Education Support

American Dance

"Rangerette Founder Gussie Nell Davis Dies"

By Joe Simnacher- Staff Writer of the Dallas Morning News

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Gussie Nell Davis, founder of the Kilgore CollegeRangerettes and creator of the Texas Institution of football halftime drill teams, died early Monday in a Kilgore hospital of respiratory complications. She was 87.

Miss Davis developed the pep squad during the 1930s as a Greenville High school physical education teacher seeking a dance outlet for her students. In 1939, Kilgore College hired her as director of physical education to attract more female students and to keep fans seated during football halftime shows. The next fall and for the next 40 years, Miss Davis and Rangerettes were legends.

"When Kilgore College and Tyler Junior College play each other in football, it could be argued that more people are in the stands to watch the girls at halftime than to watch the game," according to a 1974 Sports Illustrated article. "The football teams are junior college, but the girls are big league."

A talented musician, Miss Davis was groomed to be a concert pianist. After graduating from Farmersville High School in 1921, she entered the College of Industrial Arts in Denton, now Texas Woman's University, where she majored in physical education. She earned a master's degree in science from the University of Southern California.

In a 1973 interview, Miss 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 the church- any church."

When Miss Davis founded the drill team concept during the 30s, kick was a four letter word. As a college student, dance classes were called folk games and rhythms, "or some such evasive title," she once said. "But I knew it was for me."

It was another prohibition that opened the door for her dream. At Kilgore College, the president was unhappy with the rowdy antics of the oil patch football fans drinking under the stands at halftime. He wanted them sober in their seats. Miss Davis'

drill team put them there. But to her students, the drill team was more like finishing school.

Jeanne Hale, a retired Kilgore College spokeswoman and former Radio City Music Hall Rockette, said: “To me, the most important thing the Rangerettes accomplished was not the dancing and entertainment. Gussie Nell gave these girls a foundation for life. She taught them that, through hard work and dedication to a goal, they could accomplish anything.”

At Kilgore, Miss Davis developed a reputation as a cross between a Miss America chaperone, and a drill sergeant from Parris Island. “You didn't do that perfect, so you're going to do it all over again,” she told her students in 1973. “Never settle for less than perfect. Just remember who you are. You’re a Rangerette.”

Susan Robb of Dallas, a 1977 Rangerette, said that Miss Davis was an original. “She was the greatest,” Ms. Robb said. “She came up with the idea of a precision dance line on the football field. She really was the originator of precision dance.”

Miss Davis directed the Rangerettes until her retirement in 1980. Under her guidance, the East Texas drill team became internationally known. It appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and at every Cotton Bowl Classic halftime since 1951.

Before the 1973 Cotton Bowl, Miss Davis said she was as excited as if it were her first show. “People want to know why this is important,” she said. “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.”

Funeral services will be Wednesday, December 22, at 11 a.m. at the First Presbyterian Church in Kilgore. Burials will be in Farmersville Cemetery. Memorials may be made to the Rangerette Showcase Museum or the Gussie Nell Davis Rangerette Scholarship, both at Kilgore College.

American Dance/Drill Team School was founded in 1958, by Miss Gussie Nell Davis, the First Lady of Drill Team, and Dr. Irving Dribrodt, as the first educational school for drill teams in the United States.