

# The Oshkosh of Baby Doe

a Lecture by  
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We are going to explore here the making of a legend.

Every civilization has legends. They are usually about people who have lived an extraordinary life – have experienced an exciting adventure in that life which transcends the ordinary that everyone else experiences – a life that excites everyone’s imagination if not envy.

In our own country the catalogue of such legends runs from Davy Crocket and Daniel Boone, in the East, to Buffalo Bill, Calamity Jane, Jessie James, the Unsinkable Molly Brown and a whole list of colorful men and women in the West.

One who rose to legendary status in the vast reaches of that West is our subject now. We cherish her especially because the national legend she became had its genesis here in Oshkosh.

She is, as you know, called “Baby Doe.”

Just how important was Baby Doe in the realm of Western lore? The Colorado Historical Society is housed in a large building, a block long not far from the Capitol in Denver.

And across the front of it is a huge montage depicting the many facets of Colorado history.

Pride of place, on the extreme left, goes to the beautiful one-time Belle of Oshkosh.

I will give you an abbreviated story of the Baby Doe legend in a moment. But

first I must explain her name. Baby Doe.

She began life as “Elizabeth McCourt,” born here in Oshkosh in 1854.

She was usually called “Lizzie,” but her older brother, James McCourt, often called her “Babe” or “Baby.”

In 1877 she married an Oshkosh young man, Harvey Doe, and so became Lizzie or Baby Doe. She was a Doe, or “Baby Doe,” for less than four hours while she was an Oshkosh resident.

The night of that wedding June 27, 1877, in St. Peter’s Church, Harvey and Lizzie departed for Colorado to take up life in the exciting mining region beyond Denver.

Harvey apparently liked the term “Baby” for his bride because in succeeding months – as the Does struggled unsuccessfully to make their mine pay – the beautiful young bride became universally known to the miners as “Baby Doe.”

Here is the legend, in brief:

The Does were rather soon estranged. For one thing, Harvey was not tremendously ambitious. Baby was. She was willing to work along side him in the mine. But their efforts were not paying off. Within three years they were parted.

This left Baby sort of stranded in Colorado. She couldn’t go back to Oshkosh and the McCourts. Her ambitions would not let her.

Nor would they let her latch on to just any one to replace Harvey. She knew of and managed somehow to meet the richest man in the state, Horace Tabor. There were a couple of stumbling blocks to romance. Tabor was 24 years older than she. And he was already married.

The process of Horace’s estrangement from his wife, Augusta Pierce Tabor, was well under way before Baby came along. Augusta knew Tabor “when!”

When he didn’t have a dime.

When he grubstaked every down-and-outer to come along. When he didn’t have any business sense at all.

It didn't impress Augusta that one of the grubstakes paid off and Horace became rich. With riches came power and Tabor became a power in Colorado politics. Horace could have whatever he wanted, and now he wanted Baby Doe.

He got Baby Doe. He married her in Washington, D.C., in 1883 with the president of the United States, Chester Allen Arthur, attending the reception.

Augusta read Baby Doe's character. Baby would dump Horace if the good life ever vanished.

In the meantime the happy couple had everything money could buy. They soon had a daughter who was lavished with everything.

In a few years, another daughter, and again dressed in richest clothes.

Denver Society women shunned Baby, but she was enjoying the life Tabor's millions made possible. Theatre, concerts, all sorts of ostentatious styles were hers.

Then Adversity did set in. Tabor lost everything when silver crashed in 1893. But a strange thing had happened in the meantime: Baby had fallen completely, irreversibly in love!

It would have been easy for her to find a new way to enjoy the luxuries she had come to know. She was still beautiful. Indeed, she would get proposals for new liaisons.

But her life was strictly Horace. As she had with Harvey, she worked along side him in trying to eke out a living from the Matchless Mine. No avail. Horace's health declined.

He finally died in Denver in 1899, but not before assuring Baby that the Matchless would yield millions yet. In short, for the next 35 years Baby Doe Tabor lived a life totally dedicated to fulfilling Horace's prophecy. It was his legacy to her.

In due time her daughters deserted her. They could not take the austere life she was living at the Matchless.

Yet Baby stayed true to her Horace in spite of all the pain that her poverty

brought her. Imagine the plunge from having not a money care in the world to the point of subsisting on stale bread and whatever else she could glean.

Despite it all, she refused charity. She refused to complain. She embraced the life God laid out for her with a fortitude that even the Saints could admire.

That life, to her, was atonement for her sins. It was, in short, what God wanted for her and she accepted it without regret.

That, in a bit less than 600 words, is the legend of Baby Doe. Several books have spelled it out much more fully, and there's been a movie – not very good – and an opera – VERY GOOD – so good, in fact, that it's an American classic. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is an excellent explanation of the legend.

Now, however, we want to explore what is behind the legend – what made the legend.

We want to visit the times and the events that formed “Lizzie McCourt” into the fabulous “Baby Doe.”

The McCourts came to Oshkosh in 1849. Father, Peter McCourt, was a tailor and began in the clothing business in the frontier town. The family consisted of Peter and his wife and a couple of kids, plus his mother and a sister and a married brother.

Peter's store was in a building called Marks Block at first.

He changed to a store on the west side of the street in a few years, and here the family lived and here Father Bonduel probably said mass in the McCourt home.

The McCourt's being Irish were devoutly Catholic. They were among the dozen families to organize St. Peter's Church.

About 1854 Peter McCourt, immediately prospering, built a home several blocks further from the store, on Division Street just north of Church.

It was probably in that new house that the newest McCourt child – Elizabeth – was born at the end of September. She was christened ‘Elizabeth Nellis McCourt,’ but a few years later she became ‘Elizabeth Bonduel McCourt’ in honor of the family friend.

That emphasis on the Catholic faith is one of the main points to explain Lizzie's life. She grew up in a setting in which that was an essential distinction within the society in which she lived. Grandma McCourt has grown up in Ireland. She raised her children strong in the faith, and her son, Peter, in turn saw to it that his progeny were well-versed in the tenets of the Church.

A second attribute that became strong in Lizzie is somewhat akin to that. It was to accept the bad as well as the good as being the will of God.

Father Peter McCourt taught her that and he did it by example.

The first setback for Peter and the McCourt family came when Lizzie was going on five years old. That was in 1859.

Actually all of Oshkosh learned bitterly about adversity then. The entire business district burned down the night of May 9-10.

The first landmark to go was Marks Block. The flames leaped some 80 feet across the street and devoured McCourt Hall.

And right next to it, the first brick store in Oshkosh, Hutchinson's Hardware, fared no better.

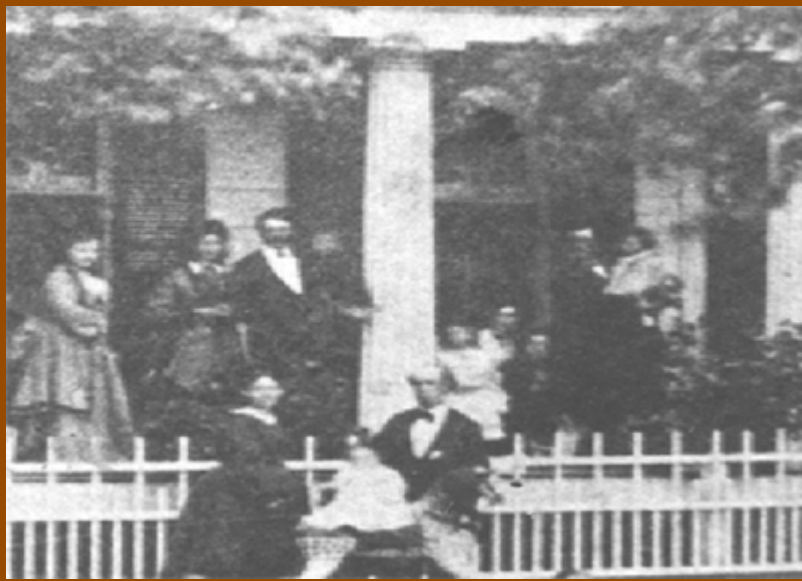
Peter McCourt and all the merchants in those blocks bounced back from that. But Peter was particularly unlucky. He suffered another loss when his store burned down in 1863. And again in January of 1866 he was burned out of business: Three times in seven years.

Let's set adversity aside for a little while and look at another facet of the McCourt family and its impact on the Legend of Baby Doe.

The McCourts were a large, and essentially a very close, family.

And they all had the fine and winsome features the Irish are often noted for. Lizzie – let it be said – most of all.

Let's introduce them.



This is a picture taken in front of the McCourt home on Division Street. It would have been taken about 1872 or 1873.

The man with the buggy is George Cameron, by now a partner of Peter McCourt.

He also had a livery.

This is the only picture I've seen of Peter McCourt.

On the hobby horse is – Willard.

Sister Margaret and husband William Courtney and son George.

Lizzie's oldest sister Mathilda Haben and family: Regina, Leo – and Irene being held by Andrew Haben.

Sister Cornelia and husband James Last. (Their son would later marry his cousin, Lizzie's daughter, Lily.)

On the fence, younger brothers Martin and Steven. (Martin died within a week of his father in 1883.)

Older brother and his wife – James and Actress Amelia Watts. She once was in a play with Edwin Booth.

Lizzie's brothers closest in age – and affection – Philip who steadfastly defended Lizzie when she was a recluse and even after her death.

And Peter Junior.

Family was completed within a year of this photograph when brother Marks was born.

I cite these and I hope you recognize that their Celtic features were especially winsome. None was more highly recognized as good-looking than Lizzie.

Mama McCourt, in fact, told Lizzie, from her early years, that she was too beautiful to have to do her share of the work around the house.

As a teen bride herself, Mama came to feel that she had missed things in life and she wanted her girls, and Lizzie in particular, to enjoy the things that she had not had. Lizzie was spoiled because of her good looks; she knew it and she lived by it.

Lizzie stood out enough so that other girls her age were jealous. Probably for that reason she had no close girl friends. Her preferred company – throughout her life – was with men.

She liked to visit her father's store which was pretty much a masculine domain.

Here she listened to the male talk and she came to understand the topics she learned. She was a listener; not a participant. But she related to that world her entire life.

Papa McCourt was also a participant in the "spoiling" of Lizzie. He was proud of her and was quite content to have her "hanging out," as they say nowadays, at his store.

But he was primarily the one who made sure she was brought up in the Faith. St. Peter's had a school during some of Lizzie's young years and she undoubtedly attended that.

Her religious instruction, however, was most likely under the guidance of the parish priest, Father Thomas Keenan who served St. Peter's parish during the years Lizzie was a young girl.

Another who influenced her was Father Keenan's brother, then a seminary student but later a priest and pastor of St. Patrick's, Fond du Lac, Father Joseph Keenan

The latter remained a friend of the McCourts for many years. He preached at Peter McCourt's funeral in 1883, baptized Lily Tabor in 1884 and corresponded with Baby in Colorado in those years.

Lizzie's formative years in Oshkosh were interesting years, and the family was important in the community. Peter McCourt built another entertainment hall, and here Lizzie certainly came to appreciate theater and concerts. McCourt Hall prepared her to enjoy the cultural events that were so important to her in Colorado.

But misfortune also was stalking the McCourt family fortunes.

In 1874, no more than two years after that family picture was taken in front of their house, fire struck.

It began within a block of the McCourt Home. Because of a lack of water in the nearest reservoir the fire got a good start and the McCourt Home plus a large chunk of Oshkosh, was doomed. The fire approached within a block or so of another prominent family, the William Does, at Merritt and Mt. Vernon. This was a mixed emotion time for the blossoming Lizzie. She was a beautiful young girl, just turning 20. She was being noticed by the young men in town, and she loved being noticed!

But the happy life she knew was being impacted by the financial setbacks accruing to the McCourts. The fire losses were a huge part, but Peter McCourt's real estate investments were not paying off.

The 1874 fire had destroyed their home but left Peter in business on Main Street.

Then on April 28, 1875, another, the most terrible fire of all, struck the city. Lizzie was involved in trying to save the goods of McCourt & Cameron, just as hundreds of people were frantically doing for stores all along Main Street. It was a painful shock for the whole town. Not only was Peter McCourt burned out, but his three sons-in-law, all in business, suffered losses – and one, William Courtney, was nearly trapped in the flames.

But when you are young you are resilient. Lizzie McCourt was not only young, she was in love. In love with love, and about this time, in love with Harvey Doe.





This is Harvey well after his marriage.

Perhaps this view will suggest a little better that Harvey was considered handsome when he was young like Lizzie.

At any rate, they became engaged, much to the consternation of Harvey's mother who didn't feel that an Irish girl and a papist with a "reputation" as a flirt was suitable for her son so dutifully brought up as a Congregationalist.

Congregationalists were not only *crème de la crème* of Oshkosh society then. But the Congregationalist Does were important industrialists.

But something changed that in 1877, just a couple of months before Harvey and Lizzie were to be wed.

The Doe mill burned down. No one knows if this was a turning point in history. Harvey, an only son, may have been in line to follow into the mill business. If he had, Lizzie would have simply lived the comfortable life of an Oshkosh socialite.

But now the mill was gone and the pathway to a national legend emerged.

Harvey and Lizzie were wed as planned, on June 27, 1877, at St. Peter's Church.

The church was filled literally to overflowing. People were standing outside. Both families were so well known.

The rites were conducted by Father James O'Malley – who had just baptized Harvey a few days before.

Instead of having an established business in Oshkosh awaiting the couple, Harvey's father, William Doe, had arranged for the young people to begin life in a new and exciting setting. Doe had some mining interests in Colorado and he gave them a mine. The elements of the legend were now all in place.

Doe was involved in politics as well as Oshkosh business. He had, a few months before the wedding, been defeated for mayor of Oshkosh. The winner was Lizzie's brother-in-law, Andrew Haben.



He's shown here some years later, probably after 1885, in his yard on Washington Avenue with his millionaire brother-in-law, Horace Tabor.

At the same time, Mama McCourt and Baby Doe were also relaxing.

The tale of Baby Doe would not be complete without looking at her daughters.

Lily, or Elizabeth Bonduel Tabor, was baptized in Oshkosh in the affluent days of the Tabors, and she was a young teenager when the now destitute Baby moved to the Matchless Mine.

Lily couldn't take that kind of life and got her uncle, Peter McCourt, to help her "escape" to relatives in Wisconsin. She ended up marrying her cousin, John Last, and had three children. Sadly, she denied, at Baby's death in 1935, that she was Baby's daughter.

Most poignant of all is Rosemary Echo Tabor "Silver Dollar."

She was so like Lizzie. She reminded Baby of her own childhood. But she lacked Lizzie's strength of character. When she came back East, she ended up in a shabby district of Chicago and died a sordid death.

So what is left of the Oshkosh of Baby Doe? Not too much.



The Doe House, Merritt and Mt. Vernon, is there. The porch on the right is an addition. The front is different.

But the basic house, designed by Oshkosh's famous architect William Waters, is there. Unfortunately, Lizzie was persona non grata there and may not even have ever been in it.



The site of that comfortable, colonnaded house where Lizzie grew up on Division Street is now a parking lot.



In Riverside Cemetery repose the McCourt parents, the monument being a present from their dutiful daughter when she was in her affluent years in Colorado.

But legends do not need to be seen or to be touched, to be real. They exist for all time because the deeds themselves are imperishable.

This is entirely true of Oshkosh's Lizzie McCourt.

