



Azalea Queen candidates dress in antebellum gowns as a part of this 40-year tradition.

The Bloom of Tradition

Spring beauty is in bloom in Panama City. The pink hues of azaleas mingle with the white blossoms of dogwood. And as the sweet fragrance of spring perfumes the air, one thing is for sure: The trail of tradition marches on.

This year, the Azalea Trail makes its 40th appearance in Panama City. For young women born and raised in Bay County, the Azalea Trail is an elegant and familiar Southern tradition. The celebration of the blossoming azaleas that are such an important part of Panama City's spring are combined with a recognition of the beauty, intelligence and charm of the young women of Bay County.

"The Azalea Trail is as a love song to spring in Panama City," said Joyce Ann Dannecker, president of the Panama City Garden Club.

Grace Helms and Vesta Boyette brought the Azalea Trail from Mobile, Ala., to Panama City in 1967. They wanted to highlight this area's beauty and blooming azaleas as Mobile had done. Ever since then, girls between the ages of 15 and 18 who participated in the Azalea Trail competition have been judged on etiquette, poise, posture, personality and eloquence.

On average, the competition consists of 60 to 70 contestants who range from

Poise and Confidence Blossom on the Azalea Trail

BY ERICA SPIVEY

freshmen to seniors in high school. The guidelines for the competition make it clear that it isn't just about beauty. Instead, the judges emphasize characteristics that will boost a girl's self-confidence. Those who make it to the second round discuss their post-graduation plans, and those in the third round tell why they want to be named queen.

Each year, the Garden Club designates a committee to determine questions for each round. The confidence and articulateness of contestants in answering the questions influence the judges' decisions.

After the Azalea Queen is crowned, the lucky lady and her court ride around in antique convertibles to their spot on the trail. Other contestants take assigned places in yards filled with azalea blossoms. The route begins at the Garden Club and ends at the Women's Club, according to the current co-chair of the event, Sayre Steere. Specta-

tors and friends drive down the trail and see the hostesses in antebellum gowns and frilly hats, waving among the blossoms. Many past contestants agree that there is something special about being a part of Southern history and this old Panama City tradition.

The reasons for participating in the Azalea Trail are as varied as the girls themselves. Some learn about it from friends or relatives; some compete year after year. Kristin Lamagdeleine, last year's fourth runner-up, is a legacy: Her mother was involved when she was a teen, and Kristin wanted to follow in her footsteps.

"I wanted to carry out a tradition within my family and my community," she said.

Each year, the decision becomes more difficult for the judges," Steere said. The girls seem to be so self-assured and poised" she said. The judging panel usually consists of a minimum of three judges and typically includes a past Azalea Trail queen.

The payoff for the queen and the four other finalists is scholarship money from the sponsoring Panama City Garden Club. Last year, businesses and individuals donated more than \$2,000 for awards to further the education of young Bay County women.