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Shackle & Hoist: The Power of Alternatives

Henry Spira

Few things in the decades-old horror show of farm animal-suffering have bothered all of us quite so much as shackling and hoisting. It should come as a relief to animal protectionists that the curtain is finally beginning to fall on the last grisly scenes of this archaic practice.

While our ideal remains the non-violent dinner table, the reality is that eating habits lend to change slowly. In terms of the "three Rs" this means that adopting a meatless diet for ethical reasons (Replacement) remains our long-term goal. In the short term our best bet is to also focus on eating fewer animals (Reduction) and working to improve conditions for farm animals as long as people continue to eat them (Refinement).

Shackling and hoisting has long been an urgent candidate for Refinement. It consists of placing a shackle around an animal's back leg. After shackling, the animal, who may weigh over a thousand pounds, is hoisted into the air until fully suspended by that leg. Here's how the trade publication *Meat & Poultry* describes it.

Shackling and hoisting of conscious animals for ritual slaughter is an area of our profession in need of major housecleaning ... [I visited one plant where steers were] hung up in a row to await slaughter. They were hitting the walls, and their bellowing could be heard out in the parking lot. To get the shackles on the live cattle, the operation was equipped with a pen with a false bottom that tripped the animal to make it fall down. In some plants, the suspended animal's head is restrained by a nose-tong connected to an air cylinder. Stretching of the neck by pulling on the nose is painful. Suspension upside-down also causes great discomfort because the rumen presses down on the diaphragm.

What follows is a brief chronicle of a 2½-year campaign to promote alternatives to traditional shackling and hoisting—a campaign which proceeded so quietly, few people are aware of it.

To backtrack for a moment, more than 40 years ago, a crude restraining device was developed in Europe as an alternative to shackling. For the time being, it was an improvement. In 1963, Cross Brothers Packing Co. patented an apparatus for holding cattle in a standing upright position. In 1964 the patent was purchased by the ASPCA. This enabled any plant to use the device without paying royalties and became known as the "ASPCA pen." Over the next several years, a number of animal protection organizations jointly funded the development of upright restrainer systems.

In 1986, the first such upright restraining system for calves and sheep was installed by Utica Veal in Marcy, NY. It was designed by Dr. Temple Grandin, whose articles are the source for this historical background.

Several major packers now began to convert away from shackling, some motivated by the dramatic decrease in worker injuries and, in at least one instance, because an owner was impressed by the potential for reducing suffering. But, in spite of these emerging changes, several major packers continued to shackle and hoist. In 1990, we began to plan how we could help change this.

Armed with information about the new restraining systems, I sat down in January 1991 and wrote to the CEO of a major slaughter facility in Ohio that had a reputation for progressive thinking. I asked what plans the company had to replace "the cruel and archaic" shackling and hoisting methods currently in use.

We were pleasantly surprised to receive a long and thoughtful reply, clearly suggesting a willingness to discuss the issue. Shortly thereafter, we met with the corporate executive at his company's headquarters. I recall that the offices were decorated with models of the corporation's banana boats. Since I had spent my younger years working on such ships, it provided an easy opening for the discussion that followed. Many animal protectionists assume that one cannot converse with decision makers in industries that are inherently brutal to animals, and this is a mistake. In fact, the CEO was open to proposals for new directions. Amazingly, the suggested equipment was up and running within four months.

We were so encouraged by the speed of this development that we immediately contacted another major "packer"---the industry euphemism for slaughterhouse---this time in Illinois. We stressed that the systems we recommended were operational, no longer experimental, and commercially available. This time, however, we received no response.

What to do? Well, we contacted the packers' trade organization, the American Meat Institute (AMI), enclosing copies of the unanswered correspondence and urging it to facilitate dialog with the reluctant packer. We referred to our track record of preferring to work constructively with major corporations to solve problems, rather than unnecessary public confrontation. Some months later we sent information packets to the entire Board of the American Meat Institute, pointing out that more than one of its directors was still involved in shackling and hoisting.

Having an alternative is important, but it also didn't hurt to point out that, in addition to the humane issues, the proposed equipment had, at another installation, reduced plant workers' injury-related absences from 126 days in the 18 months prior to installation to two lost days in the following 18 months. Within the month, this company agreed to review the situation and consult with an industry expert. Three months later, it submitted engineers' drawings to a fabricator. After some initial stalling, the upright restrainer system is finally underway.

Over the next year or so we were able to bring about the elimination of shackling and hoisting at what now appears to have been the last two major large animal operations. In both cases, the slaughter operations initially ignored our approach. And in each case we were able to apply pressure by going over their heads, in one case, to their most important customer, and, in another, to the multi-billion dollar parent corporation of an important customer.

In one case, the packer's major customer is a nationally famous manufacturer of processed meats. We felt we were in a strong position and told the manufacturer that unlike its anonymous slaughter operation it has a highly visible presence and would not want to be viewed as condoning shackling and hoisting. Indeed, after speaking to its supplier it replied that the slaughter facility would be opting for the alternative.

In what seemed a highly unusual move, the president of the food manufacturing company decided to fly to the slaughter facilities and check things out for himself. Seeing that the matter was not being seriously pursued, he found an appropriate alternative supplier and then "fired" the unresponsive slaughter facility. For this "packer," refusing to be responsive cost him dearly.

Then in 1992, AMI published its *Animal Handling Guidelines*. The guidelines were written by the highly respected Dr. Temple Grandin, stating that the "practice of hanging live cattle upside-down should be eliminated" and described alternatives.

The AMI's guidelines, widely disseminated in both English and Spanish, is an encouraging initiative---a recognition of the need for industry standards. And it's been our experience that change initiated from within the community itself is likely to be swiftest and most enduring. Activists can then amplify, energize and assure follow through; i.e., play the role of catalyst.

The last packer we dealt with also attempted to ignore us. So did its most important customer. As luck would have it, the well-known customer had just been acquired by a parent corporation that is nothing less than a household name. After 14 weeks without a response from either the packer or manufacturer, we approached the major conglomerate with copies of the relevant correspondence and our dismay at having received no reply. Six weeks later, we were informed that the packer had "received USDA approval for the installation of a restraining device for ritual slaughter. The equipment will be implemented within the next 60 days."

It appears that all major shackle-and-hoist operations for adult cattle have been or are in the process of being replaced with upright systems. This may account for as much as 80% of ritual slaughter of adult animals, which means, of course, that the war on shackling and hoisting is not over. A handful of large plants still shackle-and-hoist calves as does one large sheep operation. And then there are medium-sized operations and "locker plants" which ritually slaughter smaller numbers of animals. At this time, there's a great deal of activity and energy toward implementing upright systems in the slaughtering of calves. And discussions are currently directed toward developing and implementing low-cost, small-scale equipment appropriate for the "locker plants."

In addition to Refinement, we feel optimistic about the future of Replacement and Reduction because the environment is becoming ever more receptive to the increasing concerns for farm animal well-being---a new awareness fueled by the broad spectrum of campaigns launched by the animal advocacy movement. Additional wind in the movement's sails comes from a shifting public perception of meat. An increasing awareness that it inflicts horrendous pain on billions of animals, and that it is linked to cancer, heart attacks and diabetes for consumers, is encouraging Replacement and Reduction. In fact, meat appears to be following the tobacco trend-from chic and macho to pariah. And we can all speed the process along!

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