



## Necessary Evil or Blind Eye? Putting an End to the Cruel Practice of Horse Slaughter

BY CHRISTOPHER J. HEYDE

To most Americans the horse slaughter industry exists only in the phrase “to be taken to the glue factory,” but this antiquated phrase is off the mark. Neglected, surplus, or discarded horses considered burdensome are currently more likely to fall victim to slaughtering in the United States for human consumption abroad.

AWI has long fought against the cruel and inhumane conditions within livestock slaughterhouses. Horse slaughter facilities are no different and may, in fact, be worse. Since horses in the US are not raised or consumed for their meat, the horse slaughter industry manages to avoid much of what little oversight exists. Until

December 7, 2001 no regulations even existed in the US governing the treatment and care of horses during transport to slaughter.

Horses end up in slaughter in a variety of ways, all unlucky. Sometimes they are sent to slaughter by individuals or groups no longer able or willing to care for them. Sometimes they are retired or injured race horses, riding school or show horses, federally protected wild horses, foals born as a by-product of the Premarin© industry, or stolen horses. Auction houses provide an easy out for irresponsible equine owners to discard an animal they no longer want while getting some cash in return. Those purchased at auctions by individuals known as “killer buyers” are then shipped on double-deck trailers for as long as several days without adequate water, food, or rest only to

arrive at the slaughterhouse where workers abuse them right up to the actual slaughter.

To better understand the cruelty perpetrated by the horse slaughter industry I went to one of the three remaining US-based, foreign-owned horse slaughterhouses (two in Texas and one in Illinois) to witness what takes place. It didn't take long to realize that all of the horrible stories were going to prove true before my eyes within the 45 minutes I was there.

Located at the rear of the nondescript facility was a double-deck trailer fully loaded with horses. They filled both rows and were unable to stand normally, forced to keep their heads low. Despite the fact that several of the horses I could see had cuts and blood trailing from their mouths and noses, all looked healthy and fairly young. Only a few horses at a time were removed from the truck so many were still on board when I left. When some were moved off the trailer, workers poked them with long fiberglass rods through holes on the side of the trailer. The horses, typically very sensitive animals, slid and fell down the ramp only to be whipped by another worker's rod. All of the horses at the facility exhibited fear typical of “flight” behavior in horses, pacing in prance-like movements with their ears pinned back against their heads and eyes wide open.

Once inside the building more callous workers, standing high on the railing that lined the stalls, beat the horses on the nose, forehead, neck, back, or hindquarters to get them to move. This continued until they entered the kill chute.

Two egregious acts of cruelty took place right in front of me. Running across the floor of the barn was a grate-covered drain about three feet deep. A section of the grate was missing in one of the stalls through which horses were being forced. Because they were crammed into a space and panicking, each horse fell into

the open hole, unable to get out since the floor was wet and slippery. Workers continued to beat the horses until they were able to throw their bodies out of this hole. Due to the overcrowding and panic, a large male got his leg hooked over one of the upper rails. Again, workers proceeded to beat him continually until the horse lunged forward gouging his leg open on the solid metal fence, which forced his leg free of the rail. Federal law requires the presence of a US Department of Agriculture inspector during slaughter, but an inspector was nowhere to be found.

I left the facility with a sense of utter disbelief at the magnitude of the brutal treatment. These horses were not old, sick, or past recovery. They were adoptable. One can only imagine how many more horrific incidents take place at this and other slaughterhouses each day without any oversight.

Many of those aware of this practice simply say the industry is a “necessary evil,” that slaughtering horses is a responsible way to dispose of those who are either sick, abused, or no longer wanted. However, these people stand to gain from the industry. Selling horses to slaughter provides additional money to purchase another horse or

*At the end of his life he should be retired, adopted, or humanely euthanized if no better solution can be found. Anything else makes a mockery of the words which for centuries have been used to describe our game...  
Sport of Kings.*

—John Hettinger, Trustee, New York Racing Association

extra cash to those stealing them. These horses are being slaughtered simply because the option exists, and money can be gained. There can be no defense of this industry.

John Hettinger, a Thoroughbred owner well known in the Thoroughbred community, has taken the issue head on. He received several awards from the Thoroughbred industry for his tireless campaign to educate owners and push for a ban on slaughter. Mr. Hettinger, in a letter strongly refusing a statement issued by the “Horse Industry,” rebuffed its claim that the “Horse Industry” is opposed to a ban on horse slaughter. He said, “I doubt if there is complete

unanimity on this issue, but have NO doubt that if ALL horse owners were polled the slaughter of horses would be a thing of the past.” Mr. Hettinger further said that, “The only people with a stake in this game are a handful of people called

(throughout the ‘Horse Industry’) killer buyers and the callous and irresponsible people who dump their horses at the end of their usefulness.”

Allowing slaughter to continue is simply turning a blind eye to the larger problem of cruelty, neglect, and complete irresponsibility. Horses should not be abused whether they are at a racetrack or on a farm. Anti-cruelty laws exist in every state and should be enforced when animals are being abused. Simply exchanging one form of cruelty for another is not the answer.

Mr. Hettinger summed up the need for a total ban when he noted, “Absent legislation those of us involved in this work are doing what we can to remedy a shameful situation. With a ban on slaughter we could concentrate all our efforts on making sure that the other quality of life problems of horses will receive more and better attention than they ever have before.”

AWI's companion organization, the Society for Animal Protective Legislation, together with the Doris Day Animal League, is working with Congresswoman Constance Morella (R-MD), who introduced legislation called the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act, to ban the domestic and international transport of live horses or horse meat for human consumption. 🐾



Opposite page: Two terrified horses await their fate at a US slaughterhouse. Photo by Gail Eisnitz/Humane Farming Association.

Left: Retired horse lives at peace on one of the many horse sanctuaries throughout the US.