

by kim zachman

Horse heaven

Jones County ranch a haven for abandoned, abused

Idyll Acres Ranch has a hospice worker named Bullet. This old Shetland pony forms a special friendship with the oldest horse on the ranch. For months, the two are inseparable until the old horse finally dies. Then Bullet chooses a new best friend, usually the next oldest horse in the pasture. He stays with that horse until it dies.

Bullet came to the ranch a few years ago. He had belonged to an elderly woman who also owned a horse and donkey. The three animals were out in a pasture when a thunderstorm hit. Lightning struck and killed the horse. Did Bullet's unusual obsession with death begin when he witnessed his pasture mate die?

Just like Bullet, all of the horses at Idyll Acres have a story. Some have arrived with their ribs and hip bones starkly visible under filthy, matted coats; so weak, they could barely walk. A few have arrived with fearful eyes, afraid of humans and rightfully so. The luckiest of them were brought to the ranch because their owners didn't want them anymore. They hadn't been abused or neglected, just unwanted and unloved. But now, the 33 horses at this rescue ranch in Gray live in horse heaven and are tended to by caring people who want nothing more than to ensure their health and happiness.

Leading the Idyll Acres crew is 83-year-old Lewis Smith, a retired minister. Smith thought he and his wife, Dianna, would spend their retirement years traveling around the country in their motor home. Their plans came to an abrupt halt when Smith's mother, Inez, became ill.

"My mother had a seizure and couldn't live alone any longer," Smith said. "I had promised her that I would never put her in a nursing home. We had to stay with her."

It was his mother's idea to have horses on the farm, but the fences were dilapidated and the barn was close to collapse. Smith, an admitted workaholic, repaired the fences and remodeled the barn while Dianna cared for Inez.

"I told my mother that if we're going to have a horse ranch, it needed to look like a horse ranch and not something that was





When rescued horses – and other animals – find a home at Idyll Acres Ranch, they never have to leave. Some have a final resting place on a hill overlooking the pasture.

IDYLL ACRES RANCH

The ranch is available for birthday parties, field trips and special events. Facilities include barbecue grills, picnic tables, a riding ring, petting zoo, hay rides, 36-seat tram, golf carts and The Hitching Post, an activity center with kitchen and bathrooms.

The ranch offers an adoption program in which children can foster a horse. Once children are paired with their horses, they can help with its feeding and grooming. There is no minimum requirement of volunteer time or monetary donation, but parents are required to accompany their children.

Individual tours are available and encouraged, but please call in advance. Staff members are usually working with the animals and are rarely in the office.

Volunteers and donations are needed and welcome.

WISH LIST:

The ranch is in need of a new truck. They currently are using a 1986 model truck that's only rated to tow 3,000 pounds. Their 22-foot hay trailer when fully loaded weighs more than 6,000 pounds. They take two trips instead of one because of the limitations of the truck, doubling fuel expenses.

thrown up overnight," he said.

For four years, Smith renovated the 49-acre ranch, including sowing high-protein grasses in the pastures and building white wood fences. The original intent was to be a pasture boarding ranch for paying clients and at one time, they had 15 horses boarded there.

Then Smith discovered that there was a real need for someone to take in horses that had been abused. He learned that some horses sold at livestock auctions are slaughtered and used in dog food.

"I just couldn't handle that thought," he explained. "We decided to do away with boarded horses and do all rescue horses."

It's an understatement to say that running a horse ranch is hard work and expensive. There are no paid employees at the ranch. The work is done by an all-volunteer staff that includes Smith's daughter Lisa Rogers and her husband, Donnie, and many others. Victoria Horton, a sophomore at Macon State College, has been volunteering at Idyll Acres for five years.

"I have always loved horses. When we moved to Gray, we would pass the ranch on the way to school," she said. "My dad took me to the ranch, and we took a tour. I picked a mare named Bonnie to foster." Horton became a regular volunteer and was at the ranch every Saturday during the school year and several days a week in the summer. She mucked stalls and helped with feeding and grooming. She spent a lot of time with Bonnie.

"When a horse has been abused, you can see a tenseness in their eyes. They're not as spirited. They still have that memory that acts as a barrier, and it's very hard to break down," Horton said. "With Bonnie, I saw the light come back into her eyes. It showed me that TLC is all they need. I love working with horses and seeing them regain that trust."

HIGH TUNNEL GREENHOUSE PROJECT

Idyll Acres Ranch has been selected to participate in a pilot program sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to construct a high tunnel seasonal greenhouse.

Unlike traditional greenhouses with a climate-controlled environment, high tunnels have a simple plastic-covered frame that encloses plants in raised beds.

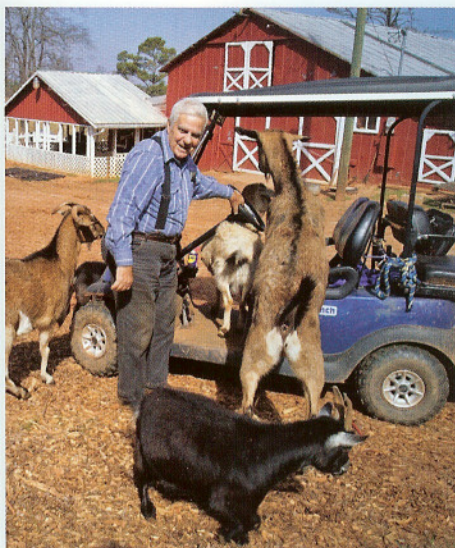
They rely on natural sunlight to maintain a growth climate during the early or late growing season when outside air temperatures might be too cool. They extend the growing season without requiring energy consumption.

Idyll Acres chose raised beds and extra wide rows to accommodate wheelchairs. The greenhouse will be accessible, allowing people with physical disabilities to participate in gardening.

• **LEARN MORE:** www.nrcs.usda.gov

Unfortunately horses do need more than just love. They also need hay, feed, water and veterinary care. Idyll Acres Ranch is a non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization and does accept donations. However, donations have diminished during the tough economy, and Smith and his family are financing the operation from their personal income and savings.

Smith made a tough decision last fall. He decided they could not afford to support 33 horses through the winter. Summer is not as difficult because the horses graze on the rich pasture grass, but in the



Lewis Smith carries treats in his golf cart.

winter, the horses have to be fed.

"I told my staff that we had to get rid of 10 horses," he said. "They looked at me and said, 'You go out there and choose which 10 will have to go.' Well, there wasn't any way in the world that I could do that."

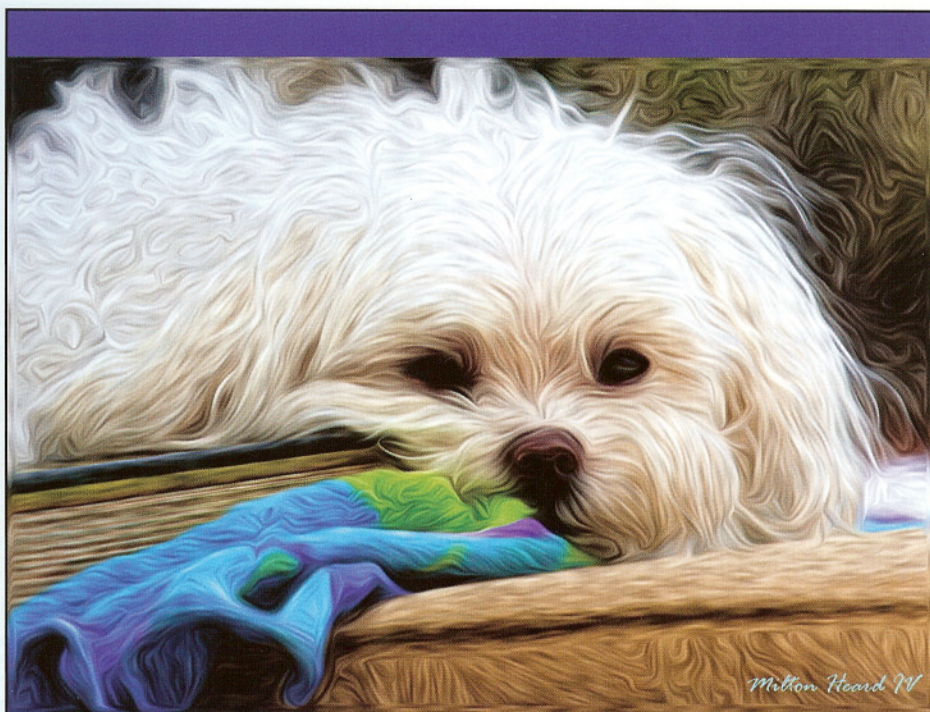
They still have 33 horses.

Idyll Acres isn't just a haven for animals but for people, too. Smith and his staff have built a riding ring and a picnic area. They have remodeled a house on the property for use as an activity center for birthday parties and school field trips. The ranch also has miniature horses and goats in a petting zoo area. Summer day camps for children are offered in June and July.

Smith's vision has certainly changed from the early days when all he wanted were nice fences and a well-constructed barn for a boarding pasture. After being a minister for 51 years, he hasn't retired from giving. "I told my wife that if we had been able to travel like we had planned to do, we would have had a good time, but we wouldn't have enjoyed anything but receiving," Smith said. "Since we've dedicated ourselves to the ranch, we've not only received but we've been able to give and that's a double blessing."

Eleven years ago, Smith made a promise to his mother that she wouldn't have to go to a nursing home. She'll be 99 years old in May. He didn't have to commit to caring for 33 horses too but he did.

"My mission in life now is to make sure these horses get taken care of, and my mother has a home on the ranch where she started out," he said. "The Lord still has something for me to do. As long as He leaves me here, I'm going to do whatever I can." **M**



Milton Heard IV

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