Education Support

American Dance

She's a Lone Star Star
Rangerettes Founder Danced her Way to Fame

by Teddy Allen, The Shreveport Times March 1990

KILGORE, Texas–The Roarin' Twenties weren't so roarin' over in tiny Farmersville, Texas. Dancing even to so much as the Hokey Pokey would get you bounced right out of the church.

So no one really knows why a history teacher at the local high school turned her house into a dance hall for the teenagers every Friday night.One of the regulars was Gussie Nell Davis. She would eventually start the world famous Kilgore College Rangerettes. Davis has waltzed her way into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame.

"She was an elderly lady–at least we thought she was then," Davis, now 83, says of the teacher. "She'd roll up the rug in her big den and we'd dance. And dance. And dance. I don't even know how we learned, but we did."

Davis and six other honorees will be inducted into the Hall March 27 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Austin. She'll join former presidential secretary Liz Carpenter, astronaut Sally Ride, former first ladies Ladybird Johnson and Barbara Bush, and politicians Barbara Jordan and Ann Armstrong.

Such an honor is hardly new for Davis, retired in Kilgore since 1979. The town once held a Gussie Nell Davis Day and gave her a car. Her 80th birthday party at the Cherokee Club was, she said, "a bash like you've never seen." In a huge coffee table picture book in her den entitled "Texas Women" and full of everything from presidents' wives to Playmates of the Month, there's also Gussie Nell Davis, high-kicking.

In 1939, the president of Kilgore College asked her to form a drill team at the school so people could have something interesting to watch during halftime at football games. The result was what the Houston Contemporary Museum of Art has called a "new, living art form"–the first drill team to perform on a football field.

What followed was instant public fascination for a dance line flavored heavily with young ladies from Ark-La-Tex. Gussie Nell's Rangerettes, celebrating their 50th Anniversary this year, served as the blueprint for everything from the Airline Blue Angels to the Dallas Cowboy's Cheerleaders. (But don't ask Davis about the Dallas

Cowboy's Cheerleaders. If they ever form so much as a straight line, she may take back everything she's said about them. She doesn't expect she'll have to.)

Besides redefining halftime, Rangerette-like groups spawned new businesses. Who would have ever thought that someone out there would make his living selling pom-pons? That satin jackets and girlie cowboy hats would boom?

"At our last Drill Team Directors of America convention, there were over 100 business booths set up," Davis said. "That's why I started American Drill Team School in 1958. We train drill teams around the country and teach them not only to dance but how to be a lady."

Gussie Nell Davis always did mean business. She made her own props–not counting the horses and pistols occasionally used–for years. For 29 of her 40 years in the business she was a one-person staff. Perhaps that made it easier for each 60 girl edition of the Rangerettes to remember who was in charge.

"They didn't talk me into anything," she said. "I was the boss. Don't think we didn't talk about everything, it's just that we didn't have a lot of time to argue."

That's because what happened after the first halftime routine on that autumn night in 1940 was one of those strange, unexplainable things that life coughs up now and then. People thought the Rangerettes were angels on recess from heaven or something.

"They just couldn't believe it," said Davis, for four decades the only coach the Rangerettes ever had.

In 1941, the Rangerettes made their first trip, performing in New Orleans at the Lion's Club International meeting. It was the first leg, so to speak, of a long trip. In 50 years, the Rangerettes have traveled more than 2 million miles worldwide, performing at athletic events, conventions, pageants, variety shows and presidential inauguration festivities.

When Davis was a teenager dancing in the den in Farmersville, it seemed unlikely she would one day be close enough to a U.S. President to polka.

"Mr. Ford was nice; Lyndon Johnson was real nice," Davis said. "Now Nixon, oh, we loved Nixon. He was soooo nice. He might have been ugly, but we sure did like him."

Hong Kong. Romania. New York City. All of those places are a long way from Kilgore, where Davis said she was "doing good at first to get 48 in the line and five girls out front." But the Rangerettes grew into the standard of precision, a mixture of desire and talent. "If you can't kick this high," Davis said, her hand about one foot above her head, "don't even show up for tryouts."

More than 2,000 girls made the grade through the years. Halftime hasn't been the same since.