

# PILOT TODAY

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Steamboat Springs photographer Rod Hanna documented the 1978 plane crash on Buffalo Pass.

# 50 years of Search & Rescue

Local organization celebrates milestone of helping save lives

**Matt Stensland** Steamboat Pilot & Today

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS -50years later, and Routt County Search and Rescue is still saving lives and rescuing adventurous souls.

It took a lot of volunteer time to

build the organization into what it is today.

"At the time, we were just a bunch of volunteers trying to help the sheriff," Chuck Vale said. "This group up here had nothing but a wing and prayer."

Vale is one of the founding members of the organization, which has about 50 missions each year, and Vale has a storied career both professionally and as a volunteer rescuer.

Search and Rescue has grown organically.

It started in 1969 when 25-yearold Marc Satre was snowmobiling with two friends on Rabbit Ears Pass and one of his friends crashed.

Badly injured, it took 11 hours to get to the parking lot, where the rescue party had finally assembled with snowshoes, skis and gear.

The young men then realized something more had to be done, and Search and Rescue was formed with six original members. Since then, there have been many epic rescues that have helped shape Search and Rescue.

## **A MIRACLE**

Forty years ago, there was an incident that led to the writing of the book, "The Miracle on Buffalo Pass" by Harrison Jones.

Rocky Mountain Airways Flight 217 left Steamboat Springs Airport Dec. 5, 1978, with 22 people on board including the pilot and co-pilot. The plane crashed an hour after takeoff as its pilots tried to return to Steamboat Springs because of snowstorms.

A heavy downdraft from a storm caused them to clip power lines

and crash.

The young Search and Rescue team, with the help of others, was able to save all but one person in the crash.

Rod Hanna documented the rescue with photography, and the images made national news.

The country paid attention, and donations started pouring in that allowed Search and Rescue to buy the first ambulance snowcat in Colorado.

**RESCUERS, 2** 

### **LONGEVITY PROJECT**



View a photo gallery of the **Longevity Project** event held Friday at Colorado Mountain College's Allbright Auditorium

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### **RESTAURATEURS HONORED**



Mark Stanford and Tod "JJ" Johnson were recognized last week with statewide awards at the Colorado Restaurant Show.

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### **#STEAMBOATSNAPS**



Tag recent Instagram photos with hashtag #SteamboatSnaps for a chance to be published in print

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**COURTESY PHOTO** 

Rescuers work at the 1978 plane crash on Buffalo Mountain.



The snowcat acquired by Routt County Search and Rescue after the 1978 plane crash on **Buffalo Pass.** 

# **RESCUERS**

From page 1

"It really turned the big page," Vale said. "It gave us resources from the donations we got to get the equipment."

Vale said funding Search and Rescue remains a challenge.

"Routt County Search and Rescue needs funding," Vale said. "Any equipment that they get, they have to beg for money."

The organization today has an annual operating budget of about \$80,000, and they rely primarily on donations.

For their 50th anniversary, Search and Rescue is not asking for money. Instead, they are throwing a party from 2 to 6 p.m. Saturday at the base of Steamboat Resort. At a discounted rate for \$20, those who attend will get two mountain coaster rides and one other

"We thought, let's not do a fundraiser," current Search and Rescue President Darrel Levingston said. "Let's do something to give back. We're hoping it will be an opportunity for a lot of families to come up that really wouldn't have been able to afford it otherwise."

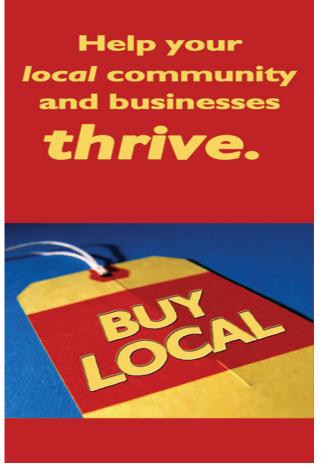
### **GETTING INVOLVED**

Search and Rescue recruits new members annually.

Levingston got involved 25 years ago when a friend of his was guiding a backcountry skiing trip, and someone had a medical issue.

"I went down to help with the search," Levingston said. "They made it out."





He has been on the team ever since.

"At the time, I was a Boy Scout leader," Levingston said. "They thought that Boy Scout skills would come in handy."

High-profile missions have helped tell the story of Search and Rescue, and every mission is unique.

Kirby Duncan, who co-founded Search and Rescue, recalled a fatal plane crash near Hayden. He remembers putting the pilot in a body bag and then looking down at his own arms.

"I looked at my hand, and it was all white," Duncan said. "I was like, 'What the heck are they doing with a bunch of flour in here?"

It turned out the plane was being used to smuggle a large amount of cocaine.

"Us rednecks didn't know what cocaine was," Duncan said.

Steamboat resident Charles Horton, now 69, spent nine days in the woods after breaking his leg while backcountry skiing on Dunckley Pass in 2005.

When he was found by Search and Rescue volunteers, he was suffering from dehydration, hypothermia and frostbite, but he was still alive.

He said he is forever grateful for Search and Rescue.

"There are going to be times when people get into trouble," Horton said. "What they do is needed, especially in a community like this."

That mission stands out

### **IF YOU GO**

What: Routt County Search and Rescue's 50th anniversary celebration When: 2 to 6 p.m.

Saturday Where: Base of Steamboat Resort, 2305 Mount Werner Circle

to Kristia Check-Hill, who has been on Search and Rescue for 20 years.

"We weren't sure what we were going to find, and to find a subject talking to us was awesome," Check-Hill said.

### **CHANGING TIMES**

Before cellphones, Search and Rescue would go on about 80 missions each vear.

They now respond annually to about 50 missions and are able to accomplish a lot without sending out a rescue team.

"Just being able to communicate with people out in the middle of nowhere has really changed Search and Rescue," Check-Hill said.

Recently, a hunter in the Flat Tops Wilderness Area used a satellite communicator to ask for help when he became dangerously sick in the backcountry.

Search and Rescue can track cellphones, and they have used social media to help identify missing people.

Classic Air Medical in Steamboat uses night vision goggles to help them fly and search for people at night.

"They are a great resource to have, should we need them," Check-Hill said.



MATT STENSLAND/FILE

Routt County Search and Rescue trains at King Solomon Falls.



JOHN F. RUSSELL/FILE

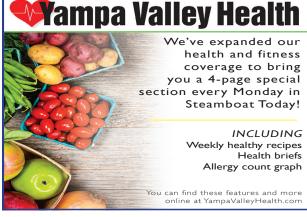
Charles Horton is loaded into an ambulance after being rescued from the Flat Tops Wilderness Area in 2005.



**COURTESY PHOTO** 

Rescuers ride horses to search for a missing money bag at the 1978 plane crash.

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