

3-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Utley, Dan K. and Long, Virginia (1995) "Sweet Success: The Debut of the Kilgore College Rangerettes," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol33/iss1/10>

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**SWEET SUCCESS:  
THE DEBUT OF THE KILGORE COLLEGE RANGERETTES**

*by Dan K. Utley and Virginia Long*

As a symbol of Texas popular culture, the Kilgore College Rangerettes can hold their own against the likes of the Dallas Cowboys, Willie Nelson, the Cadillac Ranch, and J.R. Ewing. Perhaps no group from the Lone Star State is as universally recognizable as the Rangerettes, the most celebrated women's drill team in America. For over a half century, the group has served as an ambassador corps for their institution, performing at numerous collegiate and professional sporting events, before dignitaries and political leaders on several continents, and in a wide variety of state and national festivals, parades, and celebrations. Although the group debuted amidst fanfare, fireworks, and promise, such successes were beyond the dreams of the girls and the school officials responsible for its creation.

Kilgore Junior College began as the result of educational efforts directly related to the boom era of the East Texas Oil Field. In the mid-1930s, Kilgore school superintendent W.L. Dodson proposed the formation of a junior college to be administered by the district. Although the junior college movement began late in the nineteenth century as a progressive educational reform, the concept continued to develop and gain in popularity decades later. In Kilgore, Dodson found the requisite financial and progressive resources to support his plan for a local institution of higher learning.<sup>1</sup>

The Kilgore school board, comprised of many of the city's most dynamic and successful business leaders, authorized the proposal and then worked aggressively to make it a reality. Their efforts, begun during the depths of a worldwide economic depression, were viewed as folly by some and as visionary by others. The 1930s were not considered ideal years to establish a college or to incur the sizable debt required for such an undertaking, even in an area of some commercial promise. A spokesman for the prestigious Carnegie Foundation noted during the depression years that "Shrinking educational endowments, reductions in tuition, and a scarcity of new bequests contribute to the financial dilemma which threatens the existence of many colleges and universities."<sup>2</sup>

The early success of the Kilgore plan was due in large part to the work of Basil Earl Master, the man Dodson selected to direct formation of the new system. A native of Hunt County, Masters had studied at Baylor, Yale, and The University of Texas. He became a college administrator at Greenville in 1917, when he was named president of Burlison College, a Baptist institution. Considered a leader in the junior college movement in the Southwest, Masters was instrumental in founding schools in Paris and Amarillo before joining the

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Kilgore project. Under his direction as administrator, curriculum planner, and public relations leader, Kilgore Junior College opened in the fall of 1935.<sup>3</sup>

Dean Masters advocated a strong curriculum based on the needs and interests of the community. He also believed in, and strongly supported, extra-curricular activities that helped develop the complete student. Two of his favorite organizations were the football team and the band, both established soon after the school opened. A promoter, Masters hoped the school's academic and athletic achievements, along with a strongly-developed sense of pride and spirit, would attract new students and ensure future financial support.

In 1937, Dean Masters devised a plan for a new spirit organization called the Ranger Sweethearts. He selected teacher Vivian Breland to head the group, since she was the only teacher with a free class period. Masters' goal was for the Sweethearts to complement the band and football programs, similar to the spirit clubs and pep squads then popular in secondary schools. The group, comprised of sixteen girls dressed in gray and blue uniforms designed by his wife, Carrie Masters, participated with the band at football games. Their routines, however, reflected inadequate planning and a lack of formal training. The Sweethearts participated in other school activities, such as selling yearbooks and promoting the school during a good-will tour of East Texas, but they never generated the enthusiasm and spirit Masters had envisioned. The organization was discontinued in 1938.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his experience with the Sweethearts experiment, Masters tried again in 1939. This time he chose a new leader, Miss Gussie Nell Davis. Reared in Farmersville, in Collin County, Davis had attended the College of Industrial Arts at Denton, now Texas Woman's University. At her mother's insistence she entered as a music major, but soon changed to physical education. The women's athletic programs of the time were quite limited, with emphasis on games rather than conditioning or life sports. One particular aspect of the program she enjoyed most combined her interests in music and physical training:

I love the physical activity, particularly the dance. Of course, in those days some girls were not allowed to dance; so, the classes were called 'folk games,' or 'rhythms,' or some such evasive title, but I knew it was for me.<sup>5</sup>

Gussie Nell Davis followed her work in Denton with a master's degree in physical education from the University of Southern California. She returned to Texas as a teacher with the Greenville school district. Where she taught girls' P.E. and sponsored a pep squad known as the Flaming Flashes. Influenced by baton twirling and by such drum-and-bugle organizations as one sponsored by Lutch Stark of Orange, Davis introduced elements of both into her pep squad routines at football games:

The band would play a piece, then we'd play a piece. Then there was one or two we could play together, like *Semper Fidelis*. And then after we played that piece, and we had marched around, then we went and put our

drums and bugles down and we picked up our batons, and we came back, and then we twirled.<sup>6</sup>

Time restraints precluded special dance numbers, but occasionally she would have the girls insert a small “kick” as they marched across the field.

From Greenville, Gussie Nell Davis joined Dean Masters at Kilgore Junior College. Hired in the middle of the fall term of 1939, she taught general physical education classes while developing plans for Masters’ special spirit organization. Although the idea was his initially, the dean offered few specifics. Relying instead on his instructor’s talent and creativity, he provided three general objectives: to recruit more girls (the college then had a boy-to-girl ratio of six to one); to provide a level of physical education more in line with that of the boys’ programs; and to produce a football half-time show that would entertain fans, generate spirit, and promote the school.<sup>7</sup> Davis recalled there was little elaboration beyond those points:

When I saw Mr. Masters, I said, ‘Well, what would you like for me to do?’ I said, ‘Do you want a drum and bugle corps?’ ‘Over my dead body!’ he said, and fell back in his chair. And I said, ‘Well, you want a twirling group?’ ‘No, I don’t want a twirling group.’ I said, ‘What do you want?’ He said, ‘Hmpf, that’s why I hired you.’<sup>8</sup>

After weeks of worry and indecision, Gussie Nell Davis decided to develop a drill team of precision dancers. While the idea was unique, it also afforded the instructor a release for her life-long dream of dancing on stage. As she noted, “I couldn’t dance in Farmersville, because you got put out of any church if you danced ... I said, ‘I’m going to put a line of girls out on that field and they’re going to dance, and it’s going to be me.’”<sup>9</sup> Using the team name of Rangers, a historical reference to the role Texas Rangers played in law enforcement during the early days of the East Texas Oil Field, Davis called her organization the Rangerettes.

Determined to succeed, but still somewhat unsure of how the college and the community would receive the new dance-drill team, Davis confided in few people about her plans. One of her early confidants was Earl Ford, Jr., then an art student at Kilgore Junior College and later an architect in New York. Davis enlisted Ford’s talents to design a colorful uniform based on a Texas Ranger motif. Although there were later changes in the size of the hat and the length of the skirt, Ford’s design was the prototype of the distinctive red, white, and blue outfit that is the organization’s trademark. The tri-color palette he selected only added to the uniform’s appeal, given the patriotic zeal of the pre-war era.<sup>10</sup>

During the summer of 1940, Davis worked to secure suppliers for the various elements of the Rangerette uniform. “The skirt was made in Dallas, and I think the blouse was made in Fort Worth, and the boots were made in Chicago and sent down. The hat was made in Dallas at that time, and the gauntlets and belt were made in Wichita Falls.” The first girl to model the uniform was Davis’ teenage niece, Betty Dickens, of Greenville.<sup>11</sup>

Another of Davis' early collaborators was Kilgore businessman Liggett N. Crim, a successful oilman, theatre owner, and civic leader. A showman at heart, Crim became the Rangerette's official sponsor. He also volunteered the services of his theatre manager, Knox Lamb, who was known for his elaborate movie promotional "sets." Lamb's first assignment was to design a special fireworks display for the group's debut.<sup>12</sup>

After months of preparation, planning, and speculation, the Rangerettes premiered on the evening of September 19, 1940, at the football game between Kilgore College and Daniel Baker College of Brownwood. A large crowd filled Kilgore Athletic Stadium, drawn by the team's winning tradition and by the local newspaper's promise of a unique halftime event:

Tonight's football season opener also will mark the first performance of the Kilgore College Rangerettes, 53 girls who specialize in precision marching. Their costumes will include short skirts, white boots, arm gauntlets and cowboy hats.<sup>13</sup>

A separate article provided additional details:

A colorful display will grace tonight's gridiron menu as the college presents the Rangerettes of '40, a group of lovely local lassies who'll be introduced at the half with a fanfare of bursting bombs and sky-streaking fireworks.

The side attraction promises to be the most colorful and sensational in the history of the school, rivaling Tyler's Rose Festival and other pigskin productions which tend to add something to the straight game of football.<sup>14</sup>

The Rangerette's debut lived up to the advance billing. Local journalist George Short reported the event the following day:

'How'd you like to come out of a blackout and be ambushed by that battalion,' one wisacre (sic) quipped in the pressbox last night as the Rangerettes of 1940, presented one of the most dazzling between-halves shows ever seen in East Texas... The presentation was stunningly beautiful.

Starting with a 'blackout' that was penetrated by a pin-wheel board spelling 'Rangerettes' and scores of overhead bombs that burst like thunder and then scattered stardust throughout the moonlit sky, the lights came on revealing the red, white and blue clad lovelies. They pirouetted, pranced and danced in perfect unison, colorful in movement and attire.

We're sure that the guy (who) wrote some years back that 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever' would have been content to curl up and die had he witnessed last night's show.<sup>15</sup>

Short added, in the "politically incorrect" prose of the day:

To L.N. Crim goes the thanks for the scintillating sky display and to Gussie Nell Davis goes the credit for training these young 'oomphies'. When football comes with any more attractive side dishes, we'd like to be on hand.<sup>16</sup>

Al Eason, in his history of Kilgore, provided another account of the event:

A hush as before a summer storm fell over the huge crowd who sat with bated breath. Then, as they had time to recover their wits, and as the realization that this group of girls was a local product seeped into the consciousness of the crowd, wave upon wave of hoarse acclaim rocked the stadium. The Rangerettes were a resounding success.<sup>17</sup>

For Gussie Nell Davis, however, success was not guaranteed until she had word from both Mr. Crim and Dean Masters that the group could participate in the next game, scheduled the following week in Louisiana. Since neither man was privy to the details of the half-time routine, and thus had not given prior approval, Davis had some reason for concern. She kept the girls in the gymnasium until half-time, when buses took them to the field. When the lights went out, the girls moved to the center of the stadium, and Knox Lamb lit the massive fireworks display that spelled Rangerettes in blazing script.

Well, when it burned out, the lights came on, there we were, and everybody's mouth flew open, and it was utter silence, what seemed like to me for a half hour. I'm sure it lasted all of two seconds. And then they started clapping. Then the band played, and we started our routine, and of course, it was a very simple routine, but it was some drilling to some extent and some kicking, but of course, not like we do now ... Well, after we got through, there was a standing ovation. And when it was over, Mr. Crim turned to me and said, 'Well, we'll go to Monroe next week.'<sup>18</sup>

With that simple acknowledgement of a job well done, the organization became a permanent program of the college.

Over the ensuing years, the Kilgore College Rangerettes evolved from a half-time spirit organization into good-will ambassadors for their community, their school, and their state. Even in the war years, when the college temporarily discontinued football, the group continued to perform throughout East Texas. As their fame grew outside their region, so did their impact on the Texas image. Their success influenced the formation of similar groups and provided a standard of excellence. Their routines, a combination of popular dance, military precision, and a Rockette's review, helped broaden concepts of dance and of physical education for women. What began as a college administrator's idea to promote his institution and to provide additional school spirit took on new significance under the direction of a young physical education teacher with a vision. Building on her community's record of success and on a program of innovation, perseverance, and hard work, Gussie Nell Davis created an educational concept and an organization known worldwide as one of the great cultural resources of Texas.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Doris Bolt and Bonnie Durning, *A History of Kilgore College, 1935-1981* (Kilgore, 1981), pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>Doris Bolt and Bonnie Durning, *A History of Kilgore College*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>*Kilgore News Herald*, December 26, 1975, pp. 1 and 16.

<sup>4</sup>Doris Bolt and Bonnie Durning, *A History of Kilgore College*, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>Gussie Nell Davis biographical sketch. Papers submitted to the Governor's Commission for Women in support of nomination to the Texas Women's Hall of Fame, September 1989.

<sup>6</sup>Gussie Nell Davis, oral interview with Dan K. Utley, in association with the Baylor University for oral history, May 10-11, 1993.

<sup>7</sup>Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas* (Kilgore, n.d.), pp. 62-63.

<sup>8</sup>Gussie Nell Davis, oral interview with Dan K. Utley, May 10-11, 1993.

<sup>9</sup>Gussie Nell Davis, oral interview with Dan K. Utley, May 10-11, 1993.

<sup>10</sup>Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>11</sup>Gussie Nell Davis, oral interview with Dan K. Utley, May 10-11, 1993.

<sup>12</sup>Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas*, p. 63; *Kilgore News Herald*, February 3, 1989, p. 1; Gussie Nell Davis, oral interview with Dan K. Utley, May 10-11, 1993.

<sup>13</sup>*Kilgore Herald*, September 19, 1940, n.p.

<sup>14</sup>*Kilgore Herald*, September 19, 1940, n.p.

<sup>15</sup>*Kilgore Herald*, September 20, 1940, n.p.

<sup>16</sup>*Kilgore Herald*, September 20, 1940, n.p.

<sup>17</sup>Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas*, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup>Gussie Nell Davis, oral interview with Dan K. Utley, May 10-11, 1993.