

Cumbres Pass Rescue Stalls When Weasels Break Down

By KEN PEARCE
Rocky Mountain News Writer

Attempts to rescue 34 railroad crewmen on 10,022-foot Cumbres Pass halted Thursday when two Army weasels broke down.

The men are stranded in two trains near the crest.

But an Army helicopter continued efforts to bring out 19 other crewmen trapped in a section hand house atop the pass.

The weasels—powerful, wide-tracked snow vehicles from Camp Hale—succeeded in bringing out six of the trapped trainmen from the Coxo siding—about two miles from the summit—Thursday morning.

The helicopter, piloted by Maj. Austin F. Epsaro of Stroudsburg, Pa., landed at the crest of the pass twice Thursday.

MAN HOSPITALIZED

The first time, E. W. Gilbert, who has been ill with a severe cold, was flown to an Alamosa hospital. He is a bulldozer operator.

Two other men were flown to Alamosa in the second flight. They are Jack Kelker, a Salida brakeman, and Ben Hindelang, an Alamosa engineer.

On the third and final flight, the helicopter landed at the summit and took aboard J. R. Stevens, an Alamosa engineer. The craft then flew to Coxo and picked up Walter G. Woods, also an engineer from Alamosa who is suffering from a cold.

Both men were returned to Alamosa.

Rio Grande officials said none of the men appeared to be in danger of pneumonia. They added there is plenty of food both at Coxo and at the summit.

MOTOR TROUBLE HITS

The weasels plowed through 45-foot snow drifts and ground blizzards Wednesday to reach the marooned trains. They remained at the site overnight and headed back to Chama with six of the crewmen at 7 a.m. Thursday. They arrived at Chama at 10:40 a.m., 3 hours and 40 minutes later.

Operating the weasels were Specialists Joseph Mustonen of Seattle and Robert Anderson of Powell, Wyo., along with Master Sgt. George Walcott of Ludlow, Vt., and Sgt. Dale Snell of Rock Island, Ill., top cold weather specialists who went along as advisors.

After a short rest the weasels began a second trip up the pass

at 12:30 p.m. towing sleds designed to carry 10 men each.

One of the vehicles developed motor trouble about eight miles up the pass and was abandoned. The second returned to Chama with all four crewmen and was reported also in need of repairs.

Railroad officials said the Army informed them late Thursday a third weasel and a

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Cold Weather Expert On Rescue Task Ill

Sgt. 1cl. Dale Snell, described as one of the Army's top cold weather experts, was reported ill and under a doctor's care Thursday at Chama.

Sgt. Snell was put to bed after returning to Chama from a second but unsuccessful attempt to reach stranded railroad crewmen on snowbound Cumbres Pass.

mechanic are en route to Chama from Camp Hale.

They are expected to arrive in time to permit resumption of rescue operations Friday, the officials said.

"There is an almost perfect snow road to the trains now," an official said, "and it is just a case of getting the relief weasel."

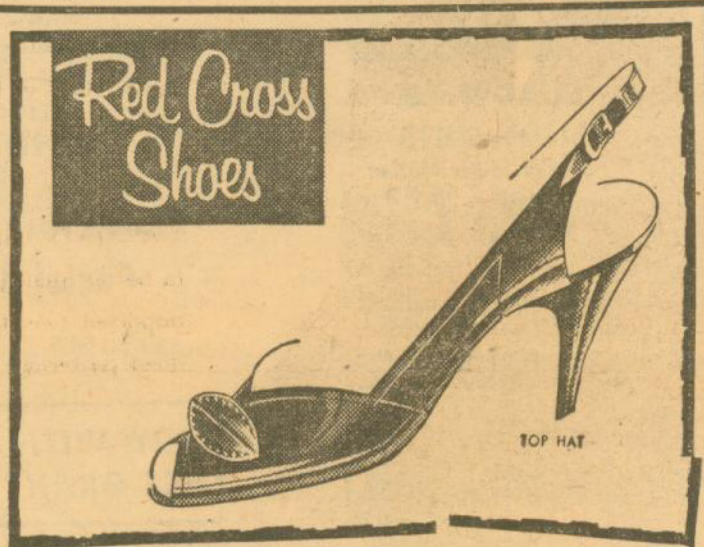
SNOW IS DRY

However, Maj. Epsaro said that should the weasels be unavailable, he thought he could remove all the stranded men by helicopter Friday if the weather remains good.

One of the six men removed from Coxo was Manuel Pacheco, 26, of Arboles, a laborer for the D&RG.

He said most of the crewmen spent the daylight hours shoveling snow to provide water for the engines' boilers. But he said the snow apparently was too dry and three of the four stalled engines died Wednesday.

Pacheco said the crewmen had been living on corn and canned pork and beans. He said he thought there was sufficient food to last through Thursday.



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