

Mary Ritter

CHSSA HALL OF FAME 1987



Elected into the CHSSA Hall of Fame in 1987 and the National Hall of Fame in 1999, Mary Ritter is one of the of “Founding Coaches” of CHSSA, but she took a long, unique route in getting there.

Her freshman year in high school was 1929; the year of the crash on Wall Street. Her father had started savings accounts for her in a couple of banks that closed. Some years later she received a check for \$0.05 from one of those banks as her share of a settlement. Her family were pioneers in the Village of Sioux Falls, Territory of Dakota, arriving there by covered wagon in 1878. Mary was the youngest of seven children. She credits her father as the most important influence in her life (Her mother died when Mary was five). “Dad was ahead of his time in many ways. He imbued in me that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to.”

When she entered high school, sports were her primary interest, but by the time she graduated, speech had become a serious contender. In her sophomore year, she had the first taste of competitive speech, participating in oratorical interp and extemp. She remembered that in those days most of the school year was devoted to contests between two schools. In her final year of high school, her school became a member of NFL which began in 1925. It was only eight years old when she first joined in 1933, just as she was moving on to Augustana College in Sioux Falls.

Her first teaching job began in the fall of 1937. Her salary: \$1,000 for the year. She recalled that her room had three windows facing north and one west. To survive she wore many layers of clothing to bed and piled many warm blankets and comforters over her. “One night to prove how cold it was, I put a pan of water in my closet. It froze solid!”

She tells it best: “Then suddenly, December 7, 1941! Pearl Harbor! The following spring I went through mental tests, health exams, and personal interviews at successive levels of difficulty ultimately traveling to Omaha for final approval. I was fortunate to be chosen for the very first group of women to be trained for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.” She stayed in after WWII ended, rose to the rank of full Colonel in the fully integrated Army and retired about 1969 with a total of nearly thirty years of service. During her military service she met and married army captain Charles Ritter and had two children: Susan and Robert.

Ultimately ending up back in the states with her two small children she began a new career teaching speech and drama at a small school, Southern State Teachers’ College in South Dakota, in the fall of 1947. By 1950 she was at Modesto High where she stayed for the next twenty-six years until retirement. Mary served many forensic positions: secretary, treasurer and president of Northern California Speech Association (pre-CHSSA), secretary, treasurer and president of CHSSA; president of the YFL, and NFL district chair. While coaching at Modesto, she had students who qualified for state in all but two of her twenty-six years and had twenty entries in thirteen national tournaments. Her own daughter was the only girl in the 1962 NFL national senate.



After military and teaching retirement, Mary spent several years doing some magazine modeling and “bit-acting”. She also appeared in several sketches on the *David Letterman Show*.