

WEATHER 'NEVER SO ROUGH' ON PASS

Avalanches Make Snowshoe Expert of Railroader

Denver Post Special

CHAMA, N. M., Feb. 2. — "I never walked on a pair of snowshoes in my life, but after last week I'm an expert."

A. O. Baker, roadmaster for the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad's narrow gauge system, smiled when he said this Saturday. But it was about the only grin he managed when he recounted the seven days he and his railroad crews spent marooned by a blizzard on towering Cumbres Pass.

The veteran of 33 years rail-

roading was among 27 men brought down to Chama late Friday night by army snow weasels in the latest and largest single rescue operation, which removed a total of 58 men locked on the mountain pass since last weekend by snows and avalanches.

NEVER SO ROUGH

Two men, well provisioned with supplies dropped in by airplane, were left at a maintenance shack atop the pass, joined by another worker flown in by helicopter.

Baker was the top railroad offi-

cial in the group trapped at the Coxo siding.

"I've never seen it so rough before," he said. "I've had to plow through plenty of snow, but we were hitting drifts so deep that it took as many as 20 passes to get through."

Finally, he said, it became obvious that they were losing their battle against the elements. After his exhausted crews had worked 48 hours without rest to melt snow and keep the engines watered, he ordered all except one locomotive "killed" and told everyone to get

some rest and see what aid would come.

"Most of the men hadn't had any sleep for three days," he said. "I know I didn't have any, and when I finally stretched out I slept for 12 solid hours."

When it came to sleeping, he said, they had to toss lots to see who would get a bed. With 15 bunks short, some of the men would have to stay up or try to doze in a chair. Baker spent one night catnapping in a caboose cupola.

FOOD RATIONED

As the storm raged on, food supplies dwindled. Baker said he put his men on two-meals-a-day rations—one meal at midmorning and one just before dark.

"We always had a coffee pot boiling at first, but then after a few days we even ran out of coffee," he said.

Army weasels reached the trains Thursday, the storm having ended Wednesday. The weasels took six of the strongest men at the Coxo siding back to Chama. That same day, an army helicopter reached Coxo to pick up a slick man.

Baker said crews fashioned a small landing patch for the helicopter. The helicopter took older men first.

"They were the ones we worried about," Baker said. "We knew in a pinch the younger fellows could always beat their way out with snowshoes, or at least make it up to the top, where there was more food. But a trip like that would have been just too much for the old ones."

Thursday, they let the fires die in the last locomotive.

"I'm sorry we had to do it," Baker said. "As long as that one engine was going, it gave the men something to do and kept morale from cracking. There's nothing deader than a dead engine."

Baker had the highest praise for his workmen.

"There was never a group that could have done more than they did," he said. "Not one complained, even at first, when we were trying to get out."

Baker has been with D&RGW here 20 years and spent 13 years before that with main-line railroads.

New Mexico Education