

Big Momma went down for the last time in early August. We all knew it was coming. Her joints were seizing; her hips were giving out; she was fighting lameness. Worse, most of her teeth were gone and she wasn't digesting her feed. She'd lost as much as 300 pounds of her normal weight and looked skeletal.

Two weeks before, on hottest day of July, I'd driven past her paddock to see her lying by the side of the road struggling to get up. We called her owners, Bob Wicklund and Gerri Wenz, and they finally coaxed Big Momma to her feet.

"I don't think she was ready to give it up," said Gerri of that July collapse. "I call it a spark. I wanted to let Momma tell me when she was ready. I knew she wasn't going to last through this coming winter. She just couldn't take it. But I wanted to let her live out the summer in good weather. Let her enjoy it."

What Gerri hadn't bargained for were nearly two straight brutal, scorching months. "The heat got to her and I thought, this is not fair," she said. "And I knew that more heat spells were coming. I didn't want to make her go through that. I had to make a decision for her."

So Gerri called veterinarian Tracy Bell.

Officially Big Momma was named Athena Diomedes. Her sire was Abundance, a well-known Hanovarian stallion. She arrived at Gerri's in 2002 when she was already 24 years old. That's pretty near retirement age for most horses although Athena was carrying a foal at the time.

Originally, Gerri, who specializes in Arabian horses, was thinking of using Athena to help start a stock of half-Arab, half-warmbloods (Hanovarians are a breed of warmblood). But Athena was finally beyond her foaling years and other horses never panned out. So Gerri abandoned the idea and Athena ended up retiring to a quiet life of munching grass in Gerri's pastures.

At first, Gerri simply called her "Momma" because she'd carried at least 11 foals in her long life. Later, people at Gerri's barn added the "Big" part. Gerri's not sure why except that, compared to her fine-boned Arabians, Momma, at 15.3 hands, was a power forward in the land of point guards.

When I asked Gerri to describe Big Momma's personality, she used words like "personable" and "opinionated." Apparently, she hated medicine, liked people and, in Gerri's phrase, "knew her own mind."

Sensing Big Momma's advancing decrepitude, other horses had begun pushing her aside and eating up her feed. So for the past two years or so, Gerri had put Big Momma and her feed bucket on the people side of the paddock fence for dinner. Many times we

drove down Poague Lane to find Big Momma blocking the road. Inevitably, she'd look up, s-l-o-w-l-y walk to one side, and resume her meals.

It made me smile every time. She was a character, a great bit of local color, the horse equivalent of an old-timer on the front porch smoking a corn cob pipe. She was completely safe outside her paddock; she wouldn't run off and leave her pasture mates behind. But we did hear from several panicky visitors about the horse that had gotten loose.

Like all serious horse people, Gerri's had to put animals down. But in the past it's always been connected to an emergency -- sudden colic or a broken bone, for example. Big Momma was the first one where old age was the main problem. "I knew it was coming and I was preparing myself. It was just a matter of timing," Gerri said. "I was sad, but I knew I had to do it. And when the time came, it was almost a relief."

Gerri called it "the long goodbye."

Big Momma's final day came just before the onset of another heat wave. Gerri, who had been monitoring the weather reports, gathered her team. Both were experienced in the rituals of death. Tracy brought her drugs and John Houser brought his tractor. John's a local farmer, fence builder and hay man. "He cares about the horses," said Gerri. "He's about laying them to rest in a good way."

They met in the morning by Big Momma's pasture. "She was ready," said Tracy. "Her will to fight was gone. The thing about Momma is that her body quit on her. Her spirit and brain were doing fine but her body wasn't doing the job any more. Her body was falling apart."

To put down a horse, Tracy usually gives it 100 to 120 ccs of Phenobarbital in two syringe-fulls. But Big Momma dropped after the first dose. Her great, powerful heart had finally stopped. She was 33 years old; by some calculations, that's around 90 in people years.

But that wasn't the end of the procedure. Before John took Big Momma away, Tracy had her pasture mate, Sunrise, pay her last respects. "If they have a bond it's better to let them realize that a horse has passed, rather than they just took it away," said Tracy. So they led Sunrise to Big Momma's body. She took a sniff and walked away.

"Living horses grieve differently," said Tracy. "I've had them paw at them, bite their ears to try to get them up. I've had them bring tears to my eyes seeing them try to revive the others."

A couple of weeks later, the heat broke. On a windy sun-drenched day that never topped 85 degrees, I drove up to Big Momma's resting spot. She was buried in a half-acre field on a hillside above Bob and Gerri's highest pasture. Except for the rutted

gravel track on the south-west side, the field is surrounded by trees, though if you cut down a couple of maples to the east you'd have a sparkling view of silos, barns, and the Blue Ridge.

The bee hives that used to be there are gone now. Without their industrious hum the field is a quiet, calm place. Nothing but breeze and bird noise. There's a patch of disturbed soil by the trees to the north where John Houser had done his work. Pasture grasses have covered other bare patches from years' past. Some day, Gerri says, she may put up markers.

I don't think our small group of farms is diminished by the passing of Big Momma. She had a full, horsey life -- fuller than most, considering the number of her offspring. I'll miss her hanging out in the middle of Poague Lane but her cycle ended as it should have. And all around me, as I stand in the middle of this hillside field, the surging greens of summer rise from the dead of summers' past.

Still I can't help but feel a little melancholy about other cycles. Rio, our warmblood Holsteiner, is at least 25 years old. He's got most of his teeth and, while lanky, his weight's good. But he is getting creaky.

Jody, my wife, got Rio for free, sight unseen, seven years ago from a woman in Illinois who wanted to get rid of him. The idea was that he'd be a "husband horse." That was Jody's idea, not mine. I've been on top of him twice. Not only am I uninterested in riding, but Rio's so big (at least 17 hands) that if I fell off him I'd have time to compose my own obituary before I hit the ground.

I like Rio, however. He's carted people around without complaint for decades and he's still a gentleman. Friendly, unaggressive, always willing. If he were a person, I'd invite him out for a beer and a ballgame. Jody feels the same way, though she's more eloquent about it.

"My heart fills up with love when I see horses," she said the other day, "but most for Rio. He sort of optimizes to me what a horse is: he's just your utter servant, and I mean that in a good way. He donates his life to you and really doesn't ask for anything in return."

A raven flies over Gerri's field; the delicate white heads of Queen Ann's Lace shake in the breeze. Someday, Rio, someday, I say to myself as I get in the car to drive back. I hope it's a long goodbye.

- John Muncie (from the September 2011 edition of *The Rockbridge Advocate*)