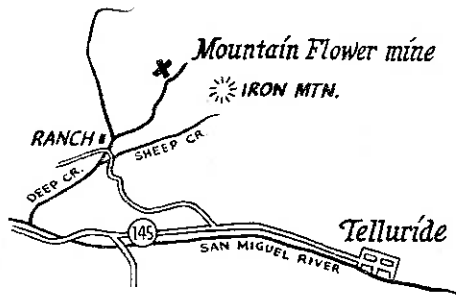


The corpse that took a powder

Stranger than death is the mystery of
Old Walt Snodgrass and how no
one can find his body or his money
in the high quiet of the San Juans

By JOHN SHYDER



This map shows the region where the Missourian said Old Walt died. Location of the Mountain Flower is marked by the "X."

THERE was nothing at all unusual about the meeting of Old Walt Snodgrass and the two men from Missouri, although—looking back now—perhaps there should have been. After all, they still haven't found Old Walt's body.

It was in 1948, late in September when the aspens were starting to turn, that the Missourians

drove along Colorado Highway 145 into Telluride in the high San Juan country, checked into the aging Sheridan Hotel on Colorado Ave. and started asking about the Mountain Flower mine, a few miles out of town.

One of them—his name was H. L. Hoecker and he was an electrical contractor from St. Joseph --said he had invested some money in the Moun-

tain Flower years before and wanted to see the mine. So did his partner, H. A. Clinger of Kansas City.

"I know where the Mountain Flower is," Old Walt told them. "Ain't been worked for years, of course. But I'll take you up there if you want to go."

Now it was perfectly natural for Old Walt—he was 72 then—to say that. He loved to talk to "outsiders" and show them points of interest around town, 'specially if they wanted to listen to his grand stories about the "old days" when Telluride had an estimated 3,000 inhabitants, 26 saloons and gambling houses, four dance halls and 150 prostitutes.

Old Walt knew a lot about the town and its people, past and present. What he didn't know he managed to make up. That usually made his stories better, anyway.

Old Walt drifted into Telluride as a young man back around 1911 after a sour marriage in Iowa and an unsuccessful stint as an undertaker's helper up in Butte, Mont. He prospected for gold a bit, but really most of his time was spent in and around the saloons and pleasure houses down the hill from Colorado Ave.

He lived in a little shanty on E. Pacific St., smack in the heart of the red light district, and never did actually work for a living. He gambled and made a little money at that. Then he handled any odd jobs that came along. And during prohibition he ran whisky for the bootleggers.

These were the days when the mines were working full shifts and so were the entertainment spots. Places like the Silver Belle, and the Pick And Gad.

You didn't just buy a drink — you bought a ticket that entitled you to one drink and one dance with a girl. The ticket cost you \$1, the whisky was watered down, and the dance didn't last much longer than five seconds. The girl who whirled once around the tiny floor with you received a fourth of your dollar and stayed sober on cold tea until late in the shift when the man-



Here's the wood shack, a crib in Telluride's once-bustling red light district, where Old Walt lived. With the old man dead, the shack was moved, now is used as a coal shed.



It was back in this country northwest of Telluride, Colo., with the aspens beginning to change, that Old Walt took his last hike.

agement allowed her to forage on her own. Old Walt used to wish he'd been a detective. Said he would have been a good one, and that he probably should have teamed up with J. Edgar Hoover in the early days of the FBI.

In later years, when most all the mines quit and the gamblers and the girls moved out, Walt kept living down there on Pacific St., keeping house in what had been a crib. He went on the old age pension, swept the floors at the Elks Club, and bet on elections and the World Series.

He let his white beard grow down over the tip of his overalls, but once a year he ambled down to the barber shop of Harry Miller and Lester Sweeney for a shave and a haircut. It was quite an event for Old Walt, and for a couple days beforehand he always passed the word around so that no one who was interested would miss the show.

Old Walt always had some money, sometimes quite a bit. He had a deal with Dan O'Rourke, San Miguel county treasurer in Telluride, and Dan would save all the \$100 bills that came into his office. Walt then would trade his smaller bills for Dan's big ones.

Sometimes Old Walt had several of the \$100 notes at a time, and he always wrapped them around his smaller bills and carried the roll with

him, tucked into the pocket of his chambray shirt.

Whenever he was talking to a tourist, Old Walt would fish a finger around in his pocket and pull out that big roll of his real casual like, as if it was his day's beer money.

It understandably made quite an impression on most of the flatlanders.

Tom Mahoney was sheriff at the time, and also probably was Old Walt's closest friend. And the Missourians told Mahoney, later, that they thought it was mighty nice of Old Walt to offer to take them up to the Mountain Flower.

They climbed into their car with Old Walt and drove west on 145 for about three miles and then cut to the right on a narrow dirt road leading back past the big Aldasoro sheep ranch to Deep Creek. The road stopped there, and Clinger, who was older and heavier than Hoecker, said he'd wait in the car while Old Walt and Hoecker walked up to the mine.

It was about 2½, maybe three, miles from the car to the mine, and Old Walt and Hoecker had to walk up a steep trail through heavy underbrush and slide rock to reach it. It was dusk when they arrived at the old mine, Hoecker told the sheriff later, and dark when they left to go back down the mountain.

Hoecker was in front and Old Walt in back and they were talking back and forth and then, Hoecker said, he noticed Old Walt wasn't saying anything. He stopped, he said, and called back into the dark. But Old Walt didn't answer.

The Missourian said he backtracked a ways, and found Old Walt crumpled like a sack of flour on the ground.

He was dead.

That tough hike just must have been too much for the old man, Hoecker said, and he sure didn't know what to do because he'd never been in the mountains before and he wasn't about to try to find his way down this steep one at night without someone's help.

So, right there beside Old Walt's body, he built a big campfire and spent the night.

Clinger, down in the car, couldn't imagine what had happened but he figured he'd better stay put and he did.

After the sun came up the next morning, here came Hoecker down off the mountain—alone.

Hoecker said he told Clinger what had happened, and they drove to the Aldasoro place and telephoned the news of Old Walt's death to the sheriff in Telluride.

Mahoney was shocked and saddened by Hoecker's report because he liked Old Walt, just like

continued

Photography by GRIN A. SEALY