” *The Sperry News* 15, no. 3 (24 February 1958), 8.

[38] The topic of whiteness and identity has been the object of some very interesting studies in recent years. An important introduction to the topic remains Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998). For a critical overview of the field of whiteness studies and its historical origins, see Christina Pruetz, “The Complexions of ‘Race’ and the Rise of ‘Whiteness’ Studies,” *Clio* 32, no. 1 (Fall 202): 27-50.

[39] For example, see “Here are Some Entries,” *Grumman Plane News* 12, no. 19 (11 September 1953): 10; “Prize Photo,” *Republic Aviation News* 45, no. 5 (5 January 1962): 8; and “Another Winner for Harry Odell,” *Republic Aviation News* 45, no. 10 (6 July 1962): 8.

[40] For example, see “You Should Listen to Me!” *Republic Aviation News* 27, no. 7 (2 June 1950): 1; and “Watch Out for Ol’ Sol,” *Republic Aviation News* 45, no. 10 (6 July 1962): 1

[41] Regrettably, Sperry does not have demographic information available for this period. National figures for 1962 indicate that of the 22.6 million women in the civilian labor force (34% of all workers), 2.7 million were nonwhite (4% of all workers). All but a small percentage of these women were African-American. The median earnings of nonwhite women workers were about half those of white women workers in 1960. See Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, *1962 Handbook on Women Workers: Bulletin No. 285* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1963), 14, 70.

[42] The most comprehensive overview of the rise of suburbs in the U.S. (and the role that government agencies such as the Federal Housing Administration played in promoting them) remains Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[43] Goodrich, “Will the Real Miss Rheingold Stand Out?” 48.

[44] “Finalist,” *Republic Aviation News* 45, no. 10 (6 July 1962): 7

[45] In her semi-autobiographical *Where the Girls Are*, Susan J. Douglas suggests that Diana Ross played a substantial role “in making African American beauty enviable to white girls.” Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 96. Also, for a very interesting discussion of race and beauty pageants, see Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, as well as Maxine Leeds Craig, “Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?” *Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[46] For a brief but insightful discussion of the relationship between African-American activists and beauty culture more generally, see Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Holt and Company, 1998), especially 256-260. Peiss points out that African Americans provided the most penetrating critique of the American beauty ideal during the 1950s and 1960s.

LIHJ is published by [the Center for Global & Local History](#)
Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794. Copyright © LIHJ & Author