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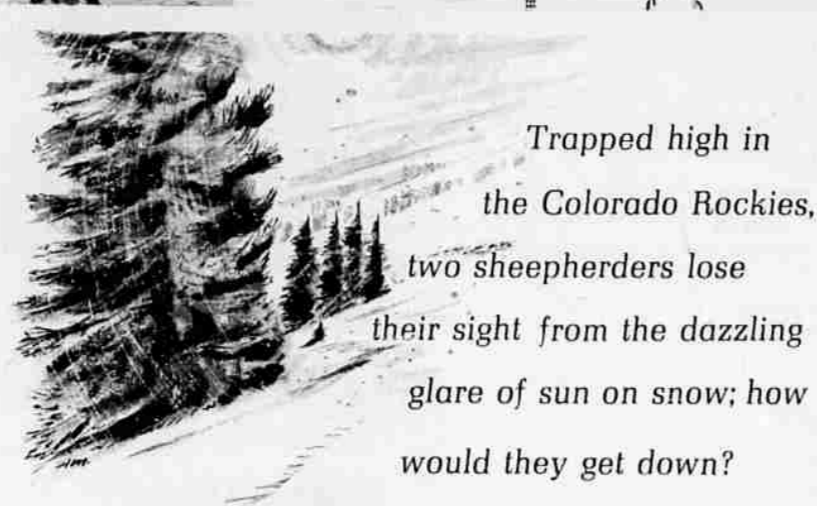


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Trapped high in the Colorado Rockies, two shepherders lose their sight from the dazzling glare of sun on snow; how would they get down?

# We Went Blind in the White Wilderness

By JOE VIGIL as told to Hal Higdon

I FIRST FOUND FEAR that day I faced the dawn and saw nothing. I stood on a snow-covered mountain plateau, 13,000 feet high and miles from help. Joe Chacon and I had fought storm and sun for three days, attempting to bring sheep down from the high country to green grass below.

Now we were snow-blind, our horses wandering lost. And I cried as I realized I might never see my family again.

The storm had begun four days earlier. You don't expect 30 inches of snow—even in the Rockies—before Labor Day.

Joe Chacon and the ranch boss banged on my door during dinner. (During summer months I irrigate meadows on a sheep ranch near Snowmass, Colo. The rest of the year I help herd sheep.)

Seeing Joe Chacon surprised me. He spends the entire summer in a tent above timber line, grazing sheep in the high country. With lush grass and cool air, lambs can be fattened for fall markets. Joe Chacon would not be down so early in the year unless trouble threatened.

The boss sat down to explain: "Snow has trapped Joe's sheep above Taylor Lake. Can you help him break them loose?"

Early next morning, we bumped along a gravel road toward Ashcroft with my horse and a mule in the back of a truck.

As we rode, Joe Chacon talked. "The snow started Saturday noon," he said. "She looked bad, so I rounded up the herd. Then more snow. I try, but one man cannot push 2,300 sheep through deep drifts. I finally come down for help."

At Ashcroft, we mounted our horses and took to the trail. Even at this low level snow had begun to fall.

As we rode upward, snow, whipped by wind, slashed at our faces. Heavy fog cut visibility to 20 feet. Even with Joe Chacon

leading, we often wandered off the trails. Nearing camp, we could hear the cold and hungry sheep blating their protests to the wind. It had taken almost the entire day to get to them, but during the blizzard we could do nothing to move them. We would settle down in our tent and wait for the storm to break.

"The horses, the mules—turn them loose!" said Joe Chacon.

"But we'll never find them in the morning," I replied.

"So be it," he said grimly. "We tie them up, we find them dead by morning."

In the morning I stepped out of our tent into fresh, white snow. The wind had died, and the bright sun beat down. The horses were nowhere in sight.

We stumbled off in search of them. The snow was knee-deep. In some places we'd go in clear to our bellies. Then I spotted a patch of tan among all the white. Our animals had found shelter behind a large rock a mile from camp. It took two hours to find the rest of the pack.

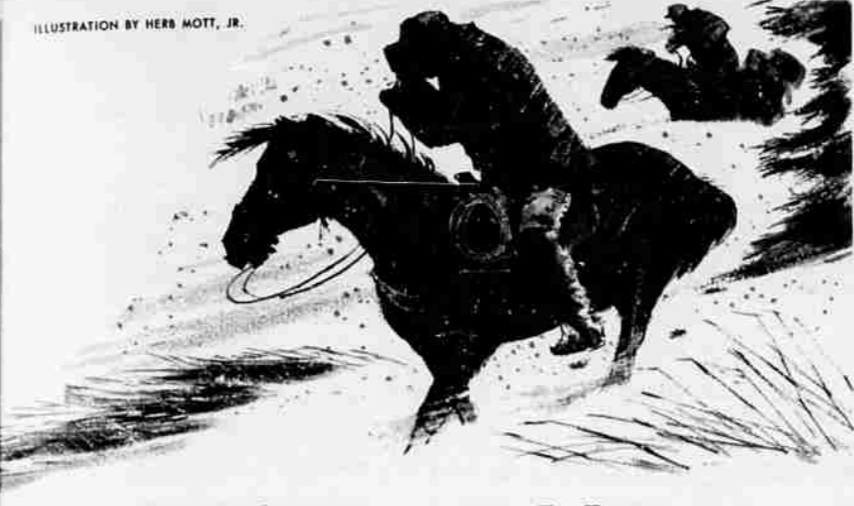
WE STARTED herding the sheep downward, fighting for every step. Joe and I, leading the mules, opened a trail by trampling the snow with our boots.

"Stomp hard," he yelled at me. "The sheep, they do not want to move." Then, returning to the sheep, we would lead them a few hundred feet down the newly beaten trail. By the end of the day, we had moved them less than a mile—but at least they were below timber line.

Before sunset I felt something wrong with my eyes. I noticed that where one pine tree stood, I saw two. I blinked my eyes to clear them, and the landscape danced. We turned to head back to our tent, and I looked up toward the east and saw a bright star. To my surprise it had a long tail!

I turned to Joe Chacon: "What do you see wrong with that star?"

He looked up and squinted hard: "A long



# the White Wilderness

tail. That star has a long, white tail." We had not yet realized it, but we were both going snow-blind. Exposure to fog and blizzard the first day, plus a second day of sun reflected off bright white snow, had eaten away at our vision.

Snow-blindness, I learned later, cannot kill you by itself, but your eyes get so sensitive it becomes too painful to open them. Your eyeballs blister; your eyelids swell. Nausea, caused by the extreme pain, slowly weakens you. A snow-blind man is like a person bound hand and foot, thrown into the middle of the ocean, and told to swim. And we were alone in the wilderness!

AFTER DINNER, the stabbing pain began. Our eyes started to run water. Joe wiped his with a white rag. I thought that by crawling into my sleeping bag I could sleep off the pain, but it didn't help.

The following morning, our sight was gone. Too late, I tied a silk scarf around my eyes. Joe Chacon made a handkerchief into a mask for his entire face.

We warmed coffee but couldn't cook food we couldn't see. Neither of us felt like eating, anyway. Joe Chacon had known snow-blindness many years ago as a boy. He told how the sickness creeps up on you. "We must get to lower country," he said. "Here we freeze to death."

We had freed our horses again during the night. Would we find them?

We went out to look, but drifting snow had covered their tracks. By forcing our eyes open for an instant, we could obtain a brief, blurry flash of the land before us. But so poor was this instant of vision that the horses might stand a few hundred feet away and we wouldn't see them.

"Back! Let's go back in the tent before we're lost," I whispered to Joe Chacon. We retraced our steps in the snow.

Soon, we groped out into the snow once more, but after going several hundred yards we still had not located the horses. "We go back for another rest," Joe Chacon suggested. Then as we turned he said slowly: "The horses!"

There, between us and the tent, stood our salvation: my tan-colored horse and his white one, almost invisible against the snowy background. We had passed within a few feet of them!

Had they wandered as far as the previous day, we would have missed them.

Saddling the horses, we led them down the previous day's trail. We had to feel blindly for where the sheep had packed the snow. Exhausted and sick, we slipped and skidded down the ice-slick hills.

Then we were among the heavy spruce, completely dependent on the senses of our mounts. No packed trail remained for us to feel our way along. We prayed that our horses would remember the way down.

At times, Joe Chacon would climb down off his horse, dropping to his hands and knees in the snow. With his fingers he would pry open his swollen eyelids in a futile attempt to recognize a landmark, but he could not see a thing. For all we knew, we might be wandering farther off.

Stumbling along sightlessly, I had lost all track of time. All I could feel was the terrible pain in my eyes and the ever-greater nausea and fatigue.

HOW FAR to go before help now? One mile? Five miles? Could we make it?

My head rolled from side to side. I remember slipping from my saddle to the ground below. It was muddy and wet, but I could not feel it.

Then a hand was placed on my shoulder. "You're safe now," a voice said softly.

Our horses had led us back to civilization. A dog trainer at Ashcroft, seeing us groping blindly through the valley, had come out to find us. He put medicine in our eyes and called the sheriff. Soon we slept soundly at the Aspen Hospital.

The sheep we left were saved, too. The boss went after them with other herders wearing sun goggles.

We can see again. Days of rest and hospital treatment have restored our vision to normal. And we have returned to the sheep and the high country we love.

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