

HERE'S TO GUSSIE NELL

by Keith Whitmire sports editor of The Galveston County Daily News.

The first lady of halftime shows passed away Monday. Gussie Nell Davis, the inventor of the all-girl drill team, died in her sleep at the age of 87.

Every drill team in every high school in Texas owes a debt to Gussie Nell. Drill teams aren't exactly a sport, but they have become synonymous with high school football in this state.

Gussie Nell created the world-famous Kilgore Rangerettes in 1940. Before that, there were no drill teams. There also weren't many athletic opportunities for young women, other than cheerleading.



As the legend goes, in the pre-drill team days much of the crowd simply left the stadium during halftime. Particularly absent were the men who wanted to sip something other than soda pop. By the time the second half started, things could get a little unruly. Especially if the home team was losing and Billy Joe Bob's son wasn't playing.

Gussie Nell was asked to create some kind of halftime activity to keep the crowds interested. It may not have been her intent, but what better way to keep a man's attention than pretty girls in short skirts?

The women got something out of it, too. They got to belong to an elite, disciplined group, just like the football players did. And the mothers could brag on their drill team daughters the way the fathers could boast of their football-playing sons.

Anyway, Gussie Nell took her idea from the high school ranks to Kilgore College and a legend was born. For 53 years the Rangerettes have entertained crowds and represented the state of Texas all over the world. There's even a Rangerettes museum on campus. I've been to it, and it's a must-see if you are ever in that part of East Texas.

The Rangerettes even have their rivals, the Tyler Junior College Apache Belles. Don't ever invite a Rangerette and an Apache Belle to the same party. And if you do, don't ever ask them which group was better. A high kick contest could break out on the spot.

Although junior college drill teams are the thing in that part of the Piney Woods, the drill team idea never really took hold at the college level. But in Texas, you can't have a high school football team without a drill team. It's a state law.

Well, you can try. There's a wealthy high school near where I grew up, that went without a drill team for decades. The rich girls just couldn't lower themselves to the discipline of precision marching.

About 10 years ago a drill team was started anyway. Now every girl wants to be on the drill team. The die-hard high school football followers consider drill teams a distraction, but I would like to see how big the crowds would be if you took away the halftime shows.

Yes, there's a lot of time and money put into drill teams these days. Nobody leaves a halftime to drink anymore. They get out their camcorders instead.