



**Helen P. Cole**

Helen P. Cole age 87 of Denison Texas passed away February 13, 2014 at Texoma Medical Center. She was born May 11, 1926 in Texarkana Texas to Otha Perry and Helen V. Cole. She is survived by friends Wesley Hunt and Karlotta Swinger.

Funeral services will be 11:00am, Saturday, February 22, 2014 at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church 530 W. Walker in Denison with Rev. A. McLean and Rev. M. Braxton officiating. Burial will follow at Fairview Cemetery. Public viewing will be from 10:00am until service time at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church.

Funeral services are under the direction of Scoggins Funeral Home in Howe Texas.

You may sign the online [quest book](http://www.scogginsfuneralhome.com) at [www.scogginsfuneralhome.com](http://www.scogginsfuneralhome.com)

**Visitation:**

10:00 am to 11:00 am on Saturday, February 22, 2014 at Mt. Zion Baptist Church 530 W Walker Street Denison Texas ([map/driving directions](#))

**Helen Cole: Former Member of the Prairie View A&M College Co-eds all girls jazz band**

**Biography:**

**Helen P. Cole** was born May 11, 1926 in Denison, Texas. She graduated from Terrell High School in 1943. After graduation she enrolled at Prairie State College (now Prairie View A&M University) in the fall of 1943, where she pursued a business degree. Helen followed in the footsteps of another classmate to Prairie View, Margaret Bradshaw (class of 41) where she joined the Prairie Co-eds, an all-girls jazz band. Two other classmates Elizabeth Thomas Smith and Clora Bryant also joined her in the band. Sherrie Tucker in her book "Swing Shift "All Girl Bands of the 1940s" refers to them as the "Terrell High Contingent." In her book Sherrie quotes the following words of Ms. Cole.

"The band is the only way that I had of trying to put myself through school." Helen played the French Horn in high school but she says she "switched to drums on a dare." "I was president of the class," she explained, "and I was putting on a program. The program had to consist of kids in my immediate class, see? And it was a musical. We had everybody in our class but the drummer. So I had to appoint someone to play the drums." The actual drummer for the band, Leon Price was in another class, but his brother David Price was in Helen's class, so she decided to appoint him. "I said, "Well since you live together, you should be able to learn how to play." But he said he was not going to do it. And so I said, "Well let me show you how." And then I just sat down and started playing. Then the teacher said, "Helen you should play." "And I said, Oh no, no, no. I can't do that." And he said, "Yes you will. You will do all right." I said, "No, no, no." "Well He made me play anyway. That's how I got started." And the rest is history.



Helen Cole (rear center) is an African American woman, who displayed courage by playing drums with a big band when diversity was not embraced by society. She was a pioneer who paved the way for female musicians today. Ms. Cole proved that standing in the midst of adversity can bring about positive changes for all. As a member of the Prairie View College Co-eds during World War II, her courage and dedication to uplifting the spirit of service members during this time of need was beneficial to the United States Army and the United States of America.

### Helen P. Cole Continued

After Helen joined the Co-eds in the fall of 1943, they began to tour, starting in the Houston, TX area to get accustomed to playing before large groups. They would play intermissions for the more notable groups. The list of big names includes Ella Fitzgerald and former Ellington trumpet player Cootie Williams, who at the time was leading his own band. Helen also recalls performing at intermission for an appearance by prizefighter the late Joe Louis. At the end of the 1946 tour, the Co-eds disbanded. Helen and Bert Etta Davis (and others of a combo) continued to perform with a smaller version of the band, no longer affiliated with the college.

Helen elected to pursue her career in music rather than complete her business degree at Prairie View. Being from a single parent family with only her mother and herself, she felt it was the best decision for her. Helen stayed with the combo and they were booked by Ferguson Brothers, the same agency that booked the Darlings of Rhythm.

Later Sweethearts of Rhythm star trumpet player the late Ernestine "Tiny" Davis took over the group, which was booked by Joe Glaser. As Tiny Davis' Hell-Divers, the combo toured fourteen countries. The group consisted Tiny Davis on trumpet, Maurine Smith on piano and Helen Cole on drums. In all Helen spent twenty-five years in combos, winding up as a duo with pianist Maurine Smith. When Maurine died in 1971, Helen returned to business school to complete her accounting degree. She returned to Denison to live and worked as a switchboard operator, then a bookkeeper with a local bank until her retirement.

In her own words, here are some of Helen's fondest memories. "I sat in with Duke Ellington's band I can't remember the town but Duke was talking with customers when his drummer asked me to sit in. It didn't take him long to get back to the stand to see who it was playing. It was the biggest thrill I ever had. I also played on a circuit with Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald and many others I can't think of right now."

Helen was presented the United States Army's Commander's award for public service. This award was presented for her outstanding civilian service to the United States Army during World War II while entertaining troops from **1943-1944** as a musician in the first all-female big bands, the Prairie View Co-eds.

Helen was an African American woman, who displayed courage by playing drums with a big band when diversity was not embraced by society. She was a pioneer who paved the way for female musicians today. She proved that standing in the midst of adversity can bring about positive changes for all.



**Helen Cole**

**Prairie View A&M Co-eds All Girls Jazz Band**