

## Oddities 2: Sidesaddles vetoed

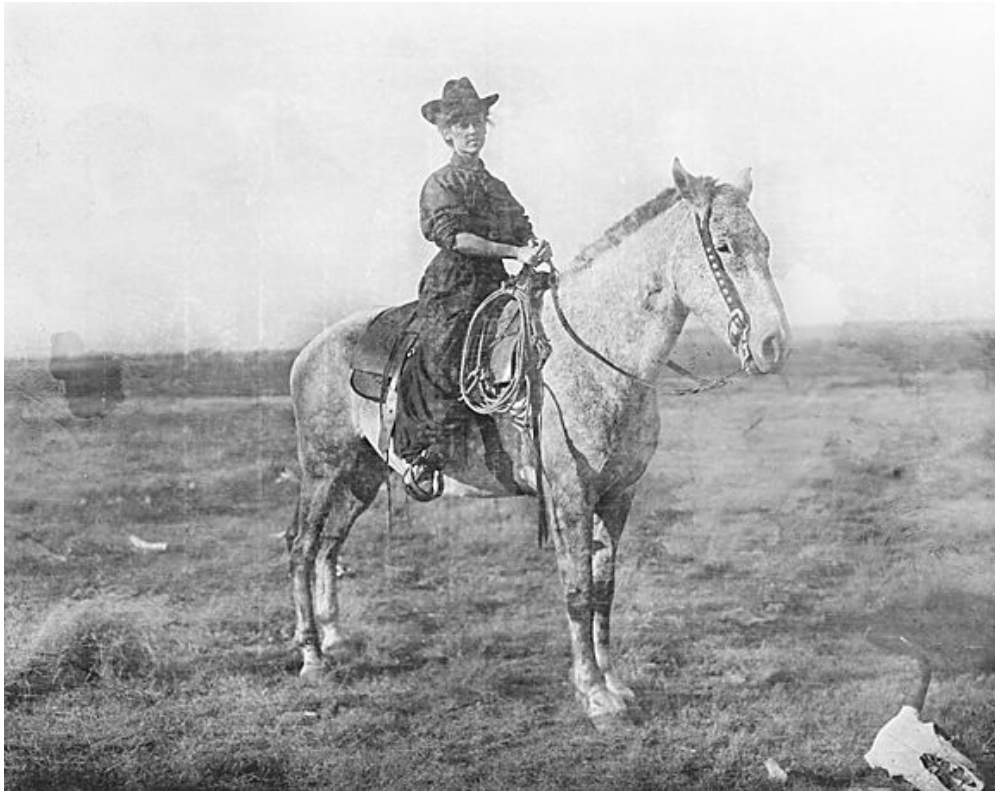
Arizona's Rim Country was no place for Eastern high-society, and if females pranced about on sidesaddles it would be the laughingstock of pioneers and ranchers. But there was one Eastern heiress, Nathalie Huntress Smith, who came to Arizona for her health and being a horsewoman brought her sidesaddle with her. However, she soon learned that sidesaddles were not only unacceptable socially they were impractical "out West." When she married local rancher Lewis Pyle in 1952 she was soon "riding astride" like all the other local girls and ladies.



A woman riding "astride" a horse was considered indecent as late as into the 20th century. Even the term was considered obscene. Rather, she must ride sidesaddle. Around army camps the "camp followers" did not hesitate to ride astride, but they wore divided skirts which, when not riding, had a flap that buttoned across giving the appearance of a tight fitting, long skirt. Such women could not be encumbered by the hoops and petticoats of the times.

In the Rim Country it was different. Riding astride the horse was a necessity if a woman was to help the men round up cattle on the range. Nor would a sidesaddle do for those rough rides into town from the ranch, or to the schoolhouse. The divided skirt was

reserved for more fancy times, like dances. Once the flap was released she could ride astride the horse. Upon arriving at her destination she rebuttoned the flap across the front and appeared in full skirt for the occasion.



Sidesaddles were brought to Europe from the Middle East by the returning Crusaders, and caught on as an accommodation for the long gowns of the ladies. The design went through several evolutions, but by the 1600s she was hooking her right knee around the padded horn and facing forward. Nevertheless, a skittish horse, a race downhill or a sudden jump could put the lady on the ground. The perch was not all that secure and mounting and dismounting was difficult, requiring the help of someone else.

Horse and saddle expert Dr. Eldon Bowman experimented with sidesaddles and pronounced them safe and comfortable. He said in an interview, "She is sitting on her one bun, and on the backside of her one leg. That gives her a very firm foundation. One of the ladies from Fort Verde rode her sidesaddle on my mule down to Indian Gardens at the Grand Canyon and back. She was perfectly comfortable the whole time. Up in Glacier Park one time when I was in the Forest Service, the guy who did the shoeing went out with me and as an experiment rode a sidesaddle for half an hour. There wasn't anyone around to see him. Real men don't ride sidesaddles. He said he could ride that OK; it was

comfortable. The sidesaddle is probably a lot more stable than we give it credit for. The women probably could ride this rough country on it and keep up with the men.”

However the Rim Country women decided against the sidesaddle. Some female settlers coming to central Arizona from Texas brought sidesaddles with them. Sharlott Hall, historian and poet of the Arizona Territory, actually herded cattle from her sidesaddle but once was thrown and injured. Finally, the dislike of uncomfortable positions, being thrown to the ground, and the lack of freedom imposed by a full skirt on female riders caused reason to prevail over propriety and women boldly rode like the men.

Lena Ellison tells, in an oral interview, “Up there on the Apple Farm Ranch (Ellison Creek) in the Mogollon Mountains, the trails were so rough we had to ride horseback wherever we went. I did not go very much, but when I did go I had to ride horseback. We rode sidesaddles for two or three years after we came. At first we all rode sidesaddles, then when we began to ride astride we designed our own outfits.”

Fritz Taylor told how his mother, Angela Belluzzi Taylor, cut the leather out of her sidesaddle to repair the children’s shoes. In Payson’s Rim Country Museum the sidesaddle on display belonged to a Mrs. Skinner who rode it about 1898.

There were priorities on Rim Country ranches, and sidesaddles just didn’t fit those priorities when horseback was the only way to get around.