

# An Award-Winning Performance

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**Doris Eaton Travis appeared to have had it all.  
Ziegfeld Follies girl at 14, successful careers  
in the movies and in business, a good marriage.  
Yet something was missing—something she found  
in the classrooms of the University of Oklahoma.**

by Anne M. Barajas

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# Doris Travis

Once, Hollywood made movies about people like Doris Eaton Travis—Ziegfeld Follies showgirl, film star, dancing instructor, businesswoman. But of all the hats she has donned in her 88 years, she takes greatest pride in the mortarboard she wore May 9 as a Phi Beta Kappa history major receiving her bachelor's degree from the University of Oklahoma.

The road to a degree can be long and arduous even for the traditional student. Travis, who was 14 when she dropped out of school to join the Follies, began the journey at age 76. Earning a bachelor's degree "with distinction" took more than a decade — making her the oldest ever to be granted an undergraduate degree at OU.

Undoubtedly, there are those who would ask Travis, "Why?"

"Getting an education isn't all work — it's also joy," she says. "I have really loved it. I've thoroughly enjoyed each course."

Travis knows all about finding joy in her work. She made her first stage appearance in her hometown of Washington, D.C., at age 5.

By the time she was seven years old, Travis and her six brothers and sisters all had stage credits to their names. At one time, five of the Eaton girls appeared in a production called "Seven Sisters." One of the remaining "sisters" was played by their baby brother Joe.

Several of the Eaton children, including Doris, continued their careers on stages in Washington and on the road. While their father kept his job as a linotype operator at *The Washington Post*, their mother accompanied them on tour.



Already a stage veteran at nine, Doris, left, and sister Mary were discovered by the Shubert family, who brought them to New York to star in a Broadway production of "The Bluebird." A few years later sister Pearl was cast in the Ziegfeld Follies.

Also caring for Doris and her actor siblings was eldest sister Evelyn, who pasted pictures of starlets on her bedroom wall and first recognized the theater talent running through the Eaton family.

Evelyn, who was 10 years her senior, gave Doris her love of learning.

"She was always reading and discussing things with me," Travis says. While on tour, Evelyn would give lessons to the children from an English grammar textbook, pick words from the dictionary for them to learn and lead field trips to museums.

When Doris was nine, she and her sister Mary caught the eye of the Schuberts, the famous Broadway theater family. The Schuberts brought

them to New York City to star in a production of "The Bluebird."

But Doris and Mary weren't the only stars in the family. A few years later, older sister Pearl was cast in "The Ziegfeld Follies." When 14-year-old Doris visited the theater, she was spotted by the casting director and also hired for the fabled revue.

"My first year in the Follies, I was too young to be in a musical," Travis explains with a laugh. "The law said you had to be 16. So I had to take an assumed name of Lucille Levant."

Travis performed in eight shows a week with the Follies for three years. By the time she was 17, she had shared the stage with such legends as Will Rogers and W.C. Fields.

But Travis was not exactly starstruck. Rogers and Fields were both at the beginning of their careers. To a show business teenager, "they were just actors in the show." Travis remembers them both as "very nice" men who were easy to work with.

Travis never thought it odd that almost everyone in her family was involved in show business.

"We were just doing what came naturally," she shrugs. "We had no view of it."

A love of books also came naturally to Travis. A show business friend introduced her to Southern literature, and she discovered the works of Charles Dickens and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Reading became a great passion.

"I'd pick up the books and read them and could content myself with them," she says.

Travis left the Follies but soon had the starring role in the 1922 English film "Tell Your Children." The movie was filmed in Egypt and directed by a D.W. Griffith protégé, Donald Crisp.



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*In the 1918 "Ziegfeld Follies," Doris, at  
age 14, portrayed a bellboy in a produc-  
tion featuring different occupations of  
women during World War I.*

Travis also spent several years in Hol-  
lywood, appearing in several movies,  
co-starring with such notables as Frank  
Cravin and Eddie Cantor.

But when New York beckoned,  
Travis returned to perform in the Al  
Jolson musical "Big Boy." During this  
time, she also became the first to per-  
form publicly the classic song "Singin'  
in the Rain" in the Hollywood Music  
Box Revue of 1929.

While Travis' career blossomed,  
three of her family members also made  
their way in show business. Charlie  
performed in a long-running play called  
"Skidding," which later was made into  
the "Andy Hardy" movie series with  
Mickey Rooney. Pearl went on to cho-  
reograph RKO musicals. And Mary

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*Her performing career at a standstill, Doris taught at the Arthur Murray dance  
studio in New York, then opened Murray's first franchise in Detroit. Her star pupil  
was automotive engineer Paul Travis. Ignoring her own rules against dating  
clients, Doris and Paul embarked on a long courtship that led to marriage in 1949.  
Above with Paul about 1952 at a studio ball, Doris eventually owned all 19  
Michigan franchises and hosted a television dance program for seven years.*



Already OU's outstanding undergraduate history major, Doris retained her love of English literature courses. At left above, she discusses Professor Al Velie's assignment with classmates Brenda Stucks, Dan Dunlap and Yuki Kishimoto.

Eaton starred in a number of films, including "Coconuts" with the Marx Brothers.

Travis, who still can perform with ease an impromptu soft-shoe routine, insists she doesn't have a favorite show business memory. However, she fondly recalls "The Ziegfeld Follies."

"The Follies were so bright and colorful. Everything was so elegant, and Mr. Ziegfeld always had the best of everything."

Although she was living life straight from the pages of a movie magazine, Travis always had one nagging regret — her lack of formal education. This regret was especially keen when Travis' business brought her into contact with sophisticated, educated women.

"They were all college graduates. That bothered me a little," she says. "I was just a little old actress kicking up her heels on the stage."

Then the Great Depression arrived, and Travis, like many other performers, found that her career had come to a standstill. She took a new avenue and began to teach at Arthur Murray Dance Studios in New York City. In

1938, she and her brothers Charlie and Joe decided to try their luck in Detroit and started Arthur Murray's first franchise. By the time she retired, Travis owned every Arthur Murray studio in Michigan, 19 in all, and hosted a weekly dance program on television.

Another noteworthy thing happened to Travis while in Detroit. There she taught ballroom dancing to a rangy, Cornell-educated automotive engineer named Paul H. Travis. Although she didn't know it at the time, Paul Travis had a claim to fame as the inventor of the sun visor, the glove compartment and the door check — that little hinge that keeps car doors propped open.

"I only had three customers," 91-year-old Paul Travis quips, "but they were General Motors, Ford and Chrysler."

"Arthur Murray company policy strictly forbade dating between instructors and clients," Doris Travis says, grinning. "My situation was even worse because I was an administrator who made the rules. I don't know how I got away with it."

After a long courtship, Doris and

Paul married. They stayed in Detroit until their retirement, when quarter-horse enthusiast Paul decided to buy a horse ranch near Norman.

The 840-acre Travis Ranch has produced such racing champions as Miss Three Wars, who won the Ruidoso Rainbow Futurity in New Mexico. At its height, the ranch was home to more than 150 quarter horses.

The Travises became acquainted with former OU presidents George L. Cross and Paul Sharp and later became major donors to the University. The couple who met on a dance floor established a regular, Friday-night dancing date that they keep to this day at the University Club in Oklahoma Memorial Union.

Even though Doris Travis was more than busy with her duties as book-keeper at the ranch and her involvement with OU activities, she says an old regret began to nag at her once again.

"I began to 'whine,' as Paul says, about not having a college education. So Paul and I talked it over, and he said, 'We're five miles from OU. Either



put up or shut up.’”

Travis studied four hours in her bedroom every day for a year to prepare for her General Education Diploma test. As soon as she passed the test, she enrolled at OU for the fall 1981 semester.

The first-time freshman was understandably a little nervous about being on campus as a student. The day before classes began, Doris and Paul went on a mission to locate each of her classrooms.

Then came the time to choose a major. Despite her love of literature, Travis was more curious about the backgrounds of her favorite authors and decided to delve into history.

“The textbooks read like English novels,” she says. “I love the suspense and drama of history.”

In an interview during her first semester at OU, Travis declared, “I don’t want to be a C student. I will aim to be an A student.”

Travis’ aim has been true. She has maintained her high grade point average, despite such challenges as a physics class that made Travis feel as if she were “at sea.” She found a tutor, and through study and determination, made an A. She excelled in history. In 1991, she was named the recipient of the Horace Peterson Memorial Award as the University’s outstanding undergraduate history major.

“If I can’t do something well, I don’t want to do it at all,” she admits. “It’s more enjoyable to strive for the very best you can do. In show business, you had to strive to be excellent, or you wouldn’t get anywhere. I just always wanted to be on the top. I always will.”

On her way to the top, Travis has brought the past and present together for classmates and instructors.

“It was unnerving when she came up to me after I’d lectured on World War I and said, ‘I met President Wil-



*More important than Doris Travis’ age, which drew attention from local and national media, was the hope she offered other older people yearning for the college education they missed.*

son,” says OU history professor David Levy. “The first thing that went through my head was, ‘Did I get everything right?’”

Travis also added perspective to Paul Glad’s class on the Roaring ’20s.

“Of course, that was my era,” Travis says. She had real, practical experience to pass on to her classmates. “The students all got up in the aisles, and we learned the Charleston.”

Her dancing expertise was called upon again during five performances with Irv Wagner’s student entertainers of OU’s Broadway Gala. Travis revived dance routines she had performed 73 years before with “The Ziegfeld Follies.”

Her background also came in handy during an OU theater class that was paid a visit by Max J. Weitzenhoffer, an OU alumnus who is producer of Broadway’s Tony Award-winner “The Will Rogers Follies.”

“I asked him, ‘Have you ever met

anyone who worked with Will Rogers?’”

“No,” Weitzenhoffer replied.

“Well,” Travis said, “you have now.”

Travis admits she was never shy about speaking her piece in classroom discussions.

“I wasn’t afraid to speak up, ask questions. It was such a marvelous opportunity to ask questions, I had to take control of myself and not monopolize the class.”

Hers is a tale that has attracted national attention from such media giants as CNN, National Public Radio, *The New York Times* and “The Tonight Show With Jay Leno.” If nothing else is gained through her efforts, Travis hopes her story will encourage older people to consider attending college. But she has one piece of advice:

“Don’t do it unless you’re going to put your heart into

it,” she recommends. “But if you’ve had to stifle your desire to get an education, just go for it and do it and let the whole thing unfold for you — and it will.

“My love of learning has stayed with me all of my life. Education has been a self-nourishing adventure for me,” Travis says.

And that adventure didn’t end with “taking the walk” at commencement ceremonies. Travis plans to keep her mind active, perhaps with a correspondence course. But first, she will spend more time with her husband and dancing partner of 43 years.

“I want to spend as much time with him now as I can,” Travis says. “These are precious years, and we like to do things together.”

Travis even is contemplating a book on the history of social dancing.

And who could be better qualified for the job than a newly minted historian who has danced her way through a lifetime of joyful learning?