



Education Support

Trouping the Colors for the Gussie Nell Davis

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The dance/drill team is an art form that was invented and brought to perfection by this indefatigable Texan, whose Kilgore Rangerettes were its first exponents and are probably still the best.

Everybody keeps hearing about Kilgore. The reason is for one fantastic woman, a few of her assistants and 65 mostly teen-aged dancing girls known as the Kilgore College Rangerettes - - the first dance/drill team of its kind and, after 35 years, still probably the best. Thousands of high schools and colleges have copied the Rangerettes since Gussie Nell Davis created them in 1940. The Apache Belles of Tyler Junior College came along seven years later, and the televising of football halftime shows made the first Rangerettes and then the Belles nationally famous.

Naturally, there is a rivalry between the two, and if not more intense than that of their school football teams, it is at least of wider interest. 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 than to watch the game: the football teams are junior college, but the girls are big league. What fans are seeing at halftime is Alabama-Oklahoma of the dance/drill world.

It had been raining in East Texas for close to a month. The sky might clear up for a while, but the ground just wouldn't get dry. The rain made the pine trees sparkle and brought creeks up over their banks to form new ponds in the fields. As far as Gussie Nell Davis was concerned, it was the worst weather possible. She would rather freeze than see it rain all the time.

"Hey, down there, fourth girl from the end! I'm sorry you don't like the girl in front of you, but crowd up to her anyhow!"

"Thank you, Miss Davis!" shouted the fourth girl from the end. This is the Rangerette Way to accept advice or criticism. There is a Rangerette Way to do just about everything.

"Another thing, girls! When you make your entrance onto that field tomorrow night, get out there fast! Be bold! If you're an instant late, the Apache Belles are liable to push you out of the way!"

"Thank you, Miss Davis!" they all shouted.

Up in the open press box at the Kilgore College stadium sat Gussie Nell, a thin, frail, ferociously energetic little strawberry-blond woman whose age seems to have been suspended in her early 20's, though her body went on to grow older. Because of the rain, it was the first day her Rangerettes had been able to practice on a field with the band this season, and tomorrow night was the game in Tyler. "I'm not fussing at those girls, I'm just loud," Gussie Nell said.

"They can hear me all the way across the Cotton Bowl. They can hear me from the press box at Soldier Field. Oh, look at that mud! The field in Tyler is going to be slow. We have to work the tempo of what the field will let us do. Every person has his own sense of rhythm, and so does every group. The Texas University is fast, SMU is fast, Texas A&M is slow. What we are is military. We need a dry field for our precision. I would just as soon it would rain and wash us out as to have to perform in the mud."

Davis Hall, named for Gussie Nell, is where the Rangerettes live for their two years at Kilgore College, unless they are girls from nearby towns who prefer to commute from home, and that is rare. The college has about 4,000 students and is state supported. By charter, it is not called a junior college, although it is one. Kilgore College sponsors a police academy and has a nursing school, a large music department, the usual engineering and liberal departments, 40 clubs and organizations, including the Rangerettes.

Girls do not get scholarships for being Rangerettes and only receive credit for a one-hour PE class that in reality takes up about 15 hours a week. But if one wonders what attracts so many sweet, cheerful little dumplings to Kilgore, it is purely the hope of becoming a Rangerette. Tryouts are held on the second Wednesday of a two week training period, and there might be 250 girls competing for 30 open spots in the line. The senior Rangerettes help choose the new ones. Then the new ones move into Davis Hall and learn the Rangerette Way. They keep up their grades. They lose weight if told to. They observe a curfew. They are taught not to drink, smoke or chew gum in a Rangerette uniform. Of the 65 girls, only 48 (plus the five officers) will be on the field at one time, so they compete to please Gussie Nell. They have managers, just like the football team has managers, to carry stuff around and to help with the wounded (pulled hamstrings and other calamities). The five managers are boys. "In this job you get to know all kinds of girls...girls who like to party, noisy girls, quiet girls," says Dale Chaffin, a tall, red haired sophomore who is the head manager. "But you can spot a Rangerette when she walks across campus. She might be homely, but she's really alive-looking and thinks she's beautiful, so she's beautiful. Miss Davis knows everything that goes on with them. She's a cool lady. As long as their personal lives don't get too messed up, she stays out of their business."



The Rangerettes have performed at 46 bowl and all-star games, including 24 Cotton Bowls and five of the college All-Star games in Chicago, marched in three Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parades in New York, appeared at countless conventions, had a number dedicated to them in the current Ice Capades, toured Venezuela, appeared at Eisenhower's first inaugural, etc. Their expenses are usually paid by the organization that invites them, and a "donation" to the Rangerette fund is shyly suggested. Money in the fund is spent on trips. The Rangerettes are not tightly chaperoned on the road, but guards are posted on their hotel floors to deflect amorous groupies and dirty old men. Gussie Nell is dismayed that anyone would even imply that sex has anything to do with the Rangerettes' appeal. "Sex is a word I have never used with my girls, and I never will," she says, adding, "Sure, I tell them that when they're out on that field I want them to forget they're mama's little girls and project! After the game they're mama's little girls again." "I think the Rangerettes right now are better than the Rockettes," says Jeanne Hale, Kilgore

College publicity woman, who is herself a former Rockette and Mrs. Texas. "It's remarkable when you consider that some girls work as Rockettes for 15 years, and Miss Davis keeps hers for two at the most, and we dance with greater precision."

"By the time a girl leaves here after two years of long bus rides, hard work and performances, she's usually got show business out of her system," says Gussie Nell. "She's ready to settle down. She's dependable, because anybody who's not dependable will not be in our line. She has good habits. She knows she can be courteous and be a lady and still be herself. She has what some people call old-fashioned virtues. But she's not worried about who she is."

Saturday morning it was raining again. The Rangerettes were supposed to pose for their official photographs on the lawn of a home Frank Lloyd Wright designed for a Kilgore oilman, L. N. Crim, but the session moved into the gym. At noon Gussie Nell went to the Town House Cafe, where she eats every Saturday if she is in town: fried chicken, cornbread, two vegetables, dessert and an iced tea for \$1.84.

"We called over to Tyler, and the field is just slop," Gussie Nell said. "I do want the girls to look good. We're all hams, you know. It's just that most of us are afraid to put on a show by ourselves, but with others we can express the ham in us without feeling like we're being stared at individually."

Outside, the temperature had fallen. A norther was blowing in. "Well, the rain is going," Gussie Nell said. "It'll be muddy and colder. We've performed where it was so cold that the girls were crying. We won't let them wear body stockings because they bag at the knees, and we've been on the field with the chill factor 16 below zero. The girls don't feel the cold while they're performing. It's while they're waiting that it hurts." The Rangerette motto is: Beauty Knows No Pain. The two Rangerette buses left for Tyler from in front of Davis Hall at 5:30. The girls were in uniform, many of them with their hair in curlers. They were singing, stretching, clapping as the buses went down the



highway. "I've never seen the girls so nervous," said Gussie Nell. Only 21 of this crop of Rangerettes had ever performed on a football field, and now it was at Tyler in the mud.

As the buses pulled into Rose Stadium, the Rangerettes began unrolling their hair. Even the captain, Vicki Murray, a dance teacher in Bossier City, La. in the summer, was anxious. "I hope nobody kicks up mud and falls down," she said. The girls formed up and marched into Rose Stadium. While the Rangerettes sit in rows in a stadium they do several hand routines to the band music. And they dance at their seats to the Kilgore College fight song, a lift from We're All Pals Together, from the old Broadway musical Rio Rita. The Rangerettes performed first at the half. Slinging clods of mud from their toes, they did their high kick without a slip. They did the traditional Rangerette march-out.

"We made three mistakes tonight," she said. "We don't expect to make three mistakes in a year."

The girls who made those mistakes would not be in the line next week. That, too, is the Rangerette Way.

"I love those girls," said Gussie Nell. "They'll forget every dance step and drill routine I teach them, but I trust they'll never forget the values we have here. Many of the modern kids, they think they can just lay around and smoke marijuana and do anything they want to anybody, but where does it get them? Miserable, empty, useless, running off to one fad and then another. My girls may not be sophisticated, but they know that the secret to life is to stay busy, be responsible, be cheerful. It's contagious. And it pays off.

"I guess I ought to get out of this business pretty soon, but people my age can get dull. Enthusiasm is what keeps a person going. If you're dull, you're not worth a thing to anybody, including yourself. I've devoted my whole life to this," said Miss Davis. "And I know I wasn't wrong."

"Thank you, Miss Davis!"

