

525.6-Mile Flight From Palm Springs : Swiss, Cartoonist Win Balloon Race

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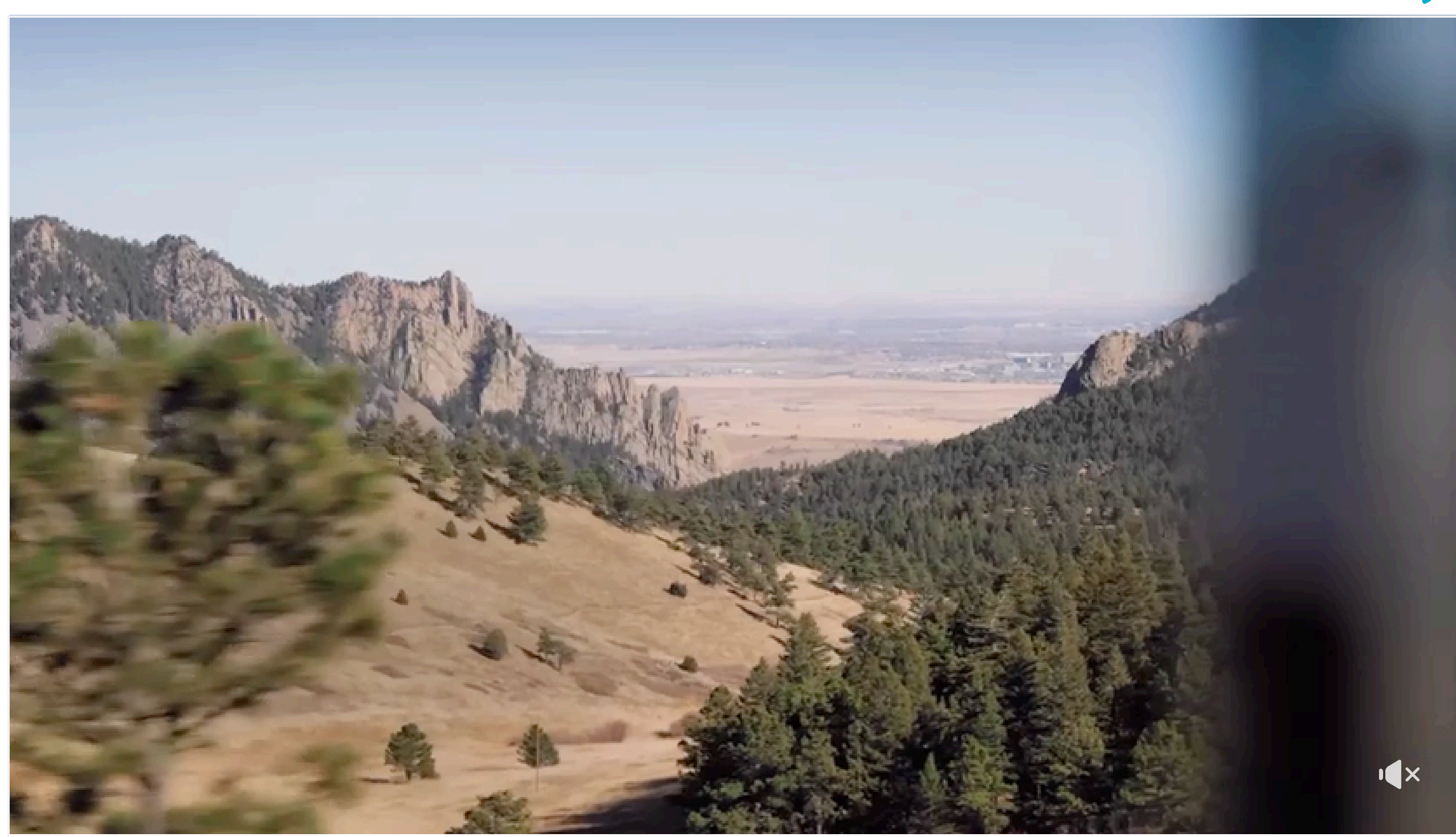
TIMES STAFF WRITER

After a photo-finish race featuring daring landings, veteran balloonist Regula Hug-Messner and co-pilot Paul Conrad, the Los Angeles Times editorial cartoonist, were declared the winners Monday of the Gordon Bennett Balloon Race.

Hug-Messner, 68, of Zollikon, Switzerland, steered the white balloon “Los Angeles Times” through dangerous winds above the mountains of northwestern Utah before landing the craft near Salt Lake City on Sunday, 525.6 miles from where it was launched in Palm Springs, race director Tom Heinsheimer said.

The balloon edged out the Benihana, which made an emergency landing on a forested mountain near Price, Utah, 517.6 miles from Palm Springs.

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The six entries in the race, which was first staged in 1906, were judged by the distance flown after their Saturday morning takeoff.

For Hug-Messner, whose balloon had damaged radio equipment, the victory was especially sweet because her father, Emil Messner, won the 1908 race from Paris, Heinsheimer said.

“Regula’s flight was in the tradition of the Messner family because she commanded a difficult flight with great courage,” he said. “Regula and Paul had to make a nighttime landing to avoid going into the Great Salt Lake.”

Race coordinator Randy Westrick said that after their 15-hour, 38-minute flight, which reached altitudes of 14,000 feet, the winning pair “had to walk eight miles to civilization at a truck stop called Teddy Bears, where they called to say they had landed and were fine.”

Conrad said the trip was fraught with trouble. “As soon as we took off we found that nothing worked, the radio was dead,” he said.

An unexpected weather front greeted the pair when they decided early Sunday morning to set the balloon on the ground, the cartoonist said.

“It was black outside and we were coming in like a freight train,” Conrad said. “We hit the top of one hill and then we were airborne again. All of a sudden, crunch, we didn’t move anymore.”

Westrick said the race was one of the closest ever and was characterized by other “interesting landings.”

The Jumpin’ Jack Flash finished third, setting down in a salt marsh near Wendover, Utah, 491 miles from the launch site. Two other balloons landed on a mountain in Nevada and in the desert near Glasgow, Calif.

Perhaps the hairiest landing was that of the the fifth-place finisher, a West German entry called the City of St. Louis, which avoided rocks, cacti and high-tension wires to land in the Little Muddy River near Glendale, Nev., Heinsheimer said.

The Gordon Bennett Balloon Race, the first organized international balloon competition, was started by the publisher of the New York Herald, James Gordon Bennett. It was staged annually until 1938, when it was interrupted by World War II. The race was started again in 1979 in Southern California.

The record was set in 1981 by the Benihana, which made a 47-hour flight from Fountain Valley to Millarton, N.D., 1,346 miles away.