Education Support

American Dance

Queen of the High Kickers

by Audrey Title for The Pioneer (TWU) April/May 1979

"Retire v: To depart, withdraw – as from business or public life; retreat, take out of active service, take out of circulation. . ."

Gussie Nell Davis (class of '29), one of Texas' most colorful women, has too much of an on-stage personality to do any of the above in May, 1979. She will, however, change stages. Forty years after she fielded the world's first dance/drill team, Miss Gussie Nell is movin' on.

As President of American Drill Team School, she will participate in conducting summer camps across the continent. As the blithe spirit behind the Rangerette Showcase, a museum-like exhibit dedicated to her at Kilgore College, she will, doubtless, greet visitors and those graduate physical education students who use it for research.

How the Rangerettes and Gussie Nell Davis came to be synonymous is part of her very special story. Mother Davis groomed her youngest daughter to become a concert pianist. The 15 year old high school graduate had been reared like a Dresden doll by her parents and three elder sisters. Music was deeply ingrained in the petite student when she discovered the Dance Division, Physical Education Department, College of Industrial Arts in Denton. From that instant it was flashing feet, rather than flashing fingers, for Gussie Nell.

"In those days, nice East Texas girls didn't dance, so we used other names such as folk games or rhythms," she laughs.

The Farmersville, Texas, native earned her baccalaureate degree at Texas Woman's University when she was 19, then was sent immediately to live with a sister in California for a year because her parents considered her too young to work. She came back with a vengeance, founding the Flaming Flashes of Greenville High School.

From 1928 to 1939 Gussie Nell's pep squad concepts grew from wooden sticks for baton twirling to a drum and bugle corps (after she learned to play each instrument) with military marching maneuvers. Finally, the dancer within her conceived the idea of dancers using the field as a stage–combining dance, drama, fanfare and flourish.

In 1939 she was lured to Kilgore College in East Texas by President B.E. Masters' triple challenge: 1) Through a girl's drill team she was to bring more girls to college and equalize the boy-girl ratio that was then 6 to 1; 2) She was to give girls an opportunity for physical activity; 3) She had to produce a show good enough to keep fans in their seats during the halftime. She did all three, and is still keeping fans glued to their seats during halftime, both in any stadium where the Rangerettes appear and on national television.

Today, there are dance/drill teams behind practically every field house in America. But for their first 12 years the Kilgore Rangerettes had no imitators. Girls' drill team training for college credit is not unusual today either. Again, Gussie Nell pioneered the way.

This year finds incomparable Miss Davis quite used to imitators. When the Rangerettes took the field for the first time, the lights went out and fireworks spelled out their name–the feminine version of the name of the Ranger Band and the name of the athletic team. She coined the name and now laughs heartily at "ettes" being used at the end of many words.

"When the fireworks quit burning, the lights went on, and Honey– there was silence," she told Dallas Morning News reporter Ann Atterbury. "When they found their hands, they clapped and cheered, and clapped and cheered some more....!"

About applause, she says, "Applause may be with your hands, or with your voice, or with your eyes. Everybody likes applause. It's praise of a kind. I like it, too!"

There were always 48 Rangerettes. Why four dozen? Gussie Nell says it's because that is a workable number. Forty-eight girls can fill in the field, don't require a lot of costumes, are divisible into two dance/drill teams–or four for presentation purposes–and you can take all 48 on just two buses.

April 21-22, 1979, marked homecoming for Rangerettes of the past 39 years and a tremendous occasion for the diminutive lady "who barks like a drill sergeant at rehearsals and rhapsodizes over the perfect performances of her beloved 'children.'" A reception in her honor followed meetings of each year's line of Rangerettes in which they contributed items for the Showcase.

Housing the trophies, plaques, awards, press clippings, cover photos and memorabilia of almost 40 years of the Rangerettes, the Showcase also will include a small theater where the visitors may view the National Broadcasting Company film "Beauty Knows No Pain," shown recently in New York's Museum of Fine Arts, or the Rangerettes on CBS's Sixty Minutes or on Dave Garroway's Wide, Wide World. There, too, will be film clips of their performances in Venezuela, Hong Kong and the Far East and in Romania.

Gussie Nell Davis' place in physical education history is assured. She is included in Who's Who in America, has a girls' residence hall named in her honor and is the recipient of the Cotton Bowl's Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Award. This International Civitan Citizenship Award winner of 1969 was national headliner of Women in

Communications, Inc., in 1973, and earned the Business and Professional Women's Club Award for 1977.

In 1978 Texas Woman's University honored her as a Distinguished Alumna; in Houston last November she was honored by the Texas Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, and there have been Gussie Nell Davis Days in both Kilgore and Farmersville.

For five decades scribes have been trying to describe Gussie Nell Davis. Some of the choice phrases include "diminutive drill sergeant" or "dedicated, demanding disciplinarian" to which she retorts, "It's just as easy to do it right as it is to do it wrong!"

Other phrases include "consummate showman," "flamboyant phenomenon," "creative spirit" and "loving, generous lady." Jeanne Denman Hale (class of '45), Kilgore College information director, could furnish several more pages of descriptive matter and memories. So could any one of the more than a thousand Rangerettes.

Texas Woman's University and the International Alumnae Association proudly claim Gussie Nell Davis. Our diminutive lady of the Piney Woods casts a very large glow over every football halftime–high school, college and professional–from border to border and coast to coast.