

Girl From the Empire State

"I COME from a large family of five children, and the fact of the matter was that if one of us didn't get a good job the others couldn't go through college. I had gotten my education and my parents had helped me all they could. I trained to be a nurse at a county hospital where the tuition was next to nothing. I definitely wanted this education, but I also thought I could probably combine nursing with a modelling career—that when I graduated if I could make considerably more modelling it would be helpful to my family. So this whole idea of Miss New York was probably something I had thought of, dreamt about, all the time I was in nursing school. I did enter once when I was in school and I was runner-up. That was probably quite fortunate, because I might not have finished school if I had won and gone to California and gotten into that whirlwind—whereas now it's good fun for me."

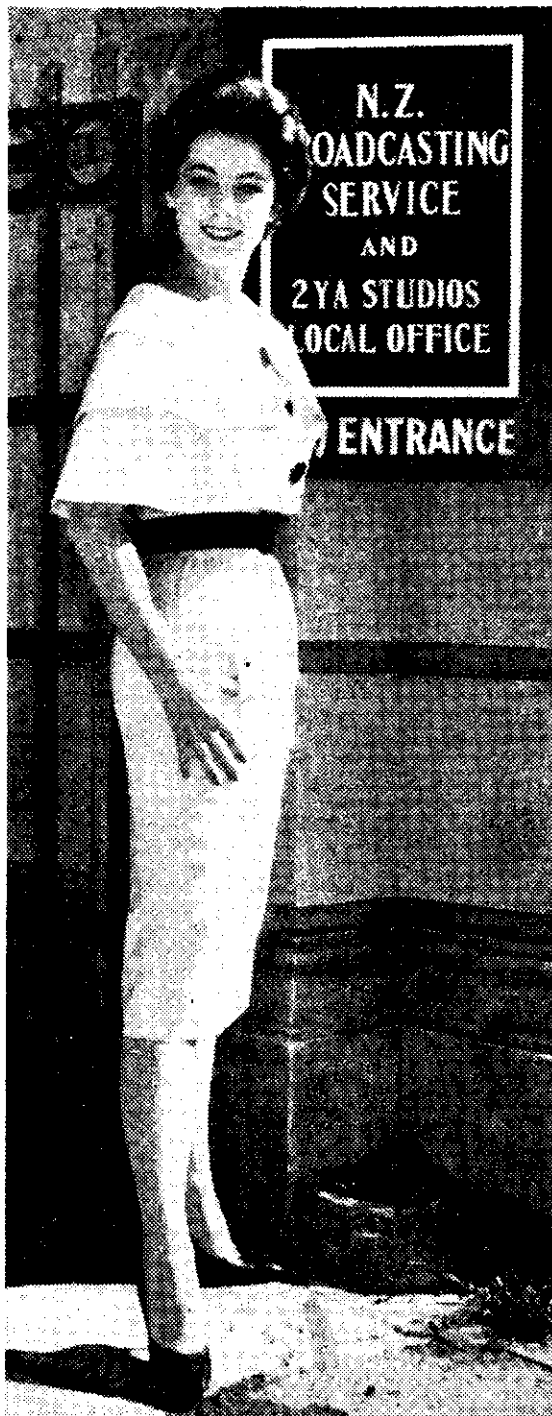
In the models' dressing room at the D.I.C. in Wellington, Arlene Nesbitt—Miss New York—told us how she became a nurse, a model and a beauty queen. As she talked Madge O'Hara moved about her, applying the make-up for Miss Nesbitt's fashion parade in an hour's time, while in the background, among the tables and racks of clothes they would wear, moved the New Zealand models who would share the show with her. For a man who knew nothing about the fashion world, an interview with Miss New York had been an alarming prospect, but from the moment she smiled a welcome, a soft-voiced young woman who is even more beautiful and charming to meet than to see on the stage, she made the job easy.

Home for Arlene Nesbitt is a small town—"a village"—on Long Island, at least an hour by train from New York. There, when she modelled bridal gowns in the city, she would rise about 7.30, "just dress and rush out of the house and mother would drive us to the station," reach the city after nine and, walking to work, get there about 9.30. Leaving work about 5 o'clock she was home about 6.30. "So it was rather a long day. It was good fun, though, because my sister modelled in the city too, so we commuted together. And a few days of the week we spent with my grandmother in Brooklyn." When the season slackened down and it was very difficult to find work, Arlene—a graduate registered nurse—would go home to work in the local hospital and do private duty.

We talked about beauty contests. They're not something, Arlene says, you just walk in and win—that's rare. A girl has to have experience behind her, maybe losing a few and realising the things she did wrong. "And I think the biggest mistake girls make is they don't smile. This was very evident at the Miss Wellington Airport preliminaries. There were so many lovely girls, but they get so frightened and so intrigued with what they're doing that they forget you can do almost anything wrong if you're smiling." But beauty contests, anyway, aren't fun at the time. "When you look back you see a lot of very worthwhile things in them, like getting to know other people and different places and ways of life. But at the time you're just so tense and so anxious that it's a drain on any girl. Once you win one—that's when the fun begins."

When Arlene recalls life back home on Long Island she speaks of a happy family and an outdoor life. Her father is a technician with Consolidated Edison in New York, but he has, besides, another job and works very hard so that the family can have what it wants. She smiles. "He's quite a dear—he's just marvellous. I've always been close to him, because he'll put things right on the line—sit down and talk objectively, whereas women I think sometimes"—a little laugh—"don't really look at the whole situation, or they take maybe a female point of view. So I've always had very good times. My parents are both very young—my mother is now 42. And they've always gotten along very well together—I still think they're very much in love—and our whole family revolves around this. The children feel wanted and loved, and there has never been any problem with us. We've just grown up as natural children and all gotten along and shared anything we had. Of course we have squabbles, every family does, but I think overall we're quite a happy, natural family. My mother has always brought us up to be one of the crowd and never made anything special of us. So I think we've been typically American." Making up this typical American family are two boys, aged seven and 11, a sister aged 14 at high school, and another, 19, in college studying to be a teacher. That was the sister Arlene modelled with. "We always double-dated and did everything together, so now it's very lonesome for me."

Living near the water, Arlene swims a great deal in summer—"I think we're rather athletic"—goes boating, and rides her bicycle, for the family all have bicycles. "We're keen on outdoors because my dad's only with us one day a week and then the family goes out to the beach together or does something like that." In the winter there's ice-skating, and long walks in the snow. Arlene remembers those walks, especially after school, as very beautiful. She spoke of the autumn, too. "We always had good athletic teams in high school, and it was always wonderful fun, especially in the fall. I think this is probably the time America has been her most beautiful for me. I miss the fall games and all the pageantry and the big parties that go with it. That was part of my whole life."



Spencer Digby photograph

Less typically American, perhaps, was Arlene's admission that though she loved the Broadway shows, at home she never spent much time going to movies. ("In Hollywood"—where she went at the time of the Miss Universe contest—"it's a different story. There you do everything.") But by the time she got home in the evenings there just wasn't that much time, and almost every weekend she spent away at the Annapolis Naval Academy. "My sister and I were both pinned to midshipmen there, so we would just hop in the car and drive five hours, and spend our weekend there going to some sporting event or to a dance."

Because she is "pretty rushed all the time," Arlene feels also that she gets more out of reading a few poems than

starting a novel and having to put it down, and she mentioned Dorothy Parker and T. S. Eliot among authors she liked. As for magazines, "I think perhaps *Time* because"—with a laugh—"this sort of fills me in. But mother subscribes to the *Saturday Evening Post* and I think the jokes are just marvellous." Television doesn't arouse her enthusiasm. "I watched one programme and that was *Men of Annapolis*, just because I had—my man there. But I don't get a great deal out of it. I enjoy maybe hour-long programmes—something you can really get into." When Arlene listens to the family hi-fi her taste leans towards the classical, but she enjoys discs made from movie tracks or plays like *Sayonara*, and her father has "quite a few of those long-playing records of Carmen Cavallaro which are just nice listening." Singers? "I think Bobby Darin. I don't, I shouldn't say, like rock 'n' roll." And she added, with a laugh, that her little sister plays her rock 'n' roll on a separate phonograph upstairs. "My father can't stand it."

In the clumsy way men will, we talked with Arlene about clothes and fashion, airing an idea or two and feeling flattered when she agreed with some of them. Did she think, for instance, that women dressed mainly to please men? "Women should dress mainly to please men, and sometimes I think they forget this." It was true, too, that men influenced women's dress. If clothes were flattering to women men liked them. Then women in turn were complimented and happy to wear them. But women should dress also in things to please themselves, pick certain colours that did something for them. Yes, there were ugly fashions too, like the sack, which everybody had to have "though I don't know whom it would flatter." Did her men friends influence her choice of clothes very much? "I would say so." And when we asked if she thought men should take an interest in what their women wear she answered, "Oh, certainly. My dad buys almost all my mother's clothes."

Arlene, who like so many New Zealanders wore a school uniform—"they're too dreadful"—thinks that while a young girl can be well-groomed and should be neat, there's no need for her to wear lipstick before about 14. "And I like make-up when it looks natural—when you don't look heavily made up," she said. "If you have the right colours you can get away with this." She doesn't agree that American women tend towards a standardised type of beauty based on a Hollywood model, and commented on a suggestion that "glamour" might have become too much of a business in the United States: "Well, then, if it is it's a pretty good business if it's improving the women and making them more attractive." As for a Hollywood influence, "What you see in the movies is not American life," she said. "I mean, this is fairy-tale business, and the clothes are just the same way. And how many people can afford these Hollywood clothes?" Was fashion only for the well-to-do? "No, I don't feel money has anything to do with it. I have worn dresses that cost me £1 and felt just as good in them because I knew they fitted me well and looked well. If you're neat in dress and hair and make-up and walk straight you can have the most inexpensive dress on and get away with it."

What was the feeling in America about the shorter skirt? "I don't know," Arlene said, "because the short skirt just

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