

The History of Riding Aside

If you have been lucky enough to be on the spectator line at the Cedar Creek reenactment over the last three years, you have been privileged to catch a sidesaddle demonstration by the Victorian Ladies Aside. These ladies recreate visions of the lost art of riding in a sidesaddle. Led by Janet Brown of Bumpass, VA, mounted on her magnificent 5-gaited American Saddlebred, Magician's Thunder, every attempt has been made to accurately portray a proper lady of the 1860's. In the attached picture, Janet's riding habit is made of hand-woven, hand-dyed butternut jean wool to reflect her impression of a Confederate Officer's wife.

The proper term for riding in a sidesaddle is "riding aside". This means that the lady is riding with both legs on the same side of the saddle. A gentleman rides "astride" – one leg on each side of the saddle. In their wisdom, our ancestors decided that the female form was not at its best riding astride – our legs are too round and our spines too long, and so, the 'sidesaddle' evolved. Today, the sidesaddle, and all it entails, has unfortunately been almost completely forced out of existence. Few people today are capable of schooling and riding a horse so that it goes well under a sidesaddle.

Turn to old chronicles, stroll through the art galleries of Europe, or examine any extensive collection of equestrian pictures, and you will soon discover that, prior to the 15th century, women were almost always pictured riding astride. The sidesaddle got the nickname as the "Saddle of Queens" because frequently queens were pictured riding aside while their ladies in waiting were pictured riding astride.

The first step towards the creation of a definite sidesaddle was in actual fact just a little foot-rest, called a *planchette*. It was designed by Anne of Bohemia, the wife of Richard II of England, in the 14th century. The lady would sit completely sideways on the horse (as if sitting in a chair) and place her feet on the footrest. The saddle contained an upright pommel similar to that of a western saddle today. The horse was usually led by a groom walking on the ground, with the lady having no control over the horse. The design of the sidesaddle went through minor changes over the next 150 years. In the 16th century, Catherine de' Medici, Queen of France, made the next major change. She created the 2nd upright pommel. She could then place her leg between the 2 pommels with her body facing more forward than sideways, pulling her skirt up in front to reveal her pretty hose and dainty ankle, while allowing the gown to trail gracefully down behind in a style that persisted until well into the 19th century. Catherine was very vain and possessed an extremely shapely pair of legs and a love of the decorative stockings that had just come into vogue, she liked nothing better than to display both on every possible occasion. Legend also has it that the 2nd pommel could have been invented by Elizabeth I of England. Elizabeth was also very vain but, unlike Catherine, not particularly proud of legs that, according to malicious gossip, were somewhat too thin.

Tales of queens and countesses to the contrary, it is unlikely that many women, no matter how daring, could have possibly ridden 'hard' in the modern sense of the word, seated on a sidesaddle. As late as 1776 a French riding instructor claimed that when he attempted to jump a fence in a woman's saddle he was obliged to stick his spur into the leather of the saddle in order to retain his balance, and would have been unseated when the

horse shied unexpectedly had he not immediately thrown his leg over the side.

At last we come to what might be termed the horsewoman's Magna Carta or Declaration of Independence; the great day upon when the leaping-head (or third pommel) was invented. It was invented in 1830 by Jules Charles Pellier of France. The leaping head is a curved horn placed on the side of the saddle at about the level of the stirrup bar. This allows a woman to lock her right leg around the upright pommel while shoving her left thigh up into the curved portion of the leaping-head. This has the effect of locking her into the saddle. The new type of saddle was at first rejected by the English on the grounds that it was dangerous and that in case of a fall a woman was certain to be hung up, though why the third, more than the two other pommels, should cause such an accident was never made clear. American women were apparently even slower than their English and French sisters to adopt this miracle invention, so that as late as 1884 Mrs. Karr, in her book *The American Horsewoman*, refers to the leaping-head as something of a novelty. For several years after 1830 the saddles had 3 pommels but gradually the pommel to the far right of the rider's right leg disappeared.

Riding aside reached the height of popularity during the late 19th century. However, it was still unlikely that many women had the athletic ability necessary to ride much faster than a walk. In fact, in Hyde Park in London and Central Park in New York, a lady was not allowed to ride at any gait above a walk. She would have always been accompanied by a gentleman escort; who rode on her right side so as not to hide the beauty of her riding costume.

Today's modern sidesaddles all contain a leaping-head and upright pommel along with other safety features. A balance strap was added to keep the saddle from slipping from side to side. A safety stirrup has been added to allow the lady's left foot to be released from the stirrup in the event of a fall. The seat of the saddle is completely flat to allow the lady to sit more upright instead of the dipped seat saddles of the 19th century that forced the lady to always feel as if she were riding uphill.

Before the 18th century, no special costume had been devised for aside riding and women usually wore on a horse exactly the same clothes that they did afoot. The extravagant skirts of the period certainly did not make things easier for them either in riding or mounting. Riding horses is a very dirty business, with the sweat from the horse combined with the dust and debris of the road. Riding costumes were designed to follow fashion trends and often displayed a military theme. Long skirts were worn to completely hide a lady's legs. Flapping around the horses' backs, they frightened so many horses that the belief arose that a horse had to be specially trained to be a lady's mount. Apparently no woman had as yet thought of wearing breeches under her skirt, or, if she had entertained such an immodest idea, she had lacked the courage to put it into effect. In fact, until the late 18th century, ladies wore absolutely *nothing* under their skirts. This practice evolved to wearing lace-trimmed drawers under their skirts. As a final mark of emancipation women of the 19th century were at long last allowed to replace their drawers with long black tights or riding trousers that matched their skirts.

One of the most famous equestriennes of her time was the Empress Elizabeth of Austria. By the matchless grace in which she sat her horse, she cast an indefinable glamour that still lies over our vision of a lady in a sidesaddle. Having ridden with her father since childhood, Elizabeth

continued to do so through her entire life. She traveled all over Europe and Great Britain attending the hunts of the areas. She had numerous riding costumes that she had to be sewn into daily.

Another story is that of Mrs. Duberly, wife of a captain in the 8th Hussars, who went out to the Crimea on a transport, and when only just arrived in 1854 received an urgent message from her husband to hurry up, not to wait for breakfast, but to gallop out to Balaclava on the horse he was sending her, where, so he said, he would show her what ‘promised’ to be a very hot battle. Accordingly, this Victorian lady in her most ladylike Victorian riding clothes missed her breakfast and was rewarded by being an eye-witness to the Charge of the Light Brigade! All of which goes to show that our great-grandmothers were not always quite as helpless as we have been led to believe.

At the beginning of the 20th century the apron skirt was invented. This skirt is exactly what its name implies: an apron made of heavy cloth just long enough to show the stirrup foot and hanging down from the knee in a straight box-like line. With this single exception to femininity, the modern horsewoman dresses for the sidesaddle exactly as she would if she were riding astride. A modern woman, riding in a modern sidesaddle, can do anything on a horse that an astride rider can do. Riding in an English style saddle, we do dressage, saddleseat, and hunter/jumper and can jump just as high as astride. Riding in a Western style saddle we can barrel race or do reining and roping in a sidesaddle.

Today, there are over 300 women in the United States that ride aside with grace and charm. There are several organizations devoted to aside riding in the U.S. – The International Side Saddle Organization (www.sidesaddle.com) and the Liberty Network (

[network.org](#)) being some of the major ones. Janet is a regional representative for the International Side Saddle Organization and can be reached at jbrown@victorianladiesaside.com. She would be happy to answer any questions you might have.