

**MOCKING WITH ALL DUE RESPECT:
PUBLIC HISTORY APPROACHES TO BIOGRAPHY**

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History can be dry as bones and dull as dust if the “story” part of it is neglected. Tragically, too many people are introduced to the subject by uninspired teachers who reduce history to an unpalatable stew of dates. Historical biography – especially biography as juicy as Elizabeth Nellis Bonduel McCourt Doe Tabor’s – is too delicious to be served dry. Such a spicy dish can be just the thing to whet appetites for scholarly investigation. Biography is an acquired taste, and as with any gourmet delight, presentation is key.

Colorado historian Caroline Bancroft understood this well. She portioned-out local history in easy-to-swallow booklets published in the 1950s and 60s. Her popular biographies, created with the tourist in mind, were handy bite-sized tomes, perfect for light snacking on the road. Bancroft had a flair for characterization and narrative drama. Whatever her research failed to produce, she unapologetically manufactured. Caroline could spin a hell of a yarn – be it history or her story. Her self-published creative efforts were readable, enjoyable, and enormously popular.

Though she based her work on documented facts, Bancroft freely invented scenes and dialogue, incorporated hearsay, and simply made up episodes when necessary. As she explained to *Denver Post* reporter Olga Curtis in 1972, “I improve history when it seems logical. My characters talk, dress up, and get involved in things because history has to have popular appeal. I put in the truth and the folklore, too.”

In a 1974 interview with *Where* magazine, Bancroft defended her invented dialogue. ““I don’t know that that person said that thing at that moment. But they jolly well better had because I had done so much research that I knew it was the kind of thing they would have said...I did what’s known as fictionalized history, except it’s almost no fiction.””

Purists may shudder, but fictionalized history with almost no fiction is precisely what historical re-enactors aim for. Those who perform with the Chautauqua Speakers Bureau, for example, incorporate the subject’s actual words into their first-person portrayals whenever possible. Extensive research also helps them to recreate historical personalities for the audience. But until the invention of time travel, some personal details will never be known, only guessed at. Informed speculation is very often an inevitable part of the historical process.

We know exactly what Baby Doe Tabor wore for her Washington wedding to Silver King Horace. The original \$7,000 maribou-trimmed gown is prominently displayed in the Colorado History Museum gallery. What we cannot know is exactly how she felt when the politicians’ wives boycotted her Willard Hotel ceremony. There is, however, a certain

universality to human emotions. Consequently, speculation based on personal reactions to similar circumstances frequently creeps into biography.

After more than six years of research into the life of Denver's visionary educator Emily Griffith, her story has become second nature to me. I have committed to heart exact quotes that offer insight into her character and philosophy. But I'll admit to "pulling a Bancroft" every now and then while in Miss Emily's high-top shoes.

Effective first-person enactors – and biographers, for that matter -- find something in their subject's personality, values, circumstances or experiences that resonates in their own life. The more they identify with the person they portray, the more emotional truth their recreation conveys to an audience. Like Emily, I have taught both children and non-traditional adult learners. I understand her – and consequently portray her -- all the better for our shared background.

Poor historical portrayals happen. These painful performances are more caricature than characterization. I cringe when someone inquiring about a program asks who I "impersonate." Catskills comics do impersonations. I think of my presentations as reanimated historical biographies.

I won't tell you exactly what parts of Baby Doe's story I identify with. Suffice it to say I am no saint. Probably far more women empathize with the first Mrs. Tabor, the hard-working and frugal Augusta, heartlessly thrown over for an immoral younger woman. It

is this negative identification factor that makes Baby Doe such an intriguing and controversial character.

The public perception of Lizzie Tabor as home-wrecking hussy is not helped by the Tabor exhibit at the Colorado History Museum in Denver. On one wall of the exhibit, the Reubenesque portrait of a young, dreamy, voluptuous Baby Doe is juxtaposed with an old, bitter, pinch-faced Augusta as cheerless as “American Gothic.”. Most of the featured artifacts reflect the brief halcyon days of Horace and Baby. There is little indication of the hardship, loneliness, and hopeless devotion to a dead husband’s dream that characterized the last thirty years of Baby Doe’s life.

Horace Austin Warner Tabor got his posthumous day in court several years ago, thanks to Tom Noel’s Colorado History Group. Before a packed house at Tabor’s Leadville Opera House, Duane Smith assumed the persona of Colorado’s Silver King in a 1993 “Mock Trial.” He defended H.A.W. against charges of adultery, bigamy, and white male chauvinism. Who better to portray Tabor than the author of his definitive 1973 biography? Other professional and amateur historians played the roles of key figures in Tabor’s tale. The free-wheeling spectacle climaxed with a song by Baby Doe which melted the “jrrors” hearts and resulted in the acquittal of the obviously guilty philandering silver tycoon.

On the heels of that first successful event, the Colorado History Group held Mock Trials of notorious cannibal Alfred E. Packer and the indomitable Margaret “Molly” Brown.

The events raised not only public awareness but also much-needed funds for arts and local history organizations. Perhaps the most contentious figure in Colorado history still awaited her own public reckoning. Baby Doe Tabor was due to face the music.

I didn't think of myself in her role when the Colorado History Group decided to present the Mock Trial of Baby Doe last year. But from the beginning, I had very definite ideas about how Baby might respond to the myriad charges leveled against her. I had researched her life thoroughly in preparation for a graveside appearance a few years earlier in a Dr. Colorado "cemetosium."

Whether or not Tom Noel invented the cemetosium, he named and perfected the genre. Each year on the Saturday before Halloween, he leads enthusiastic throngs through Denver's oldest boneyards. There the Colorado Historical Society tour group encounters the departed beside their final resting places. Appropriately arrayed in period costume, the "ghosts" deliver stories of their lives in monologue. The briefly resurrected are always a monster hit, attracting unwieldy crowds of more than a hundred.

I chose to portray Baby Doe at Mt. Olivet Cemetery – and subsequently at her Mock Trial - in her Matchless Mine years for two reasons. I'm obviously too long-in-the-tooth to convincingly play a twenty-something floozy. But more than that, I believed that the older, wiser, desperate and destitute Baby was a far more sympathetic character than the materialistic young divorcee who set her cap for Colorado's richest man. The older Baby

suffered and repented for her sins a thousand times over. I wanted the public to understand her torment and contrition, as well as her pride and determination.

The second Mrs. Tabor was officially charged with Home Wrecking, Gold Digging, Adultery, Indecent Extravagance, Child Endangerment, Trespassing, and Panhandling. Who would prosecute the notorious Baby Doe? Tom Noel stood firmly for decency and against the accused. His team came to include eminent Western historian Patricia Limerick and the Honorable Mary Malarkey, Chief Justice of the Colorado State Supreme Court. For the defense, Denver City Auditor Dennis Gallagher and prominent local lawyer Walter Gerash joined Dani Newsum, able attorney, TV personality, and CU-Denver history professor.

Obviously, Augusta would lead off for the prosecution. Others testifying against Baby included Harvey Doe, her hapless first husband, Jake Sands, her “special friend” from Central City, traitorous daughter Lillie, muckraking reporter Polly Pry, and creative biographer Caroline Bancroft. Slated to testify on the defendant’s behalf were Horace, Silver Dollar, and Leadville pal Sue Bonnie. We incorporated Judy Nolte Temple’s new findings on Baby’s emotional and mental state by calling for the defense a fictitious psychoanalyst. Larry Boning, a real-life judge with prodigious Mock Trial experience and an oversized novelty gavel, presided.

It was our great good fortune to recruit knowledgeable, talented, and conscientious players for every part. We provided each with a crib sheet, outlining his or her

character's relationship to Baby Doe and suggestions for how they might speak to the charges. Though most of the cast were well acquainted with the Tabor tale and their assigned roles, we also provided resources for background research. Among these were two surprisingly useful popular Internet sites.

Babydoe.org is home to the DoeHEADS, "devoted to an exploration of the lives of Baby Doe, Augusta, and Horace Tabor and the opera they inspired." The DoeHEADS site lists more than 50 members, including James Metz of Oshkosh and Duane Smith of Durango. Despite their funny-sounding name, the DoeHEADS are an impressively informed and devoted lot.

The website features biographies and photos of the triangle's principals, as well as Tabor-related historic sites, an excellent bibliography, full-text and excerpted articles, speeches and interviews. There is even a rare clip from the 1932 film "Silver Dollar," based on the Tabor story and starring Edward G. Robinson.

Legends of America.com was another pleasant web discovery. This "Travel Site for the Nostalgic & Historic Minded" features eight pages of solid Tabor biography and rare historic photos. The site provides a great overview for cyber-surfers too impatient for full-length books or in-depth research.

Our dress rehearsal on the eve of the Mock Trial was a trainwreck. The dynamic had yet to gel, and I faced the day of performance with trepidation. Why had I thought this was a

good idea? Nearly 600 spectators crowded the Turnhalle, a historic German opera theatre in the former Tivoli Brewery on the Auraria campus. Twenty “Shady Ladies“ from Central City arrived in period dress, half rooting for Augusta and half supporting the defendant with “Free Silver! Free Baby Doe!” placards. Baby was discourteously dragged up the center aisle in handcuffs, and there was no turning back.

The trial unfolded so perfectly that I was forced to conclude the proceedings were blessed by the spirit of Baby Doe herself. The spontaneity, wit, and earnest role-playing of all involved ensured a memorable event. The essence of Baby’s defense was that she was guilty only of leveraging her God-given talents to achieve her goals in a time when options for women were limited.

Though no one could consider Baby Doe innocent, members of the audience “jury” found her “Not Guilty” on all charges by a margin of five to one. Augusta-lovers resigned themselves to the majority verdict but resolved to fight another day.

“I never thought about things from Baby Doe’s point of view before,” I overheard someone say after the production. Such comments reflected a new perspective and empathy for Lizzie Tabor on the part of many spectators – exactly what we’d aimed for..

Do public history variations on biography compromise historical integrity? Must accuracy be sacrificed at the crossroads of education and entertainment for the sake of popularity? I think not. When the preparatory research is creditable and the underlying

respect for those being “mocked” is genuine, enlightenment and enjoyment are NOT mutually exclusive.

How important is it that history be popular? Serious scholarship is not for everyone. But historical biography should be. Former CHS chief historian David Halaas, considers embroidered stories of the past sometimes justified. “I am comfortable with myth,” he says in Marilyn Griggs Riley’s *High Altitude Attitudes*, “as long as it brings knowledge of the West.”

Colorful characters with larger-than-life stories have always drawn the public to Western history. Imaginative public history productions make these biographies accessible to general audiences. The public recognizes liberties taken for the sake of fun and understands that these portrayals of actual historical characters are “based on a true story.” Successful first-person programs, cemetosiums, Mock Trials, and websites entice at least some portion of their audience to consult documented resources for more information. Even those audience members who never pursue further study come away knowing something about historical biography they didn’t know before.

It is entirely possible to have fun with – without making fun of – historical characters. The mere fact that they’re dead needn’t prohibit them from being lively.

To illustrate my point, I’d like to close with a song I wrote for Baby Doe’s mock trial to acquaint the audience with her remarkable rags-to-riches-to-rags story. To the familiar

tune of “Clementine,” this is “The Trials of Baby Doe.” You are cordially invited - and heartily encouraged – to sing along with the Chorus.

The Trials of Baby Doe (To the Tune of “Clementine”)

(1) In appearance like a cherub
Face and figure shaped to please,
When she used ‘em and she floozed ‘em
She brought grown men to their knees.

[Chorus]

*Oh my darlin’, Oh my darlin’,
Oh my darlin’ Baby Doe,
You will have to face the music,
Dreadful sorry, Baby Doe*

(2) Her first husband had a gold mine
But he didn’t like to work.
She caught that louse in a cathouse
And divorced the lazy jerk.

(3) Set her cap for Horace Tabor,
Though he had a faithful spouse.
He got busy with loose Lizzie
And commenced to playing house.

(4) Dumped Augusta like the garbage
So’s to take a trophy wife.
Quite the stunner and much funner,
Baby loved the lavish life.

(5) Gilded coaches, diamond broaches,
For the Tabors, life was fine.
Lived like royals on the spoils
Of their Leadville silver mines.

[Chorus]

(6) When poor Horace was impover'ished
By the sudden Silver Crash,
All predicted wealth-addicted
Baby Doe'd go with the cash.

(7) But she stuck by aging Horace,
'Til his end was by his side.
Loved her honey more than money,
Worked the Matchless 'til she died.

(8) Lost her fortune, lost her daughters,
And some say she lost her mind.
It's a mystery whether History
Guilt or innocence will find.

[Chorus]