

NDJ:6 Jeanne Magagna

Welcome to Rock Springs

My brother Gianni sent me the Union Pacific train ticket and five dollars. I kept both carefully pinned beneath my underclothes worn with my everyday black woolen dress.

It was September 1898 and I had just turned eighteen. My mother felt it best to let me find my freedom in the New World. My back was already weak and deformed through starvation and she could see no future for me apart from working for a lifetime in the worn-out Trentino fields.

My hunch-back ached as I trundled slowly through the Ellis Island gateway with the hundred and fifty survivors of the sea journey from Naples to New York. I had been sleeping for sixty nights in a bumpy bunk bed positioned in a dormitory of babies, young mothers and older Italian women. Our numbers had diminished as the storm caught hold: pneumonia and scarlet fever had captured and imprisoned some in death.

When, after a few days, the custom officers finally let me leave Ellis Island, I walked to Penn Station with my light bag containing a cotton nightie, old yellowed underwear and my grey Sunday dress. Boarding the Union Pacific train headed West, I discovered I lacked a word in common with the black porters and suited white gentlemen. I stared carefully watching their lips move when they spoke to one another. By silently mimicking their mouths with mine, I gradually learned “hello, please, thank you, may I have some water please, no thank you.”

Four days later I had completed the first stage of my self-learning. I was determined to continue this, for I liked the new challenge of this strange language. I had left school at age thirteen to support my parents by picking courgettes and peppers for the Clez farmers’ outdoor vegetable market.

My panasegalla, the hard-bread rolls, were secreted in the folds of my hand-crocheted black shawl and in the pockets of my heavy wool dress. Agua, or “water”, as the Americans called it, would make it possible for me to survive this long trail from New York’s high buildings, through flat green Kansas wheat fields to Wyoming’s barren land. I was hypnotized by the miles and miles of desert mottled with grey-green sage brush and a few herds of deer and antelope scattered in the

distance. As we traveled through the Wyoming plains I felt myself to be entering an extraterrestrial space where no people, no places, existed. How could anyone live here? The only signs of humanity, erupting each hundred miles along the railroad, were small oases consisting of ten or twelve worn-down grey shingled buildings which provided coal, food supplies and a shelter for passengers waiting to alight for the train journey out West.

The train stopped at Cheyenne, Laramie, Rawlins and finally my new home. Arriving at my destination I saw a sign across the street. It read The Grand Hotel and Bar. I would live on the second floor of this six-bedded hotel. It was here that I was headed to make the beds, sweep the floor, become a maid while trying to catch words drawled by the Wyoming cowboys en route to Denver.

Shortly I spotted my sleepy-eyed, fattened brother, Gianni. He stood beside the rail-tracks with tear-filled eyes and a tender smile of joy, right beside the white lettered log board saying, Welcome to Rock Springs.

So, this was Rock Springs, a coal-mining town with not an ounce of water within sight.

Rock Springs where I was to meet and marry the janitor who swept the floors of the Grand Cafe Bar below.

Rock Springs, the place where I was to learn English,

sell large extra high white Angel food cakes for people's birthdays,

and work without pay as my Italian friends' interpreter.

Rock Springs where I was to raise four children, under twelve, single-handedly after my forty-one year old husband drowned in quicksand.

Rock Springs, where I subsequently was to become the first woman rancher after winning a battle the other ranchers who wanted to buy the sheep and homestead land that my husband, Louis, had received in exchange for doing extra chores as a cleaner.

Rock Springs, the place where my four children were to be raised: a rancher, a lawyer, a Stanford University writer and a son who, aged sixteen, was to die of diphtheria.

Rock Springs.. .my home till now when I find myself an old woman, ready to die.