

Setting A *Side-Saddle* Jumping Record

Madame Marantette, born as Emma Peek, secured a spot in history after clearing fences that towered over 7' tall.

By Anna Sochocky

When Emma Peek was born on Sept. 5, 1849, women lacked many of the rights they have today. They didn't have the right to vote in the United States, and they couldn't own property outside of marriage. But they *could* ride, and that's just what Emma Peek did.

The future side-saddle high jumper grew up on a farm in Mendon, Michigan. Her father, John Peek, paved his own way as one of the Forty-Niners in a rush to California's goldfields and later claimed his own place in Michigan pioneer history with his wife, Matilda.

From the age of 7, Emma demonstrated a skill for the saddle and an instinct for training horses, and she appeared at county fairs, on racetracks and in endurance competitions. Emma became a fixture on the equine circuit and built a reputation as the competitor to beat.

Yet, her ambitions and drive to see the world beyond the town of Mendon were delayed. Emma was married in secret to Patrick Henry Charles "Charlie" Marantette, the son of a strict French-Canadian Catholic fur trapper, but after in-laws learned of the couple's subterfuge, family pressure forced Charlie to seek a divorce and have the marriage annulled. Emma was free to ride into her future.

D. H. Harris, a silver-tongued promoter and Kentucky colonel, swept into Mendon in 1882 with one goal: to find an equestrienne to headline his traveling troupe of performers. Harris, an accomplished equestrian showman, spotted Emma and recruited her to ride for his troupe. Enamored by her skill in working with horses and training them to respond to her commands with ease, Harris vowed to take Emma from the ranks of amateur to professional.

Emma became Madame Marantette, and she married Harris many years later.

The Harris-Marantette troupe toured extensively, and with Harris' money, acquired superb show horses that were trained to race under a harness and execute the high jump. Madame Marantette gained success on her mount Evergreen, with his ability to perform 12 distinct gaits, including some of the movements that riders know today, such as extended walk, half-pass, passage, and piaffe, to name a few.

MADAM MARANTETTE ON HER CHAMPION HIGH-JUMPING HORSE, "ST. PATRICK."
WORLD'S RECORD, 7 FEET, 10¼ INCHES.
MENDON, MICHIGAN.



HISTORICAL ARCHIVE PHOTO

As the Marantette stable swelled, transport across the country and later worldwide proved a problem. Harris acquired and rebuilt a private Pullman car, and the husband-and-wife team traveled with multiple horses, a selection of dogs, a special buggy for driving, and in the end, an ornery ostrich called Gaucho trained to harness with one of Marantette's equines.

Once nationally known, Emma and her stable joined the Great Barnum and Bailey Circus, touring the United States and performing for royalty, including King Edward in the United Kingdom.

Though Marantette's circus career would last over 40 years, her lasting fame came not from the big top but the high jump.

HER FIRST RECORD

Sitting side-saddle dates to the Middle Ages, allowing a woman to ride modestly with fine clothing draped over her legs, but for Emma, riding side-saddle meant more than

decorum; it meant control over her horse.

Emma stood firm in her conviction that riding side-saddle exhibited true horsemanship. In an interview with the *Kansas City Star* in 1910, Emma gave reasons for preferring the side-saddle to riding astride.

"Ride astride? Well, I should say not," she said. "Never in my tomboy days out on the farm did I ride that way. Really, I think it is awfully uncomfortable for a woman, and no one would try to contend that it is pretty. You'll notice that all the girls who ride astride sit forward in their saddles, not back and free like the men. They say it makes you look lopsided to sit sideways. Am I lopsided? Look at me."

By the time Emma was tackling massive jumps, the side-saddle had undergone its own revolution with the addition of the second pommel. Also known as the leaping head or horn, it increases the rider's freedom of movement and security in the saddle and opened avenues for women like Emma to stay on a horse at a gallop or jump high fences.

But Emma's first record-setter, Filemaker, didn't start out on the right hoof. Fractious and abused, the horse that would first carry Madame Marantette to success suffered from a fierce temper and aggressive personality. Though discouraged from buying Filemaker in 1890, Emma didn't heed the warning.

"Horses are very much like men," she once mused. "Sometimes they must be humored and made to think that they are having their own way when in reality they are doing what you want them to do. I control horses by kindness and the proper amount of firmness. If they are good, they get sugar; if they are stubborn, they get the whip—but little of the last."

Describing Filemaker as the best horse she ever had, Emma never carried a whip or used spurs on the horse. The rider must stay out of the horse's way, according to Emma.

Emma would ride Filemaker up to the jump slowly and bring him closer to the fence, so the horse navigated jumps from almost a standing position, appearing to float straight

up close to the barrier with hind feet tucked over the obstacle.

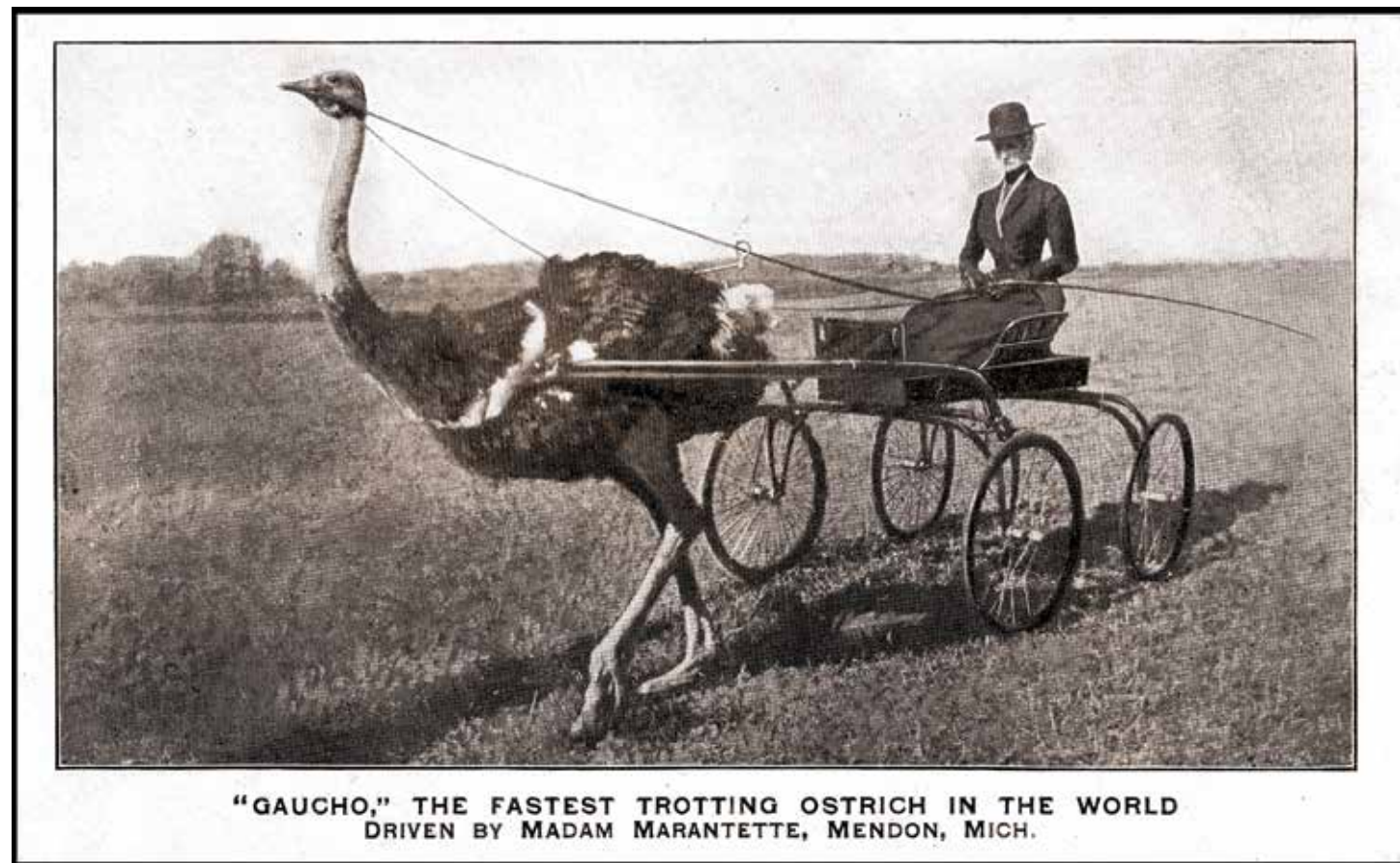
Filemaker and Emma set and broke their own records within a year of training. During an 1891 exhibition, the pair cleared bars at 7'3½" before going on to achieve their record-setting height of 7'4½" in Taunton, Massachusetts, that October.

Filemaker died in 1896, five years after making history, but Emma found a worthy successor in St. Patrick, a 2-year-old 16-hand dun Irish hunter who arrived on their farm from Dublin in 1901.

ST. PATRICK'S CHALLENGE

"I will jump with St. Patrick, who now holds the World's Record of 7' 10¼", over stiff bars, for a purse of one thousand dollars, the money to be deposited in the First State Savings Bank of Three Rivers, Michigan," read the challenge laid down by Madame Marantette in April 1912.

Gaucho gained fame as Madame Marantette's trotting ostrich that she trained to harness race alone and with a horse.



HISTORICAL ARCHIVE PHOTO

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Though maintaining a grueling travel and exhibition schedule, Emma understood that St. Patrick showed even more talent than Filemaker. In 1902, one year into the pair's partnership, St. Patrick cleared a fence measuring 6'8" without difficulty.

Emma's pursuit of beating Filemaker's high jump record of 7'4½" inches began in earnest. And at Recreation Park in Kalamazoo, Michigan, on Sept. 30, 1904, the duo landed a 7'10½" jump. They continued touring together, regularly clearing fences higher than 7', for numerous years.

"People used to have a way of asking me when I would retire, and I would tell them from year to year that it would be the next," Emma told the Birmingham News in 1913, when she was 65. "But each fall I could not resist the call of riding, and I began to consider why I should retire if I could go on doing as well and better than I had previously. Now, I am determined to ride until there is nothing of me."

The last public performance of Madame Marantette and St. Patrick celebrated the rebuilding of the village of Mendon, Michigan, after a tragic fire in 1916. Two years later, rye and weeds along the fences of St. Patrick's retirement field caught fire. After Emma discovered that her beloved horse's hind legs were severely burned, she raced to save him with the help of a local veterinarian. Due to the severity of the burns, Emma thought it best to put him out of his misery in 1918.

Though newspapers of the time reported her high jumps as world records, Emma's achievements—most of which took place at exhibitions or circus performances instead of competitions—were never officially verified to earn her a title.

At the age of 73, Madame Marantette died Jan. 26, 1922, after a 10-day bout with pneumonia at her farm in Mendon. Two days before her death, Emma made her will directing that her snow-white horse, Chief Geronimo, and her white poodle, Tiny, be destroyed, and that her dog be buried in her casket. *🐾*

The Other Record Holders

While Emma "Madame Marantette" Peek was setting side-saddle high jump records in the United States, riders in other countries were also testing their limits.

Australian rider Esther Martha Mumford Stace set the Australian showgrounds alight with her debut ride at the 1891 Walcha Show when she was 20. Competing in the ladies jumping contest against two other competitors, Stace topped a fence of 5'6" before the show referee and judges abruptly halted the contest, citing safety concerns.

It would be a 12-year-old gelding named Emu Plains that ferried Stace, known for her scarlet competition coat as well as her riding skills, to stardom. Standing at 16 hands, Emu Plains had already demonstrated his jumping skill before the 1915 Sydney Royal Easter Show by securing wins in 1910, 1912 and 1914. Stocky in physique and fractious in nature, Emu Plains required Stace's skilled and delicate control.

The 1915 show had already been hobbled by the breakout of World War I in 1914, and the number of riders and horses commissioned to serve gutted the event. But complications didn't deter Stace, and in the spring of 1915, she steered Emu Plains over a 6'6"

PHOTO COURTESY SUSAN OAKES



Susan Oakes and SIEC Atlas cleared a 6'8" wall in 2013 to earn a place in the Guinness World Records.

fence in the ladies' high jump competition.

Stace died young, at the age of 46 and having been widowed for more than 20 years. Only her daughter attended the funeral as her two sons were fighting on the front lines. The Catholic Press reported that at Stace's burial, "The hearse was followed by a led horse carrying her side-saddle, draped with the many ribbons she won during her long career in the show ring; then came a large possession of relatives and friends."

But though her achievements were impressive, no one would enter the official world record books until recent years.

Susan Oakes grew up in a riding family in Great Britain surrounded

by ponies, and she started riding at 4. Watching her grandmother and great aunts riding side-saddle, Oakes concluded that if she could ride astride, she could ride side-saddle.

Like her parents, Oakes came from a hunting and point-to-point background, and she also learned how to jump puissance walls over 5'. Oakes warmed up with grand prix show jumpers at the Aintree National Show (England), and she set a British side-saddle jumping record there by clearing a 5'9" obstacle. Oakes set her sights on beating Stace's record after seeing a photo of her and her winning jump.

But jumping side-saddle has its drawbacks. "It's very difficult to see a stride when you are riding side-

saddle," said Oakes. "I have to walk my strides and put a marker down so that I know when to take off."

On October 24, 2013, a videographer, photographers, a Fédération Equestre Internationale official, the CEO of Horse Sport Ireland and others held their collective breaths when Oakes entered the Equestrian Sports Training Facility arena near Dublin.

The red-and-white brick wall loomed large before Oakes, but she cleared the 6'8" puissance wall on her 17-year-old stallion SIEC Atlas. The same day, Oakes also cleared a 6'5" triple bar with SIEC Oberon while riding side-saddle. Six years later, in 2020, she was approved as a Guinness World Records title holder for her achievements.

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