

**BIOGRAPHY OR HAGIOGRAPHY:
LESS FAMILIAR FACETS OF THE COMPLETE BABY DOE**

WHA 2007 Conference

©James I. Metz, Editor emeritus, *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*

The Archbishop of Denver has never received a request to initiate proceedings looking for the canonization of one of the well-known adherents to the Faith in his archdiocese, Elizabeth McCourt Doe Tabor. And it's not likely to occur to anyone to press for it in the future, either.

Just the fact that she had that surplus of surnames suggests that the task of the Defender of the Faith would not be terribly daunting in advocating the Devil's side in any formal canonization process.

So I'm not envisioning here, even in wild imagination, the insertion of the name of Elizabeth Tabor into the Litany of the Saints.

But I do see a sort of *de facto* canonization – New Orleans style. That is, the fabled “Baby Doe” of our study clearly and most devoutly wished “to be among that number, when the Saints go marching in.”

Biographers are drawn to their subjects in diverse ways. There probably was an almost Calvinistic inevitability to Sandburg's Lincoln. My own path toward biography is more pedestrian. I was drawn by the old adage: “Local girl makes good.”

Where I grew up, the understanding of Baby Doe centered, not on the Oshkosh hussy portrayal long familiar to Denverites, but upon her going forth from the old home town and captivating a millionaire and enjoying incredible riches and seeing it all melt away and accepting her eventual lot of destitution with heroic forbearance and fidelity.

After reading Bancroft, Burke, Hall, Karsner and others I was always left with a question unexplored: What was there in Baby Doe's growing up years – in Oshkosh – that set her on her path to legend? Those standard biographies necessarily, and understandably, explore little of her life before Colorado and what they do mention is often enough supposition – and just as often inaccurate. What was it about her early years that lead to legend? That became my quest.

Some people live a life full of surprises. Lizzie McCourt, I find, lived a life full of reprises. You have to understand this if you are to comprehend fully her later life; her early years give clues as to why she reacted as she did to latter day, bitter circumstances.

The prime example: Baby Doe is legend because hers is a story of going literally from riches to rags. Few people recognize, however, that she experienced that twice!

Let the following be submitted to a candid world:

Lizzie McCourt was nurtured by the frontier right from her birth in 1854. Oshkosh's rough edges were a familiar element of her childhood so that her later experiences in hardy Central City and even harder Leadville were certainly not eye-openers to her. She grew up where raucous, brawling lumberjacks were a necessary component of the local economy if not of the society she observed about her.

That society was not unlike those “better people” who concomitantly aspired to bring the trappings of “culture” to the Colorado frontier, precisely as Horace Tabor did in building the Tabor Opera House in Leadville.

Lizzie McCourt’s family and particularly her parents were among the Oshkosh people who coveted “civilized” influences for their town, so much so, in fact, that Peter McCourt – Lizzie’s father – built and operated Oshkosh’s first entertainment venue called McCourt Hall. It is almost mystic that the inaugural performance at Tabor’s glitteringly appointed new opera house in Leadville in 1879 was headlined by Jack Langrishe almost exactly twenty-one years after his performance at McCourt Hall was the highlight of its second season.

The social setting that Lizzie McCourt grew up in was a bit more finely defined than just being among the culturally attuned folks of Oshkosh. She grew up quite conscious that the McCourts were in an Irish Catholic minority in that frontier setting begun and largely populated by Protestants. It is impossible to overstate this heritage.

The McCourts came from County Armagh, Northern Ireland. Peter McCourt’s mother grew up amid the animosities of Orange Order Protestants literally battling their neighboring Catholics, her people. No surprise that she taught her children to be steadfast in their faith, and none took that to heart more than Lizzie’s father, Peter.

Peter was especially proud when, occasionally, a missionary priest to the nearby Menominee Indians, Father Florimond Bonduel, said Mass in the McCourt home. Although Lizzie was born later and did not personally know Father Bonduel, it seems significant that her middle name was in honor of that cleric for he was the first of a long list of priests who were indirectly – or directly – an influence on her.

She received her earliest understanding of the faith from Grandma McCourt – who incidentally doted on her much more than on her siblings – and of course she was instructed by a succession of parish priests, particularly Father Thomas Keenan whose brother, Joseph, lived with him as a seminarian and remained, after his ordination, as a friend and mentor to Lizzie even as she became Mrs. Tabor.

But the greatest influence on her life was her father. Peter McCourt was an early leader in Oshkosh. A tailor and clothing merchant, he was well-regarded by everyone. Lizzie McCourt's early years had to have been pleasant. She was the fifth of Peter's dozen children and those early years were relatively affluent for the McCourts.

Now a hallmark of being Irish is being partners to the fabled "luck o' the Irish."

In the case of Peter McCourt, that luck was anything but good, and the succession of misfortunes that fell to him – and his reaction to them – had a lasting impact on Lizzie and instructed her how she could cope with the adversities that came flooding to her in her own time.

Lizzie was going on five when the first bit of hard luck visited the McCourts. Peter's clothing store and McCourt Hall burned down one night in 1859 – along with every other business place in Oshkosh! Lizzie was old enough to sense the magnitude of the loss to her family if not to the community. The energetic resolve of Peter McCourt and the rest of the business people to rebound would also be evident, even to a five-year-old.

Bad luck – also in the form of a fire – visited Peter McCourt's business anew in 1863, when Lizzie was nine, and again three years later, in 1866. Lizzie as a pre-teen

was quite aware of what was happening to the McCourt family's assets. But she was equally cognizant that father Peter was determined not to give up – not to yield to despair; to put his trust in God, in other words. His faith was undeniably sustaining him. The lesson was being absorbed by Lizzie who had by now a particularly close relationship with Papa.

As a teen, Lizzie liked to “hang out,” as we might say today, at Peter's store which was, if nothing else, a masculine bastion. Her preference for that type of setting was a life-long choice for her.

Indeed, the example of Peter McCourt remained with daughter Lizzie all her life. Peter loved flowers and the fruits of nature generally; Lizzie likewise always was inspired by flowers and the natural beauty surrounding her in Colorado. Peter was exceedingly generous, well-known for his philanthropic nature. No wonder that to her, Horace Tabor's personality was a reprise of her father's.

Lizzie, as a blossoming teenager, was being noticed by the men who shopped at the McCourt store, and increasingly – and more importantly – by dozens of young men about town. She was, incidentally, not the only McCourt girl noted for her good looks. Her older sister, Cornelia, or “Nealie,” in fact once won a “prettiest girl in town” contest. She and the other McCourt girls were known not only for their good looks, but also for talents in music and other arts. It is ironic that one of Nealie's offspring was the font of great spiritual anguish for Baby Doe in her last decades.

Although all the McCourt girls were pretty, it was Lizzie who stood preeminent and came to be recognized as the “Belle of Oshkosh.”

In her nineteenth year another episode of McCourt misfortune occurred. The family lived in a substantial house just beyond the business district. Lizzie was born here the year it was built and continued to enjoy the conviviality of her family in that setting. Now, in the summer of 1874, a fire broke out half a block from the McCourt home. The flames spread quickly and engulfed their house within half an hour. It was among the first half dozen of 500 homes wiped out by that fire.

Peter McCourt was not able to rebuild the house. The McCourts had to rent in order to have a roof over their heads. The family's downward financial spiral was clear to everyone. Nonetheless Peter characteristically determined to carry on. The family still in his care consisted of Lizzie, six younger McCourt boys and a younger daughter, Claudia. He still had his clothing business and McCourt Hall, but the income was not up to what he had been enjoying.

Even that was doomed. Less than a year after they lost their home to that devastating fire, another wall of flame created havoc for a major portion of Oshkosh, cutting a swath three or four blocks wide on a mile and a half path, again destroying the center of town. For the fourth time Peter's clothing business was wiped out by fire.

In this instance, Lizzie and a couple of her brothers labored to remove and secure some of the store goods. This helped Peter to try to renew his business, but his efforts were doomed. In less than two years he was bankrupt. The McCourts had gone figuratively from riches to rags.

Lizzie already had absorbed the message: Trust to God. Never give up.

She was now the object of the aspirations of any number of young men. So in spite of the adversities clobbering the McCourts, this was an exciting time in Lizzie's life.

Eventually she settled on one of the suitors, albeit a Protestant one, Harvey Doe. Harvey was the only son of an Oshkosh entrepreneur, William Doe. Harvey seemed a cut above the other young suitors. Mama McCourt especially liked him and he fit right in with the jovial McCourt family circle. Harvey's parents were less accepting of Lizzie. They feared that good Congregationalist Harvey might fall under the spell of Papist Lizzie. They were right. Before the wedding Harvey presented himself to the parish priest for baptism as a Catholic.

One other pre-nuptial event put the course of history on a new tack. The Doe lumber mill was destroyed by fire just weeks before the wedding. Harvey, who stood to become eventual inheritor of the business now had no such position to inherit. Instead the senior Doe sent Harvey and his bride to pursue a new life in another locale where he had some business interests: Colorado. This could be called "Plan B" for the couple.

What followed for Harvey and Baby Doe in this new setting has become quite familiar. I will not address that at length. Sufficient to say that their dreams and aspirations soon shattered, they divorced and now Lizzie "Baby" Doe, devout Catholic though she was, was going it alone and determined to succeed one way or another. Enter now the ebullient Horace Tabor. They wed. Baby's ambitions were fulfilled beyond her wildest imagination. She bore Horace two daughters and they all enjoyed the lavish life.

Was it a reprise of the "luck o' the Irish," McCourt style, that now set in? The Tabors were precipitously broke, more penniless, in fact, than Peter McCourt had been

after the final fire had wiped him out back in 1875. But Baby had well-learned the lessons of acceptance that her father had taught.

With Tabor's untimely death in 1899 – after he accepted, like Harvey, the ministrations of the Catholic Church – Baby Doe was now embarked on a period of her existence that was as trying, as painful, as anyone could possibly imagine.

These last 35 years of Baby Doe's life are the mesmerizing ones; the reasons, in fact, that we are here today, examining and savoring their complexities. When I focus on these years I see them as a continuation of her lifelong devotion to the faith and her fulfillment as a Christian.

As Mrs. Horace Tabor in Denver, Baby had worshiped at Sacred Heart Church which was then run by Jesuits. She appreciated the spiritual advice of Father John Baptiste Guido, an eminent scholar in the Society of Jesus and pastor of that church.

Baby now faced the daunting task of being a single mother raising two daughters. She disdained the route of marrying again. She would depend on the sweet memory of Horace which included at least the hope of restored good fortune, and the sustaining Faith of her fathers.

She chose to do it in Leadville and this was very soon a turnoff for her first-born girl. Lily, now a teenager, fled to the Midwest to live with Mama McCourt and Aunt Claudia. Leadville, Lily believed, was Endsville. Second daughter Silver Dollar sustained Baby's aspirations for a time and remained a companion. But she, too, became restless. She came to aspire for things beyond Leadville. When she left the Matchless it

was with Baby's tacit approval, although Baby understood it would be leaving her desperately alone.

But not entirely alone. She had her faith.

Now it is always possible to conjecture that Baby turned to God the same way a condemned man does when he hears the executioner sharpening his blade just outside the cell.

But I feel there is enough evidence that Baby Doe never really lapsed in her devotion to the church. Her correspondence with priests during her affluent as well as her later troubled years shows me a continuum to her spiritual attachments. Her devotions were very much like she would have learned in her early years as Lizzie McCourt.

Of course, the spiritual looms all the larger when there is practically nothing else at hand. Baby became devoted to a number of saints she gleaned from reading her copy of "The Lives of the Saints." Saint Augustine was one she did relate to. He had spent his youth enjoying carnal pleasures. Did Baby Doe see him as showing her how to surmount her own past?

Another she was able to relate to now was Saint Rita. Rita is known as "the advocate of desperate cases." Baby's desperation was much like Rita's. The saint had suffered long because her two offspring had turned from God. Baby's daughters were also now beyond the influence of the faith and it was an ongoing, crushing spiritual burden for Baby.

Silver was embarked upon a dissolute life which Baby fully realized but would not acknowledge. Even more distressing for the lonely, grieving mother was the course Lily had chosen. Lily now lived with the widower of Baby's sister Nealie and his children – and then she married one of them, her cousin, John Last. “This terrible thing would not have happened had Nealie lived,” Baby lamented.

She became aware, moreover, that John and Lily Last had not only abandoned their faith, but were adamantly against religion itself.

For many years, Baby Doe's prayer life was wide-compassing. She prayed diligently for her relatives and for others from her past. . On the anniversary of the birth of both her first and her second child, July 13, 1924, she recorded that she was spending the whole day in prayer for the souls of Harvey Doe and of their stillborn son, delivered that date in 1879. The next year she recorded that she took a dollar to have a mass said for Harvey.

But most constantly in her prayers were her daughters and Lily's children. She was deeply hurt when Lily failed to acknowledge receiving a book Baby sent her about Saint Rita. But she never ceased to pray for them. She died, of course, before the final ignominy of her descendents' disdain for her faith played out. Lily died eleven years after Baby did, in 1946 at Milwaukee. There was no funeral and she was cremated in a final defiance of Baby's faith. Of Lily's three children, the two daughters, spinsters Kelly and Jane Last, likewise scorned any funeral rites and were cremated. The last descendent, Jane, died in 2001 in Milwaukee.

The spiritual legacy of Baby Doe Tabor thus was anything but fulfilling. Still, her steadfastness to her beliefs, that unrelenting persistence she had learned long ago as

Lizzie McCourt, must be recognized. It seems perfectly appropriate to hope that her God sees to it that Baby Doe may be among that number when the saints go marching in.