

## **Before the Ride: Modern Considerations for Human Safety and Equine Welfare and**

### **Equestrienne CDVs Part 2: Portraits of Riding Habits**

by Dr. Holly Ray

Before you borrow an antique saddle and gallop off like Annie Etheridge to your next historical event, there are several important principles to learn to keep you and your mount safe. While it is exciting to find a period saddle, most are suitable only for display and educational purposes. Many are fragile with dried out leather, and the rigging has a good chance of tearing away when the saddle is cinched. The foundation on which saddles are built is called a “tree,” and this must be examined to make sure it is stable and without damage before even thinking of riding in it. It is also important to not pretend your modern astride saddle is a sidesaddle by slinging your leg over the horn; the two types of saddles are balanced differently, and in doing so there is risk in injuring your horse’s back.

Sidesaddles can be some of the most difficult saddles to fit, because they must fit the horse and leg length of the rider. Horses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tended to be thinner and less muscled than our horses today, so finding an antique tree that is wide enough for your horse is not an easy venture. Using a too-narrow saddle will pinch the withers, causing pain, sores, an unwillingness to cooperate, and a potential injury to yourself when your horse will (rightfully so!) try to unload you. Many of the seats on antique sidesaddles are smaller than what we require today, therefore making them unrideable even for an average sized woman. It is my opinion that a properly fitting newer sidesaddle would be better for modern use in most circumstances. While it will not be 100% period correct, that is a small concession for safety. Once you are in the saddle, rest assured that not much of it will even be visible.

One major safety feature lacking on most antique saddles is a leaping head/pommel/horn. The leaping head is the pommel that goes over your left knee, allowing a strong scissor grip during an emergency, or for security when jumping. It was invented in the 1830s by Jules Pellier, but did not gain popularity and widespread use until the post-Civil War era. Saddles without a leaping head are not considered safe for activities beyond a casual walk.

Attire can also be considered paramount to safety. **Ladies did not ride in their crinolines/hoops.** Even if you think you can bunch your hoop or cage and hold it down, do not do this. Not only is it gauche and unbecoming, it could pop up and spook your horse; furthermore, in the event of a fall, you could be seriously injured if it got caught on the saddle and you were dragged. Sometimes in CDV images of ladies wearing riding habits the subject may be seen in a crinoline for the purpose of the photograph, but this does not translate to mounted attire. A petticoat and trousers that matched the habit skirt would, however, be appropriate.

Mounted riders were most often photographed from the “near side” (the side of the saddle on which the skirt hangs freely, which is most often the left side), showing the full length of the skirt, but four images in this 4-part discussion are photographed on the “off side” which allows us to visualize the saddle.

The CDV section below will contain my interpretation of each image with a summary of both salient and subtle points. Images are from the 1860s unless otherwise noted for comparative purposes.

When taking your horse to historical events, some other important items on your planning checklist should include:

- Does the venue allow horses on the property? Find out BEFORE you get there.
- Will there be suitable accommodation for your horse? Your pampered show horse will have a stressful time tied to a picket line if he has only known a big box stall.
- You will need a Coggins test for interstate travel.
- Horses should be up-to-date on vaccines. Check the area to which you are travelling to see if there are preventable endemic diseases in that locale i.e. Potomac Horse Fever.
- Take enough grain and hay from home. Do not rely on forage as there may be no grass available. Make sure you will have a safe water source; if not, bring water from home.
- Be courteous and clean up your horse's manure where appropriate.

- 1) Oakland, CA, late 1860s. The teenage girls appear to be twins, or at least sisters. Their wool habits with coat sleeves are heavily decorated with buttons at the armscye. They each hold gauntlets and an ivory park whip with silk tassel, and each wears a watch and chain.

*Ray, Image 1. From the collection of the author. Used with permission.*

- 2) Scotland, back inscription: "Welsh (referring to Welsh pony?) Ewerhille." Plain habit of thicker wool or velvet has coat sleeves. Her lovely hat has a curved brim and bears a large ribbon flower/bow on the front. Since the subject is photographed from the offside, we can see that the saddle is an example of a transitional 3-horned sidesaddle bearing a handkerchief pocket. She carries a ferruled park whip.

*Ray, Image 2. From the collection of the author. Used with permission.*

- 3) No back mark. The plain wool habit bears modified coat sleeves to allow the puffy undersleeves to show. She is wearing gloves, neck bow, earrings, and is wearing a shallow crowned hat with plume and veil. She carries a very fancy ivory handled park whip.

*Ray, Image 3. From the collection of the author. Used with permission.*

- 4) Two tintypes of upper class Cora Moffit. The skirt is likely wool, and her Zouave jacket is heavily decorated with braid. Her Mousquetaire hat bears a huge feather pad and long trailing tulle veiling. Her horse wears a crupper, martingale, and a double bridle with tassel (we often see tassels on Victorian bridles).

*Ray, Images 4 and 4a. From the collection of the author. Used with permission.*

- 5) Stereoview, Chestnut Hill area of Philadelphia. Child is wearing a sacque coat trimmed on the sleeves and border. Her hat is heavily decorated with feathers. A hitching post is noted, and the gorgeous stone barn and stately home illustrate that this is a wealthy family. Little sister supervises from the step.

*Ray, Image 5. From the collection of the author. Used with permission.*

- 6) Ambrotype, late 1850s/early 1860s. The child is wearing a matching skirt and sacque coat. I believe she is using a rail saddle and the pony is wearing a crupper. Note that the skirt nearly touches the ground.

*Ray, Image 6. From the collection of the author. Used with permission.*

*Dr. Holly is a veterinarian and a certified sidesaddle instructor. She would be happy answering any questions you may have about getting started with your sidesaddle adventures.*