

Gale Eisnitz of HSUS has been investigating horse transportation problems for several years, with a focus on auctions. The conditions, she says, are often "deplorable." She particularly decries the use of so-called double-decker "possum belly" trailers, which "don't even allow the horses to hold their heads up or stand. Horses are a lot more fragile than cows, and their legs are quite prone to breakage. When the horses are packed in a trailer, they frequently trample each other. Some of the trailers are so old the bottoms fall off them on the highway, with horrendous results."

Eisnitz is saddened by the auction process, which frequently sends horses in the prime of their lives to the slaughterhouse. "There are gorgeous young healthy horses going to be slaughtered," she said. And horses can be abused prior to shipment. According to Eisnitz, "Once the owner knows the horse is going to the slaughterhouse, he'll often stop feeding it or giving it water. By the time they get on the trailer, they're often on their last legs, with serious illnesses and malnutrition."

Former Pets

Often, horse owners don't know that their former beloved pets are going to the slaughterhouse, as a survey of Connecticut horse fanciers revealed. According to John Porto, owner of the High Lonesome Farms in Easton, "Many Connecticut horse owners who don't want to keep their animals anymore — maybe their kids have gotten more interested in the opposite sex — will put ads in the paper and try to get top dollar. But if it doesn't sell a dealer will come by and 'steal' it. Ninety percent of the dealers won't say where the horse will end up. The price for horsemeat varies a lot, from 20 cents to 70 cents a pound. When it goes up, a lot of the horses sold at auction will end up on that ramp that leads to the slaughterhouse."

Bob Baker of HSUS, a former thoroughbred breeder, agrees. "When the price goes up to 50 cents a pound, the guys from the stables can't compete. The 70s were a turning point. After that, calling the killers became profitable." (A peak year for horsemeat was 1977, when 324,000 animals were slaughtered, according to the USDA).

Nancy Marr, who runs the Equine Information Service says, however, that most responsible owners will arrange for their animals to be humanely euthanized. "My mare got cancer and I had her taken to a farm, where, with a vet in attendance, she was given a tranquilizer, then a lethal injection. After that they dug a hole with a

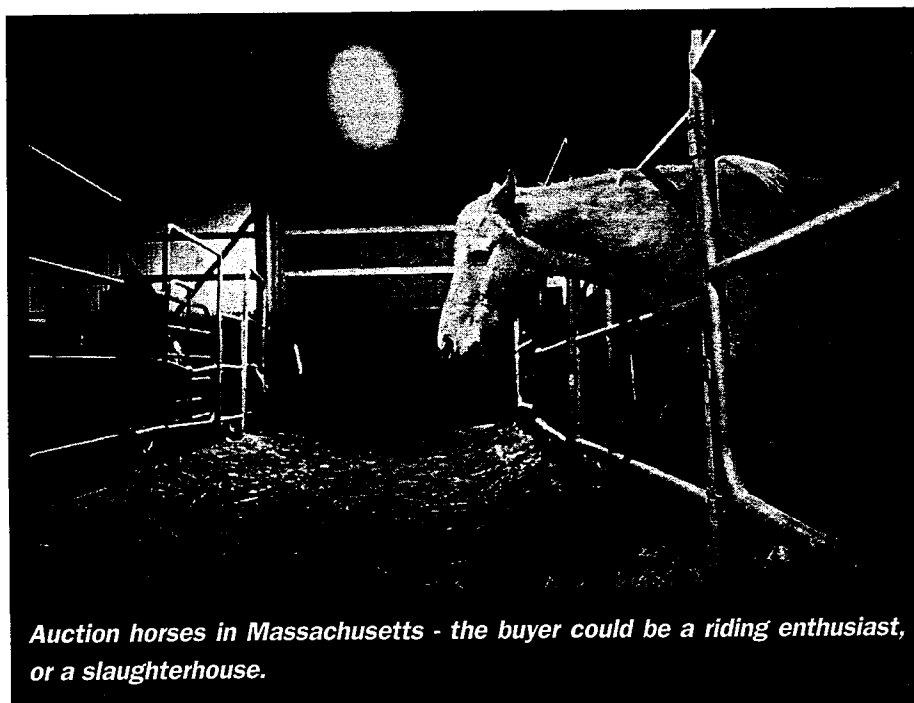
back hoe and buried her. There's also a shooter who comes around to make sure that horses are killed properly.

"Most people I know would never send their horse to the slaughterhouse. These are more than pets. Horses are very sensitive and can smell blood and death — they even shy away from carcasses on the road. They know they're about to be slaughtered, and that's cruel. It's also cruel to transport a horse that is sick or lame."

Filling A Need

But Bonnie Kreidler, editor of the *Fairfield Bridle Trails Association Newsletter* and a frequent writer about horses, says that slaughterhouses provide an important safety valve for over-abundant horse populations. "In a way it's needed because there's no other way to cope with horse surpluses. You can't just turn them loose the way people do with unwanted cats and dogs. In 1985 when there was a trade restriction imposed by France, there was a serious problem and the value of horses plummeted. The slaughterhouse has its place in the cycle of life."

Nick Lacy Photo



Auction horses in Massachusetts - the buyer could be a riding enthusiast, or a slaughterhouse.

Kreidler points out that it costs approximately \$1,000 a year to feed a horse, plus sta-

bling costs that range from \$100 a month in rural areas to as much as \$1,000 a month at exclusive riding stables with indoor riding rings. Many people who raise horses, she said, invest \$5,000 in a two-year-old animal that is only worth, at best, \$1,500.

"Unfortunately, all the extra horses can't be absorbed," she said. "The available land base (for horses) is shrinking and horses are a luxury item."

Molly Maloney Sweeney is currently looking for two horse tenants to occupy her barn. She wants \$250 a month each. "People don't realize the responsibility involved in keeping a horse," she said. "It's like having children." She adds, "Some people are responsible and some people aren't. Look at the way people abandon children and leave dogs to starve at their summer homes." Sweeney notes with pride that a pony she once owned is now being ridden by the grandchildren of the people to whom she sold it.

Patricia Whalers knows those irresponsible horse owners well. She is the founder of the Connecticut chapter of Humane Organization Representing Suffering Equines (HORSE) and runs a rescue facility that is always fully stocked with neglected horses. There are currently 11 in residence, and Whalers "guarantees" that eight of them would