

The History of Seafair Royalty

In the 1940s, Seattle was a sleepy port city with a population just over 360,000. While many other smaller Washington cities had festivals to draw tourists, Seattle was without an event to call its own. In early 1950, Seattle changed that. Walter Van Camp arrived from St. Paul where he had served as director of St. Paul's highly successful Winter Carnival, and he brought with him many ideas for this new Seattle summer festival. Time was of the essence to orchestrate all that was involved for the festival to take place that August.

To start, a make-believe nautical tale was created to bring the festival to life. The Legend of Seafair perfectly captured the water carnival theme. The personalities of the legend came to be known as King Neptune, Emperor of the Ocean and King of All the Seas, Prime Minister, and Queen of the Seas along with a Royal Court, composed of two Ladies-in-Waiting, Princesses, Captain of the Guard, twelve King's Guardsmen, two Trumpeters, and Royal Pages. This Royal entourage would add to the new festival's pomp and pageantry.

Van Kamp turned to the Washington Athletic Club and its 101 Club to find the male monarchs. This group of business professionals worked to support athletics and civic projects for decades, and it was a natural for King Neptune and his Prime Minister to be selected from this illustrious group. Local businessman Victor E. Rabel served as the first King Neptune with Ray Eckmann as Prime Minister. The selection of the Queen of the Seas would take place at the Civic Auditorium, known today as the Center House. There were 20 princesses representing local communities vying for the title of Queen. The coronation was a spectacle marked by a two-hour pageant, which included elaborate scenery and regalia, King Neptune rising out of the ocean, and the enactment of the Legend of Seafair. The selection of Barbara Curtis as the first Queen of the Seas was the highlight of the program followed by the announcement of her Ladies-in-Waiting, Sylvia Montgomery and Colleen Kennedy. A group of counsellors served as judges to select the Queen.

Seafair's first festival was a success, with enthusiastic crowds attending the myriad of events, even though the majority of Seattleites did not know what the festival

was about. In 1950, publicity was a bit more difficult to achieve. Local TV consisted of only one channel, KING-TV, which aired only seven hours of programming each day. The radio community and both local newspapers embraced the new festival. Barbara Curtis fondly recalled her reign over the festival: "It was a magical time in the city, but a bit chaotic. No one knew what the



From top: Community Princesses from 1952; The Royal Boys from 1956; Opposite page: 1960 Seafair Finale
Photos by: Seafair Historical Photo





Royalty was all about. The King, Prime Minister, and I along with our entourage rode around wearing our royal attire, and we received the strangest looks. People wondered why we were dressed up for Halloween in the middle of August!"

Setting the stage for future Seafair Royals, the 1950 Royal Court represented Seattle and Seafair as spokespersons throughout the year, visiting hospitals, retirement homes, communities, and other festival across the state as well as greeting visiting dignitaries.

Lavish pageantry continued through the decade of the '50s and into the '60s. The coronation venue shifted from the Civic Auditorium to the Green Lake Aqua Theatre. Kings and Prime Ministers continued to come from the WAC's 101 Club. Their reputations and respect added to the believability of their royal roles. A panel of judges, known as the "Secret Seven," evaluated the princesses on poise, general conduct, speaking ability, and beauty.

But Seafair was not immune to societal changes. The Vietnam War, political activism, racial unrest, assassinations, the feminist movement, and the hippie movement moved Seafair off the front pages of local newspapers. Times were changing. Seattle

added professional sports teams and other big events throughout the year providing different options for the citizens of the Puget Sound.

The latter part of the '60s and '70s made way for updating all aspects of the festival including the Royalty. The Royal Court was streamlined, and the coronation took place in different locations. A panel of published judges replaced the "Secret Seven." The princesses were now evaluated on specific areas including personal interviews, academic review, community work, leadership, and eventually talent/creative expression. Callie Lynn Garcia served as the first woman of color to win the title in 1971 and opened the door for more women of color to participate. Callie was the last Seafair Queen of the Seas, as the Women's Rights Movement contributed to changing the name of Seafair Queen to Miss Seafair. In 1974, Galen Motin was the first African American to win the title of Miss Seafair, opening the door further.

The festival did not have any male rulers from 1972 to 1974. From 1975 to 1977, a King Neptune and a Miss Seafair, along with her runners-up, ruled over Seafair. Once again, the King came from the 101 Club and, beginning in 1978, the Prime Minister came from one of the five Seafair Family groups. A scholarship was added



From top left: JFK and sister Eunice, receive the key to city. Presented by Queen Midge - 1960; Princess Janice Walters Ederer, 1963; 1974 Miss Seafair, Galen Motin; Bob Hope with Seafair Queen and Clowns from 1964; 2019 Seafair Royalty – Andrea Diaz, Rich Gray, Kim Holcomb; '70s Seafair Royalty; Seafair Royalty welcome Bing Crosby to Seafair, 1959

JFK: Photo by: Seafair Historical Photo; Ederer, Motin, Bob Hope, '70s Royalty: Photos by: Seafair Historical Photo; 2019 Royalty: Photo by: Greg McCorkle – Seafair Photography Committee

to the title of the pageant in 1980, and in 1985, the scholarship program replaced the pageant.

More changes were on the horizon for the festival as it moved into the '80s and '90s. Seafair introduced a variety of affordable events which aimed at involving people of all ages and backgrounds. In 1999, Seafair celebrated its 50th Anniversary. The Aqua Follies at Green Lake came alive again for four sold-out performances. Vintage and modern hydros raced on Lake Washington. All Seafair events drew record crowds. Former Kings, Prime Ministers, and Miss Seafairs attended many of the special events including the Coronation of Breann Parriott as Miss Seafair 1999 by the first Seafair Queen, Barbara Curtis Wall.

The decade of The New Millennium brought an update to the Royalty program yet again by adding Queen Alcyone, meaning calming of the seas, to the Royal Court. After having a King and Prime Minister for 50 years, Queen Alcyone enabled Seafair to honor both a male and female that have made significant contributions in the community. The selection of Miss Seafair followed the same format through 2018.

Seafair Royalty has continued to evolve throughout the

decades to keep it relevant to the times in which we live. In 2019, the festival changed yet again, deciding to select Miss Seafair based on her academic abilities, public speaking skills, and community service with nominations coming from local universities. Andrea Diaz, Miss Seafair, joined Rich Gray as King Neptune, and Kim Holcomb as Queen Alcyone, as the 70th Seafair Court. In the future, a new program will emerge, supporting local young women. The Women in Leadership Program will provide support, encouragement, and leadership opportunities for local young women in college. This new program, being developed by local female leaders, will provide networking and real-world experience to help young women, including minorities and those who would not otherwise have access to such opportunities, achieve at a high level and prepare to be women leaders in the workforce.

Throughout seven decades, each Seafair Royal Court accepted the role in a slightly different way, but all served to celebrate the tradition of Seafair and the community spirit of greater Seattle. Though 2020 will not see a Seafair Royal Court, Royalty will always be an important part of the history, and future, of Seafair.

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