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# M. E. KEZER: OKLAHOMA PIONEER WITH A PAST

(Claude Kezer, Miss Dolly's nephew, reports that Miss Dolly's sisters, embarrassed by their sibling's profession, refused to place a marker at her gravesite. Kezer, his brother, and sisters, raised the needed money, bought a marker, and thus proclaimed their family's connection with the "woman with a past.")

During frontier days, the "world's oldest profession" was an industry in itself. This is the story of an Oklahoma madam in Woodward.

— Louise Boyd James

Mary Eliza Kezer arrived in Woodward, Oklahoma Territory, in 1894. She came from Denver in response to a job opportunity — a madam was needed for the local honky tonk and adjacent cabins. She got the job, and for over six years was Miss Dolly of the Woodward Dance Hall.

Just twenty years earlier, Eliza, then a fifteen-year-old Kansas farm girl, promised her dying mother that she would remain a virgin and never marry. Eliza was able to keep only part of the oath; for prior to coming to Oklahoma, she was a prostitute in one of Denver's fanciest bordellos.

This fate had been determined for her, when, within a month of her mother's death, her father, Daniel Kezer, deposited Eliza at the Union Depot in Kansas City. He gave her fifty cents and left her on her own.

The money did not last long, even though Eliza rationed it to buy food as she looked for work. She found shelter by hiding in the waiting rooms of the depot, and a fruit vendor gave Eliza bananas after her money was gone.

Eliza finally collapsed in the street. She was taken to a nearby doctor who took her into his home and cured her pneumonia. When Eliza's health returned, she did housework to repay his kindness. The doctor eventually placed the girl on a stage to Colorado, saying the climate there would be better for her stubborn cough. The teenager who boarded that stage was no longer a virgin.

In later years, as Eliza told the story, she failed to account for about five years of her life at this point. It is probable that she joined the prostitutes in Denver's French Quarter as the Colorado city enjoyed its silver boom. In about 1880 Eliza met a newspaper man; he was the only man she ever loved.

Legend says he was with the Denver Post, but Catherine T. Engle, Reference Librarian, Colorado Historical Society, reports the Post did not begin publication until 1892. Eliza may have changed the name of the paper in her original telling, or the name may have become altered with the passage of time.

Her editor helped design and print the invitations to the opening of the Tabor Grand Opera in September, 1881. Eliza saw the beautiful satin invitations prior to the event and had a gown of white satin designed to wear to the gala affair. Both the invitations and the gown were trimmed with long-stemmed roses.

Eliza did not understand the opera. She believed most

of the Denver audience shared her confusion, but Eliza had a marvelous time.

She lived with the editor two years. They enjoyed a Pygmalion-type relationship, with the newspaper man leaving lessons for her to study while he was gone during the day. She was proud of her ability to learn and over sixty years later still expanded her knowledge as an avid reader of Time magazine.

This happy time ended with the death of her friend, either from a heart attack or through an accident. She then moved back to the bordello life, where she entertained only wealthy men. She wore handmade French chemises and claimed never to have spent an entire night with a customer.

She continued to attend Tabor events, for many stories from this time period were of Horace and his Baby Doe. As Miss Dolly, Eliza attended the parties where all women wore beautiful gowns. Sometimes, her gown was lovelier than Baby's.

At all Tabor parties the wine flowed. In fact, Eliza told of a pink vase large enough to hold a person. Horace would pull Baby from this prior to filling it with champagne. Eliza owned two small pink vases, miniatures of the Tabor possession. These are displayed now at the Plains Indians and Pioneer Museum in Woodward, Oklahoma.

Declining silver fortunes in the early 1890's ended this way of life, both for the Tabors and Dolly Kezer. As Horace and Baby struggled to salvage something of their silver empire, Dolly looked for a new way of life. It was for this reason that she went to Woodward.

Woodward was created by the land run for the Cherokee Outlet in September, 1893. It was a division point on the Santa Fe, and a cattle shipping town. Woodward was a little Dodge City, known for a sporting life; it boasted many saloons, gambling establishments, and the dance hall north of Main, just across the Santa Fe tracks.

This brothel ran unhindered by serious law enforcement for about eight years. It was here that Dolly worked.

While some elements in Woodward desired to close the dance hall, unwritten rules developed for its continuance: Prostitution should be confined to that block. The girls who worked at the honky tonk must not visit town often and then must be back across the tracks by dark. A proper woman passed to the other side of the street to avoid a chance meeting with a dance hall "inmate." Proper women never wore red, the color of their sisters to the north. Nice women did not cross the tracks going north unless absolutely necessary. One daring adolescent girl, in defiance of her mother's warning, actually stuck her toe across those tracks!

Dolly entertained north of the tracks with stories of her Denver days. As she did this, the differences in the two towns became more and more obvious. Woodward



had a long, sandy, main street. There were no sidewalks, only boardwalks in front of some of the scattered businesses. There was no electricity, city water, or sewer system. And even when dressed in their finest, Dolly's girls were just plain cheap.

She realized this at a lavish party about 1900. Her girls were in their best. Cattlemen and cowboys were in abundance. Santa Fe officials reportedly furnished flowers to decorate the dance hall.

The party must have been for the Oklahoma Livestock Association's annual convention. Woodward really celebrated for this event each March as cattlemen from Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas arrived to discuss their mutual industry and its problems.

Dolly decided at that party to leave the dance hall. The next morning she located a homestead four miles southwest of town. She filed on the land. She packed her beautiful clothes in a trunk, sold her jewelry, and paid the way home for any girl who would leave.

Cowboy friends donated a cooking pot, a bedroll, and a dog. They helped build a board house, which always leaked. They built fence as she acquired money to buy posts and wire.

She earned money by doing laundry and housework for people in Woodward. She walked the four miles to

town and picked up laundry from saloons, restaurants, and barber shops. Then she carried it home. After washing and drying the clothes, Dolly carried the dried bundles back to town.

Dolly Kezer was smart, and she was tough. She survived the five years required to "prove up" her land. In September, 1906, she made final homestead entry, and the land belonged to her.

She lived on the claim long past the final entry, dying on her land in the spring of 1947 as the tornado swept Whitedeer, Glazier, Higgins, and Woodward. Before her death, Dolly had made peace with herself, her neighbors, and nature. She talked to God each day, reading from her mother's worn Bible. She fed pet squirrels and quail. A dove rode on her shoulder. And always there was a dog.

Dolly visited with neighbors. Sometimes half-sisters came to talk and drink her Hills Brothers coffee. She hoarded quarts of peanut butter and tried unsuccessfully to forgive her father.

But there must have been times during those years when she opened the old trunk, filled with satin and taffeta clothes with laces and ribbon trims, and enjoyed becoming in memory, Miss Dolly of the fanciest brothel in Denver. ■

PHOTO COURTESY PIONEER MUSEUM, WOODWARD



This lonely windmill still stands on Eliza's homestead. The boards in the foreground are from her small home destroyed by the 1947 tornado.

PHOTO COURTESY PIONEER MUSEUM, WOODWARD



The black taffeta blouse recently found by Kezer Family members. In the background are pictures of Eliza's parents and Eliza as a child. Hanging above these are two French prints from brothel days.