Education Support

American Dance

History of Dance/Drill Team . . . the first twenty years 1929-1950

By Joyce E. Pennington

Once upon a time, back in the "roaring twenties," there were pep squads. Yes, throughout Texas and the Southwest there were pep squads at over 150 high schools that were the predecessors of drill team. They spanned from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso, from Central Texas to the Piney Woods of East Texas and on to Louisiana and from the Rio Grande Valley to the Permian Basin of West Texas. Squad sizes varied from 10 to 180 and uniforms were primarily long pleated skirts and blouses with a military flair. The pep squads were primarily girls, but some had a few spirited boys to participate that were from the ranks of the R.O.T.C. It seemed that with the Great Depression era beginning in 1929, folks were looking for something positive in their lives. They were looking for ways to renew personal spirit and enthusiasm. It would be an organization that would add poise, confidence and social skills. An organized team of young people that would perform in precision and cheer the home team to victory seemed to be just the right medicine for the times.

Towards the end of the roaring twenties and beginning of the thirties around the time of the Great Depression, two women in completely opposite parts of the state, would change the face of precision performance and impact our world called drill team. Each carved their own identity in the groups they directed without ever having crossed paths until several decades later.

In 1929, a petite lady named Gussie Nell Davis, returning from an education at Texas Woman's College (Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas) and a master's degree at U.C.L.A., was asked to come to Greenville High School in Greenville, Texas, to teach physical education and sponsor the pep squad. "I turned to my sister (in California) and said, what in the world is a pep squad?" Miss Davis queried.

The first year, they did stunts and held up letters and did a little marching. The second year, they expanded on their marching drills and even did a pigeon release on the field at half-time. "The third year we got these real cute little costumes that had

sweaters with a 'G' on them," Miss Davis said. "They thought we were really cute. We all did! We started marching and doing all sorts of drills and added some rhythm and dance steps to music. Then the band started doing it with us!" she added.

The pep squads had a variety of activities from forming a "T" in the stands for "Tigers" (El Paso H.S.) to military drills and formations on the field that had a swing flair. Some of the groups would play drums and bugles to emulate the drum and bugle corps that were popular around that era. Deep in East Texas, some of the pep squads would have carved wooden batons that they twirled in unison. The wooden batons evolved into long heavy metal batons that were eventually carried by the leaders or officers in a ceremonial entrance or 'strut.' Each group began to etch their own identity and style including a variety of looks and changes that would quickly affect the evolution of team uniforms. While some stayed in the stands, other groups took to the field with precision drill movements, similar to the band and R.O.T.C., while others added swing moves and performed in precision to music.

"Then after a year or so we changed costumes again and got these cute little red wool coats with brass buttons and we got caps like the band with a visor and a little feather on the top front," she said. "They didn't have such a thing as drum boots or that type. So, we got jodhpurs that weren't too tall, but had a little bit of heel on them, to make those long skirts look a little bit more graceful," Miss Davis explained.

"One day the girls were paying no attention to me. I looked over to see what it was and there was a boy at the gates to the football field where we were rehearsing. I left them and went down to see what the young man had in his hand," she continued. "What is that thing you have in your hand?" she asked. "It's a baton," he responded. "And what do you do with it?" she asked again. "You twirl it," he said. "Show me," she inquired.

The group in Greenville was called the Flaming Flashes. Henry Franka, the coach of the Greenville High School football team at the time, said about his team, "We are just like lightning, our football team is. And if we are lightning, then you are the flash that is right there with us." And so became the Flaming Flashes. They added a white satin ascot to their uniform that had a FF on it. Now it has been shortened to Flashes.

"One of those years Port Arthur High School came up to play Greenville in the quarter finals of football. They had a drum and bugle corps. We were sitting in the auditorium when along came something that sounded like an earthquake...all the thunder in the world. All those drums and bugles were beating coming up the front steps and around the auditorium," she explained. "Little did I dream that I would soon be traveling to Orange, Texas, to see Letcher Stark to buy bugles and drums and to learn sort of what to do," Miss Davis said. "So, I had to learn to blow a bugle and beat a drum and after our bandmaster gave me a few lessons, he said, 'Now they're yours, you take them.' And so, I had a drum and bugle corps."

In the early thirties, over 700 miles away in the Rio Grande Valley, was a spunky young student named Kay Teer. She was a born leader and was easily elected as cheerleader in 1930 from a field of over sixty candidates at Edinburg High School. As

many of the candidates were her friends, she was sad for the girls that didn't make it as she knew they were just as eager to support the team as she was. She went to Mr. C.A. Davis, the principal of the school, asked if there was any way that the other 50 plus girls could form a group to go out on the field at half-time and be a part of school spirit. "As convincing and as determined as Kay was that day in my office, I knew I had to agree with her idea for I figured she could easily go to the 'higher ups' and I really liked being principal!" said Mr. Davis at the team's Golden Anniversary celebration in 1986. After graduation from the University of Mary Hardin Baylor, Kay returned to Edinburg H. S. to teach physical education and to direct the Red and Blue Sergeanettes, as they would be named in 1936.

They had beautiful red and blue military style uniforms that had shiny brass buttons and an army style cap. They marched on the field with a 'military swing' style. The Sergeanettes eventually evolved into a precision dance group that brought acclaim from around the state. They continue their rich traditions, still following the original constitution and guidelines that were set in 1936 under Kay Teer's (Crawford) direction.

In 1939, after earning her master's degree, Kay moved to California to work on her doctoral degree at University of Southern California. The physical education department was quite impressed with her work and background. In the early forties the principal at El Centro High School was so impressed that he offered her triple her Texas teaching salary to start a precision dance/drill team at his school. It was an offer she could not refuse.

As Mrs. Crawford continued her doctoral studies, she organized a project in her methods class that involved a national dance/drill team competition. Because it was a methods class, they had to follow through with their project, so thus became the first Miss Drill Team USA in California. It was such a success, they continued the following year, and over thirty years later, the oldest and most successful continuing competition in dance/drill team history continues today and includes teams not only from across the U.S. but several foreign countries as well. There were over 150 schools in Texas during the 1930's and 1940's that had pep squads or drum and bugle corps. The Ball High School Tornettes had over 100 members and had evolved from a pep squad to a drum and bugle corps, then a military marching group and eventually a precision drill team. One of their directors was Barbara Tidwell, a former Kilgore College Rangerette, in the late fifties before she was recruited to come to Southwest Texas State University to start the first team at a ‘four year college’ called the Strutters (1960). Other schools with group membership that exceeded 100 members at the time were Abilene High School, Austin High School (Red Jackets), Beaumont High School, Brownwood High School, Woodrow Wilson High School (Dallas), El Campo High School, Gatesville High School, Reagan High School (Houston), Sam Houston High School (Houston), Orange High School, Palestine High School, San Angelo High School, Brackenridge High School (San Antonio), Thomas Jefferson High School (Lassos, San Antonio), Sweetwater High School, Temple High School (Pepperettes), Texarkana High School, and Waco High

School to name a few. Several of the teams even had boys as part of the pep squad. Some of these teams were Brenham High School, Cameron High School, Commerce High School, Ennis High School, Kaufman High School, Kressi High School, Mt. Pleasant High School and Mineola High School, who led the state with the most male participation with 25 boys in addition to 50 girls.

John Tyler High School in Tyler, Texas formed a pep squad of 34 women in 1929. The group flourished and grew to 80 members in 1936 and was named the Blue Brigade under the direction of Mildred Springer. "It was the most exciting thing to happen. The organizing of the Blue Brigade along with the Drum and Bugle Corps, " said Katherine Saleh Peters, one of the charter members of the Blue Brigade from 1936. "Being a part of parades including the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show parade were a first. Remembering the John Tyler H.S. quarter finals against Temple High School....we lost but the train ride was a great adventure!" she continues. "The way I got into the Drum and Bugle Corps was I borrowed my cousin's Boy Scout bugle since all of the instruments had already been assigned. Lucky me!" she exclaimed.

Opal Morgan Matthews was a member of the Blue Brigade in 1942. She had fond memories..."How we loved Mildred Stringer and how we wanted to be just like her! One year the Blue Brigade had a big write up in Life Magazine back when the magazine was big and everyone read it. " She continues, "We always wore white gloves with our uniforms. They were furnished to us by Burks-Walker Funeral Home!"

In 1939, Dean Masters, the vice president of Kilgore College, contacted Gussie Nell Davis in Greenville, Texas, about coming to Kilgore to start a group that would 'be interesting and keep the folks in their seats at halftime.' They also needed to recruit women to the school since the enrollment was primarily made up of men who were seeking to learn more about the oil business. Miss Davis responded, "Well, what do you want, a drum and bugle corps?" Dean Masters just laughed. He sat back in his chair and said, "Over my dead body." Miss Davis queried, "Well, what do you want?" He said, "Hmmm. That's why I hired you."

Well, after Miss Davis conceived the idea of having a precision dance group perform on the field with the band, there had to be a costume. So, she secured Earl Ford, an art student at the college, to come up with a drawing. She decided on the name Rangerettes because the football team was the Rangers. The boots were not western, but the gauntlets, belt and hat were. “We were little devils wearing skirts two inches above the knee!" Miss Davis laughed. She took the design to Oak Cliff Uniform Company in Dallas to make the first uniform. The man there knew exactly what to do. He made uniforms for the drive-in restaurant waitresses and had Miss Davis take a look at all the designs. The boots were made in Fort Worth and the hats came from Chicago. The skirts were made in Dallas and the blouses in Fort Worth.

And so, September 12, 1940, marked the first performance of the Kilgore College Rangerette line on the gridiron. They came from all around East Texas to be a part of this first group. There were 48 members on the line with 5 officers in front. There were

no reserves at the time so if someone was ill or couldn't perform, Miss Davis donned a uniform and jumped right in the line to perform in her place! Has the uniform changed much over the years? "Just the skirt," Miss Davis would explain. "It has come up, and up, and up....why is it only about 12" long now!"

Word spread quickly around the country about the Kilgore Rangerettes. They became very much in demand for special performances including conventions and grand openings including the Shamrock Hotel in Houston. They were even invited to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show, the Ice Capades, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the 1946 Rose Bowl, the 1949 Cotton Bowl, The Houston Metropolitan Museum even declared them a new 'art form.

In less than a decade, there was another precision dance group that premiered from East Texas. In 1947, Tyler Junior College established the "Tyler Roses," named for the town being known as the Rose Capitol of the World. In December of that year, the name would be changed to Apache Belles by director Mildred Stringer, who had also founded the John Tyler High School Blue Brigade in 1936. President of the college, Harry E. Jenkins, wanted to have a drill team or pep squad program for women. Stringer, who continued to direct the Apache Belles until her death in 1963, transformed the group from the idea of a pep squad to a 'world famous' dance/drill team with her charisma and attention to detail. They were the first to incorporate the uniform as a prop through their skirt and cape routines.

In 1948, former Tyler High School cheerleader, Alfred Gilliam, was hired to be the full-time dance instructor and choreographer for the Belles. It was Gilliam who created the trademark style and unique dance routines that made the Apache Belles famous practically overnight. Gilliam combined style and grace to create glamorous half-time shows that kept people in their seats at half-time.

Precision dance didn't stay exclusive to Texas long. Towards the end of the forties, there were groups cropping up throughout Louisiana, Oklahoma, Kansas, California and Iowa. The new group of the future for young women continued to spread in popularity throughout the Midwest including Missouri, Ohio, Illinois and Indiana and further west in Washington State. Show business seemed to have an impact on the teams in California by presenting pageantry type halftimes. This was only the beginning. Following World War II in the late forties, the nation looked to reunification of the people and half-time shows were an added bonus when the men came back from the war. Drill team was not only here to stay...it would create a new venue and identity for young women around the nation.

Drill Team Marches On..... Joyce Pennington is in the process of compiling the history of dance/drill team for every region of the country and around the world for Dance/Drill Team Directors of America. You will see spotlights on several states and regions of the country in future issues along with how drill team evolved and spread during the 1950's to present.

If you have information that would be helpful in completing an accurate account of the history of drill team in your state, please contact Joyce at ***254-947-0613*** *or e-mail* ***danceadts@gmail.com***