HORSE AUCTION
NIGHTMARE

It was a cold, rainy Saturday morning when HSUS investigator Gail Eisnitz met with state humane officers, sheriff's deputies, and local humane society officials at the Front Royal, Virginia, Livestock Exchange. Auction business was brisk; trucks and trailers crammed with horses crowded the gravel parking lot, their owners prepared to sell their stock to the highest bidders.

For nearly a year, Ms. Eisnitz had spent her Saturdays documenting the deplorable conditions under which horses are being sold at Virginia auctions, in the heart of “horse country.” It was this documentation that finally convinced a local Virginia prosecutor to file animal-cruelty charges against horse owners and dealers who peddle neglected and abused horses at auction for profit.*

Each year, thousands of horse auctions are held in the United States. These sales, generally held at county livestock markets weekly or monthly, attract farmers, ranchers, pleasure-horse owners, riding stable operators, and slaughterhouse buyers. Between 150 and 300 horses are auctioned off at each sale, totaling well over a half million annually, according to HSUS estimates. These animals include everything from healthy young thoroughbreds to broken-down old mules. Because the racing industry produces thousands of excess horses that don't prove fast enough at the track, these, too, can usually be bought, for $200 to $800 each.

Some people looking for inexpensive riding horses and ponies do purchase horses at auction, but many horses are too old, sick, lame, or temperamentally unsuited to be riding animals. The majority of horses sold at auction—usually between 60 and 90 percent—are purchased for slaughter.

Although some horses go to America's pet-food manufacturers, most of the horses slaughtered in the United States are processed into horsemeat and shipped overseas for human consumption in Europe and Japan.

“America's horse auctions have become dumping grounds for thousands of unwanted, abused, and neglected horses,” says Ms. Eisnitz.

“Whatever that animal’s condition—even if it’s old and decrepit, seriously injured, or near death from starvation—there's always a buyer at auction. Most often, that buyer is the killer buyer.”

Working closely with Virginia humane officer Bettijane Mackall, volunteer Patricia

* No charges were brought against the Front Royal auction itself.
Beal, American Horse Protection Association Representative Pat Rogers, and the Warren County Humane Society, Ms. Eisnitz documented the many abuses at Virginia horse auctions. The number one affliction was starvation. "It's difficult to visit a horse auction in Virginia or elsewhere and not discover horses suffering from extreme malnutrition," says Gail Eisnitz. "These horses were skeletons—they were like walking dead."

The HSUS discovered hundreds of horses with broken knees, legs, and noses, dislocated shoulders, burns, and infected eyes, ears, and wounds as well as horses suffering from serious systemic infections such as pneumonia and strangles. These victims included:

- A badly bruised thoroughbred mare that had recently foaled but had apparently not received any subsequent veterinary care. The mare's uterus had become infected, and, by the time the animal reached auction, it suffered from a raging fever, with blood and pus oozing from its vagina.
- A horse with a severe ear infection; the flesh on the outer ear had been mangled, and blood and pus seeped down the animal's face. The odor of the infection could be smelled from ten feet away.
- A mare that had been forced to jump a cattle guard and become entangled in the metal rungs, sustaining traumatic injury to both hind legs. When the animal arrived at auction, the bandages covering its legs were blood-soaked, and flies were living on the exposed flesh. When a veterinarian removed the bandages, "it was difficult for us to believe what we saw," says Ms. Eisnitz. "The skin had been ripped off both legs from the hock down to the ankle. Inside, you could see torn ligaments and tendons and the entire length of the bone."
- An ex-race horse with a knee injury that had gone untreated for so long the animal's leg was totally deformed. Its knee was swollen to the size of a cantaloupe, and the animal could barely walk. A second thoroughbred had a deep tissue infection, still oozing, in its foot.
- Untold numbers of horses, ponies, and donkeys with serious and painful foot problems including founder (inflammation of the very sensitive tissue inside a horse's hoof), which makes it excruciating to walk. Many animals suffered from overgrown feet, the result of inadequate or nonexistent trimming. As a horse's hooves grow longer and longer, they curl up, making it very difficult for the animal to stand and eventually rendering it a virtual cripple.

Animals arrive at auction in these appalling conditions for any number of reasons: owners haven't realized the responsibility, time, or expense involved in caring for horses or can't afford proper veterinary care when their animals become injured or sick. For many horses, the winter months are particularly bad; there is not enough pasture to sustain them, and cold weather forces them to use precious calories to stay warm. Denied necessary sustenance and in weakened condition, they are loaded on to trailers and shipped off to auction for slaughter.

Some horses—particularly the malnourished ones—are purchased by middlemen, dealers who take them home, fatten them up, and return them to the auction for sale at a profit to killer buyers. These animals may change hands repeatedly before they ultimately end up at the slaughterhouse door. Buyers from the country's eleven federally inspected equine slaughterhouses will purchase just about anything at auction that will bring them a profit in the lucrative overseas horsemeat market.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that, in 1989, approximately 350,000 horses were slaughtered in federally inspected plants in this country, triple the number slaughtered annually just six years ago. An additional 80,000 horses are crammed into tractor trailers bound for Canadian packing plants. Due to less stringent food and drug regulations, Canada, too, has developed a large commercial horsemeat industry.

Transported by haulers who don't care about the animals' well-being, horses may be unloaded and left at the auction barn unattended for days on end. Without access to water, horses become severely dehydrated. Food is rarely provided, even for the most emaciated of animals.

While some horses are jammed together in incompatible groups inside large, unbedded pens, others may be housed individually in stalls that are too small for them. HSUS investigators have seen horses crammed inside closet-like enclosures—tiny stalls with boards over the top that make it impossible for the animals even to raise their heads in a normal fashion. The floors of pens and stalls become urine-soaked, and the animals become mired in inches of manure.

When it comes time for an animal to be auctioned, it is cruelly whipped and prodded up to the auction ring, then whipped repeatedly to make it show some signs of life. As the auction progresses, the killer pens become increasingly crowded. Young and old, healthy and sick, ponies and draft hors-
es, mares and stallions, all are forced together. Fighting erupts, horses are bitten and kicked. An old pony, once a faithful companion to generations of youngsters, a spirited racehorse with a broken leg, and a young, healthy mare crying out for her foal are lost in what quickly becomes a sea of anonymous animals.

Late in the day, the animals are loaded onto tractor trailers for the long haul to slaughterhouses or Canada. Crammed inside double-decker vehicles intended to haul pigs and cattle, these animals may endure days on the road, in subzero temperatures, without food or water. Those that slip and fall will never stand again and may be trampled to death.

The Virginia auction raid was months in planning, with The HSUS lining up facilities, manpower, and veterinarians to care for all the horses potentially to be seized. Humane officers had to be convinced to take on such a case, as it could involve the prosecution of numerous individuals for animal cruelty.

"We had an investigator inside the auction barn for two days before the scheduled raid," explains Gail Eisnitz. "Much to our surprise, he learned that auction officials were actually turning away individuals with abused animals." By the day of the raid, a written notice was being distributed to all individuals at the auction house informing horse owners that their "lame, crippled, or thin" animals might be seized by the humane society. The HSUS later learned that auction officials had received a warning about the raid two days before it was scheduled to take place.

Even with the advance warning, however, state humane officers were able to seize three horses in extremely poor condition and arrest one horse dealer. (He was later acquitted when authorities could not prove that he was responsible for the condition of the animals.) Seized were an Arabian mare and colt, both emaciated and parasite infested, and a thoroughbred gelding that had been sold to the slaughterhouse, despite the fact that its leg was broken and had apparently gone untreated for many months.

Immediately after the Virginia raid, a high-ranking state agriculture official came to Washington to meet with The HSUS to discuss possible solutions to the auction problems documented. We urged him to improve regulations and, more importantly, to upgrade enforcement of those regulations that already exist.

The National Enquirer ran an article on The HSUS's investigation and urged its readers to contact us if they wanted to help. More than 37,000 responses have poured in.

As a direct result of The HSUS's crackdown, concerned Virginia residents, outraged by the conditions we documented, joined forces to create a horse humane society in northern Virginia, specifically for the rescue and rehabilitation of horses from auctions. But the key to ending widespread auction exploitation lies in prevention—preventing irresponsible horse owners and dealers from making a profit from abused and neglected animals. With the adoption of stronger regulations and stricter enforcement, owners will realize that distressed, abused horses cannot be auctioned off like used junk, and the trade in these pitiful creatures will eventually dry up. Without a way to market such animals, we hope unscrupulous dealers and uncaring owners will finally be driven out of business.