

Horses are viewed by twenty-first century Americans in a way that sets them apart from most other animals. Unlike dogs, cats and canaries, horses do not share our homes, yet most have names. They hold a special place in our hearts and imaginations that sets them apart from wildlife and most other livestock, yet they are not always classified as companion animals. This state of limbo, whereby horses are considered to be somewhere between livestock and companion animal, arises from their history in America.

When this country was developed during the last centuries, the term "horsepower" often referred to the power generated by a horse. Horses

ance and behavior rather than strength and build. In our affluent society, an increasing number of people who once longed for a pony as a child, are now able to afford a horse and become first-time horse owners as adults. Horses are a multi-billion dollar industry in this country. Americans are buying horses for companionship and participating in horse-related activities, such as horse shows and trail rides. Many are building fancy barns and show facilities, hiring professional trainers, developing and marketing new products, funding innovative veterinary and nutritional research, and spending more money on equines than ever before.

Although horses today participate



Where Do America's Beautiful Horses

The Grim Truth About How These Free Spirits Are Let Out to Pasture

by Laura Nelson

were a necessity for ranching and farming, and unless there was a body of water and a boat between where you were and where you wanted to go, you needed a horse to travel. Now many riding lawnmowers have more horsepower than the Budweiser Clydesdales, and hitching posts have disappeared from Main Street. Yet horses are still vitally important to many Americans.

Today horses are generally more beautiful, better fed and better cared for than horses in the past. This is due in part to the value placed on appear-

almost exclusively in sport and provide companionship for many, relevant laws have not kept pace with the times. Elevated to a higher status, horses continue to receive the same minimal level of legal protection as other livestock, protections that arose from a desire to protect their value as beasts of burden. In fact, almost all of the early anti-cruelty laws specifically prohibit over-working and over-driving horses, and ameliorating cruel treatment of overworked horses was the primary motivation for forming the first humane societies in the nine-

teenth century. Although the way horses are used and valued has changed over the years, their legal treatment has not.

While society's view of horses as livestock has progressed to resemble companion animals, other things remain unchanged. Although horses are considered by many people as part of the family, we dispose of them differently than dogs and cats, most of whom will stay with us for their entire lives. Most of us wouldn't dream of offloading our dog simply because he had slowed with age. But it is not at all unusual to sell a horse an owner



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feels he or she has outgrown, or who is old, lame, sick or unwanted. Most horses are bought and sold many times during their lives, and they often live up to 30 years.

Sadly, many of these unwanted horses are still disposed of via a local livestock auction.

While some of the horses are purchased by caring individuals, many are not so lucky. Middlemen, or “killer buyers” working for one of a handful of slaughter houses in the U.S. and Canada that process live horses for human consumption abroad travel from one auction to the next collecting young, old, sick and healthy animals until their trucks are full. Many people who sell their horses at auction are unaware of this practice, which, while legal, remains relatively unknown. Others, fully aware of the risk inherent in selling their horse at auction, still enter their

horse into the ring, confident that he or she will not be bought by a killer buyer, because the animal is still young and healthy. But with an increased demand for horse meat in Europe and Japan (partly due to concerns about mad cow disease and foot and mouth disease, and the subsequent desire to find “safe” sources of meat), killer buyers will now compete with legitimate buyers for a younger, fleshier horse. Further, although a horse may not be bought by a killer buyer its first time in the ring, its chances of ending up on the killer’s truck increase each time the horse is sold during its lifetime.

Most Americans are shocked to learn that our horses are being slaughtered to satisfy consumer demand abroad. In fact, 55,776 horses, including work, race, wild, and companion horses, were slaughtered in America last year for human consumption. Thousands more were shipped to and slaughtered in Canada and Mexico. Luckily, only a few slaughterhouses that kill horses remain in the United States. However, these horses — many who are feeble to begin with — face a harrowing journey to distant slaughterhouses that impose unspeakable cruelty on the animals. Many are deprived of basic necessities, such as food, water and rest, for more than 24 hours at a time in the cramped double-decker trailers designed for transporting cattle and sheep.

Worse, perhaps, than the suffering horses experience during transportation is the terror they face at the slaughterhouse, where callous treatment often results in prolonged suffering. Horses often remain conscious through the last stages of slaughter, due to improper use of stunning equipment. Ironically, it is the very people who once loved these horses who are ultimately responsible for their tragic end. If only they knew they were consigning a once-beloved animal to an unspeakably terrifying and painful end.

One Horse’s Story

When the old gray horse lifted his head, he looked different. For a moment, the years fell away. If you knew what to look for, you could see the unmistakable lines of a thoroughbred in his head and body. Twenty-some years ago, he sped around racetracks, intoxicated with his own strength and speed. Maybe he won thousands of dollars for his owner(s) — even good racehorses are often traded like baseball cards — or maybe not. But like most of the thousands of thoroughbred race horses registered each year by The Jockey Club, the gray ran as a two- and three-year-old, as fast as he could; his only purpose in life was to win.

Thoroughbred horses do not mature, that is, they do not finish growing until they are five. Young horses, of course, know nothing of the damage that racing at top speed can do to their immature bones and joints. Trainers did what they could to minimize the gray’s pain, but racing injuries are unavoidable and generally considered a cost of doing business. Inevitably, repeated injuries ended the gray’s racing career, as they do to nearly every racehorse, before he was five years old. Thousands of young racehorses are slaughtered for meat when injuries end their racing careers. But the gray horse was lucky.

The gray was a big, beautiful horse, and his injuries were not too bad. A smart trainer bought him cheap and found he could jump. Unlike most former racehorses, the gray was calm and easy to ride. He soon became a valuable show horse. For more than a decade, he gleamed with health and good care as he romped around show rings, as he made the jumps look easy and his riders feel proud. The gray was pampered by a series of teenage girls who adored him from the moment their parents bought him, until they went off to college and sold him to another

loving girl. Then, when he became too old and stiff to win at shows, he became a lesson horse, placidly circling the ring while novices learned the rhythm of a horse's gaits.

Finally, a novice rider bought him, a man in his forties, who always wanted to ride but was unable to afford a horse until later in life. Together they had some happy years of quiet trail rides, the old horse's steadiness giving the new rider confidence. Finally, after more than twenty years of being used and cared for, the gray horse could no longer carry the man on his back. The gray's owner loved him, but he wanted a horse he could ride. There was no way he could afford the expenses of owning more than one horse. Sadly, the gray's days were numbered.

What happens to horses like the old gray – and the tens of thousands of elderly, unmanageable, abused or simply unfortunate horses and ponies who end up at slaughterhouses every year – says a lot about the kind of people we are. Sometimes, as difficult as it may be, it is necessary to face reality and make hard choices about what is in the best interest of the animal. Alternatives to slaughter do exist.

Aside from a relatively small handful of people who choose to, or are in a position to, keep their old horses to the end of their days, owners of old, unsound, sick, or simply unwanted horses have basically two choices. Placement at one of a growing number of private sanctuaries that care for old and abused horses is one option. But most private sanctuaries have limited financial resources, and are in need of additional space. If keeping the horse or placing him or her at a sanctuary is not possible, another option is euthanasia, which brings instant, painless death in familiar surroundings without stress or fear. Depending upon local code, the body may be buried or, for a small fee, can then be picked up and transported to a rendering plant where it will be



The dual existence of horses: Cherished companion animals and mistreated livestock, shown here (above right) being loaded onto a double-decker trailer on their way to slaughter. Laura Nelson on her farm with her beloved horses (right).



processed into tallow, gelatin and bone meal.

Selling horses at auctions is not a humane option, because the possibility of the horse ending up at a slaughterhouse is all too real. Nor is selling to a private buyer. When a buyer promises he will provide a good home to your horse, although sometimes true, such arrangements are normally only temporary. There will come a time when the old horse is likely to be replaced with a younger, more attractive horse, and once again the older horse enters a market where his or her chances of going to slaughter are increased. Through a series of sales and transfers, the horse you once loved is now the property of someone who cares nothing for his comfort. His end, which might have been easy and painless had you arranged it yourself, is now filled with pain and fear.

Most Americans react with revulsion to the notion of eating cats and dogs; the idea of eating horses is equally repellent. Horse owners must confront the fact that by selling their horses when they have lost their usefulness, they may be condemning the horses to a cruel trip to the slaughterhouse. The time has come to reform our laws and protect our horses from

the suffering they undergo in order to be exported as meat. People who believe that our unwanted horses should be given a kinder end favor a ban on the slaughter of horses for human consumption.

Horses play an important role in history and modern culture. The way we value our horses has progressed. While some people see them as livestock, many love them as companion animals. Now it's time for our laws to reflect the horse's increased status in our society. 🐾

Laura Nelson is a former Animal Legal Defense Fund attorney now living on a farm with a happy family of rescued horses, burros, cows, pigs, dogs, and cats. The farm is supervised by a goat named Elvis and a 48-year-old pony mule named Tulip. Nelson's most recently rescued horse, acquired Easter weekend, is a gentle, intelligent 19-year-old Arabian mare with a history of abuse and neglect.

If you'd like to find out more about state legislation protecting horses, please visit the following website: www.equineprotectionnetwork.com.