



The Nearest Horse to Heaven

Could a horse survive winter alone on the Colorado tundra at 13,000 feet? With a little help, yes...as proven in February, 1956. That's when a private pilot flying from Denver to Gunnison was stunned to see a big bay horse stranded on the barren, windswept saddle connecting 14,420 foot Mount Harvard and 14,196 foot Mount Yale. Mammoth snowfields blocked any descent to milder climes, and it seemed clear the horse would perish without food. Gunnison pilots volunteered to drop hay bales from small planes. Such dangerous flights amidst the icy gales of the Continental Divide prompted volunteer pilot Gordon Warren to say, "That horse was getting the kind of flying out of us that money could not buy."

The *Denver Post* was the first newspaper to see the story's potential. Other papers followed, both in America and around the world. *Post* reporters figured they needed a name for the unnamed horse. They chose Elijah, after the Biblical personality kept alive in the desert when God sent ravens to drop morsels of food.

Commercial airline pilots flying from Denver to Los Angeles altered their routes slightly to give passengers a glimpse of the famous "Horse in the Sky." An Air Force veteran offered to parachute onto the Continental Divide to keep Elijah company until snows melted. *LIFE* Magazine declared Elijah "... the most worried-about horse in the United States."

From aerial photos, Bill and Al Turner of Buena Vista became convinced that mysterious Elijah was actually their escaped trail horse named Bugs. They flew over the ridge to confirm it was indeed their horse. In April, the Turners led an unsuccessful attempt to rescue Elijah/Bugs. Near the end of May, they tried again. Though snows were still deep, the Turners and others shoveled their way to the horse, leading him down through narrow pathways in the snowfields.

Overnight, Coloradoans who awakened each morning to ask, "How's Elijah?" were now suddenly asking to actually *see* Elijah. Accordingly, a parade was organized through downtown Denver. Centennial Race Track showcased Elijah in its winner circle, where officials draped the bewildered gelding with flowers and a colorful winner's blanket. A special stall was constructed in the lobby of the Brown Palace, and thus Elijah became one of the famed hotel's most unusual guests.

But Elijah was, after all, really just Bugs the mountain horse. And his handlers could see that this horse was increasingly unhappy in the big city. So festivities were cut short. Bugs was returned to his beloved alpine pastures, where he lived a long and uneventful life as a trail mount.

Bill Turner always maintained that this particular horse had an aversion to all things urban, especially automobiles and women in skirts— which is why, in the wintry weeks of the rescue attempts, a *Denver Post* columnist had raised a troubling possibility: "Perhaps this horse in the clouds does not wish to be rescued, but is exactly where he wants to be!"