

## World's Oldest Horse

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By Nate Carlisle

As he clip-clopped out of the hospital and into the sunny spring morning, Copper released an energetic neigh.

The 51-year-old Copper is the oldest horse in the United States, according to one source. And after last week's reported death of a 51-year-old equine overseas, Copper might now be the world's oldest horse on record.

The Equine Clinic at the University of Missouri-Columbia admitted the former police horse for treatment Thursday because he'd refused to eat for 11 days. After he began eating again, Copper left the clinic yesterday and returned to pasture near the eastern Missouri town of Richwoods.

"I've heard of them getting pretty old, but never anything like this," said MU veterinary intern Nathan Earl, who treated Copper. "I thought it was an April Fools' joke when it came in. I looked at the date" of birth "and I went: 'Yeah, right.'"

A horse's typical life span is 25 years. Copper, a gelding who is believed to be a mixed Morgan breed, would have been born in 1953, during the first Eisenhower administration. He's outlived much higher-profile equines, including all three horse-racing Triple Crown winners born in his lifetime.

The Guinness Book of World Records listed a 51-year-old horse in Pembrokeshire, Wales, as the oldest living horse. That animal's owners issued a news release last week saying the Arab-Welsh cross had died. Mester said she's considering having Copper's seniority status verified by Guinness.

Mester said Copper served as a police horse in St. Louis until age 22. His next owner had him about 20 years, until 1995.

Mester said that's when Copper escaped from his stable one day. The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office found Copper malnourished, with his ribs and pelvis showing beneath his hide. The owner agreed to release the horse to the humane society, which sent Copper to a rescue ranch near Union.

Mester volunteered at the ranch. She adopted Copper in 1996. Since then, he's been out to pasture with some mares.

When he stopped taking his feed, a Richwoods-area veterinarian came to Mester's farm. The veterinarian thought food might have lodged in his

esophagus and referred Mester to the MU clinic.

" He was really scared the first day he came here," Mester said of the clinic. "Really, really scared."

Earl said he didn't find evidence of choking, but the veterinarian did diagnose an ulcer. Earl's prescription includes an ingested compound that prevents acid production.

Earl said Copper attracted lots of attention at the equine clinic and the adjoining small animal hospital, which both serve in part as teaching laboratories for MU veterinary students. Earl said faculty, staff and students from all over the complex came to see the old horse they'd heard about.

Copper shows signs of his age. Yesterday's walk from the hospital to a horse trailer was slow. Mester said Copper has cataracts that limit his eyesight. His teeth are almost gone.

Despite that, Earl said Copper doesn't have any life-threatening conditions, and there's no reason he can't keep going.

" Unless he has a catastrophe," Earl cautioned, "but horses are prone to catastrophe."

Mester said she spends time and money taking care of Copper, "because I love him, because he's worth it."

" He put in time for the people of St. Louis, and now it's time for him to lay back and enjoy the rest of his life."

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