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STATE TREASURES; TWO FORMER MISS NORTH CAROLINAS REMINISCE ABOUT THEIR REIGNS

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What can be expected when two former Miss North Carolinas get together for an afternoon?

Tea and crumpets?

Not so when the 1963 Miss North Carolina pageant winner, Jeanne Swanner Robertson, visited the state's first pageant winner, Ruth Covington Thomas, for the first time recently in Greensboro.

The only tea was iced, and these women didn't have time for crumpets, or any dessert.

A crown wasn't all they had in common.

They had tales to trade.

And loved every minute of it.

Thomas was the state's first Miss North Carolina in 1937 and was second runner-up in the Miss America pageant. Robertson claimed state crown No. 26 in 1963 and the Miss Congeniality title in the national contest.

They aren't frilly show ponies; they're wily and spunky.

Robertson works as a professional public speaker and humorist, traveling 10 months of the year to different parts of the country to share her stories at conventions and banquets. But her visit to Abbotswood retirement center was a special one.

Her scheduled speech for the residents of Abbotswood was only the second point on her agenda. Her foremost reason for visiting Abbotswood - during her week of vacation - was to meet Ruth Thomas, an Abbotswood resident.

Thomas says she entered the first Miss North Carolina pageant in 1937 "on a lark." Thomas, who lived in Charlotte, was only 15 years old at the time. The minimum age requirement was 17. When Thomas filled out the form, she says, "I just skipped the age part and signed my name."

After she won Miss North Carolina, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer offered her work in Hollywood.

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"They wanted me to play Scarlett O'Hara," says the dark-haired, blue-eyed Thomas. "I had a southern drawl; I was tiny. But I turned it down. I said, 'No I can't go to Hollywood; I need to go to the ninth grade!'"

To this day she doesn't regret her decision. She wanted to finish school.

Her age presented a few difficulties at the Miss America Pageant.

"When we were in Atlantic City (for the Miss America Pageant), they had local boys escorting all the contestants. My escort was 28 years old. I felt bad for him because I was only 15. I think he was hoping to meet someone older."

Finishing as the second runner-up wasn't bad for a 15-year-old girl on a lark.

Robertson turned her pageant experience into a valuable career.

"I had the opportunity to speak every day and develop my public speaking skills," says Robertson. "A week after the Miss North Carolina pageant I went on a tour, cutting ribbons and things like that. If you could speak for 15 minutes and make the people laugh, they loved you."

Robertson hails Thomas as her forerunner in the field of public performance. After Thomas won Miss North Carolina, she traveled around the Charlotte area singing and dancing at banquets and other public events.

"Imagine," says Robertson, "In '38 and '39, going around and doing programs. She led the way for me."

After the pageants, Thomas performed for many groups around North Carolina.

"But I didn't sing at church socials," she says. "I didn't sing church music. I wiggled around too much."

Thomas had studied dance for years before she entered the Miss North Carolina pageant. The first pageant was strictly a swimsuit competition. "The pageant was held by a pool," says Thomas. "We were in swimsuits all day."

The Miss North Carolina pageant didn't have a talent competition at that time, but the Miss America Pageant did. Thomas was lucky to be so well-prepared for the talent element.

"My dance teacher brought out a song called 'Goono Goo' for me. I sang and danced - I had a double talent. I figured if the judges didn't like one they'd like the other."

"I had a double talent too," says Robertson. "I played the ukulele and sang. They have in the book that I do comedy, but I really was trying to sing. I would have shot basketballs if they had let me do that."

Robertson, at 6'2", is the tallest woman ever to compete in the Miss America contest. She coached women's basketball at the high school and collegiate levels before letting her work as a speaker become her full-time job.

When Robertson judged Miss America pageants in 1990 and 1994, she was astounded by the number of contestants who are athletes. "But there were many athletes when I competed too," she says.

Remember, this was 1963. There was no Title IX. Why did so many female athletes succeed in pageants?

"Being an athlete teaches important skills that you need to win a pageant: how to be tough, set goals, and know how to win."

This is the same toughness shown by the 15-year-old girl who worked her way to Atlantic City. The same toughness the former Miss North Carolina shows whenever she makes fun of her size 11 feet, or of being 6'2" in the seventh grade.

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These women have the toughness to laugh at themselves.

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