

**ELBA
MAY
GHENT**
1885-1950



**HORSE
DIVING STAR
MAMIE
FRANCIS**

Mamie Francis thrilled audiences in Wild West shows with her daredevil act of riding her horse off a fifty-foot-high platform into a barrel of water just ten feet across. Between 1908 and 1914, she performed this stunt 628 times, despite her inability to swim. She also performed as a sharpshooter, before and after the years of her diving act.

She was born Elba May Ghent in September 1885 in Janesville, Wisconsin. She became an accomplished equestrian by age sixteen while living on a horse ranch with her mother. When Pawnee Bill's Historical Wild West Show stopped in Kenosha, Wisconsin for a two-night performance, Elba signed on as one of the entertainers. First Buffalo Bill Cody and then Pawnee Bill had Wild West shows touring the country from 1883 until movies gained prominence in the 1930s.

Once under the patronage of dashing rider Lulu Bell, Elba took on the stage name Mamie Francis. As she excelled at riding and shooting, that became her act in the show. In time she would be billed the greatest horseback and rifle shot in the world. Shortly after joining the show, Mamie met Roman-style trick rider Harry Skepper, who also performed tricks on horseback. They had a daughter Reine in 1901 but Skepper left them in 1905, so Mamie left Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show as well.

Mamie didn't have long to regret the separation. She was asked by Lillian Smith, a female shooter who once competed against Annie Oakley, to join her husband Frank Hafley's show. Around the same time, Frank began his first collaboration with the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Show. The Hafley show featured world horseback riding champion Lillian and Ada Sommerville, who danced to the operetta Merry Widow Waltz on her horse, so Mamie had to come up with something special.

In late 1907, Mamie added horse diving to her repertoire, an act that looked crazy, wild and incredibly brave. After the first jump, Mamie realized that her horse was not suitable for such fun, so she changed to an Arabian horse whom she named Babe. Soon it was Mamie and her dizzying performances that became the main sensation of the Frank Hafley show. When Hafley became Coney Island's amusement director at Dreamland Park, Mamie became "one of the biggest sensations ever seen in this country", according to Billboard magazine.

Lillian divorced Frank in 1908. A year later, Mamie married Frank. For about a year the three were thrown together professionally again as part of the 101 Ranch Wild West Show, with the women performing a comedy-shooting act in which Lillian shot targets on Mamie's head or mouth. Finally in 1914, 29-year-old Mamie gave up jumping. She and Frank bought a ranch in Ridgway, Colorado the following year. They continued their Wild West shows until the Great Depression forced them to downsize.

After Frank died in 1940, Mamie sold the ranch and bought a Fort Worth house. She spent her last days at her daughter's ranch south of San Antonio where she and her husband were breeders of Santa Gertrudis cattle. Mamie died of cancer in February 1950 at age 64 near Tilden, Texas.

In 1981, the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame honored her. As you enter the Museum, Mamie and Babe is depicted on the museum's ceiling as a partial horse figure with a rider surrounded in blue. Mamie Francis became known for her courage, skill, and beauty, entertaining untold number of Americans during the heydays of the Wild West Shows and rodeos of the early 20th century.