

A RAINY NIGHT IN AGAWAM

It's a rainy night on a back road in Agawam, Mass., and the trucks are filing into the barnyard of Crowley's Commission Sales Co. The cheerless yard and frozen puddles of slush don't prepare visitors for the warmth and crush of the auction hall, where spectators smoke and chatter, milling around the dusty stock pen. Some families clamber directly into the bleachers, but those familiar with the place push in through the heavy barn doors to where the horses wait, quietly chewing in their makeshift pens.

This is where the action is — by nightfall everything from saddle pads to used packs of playing cards will have been auctioned off, but the horses are the big draw. There must be 65 animals waiting their turn on the block, all with numbers taped to their shifting rumps. The professionals move briskly along the pens, noting chipped feet, lumpy knees, swayed backs, while families treat the place like a petting zoo, letting the horses nuzzle in their kids' pockets for carrots. There are pairs of huge Belgian work horses, feet like manhole covers, necks like sides of beef, standing stolidly side by side after years of pulling hay wagons around tourist spots. There are children's pets who have seen better days, long in the tooth, still showing traces of careful grooming.

A few look like they have days to live - one small gelding, caked with manure, hangs his head down around his buckling knees. An angry cut over one eye shows up against his white coat; his eyes are glazed, the breathing labored. Later, he's one of the first horses sold, bringing in \$275- "dog meat or Dinty Moore," jokes one spectator. Most of the horses are bought and sold by dealers, auction owner Dennis Crowley says. "You get a couple of backyard horses someone wants to get rid of, but a lot of them go to buyers for summer camps, looking for quiet horses for kids," he says. "Camp buyers will buy up to 400, 500 horses."

Not many go to slaughter from his auction, Crowley claims. "Around here, there's only one place that uses them," referring to Amfran. But, he adds, auctions in other states sometimes see as many as 90 percent of the horses sold shipped to the slaughterhouse. "In New York, they sell 150 horses and maybe 140 of them are for meat," he says. "People say, 'What a great auction,' and they don't get it, if you know what I'm saying."

— Lesley Riva

have ended up in the slaughterhouse if she had not rescued them.

"I have a neighbor who got tired of her horse, so she stopped feeding it for three weeks," Whalers said. "I heard about it and absolutely freaked out. By the time I got the horse it was a walking toothpick." She says many horse owners are "absolutely ignorant" about what is involved in keeping so large an animal — and that ignorance feeds the slaughterhouses.

"There is hay and medicine and special shoes — all that can cost \$300 a month. Parents will buy a horse because their daughter expresses an interest in one and they'll have no idea it's so costly. Maybe the neighbors will complain and that will be the last straw that leads them to sell the horse." Whalers thinks prospective horse owners should "think twice" before taking the plunge, and check with experts about costs.

Tiny Volume

Producing horsemeat is obviously not a major American industry. Tony Nolan, editor of *Meat Plant* magazine, calls it an "absolutely minuscule" part of the U.S. meat business. "It's considered a non-edible product here, except for dog food," he said. Rich Parker of the American Meat Institute concurs. "I don't know if we have any information on that," he said. "We don't have any members who slaughter horses." When told that Amfran processed 10,000 horses a year, Parker commented, "We have beef plants that process thousands a day." In America in 1988, he said, slaughterhouses killed 35 million cows, two million calves, 5.4 million sheep, and 88 million hogs. This contrasts rather sharply with the just under 300,000 horses killed in the same period. Still, the slaughterhouse is becoming the frequent destination of many American horses, too old, too lame, or as Amfran's Francis Raineau put it, simply no longer serving the interests for which they were bred.

Raineau looked out the window of his farmhouse at the packing plant beyond. "People bring horses with them," he said. "You'd think there would be more horses in rural areas, but that's not necessarily true. Where there are people, pets, racetracks, and farms, that's where there are horses." And raw material for Amfran, the horse recycler. ■