# Education Support

American Dance

## A Tribute to Miss Gussie Nell Davis

**"Memories..."**

**by Joyce E. Pennington**

The death of Miss Gussie Nell Davis, founder of the Kilgore College *Rangerettes*, on December 20, 1993, brought an outpouring of thousands whose lives she touched. Miss Davis was 87 years of age and a pioneer in the dance/drill team industry.

She was born in Farmersville, Texas, on November 4, 1906. She attended college in Denton, Texas, at what is now Texas Woman's University where she received her under-graduate degree in physical education. She went on to the University of Southern California where she received her master's degree in science. At one time she wanted to be a dancer on the stage, but her family wanted her to be a concert pianist. In 1929, upon returning to Texas, she accepted a teaching position at Greenville High School where she was also placed in charge of the pep squad. She developed the pep squad into a performance team on the field that performed drum and bugle style routines, twirling and eventually precision dance steps that evolved into the "Flaming Flashes" drill team.

In 1939, the board of regents at Kilgore College approached Miss Davis to come to Kilgore to develop a halftime show that would keep the people in their seats. It was a very conservative Bible Belt community and some of the citizens would go out to their vehicles at halftime to have "a nip of whiskey." This caused great concern for the college. When asked what they had in mind for this show they replied, "That is why we hired you!"

In 1940, the first line of the Kilgore College *Rangerettes* performed and developed a new art form with their precision moves and trademark high kicks. During her 40 years with the *Rangerettes*, the group traveled to several foreign countries and appeared in many bowl games, on national television, in countless numbers of parades, at conventions and on magazine covers. Miss Davis retired as director of the *Rangerettes* in 1979 and continued to be active in the community, garnishing many awards, including her 1990 induction into the Texas Woman's Hall of Fame in Austin. Other inductees included Barbara Bush, then First Lady of the United States. Other

tributes included the construction of the *Rangerettes* Showcase Museum on the Kilgore College campus and the naming of Davis Hall, a women's dormitory in her honor.

In 1958, Miss Davis and Dr. Irving Dreibrodt, director emeritus of the Southern Methodist University Mustang Band, created the first drill team camp with the *American Dance/Drill Team School*®. Teams came to the SMU campus from all around the nation to learn routines and hear Miss Davis present her famous "Poise and Projection" speech. I was a student at camp in 1966 and 1967 and remember well her talking about our "salad bowl," "bird cage" and "bowling ball" and how important they were to our posture. Through the camps, tens of thousands of young women were touched by her message of how to be a lady.

Martha Dean, former Kilgore Rangerette commented, "Under the leadership of Miss Davis, we all learned not only the precision drills for which she made the *Rangerettes* famous, but also skills which will serve us throughout the rest of our lives. She instilled pride in a job well done, a sense of individual responsibility and working cooperatively with others. Miss Davis was also my first employer, as she gave me the opportunity to work as a dance instructor for the *American Dance/Drill Team School*®. She worked right along with us at the camps, passing along those same basic skills to hundreds of high school girls. She was truly a lady who inspired awe in everyone."

Jeanne Hale, retired director of public relations at Kilgore College, who assisted with Rangerette publicity for many years: "To me the most important thing the *Rangerettes* accomplished was not 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 and this lesson carried over into their personal lives. She practiced 'tough love' before that became a byword. She was hard on the girls, but it was for their own good. I knew her professionally, but I also went through all her keepsakes and personal correspondence before the Rangerette Showcase Museum was built. I was amazed at the reach of her compassion; she sent friends letters of congratulations or commiseration. Miss Davis was a very intelligent person. She brought intelligence to an area which a lot of people tend to think of as frivolous."

Miss Davis is survived by two grand nephews, a grand niece and a host of *Rangerettes* and close friends. Miss Davis was in love many times, but said that she had only one true love, *Rangerettes*. She had spent a short time in the hospital with some breathing complications, but was due to be released. She was in good spirits and had enjoyed visiting with friends the day before her passing.

Her services were held on Wednesday, December 22, at the First Presbyterian Church in Kilgore and her burial was in Farmersville, Texas. Her honorary pallbearers included all past and present *Rangerettes*, managers and voices, which filled over half of the sanctuary.

I lost a special friend, a mentor and my hero. She will always be the angel sitting on my shoulder as I make an humble attempt to carry on her great traditions. She will be missed by many, and remembered by all.