



TEXAS WOMEN

a book written by Richard Pruitt and David Woo

"Gussie Nell Davis, the 77 year old founder and retired director of the Kilgore Rangerettes Drill Team, has the distinction of being the oldest woman in the book. Her picture was taken in several different settings. The last one was in the Rangerette Showcase. On a whim, David asked her to do a high kick while she precariously stood on a narrow stage. Without hesitation, up went her leg and the photographer snapped the portrait that is in the book."

Thousands of women on drill teams around the world can thank a daring former Kilgore Junior College instructor for having the courage to introduce the popular dance form. In 1940, Gussie Nell Davis was instructed by the college president to find a way to keep people in their seats during halftime at the football games. He also wanted her to attract more women to the school because coeds were outnumbered by men six to one.

She first suggested a drum and bugle corps, similar to the one she headed during her 10 years at Greenville High School. The president turned that idea down. Then she remembered the dancers she had seen in California while attending UCLA and decided to introduce 48 women doing synchronized dance routines. Because Kilgore was such a cosmopolitan town, she dared to dress the women in somewhat risqué short skirts. "I was really a devil," she says, describing how she decided that the skirt length would be two inches above the knee.

Gussie Nell describes how she was literally shaking the first time the drill team performed at a game. She didn't know if she would be applauded or run out of town. The claps and cheers at the conclusion signaled approval, marking the beginning of what she calls an "art form" introduced around the world.

The Kilgore Rangerettes served as unofficial state "ambassadors" as they did their high kicks and dances in the coldest of bowl games and received the warmest of receptions while performing everywhere from The Ed Sullivan Show to President Eisenhower's inauguration.

Gussie Nell took personal satisfaction when the women performed well because it gave her an opportunity to live out her unfulfilled fantasy of being a professional dancer. She didn't get to because her mother was determined that she would become a concert pianist. The first time Gussie Nell ever defied this wish was when she was in college and switched her major from music to physical education.

Later when the Rangerettes performed, she says, "If they were good, I felt like I was a success. If they made a mistake, I felt like I had made it."

After 51 years of teaching, Gussie Nell retired in May 1979 and didn't look back. "When I got through, that was it. I had gotten up every morning at 6 o'clock and worked on Saturdays when we had ball games. When I quit, I quit. I think that's enough."

