

Scandal boosts pageant's appeal

By Evan Schuman
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ATLANTIC CITY — The scandal surrounding the first resignation of a Miss America is expected to increase the number of viewers watching the pageant on television tomorrow night.

Commercial sponsors say they anticipate as many as 35 percent more viewers to watch the show this year. Seventy-five million Americans saw Vanessa Williams crowned last year.

Pageant officials say they want to put the Vanessa Williams incident behind them as quickly as possible. To accomplish it, they hope to stage a flawless 1984 show.

DISASTER STRUCK in July when Miss America officials were told that Ms. Williams had posed nude for sexually explicit photographs which were later published in Penthouse magazine. The former Miss New York — and the pageant's first black title-holder — stepped down three days after the news struck.

Among the 51 pageant contestants vying for the 1985 crown and the \$25,000 scholarship that goes with it, the main topic of discussion has been what young girls would have thought if Ms. Williams had continued as queen.

Some contestants said they believe Ms. Williams may have tarnished the pageant.

This year's Miss Washington, Rebecca Jane Wood, said:

"AS STATE queens, we get a great deal of looking up in awe from little girls and children and our public. Multiply that by a thousand and that's what Miss America receives. I think she has a responsibility to all those children and people who do look up to you with a great deal of respect."

Four leading corporate sponsors are staying with the pageant.

Donald Osell last year persuaded Pillsbury Co. to spend \$840,000 to advertise on the show. Osell, Pillsbury's vice-president in charge of marketing, said he thought in terms of the pageant's long-standing reputation for delivering clean, wholesome family entertainment and good ratings to viewers 24 to 49 years old.

Albert Marks Jr., the pageant's chairman of the board, said he had to

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talk advertisers into staying with the event this year. "I cannot but believe that the continuing publicity would prompt a much larger viewership than normal," Marks said.

OSELL WAS not alone among pageant officials and contestants who were trying to assess whether the pageant's all-American girl-next-door image had been irrevocably injured by the well-publicized incident.

"At first, we were hurt," said Dick Welsh, the pageant's television consultant. "I think we were really scared that it was going to have some long-lasting effect on the pageant."

Lisa Johnson, the 22-year-old Miss Maine, said she would have fired Ms. Williams.

"I WOULD have to, to maintain the pristine image that influenced me when I was five years old. To preserve this tradition, it would be a must," Ms. Johnson said.

Debbie Nakanelua, Miss Hawaii, said she believes all pageant contestants must lead spotless lives to give youngsters someone to idolize and emulate.

But since girls age eight to 16 account for only a small portion of the viewing audience, television and advertising executives are more concerned about the feelings of women between the ages of 24 and 55 who make up about 60 percent of the pageant's viewers.

Controversy has been fueled with news of a second batch of photos of Ms. Williams to be published in December.

THE POTENTIAL for controversy isn't settled this year either. Penthouse publisher Bob Guccione claims to have 350 nude color slides of at least one current Miss America contestant. Even if Penthouse magazine publishes nude pictures of the winner of this year's Miss America Pageant, she may be allowed to serve her reign, pageant chairman Marks insisted yesterday.