Typical pen of horses sunning themselves in the morning sunshine. Note most animals are thin.

Just the Facts

Let's take a realistic look at the horse slaughter situation.

Article and photographs by Kasie McGee

THE THIN bay horse is led from the ring to the cry, "All in, all done, sold. Three hundred ten on 441," from the auctioneer.

Nothing unusual, unless you happen to know that buyer number 441 is buying horses not only to speculate on and sell later as riding animals, but on contract to one of the American horse slaughter plants.

He converses two or three times a week with the plant or livestock manager of the packing house he is bonded with, to discuss market demands and orders the plant needs to fill, including what type of horse, and how many are needed.

The Hard Questions

The above scenario is a typical weekly event in any part of the country. Many horse owners would be appalled to learn that this is where the majority of horses who are sent to slaughter come from. Many horse owners are appalled at the thought that horses are killed for food at all.

Typical condition of the feet of draft horses that come into the plants from the Amish country.

But is horse slaughter as horrible as it has been represented? Many of the activist groups that focus on the welfare of horses would have you think so, in their quest to improve the quality of life for our equine friends.

In order to determine if humanely slaughtering horses really is a welfare issue, we need to look at a few characteristics of the industry itself, including:

- where the horses come from,
- the condition of the horses before and after arrival at the plant,
- how they are handled and housed at the plant,
- the actual slaughter process,
- and finally, possible alternatives to slaughter for these animals.

If horse slaughter were truly the culprit, the problems would be occurring in the plants themselves, but our research doesn't bear this out. Over a two-month period of the summer of 1999, Dr. Temple Grandin, myself, and Jennifer Lanier, all from Colorado State University, observed nearly 2,000 horses coming into two plants in Texas. We collected data on just over 1,000 of these animals.

Of those animals, less than 8 percent were actually welfare problems, and of those, none were due to anything the plant had done. The animals were welfare problems from what we called their point of origin. For the most part, the horses who came into the plants were there due to things that simply happen to horses—old age and arthritis, lamenesses, illnesses, and accidents.

Two of the most severe problems that were definitely welfare concerns were horses who had been shipped with broken legs. Now, a broken leg most likely is due to an unfortunate accident or, at worst, carelessness on the part of the handler/rider. It becomes a welfare issue when the animal is asked to endure a normally stressful event like a long trailer ride.

The most common examples of questionable welfare were horses who had evidence of chronic laminitis that had been left untreated, or cases of acute laminitis where the animal simply lies down all the time due to the pain. Several of these "downer" horses had been affected for so long, they had running sores (bedsores) on their sharp, bony areas, such as hips, hocks, elbows, and knees.

Many horses were extremely thin, some emaciated. Some may have merely been so due to a lack of adequate feed, but most also suffered from more than one ailment.

The question: If the slaughter plants were not there to end the suffering for these animals, what would have happened to them? If the owners were going to be responsible, they would have taken care

of the animal properly in the first place, or had the animal euthanized if they were unable to do so. Also, many owners who do have their horses euthanized are unaware that sometimes the carcass is then simply hauled to the local landfill.

The Buyers

As stated earlier, the majority of the horses found in the plants have come from auctions. Others have been sold directly to the supplier, who delivers to the plant, and a very few horses are brought in to the plants by the owners or by a neighbor.

Part of this is due to proximity; there are only three plants left in the United States, two of which are in Texas; the third is in Nebraska. Not very many horse owners could reasonably get their horses to these plants even if they wanted to do so.

Few horse owners would know, if asked, how to get in contact with a buyer for the plants, as these buyers understandably keep a low profile. The general horse-owning public vilifies these traders as the dreaded "killer-buyer," yet most of them see themselves as saviors of a sort, putting an end to the poor treatment or misuse of many of the horses they deal with.

Granted there are a few who have no compassion or ethics in "horse-dealing," and see only the bottom line each animal represents. There are those few who do misuse drugs such as corticosteroids, tranquilizers, and painkillers to misrepresent the health or soundness of the animal, but they really are the minority.

The Auctions

Another quality we need to examine is the condition of the horses before and after arrival at the plant. Having seen how they looked on arrival at the plants, I now needed to backtrack to the various auctions they had come from. I traveled to several auctions

An example of irresponsible breeding: a large group of horses (46 total) from a "breeder" from Louisiana. All the horses were Coggins positive, which was why they were at the plant. These are his good mares that he said all "throw good-colored colts." The small bay Paint on the left side is a 7-year-old mare who had given him five foals, not a yearling, as she appears. The gentleman said he never tested, as his horses never left his property. He did, however, take in outside horses, without requiring proof of good health. Every animal he owned was destroyed.

in Texas, Kentucky, Indiana, West Virginia, and Ohio the spring and summer of 1999.

The breeds differ somewhat, depending on what area of the country you are in, but the quality and condition of the animals in the $200 - $2,000 range differed very little. This bottom end of the horse market is the source for horses who end up at the slaughter plants.

In these small "country" auctions can occasionally be found a gem in the rough but, more often than not, what is found is a sow's ear dressed up like a silk purse.

At one auction in Indiana, I did not see one horse who was free of obvious unsoundness. Every horse or pony either had evidence of a past bout of laminitis, was spavined, had poorly healed cuts, ringbone, contracted heels, or simply arthritis, among other problems.

Coupled with these unsoundnesses, you can sometimes observe suspicious behavior patterns (biting, pinning ears back when approached, rearing or bucking in the ring). Many horses observed were very thin. Many exhibited physical symptoms consistent with disease, such as hyperthyroidism or Cushings.

The poor-physical-quality animals are generally purchased by the packer-buyers, as nobody wants or can afford to buy someone else's problems. If the animal is older and not trained to ride, or lame, there is a good chance he, too, will go to the packer-buyer.

The question is, if the slaughter plants were not there to end the suffering for these animals, what would have happened to them?

At the Plant

Once the horses arrive at the plant, they are weighed, graded, sorted by grade, and assigned a hip tag number that identifies them all the way through the plant. The plant in Nebraska doesn't weigh the live animals or grade them until they are carcasses, but it does have a United States Department of Agriculture inspector who looks at the animals alive.

In Texas there are brand inspection laws, so every animal is looked

at not only by the USDA veterinarian, but also by a Texas Department of Health inspector, and by a brand inspector who is armed with a current list of reported stolen horses and with a microchip reader. Accused repeatedly of accepting stolen horses, the plants do everything in their power to eliminate that possibility.

Many horse owners mistakenly feel that branding is cruel, as it is temporarily painful, but it is, unfortunately, to date the only accurate method of *permanently* identifying the animal.

The majority of horses reported stolen are sorrel geldings with little to no white markings, according to sheriff's deputies from three counties in three states. The American Quarter Horse Association alone registers thousands of these animals a year.

Happily, the majority of horses reported stolen are also generally found with 72 hours somewhere close to home. The microchip reader is marginally successful as far as the brand inspectors in Texas are concerned, as they rarely find horses who have chips, and sometimes the chips can't be read.

At any rate, in today's tight market, very few decent riding horses are stolen and sold for slaughter, as they are worth much more sold as grade riding horses.

In the Pens

Once the horses have been sorted, they are put into large pens with food and water. The USDA requires that holding pens in any slaughter facility be under cover, so the horses are protected from the extremes of the weather any time of year. Although these pens do get crowded, it is unavoidable and only for a short time, as most horses are killed the same day they come into the plant.

The staff in these plants recognize that stress is expensive both for the live animals and for the end product,

An aged Quarter Horse-type gelding with carpitis in the left knee. He was very sore on this leg, and exhibited evidence of prior soundness problems. Note the pin-firing scars for the bowed tendon in the same leg. His body condition was good, however, as he had not gotten into poor condition before going to the plant.

which is the meat. Many people working in these plants have horses. None like to see abused, neglected, or frightened animals, and they do the best they can to minimize stress in the horses due to crowding, fighting, or handling.

Stallions, aggressive mares or geldings, and blind or lame animals are segregated from the general population. Extremely subordinate animals are also sometimes isolated so that the other horses don't continually attack them. Horses who are in very poor condition are the first to be killed in order to diminish their suffering.

In handling, the main goal is to move the horses from one place to another at a quiet walk. They are not to be rushed or crowded into the alleys. Should somebody rush the horses, crowd them, or generally panic them, that person is usually removed from handling the stock.

The Process

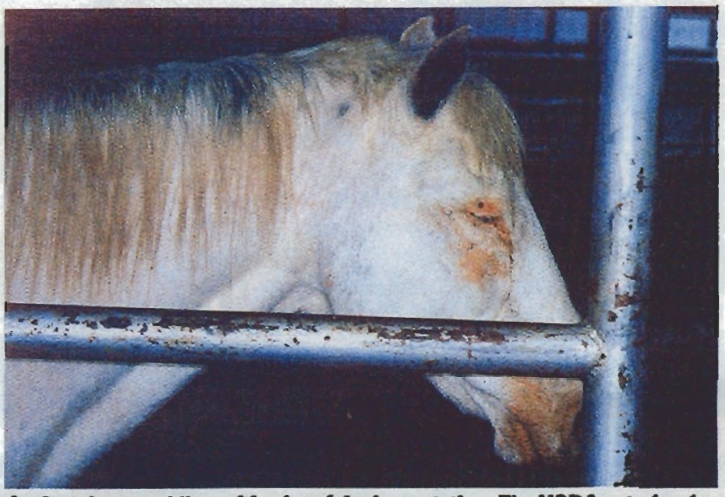
The horses have been sorted, and the bell rings, indicating the processing line is starting up. A group of horses is in the collection pen, and they are being gently encouraged into the single-file alley that leads to the stunning "box." The single-file alley is about six horse body-lengths long, then there is a gate that holds one horse just prior to the stun box, which also holds one horse.

The animals enter each box, and generally stand quietly. They may exhibit apprehension, but nothing more extreme than that exhibited when put into any new surroundings. Occasionally a horse will get panicky, but that is usually attributable to the footing, or the excitability of that individual horse.

The device used to put the horses down is called a captive-bolt stunner. It works off the same principles as a firearm, but the "bullet" in this case is a steel rod that is attached to the stunner. It is highly effective on the first shot, rarely needing a second shot. It is, by the way, the same device often used by veterinarians to humanely euthanize a horse, with the exception that some of those used in the plants are air-powered.

The horse stands in the stunning box, the stunner operator places the device on the animal's forehead, pulls the trigger, and the horse falls, dead immediately. The pit crew determines that the animal is indeed dead, and the meat-cutting process begins.

The slaughter and meat-cutting



An Appaloosa gelding with a lot of depigmentation. The USDA veterinarian said it looked suspiciously like skin cancer to him. Breeding for too much white or concentrating only on getting color causes these problems in both Appaloosas and Paints. This horse was also blind in the right eye.

process of any animal is unpleasant and messy, there is no argument about that. The methods used in processing horses are often better than those used in beef processing plants, due mainly both to low volume as well as more restrictive inspection criteria for horses. Horse plants are not only required to meet rigorous USDA requirements, but European Union standards as well, which are much more stringent that those of the USDA in many ways.

The plants tend to be small, only processing between 15 to 30 animals an hour, as opposed to cattle plants that process 300 animals an hour. Horses are treated as individuals, rather than by the pen or truckload as in cattle and sheep. Humane treatment is easier to achieve when individuals are recognizable, rather than when dealing with a faceless mass of animals.

The Market

The thought of horses that we know and admire being killed for someone else's gourmet enjoyment seems untenable, as it should. However, most horsemeat is not actually a gourmet food in Europe; rather it is a mid-priced staple meat bought by many middle-class families. And the number of those consumers is also steadily declining. One reason is that as European economies improve, more families are getting involved in horse-related activities, and fewer find the thought of eating horsemeat desirable.

The Realities

Many horses become unsound or otherwise unusable as they age. Although some lucky ones find their way to retirement farms, or an owner willing to feed and care for them until they die, most unusable horses are not cared for adequately, and many suffer malnutrition and little to no maintenance.

The retirement farms sound like a really good deal, but the majority of those have limited space, too many horses for the available resources, and long waiting lists. It is, after all, a losing proposition. There simply are not that many people who can afford to operate a farm or ranch guaranteed to operate at a loss.

We can, however, reduce the numbers of horses who go to the plants by breeding more respon-

Typical horse brought into the slaughter plant: aged Quarter Horse gelding, arthritis in both knees, and lame. This fellow's feet had been cared for, however, and he had not been allowed to get into poor condition before being brought to the plant by his owner. The man was a local rancher, and had owned this horse since he was a 2-year-old. He felt the only dignified thing to do was end the horse's life once the old fellow couldn't get around and graze or play with his pasture mates any more.

sibly; providing appropriate hoof, medical, and nutritional care to our equine charges; and by giving sensible training to our young stock.

Accepting the responsibility for ending a suffering animal's life with euthanasia is one alternative, if sending the horse to slaughter is not acceptable for aesthetic or welfare concerns.

We should also recognize our human limits when it comes to the type and quality of horse we can financially and emotionally afford. Some of us are simply not equipped to handle a Secretariat or a Rugged Lark, either with the skills we possess or financially. Recognizing these limitations allows us to own a horse who "fits," and decreases the chance of a poorly trained and potentially dangerous animal going to slaughter.

If the slaughter plants were to disappear altogether, the welfare of many of these horses would decline rather than be improved. I have been told repeatedly by vets, shoers, and other horse people that if those horses didn't have the plants to go to, they would, in many cases, be left to die in a pasture, or worse. How many people say they "are letting the old guy die of natural causes" while refusing to recognize the natural causes he is dying of are a combination of metabolic disease and starvation?

We should also be aware that to the ubiquitous "them" we perceive as abusers, we *are* the "other guy!" Improving the welfare of horses shouldn't start with legislating other people's actions, but with the perhaps painful examination of our own. The slaughter plants are probably not the real enemy, but we, the horse owners, could be unintentionally.

The author is a graduate student at Colorado State University, studying equine behavior. She has raised and shown Quarter Horses since the early 1970s, in both pleasure and cattle events. She, her husband, and two sons raise registered black Angus cattle on their ranch east of Colorado Springs.