

Trail's *End*

Seeing the growing need to provide a peaceful last resting place for equine partners, David and Marta Heidt started Omega Farms in Oregon.

Story by TERESA CARP

Photography by CHRIS PIETSCH



The tranquil Noti, Oregon, pasture where David and Marta Heidt's horses graze is also the final resting place of nearly 1,000 horses. Owners sometimes leave flowers or other memorials in honor of their horses.



Top: David and Marta Heidt, who board horses and also care for their own, do not run Omega Farms only for monetary gain; they feel it is their calling. "It's a matter of doing unto others what you would have them do for you," David says.

Above: In rough terrain, the Polaris and sled are used to transport animals to the loading area.

LAST CHRISTMAS, LINDA OLSON OF WALTERVILLE, OREGON, received devastating news. Her mare, "Fancy," was dying of kidney failure. The news robbed the season of joy, but at least Olson could take comfort in knowing that Fancy would receive a dignified burial when the time came.

Nestled among the lush foothills of the Oregon Coast Range, near the town of Noti, lies a secluded valley ringed by Douglas firs. It's home to Omega Farms. David and Marta Heidt, both 47, use their 377 acres to farm, grow timber and raise horses. But their best-known enterprise is a real head-turner—the couple are equine undertakers. Marta runs the office; David collects and inters horse remains.

A lifelong horseman, David Heidt is keenly sensitive to the swirl of emotions involved in his work. More often than not, owners are distraught to the point of tears. He allows plenty of time for them to say goodbye and routinely offers to braid and snip off a lock of mane as a memento. Owners may press a blanket or flowers into his arms to place inside the grave. However long it takes, Heidt listens and offers consolation.

"My job isn't just to pick up and bury animals," Heidt says. "It's to console the owners and help them gain closure. That's why I encourage them to visit the farm. Only about 2 percent actually do, but those that come always say they're glad they did, and that it's comforting to know that their horse is resting in a quiet, beautiful place."

Because it does no advertising, horse owners learn about Omega Farms by word of mouth from veterinarians and the

farm's customers. Clients telephone the Heids when a horse has died or is about to die. Sometimes, owners haul horses in, but usually Heidt collects the remains. He has equipped a 1993 Ford F700 flatbed truck with a knuckle-boom crane, a large steel box and canvas straps to attach to the horse to hoist it into the box.

In case death has come in a difficult location, the flatbed carries a Polaris 500 all-terrain vehicle with a winch and a 4-by-8-foot towing sled.

Back at the farm, Heidt uses an excavator to dig a grave 8 feet deep, 7 feet long and 2½ feet wide. He buries horses intact.

"The only alteration we make is to remove shoes because they aren't biodegradable," he says. "We know owners don't want the body taken apart just to make it easier to bury."

He lays the horse on its side with its feet next to the grave, then uses the excavator to tip the body so it lands feet-first inside. The horse ends up with legs folded in what resembles a natural sleeping posture. As required by law, Heidt sprinkles the body with hydrated lime to speed decomposition, then fills the grave with loose soil from an adjacent hole that will become the next grave.

Because the land is zoned exclusively for agricultural use, the burial ground is by definition not a cemetery. In fact, horses belonging to one of the Heids' tenants graze peacefully, oblivious to the hundreds of graves underfoot. There are no individual grave markers, but Heidt marks rows of graves with posts and records every grave in a log so that he can readily locate it for a visitor. Some grieving owners create impromptu memorials in adjacent woodland.

With the burial count nearing 1,000, it's hard to believe that the Heids got into equine undertaking by accident. Heidt had worked as a ranch hand and a construction electrician; then he owned and operated a successful rubber-recycling business. When he sold that company and went into farming full time, he never anticipated what an odd turn his life would take.

In 2004, an Appaloosa that Marta had owned since she was 13 years



David Heidt's specially designed 1993 Ford F700 truck carries a Polaris all-terrain vehicle and large sled that are used in moving horses. The unique loading design eases the animals' transition to the vehicle.

DISPOSAL OPTIONS

✿ **RENDERING PLANTS** once offered affordable, accessible removal and disposal of large-animal remains, but dwindling profitability and growing public distaste have pushed the industry into decline.

Most renderers do not process animal remains, but collect them for companies that do. Service areas tend to be limited, as little as 50 miles wide, because of operating costs. Many operators do not advertise, citing harassment by animal rights activists or what one calls "dead skunk in the road" service requests.

Large-animal veterinarians and state agricultural agencies maintain lists of renderers. Fees range from \$125 to \$300 per carcass, even when owners deliver the remains.

Other commercial and institutional options include:

- ✿ **CREMATION.** Pet cemeteries charge hefty intake fees for large animals (up to \$350 per head), and incineration costs \$1 to \$1.50 per pound.
- ✿ **FORMAL BURIAL.** Only a few pet cemeteries bury horses because of the space and effort required. Costs range from hundreds to thousands of dollars.
- ✿ **EXOTIC ANIMAL PARKS AND RESCUES.** By pre-arrangement, parks such as Wildlife Safari in Winston, Oregon, and rescuers such as Yogie and Friends Exotic Cat Sanctuary in Frierson, Louisiana, accept live, uninfected, non-drugged horses to slaughter as needed. Euthanasia is by gunshot. Although many people express revulsion, there is no shortage of donors. "We stay pretty busy year-round taking in (live) horses," says Rosie Mussatti of Wildlife Safari.
- ✿ **VETERINARY COLLEGES.** A few, such as at Cornell University, accept for teaching purposes horses that have died of unusual disorders, and schools dispose of horses that die while in their care.
- ✿ **LANDFILLS.** A few accept carcasses for an extra fee. Public agencies controlling solid waste disposal can steer horse owners to them.

When considering do-it-yourself disposal, such as the following, bear in mind that handling of carcasses, even disease-free ones, can pose environmental, public health and public relations risks, and is thereby subject to regulation. Failure to know and follow the law can result in severe penalties.

- ✿ **NATURAL DISPOSAL.** When large animals die on rural acreage, it's usually legal to "let nature take its course" within limits.
- ✿ **FARM BURIAL.** Restrictions apply even when interring horses on your own property.
- ✿ **COMPOSTING (BIOPROCESSING).** Increasingly popular in an age of "green" thinking, but hardly a no-brainer. Bioprocessing requires proper equipment and facilities, can be technically complicated, and involves close monitoring (taking internal temperatures, turning remains, preventing fluid runoff).
- ✿ **OPEN BURNING.** Generally allowed only in livestock disease emergencies or after natural disasters.

In 2009, the Humane Society of the United States published *Humane Horse Remains Disposal* at humanesociety.org. This state-by-state guide summarizes disposal regulations and lists euthanasia programs, pet cemeteries, renderers and other resources. However, the recent economic downturn has taken a toll on the pet industry, including some of the providers listed.

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old had to be put down. The Heidts buried it on the farm and asked area veterinarian Hank Anderson what other horse owners did. To their dismay, they learned that those without rural acreage and heavy equipment had two choices: a distant rendering plant or an animal park that takes aging livestock to feed big cats. Anderson urged the Heidts to start a burial service because they had the land, the equipment and the know-how.

Though initially reluctant, the Heidts couldn't stop thinking about the proposal, and they finally decided to give it a go. Besides drawing up a business plan and working out the mechanics of collecting and bury-

ing dead horses, the Heidts faced a regulatory marathon. After obtaining a special-use permit from the county, they had to get conveyance and burial permits from the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality and the Division of State Lands also had to sign off, and because a fish-bearing creek flows through the farm, the Army Corps of Engineers weighed in.

Six months, \$2,000 in fees and an "application as thick as a book" later, the Heidts were good to go... though, even now, they still must undergo annual state inspections to renew their license.

All this to start a business that

BURIAL PROVIDERS

What owner wouldn't embrace the idea of interring a beloved horse in a natural setting readily accessible for visitation? Yet Omega Farms is one of only a few businesses in the nation providing this service.

Doyle Shugart is the spokesman for the International Association of Pet Cemeteries & Crematories (IAOPCC), whose members provide final arrangements along with grief therapy and counseling or referral to pet-grief therapists. However, he isn't sure which, if any, of the trade group's 150 members bury horses because "it requires a good bit of space, which most cemeteries just do not have." A horse owner himself, Shugart does not bury horses at his own facility in Georgia.

Here are a few businesses that provide horse burial (usually in addition to cremation):

- ✦ **ABBEY GLEN PET MEMORIAL SERVICES**, Lafayette, New Jersey. Burial in a marked plot costs \$5,000. Owners must make separate arrangements for transport. (800-972-3118)
- ✦ **ANGEL VIEW PET CEMETERY & CREMATORY**, Middleboro, Massachusetts. Also serves nearby states. Horses can be euthanized on-site or remains can be hauled in by a contractor who charges \$85 per hour. In a "country burial" (\$500), a horse is buried in a group plot. Burial in an individual marked grave costs \$3,000. (800-287-0066; 508-947-4103)
- ✦ **AT HOME ON THE RANGE PET CEMETERY**, Manhattan, Montana. The company doesn't publish fees but says it offers a "farm field burial" (\$350 to \$375) in which no record is kept of a body's location. There is a separate, variable transport charge. (406-282-7378)
- ✦ **CRAIG ROAD PET CEMETERY**, Las Vegas, Nevada. Burial costs approximately \$3,000, with a separate charge to collect remains. (702-645-1112)
- ✦ **EVERGREEN PET CEMETERY**, Evergreen, Colorado. Owners must separately arrange for transport of remains. Burial in a pasture without markers and with no visits allowed costs \$500; burial in a marked grave in the cemetery where visits are allowed costs \$900. Evergreen requires 24 hours notice to prepare a horse grave. (303-674-7777)
- ✦ **PINE HILL PET & HORSE CEMETERY & CREMATORY**, Bowie, Texas. It costs on average \$300 for collection and burial in an individual, marked plot. (1-800-219-PETS[7387], 940-872-4701)
- ✦ **REGENCY FOREST PET MEMORIAL PARK**, Middle Island, New York. Also serves Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Collection and same-day burial costs about \$2,000. Plots are marked and visits allowed. (1-800-372-PETS[7387]), 631-345-0600)
- ✦ **TWIN OAKS PET CEMETERY & CREMATORIUM**, Okeechobee, Florida. The cemetery has 120 horses buried in a 20-acre tract protected against other uses for 50 years (dating from 1998). The basic fee is \$985 for burial in a single plot that can be marked by a headstone if the owner chooses. Transport is charged separately. (863-467-6377)

Heidt admits "isn't a real money-maker." The Heidts rely mainly on their other enterprises for their livelihood.

"We are Christians, and what we do is our mission, our ministry, so to speak," Heidt explains. "It's a matter of doing unto others what you would have them do for you."

The Heidts charge only what they deem reasonable. Rates start at \$125 to inter deceased horses that owners bring to the farm, horses euthanized by a veterinarian on site, and horses Heidt transports from area veterinary clinics. To collect a horse elsewhere and bury it at the farm, the base rate is \$275. It can cost considerably more for a burial involving a long collection run; the Heidts have logged more than 200 miles on some round-trips. Clients say the fees are fair, given that renderers may charge \$250 or more just to pick up or receive a carcass.

Early this year during one of the area's rare snowstorms, Linda Olson made the pilgrimage with her daughter, who had a horse buried at the farm a few years ago.

"Because of the deep snow, David took us on his ATV to both graves, and it was incredibly comforting to see where [our horses] are buried," she says. "It is such a peaceful and beautiful spot. It really gave us a sense of closure."

Olson took comfort from seeing horses amble through the pasture as a sign that the circle of life goes on.

"There's no one I trust more when it comes to horses," Olson says. "When it came time to get another horse, I actually ended up buying my new horse from David."

Eugene veterinarian Richard Mosier, an equine sports medicine specialist, recommends Omega Farms to all his clients.

"The Heidts are the perfect people to offer this service," he says. "They are caring and compassionate. They take their time because they understand how hard it is for someone to say goodbye to their horse. It's more than a business to them, it's a calling."

TERESA CARP is a freelance writer from Eugene, Oregon. For more information on Omega Farms, contact them at 541-935-1588 or visit omega-farms.com.

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