

# Old Friends, New Choices

**Your senior horse may have more options than you realize**



*Article and photos by Angel S. Gnau*

**T**housands of horses are sent to slaughterhouses, auctions, or end up being abused or neglected each year in the United States. We hear it on the news all the time. It's heartbreaking when you think that many of these horses were beloved family members, pampered show horses, or racehorses, once loved, well trained and cared for.

Horses end up in this situation a variety of ways. Old age, chronic illness, and lameness are the most prevalent, but sometimes a horse just slips through the cracks. Horses are expensive to keep. People become overwhelmed with the costs, especially when a horse becomes too old or injured to be useful. They decide to sell the horse either privately or at auction, thinking the animal will go to a good home, where in reality the horse may end up in the wrong hands or in a slaughterhouse. There are also cases where a horse or horses are stolen from their owners and sold to the slaughterhouse.

Horsemeat is big business in Europe and Japan. We are appalled by the idea of consuming horsemeat here in the US, but to some cultures, horsemeat is a delicacy. On the other end of the scope, in countries like India the cow is seen as a sacred animal, whereas Americans love beef. So it is all subject to the culture one is raised in as to what types of animals are deemed suitable for human consumption.

## Alternatives to Auction and Slaughterhouses

Luckily for horse owners and lovers alike, there are alternatives to auctions and slaughterhouses for our beloved pets and companions. Some people are fortunate enough to own land and have the financial means to keep their old horses until their natural demise. Other options are to donate horses that still may be useable to non-profit organizations such as 4-H, boy scouts, girl scouts, mounted police, therapeutic riding schools, and other institutions. Not only will you find a new, caring home for your horse, but also your donation is tax-deductible. You can ask to see an organization's non-profit 501(c)(3) status, and it is a good idea to look up the organization on the IRS website ([www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov)). If you donate a horse, they should automatically offer a written receipt of the donation (always ask for a receipt with estimated value) that you can take to your tax person to list on a Schedule A form. There is minimal paperwork if the horse is valued at \$250 or less, but you may need a certified equine appraisal if the horse is valued at \$5,000 or more. You can find these requirements at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov).

More options for old or unrideable animals include new homes as pasture mates, in riding schools (only serviceably sound and retrainable horses), with individuals seeking a "pet" horse and more. Again, remember to thoroughly check out whomever you plan to donate your horse to, as once he is out of your possession it may be difficult to take the horse back if conditions are found to be unfavorable.



**"Silver," rescued from slaughter to be a companion and teacher**

Another option for the very old or crippled horse might be wildlife sanctuaries that have big cats, where the horse is humanely euthanized and the meat used to feed the sanctuary animals. This may seem a bit barbaric to some people, but in reality, the horse is no longer made to suffer and plays an integral role in the preservation of another species. I had the opportunity to work with the Wildlife Waystation in Angeles National Forest by hauling donated horses to the Waystation. Horses were always treated with respect and well cared for before they were needed.

## Retirement Homes for Horses

Some states are lucky enough to have equine retirement farms or ranches. These establishments are entirely set up as retirement sanctuaries for old racehorses, show horses, or backyard pets. The requirements for entrance into one of these retirement facilities vary. Most will require a one-time fee of up to \$5,000 per horse, and the

owner signs over his or her ownership of the animal to the facility. This can be daunting at first, but when you think about it, your horse could live another 10 years or more, so this “donation” would be a small percentage of what you might have to pay at a boarding stable, not to mention vet and farrier bills. Some facilities also offer boarding and rehabilitation, and will more than likely require a monthly fee to care for your horse, but you retain ownership.



“Spectacular Bid,” racehorse retired to stud

## It is very important to fully research any facility you plan to leave in charge of your horse.

If you decide to retire your horse to pasture or a retirement facility, be sure to visit the facility, look around the premises and make note of how the grounds are maintained and what the other horses look like. Are they fat and happy, or are there problems with manure, flies, and crowded conditions? Are there enough qualified people to adequately take care of all the horses’ needs? Ask for references, talk to other owners who have already donated their horse. Will the horse remain there for the rest of its life (get this in writing) without the possibility of being sold or abused? It is very important to fully research any facility you plan to leave in charge of your horse. See sidebar above right for facility ideas.

### The End

Of course, there is also euthanasia, which can be hard to do, but at times is necessary. I had to euthanize one of my own horses at age 24. I had grown up with “Copper” and had owned him for 14 years. We did everything together, from trail riding to entering our first horse show. We learned how to barrel race, jump, and everything in between. He was with me when I had to go away to a girl’s school, and even went to the racetrack with me as a pony horse, as that was

## Options to Explore for Your Senior Horse

I have found some of the following facilities on the Internet and wanted to share them with our readers. NWHHS is not affiliated with or specifically recommending any of these facilities. This information is given only as a courtesy to our readers:

**Intercollegiate Horse Show Association, Inc.** ([www.ihsainc.com](http://www.ihsainc.com))

**North American Riding for the Handicapped Association** ([www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org))

**Ryerss Farm for Aged Equines** ([www.ryerss.com](http://www.ryerss.com)) is the oldest retirement facility for horses – est. 1888

**Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation** ([www.trfinc.org](http://www.trfinc.org))

**United States Pony Clubs** ([www.ponyclub.org](http://www.ponyclub.org))

**Wildlife Waystation** ([www.wildlifewaystation.org](http://www.wildlifewaystation.org))

### Equine retirement facilities in Oregon and Washington

**Anchor Ranch Retirement Home For Horses – Oregon:** [www.anchorranch.com](http://www.anchorranch.com)

**Nodaway Farm – Washington:** [www.nodawayfarm.com](http://www.nodawayfarm.com)

**Smooth Moves Equine – Oregon:** [www.massagemyequine.com](http://www.massagemyequine.com)

**Sunny Acres Ranch – Washington:** [www.sunnyacresranch.com](http://www.sunnyacresranch.com)

about the only time I could see him. The trainer I worked for rode him more than I did! Copper was a great horse, but when the time came, I knew I had to do the right thing by ending his misery and letting him go. It was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, including fighting my own cancer. I think about him often...he was truly a great friend.

Decisions like these can be hard to make, but they have to be addressed at some point. None of us, horses included, live forever. Horses don’t have the choices we do. It would be nice if humans and horses alike could be assured of a quiet, peaceful passing at the end of our lives, but that is not often the case. Whatever decision you make, be confident that you are making it in the interest of your best friend...your horse.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Angel and “Copper”

Angel Gnau is a certified equine appraiser and consultant, and manages her “Pacific Equine Appraisal” in the Portland, Oregon area. She appraises all breeds and disciplines, and is available nationwide. Her background comes from more than 30 years in the horse industry as a trainer and consultant. She is also a freelance writer specializing in horse-related articles. Angel can be contacted at 503-684-2097 or 800-484-9538 x 4344, or by email at: [angel.gnau@verizon.net](mailto:angel.gnau@verizon.net)