

Vintage Horse Care Manuals Reveal Attitudes From The Last Century

Some things haven't changed in 100 years—and some couldn't be more different.

Eliza McGraw

WHEN I BEGAN leafing through the National Sporting Library's extensive collection in Middleburg, Va., I knew I would find plenty of examples of vintage horse care manuals. But after just a few hours, I had found more than I could have imagined. I found so many, in fact, that I had to restrain my subsequent reading to books published between 1810 and 1910 (which I picked for its appealing 100-years-ago symmetry), just to set some limits.

As I read, I learned about drenches and balls, molten-grease, tinctures and physics. I read chapters on air, lit-

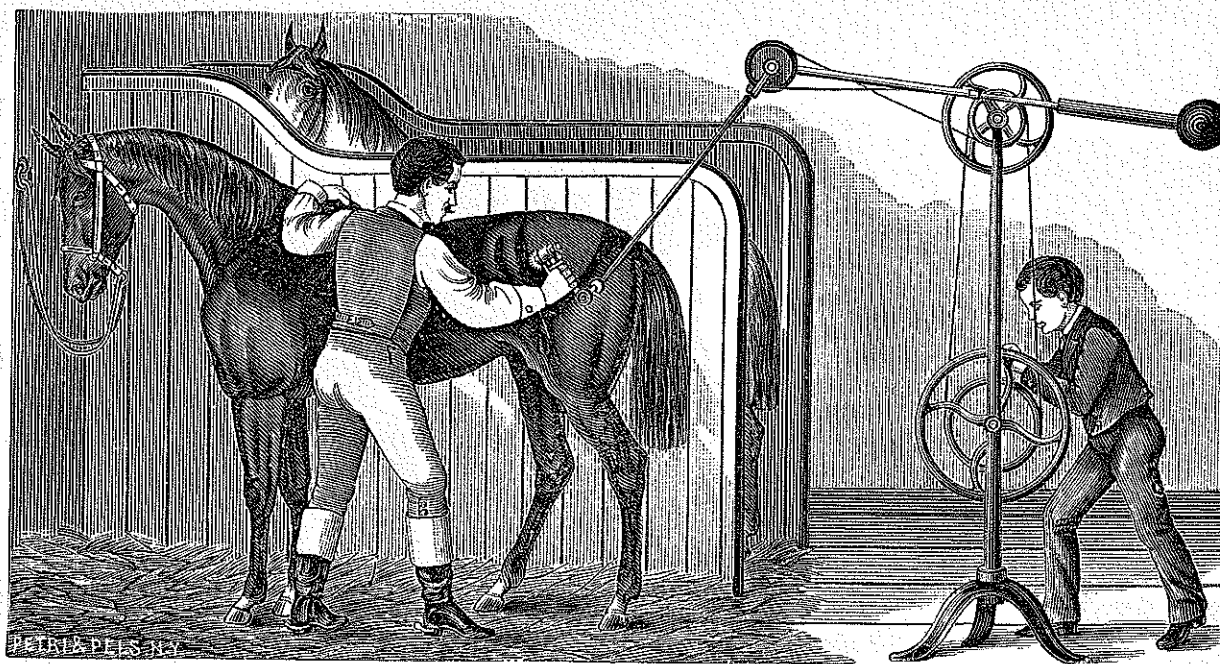
ter and light, chapters about conditioning, and one called "As To 'Soundness,'" which asks plaintively, "A splint is a splint, a filled tendon is not smooth, a 'bit of a cold' is not good wind. Where shall the line be drawn, and who shall draw it?"

Horse care topics, then as now, provoked controversy. Obviously, more people used to own horses and keep them at home, as the title of Francis Clater's 1846 *Every Man His Own Horse and Cow Doctor* indicates. Horse keepers were expected to have some familiarity with agriculture and animal husbandry in gen-

eral—Clater's book, for example, describes a recipe for horse medicine that should be "new-milk warm."

Buying the right animal was a key topic for these manuals. In his 1892 *Gleason's Horse Book*, Oscar Gleason cautions: "Who buys a horse needs a hundred eyes."

In 1903, Francis Ware published *First-Hand Bits of Stable Lore*, which also includes advice about horse buying: "A man's wife and his horse are two acquisitions which he must choose for himself." And, sounding as if he's giving car shoppers tips, Ware advises his readers to be candid at all



POWER CLIPPING MACHINE

Before the dawn of electric clippers, author George Martin illustrated the power clipping machine in his 1895 manual, *The Family Horse*.

Recipe No. 2½

Restorative Ball

TAKE—Tartarised antimony, one drachm;
Aniseed and carui seed, of each two drachms; -
Ginger, one drachm;
Venice or common turpentine, sufficient to make into a ball.
This ball may be repeated if necessary every other night.

—Francis Clater, *Every Man His Own Horse and Cow Doctor*

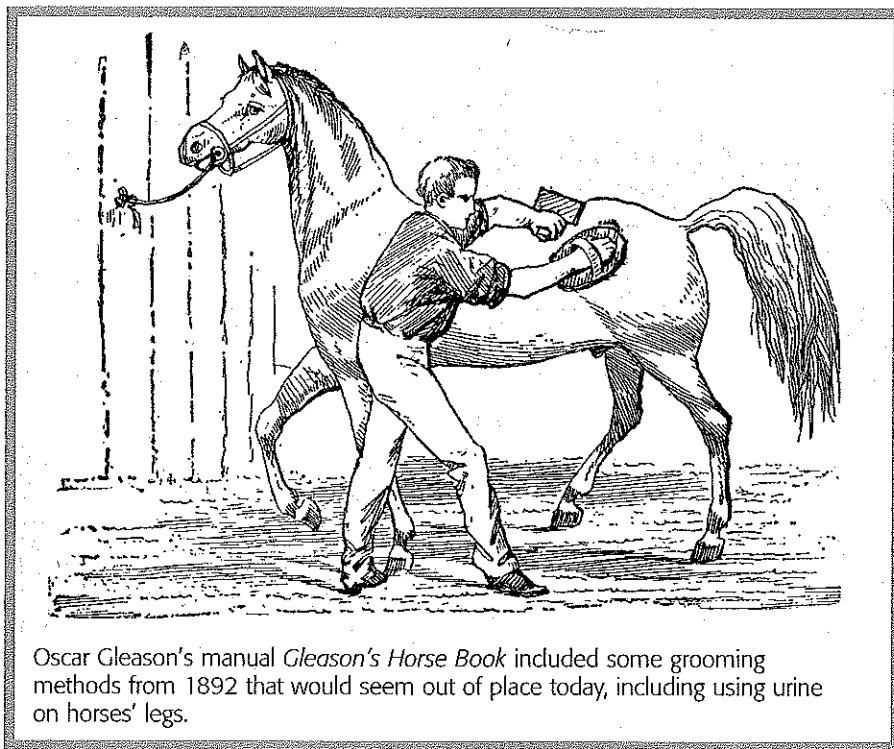
costs. "It will cost you a struggle to acknowledge [knowing nothing about horses] but never mind, it's no secret, for the dealer knew it the moment you walked into the yard, and he will think a lot of you for being man enough to acknowledge what to him was perfectly plain."

Ware also includes some quainter warnings for the neophyte horse shopper: "Distrust the sunken eye, and the head narrow and prominent between the eyes—the horse may not be vicious, but he is peculiar and probably crochety," he writes, growing fatalistic: "If you like the looks of him, go ahead, no matter what anybody says; buy him, if he's reasonably sound, but don't let the veterinary, as he is prone to do, attempt to predict what may happen after you have owned him six years. You'll all be in luck if any of you are alive then."

Care And Feeding

Unlike changing opinions of horse physiognomy—even if these days we don't particularly want to buy a horse who is "prominent between the eyes," we probably don't refuse him because he's "crochety"—much stable management technique remains consistent, beginning with the process of getting the carefully selected new horse home.

Keep expectations reasonable and safe, writes William Youatt in his 1874 *The Horse*: "Nothing is so common and so preposterous, as for a person to buy a horse from a dealer's stable, where he has been idly fattening for sale for many a day, and imme-



Oscar Gleason's manual *Gleason's Horse Book* included some grooming methods from 1892 that would seem out of place today, including using urine on horses' legs.

diately to give him a long run after the hounds, and then to complain bitterly, and think that he has been imposed upon, if the animal is exhausted before the end of the chase, or is compelled to be led home."

A new horse should always be led home to a well-aired stable. Ventilation, then as now, preoccupied barn planners and horse owners. "Air, air, air," writes Ware. "None of our stables get half enough... Any arrangement for ventilation is good, provided there is just twice as much of it as the owner and architect have agreed to be necessary."

Feeding decisions were no less contentious. Your boarding farm manager would probably appreciate a plaque lettered with Professor Dadd's

admonition: "Now, reader, pray do not find fault with your stable-keeper because your horse does not look fat and sleek. You had better trust to the discretion of the man, who, having been long in the stable business, is perhaps better qualified than yourself to judge of the effects of food under the states of rest and exercise."

It's easy to see parallels between today's complex feeding beliefs and schedules and those guiding the lists of potential horse feed in these manuals. Gleason likes to feed horses roots (including, of course, carrots), and in the winter, he says horses should have ½ of their daily ration in Indian corn. (He vetoed manger feeding, since "if you turn your horse out in a field you will never see him

Oscar Gleason Answers Questions:

- Can a cribbing horse be cured? *No.*
- Can ringbones be cured? *No.*
- Can spavins be cured? *Not after they have become seated.*
- Can heaves be cured? *No.*
- Can shoe boils be cured? *No.*
- Can blindness be cured? *No.*
- Can nervicular [sic] lameness be cured? *Not after long standing.*
- Can splints be cured? *No.*

—Oscar Gleason, *Gleason's Horse Book*

Encourage Him

Kindness with the family horse is of the utmost importance. Always cultivate an acquaintance, and be on social and friendly terms with him. If he is tired and worn out, it is astonishing how these little attentions will encourage and cheer him up.

—George Martin, *The Family Horse*

graze up the hill. He eats sideways or down.") Walsh feeds beans to sound horses but not to those with any health problems, since they "produce inflammation."

In the barn, Gleason uses straw for bedding (10 pounds is plenty for overnight, he writes), since sawdust and shavings cause thrush.

To stop cribbing, he writes, line the stall door with sheepskin, and treat that with cayenne pepper. Youatt frets over grooms rushing their work and formulated a test for owners who suspect laxity: "There is no necessity...for half the punishment which many a groom inflicts upon the horse in the act of dressing [grooming]," he writes, "and particularly on one whose skin is thin and sensitive...After all, it is no slight task to dress a horse as it ought to be done. It occupies no little time, and demands considerable patience, as well as dexterity. It will be readily ascertained whether a horse has been well dressed by rubbing him with one of the fingers. A greasy stain will detect the idleness of the groom."

To clean a gray horse? Use castile soap with charcoal, says Gleason. He also proposes an unorthodox method for moisturizing horses' legs. "I claim that every stable should have a barrel placed in some corner with a notice above it 'urinate here,' and two or three times each week each horse should be swabbed with the urine. To do this take a broom-handle and make a swab on the end of it with rags."

The Well-Dressed Horse

Those of us addicted to the purchasing of blankets, sheets, stable rugs

and coolers will be pleased to know this is a time-honored American pre-occupation.

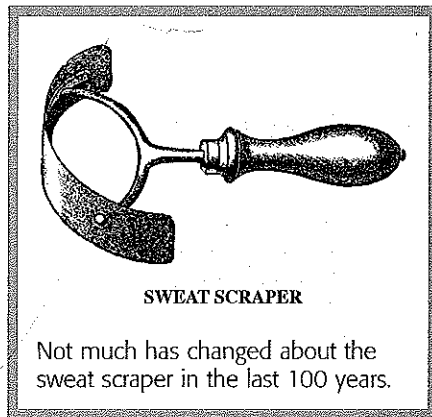
As George A. Martin writes in his 1895 *The Family Horse: Its Stabling, Care and Feeding*, "Hunters, trotters, and running horses require an outfit almost as extensive and varied as the trousseau of a fashionable bride, but the needs of the family horse are quite limited."

"See that...the blanket is large enough to cover the animal from the neck to the tail...If not do not buy it any price," adds Gleason.

For his part, Ware dismisses the whole plan: "Blankets as generally used are a delusion and a snare," he writes in *Stable Lore*.

For conditioning advice, Gleason sticks with common sense: "Always stop at the hill and let your horse catch his breath. If you have ever run up hill yourself think of your horse."

But in his 1892 *The Horse In The Stable and the Field*, J. H. Walsh takes note of some divergent methods, including one exposing a horse to heat and then bathing him in cold water. People apparently believed this could condition a foxhunter as well

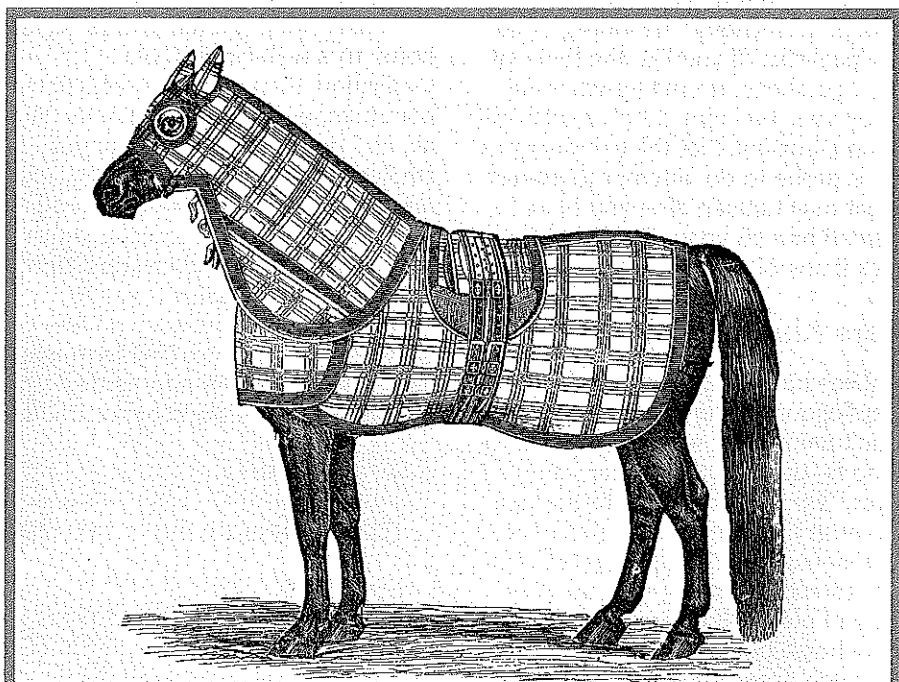


SWEAT SCRAPER

Not much has changed about the sweat scraper in the last 100 years.

as exercising him could. Walsh advocates against this, since he believed that "though a horse may be made light and airy by means of the bath and walking exercise alone, his muscles cannot be braced and rendered bigger, as they are by actual fast work."

He does, however, recommend "physic," or purging, as a health measure. "If at any times the legs become hot, a dose will carry off the plethoric condition which shows itself in this way, and the rest which must be given after it will assist in relieving them."



HORSE ARRAYED IN FULL WALKING SUIT

George Martin wrote that: "Hunters, trotters, and running horses require an outfit almost as extensive and varied as the trousseau of a fashionable bride," in his book *The Family Horse*.

His recipe: one physic-ball [home-made pill] of three or four drachms [a drachm is 1/8 of a fluid ounce] of aloes [aloe leaves, used as a purgative]. If a rider has not followed this conditioning advice, and finds that an out-of-shape horse is exhausted, and cannot even walk another step, "the better plan is to leave him with a light covering on him of some kind, and at once proceed to procure a quart of ale or wine, or spirits and water, whichever can be obtained the most easily," he writes.

All In The Family

Given the ambition to own a horse, and the question of 'means' affirmatively answered, the obstacle of 'ways' remains; and many a Mr. Neophyte has found, or fancied, this an insurmountable obstacle. Generally recourse is had to Uncle John, whom family tradition has handed down as a combination of the serpent and the hawk in matters equine; Cousin Will also knows a man who is on terms of friendship with another man who keeps several horses, and is therefore an expert; grandma, according to the fairy-tales recited at family reunions on Thanksgiving and Christmas, was a regular daredevil in her salad days, and still has fancies for the flowing tails and arching necks that used to look so well on sofa cushion and sampler.

—Francis Ware, *First-Hand Bits of Stable Lore*

Medications And Remedies

Sometimes, even a quart of ale cannot placate a horse's emotional upset, which can then cause as much trouble as physical distress, writes Ware in his 1903 *Our Noblest Friend The Horse*.

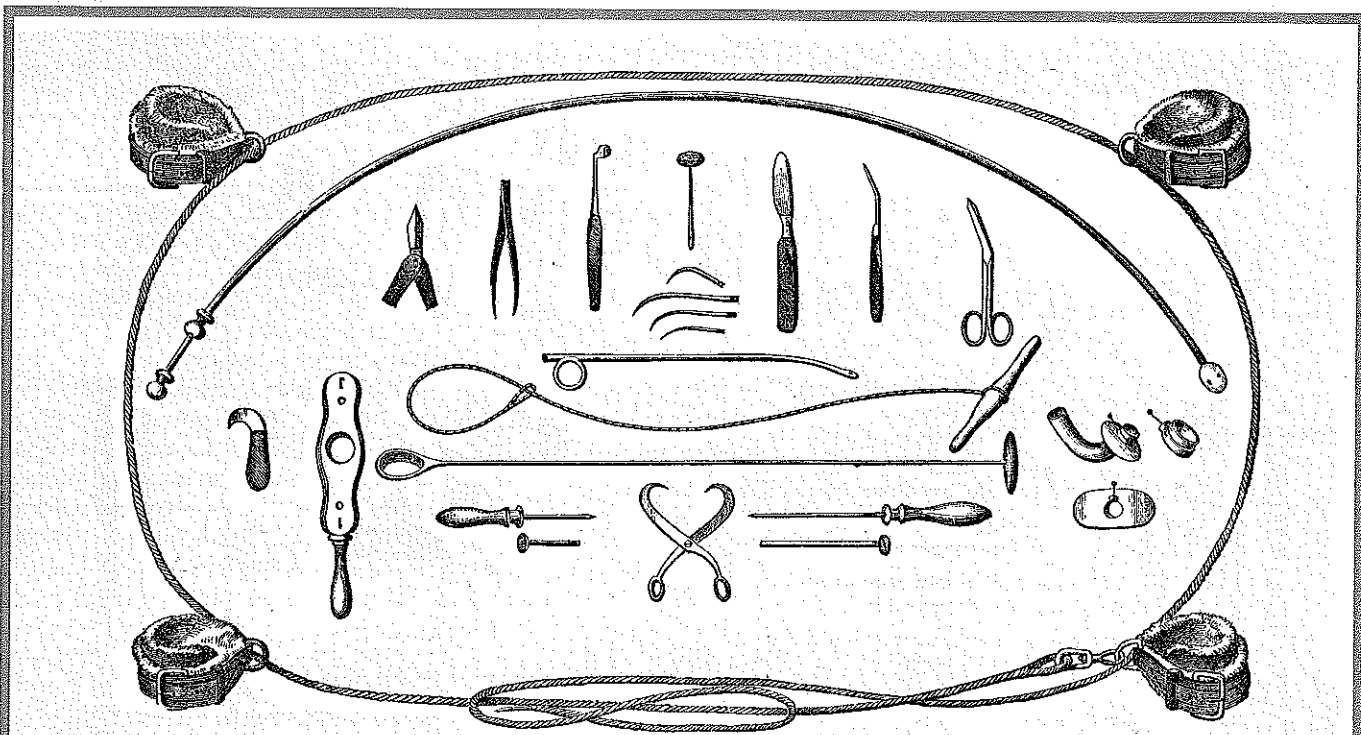
Noting similarities between people and horses, he writes to "try to alleviate [a distressed horse] by ensuring him equine companionship, by little attentions and delicacies, by regular exercise, etc. As you would in

similar circumstances brood over your condition if left in solitary confinement, so will he; as your depression would be increased by over-feeding and lack of exercise, so is his; as wholesome fatigue ensures the kindly oblivion of sleep to you, so it will to him."

"Use as little medicine as possible, but prevent sickness in your horses by giving them the proper care and attention," echoes Gleason.

Then as now, even those horses receiving the best attention did, of course, fall ill sometimes, and the care manuals have more recommendations for these circumstances, although Ware exhibits little patience for those who don't pay attention to their horses' needs.

"Colic is a more common trouble than it should be, and of ten cases eight are the fault of the groom or owner," he complains.



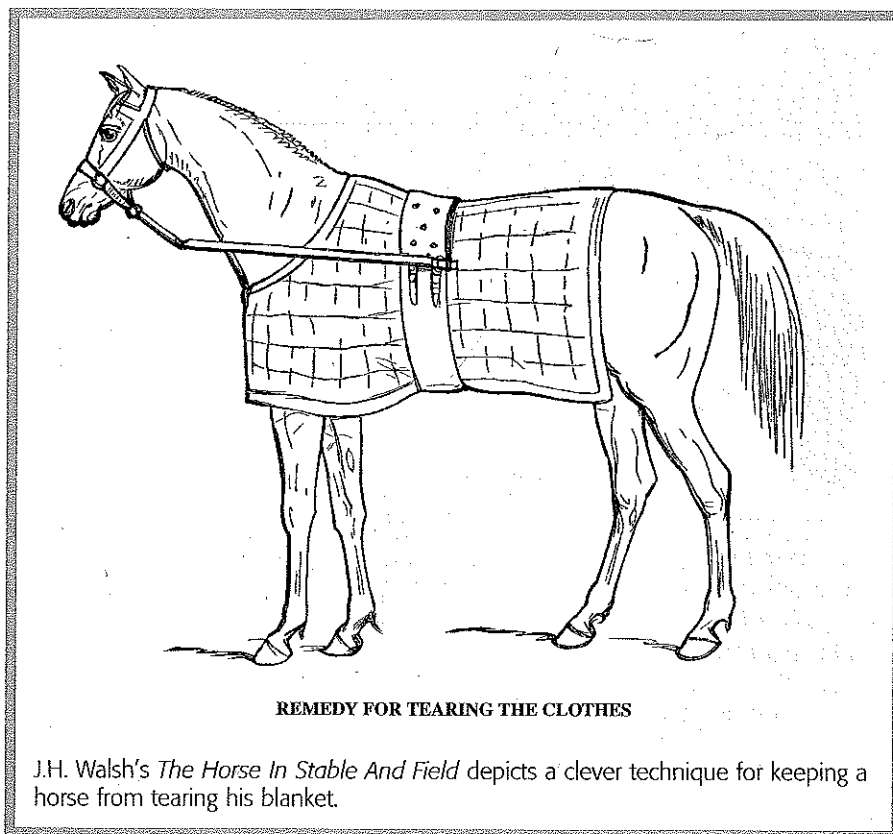
SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS USED IN VETERINARY PRACTICE

George Dadd's 1908 manual, *American Reformed Horse Book*, included recipes for several concoctions as well as this illustration of surgical instruments used in veterinary practice.



Instead of keeping the Banamine handy, Professor George Dadd, in his 1908 *American Reformed Horse Book*, recommends that owners make a solution of fluid extract of chamomile, three ounces fluid extract of ginger, two ounces powdered hyposulfite of soda [a chemical used now as a photography fixative], and five ounces of water. How much should the horse receive? "A wine-glassful night and morning."

Ware recommends that the colicking horse be drenched with chloroform, laudanum, sulphuric ether and linseed oil, a combination of which today's owners may feel a bit wary, as they would with how these mixtures are administered: "To give a drench, back the horse into the stall...and placing a loop made of strong cord over the upper jaw, have an assistant slip the tines of a stable fork into it, and elevate the head...A cow-horn, a rubber bottle, or a long-necked strong glass bottle, like a hock [an old name for German wine] or champagne bottle, are the best



REMEDY FOR TEARING THE CLOTHES

J.H. Walsh's *The Horse In Stable And Field* depicts a clever technique for keeping a horse from tearing his blanket.



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receptacles for the fluid," he writes.

Despite this advice—no one likes giving horses medicine, but we're currently in agreement that it no longer involves a pitchfork and champagne bottles—some of the medical advice in these manuals seems prescient. Just as people now ice a horse's feet if they are worried he might founder, Walsh recommends that "the horse should be fed on the least heating food which will serve the purpose for which he is intended, and his stable should be kept as cool as possible."

In cases like Walsh's advice, these manuals look toward the future. And throughout them all, the goal of maintaining a horse in an innate state becomes manifest. Even in an era of harsh bearing-reins, stable blankets for every horse and curb bits that would give today's most hardened trainers the shivers, care manual authors focused on keeping a horse healthy with as little artifice as possible.

As Youatt writes: "Open up the stables, pack away the blankets, and realize that a horse is healthy in proportion as he approaches his natural state." ♣