

Caesar's Rescue June 29/30, 2002

Caesar was a two-year-old Canadian Sports horse belonging to Patricia Merli. His home was Laurel Ridge Farm, located near the summit of an extensive mountainous area known locally as the Foothills of the Berkshires in northwestern Connecticut. Of the more than a dozen riding horses on the farm, Caesar was undoubtedly the most adventurous. Rarely did a horse break out of a paddock, and if they did, they would be happy to graze on the grass that had been just out of their reach on the other side of the wooden fence.

Caesar had to prove to the world that he didn't fit into such a quiet majority, and one fine day near mid-summer in 2002, he gently took the hasp that secured his stall gate into his lips and opened it, causing the gate to swing open.

At first, no one noticed his absence, as it was common to have several gates open at any given time, while the inhabitant could be found grazing or playing with his mates in an adjoining field or paddock, but at feeding time it became apparent that Caesar was definitely among the missing. Initially, it was assumed that he probably had gone visiting at the adjacent farm down the road, but when that did not prove out, and none of the neighbors remembered seeing him, real concern set in, and to make matters worse, it was getting toward the end of the day. The area roads, especially the gravel ones, were walked by teams of searchers, all trying to see any signs of a wandering, riderless horse, but to no avail.

The next morning, the last day in June, many searchers, alerted by phone calls overnight, showed up at the crack of dawn. They fanned out scouring the countryside for any signs of the missing horse, but it was a difficult task, as all the trails and open areas anywhere near the farm had been walked on by any number of horses. People in trucks and autos drove for miles in every direction, some going into Massachusetts, but they all came up empty handed.

Finally, two searchers, nearly a mile into the adjacent Algonquin State Forest, came across footprints of a horse that had been running at a full gallop. The trail crossed the path at right angles, something that never would have happened with a rider in control. Immediately they returned to the farm, and the local fire departments ATV's were called into service and the trail followed. They had not progressed very far however, before the firemen began to realize that they were rapidly nearing some very high and dangerous cliffs that arose some 700 feet above a reservoir to the east of the mountainous terrain. If the horse had not changed course, and very soon, he would literally have run out of level ground. A short distance further and their fears were confirmed; the tracks headed straight for the top of the cliff where they vanished.

When they looked over the edge, they didn't know what to expect, but what they saw certainly wasn't one of the possibilities that had crossed their minds. On a relatively level shelf of wooded landscape some 80 to 100 feet below them stood Caesar, apparently not the worse for wear. They returned immediately to Laurel Ridge Farm, where calls were sent out to the widely scattered searchers.

The ledge Caesar was on was some 500 feet above Connecticut Route 8, a major north-south highway. The location was about one and one-half miles from the Massachusetts border in an uninhabited area surrounding Colebrook River Reservoir, owned by the Hartford Metropolitan District Commission.

The firemen on the ATVs returned to the site above Caesar and while one rappelled down the face of the near-perpendicular cliff to the ledge, others lowered hay and water down to the stranded horse, who by this time had not eaten or had a drink for well over a day. Soon several fire and rescue vehicles assembled along Route 8, directly beneath the spot Caesar was stranded on. It didn't take any time at all to realize that there was now way the horse could walk either up or down from his prison. It was determined that the only practical method would be to employ a helicopter, but no one had any knowledge of the whereabouts of a commercial chopper.

At this point, one of the central figures to emerge during this crisis was contacted. Lynne Thibault is the wife of one of the deputy fire chiefs, and she has the reputation of being able to resolve just about any situation that might arise. Lynne was also the telephone coordinator for the Colebrook Fire Department, and before the day was to end, she had proved her worth many times over.

Of all the essentials that would be needed, a lifting harness strong enough to lift a 1,200-pound horse would prove to be difficult to locate. Initial inquiries found that the nearest was in North Carolina, nearly 1,000 miles away, but tentative plans were being considered to have it brought here. Lynne next made contact with an animal rescue unit in Windsor, Connecticut, and while they did not have such a harness, they knew of one in Methuen, Massachusetts, 2 ½ hours away. Contact was made with the team in Methuen, and they immediately left for Colebrook, where they met with the helicopter crew and made ready to lift the horse off the face of Spencer Mountain.

In the meantime, the news had spread throughout Colebrook and the surrounding communities, where it was heard by Steve Girolomin of Torrington, who was pitching horseshoes at Tucker's Place, a restaurant and pub in New Boston, Massachusetts, three miles or so north of the rescue site. He commented that it was too bad he hadn't heard about their needs earlier, as he owns one of these specialized harnesses, which he had purchased in order to lift a horse that had medical problems with its legs. Steve knew that the Methuen team was on the way, but decided that he would go to the rescue site to see if he could be of help.

As it turned out, he became one of the key players in the unfolding drama, as the Methuen team climbed the mountain and trussed the horse up to be lifted off by the helicopter, which left them up there to get down the best way they could. There would be no one at the landing site a half mile away to disengage the intricately secured harness until they could make their way there. With Steve on the scene giving a crash course to the group of firemen and Laurel Ridge Farm personnel, the landing went off without a hitch. To an observer, it appeared that they were a group of professionals who had done this maneuver many times.

The training that the firemen and equestrians received is invaluable, and all are so happy that this dramatic event had a happy ending.

The community support so freely given made it a truly heartwarming and never to be forgotten event.