

*Where Daisies Nod*  
book review by Jonathan Thompson  
of the Silverton Mountain Journal

If you want to learn about a town, you talk to the people who live there. And if you want to learn about a town's history and not so recent past, you must speak to the people who died there.

That is the approach taken by Freda Peterson in *The Story of Hillside Cemetery*. We can not say for certain that she actually speaks to the dead, although the details of her biographies suggest something like that, but we can say that she speaks for the dead, telling their stories with remarkable attention and care. In so doing, Peterson sheds new light on Silverton's past and on the people who lived here, struggled here, and who made this town what it was and is.

*Where Daisies Nod*, Peterson's newest volume of excerpts from the two large volumes about the cemetery, is no exception. It is an accessible and even riveting little volume taking us through life in a mining camp, demonstrating that living here was never easy and that in many cases, dying was not so easy either.

With a short opening account of the flu epidemic of 1918 which killed 10% of the town's population during a three week stretch, Peterson quickly lets us know that this book is a little less cheery than the flowery title might suggest. The emphasis of *Where Daisies Nod* tends toward the biographies of those who died prematurely or violently. Although a few accounts are of peaceful deaths at home or during sleep, the vast majority deal with explosions, suicides, painful diseases, and, of course, avalanches. The idea of the romantic, wild West suffers under the weight of the tragedies laid out for us in brief, concise form.

Anybody who thinks that the mining life was an easy and peaceful one should have a little chat with "Cap" Walker, whose stove exploded while he was thawing dynamite. Apparently he mistook a stick of explosives for a piece of wood and threw it into the fire box. His leg was nearly blown off and he died three days later.

Dominick Avi was crushed by a rock. He was spared a quick and merciful death by six weeks of excruciating pain before he finally perished. Dozens were killed in snow slides, usually caught totally by surprise in seemingly safe situations, like the 11 men killed in 1906 while eating dinner at the Shenandoah boarding house.

Others were blown to bits by dynamite, sometimes by their own devices. Suicide was not uncommon among miners who chose a number of means to do away with themselves, including shooting themselves, throwing themselves to the mercy of the Animas River's icy waters, or drinking acid. The most foolproof tool, however, was explosives, which left the survivors picking up pieces that had been widely scattered.

A guy named "Black Jack" kicked the bucket after drinking a bottle of gin, a bottle of whisky, and a third bottle of hard liquor and Ike Yoho, upset about an article in the Durango newspaper, attacked the editor of the same rag and received a fatally crushed skull in return.

But it was not only the miners and the hell raisers who had it hard. The mortality rate for newborns and young children was frighteningly high and the mothers often fared no better. It was not uncommon for a man to lose both wife and newborn child at the same time.

The sometimes spectacular details of death in *Where Daisies Nod* make for interesting reading. But with each amazing tale of mortality is an equally astonishing tale of survival. Somehow, the people who lived here, faced with so many dangers and tragedy, were able to keep going, to persevere against the harsh realities of the rugged terrain, climate, and lifestyle, and beat out a decent, productive, and even enlightened existence.

The San Juan mining camps were made of a diverse and ethnically rich group of optimistic dreamers who left home and family in Italy, Sweden, Wales, Russia and elsewhere to pursue some elusive dream of freedom and prosperity in the mountains of America. Somehow, they were able to all band together and create something called community.

For all of the grim accounts in *Where Daisies Nod*, some of the most captivating are more optimistic and end much better. Take the story of Giuseppe and Teolinda Giovannini. The couple died within two days of each other during the flu epidemic, leaving an infant daughter. Peterson tells us about the journey of that daughter from state to state and continent to continent along with the return journey of her son, 80 years later.

Peterson is a tireless researcher, digging up details from personal accounts, the brittle and faded pages of old newspapers, and elsewhere. As someone who has spent a fair amount of time in front of a microfilm reader myself, I have a difficult time comprehending how the author was able to dig up so much ..in all; the unabridged two volume story contains entries for over 3,300 burials in this county.

With *Where Daisies Nod*, Peterson once again proves herself to be, along with Allen Nossaman, the most complete and illuminating chronicler of Silverton's history. We should not only read, but also cherish her books. The stories contained within can speak to us over and over and can serve as references and stepping stones back into another time whose hardships and the characters that struggled against them might otherwise be forgotten.