



# AN OPEN GATE: Rethinking Our Stabling Practices

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

I sat watching the white tops of steel posts singing by the van window as we rolled down the long gravel road leading to the show barn. It was early in the spring of 1983 and I was one of many college students set to visit a Quarter horse breeding and show operation not far from Phoenix. I was crammed up against the armrest of the 15-passenger van we rode in, vying for a glimpse of the 60-stall barn we'd heard so much about. We rounded the last bend in the road and the barn came fully into view. The barn stood sprawling out across a compound neatly packed in gravel. It was long and low, lying up against the desert skyline, doors closed. Something struck me as unusual, though I could not immediately put my finger on it.

We pulled into the parking area and untangled ourselves from the van. The weather was chilly, but dry. The desert swept off away from the barn like a long sloping pool table. The sun warmed through my light coat and softened my shoulders. The barn manager met our instructor at a small door and let him know we were at a halter horse show barn, and though they were getting ready for several big shows, he would give us the tour.

While he began his intro it hit me. There were no horses. I looked across the desert in all directions, listened intently, shuffled over to the edge of the pack and peered around the end of the monolith. Nothing. No outside pens, no pastures. That was when he heaved on the big corrugated slide door to let us into one of the 4 breezeways. I will never forget the steam that rolled out of that door when it hit the fresh desert air, nor the smell of the ammonia, the particles of dust that mixed with dirt that had never been washed with rain. I will never forget the whinnies of the horses inside that barn, all pitches, all muffled by the walls and insulation.

They stood in row after row of box stalls, cloaked in double blankets, hooded and braided, padded and painted. Claustrophobia tugged at my own collar as we were led deeper and deeper into the maze. Horse after horse, overfed and under footed, standing in box stall after box stall, beneath the buzz and hum of artificial lights, a radio blaring.

I stood in amazement. I had never seen so many horses so incredibly fed, clothed and cleaned and equally so mentally neglected.

My heart ached when we left it, when the manager rolled the big door closed again on them all, sealing them away from the sound of the birds singing in the trees, the breeze playing thru them, the warmth of sunshine. That was many years ago.

## Horses move.

Movement is the cornerstone of their existence. Their body cannot function correctly without "quality movement" and their mind cannot function correctly without it either.

I'm not sure where humans got off track on how to stable their horses but I suspect it has its roots in the "tie stall era" of the pre-industrial age; back when horses were "horsepower" and their energy was harnessed on a daily basis.

Then folks went from tie stalls to box stalls and that is where so many got stuck.

I know people that do not feel they are doing their horse a disservice by locking him up in a box stall all week. Humans like confinement. Box stalls are about the same size as an average human bedroom. Of course, pound for pound, a 165 lb. human would have to live in a space a little over 3 by 3 feet to accurately feel the confinement many horses live with eternally. Given the fact that horses must defecate in their living space, a friend of mine claims a box stall is really more like our 165 lb. human living in a porta-toilet.

We are all limited, in one way or another. Not enough money, not enough space, not enough time. Though our intentions are good we lose sight of what an incredible conditioning resource we have in "unfettered" movement. I have been encouraging horse owners to get creative and tap into the mental benefits of "turn out."



One boarding stable group I spoke with in Washington state is considering finding some quality turnout in their area and starting up a rotational plan for groups of horses that are socialized into a small band and rotated in and out of confinement throughout the year- giving their riders access to their mounts intermittently, while giving the horses "off" time in a more natural setting. This kind of creative approach to stabling could unlock the stall door for many.

In my travels I have seen horses trained and shown that never knew turnout. I have been told that they were "too valuable" to turn loose to frolic and buck and kick- that they might hurt themselves- and that the investment was too great. I have been told that I do not understand, that they get worked on a regular basis, walked and ridden and exercised and that they are fine, that I should mind my own business.

I understand the business of horses, that it can be fair and just to ask them to perform for us, given that the relationship we forge with them is a balanced one. I have no qualms "calling on" my horses, when I have prepared them for it, when I have offered them something in return. Having said this, for all my investment in time and effort, shaping what God gave them into something useful and productive for myself, I know

that it does not give me the right to protect them from life as they were made to know it.

The horses in that Arizona show barn, so many years ago, are all gone now, replaced by others whom I suspect will log a similar existence. I wish I could go back to them, though, back through the years. I wish I would have listened to the whinnies that day and found a way that at least a few of them could have felt the sun on their hide in an afternoon, or slept quietly under the stars with the desert breezes whisking their manes in the darkness.

I wish that we could find a way to accept them for what they are and though we will ask them to carry us through our lives, perhaps we could allow them the luxury of silence and weather, and the smell and the taste of grass.

Horses have given me my livelihood and I am indebted to them for that. They have also given me some of the most challenging, frustrating moments of my life and consequently some of the most rewarding, illuminating, inspiring moments of my life, and I am indebted to them for that. It is this debt that compels me to plead their case, in hopes that someone might heed it and rethink their stabling practices, open their mind to a whole new stabling model and open the gate.