

Museum News: Aside, or Astride...That is the Question

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator
Terrell County Memorial Museum

In the new Ranch Room at the Terrell County Memorial Museum one can find a wondrous piece of the leatherworker's art...an authentic Western sidesaddle. This old-style sidesaddle was made for a big horse and roughly twice the size of a modern sidesaddle. The story of the sidesaddle is a fascinating subject.

Earliest evidence of horse riding indicates that all who rode horses, both male and female, rode astride the animal's back with legs firmly planted on either side. There is some evidence of sidesaddle use in early 9th Century Europe, but before that, women rode like men, usually wearing divided skirts or breeches.

But, the lady credited with introduction of the sidesaddle to all women of bearing and peirage was Anne of Bohemia - 1366-1394 - Queen of England and devoted wife of Richard II. In her 1000-mile maiden trip across Europe to meet her intended, she rode an early sidesaddle to protect her chastity. As the royal train and retinue slowly passed through village and city the populace was impressed with the beautiful young princess and her demure horsemanship. Use of the sidesaddle spread among women of breeding and aristocracy and soon became the hallmark of good manners and chaste behavior.



Photo: TCMM



Photo: Public Domain

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The sidesaddle that Princess Anne used was nothing more than a padded chair facing the left side of the horse, with a wooden plank for a footrest. She did look grand in her royal trappings, almost as if sitting on her royal throne. Eventually the sidesaddle evolved to what we consider the traditional form, basically a broad saddle with two horns or pommels and one stirrup, facing the horse's left side.

Each part has a name, according to the diagram below. The fancifully named "leaping" pommel was developed in conjunction with the fixed head or top pommel to enable the equestrienne to remain on the horse when it was at high gallop or leaping



Photo: Public Domain

Princess Anne-style sidesaddle

over fences. She wedged herself onto the saddle using the pommels and held on for dear life.

The saddle we have at the museum is built in the Western saddle tradition with much leather tooling and decoration, but much broader than modern sidesaddles. The only other difference between it and a Western saddle, other than the unique pommels and single stirrup, is that the cantle, or raised back portion is almost flat on the sidesaddle.

Terrell County - Its Past - Its People, our county history book, has a few comments about sidesaddles, but not much. In her wonderful remembrance of life in Terrell County in the past, Myrtle Carter Higgins had this to say: "I used to ride a sidesaddle before we moved to Terrell County. No nice girl ever rode astride. They would put me on a horse, fix the men's leather leggings around me some way and let me "split the brush" after the milch cows. I had to go up a lane to another pasture for them, and Mama could tell every time when I ran them, as they would not give as much milk as they should. It was a lot of fun when I had a lively horse. My, I'd hate to try to stay on a sidesaddle now, much less run the cattle through the brush. Brush and prickly pear were so thick that in some places one had to back off a trail almost."



Photo: Public Domain

Mrs. Esther Stace, shown riding a sidesaddle and clearing 6' 6" at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, 1915.

Elma Dill Russell Spencer, wife of Judge R. F. Spencer and partner in the Big Canyon Ranch, was quite the sidesaddle aficionado. She was known for her horsemanship and that she preferred the sidesaddle almost exclusively. Charlena Chandler of Independence Creek reports that her grandmother rode a sidesaddle, but, sadly, she left no anecdotes to share.

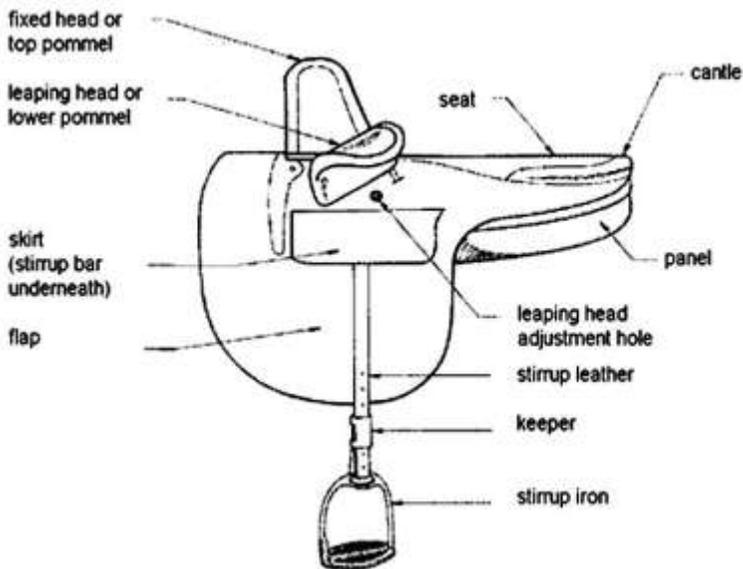
Mrs. Spencer and Mrs. Chandler were indicative of our earliest Terrell County Anglo settlers, who came from English and Scottish traditions where ladies did not go into the field to work cows, sheep and goats. Such proper ladies would hardly even consider wearing breeches or split-skirt dresses. In this day modern ranch wives are full partners in the business and have no qualms about joining the men to work stock and do the chores, while wearing “britches” and riding astride.

After a long run of popularity, the sidesaddle began to fall out of favor as more women rode astride and ignored their expected gender roles in the saddle. However, there is still a cadre of riders who use the saddles. Sidesaddle instructor and horsemanship judge Billie Whited maintains that when “properly constructed and ridden, the aside seat is



Photo: Public Domain

The “leaping” pommel (r) and the “fixed head” pommel (l) in action.



Modern sidesaddle

Illustration: Oregon Regency Society

so secure that some therapeutic riding programs use them for disabled riders... Many breeds and organizations offer divisions or classes for the sidesaddle rider, or allow aside riders to compete in open classes.” “From barrel racing and reining to hunt field and dressage to costumes and parades,” according to Whited, “the demand for sidesaddles is on the rise.”

Though the Age of Elegance has passed into history, there will always be those who prefer the old ways. For now, though, our sidesaddle at the Museum is evidence of a much more genteel time that reached even into Terrell County, indeed, all of the Big Bend. Along with our Western saddles, it makes a fine example of local ranch life, of a time when rodeos and ropings rubbed elbows with polo matches and elegant country parties.