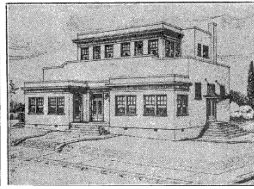


**JESSIE DUKE-  
RICHARDSON  
SIMMS  
1878-1939**

The Jessie Duke-Richardson School

Northwest Corner Fifteenth and Court, Muskogee, Okla.



**SCHOOL  
OF  
FINE  
ARTS**

The pink Jessie Duke-Richardson School of Fine Arts in Muskogee stood on the corner of Fifteenth Street and Court Street for many years. Its legacy was an important part of the early history of Founders Place, along with West Junior High across the street, but both have been forgotten over the years.

Jessie Duke was born in July 1878 in Memphis and married John Edgar Richardson in 1897. After a short period, John quit his grocery store bookkeeping job, moving to Fort Smith to become a public auditor. Jessie was teaching music in their home. The family moved to Muskogee in 1910, living on Denver Street. When Richardson passed away in early 1918, Jessie and her son moved to 1218 West Okmulgee.

In the 1915 edition of “The Musical Monitor”, Jessie was applauded for her popular readings. “She has a beautiful voice and in addition a charming personality that wins her audience at once.” According to her admirers, she had a great talent for story-telling and entered into the spirit of her reading with that keen interest and understanding inherent of a great artist.

The Muskogee Democrat edition of April 3, 1915, commented, “it is seldom that Muskogee Shakespeare Club has an opportunity of hearing such a splendid Shakespearean lecture-recital. Since coming to Muskogee, Mrs. Richardson has always been in demand at social functions and has given several recitals which were always greatly enjoyed.”

Jessie expanded her teaching in 1915. She advertised that the “Duke-Richardson School of Music and Expression” would begin classes in the fall. She promised to teach public speaking, expression and music education. The classes offered included Shakespeare and forensic oratory, dance based on ancient classical Greek principles, and voice in private or ensemble classes.

Her students in the 1930s included Anna Cook, Olivell Graves and Gloria Gulager. Graves described Jessie as having a wonderful and charming personality. The girls were also taught esthetic dancing and special readings, including how to express themselves and talk to people. Jessie’s manner inspired her students to conduct themselves properly.

When President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed the first week of May, 1924 as “National Music Week”, Jessie’s students performed twenty-minute recitals daily during the noon hour at West High School across the street. A local advertisement at the time called the Jessie Duke-Richardson School the “foremost school of fine arts in the Southwest. Advantages equal to those found anywhere.” Classes offered also included piano – beginners, intermediate, advanced and artist – and drama – individual and class instruction.

Though only five-feet-four-inches tall, Jessie always dressed immaculately and wore her dark hair in tight curls. Sometimes she could be seen at the Severs Hotel, having lunch with various gentlemen she knew in town. “She had on her diamonds and beautiful clothes that came from New York.”

From 1928 to 1932, she coached performers in both Hollywood and New York. In 1930, she lived in Manhattan to study advanced piano under Spanish virtuoso, Alberta Jonas. She returned to Muskogee around 1936 but fewer students returned to her studio due to the effects of the Great Depression. However, her financial circumstances improved immeasurably when she married James Simms in June 1936.

After her marriage, Jessie ceased teaching music and elocution and closed her School of Fine Arts forever – a sad day for music lovers. Jessie died in August 1939 at age 60. The pink iconic building fell in disrepair over the years due to neglect and was torn down by the city in 2021 due to its dilapidated condition.