

Beulah A. Harriss

1889-1977

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I. CONTEXT

In 1913 North Texas State Normal College, now University of North Texas (UNT), President William Herschel Bruce realized there was a need for a girls physical education program at the college. He saved on the school's fuel bill for a year to pay the teacher's salary.¹ After learning the University of Nebraska - Lincoln (UN), was the first state university to offer professional preparation in physical education for women starting in 1898,² he traveled there in 1914 to hire the college's first women's physical education teacher. Miss Beulah Ann Harriss was chosen to fill the position.³

In 1914 she was the only graduate to receive a degree from the University of Nebraska with a Bachelors of Arts in physical education.⁴ Following graduation, she would travel to Denton, Texas 100 years ago, making it her home for the rest of her life. On her arrival at the college there were four buildings, seventeen faculty members, and less than six hundred students. She would always say she had three strikes against her when she arrived in Denton. "She was from the north of the Mason-Dixon Line, she was young, and she made girls wear bloomers".⁵

President Bruce liked to tell her he got her out of the coal bin.⁶ Upon her arrival at the college, all she had to work with was a piano with 2/3 of the keys missing, a set of Indian clubs and a set of dumbbells.⁷ This didn't discourage Miss Harriss; she started making history at the college, where she served from 1914 until her retirement in 1960.⁸

At the same time her career began as a physical education teacher at the college, she also played a significant role in bringing Girl Scouts to girls between the ages of 18 and 21, by organizing a Girl Scout Troop at North Texas State Normal College in 1917.⁹ Miss Harris, who was one of the first Girl Scouts in Lincoln, Nebraska was to begin a long history of association with Girl Scouts of America beginning in 1914 when she first came to Denton and contributed through 1977.¹⁰

The Girl Scout organization was started by Juliette Gordon Low. She assembled 18 girls from Savannah, Georgia, on March 12, 1912, for a local Girl Scout meeting. She believed that all girls should be given the opportunity to develop physically, mentally, and spiritually. With the goal of bringing girls out of isolated home environments and into community service and the open air, Girl Scouts hiked, played basketball, went on camping trips, learned how to tell time by the stars, and studied first aid.¹¹

II. OVERVIEW

Beulah Ann Harriss was born in Hoxie, Kansas on November 11, 1889.¹² She was the youngest daughter of seven children born to farmer Sion Harriss, born January 5, 1847 in Wayne County, Illinois and former teacher Mary Frances Richards born December 2, 1860 in Moultrie County, Illinois. The family settled in the town of Fairbury, Nebraska where three of the children followed in their mother's footsteps. Beulah's brother Riley Clement Harriss was county

superintendent of the Jefferson County schools from 1908 to 1915 and eventually was elected as Nebraska State Senator from 1919 to 1921.¹³ Her oldest sister, Stella, received her Master of Science in chemistry, foods, and nutrition from Kansas State University and taught there until her retirement in 1953.¹⁴ Miss Beulah Harriss also chose the teaching profession. She attended Nebraska State Normal School, now Peru State College (PSC). It was the major teacher college in Nebraska for nearly forty years. The programs were one and two years in length until 1921 when four year programs were instituted.¹⁵ She received a permanent teaching certificate when she graduated in 1911.¹⁶ She was a member of the Philomathean Society, which is a literary organization and one of the oldest organizations on campus (1868). She was a member of the Athletic Association, Secretary of the Athletic Board, a gym assistant, Secretary of the YWCA, and the Assistant Athletic Editor of the yearbook. Her senior thesis was “The Value of Physical Education”.¹⁷

Continuing her education, she attended the University of Nebraska during 1912 to 1914, where she received an undergraduate degree.¹⁸ The Daily Nebraskan newspaper often carried accounts of women’s sports competitions. Miss Harriss is listed as playing second base in the game of baseball for the sophomore class in the spring of 1913. On October 5, 1913 Miss Harriss played field hockey in the first public game ever played at Nebraska. She was also involved in a tennis tournament on October 25, 1913. In 1914 Miss Harriss was a member of the senior women’s basketball team.¹⁹ The 1915 University of Nebraska Cornhusker yearbook lists Beulah Harriss earning her letter “N” for winning second place in the Shot-Put in 1914.²⁰ She received her Master’s Degree from the University of Southern California in 1933.²¹

Miss Harriss’ career at the North Texas State Normal College which began in 1914 would become a list of many firsts. The basketball team coached by Miss Harriss was undefeated

for three years during 1918-1920 and was recognized as champions of the State of Texas.²² She helped organize the Texas Woman's Recreation Association; the Woman's Recreation Association at NTSC and served on the faculty athletic committee since it was formed in 1920.²³

The physical education program was growing and by 1924 there was a need for a larger gym. The new women's Harriss Gymnasium was named in Miss Harriss' honor.²⁴ The original girl's gymnasium was located in the basement of the library building. Miss Harriss once recalled her earlier days; she said no young lady was ever seen outside the play area in their gymnasium costume. Female students dressed in the basement of the building. When it was assured that all male students were in their classrooms, the girls would slip out into the play area. The whistle would recall them to the basement before classes were dismissed, so that no young ladies could be witnessed by other students while at play. At one time a faculty member suggested the young ladies wear a black ankle length skirt over the full bloomers for the sake of modesty. Miss Harriss assured President Bruce her ladies wore all the dry goods they could handle.²⁵ Each bloomer costume contained a total of 14 yards of dry goods.²⁶

The organization of the Green Jackets Club was established in October 1925.²⁷ The club came about largely through the efforts of Miss Beulah Harriss, the sponsor. Miss Harriss along with three representatives from the North Texas State Normal College attended a state meeting of the Woman's Athletic Association held at the University of Texas in Austin, where they discussed the organization of jacket clubs,²⁸ patterned after the Orange Jacket Club at the University of Texas, which had been founded by Anna Hiss.²⁹ The purposes and ideals of the Green Jackets were to support all worthwhile activities of the college, to maintain a wholesome spirit of loyalty among the students, to aid any organization that might call upon them, and to develop leadership, sportsmanship, organized pep, loyalty, and service.³⁰ Unfortunately the

Green Jackets were the only other service organization started through the Orange Jackets effort to survive as a service group. All the others around the state developed into pep squads. Miss Harriss quoted on the clubs 50th anniversary “we planted this seed never knowing it would be what it is today. This group is almost as persistent as the dandelions in my front yard”. The organization is still going strong on its 89th anniversary this year.³¹

In 1925, the Board of Regents for all Texas teachers’ colleges banned women’s intercollegiate athletics. In response to their decision, Beulah Harriss formed the Women’s Athletic Association on campus to provide female students with a way to play intramural sports and non-sanctioned extramural sports.³² The Woman’s Athletic Association was organized February 29, 1925.³³

The Rho Chapter of Delta Psi Kappa, national honorary professional fraternity for the promotion of interest in the field of physical education was installed in the North Texas State Teachers College on March 31, 1928.³⁴ Miss Beulah Harriss was one of the twelve charter members. She served as the National province director of the fraternity from 1946-1950, as the National Grand president for three terms from 1950-1956 and as the province director again in 1958-1960. In 1960 she was the first to receive the title of Honorary National President.³⁵

She was a charter member in founding the Texas State Physical Education Association (later to be known as Texas Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance)³⁶ and served as president in 1933.³⁷ The Texas State Physical Education Association was founded as a result of a November 9, 1923, letter from Mary Bell Smith, president of the Dallas Physical Education Round Table, to physical education directors urging them to meet at the Texas State Teachers Association convention in Fort Worth to organize a state society. Miss Harriss along

with twenty-one individuals met in the Westbrook Hotel on November 30, 1923 and voted to form the Texas State Physical Education Association as a section of the Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA). The state association operates independently of the national organization but supports its programs and has adopted its name and structure. "Health" was included in the name in 1935, "recreation" in 1936, and "dance" in 1982.³⁸ In 1958 she received the TAHPERD Honor Award.³⁹

During the summer of 1932 Beulah traveled to Los Angeles where she attended the International Recreation Congress as the Southwestern Representative.⁴⁰

While attending the University of Southern California to obtain her master's degree⁴¹ she needed money while she was there, she wired her bank back in Texas, only to find out it had closed. She found out the story her father had told her when she came to Texas, about putting her money in a First Nation Bank because it was the safest and would never fail was untrue. The same thing happened to her the following year.⁴² Not to be discouraged, Miss Harriss along with 12 other professors from the North Texas State Normal College organized The Denton County Teachers Federal Credit Union with \$550.00 in 1936.⁴³ At an event in 1976 honoring Miss Harriss she said she put her nickels in the credit union and they grew and the credit union never failed.⁴⁴ As of 2014 DATCU now has 10 locations in Denton County.⁴⁵

Miss Harriss was a teacher, friend, advisor and mother-confessor to thousands of men and women students.⁴⁶ In 1947 the NTSU faculty members elected her president of the Chapter of the American Association of University Professors.⁴⁷ In 1950 a student election named Miss Harriss as favorite NTSU Professor.⁴⁸ In 1959 she was chosen by the student government group as winner of the annual Fessor Graham Award for the outstanding faculty member of the year.⁴⁹ After 46 years at UNT Miss Harriss retired on August 23, 1960.⁵⁰

She received Professor Emeritus Rank in June of 1977.⁵¹

The North Texas Athletic Hall of Fame which was established in 1981 to acknowledge former athletes, coaches and administrators whose accomplishments have brought credit to the University of North Texas and had a special impact on Mean Green athletics. Beulah Harriss was inducted in 1987, 10 years after her death which occurred in 1977.⁵²

While Beulah was attending the University of Nebraska between 1912 and 1914, she and her friend Della Marie Clark discovered that the Y.W.C.A in Lincoln Nebraska was starting a Girl Scout troop. Both girls were some of the first to join.⁵³ This making Beulah Ann Harriss the first recognized Girl Scout in Texas on her arrival into Denton in 1914.⁵⁴

Eventually Beulah and Della (Clark) would meet again. The physical education department at the North Texas State Normal School was so successful; by 1917 there was a need to hire another teacher. Miss Clark was hired to join Miss Harriss.⁵⁵

During this same year there was a recognized need in Girl Scouts for an organization for young women between the ages of 18 and 21. The suggested name was "Citizen Scout".⁵⁶ Hearing this, Beulah started the first Girl Scout troop at the college in Denton Texas.⁵⁷ In April 1923 members of the Citizen Scout Troop number one of the North Texas State Teachers College, the Poppy Scout Troop of the Training School, the Iris Scout Troop of the Denton High School and the Eagle Scouts of Denton, chaperoned by Miss Beulah Harriss and several of the Scouts parents built the first Scout Lodge at Hills and Hollows south of Denton.⁵⁸ In 1929 a two room house was purchased from L. L. Morse for \$100.00 and moved to the city park (now know as Quakertown Park). The building became known as the Girl Scout "Little House."⁵⁹ By 1953 Girl Scouts in Denton had grown from 259 to 670.⁶⁰ With funds secured by the Soroptimist Club, the Girl Scout Club House in the park was remodeled. The larger Girl Scout Little House

included an office, storeroom, kitchen, council room and bath.⁶¹ Unfortunately through the years the condition of the Little House deteriorated. It was condemned and torn down in 2007.⁶²

Miss Harriss would remain an active member of Girl Scouts for the next 50 years at which time she was recognized for her many contributions to the organization and made a lifetime member.⁶³ In November 1960 she was honored at the Girl Scout National Convention held in St Louis. The theme of the presentation was "Honor the Past-Serve the Future". The ceremony saluted the groups of people who built the Girl Scout movement in our country. She was recognized as being the leader of the first Girl Scout troop in Denton in 1917.⁶⁴ At an appreciation dinner in January 1967, entitled "Your 50 Years in Scouting, Miss Beulah" she was presented with her Girl Scout 50 year pin and was made a lifetime member.⁶⁵

In an article titled "Fifty Years in Scouting, Raises Lots of Little Girl Scouts" Miss Harriss quoted "The Lord wouldn't let me have any of my own, but I've sure raised a lot of other peoples". She said that after 50 years of work with Girl Scouts she had many children. We have to have one thing in common and that is to love youngsters and be willing to give our time to them.⁶⁶

Retirement didn't slow Miss Beulah down; it only opened another door in which she could give back to the community. After 46 years, Miss Harriss retired from the UNT in 1960.⁶⁷ Two years later in 1962 she became a charter member of the Flow Memorial Hospital Auxiliary volunteering as a Pink Lady.⁶⁸

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Beulah Ann Harriss' contributions to the city of Denton, Texas were extensive. She coached the university's first women's athletic teams and instructed every sports activity except

football.⁶⁹ She organized the Physical Education Department during the 1918-1919 session and remained active until her retirement in 1960.⁷⁰ She was a founder of the Texas Woman's Athletic Association and the Texas Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation.⁷¹

She started the first Girl Scout troop in Denton in 1917.⁷² In 1922 she became Commissioner of the Denton Girl Scout Council. During her 50 years in Scouting she served in practically every capacity on the board from Commissioner, secretary, personal chairman, nominating committee and various other kinds of committees.⁷³

She organized the Green Jacket Club in 1925 which is a spirit and service organization at North Texas. Members show strong leadership skills both on and off campus, have a true passion for service toward UNT and its community, are outstanding students in the classroom, and constantly serve as role models for their peers.⁷⁴

After a devastating depression had swallowed the fortunes and dreams of many; it took great courage to start a new financial organization to serve educational employees and members of their families. Miss Harriss was a charter member of The Denton County Teachers Federal Credit Union, now known as DATCU which was founded in 1936. She was honored on the Credit Union's 40th Anniversary by Mayor Tom Jester proclaiming February 27, 1976 as Beulah Harriss Day in the city of Denton.⁷⁵ DATCU has grown from the first office, at 322 Avenue B., which was simply a small room in the old Balthrop residence where the North Texas State University biology building now stands. In October, 1941, a 20' by 40' brick building at 112 Fry Street was purchased for \$2000 and the young, spirited and growing Credit Union moved to its second home. The present location at 212 West Sycamore was completed in May, 1965, with an

addition completed in December, 1969. From its meek beginnings of a pledge of only \$550.00 from 13 people, it has grown to 10 locations,⁷⁶ with assets over 600 million dollars.⁷⁷

After her retirement, her role that touched the most lives was that of a Pink Lady. Beulah Harriss was a charter member of the Flow Memorial Hospital Auxiliary in 1962.⁷⁸ In November 1977 a month before her death, she was honored by the Flow Memorial Hospital in recognition of her 6,500 hours of volunteer service to the hospital as a Pink Lady.⁷⁹ In 1975 she was honored by the Board of Realtors for her selfless service to the community.⁸⁰

Miss Harriss was a member of the Eastern Star for more than 50 years and was also a member of the First Baptist Church in Denton Texas for 60 years.⁸¹

Miss Harriss passed away on December 21, 1977 at the age of 88 and is buried in the Roselawn Memorial Cemetery in Denton Texas.⁸²

UNT continue to offer the Beulah Ann Harriss –Delta Psi Kappa Scholarship, the Beulah Harriss Memorial Scholarship-Physical Education, and the Beulah Harriss Memorial Scholarship-Health Science.⁸³

Miss Harriss may not have been born in Texas, but she devoted her entire adult life to the youth and citizens of the city of Denton. To ensure her legacy will continue and to preserve Beulah Harriss Day, that was started back on February 27, 1976 as a recognition for starting DATCU, Girl Scout, Elise Clements had Mayor Mark Burroughs proclaim February 27, 2014 Beulah Harriss Day. It is her goal for all future Girl Scouts to continue this celebration to honor Denton, Texas' First Girl Scout.⁸⁴

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