



Jeanne Robertson

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The 80th anniversary of the Miss North Carolina Pageant will be on statewide TV on Saturday, June 24. (No, I didn't compete in the first one. Y'all are so funny.) That's more than two months from now and certainly not on most of our "radars" at this point or for some, ever. I understand. Just so you know, though, around the state young women are working their heads off to be ready to compete in June. They're fine-tuning their respective talents, studying world events for their interviews and walking in heels with sheets tied around their waists, dragging on the floor like evening gowns. Having "been there," I strongly suggest they also bone up on etiquette.

The week after I won the title of Miss North Carolina in the last millennium (54 years ago) two women with the Pageant began to work with me to get me ready for the Miss America Pageant. Or, as many say in the south, the Miss "Ahmurica" Pageant. They said that I was the most raw material they had ever started with. (I told Mother that and in horror she said, "They ended a sentence with a preposition?")

It was too late to do much about my talent. I knew four chords on the banjo, ukulele and accompanied myself as I sang an original song. Some news reports listed it as comedy, but I was singing the best I could. There wasn't enough time to switch to playing something like the harp and anyway, while it might have scored points, no one had ever seen a singing harpist. The two women put talent aside and hoped the judges in Atlantic City might nod off when I was performing. (They also discussed causing a diversion in the lobby at that time.) Instead, we worked on walking and talking and similar things that they believed needed improvement and were "doable" within the time frame. In the middle of all this training they accompanied me to a reception in my honor after which they quickly turned their attention toward improving my etiquette skills to "cover all the bases."

The reception occurred soon after I was crowned Miss NC in Greensboro. I remember the occasion as though it were yesterday. It was the first time I met cheese surrounded by thick, red plastic.

As the guest of honor at the reception I was smiling and conversing with a small group when a member of the wait staff extended a tray in my direction offering some type of hors d'oeuvre shaped in small red triangle wedges. It looked like cheese with maybe a tomato around it or pimento. It didn't dawn on me the red part was thick plastic. I simply nodded "Thank you, I picked up one of the red "whatevers" around cheese and placed it on my little plate. Minutes later, I nonchalantly put it in my mouth, thick red plastic cover and all, and started trying to chew. On the first bite the elastic stuck to my top teeth and embedded in the bottom ones, holding them together almost shut tight. If I tried to open my mouth, I feared my teeth would be pulled out of my gums. That would not do. Mama and Daddy had spent a lot of hard-earned money on braces for those teeth. I went to work, managed to chew off a small

piece of the plastic and stored it my right cheek. After repeating the process over and over, I looked like a squirrel with nuts in bulging cheeks and a crown on its head. Being young and determined to hide this sort of thing, I slowly chewed away while trying to appear interested in the conversation, smiling from behind my locked jaws. I was thinking, "This is tough cheese." Others must have been thinking, "She's going to the Miss America Pageant?" A kind woman slipped me a napkin and whispered, "Don't swallow it."

After that reception the powers-that-be decided to go over a few areas other than walking and world events. "Etiquette school" moved to the top of my daily list. This bothered my mother because she thought she had done a good job teaching me about such things. When she heard about the plastic, though, she sighed and told the women, "Do what you can." Being nice, they told Mother it was best to "cover all the bases." In matter of weeks, I learned more etiquette than I ever cared to know. It wasn't enough.

It is not that growing up in the wonderful small town of Graham, NC I had never heard of a finger bowl. I had heard the term "finger bowl" somewhere, some time. It was just that we didn't use them every day in Graham. To be truthful, at that point in my life I had never seen a finger bowl. I guess if I had never thought about it, I would have thought a finger bowl would be about the size of somewhere to put your fingers. I would have never dreamed it's a bowl 4-5 inches across that's filled with warm water so people can wash their fingers at the table during very formal meals. Quite frankly, in Graham High School Home Economics, we were taught not to eat with our fingers. (If we had done so, Aunt Bea would come out of nowhere and hit us on the hand with her spoon.) Clearly students were getting away with this in other areas of the state. I certainly wouldn't have thought this bowl would have a lemon in the water to help cut the grease off one's fingers.

Several weeks after this etiquette push began, I was back in Greensboro as the guest of honor at a formal banquet at a country club. As the honoree I sat at the center of the head table with people to my right and left. As soon as I saw the situation, my head started working like a computer and computers hadn't been invented. Etiquette. Etiquette. They taught me something about this exact situation. Now what was it? It came to me. I had been taught that as the guest of honor and the person at the center of the head table, everyone would wait until I began to eat before they started.

As mentioned, it was a formal banquet. During the first food courses served I tried out what I had learned. Each time a course was brought in, I sat right there at the center of the head table smiling my polite smile and chitchatting, but I was watching the rest of the table out of the corners of my eyes. You would have been proud of me at that point. With each served course, I smiled at the people on my left and when all were served, I picked up the correct utensils and started eating. Sure

enough, the others at the head table then followed suit. The women helping me were correct! Everything clicked along smoothly through an assortment of courses, and then, my Graham stomach told me it was time for dessert. This is where you wouldn't have been as proud.

At that point, the waiter brought in a bowl about five inches wide and put it right down in front of me. Well, for Pete's sake. The liquid in the bowl looked like water to me, but it had a lemon floating around in there. I thought to myself this must be some new type lemon dessert.

I smiled patiently and watched while they served the people on my right. Then I turned my head and smiled my pageant smile while they served the people on my left. And when everyone at the head table was served, I picked up my spoon and dove right in.

Three people at the head table picked up their spoons and dove into their finger bowls too. I've always wondered if they were as clueless as I or were trying to make me feel better. After several spoonfuls, I finally saw others washing their fingers. It hit me and I froze, spoon in my mouth. They didn't say anything in etiquette school about how to delicately get a spoon out of your mouth and back in place on the tablecloth.

My career as a professional speaker for now fifty-four years has afforded me the opportunity to attend literally thousands of meal events. In all my years of travel, I have encountered only one other finger bowl. It was at The Greenbrier in West Virginia. I almost fell asleep before I was introduced to speak. They served an eight - not a seven - but an eight-course meal. At one point I remember thinking the next time they brought in food in it would be bacon and eggs.

Contestants. You've got a little more than two months to be ready for this year's Miss North Carolina Pageant. It's crunch time. Please remember that many of us out here truly know how hard you're working. I'm one of them. That lets me offer a piece of advice. Cover all your bases. When you're on those treadmills, slip an etiquette book on the shelf in front of you and read. It might help you get to the Miss "Ahmurica" Pageant. Good luck!

