

## *Doctor Marchal*

**The subject discussed here has, as its point of departure, the discovery of a photo in an antiques shop. But not just any old photo as you will soon learn.**

Let us begin with the oldest direct testimony from the user of a hobby horse in France which, according to the writer himself, he rode from 1854 until at least 1870. It is important to point out that he did not begin his ‘velocipedic’ activities in 1818, but 36 years later. The following text is taken from *Le Vélocipède Illustré* of 24 April 1870<sup>1</sup>.

‘To the editor.

Dear Sir,

I have been using a velocipede<sup>2</sup> for my transport since 1854... My bicycle does not have that degree of perfection that can be seen today in modern equipment of this type. My feet, instead of resting on pedals attached to the front wheel, simply rest on the ground and are used to provide propulsion to the machine. I have travelled up hill and down dale on this faithful steed for at least fifteen years, following without distinction roads, byways and even footpaths thus making a substantial saving in time and in horses.. I have often done between twelve and sixteen kilometres an hour; I have even gone as fast as an express train when going down steep hills. My legs rested on a double support which, when needed, served as a brake. Even today, despite my being seventy-five years of age, a trip of twenty kilometres doesn’t daunt me at all and has no more effect than a stroll of an hour and a half.

When I started to ride a velocipede, it caused astonishment among the country people, but it didn’t take them long to give it their approval. Many times, the parents of a child in an emergency have come to me weeping, “It’s urgent, Doctor. We beg you to get out your iron horse. You will get there quicker.” For that is what they called my machine.

I would add that not only did I save on time and money by using this method, but its use has always been for me a pleasant distraction, a recreational exercise and one which I could compare with skating.

Dr. Marchal, Lorquin (Meurthe).’

There you have a text which tells us more about the use of the hobby horse, which has often been presented to us simply as a form of amusement. Here we have it at the heart of a professional activity, that of a country doctor, which confirms to us that it was not used exclusively by high society, which is what the engravings of 1818 seem to depict. This man well understood, and he cannot have been the only one, that this method of transport was a real gift for those people whose work involved having to travel. He restates the argument which Baron von Drais and his followers put forward for a long time that one could ‘make a real saving in time and horses.’ In 1870 Dr. Marchal said that, despite his age, he could travel daily fifteen to twenty kilometres.

The story of Dr. Marchal could have finished there. But a little touch of the finger of destiny, the acquisition of a photo in an antiques shop in February 2014, would help to throw light upon the velocipedic life of this man in a significant way.

It all began with an extremely rare photo. Rare in that no photo of this type was known to exist up until today. And it was here that a miracle took place. Yours truly, who in four decades of documentary research had never even dreamed of finding such an image, was offered this document. And it is a contemporary document, that is from before 1870, the probable date of the demise of the French velocipede (with the exception of the photograph of Père Galloux). When I had got over the first excitement, a close examination followed in order to find what the photo 'said' to me. Its format, called *carte de visite* (visiting card) 6 x 10cm, enabled one to come up with a possible date: after 1854, the year of the patent application for the process by Adolphe Disdéri who popularized photography. The photo, which is not of perfect sharpness is nevertheless an appealing document. A bearded man appearing to walk is seated on a hobby horse. On the back: the printed name and address of the photographer: 'J. Lintz, Photographer, Sarrebourg, Faubourg d'Allemagne.' Sarrebourg is a town in the department of the Moselle. Then an inscription in hand-writing: 'Doctor Marchal of Lorquin.'

Starting from there it became possible to bring together the Doctor Marchal of *Le Vélocipède Illustré* and the one in the photo. His name, his profession and his village all correspond. It only remained to prove that it was the same person. This has now been fully established. Who then was this so unusual doctor? A strange fellow.<sup>3</sup> His life is quite well known thanks to a school exercise book written by the niece of one of his servants, Louise Souter, just after his death. The text was examined by someone called Georges l'Hôte and published in a memoir in 1982.<sup>4</sup>

Charles Marchal was born in Lorquin, a small village in Lorraine on 23 March 1809. After getting two baccalaureats, he entered the faculty of medicine at Strasbourg where he gained the title of Doctor of Medicine. He then returned to Lorquin and established his practice which he continued for nearly sixty years. A man of multifaceted interests, Doctor Marchal went in for all sorts of activities in his leisure hours. He wrote, he was a keen archeologist, even creating a small museum at home filled with his finds. He did not actually marry but his wedding ceremony remains a legend in the village because Charles fled from the *mairie* just before signing the register after being rebuked by his bride when he inadvertently trod on her train.

The reader will understand that the doctor of Lorquin was no ordinary man. From that to riding a velocipede was but a step.

Louise Souter records:<sup>5</sup> He did his rounds, depending on circumstances on horseback or in a sleigh. Around 1850, if the weather was good, he used a velocipede, a hobby horse invented in 1818 by the Baron von Drais, to great amazement in the country round. Fear and distrust. The doctor, like the *curé*..... could put a spell on you, one of those people who lived on the edge of the community and 'knew things.' Parents forbade their children from approaching the diabolical machine. There's 'something nasty' in that there, they said, which could make it go or go off bang; it could certainly do you harm if you so much as touched it with a finger. Our good doctor was highly amused.

One day when he was coming down the hill at Notre-Dame de Lhor on his machine, between Saint-Quirin and Heille, some honest peasants who had come there on pilgrimage saw him and instantly panicked, fell on their knees and prayed to the Virgin and all the Saints, thinking that the Devil had come. 'Don't be afraid you old witches, I am not the Devil,' he shouted out as he passed them.

‘That isn’t the Devil anyway,’ said the bravest a moment later, ‘I think it’s Monsieur Marchal from Lorquin. But, my goodness! What sort of carriage has he got today? It must be the Devil’s work to make something like that.’

These stories bear out what the doctor said in *Le Vélocipède Illustré*; Our man travelled about the countryside of Lorraine on a hobby horse. It also shows the state of mind of people when faced with a vehicle which they considered diabolical.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the mentality and the intellectual level of some people was fairly low. Doctor Marchal amused himself with them and took pleasure in recounting a host of such anecdotes.

The one about the Devil on a velocipede was not the least piquant. Louise Souter was not the only one to have witnessed the ‘velocipedic’ activities of the doctor. Before his death, the *Journal de la Meurthe* published the following article in 1890:

‘The venerable doctor Marchal of Lorquin is well known to us, and we have seen him many times proudly seated on the bicycle invented by himself, fifty years ago Gentlemen! In earlier times he alarmed the children and the good ladies; he used to wear a goatskin against the rain and could be seen from afar with his great beard whipped by the wind and with his machine covered in a sheepskin in which were secreted his kit of instruments and his medicaments. It was steered by his hands on two long goat’s horns and it gleamed in the sunlight; add to that that the good doctor had installed at the head of the machine a lamp with two separate beams, which looked like eyes aflame and that he would sound a warning with a harsh trumpet. How many of the simple folk of Lorraine had not thrown themselves upon their knees, signing themselves frantically before this tool of Satan!

For a long time now, we have perceived that in any case this was a benign devil and a good doctor, learned, devoted and a friend to all his patients. His monumental bicycle is now long retired; but it remains a model, which though it has neither the resilience nor the lightness of its descendants, it can claim nevertheless the honour of a numerous posterity.’

The author of the article is mistaken regarding the dates (it should be 1854 and not 1840, as Marchal confirms) and calls the velocipede a ‘bicycle’, a name which was only given in 1890 to indicate certain types of cycle. He implies also that the doctor invented the velocipede. But taken at large, he describes, as does Louise Souter, a man astonishing the populace on his machine on wheels.

The journalist states that he knew the doctor well and to have frequently observed him on his machine: the good doctor, even if he frightened the people round, was a kindly devil.

Visual examination of the hobby horse shown in the old photo confirms that it is clearly the one described by doctor Marchal in *Le Vélocipède Illustré* since, as he says, it is equipped with a brake, something which was very rare on French hobby horses (only a single example of this type is known equipped like this). He writes, ‘my legs rested on a double support which, when needed, served as a brake.’ The photo clearly reveals a support for the feet and a sort of pedal fixed to a cranked shaft the end of which carries a shoe, obviously made from wood, which operates on the metal tyre of the rear wheel.

Broadly speaking, the machine resembles Drais' first design, but looked at more closely it is basically different.

Could one relate this velocipede to another machine which is still extant? To see that, there is a machine displayed at the Dutch museum, Velorama which comes from the former Museum at Cadouin in the Dordogne. It is certain that this one comes from the same constructor. It seems to be absolutely identical, except for the brake which could have disappeared. One detail however does confirm that it is not the same: the position of one blade of the rear fork. On the hobby horse at Velorama, this arm is practically vertical and that in the photo is very much inclined forward. It would seem nevertheless that the machine in the photo had belonged to doctor Marchal because another coincidence is noteworthy: the seller of this photo insists that he acquired it from the Cadouin Museum after it had closed. Did the doctor have two machines? Well, yes. The historian Camille Maire from Metz confirms this. He has in effect found the documents which were compiled after the death of the doctor which indicate that his goods and chattels included two velocipedes.

Having become deaf and blind, the doctor died on 25 September 1892. Having no dependents, he made a gift to the town of Lorquin of his collections and his house.

After his death, one is able to follow the path of the two velocipedes. On 9 October Maitre Welter, lawyer of Lorquin, made an inventory of the house of the deceased and noted that, amongst other things, two old velocipedes made by the deceased himself.

The mayor of Lorquin, Léopold Vallet, who had accepted the Marchal legacy, was reduced to selling the doctor's collections and the two velocipedes. It was the lawyer, Welter<sup>6</sup> who acquired them on 16 August 1905.

In 1905 therefore, the doctor's velocipedes were sent to Metz along with the lawyer's other acquisitions. They were bought in the name of the Lorraine Historical and Archeological Society of Metz. In June 1906 another eminent member of the Metz society, professor Keune, acquired six chairs bought by his colleague from Lorquin. His intention was to give them to the museum at Metz.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand the records of the society tell us nothing of the fate of the velocipedes. However, since the chairs finished up in the museum, why should not the velocipedes, asked Camille Maire in his research? After having questioned an archivist,; yes, there is a hobby horse from doctor Marchal in the museum. It is housed in the reserve collection. A photograph of it was taken and, looked at from close up, it is indeed the hobby horse described in *Le Vélocipède Illustré* and shown in the picture by the photographer J.Lintz. All the details correspond: foot-rests, brake..... M. Maire still questions this<sup>8</sup> however: 'So where is the second velocipede of Doctor Marchal?' It seems that this is the one displayed at Velorama. So what route did it take between the Lorraine Society of History and Archeology of Metz where it was in 1905 and this Dutch museum? Why did one leave the museum at Metz and not the other?

According to M. Maire, the one at Velorama remained with Mme. la veuve de Rossel, granddaughter of Louise Souter. Contacted in about 2000, Mme. de Rossel stated that 'a man from the region of Paris came looking for it around 1982-1983.' It is possible that this man was Gérard Buisset, owner of the velocipede museum at Maule (Yvelines) at the time, which was later transferred to Cadouin.

In conclusion, one should not despair concerning the unknown origin of those anonymous surviving hobby horses. Lucky discoveries, like this one, or the modern methods of research will allow us, I think, to throw light on other mysteries in the near or more distant future.

Thank you.

Claude Reynaud.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>. *Le Vélodrome Illustré* p.26.

<sup>2</sup>. Translator's note: The word 'velocipede' was used from the very beginning of the two-wheeled machine in France. This has been retained in the translated text as it was used by Dr. Marchal and others, although it refers to what, in English, would be called a hobby horse.

<sup>3</sup>. With thanks to Messrs. Eric Knittel of Lorquin and Camille Marchal of Metz for their help.

<sup>4</sup>. Academie Nationale de Metz.

<sup>5</sup>. *Dr. Charles-Sébastien Marchal de Lorquin (1809-1892)* by Georges d'Hote. Memoire of the Academie Nationale de Metz. 1982. p.166.

<sup>6</sup>. He was a member of the Lorraine Historical and Archeological Society of Metz. It was in this capacity that he acquired these properties.

<sup>7</sup>. Sale or donation?

<sup>8</sup>. *Revue Lorraine Populaire*. No. 188. February 2006. p.33.