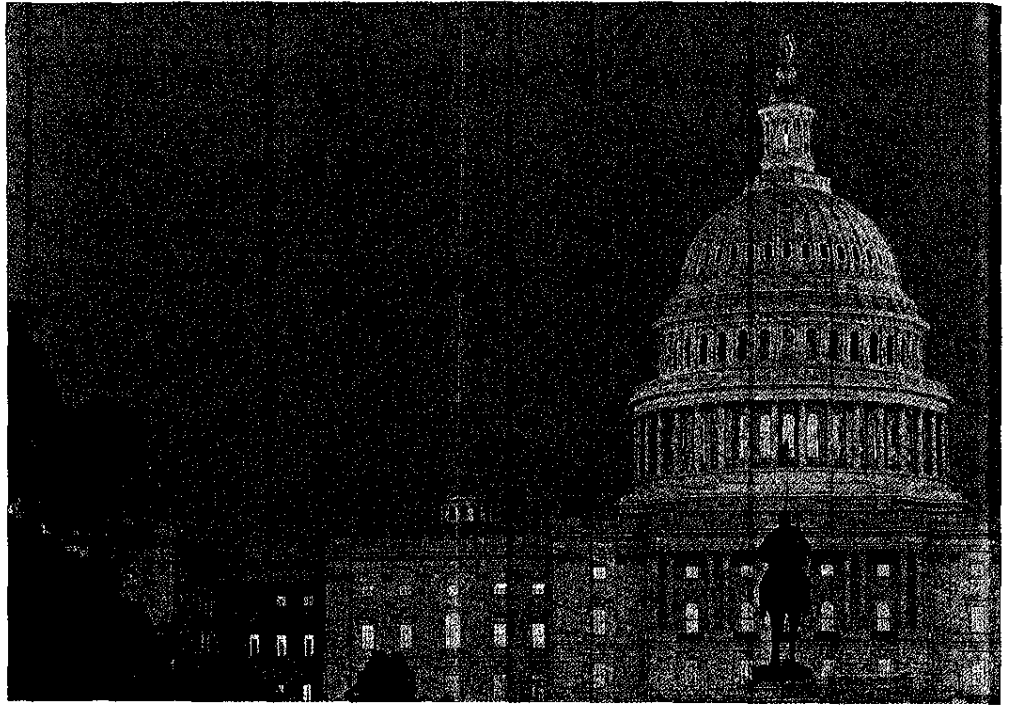
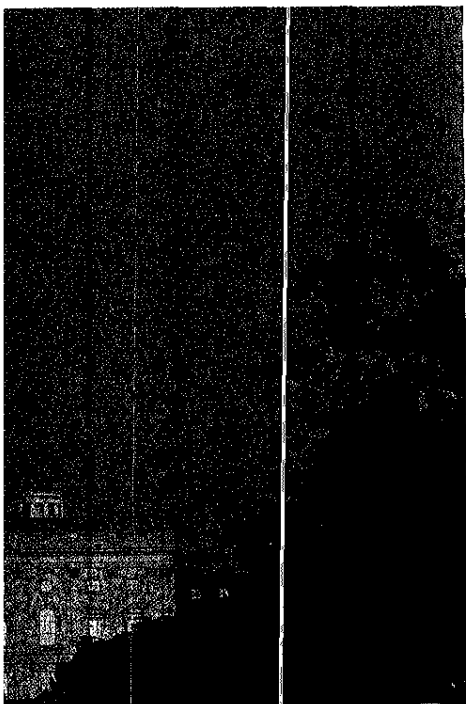


An American Tragedy

They [horses] are slightly below the American Bald Eagle in terms of the reverence Americans have for them," stated US Congressman John E. Sweeney of New York. America is known for a lot of things; baseball, hot dogs, Ford and a democratic republic. But one item left out of that list is, to many of us, the most crucial - horses. Since the birth of our country, equines have played an important role in our history. "The horse is a symbol of our nation's prosperity, strength and growth," Representative Sweeney told *Horse Connection* in this exclusive interview. "Horses helped us cultivate the land, they died in battles, they keep us entertained, and provide majestic beauty."

Horses are an integral part of our lives, whether we realize it or not, summer camp horses, parade horses,





show horses, plow horses, therapeutic riding horses, police horses – even that first pony you begged to ride at the summer fair. Horses carried U.S. armed forces through the rugged portions of Afghanistan. Cars are named after them. Commercials feature them. Their personalities and intelligence have endeared them to us. Yet every year, thousands meet cruel and inhumane fates, hauled across country in crowded, confined trailers with no food or water, shoved into line with electric prods, stunned, sometimes ineffectively, hung upside down by their legs and bled to death, before being shipped overseas as a delicacy. This American tragedy is the reality of the slaughterhouse.

According to Congressman Sweeney,

“40,000 [horses] were believed to have been slaughtered 3 years ago, and 50,000 this past year. There was an 18% increase. We have seen over the past decade something of a decline, but then we saw it spike back up.”

Why is the government allowing horse slaughter?

“The only reason the slaughterhouses are running is that the owners say it’s a federal, not a state’s rights, issue.”

Currently, there are two slaughterhouses in operation in Texas, and one proposed for Illinois. These are all foreign-owned operations, not American.

“In the U.S., we have long since done away with the practice of eating

horsemeat. It never really was accepted,” Sweeney notes.

So why do Americans put up with this practice?

Because most of us are unaware that it is going on. Amidst all the coverage of the war in Iraq and the Dow falling and rising, we, as Americans, have failed to notice that our best and beloved friends are dying. But when we do hear about it, it stings even non-horse people to the

core, says Sweeney. "The best example of the offense we have taken from this practice was the great Thoroughbred Ferdinand, the Kentucky Derby champion. Ferdinand was a great champion, and he was sold for stud to Japanese conglomerates. They made \$3 million off him, but weren't satisfied that the offspring were of the championship caliber. So to make even more money off him, they decided that they were going to sell him for slaughter,

expensively. His prior owners, and many affiliated with the racing industry, desperately tried to buy him back, but all were refused. The horse was slaughtered, and sold as 'eating a great American champion.' The story is tragic, even for non-horse people."

Why are we shipping our horsemeat overseas anyway?

"It is being sold overseas as delicacy items...not just as horsemeat, but as

American horses." Kind of like Russian caviar or French truffles, American horsemeat has become something that foreign chefs search for by name. "If the French and Europeans decide that this [horsemeat] is their culture and what they like, let them eat their own horses," Sweeney says.

But why don't they eat their own horses? Why must they buy their meat directly from America? Why must they eat our dearly beloved friends, the ones we pamper and love?

BECAUSE we pamper and love them! American horses are renowned for being well fed and exercised. Plus, they eat lots of herbs and grass. This sort of diet makes their meat prime eating material for foreign horsemeat connoisseurs. Regardless of whether Americans eat horsemeat or not, there's still a market for it, and unless we do something, it's going to grow.

The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is now making its way through the House of Representatives. Congressman Sweeney is its creator.

"It is a piece of legislation intended to ban the slaughter of American horses for the purposes of human consumption."

Is there hope that this bill will pass?

"Yes, very much so. A substantial majority of the American people, in any poll that's ever been done, are in the 70% and higher numbers [opposing] the slaughter of horses for human consumption. Also, a majority of members in Congress have signed onto the bill. 217 'yes' votes pass a bill. We may be over 230....will it pass? I believe that in the end, you can't circumvent the will of the people, or the will of a majority of members in Congress."

But that's not to say that everyone is for it.

"There's resistance from the agricultural committee, specifically the committee chairman."

Why would anyone oppose such a humane act, though?

"Their inference is that there will be an 'overpopulation' of horses. But there has been a huge growth in the numbers of farms and people that take horses in for rescue purposes. We believe the argument that there's nowhere for these horses to go is frivolous."

True, but does the opposition have a strong footing?

"The question is, can one person hold up the will of the majority of members? I think that in the end, if enough people weigh in on this, that won't be the case."

Sounds good...but how do we know if this will make a difference?

Sweeney says to look at the example of California: "California passed a bill banning the slaughter of horses for the purposes of human consumption...in the first years, the


stealing of horses was reduced substantially. The [American Horse Slaughter Prevention] act will effectively stop [slaughter] companies from going on against the will of the people and opening up plants."

Will this act affect cattlemen and cows? How about people with horses too lame or ill to live?

"I narrowly drafted this piece of legislation so it is just about horses. It has no impact on people who need to put their horse down for health or other reasons. The regular rules and laws still abide."

Lastly, what can we horse people do to help?

"Write, write write. Write your Congressman. Write, in particular, the agricultural committee. Ask them to hold a hearing on this issue, and to put the legislation up to vote. The more you write, the better it is."

Horse people know the deep bond that is shared between owner and horse. It is a quiet link, almost invisible, except to the two of them. In the words of "Ode to the Horse," "The world's past has been born on his back. We are his heirs. He is our inheritance." Let's not squander this beautiful, valued inheritance by sitting back and doing nothing. Write for your horses' lives today! 

About the author: Anastasia Ealey is an articulate 17 year old horsewoman who lives in Northern Ohio. She has been riding since age eleven, and writing since age two, and aspires to be an author.