

# If she's in a white gown, it must be summer on bay

## Chesapeake yacht clubs hang on to a queenly tradition.

By Kristen Wyatt  
Associated Press

PASADENA, Md. - It was sunny, about 80 degrees - fine weather for an afternoon promenade along the Chesapeake Bay wearing a floor-length white gown, long formal gloves and a tiara.

Think summer starts on Memorial Day? Not in Maryland, where a decades-old tradition of opening summer the first weekend of June at the Maryland Yacht Club culminates in a curious throwback: the crowning of the Queen of the Chesapeake.

The pageant stars "princesses" nominated by yacht clubs around the Chesapeake, ages 16 to 21 and wearing white gowns. It's a pageant the way pageants used to be, before high-pressure talent contests, fitness evaluations and big-money scholarships.

Here, contestants give beauty-queen waves wearing sashes in the colors of their home yacht clubs. They pick a song for a promenade in front of about 200 yacht club members gathered for the event, then receive roses before going onto a makeshift stage overlooking the Chesapeake to await the decision of a three-judge panel.

"It hasn't changed much," says the first Queen of the Chesapeake, Rachel Holmes Cruzan, who was crowned 60 years ago, in 1948. Now 77 and living in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., Cruzan lived in Bel Air when she won the first Queen of the Chesapeake pageant. She was 17 years old, talked up her skills at waterskiing and power-boating and ended up marrying her escort two years later.

Cruzan returned to the club for the opening of its 100th season, and at the pageant was handed a dozen red roses and given a front-row seat.

Contestants read a short essay, just a few sentences long, on the Chesapeake Bay, extolling the pleasures of sailing and crabbing and duck hunting. Then they answer a simple question - what charity would they start? - and that's about it.

The winner spends her reign visiting yacht clubs for their dinner dances and winter balls, with the high honor of wearing a white gown everywhere she goes while the other princesses make do in Sunday dresses.

If it sounds old-fashioned, it is.

"Maybe yacht clubs are a retro kind of thing," mused Sandy Stevens, a Maryland Yacht Club member who has emceed the Queen of the Chesapeake pageant for years. "We keep up our tradition with our uniforms and our ceremonies. And there's a big segment of the population that really likes that."

The Chesapeake's yacht queen tradition is unusual, even among yacht clubs. Organizers say the only other group with a similar princess and queen system is the nearby Delaware River Yachtsmen's League, which sent a delegation of about 10 sash-wearing princess to observe this year's Queen of the Chesapeake

pageant. They were seated in the front row and given pink and purple bags as gifts.

"Seeing all the queens and all the princesses since I was 3, they always looked so pretty and they had so much fun," says Ann Friars of West Deptford, three-time princess of the National Park Boat Club in New Jersey and a favorite to win the Delaware River pageant later this summer.

That pageant is a little less formal - contestants are free to choose their gown colors - but decorum is still upheld.

"We're not allowed to wear flip-flops and stuff" when visiting yacht clubs, Friars explains.

As other pageants decline in popularity - even the venerable Miss America Pageant has vanished from network television - the yacht queens of the Chesapeake aren't going anywhere. For tradition-loving boaters on the Chesapeake, it just isn't summer until white-gowned beauties take a turn promenading along the water.

"It's a wonderful thing to see young people put their heart and souls into the yachting community," says Coles Marsh, commodore of the Chesapeake Bay Yacht Club Association, made up of 129 clubs from Virginia to New Jersey. "We do this every year. We'll always do this every year."