



# HORSE OUT OF HELL





## Moshe: A Living Legend Who Became A Symbol Of Survival

*By Janet Herring*

**H**ell Hole had been her home. A steep and rugged canyon forested with thick evergreens, its brush and timber were impassable to all but the bravest woodsmen, and were a nightmare for firefighters. This was the white mare's home terrain. But Hell Hole burned, an inferno, the hottest spot in the six-day forest fire that charred 13,000 acres on the northern California coast. All that's left of the canyon now are the black and burnt brown skeletons of fir and redwood trees.

And the mare.

Moshe, she's called by the hill people who've seen her on the ridges west of the little lumber town of Cazadero. Moshe, because she, like her namesake, Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, is blind in one eye.

It wasn't the fire that took her sight; the flames only singed her once ground-sweeping tail to hock level. Her eyesight's been gone most of the 26 years Moshe has run wild. California has only dwindling numbers of unfenced, unclaimed horses on the loose. Of those, Moshe is undoubtedly queen.

Few people have actually seen the white mare. (Her grey and



white markings actually make her a pinto, but at the distance from which most glimpse her, she appears to be white.) But she is well known in these mountains. She has seen a lot in her 30 years. Her life has encompassed a murder; a two-year drought; a heavy snowfall in a land where it never snows; two large-scale forest fires and numerous smaller ones; the paving of what were once remote mountain logging roads and the inevitable coming of man. She is a survivor.

I felt her spirit even before I saw her. It was eerie searching for her afoot in the remains of a charred forest, silent and still smouldering. The prints of a barefoot horse were evident alongside the tracks of deer in the fresh dust of the newly bulldozed fire road. I knew they were hers. My hope of finding her grew as I followed the tracks up the ridge in the hot afternoon, the smell of smoke all around. Then, suddenly, the tracks veered off the dusty path. There were no hoofprints left to follow over the crisp sponge of the burnt forest floor.

### Everyone knew where she'd come from, and everyone left her alone.

All the way up the ridge I could feel her presence, as if she, hidden like an Indian scout, were watching me cross her homeland. I knew if I was going to see her it would be on her terms. She would see me first. It happened exactly that way.

I reached the upper meadow along Blue Jay Ridge, and the fenceline, in the late afternoon. The meadow was still relatively green, the fire having stopped before it got to the dry meadow grass and Morhardt Ridge just beyond. A short search of the meadow turned up droppings and other signs indicating the mare had bedded down there in recent evenings. This was her new haunt. After an hour of anxious waiting,

disturbed only by the sound of a forestry helicopter keeping a constant vigil for any new fire signs, Moshe was still not to be found.

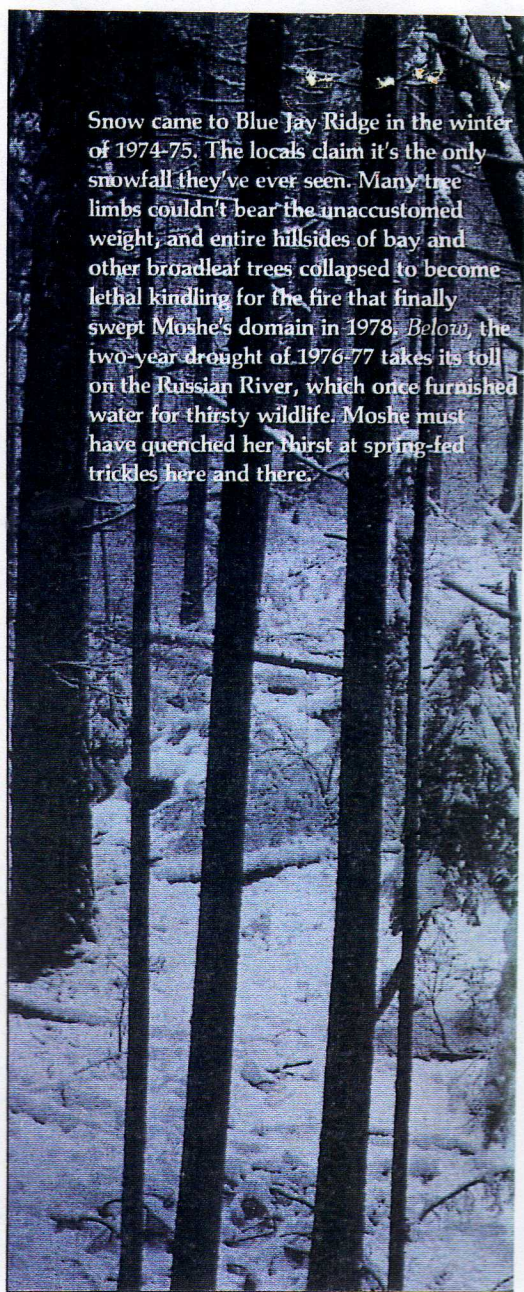
A lone home still stood on the edge of the meadow, miraculously untouched by the flames. A black Labrador Retriever lazed on the porch, indicating someone must still be in residence. The dog woke and barked as I approached, bringing his master to the screen door. I asked the man in smoke-smudged clothes if he'd seen the mare that day, or if he knew where else I might look for her. He said nothing. A smile crept onto his face. He raised his arm and pointed at something behind me. I turned.

There, looking squarely at me from across the meadow, was a white horse. Her color against the backdrop of deep forest greens was like an oasis in the midst of the burned wasteland. But she was not a mirage, not a phantom. Moshe was real. As I approached her she moved and cocked her head to better see me with her one good eye.

Moshe was as curious as I. She left the edge of the forest and came into the meadow. We walked toward each other for several yards, then stopped and surveyed each other. I settled on taking pictures of her from where I stood. Moshe, still intrigued, came closer. She circled around me, always keeping me on the side of her good eye. I spoke to her in whispers. She was within arm's reach when the click of the camera shutter startled her and she moved away. She turned and headed down the dusty road up which I'd come.

The mare appeared to be in the best of health. I'd expected a skinny, bony old nag with long feet and matted mane and tail. Not Moshe. She was in good flesh, yet trim from her wild wanderings. Her mane was windblown, nothing more. Her tail was slightly singed. Her hooves were trim from

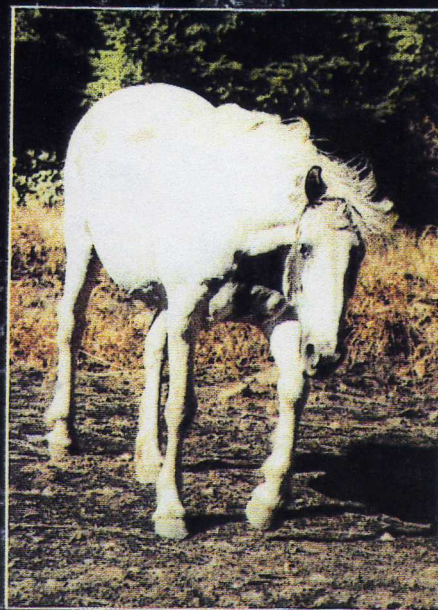
Snow came to Blue Jay Ridge in the winter of 1974-75. The locals claim it's the only snowfall they've ever seen. Many tree limbs couldn't bear the unaccustomed weight, and entire hillsides of bay and other broadleaf trees collapsed to become lethal kindling for the fire that finally swept Moshe's domain in 1978. Below, the two-year drought of 1976-77 takes its toll on the Russian River, which once furnished water for thirsty wildlife. Moshe must have quenched her thirst at spring-fed trickles here and there.



running the rocks and ridges. Not so much as a smoke smudge or grass stain dirtied her clean white and grey coat. Looking at her it was hard to believe she was really 30 years old, or close to it. Her gait had a trace of stiffness to it, the only clue to her old age.

Until steady rains come again, good grazing land will be hard to come by for Moshe and the wild deer and pigs. It was a human's power lawnmower that started the killer fire; it seemed only proper that man should make an attempt to help the wildlife survive while Nature gets back on course. In just that spirit, the local county sheriff's search and rescue unit joined forces with the area's Humane Society and hauled four





tons of hay into the burned out sectors.

It was at one of these hay drops I last saw Moshe. She had her muzzle buried in the green alfalfa. At that moment she seemed as content and tame as any

barnyard horse. She cocked a hind foot and rested, but her ears were never still. She listened in all directions—perhaps for the sound of a crackling branch, or the roar from a wall of fire. Her nightmare. Watching her eat I felt the same spirit to survive in the trees around me. Burned, but not entirely dead, they stand tall and struggle to be green again.

**I** will always wonder how Moshe would tell her own story. The legend pieced together begins in 1952. Moshe, or Sasha, as it's thought she may have been called in earlier years, was owned by the Sefeldt Ranch some six miles due west of where she now roams. One afternoon the mare showed

up riderless at the neighboring Shap Ranch on Creighton Ridge. When the rancher returned the mare to her home, he found Old Man Sefeldt in the house with a broken neck. Sefeldt's murder is still one of the many unsolved, mysterious crimes that once haunted this secluded, heavily forested coastal mountain range. The famous outlaw, Black Bart, staged many an ambush not far from Blue Jay Ridge.

No one bothered to take in the mare when her owner was killed. She was young, and on her own. She took to roaming a 10-square-mile area. Everyone knew where she'd come from, and everyone left her alone.

Moshe began a legend but it's







one no one recognizes or claims. One old-time native of the area made an attempt to catch Moshe five years ago, claiming she belonged to him. His efforts were thwarted by the local mountain folk. It's not been tried again.

Four years ago the mare vanished. She was seen again during the severe drought that plagued the Western states last year and the year before. Since the

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recent fire, she's been seen much more. The fire forced her closer to the populated areas saved from destruction. Creighton Ridge and Hell Hole are barren of feed and shelter now, so Moshe wanders what's left of Blue Jay Ridge instead.

One woman who lives along Blue Jay Ridge was hitchhiking out of the burn area when I asked her for directions early in my search. "The first time I met her was right after the fire. We had all of the goats with us and seeing her kind of scared us. We weren't sure what she would do. She's been hanging around closer to us now. The second time I saw her I was sleeping by the house and she came up near me. The last time I saw her was when I was walking in the upper meadow."

Guy and Terry Kuttner have lived on the ridge for eight years. Intrigued by her history, they've

tried to keep track of Moshe and keep her legend alive. (Guy described her as being rather skittish and liking women better than men.) In past summers, Moshe frequently meandered into their garden, overlooking Hell Hole. Moshe and the Kuttners were there, atop Hell Hole, when the fire swept up the canyon and engulfed Blue Jay Ridge. The Kuttners rescued their own animals and headed down the mountain, fire all around. They were lucky to escape.

**G**uy remembers Moshe being calm even then, in the face of the fire. He believes she remained calm because she was free to save herself. Sadly he relates the fate of three friends' horses. Each was tethered or corralled. None of the owners could get to their horses before the fire did. Each horse died, helpless to free himself and escape. Moshe survived, they say, by running and dodging from ridge to ridge, staying just ahead of the fire.

Jim Murphy, a local veterinarian and member of the search and rescue unit, spearheaded the hay drop operation. He and his crew left hay in all the spots they'd been told the mare might be. They wanted to find her for another reason as well: to make sure she hadn't been burned in her run from the fire.

Dr. Murphy grinned. "The mare's a smart old son-of-a-gun. She knows the area real well and she managed to stay in front of the fire. Except for her tail, there's not a burn mark on her. For an old mare, she's in excellent condition. With a little feed you can walk right up to her, though you can't get close enough to put a halter on her." He, too, seems to have been caught in the spell the mare casts. "It would have been a shame to have brought her in if she'd been hurt. She's been up there so long. Everyone up there knows about her. She's not doing any harm, so they just let her live out her life up

there," Dr. Murphy explained matter-of-factly.

Humane Society Officer Dick Seslar said his agency first heard about the mare the day before their first hay drop. "Jim Wilkins [the longtime wrangler at the Boy Scout Camp near Cazadero] came over and expressed concern for her welfare. He'd heard her tail had been burned off in the fire. We made sure everyone was on the

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lookout for her and that plenty of hay was spread out in her area. Dr. Murphy and another man were in a four-wheel-drive vehicle when they finally saw her. They got close to her. She came right up to them, but wouldn't let them catch her. Had she been burned we would have made an effort to give her aid. It would have been a shame, though, to catch her after 30 years." The local people, too, intend to keep an eye on Moshe to make sure she has enough to eat throughout the winter months.

It seems to be the consensus in the hills around Cazadero that the mysterious Moshe should remain just as she is. She is their own symbol of victory—much like the white chalk horse figure carved in the Berkshire cliffs of England symbolizes a victory great in its time—that of Alfred the Great over the Danes in 871.

Like Moshe, these hill people are made of stamina and a willful spirit that never gives up or gives in. They wait only for spring to begin rebuilding their burned homes. Moshe will no doubt pass by as they raise the new timbers and hammer the nails home.

Perhaps the carpenters will pause a moment when they see the white mare come into view. And perhaps they'll think back to the summer of the great fire. The summer they all survived. □





Below, local Humane Society officials prepare for the hay drop in the burned areas. It was the hay drop operation that put these men onto Moshe's elusive trail after the fire. *Opposite page*, a helicopter search-and-rescue crew takes a breather from their tireless watch over the fireswept hills.

