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A Miss Subways turns 85



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Not all the celebrations of the nation's 250th anniversary this week will feature people in hooped gowns or three-cornered hats. This morning there will be a reunion of women who won the city's Miss Subways contest, back in the day.

The organizer is the restaurateur Ellen Hart, who had a moment of fame as a Miss Subways in 1959 and wants to celebrate her birthday (a little late) as well as the nation's (a little early). She turned 85 last Saturday. She expects about 10 other Miss Subways to attend the gathering today.

The Miss Subways contest ran from 1941 — by coincidence the year in which she was born — until the mid-1970s. In the 1980s, when she arranged the first Miss Subways reunion, an official from a company that sold subway advertising said that the contest had lost social significance.

But back to 1959. “I went to Jamaica High School, and they all suggested that I should enter the contest,” Hart said. “At the time, I looked like Elizabeth Taylor. See my picture over there?” She was sitting at a corner table in her restaurant, Ellen’s Stardust Diner on Broadway, where Miss Subways posters and photos line the walls.

“It wasn’t a modeling contest,” she said. “I just wanted to be on Broadway. I wanted to be a singer. You know, a famous singer.” She got to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at several Knicks and Rangers games and performed in bungalow colonies in Rockland County.

“Once in a while” during her time as Miss Subways, “somebody would recognize me” when she rode into Manhattan. “Not always,” she said, “but once in a while, and that was a thrill.”

The fare then was 15 cents — \$1.74 in today’s dollars, or 71 percent less than the current \$3 fare. One of Mayor Zohran Mamdani’s campaign promises last year was to make buses free. What about subways?

Hart said felt bad for people who struggle to “get their money together for a subway or a bus.”

“It’s very hard to make it in the city,” she said. “The prices of groceries are up. You know, gas is up. Everything is up, and it’s really difficult.”