

The Grateful Dead's "Casey Jones" was playing on the radio at Amfran Packing in Plainfield, and several employees in baseball caps and bloody aprons were whistling along as they went about their work, which just happened to be butchering horses.

Amfran is one of only 14 horse slaughterhouses in the country, part of a growing industry that, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, killed 236,467 horses in 1991 (and 347,029 in 1990). These figures are actually deceptively low, because a real total would include the horses exported for slaughter (such as the 55,892 sent live to Canada for slaughter in 1991). In addition, slaughterhouse licenses are reportedly pending in Colorado and Idaho.

The rise of slaughterhouses for horses can be attributed to several factors: the decline in value of horses bred for racing, an excess population of riding horses, and a steady appetite for horse-flesh in several European countries, including France, Belgium and Italy. Many young, healthy horses, even those with championship bloodlines, are quite simply worth the most as meat. With wholesale prices for horse steak ranging from 20 to a high of 70 cents a pound, a 1,000-pound horse can bring as much as \$700 and the slaughterhouse buyer will outbid a competitor from a riding stable or track at the auctions where the animals' fate is decided (see sidebar).

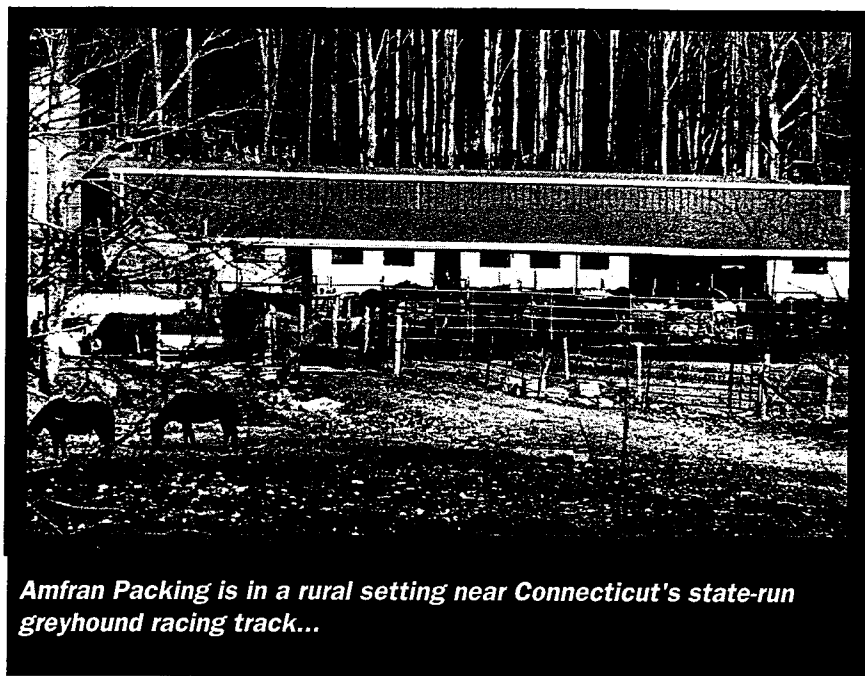
Not all horses delivered to slaughterhouses were acquired legitimately. Just as there is a huge and growing trade in stolen pets to be sold to research laboratories, there is a thriving trade in stolen horses for slaughter.

Amelita Donald, a volunteer state representative of the American Horse Protection Association (AHPA) in Dallas, Tex., offers a "personal guesstimate" that as many as 12,000 horses are stolen in Texas every year.

Donald knows the problem from personal experience. Her two horses were stolen from her on Mother's Day, 1990. "I loved them like children," she said. "It was the rudest awakening I ever had. I tried to find where they went but I couldn't get any help; everybody kept passing the buck. Finally, a sheriff told me to check the slaughterhouses."

Texas, with one of the largest horse populations in the nation (more than a million, over 50 percent of the total in the whole country) is also the country's slaughter capital. There are four plants, in Palestine (Transcontinental Packing), Kaufman (Dallas Crown), Fort Worth (Beltex Corporation) and, the country's largest, in Morton (Great Western Meat Company).

Together, these four plants kill 185,000 horses a year, all overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Donald points out that, despite some recent legal reforms she helped push through, it's still almost impossible to trace horses once they're stolen. "Horses get stolen because the laws on the books are not enforced. The thieves know that they can get away with it; they're seldom sentenced because they're seldom caught. The evidence is gone within 24 hours. Your only recourse is to ask the slaughterhouse workers if they remember that particular horse."



Amfran Packing is in a rural setting near Connecticut's state-run greyhound racing track...

Nick Lacy Photo

Texas law now requires a bill of sale in horse trades. And slaughterhouses must keep a description of every horse killed, including size, color and probable age. In addition, they have to keep the name, age and vehicle description of the seller. All this information must be made available to the public within 24 hours.

The laws help, but what would really impair the trade is an enforced federal law controlling intra-state horse transport and

slaughterhouse practices. AHPA is among the many groups urging Congress to adopt new laws. Another group, the Coalition Against the Horse Slaughter Trade, has collected thousands of signatures on petitions protesting the inhumane treatment of horses on their way to slaughterhouses.

Failing that, progress could be made with routine branding or tattooing of horses. And Donald points out that a \$7 electronic chip that can be implanted in a horse's neck (already in use in Canada and Europe) could mean immediate positive identification. "Instead, people make it easy for the thieves by not marking them at all," Donald said. "It's like leaving a Maserati in a mall parking lot with the keys in the ignition."

California has no slaughterhouses, but it does have a huge horse population, and a tremendous problem of horses stolen there and transported out of state for slaughter. California enacted a law that went into effect last January requiring detailed paperwork on every horse transported out for slaughter, and a tracking mechanism for locating them once they're stolen.

Ursula Liakos, with the California-based Horse Welfare