

Silverton cemetery haunts the living

By Nancy Lofholm

[The Denver Post](#)

Updated: 11/24/2008 09:15:47 AM MST



Elyse Salazar, Silverton town administrator, walks through Hillside Cemetery, which she describes as "somewhat of a free-for-all" because the graveyard has no official plots.

Below: A portrait of the deceased graces his headstone. (Photos by Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

SILVERTON — In tranquil Hillside Cemetery where tombstones cling to suncatching slopes tangled with raspberry brambles and littered with pine cones, it's hard to fathom how the dead can be so problematic.

But there are about eight times more of them than there are live folks in the town below. Many of the 3,300 dearly departed have been at Hillside for a century or more. They are scattered across the rocky folds that have served as the cemetery for 133 years.

During the boomtown mining days, avalanches, mine accidents, pneumonia, done-in livers, childbirth, miner's lung and lead poisoning (a euphemism for gunshot) made burials a brisk business. Until 1910, there were undertakers and cemetery workers to tend to the



Two weathered headstones sit in the cemetery. There are 2,000 unmarked graves from the town's early days. (Helen H. Richardson | The Denver Post)

ashes-to-ashes-and- dust-to-dust business in an orderly fashion.

But modern Silverton has no official caretaker, no grave digger. No great surprise in a town without a mortician or funeral home.

There are also no official plots. Silverton Town Administrator Elyse Salazar refers to Hillside as "somewhat of a free-for-all."

There are 2,000 unmarked graves from early days. But even the more modern deceased hold no deeds as in most cemeteries. For a \$250 fee, they simply get the rights to a very, very long rental on a spot they can only hope won't yield another casket when the digging begins.

"If there's someone down there, I tell them 'You have to move over,' " said Freda Peterson Gooch, a tiny, spry 80-year-old history buff who is the closest thing this town has to a mortician.

A burial here can mean hacking at the rocky soil with a pickaxe and shovel on the steeper slopes — a job Peterson Gooch has been known to help with — or relying on the goodwill of a local contractor who volunteers his backhoe in less vertical spots.

The slopes also can make it impossible to use a casket-lowering device. Town employees and, yes, Peterson Gooch, sometimes are called on to grapple with ropes to ease caskets



Volunteer Mary Beaber tends a recently marked gravesite at Silverton's Hillside Cemetery.: (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)
into their holes.

Snowbound for months

Geography and weather also bring their woes.

Some graves have slid down the slopes, leaving tilted headstones, sinkholes and crumbled stone walls. Winter buries the whole 20 acres in more than 10 feet of snow, making it tough to reach the earth, much less dig in it.

The infirm here are well-advised to try to hang on until spring.

But all those problems have created an unusual local affection for a cemetery that is a far cry from the orderly, manicured Forest Lawns and Cedar Groves of other towns.

Each June for the past 16 years, retirees Paul and Mary Beaber — and Peterson Gooch — have led a band of volunteers up the hill. They have come from as far away as New Mexico armed with loppers, clippers, shovels and rakes to tidy up Hillside. They also place 10 to 20 new gravestones each year on unmarked depressions in the earth. They have placed 250 so far, and hope, with the help of deep discounts from Durango Monument Works, to eventually have a marker for each of the unknown graves.

They are able to engrave names, dates and cause of death on the stones because Peterson Gooch has been digging up those details for 21 years. She has sifted through obituaries, news stories and matters of official record in more than 7,000 historic newspapers.

She has documented deaths from 4-year-old Rachael Farrow's untimely demise in 1875 — the first burial in Hillside — to the most recent interment of Louise Bergman in October. She has compiled all that in two thick hardbound volumes titled "The Story of Hillside Cemetery." They dwarf most Bibles.

Silverton's rough history is not sugar-coated in the volumes or on the stones.

Bobby Walker died of dropsy, or edema, at the county poorhouse. Angelo Vito "blew himself away with blasting powder" at the Sunnyside Mine. Flake Blanton was swept to his death in a massive avalanche. Ed McGinley starved and froze in his cabin at the Forest Queen Mine during a bad snowstorm and had his fingers gnawed off by rats.

Delia Curry killed herself by drinking carbolic acid after a disappointing love affair that left her in "a delicate condition." Henry Morris Allen was unnerved by a slip on the ice when he was getting out of his sleigh. It caused his heart to fail. Gust Anderson fell down a mine shaft. Louis Berg was hit in the head by a falling timber at a mine. A rock caved in on Charles Amos. Kid Thomas, a.k.a. "Copper-colored Kid," was lynched by vigilantes when he was 16 years old.

The late Hunter Thompson's attorney and partner in wild living, John Clancey, died in a crash and is buried here under a bronze sculpture. He had lived in Silverton for a few years in the 1970s and stipulated in his will that he be buried in Hillside.

There is a good chance Clancey may be buried under his fancy marker. But that's not always the case. Some of the new headstones are placed by Peterson Gooch's best guesses. She said she gets as close as she can by looking at other family members' graves, nationality and date of death.

One marker is placed over two trenches where 90 townspeople were buried in one mass grave in 1918 when the flu epidemic wiped out 10 percent of the town's population.

A memorial has also been placed where Chinese railroad workers, who were not allowed to be buried in the cemetery, had to settle for an afterlife at the bottom of the hill.

"All of the people buried up there are really kind of special friends, whether they were worth a darn or not. Each life is worth remembering," Peterson Gooch explained.

"The stillest of the still"

Townspeople like to walk their dogs here amongst their friends in the afterlife. The local historical society has a scavenger hunt for schoolkids who answer a list of questions about the cemetery and its inhabitants. Family members have picnics on park benches they have set out near the resting places of loved ones.

Yes, this cemetery is a pain for the living. But a sign at the entrance reminds them why they bother.

"Our village graveyard,

A place where all things mournful meet.

And yet the sweetest of the sweet,

The stillest of the still."

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