

OPERATION HAYLIFT

Written Jan. 1987

by James L. Jacobs

The winter of 1949 was severe. Snow was so deep the sheep and cattle that wintered on the desert ranges could not get to the forage and many were starving. I was assistant forest supervisor of the Fishlake Forest when I received a phone call from the R. O. early in January. The Forest Service had agreed to help rescue sheep and cattle on the west desert in Utah and Nevada which because of deep snow and unusually cold weather could not graze their usual winter forage.

The R. O. was sending tractors and other equipment to open roads so hay and other feed could be hauled to the livestock. I was to meet the tractor crew at Milford and organize truck caravans to haul feed. I was given a one-ton pickup with four wheel drive.

I checked into the hotel at Milford, stayed overnight, but left my bag in the room and said I would be back that evening. Six weeks later I got back to Milford.

At the Desert Range Headquarters in Pine Valley, the Forest Service tractor crew and stockmen with trucks loaded with feed set up a caravan to rescue livestock on the south end of Pine Valley. Tractor, service truck, sheep wagon to eat and sleep in and a dozen trucks lined out. Forest Service radio kept them in touch. Snow was so deep they could not follow the road—so they took off down the valley, distributing feed to stranded livestock. Tractor had to build road across some gullies. Took four days to make the trip.

High mounds kept filling up roads with hard packed snow. After clearing snow out several times, they found it was easier to make new roads by clearing snow parallel to old road. Then when new snow packed new roads, another road was plowed out—as many as six roads in places.

One midnight I worried about a tractor operator in Snake Valley all alone plowing out the road, so I drove my pickup to see how he was doing. He was o.k., so I stayed

with him a while and then returned to Desert Range. The temperature was 42° below zero.

Sheepman Wallace Wintch of Manti woke me up late one night to get me to take a replacement herder to his sheep camp in the hills east of Pine Valley. His herder's wife was critically ill, and he had brought another herder to replace his herder so he could take him home to his sick wife. I took Wallace and his herder to his sheep camp east of Pine Valley in my jeep, and it was almost morning when we got back to the desert station.

Forest Service radios were used for communication to coordinate the many crews of men and equipment that were active in the rescue operation. The value of these is illustrated by a trip I made into extreme north Pine Valley. I was many miles away from anyone when the motor of my jeep quit running. There was no one at the Desert Station radio, so I radioed my need for help to the Dixie National Forest at Cedar City. They phoned the message to Desert Station, a mechanic was sent from there to rescue me so I did not have to spend the night alone in the supzero wild.

To make a film of the rescue operation a photographer named Richard Mosher was sent by the regional forester's Buick driven by Marvin Seldon for me to guide him to get the best pictures. We had difficulty getting him to the best places in Utah and Nevada. The regional forester sent R-4's nineplace Noordyn Norsemen for us to use in filming the rescue operation. We would fly a small circle within the large circle flown by the Air Force C-82 planes—flying boxcar.

The main action was Air Force planes hauling hay from Fallon, Nevada, to Ely where they would land, pick up a "spotter" stockman who would direct the plane to needy livestock where hay was dropped to the stock. The plane would then return the spotter to Ely and return to Fallon for more hay. These planes flew 405 trips averaging 660 miles for a total distance of 11 times around the earth. They hauled more than 1800 tons of

hay to the starving livestock. John Parker, forest ranger at Ely, was coordinator between the Air Force and the stockmen at Ely.

55 large army trucks from Oakland, California hauled hay to many of the livestock throughout Nevada. Many of the drivers were not familiar with driving on winter roads, and eight of the trucks were wrecked.

Two fatalities resulted. Douglas Clark of Cedar City froze to death trying to find his sheep camp in a blizzard. A shepherd named Mr. Peacock ran out to drive his sheep back from bales of hay being dropped from a plane when a bale of hay hit and killed him instantly.

At Ely a soil conservation man determined that the snow was so deep that when it melted the main street of town would be flooded. So hundreds of sandbags were filled by the people in town and used to make a channel for the expected flood to protect businesses. But melting snow was gradual, the soil was so dry that not a drop of water ran down main street. The SCS man was so chagrined that he asked for and received a transfer away from Ely.

Although many sheep and cattle did starve and freeze to death, the rescue operation was so effective that the total livestock loss was minimal.