



We Created a Whole Industry

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Gussie Nell Davis is a perfectionist. Even as a child, "...if I skated, I skated better than anyone on my block. I tried to do better than anyone else. It is as easy to do something well as to do something messy," she said in an interview at her Kilgore home.

The desire for excellence stood her well in a lifelong career as founder and director of the world-famous Kilgore College Rangerettes. All of Texas was to honor her as a creator of a new art form, the dance/drill team, with her induction into the Texas Woman's Hall of Fame in March 1990. "I was very excited. It was quite an honor, honey," Miss Davis said with a sparkle in her eyes. "It was a complete surprise." "My photograph, the one that's at the museum (Rangerette Showcase Museum) and photographs of the other honorees, were on display for a week in the Capitol Rotunda in Austin." Several friends accompanied her to the festivities, including Anne Dean Turk, Virginia Bolt and Peggy and Howard Coghlan. "Peggy's husband escorted me to the governor's reception," she said. "They're such good friends to me." Mrs. Coghlan, a former Rangerette, was Davis' assistant in the early '50s. A buoyant Miss Davis recalled her many years as Rangerette "Boss lady" with great satisfaction: "I never married, because I knew I would want to devote as much time to a husband as I did to Rangerettes and I couldn't do both. I would say to my suitors, 'just give me one more year with the Rangerettes,' but I never really wanted to give it up."

"I almost got married right after I came here, but I just didn't have time. Oh, I had some good-looking ones! Gorgeous men. But I really enjoyed the Rangerette trips, the publicity, the notoriety. It was glamorous!" "I've met so many people, most of them nice. People who are secure, successful in what they do, are nice to you. Those that aren't--you just smile and go along as nicely as you can."

When I retired, I had taught Rangerettes for 40 years. With a performing group like the Rangerettes, you're in tension all the time. Doing, creating, pushing people all the time. I do not know how I did it." But she did it. And, oh, how she did it. Little did Miss Davis realize when she created and directed the "Flaming Flashes" in 1928 at Greenville High School, Greenville, Texas, that she had planted the seeds of a phenomenon which would grow into the world-famous Kilgore College Rangerettes. The Flashes began as sort of a drum and bugle corps, Davis-style. She dressed her girls in the fashion of the day, ankle-length white skirts, had them wear boots to balance the bulkiness of the skirts, and designed short red jackets to give the uniform "snap." They also wore military-style caps with feather plumes.



At practice one afternoon, "I saw a boy standing by the field, watching us. Something he had in his hand kept flashing, reflecting the sun. When I went over to him, I found he had a baton." "That's were I got the idea to have lightweight wooden batons made for the Flashes, since there was no place to buy such a thing back then." As the Flashes became more proficient and Miss Davis more imaginative with her halftime performances, word began to spread around the state about her



drill team. "I'd had the Flashes for 10-1/2 years when I got a call from B.E. Masters, president of Kilgore College. He heard about me from mutual friends--parents of a boy I was dating. "

" He told me he wanted something to keep the fans in the seats at halftime of the football games, and I thought the college needed a first-rate girls' organization to attract more women to the campus."

"I came to Kilgore in the fall of 1939. One of my first friends was Mrs. Earl (Vinnie) Ford. I practically lived at Vinnie's house back then and we began to talk about a costume for the drill team." "She had a son, Earl Jr., who was in the band at Kilgore College and took art from Gustav Ivan, the college's first art teacher. Mr. Ivan's wife, Martha, taught in the English department." Earl Jr. designed the Rangerette uniform at home, with his mother and me hanging over his shoulder."

"First we had grey and blue. Then we changed it to a white blouse with a blue skirt, but that just didn't work. The next time I went over to his house, Earl had put a red blouse with the skirt, and I knew that was it!" Ford's design was so perfect for the Rangerettes very little has been altered from the original costume. As fashions changed, the hemline was raised above the knee, and some other variations have been made, such as adding 'Alice Lon' petticoats to make the short skirts stand out. Miss Davis taught health education courses at the college, and it was from those classes she gleaned the first group of Rangerettes. "At first, I had to teach the girls to dance. None of them had had years and years of lessons like the girls now. Most of the early Rangerettes had never been out of their home towns."

"We didn't just teach them to dance, we taught them to be poised, how to walk correctly, remember names. We worked on clothes. A Rangerette will not remember the routines, but will always remember the manners."

"I also would tell them to be careful who they dated--not to go out with a deadbeat. Find out a man's potential before you marry him. Find out if he'll be successful. I told them to see their prospective husbands in a different environment than college life before settling down with him." Early in the spring of 1940, she was surprised to find a former boyfriend selling athletic equipment to the coaches at Kilgore College.

"We went to dinner at Bob's hotel coffee shop downtown. He told me he had a meeting after dinner to try to sell baseballs to the Kilgore Baseball club and I had planned to go home when his meeting started."

"As we were talking, he pointed across the room and said 'see that man? He's the one I'm meeting with.'" Miss Davis' friend made introductions, and the man, L. N. Crim, pulled a chair up to the couple's table. Crim invited Miss Davis to join them upstairs in the hotel and overrode her objections when she demurred that it wasn't proper for a woman to go upstairs to a hotel room with two men, even for a business meeting. "Somehow the subject of fireworks came up. I don't know where I got the idea, but I wanted fireworks with the Rangerettes' first performance. I had no idea that L.N. Crim had fireworks." Miss Davis' imagination captured Crim's interest -- he recognized an opportunity to promote a town he loved, Kilgore, and indulge a favorite pastime, fireworks. Crim had Knox Lamb, manager of his movie theater, design a special display. "Knox was fantastic! He was artistic and funny," said Miss Davis. His sparkling red, white, and blue explosions spelled out "Rangerettes" in script. Lamb was later to

fashion the well-known electric 'SMILE' sign for the Rangerettes' practice gym. All Crim ever said to Miss Davis about the premier performance of her girls was, "We'll go to Monroe next week."

"I knew then that we had something," she said. "We always had fireworks from then on, until the war. You couldn't get the materials during the war. We had a football team the first three years I was at the college.



The next three years (the war years) we didn't. During that time, the Rangerettes danced a lot for the service men. We'd go over to Camp Fannin in Tyler. We also helped sell war bonds." Miss Davis began to incorporate more and more dance steps into her choreography, as dance was a special love of hers. She also played her own accompaniment for Rangerette rehearsals, something she was well able to do. "My mother raised me to be a concert pianist. That just wasn't what I wanted to do. But all those piano lessons did help me get things done in phases when I began to create routines for the Rangerettes." Miss Davis says there are Rangerettes she can still recognize better from the back as a result of her years on the piano bench. "I had to watch them over my shoulder as they practiced. Mistakes really showed from the back, anyway."

"You know the officers also twirled batons through 1947 or 1948." "I studied dance while I had the Flashes, but very quietly, as dancing was sort of frowned on back then."

"After I came to Kilgore, I continued my dance study with Denard Haden, who had a dance school in Nacogdoches. Denard was so talented. He was the most creative person I've ever known."

"He'd been principal of a high school for 3-1/2 years before he finally made up his mind that what he really wanted to do was teach dancing. He resigned the job by mail! Never went back, once he decided."

After the war, when the Rangerettes and Ranger Band resumed their halftime appearances, Miss Davis saw the need for additional choreography. Bill Miller, a Kilgore College student from Gaston, first assisted Miss Davis as a part-time choreographer. "Bill created one of the routines for our 1946 Rose Bowl performance. I did the drill, he did the other routine. He was only with us for about two years. I believe he went on to Dallas. "Still," Miss Davis said "I felt like it was looking so much like me. We need some help." In 1947, she recalled, Haden was added to the Kilgore College Faculty. "Denard would come over during the week and teach me new routines. Then I would teach them to the girls, or he would work with them. He thought of the most wonderful things!" Miss Davis, needing to supplement the Rangerettes funds ("we had the smallest budget on the campus, honey!") remembered how successful the parents booster clubs had been in Greenville High School. "They'd plan a little show, and sell sandwiches and drinks in the gymnasium. It was \$1.00 at tables set up on the floor, but only \$.50 if you ate your sandwich in the bleachers."

"Anyway, I went to the president and asked if we could do something similar. He agreed, and that's how the Ranger Roundup (a campus-wide fund-raiser and variety show) got started."

"The second year we didn't sell sandwiches, because no nobody wanted to make them! The girls would decorate the gym until you couldn't see the bleachers. We had an orchestra, and they dressed in evening dresses." That's when sororities really meant something, and if the girls missed the bus to a performance,

they could hitchhike without fear." The fund-raiser evolved into a production called the Ranger Roundup which grew more elaborate each year, until it became unmanageable.

"I remember one year L' Louise Lacy Graham, the art department head, designed an 18-foot tall set of New Orleans' buildings," Miss Davis said. "She drew it in such perfect perspective one of the college officials became concerned for the safety of the performers. He thought the balconies were real."

"L' Louise was one of my best friends. She was so talented, and designed so many of our props. One year she had made huge, beautiful red roses for our routine to 'Everything's Coming Up Roses.' I helped make big green petals for the stems." "I was in the press box watching the performance. The girls made a circle, bent down with the roses hidden. The bottom row was on its knees, the next row a little higher, the next row above that. The girls would gradually lift the roses and from the stands it looked like a garden blooming." "Just as the very last rose bloomed, L' Louise, who was sitting in the bleachers, died of a cerebral hemorrhage. I've never gotten over that. I never will."

Later, an annual Rangerette show, "The Review," was resumed, performed on the football field. Included in the program were routines used during the year, and also some new dances. "Deanna Bolton called and asked to have her twirlers perform on the Review," said Miss Davis. "I was more than happy to have them, because it gave my girls a break during the show."



"We also had the Campus Beauties. This was in the early days of rock'n'roll-- nobody had heard such about it. One year I had a flat bed trailer with an orchestra brought in and they played rock'n'roll music for the Review."

"Once we had to move to the baseball diamond when the football field was resodded. It was very hard to make our routines work in that diamond shape!" "I tried going back and forth between the auditorium and the football stadium, but finally settled on the auditorium. That's when the show became the Rangerette Revels."

Miss Davis had an accompanist by this time, Mrs. Chris Stewart. "Mrs. Stewart played for Denard's dance classes for many years, until he began to use record in his studio. That's when I was able to hire her to play for the Rangerettes. She was the sweetest, prettiest thing!"

"She was a Yankee from Illinois moved here, loved it and never went back. Mrs. Stewart was with us for so many years, and chaperoned many of our trips." Miss Davis only missed one of the many fabulous performing tours during her tenure as Rangerette director: "I'd been so sick, I couldn't go on the Romanian trip. The girls came and sang under my window before they left. It made me want to go no matter what my doctor said!"

" You know, we performed more places, danced more movies, had so many invitations. You had to promote yourself to get these bookings, and there were so many good Kilgore friends who always supported us." "Oh, there was Charlie (Charles K.) Devall, (former Kilgore News Herald publisher) and

his wife, Lyde. They went on every trip with us, paid their own way, and would always contact the wire services to make sure we had coverage wherever we performed."

"Charlie realized the Rangerettes were an asset to Kilgore and he'd make sure there was a photographer waiting when we'd arrive somewhere." "He helped with some of our funding. When we went to Washington for president Eisenhower's inauguration, he made a list of every wealthy person who could help, and made sure they were contacted to be donors for the Rangerettes' expenses."

"He'd send tear sheets of our newspaper coverage everywhere we were to perform. To the senior bowl, the Rose Bowl, the Cotton Bowl. He kept our name in front of people, which is what you have to do if you want to get bookings."

"Charlie Devall kept us in the Cotton Bowl these 35 years. You know, he's the one who put the 'go' in Kilgore! A Kilgore man is the reason we got our very first Cotton Bowl date in 1949. He went hunting with a Cotton Bowl board member, showed him pictures of us, and the man went back home and redid the whole halftime show to get us in it."



Miss Davis not only created halftime entertainment, she spawned a whole new business with her Rangerettes. "We had the first drill team school in the world (American Dance/Drill Team School®), at Southern Methodist University. We teach all the high school drill teams there routines for the next year. And do you know, there are more than 100 vendors who set up booths at our camp each summer, selling drill team supplies? When I started Rangerettes, there was nothing like that. You couldn't buy those things back then. We created a whole industry. Miss Davis created more than an industry; she created a way of life--the Rangerette way.

Like the Rangerettes Forever say, "Once a Rangerette, always a Rangerette." And, despite the perfectionist that she is, Gussie Nell

Davis never quite fulfilled her directive from Kilgore College president B.E. Masters. She never did get the football fans to stay in their seats during halftime. Her Rangerettes have kept them on their feet, cheering, for 50 years.

Gussie Nell Davis Said:

"All I ever really wanted was to dance on the stage. But I grew up in Farmersville, and in Farmersville, if you danced you were thrown out of church -- any church." 1975 interview

"I considered marriage, but I always needed just one more year for the Rangerettes, then one more." 1970 Southern Living

"It is as easy to do something well as it is to do something messy." 1990 Ranger Yearbook

"You know, Honey, there's a little ham in all of us. Most people just don't get their chance to let it out. The girls come to me, and for two years they get the chance to perform all the things in the spotlight they dreamed about." 1987 interview

"There's nobody in the world, anywhere on a stage, in television, or on a football field or on a street that does routines as precise and as perfect as we do. Nobody! I'm positive of that. They don't make mistakes!"
1979 interview

"I have a wheel inside me that never runs down, never gets tired. I work hard--not because I have to --but because I want to. But then its not work if you like what you're doing. I hold very high standards for my girls. I want them to look, think, act and dress like ladies. I want them to complete their education and to work as hard at whatever they choose to do in life as they have at being Rangerettes. Perhaps that's been the secret of our success." 1975 interview

"When I was little my mother said, "If you will just sit still for five minutes, I will give you a nickel." That was the hardest thing I ever did. I haven't sat very still the rest of my life. " 1987 interview

I'm not fussing at those girls, I'm just loud. They can hear me all the way across the Cotton Bowl. They can hear me from the press box at Soldier Field." 1974 Sports Illustrated

"We have a thing -- beauty knows no pain, we keep saying." 1969 Dallas Morning News

"Not one thing has changed about the uniform except the skirt. It ha gotten shorter and shorter and shorter and I just wonder if someday it might end up with a ruffle around the waist." 1987 interview

"There's a feeling that comes from inside of you with good posture." 1987 interview

"Show me how beautiful you are. Show it from the inside." 1987 interview

"If you can't be the best, you should get out. We haven't lost a halftime in 20 years." 1958 Dallas Morning News

"I would never dream that it (Rangerettes) would end up as big as this. It's just wonderful." 1962 ,Kilgore

"I was frightened during the first performance. I didn't know if I had a job after the game." 1964 ,Kilgore

"When they leave Kilgore College they forget their routines, but other things they learn here they take with them." 1964 Dallas Morning News

"When they make a mistake it nearly kills me. It's as if I'd made the mistake myself." 1966, Dallas

"I was afraid they would make fun of us there in California, so near Hollywood. But as it turned out, California had never seen anything like our group." 1966, Ft. Worth Press

"When they are out there on that field, they're not Rangerettes-they're me. And I have to be the best. Perfection is the key word, and nothing short of it will do. If you can't kick you can't get in."



"Our skirts for the original uniform were two inches above the knees. I can't believe we were so daring. " People

"They are dependable. They learn discipline, which we can't work without. They learn to dress properly and how to present a good appearance. They learn good posture, but there are two things I can't do anything about -- hair and short dresses." Kilgore News Herald

"On the field, I urge them to be devils, flashing and prissy, but the moment they march off -- the sweetest of sweet young ladies." 1973, Shreveport Times"

Never settle for less than perfect. Just remember who you are. You're a Rangerette." 1987 interview

"I can spot a phony smile a mile away. I can spot one ten miles away." Dallas Morning News

"Why does a girl really want to be a Rangerette? Because she knows it's the first organization of its kind and the best, I hope. All others are copies. We blazed the trail, set the pace." 1971, Dallas Morning News

