

## American Dressage Legends: Kyra Downton

*By way of Russia and China, she introduced the US to Grand Prix dressage*

**E**specially in the early days of American dressage, the pioneers of our sport—a number of them immigrants—had some remarkable stories of how they'd arrived in this country and become involved in the equestrian world here. But perhaps none had a rockier road than Kyra Geintze Downton.

she told the San Francisco-area *Country Almanac* in a 1986 interview, the family subsisted on the barest of foodstuffs. Then her father sent Kyra and her mother to Shanghai for safety. The young girl, who would live in Shanghai until after World War II, did odd jobs to earn money, including developing an artistic talent that would resurface later in her life. She also managed to ride again, becoming involved with racehorses and hunters—until “the Japanese came and put me in a concentration camp. That’s another two years of starvation,” Downton told the *Almanac*.

(Although this account could lead one to assume that Downton was barely scraping by during the bulk of her years in China, close friends paint a different picture. As the well-known dressage judge J. Ashton Moore recounted for the California Dressage Society’s “Millennium” issue of *Dressage Letters* in 2000, “She had a stable of race horses which raced successfully at the magnificent Shanghai Racecourse, and she had a stable of hunters and riding horses...in another part of the city (where she had a bamboo-covered riding arena and a groom for every horse!).”

The historical record doesn’t include an account of how or where they met, but after the war, Kyra Geintze married Franklyn Downton, a US Army officer from Minneapolis. The Downtons relocated to California, where they settled in Atherton, near Palo Alto. It was there that Mrs. Downton’s equestrian interests were finally able to take center stage.

According to the *Country Almanac* profile, it was at an equestrian competition in Pebble Beach that Downton, who had won a jumping championship, was told she “would



TRAILBLAZER: *The Holsteiner Kadett was possibly the first Grand Prix horse in California*

have won the three-day championship if she had entered the dressage.” It was also at Pebble Beach that Downton met the late Elizabeth Searle, an instrumental figure in California dressage who later received the USDF Lifetime Achievement Award.

As Searle recounted for the CDS *Dressage Letters* in 2000, both women were involved in eventing in the 1950s when they met. Searle and Downton became close friends, and together they became more involved in dressage.

“Kyra became interested in having some clinics at her lovely Atherton estate and began to invite people on a fairly regular basis,” Searle wrote. Downton’s clinicians included such well-known European names as Lt. Col. Hans Moeller and Col. Waldemar Seunig.

In pursuit of her dressage education, Downton, like many other American riders, traveled to Europe to train. It was during a stint in Germany that she purchased the gray Holsteiner gelding Kadett, who was trained to Prix St. Georges when she bought him and finished to Grand Prix by Downton, according to Searle.

In the May 1972 issue of *Dressage Letters*, former CDS president Melanie Lofholm wrote of the horse: “For the ’60s at least, Kadett was just about the only horse that had any connection at all with Grand Prix de Dressage for Californians, who were just



CAREER HIGHLIGHT: *Downton on the gold-medal podium at the 1967 Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada*

Downton (1913-1999) was born in Russia and grew up in Vladivostok, not far from the Chinese and North Korean borders. The daughter of a cavalry officer, she found herself on a horse at the age of three; later, she and her brother rode donkeys given to them by their father.

Then World War I erupted, and the Russian Revolution changed Downton’s life forever. For three years,

beginning to emerge in numbers with their growing interest.”

Downton would return to Europe with Kadett to train and show. She worked with such notables as Col. Alois Podhajsky of the Spanish Riding School—who would later come to the US to coach her before the 1968 Olympics—and Josef Neckermann. Downton’s and Kadett’s competitive high-water mark was at the 1967 Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada, where they won the individual gold medal and team silver. The pair also competed at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, where they did not fare as well, placing twenty-first individually and eighth in the team standings. Although Downton was the highest-placing US dressage rider in Mexico City, she called the performance a “heartbreak” and

“the agony of defeat.” She told the *Country Almanac* that the problem was “a training regime [sic] so intense that it made both her and the horse tense and spoiled the perfect understanding between them.”

Her Olympic Games disappointment caused Downton to throw herself into her other passion: art. She began to paint and to carve sculptures from redwood driftwood—birds, nudes, horses, and other animals. Some of the equine sculptures became special dressage-show prizes, Searle recalled.

Atherton Dressage, as the community at the Downtons’ facility became known, served as a forerunner to the California Dressage Society. Downton nurtured dressage in her area not only by hosting dressage clinics and associated social events, but also by import-

ing warmbloods from Europe, becoming involved with the US Pony Clubs, and assisting promising youth riders.

Downton, who died in 1999, was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 2002. The “imperial Russian” with the “diffident but generous nature,” as Jeff Moore described her, was a true dressage trailblazer, taking California and the US to a level of excellence and involvement it had never before experienced. ▲

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