

Book Review *Over My Dead Body!: The Story of Hillside Cemetery*

By Freda Carley Peterson - Review by Kathryn Lively

As most amateur and professional genealogists will agree, there is nothing like tiptoeing through the tombstones of an ancient cemetery, casually inspecting their worn marble faces for names and dates and any other scraps of information needed to fill branches in one's family tree. Having lived in a family of adventurous souls whose travels have taken me across the United States and Canada, I've visited many a weed-choked boneyard, some whose residents date back to the seventeenth century. I've often wondered about many of the people who lay underneath each stone I visited—did they work, and if so, what did they do? What were they like? I'm sure others who have trodden ancient cemeteries have asked the same questions.

Freda Carley Peterson apparently asked herself those questions during her trips to the Hillside Cemetery in Silverton, Colorado, and unlike many of us she took her queries one step further by actually researching the history behind *every* body resting there. Peterson collected microfilmed newspapers dating as far back as 1879, spending eight years reading obituaries of over 2,600 people interred, making as many notes on each person's life as was available. The end result was *The Story of Hillside Cemetery*, a now out-of-print tome which will soon see new life in a two-volume set expected to total over 1,000 pages, with the new Hillside "resident" count numbering well over 3,500.

For now, those with ties in the Colorado area can check up on possible ancestral ties with the Hillside Cemetery through *Over My Dead Body!*, an abridged version of Peterson's epic, containing a fraction of the obituaries. Though the book is small, as Peterson notes, it is easier to pick up than *The Story of Hillside Cemetery*, yet just as difficult to set down unfinished.

Many of the obituaries listed in *Over My Dead Body!* span the late nineteenth (Silverton was founded as a mining town in the 1870s, hence many residents entombed in Hillside were European immigrants) to the early-to-mid twentieth centuries. Entries for each person range from brief paragraphs—such as the one for the infant son of the Walter Conklins, who sadly passed away before being given a chance to merit a longer mention—to several pages, space reserved for Silverton's more colorful folk.

There's Stefania Nones Bazzanella, who tried to stop a saloon gunfight and fell victim to stray bullets; saloon owner Joe Dalla, who was allegedly involved in Stephania's murder, met a more gruesome fate in a mine explosion while drilling in the wrong place. William Easley succumbed also to an explosion, only in his case the act was suicidal—exhausted from alcoholism and mounting debts, Bill tucked a lit stick of dynamite in his pants and put an end to his earthly misery. Ouch.

Nettie Lewis, after a failed career as a brothel "lady" and a broken heart, swallowed poison. Peter McEnay perished in a fire at the Gold King Mine, and little Rachel Farrow, at age three or four, became Hillside's first resident when she was laid to rest in 1875. Where available, Peterson included with most entries excerpts from newspaper obituaries and information regarding funerals, including hymns sung and names of survivors.

This is not to say that every death in Silverton occurred with violent natures. Just as with any city, Silverton suffered its share of flu epidemics, deaths as a result of age, death after childbirth, and other final curtains.

And avalanches, boy, have there been snow avalanche-related deaths in the small Colorado town! Quite a few listings in *Over My Dead Body!* detail the lives and deaths of those swept up in thundering snowslides, many of whom were not found until the

spring thaw.

As a historical read, *Over My Dead Body!* offers an interesting insight into the existence of the people of a simple mining town in nineteenth century Colorado. Through the individuals' deaths in this town, we learn more about their lives, and consequently we learn that these people, though living in a different century, are not at all different from us.