

Thomas Andrew KECK – Beata Emma LORENZ



Thomas Andrew KECK was born on 2 Jun 1907¹ the second of 8 children of Joseph and Julia in Decatur, IL. After finishing 8 grades at St. James Catholic School in June 1921, he went away to high school to study for the priesthood to St. Mary's Mission Seminary in Techny, IL. This seminary was owned by the Society of the Divine Word. His brother, Leonard, started there two years before. His report cards show that he was an "A" student and took courses including Latin, Greek and German.² One of his Latin books contains anatomy sketches of torsos, arms, head, etc. indicating an interest and ability in drawing at an early age. Towards the end of his high school Tom questioned his vocation to the priesthood. A priest counselor advised him, "If you can't propagate the faith, you can propagate the faithful." He finished high school at St. Mary's in June 1925.



Sometime in 1926 Tom met **Beata LORENZ**, who was raised a devout Lutheran. She was born on 17 Apr 1910 in Decatur, IL, to Rudolph Lorenz and Emma Hellenberg. She attended St. John's Lutheran School, was confirmed, and graduated in 1923. Her dad was principal of St. John's school and choir master at the church. In 1926 he had a falling out with the pastor and stopped going to church. Bea gradually stopped going to church after that. She went to Central Junior High School and worked as a housekeeper and nanny for wealthy families. When the work overwhelmed her and her studies suffered, she decided to drop out of high school at the end of her third year. Her father agreed that it was best and she began working full time as a housekeeper.

Bea and Tom began dating but when Bea found out that Tom was a Catholic, she told him to "go jump in the lake" and broke up with him. But love prevailed and they resumed their courtship. Nonetheless, her father could not tolerate her dating a Catholic and stopped speaking with her. Rudolph told Bea not to come to his house again. She kept in touch with her mother by phone. During their courtship, Tom created several original greeting cards which he gave to Bea, as well as a drawing of five babies, which he predicted, would be what their children would look like.



Tom had various jobs including chauffeur and draftsman at Muellers starting in 1926. He took a night course in drawing and lettering at the YMCA and received his diploma in card writing in Feb 1928.³ Once Bea and Tom planned to marry, she decided to convert to Catholicism. She took instructions and they were married on 9 Feb 1929⁴ in St. James Catholic Church in Decatur with Leonard, Tom's brother, and his

wife, Lucille as their attendants. None of Bea's family attended the wedding.

Their first child, Betty, was born 1 Aug. 1929. Bea's mother lost her arm in an automobile accident near Kankakee in Sept. 1929 and had to stay in the hospital in Kankakee. Bea went home to visit her dad. He said, "What took you so long to come back home." They were reconciled from then on.



¹ Certificate of Birth

² School Reports 1921-25

³ News clipping

⁴ Marriage License



In Oct 1929 the stock market collapsed and the great depression began. They lived in a small apartment above JJ Moran's funeral home. Tom was painting signs at this time and would barter his service for whatever he could. One item he got this way was the oak kitchen table that served the growing family for many years. Bea recalled riding in a taxi when few could afford it. Tom was always very resourceful and never without work. He had his own sign shop on shop Main St. Tom's dad, Joseph, often helped him around the shop.



Bea with Betty, Bobby and Virginia

The following children were born in the 1930s: Bob, 1930, Virginia, 1932, and Tom, 1933. They bought the house at 475 Sheridan Dr. in 1934. Jim, 1935, Carolyn, 1936, Sylvia, 1938, Joe, 1939 were all born in this house.

During the World War II Tom worked in the Houdaille-Hersery defense plant. Marilyn was born in 1941, Don, 1943, Cathy, 1944. Tom eventually received a draft notice and tried to get ready by putting on a backpack and walking 10 miles or so. But in the end he was given an exemption because of his large family (10 children). During the war they had a sizeable vegetable garden as well as a cow and chickens. The cow and chickens were later sold or eaten but the garden continued for many years. Bea was

especially fond of her flower garden and usually had help weeding from the kids.

At home, Tom was continually expanding and remodeling the small family house to accommodate the growing family. First, the front porch was enclosed to enlarge the living room and the boys' bunkroom was added next to it.

Next, the kitchen was remodeled and enlarged by reversing the stairs to the basement. It was summer time and a temporary kitchen was set up in the old garage while Bea was treated to a visit to her cousins in Kinderhook, NY. Then the frame garage was replaced with a larger, cement block building. And finally, the two original bedrooms and bath were enlarged resulting in an extra bedroom and bath in the basement.



1940 Bob, Sylvia, Tom, Jim, Carolyn, Virginia holding Joe



After WWII Tom opened up another sign shop on 236 East Eldorado St. Three more children were born: Jean in 1946, Bill in 1948, and John in 1951. Bea lost three children at birth: Larry, 1949, Michael, 1952, and Loretta, 1954. Both Tom and Bea loved each of their children dearly and treated each one special.

Tom got involved in Boy Scouting as Bob and Tommy joined Troop 18 at St. James. He served



1943 Joe, Sylvia, Carolyn; Jim, Tom, Virginia, Bob, Betty, Bea holding Don, Tom holding Marilyn

as Assistant Scoutmaster and then as Scoutmaster. He built a covered wagon-like trailer to haul the troop's tents and other equipment on camporees and other outings. Bea was a member of St. Elizabeth's Society at St. James. She also belonged to a study group called "Do Unto Others" made up of mothers of children in St. James School (Tauber, Collier, Moran, Eller, Dayton, Pfile, and Scherer).



1946 Virginia, Betty, Bob, Jim, Joe, Tom, Sylvia, Carolyn

All the children attended St James Catholic School. This meant Tom had to drive them in the morning and pick them up after work in the evening. They walked to Grandma's house three blocks away on E. Clay St. There it was mostly doing homework down in the basement after a small snack. Sometimes there were errands to run or chores in the garden. Grandma was very strict; grandpa gentle and entertaining.

Sunday Mass at St. James Church was taken for granted. Often this required more than one trip, especially when one of the boys were Mass severers. Special occasions involved First Communion, Confirmation, or graduation. Pastors in those days included Fr. Ostendorf and Fr. Klasner. School was staffed by the School Sisters of St. Francis from Milwaukee.

Most school days began with Mass. The children received a first rate education and both parents were very involved with scholastic achievement and supervising homework.

Extracurricular activities, besides scouting, involved playing in the ravine and woods, swimming in Lake Decatur nearby, and helping in the garden.

Tom worked for Grossman Signs from 1945-?. In 1945 Grossman started manufacturing Picture Craft, a paint-by-number hobby kit. Tom brought much of this work home for the family to work on. Soon the whole family, including Tom's parents, were involved in this cottage industry working in garage and basement. It was the first time the family had extra income and had a chance to taste a little luxury.

Tom bought a 1950 Chevy station wagon and Tom and Bea took Bob, Tom, and Jim on a two-week vacation to Minnesota northwoods fishing and camping. Again in 1952 he bought another Chevy station wagon and took another vacation



with Bea, Jim, Joe and Don through the Smokies, Blue Ridge, Shenandoah, Washington, and New York. They stopped to visit Bob, who was in the Army stationed in Bear Mountain on the Hudson River, and continued up to 1000 Islands in the St. Lawrence River.

Tom was a member and secretary of the sign painters' union. After leaving Grossman's, he worked for Barnett Signs. He painted signs for Dolson Advertising until he retired in 1973. His hand painted billboards and murals dotted the county and surrounding area advertising restaurants, furniture, etc.

He had many hobbies and an encyclopedic mind. One of Tom's favorite ways to relax was listening to classic music. Besides his LPs he taped many broadcasts from public radio and always had his tapes along on camping trips. He also played classic music on the piano when he had the chance. From time to time there was an old piano around the house. He loved to paint in oil: landscapes, portraits, animals, etc. He was very active with his stamp collection for quite a few years and also with model railroading.

Tom's trademark was the ever-present King Edward cigar hanging out of his mouth, often unlit but well chewed. He seemed quiet, somewhat reserved, but had a great sense of humor. He was the final discipline agent in the family but rarely had to resort to physical punishment.



During her child rearing years Bea was recognized as a subject matter expert by many relatives and friends. She advised and counseled many young mothers on nutrition, breast-feeding, childhood illness, discipline, etc. From 1960 to 1967 Bea was involved in wedding catering. With Virginia's help, she baked and decorated wedding cakes, also providing dishes, table clothes, decorations, punch, food and drink. In 1965 she catered Cathy's wedding and another wedding the same day, then cared for Virginia and Bill's 6 children while she was in the hospital with Teresa.



1953 Sitting: Bea, Jean, Bill, Tom, John. Standing: Carolyn, Cathy, Virginia, Betty, Sylvia, Marilyn, Bob, Don, Joe, Jim. Tom was away in the Army; Bob on home leave.

She also assisted the terminally ill starting with her father, Rudolph, while he was dying of jawbone cancer in 1956. In 1958 she kept vigil with Tom's sister, Dolores, who also died of cancer. She also spent hours at her husband's side in 1974, and Clara's in 1976. She was always available in time of crisis and need.

Bea knitted afghans and enjoyed doing other craft projects. In 19__ she and Carolyn opened the Treasure Shop, a craft supply shop. It offered a wide line of cloth, thread, and accessories and also



taught different skills ranging from quilting to knitting.

In mid 1968 Tom had a myocardial infarction and was taken to St. Mary's Hospital in Decatur. He told the doctor there that he had bleeding from his rectum but the doctor said "Let's get your heart stronger then we will look at that." After recovering from his heart condition the doctor recommended a specialist in St. Louis. There he was diagnosed with colon cancer and an enlarged prostate. In December 1968 he had part of his colon removed, which resulted in a colostomy. He also had his prostate operated on, which was found to be non cancerous. After chemotherapy he tried to live his life as normally as possible, going on camping trips and continuing to work.



On February 27, 1974 he had a stroke and was hospitalized for a short time. He had another stroke in April and was hospitalized for two weeks. Sylvia worked at St. Mary's as a nurse and visited him 3 times a day. The doctor said there was nothing much they could do for him and asked if he should stop the IV. The family decided to stop it, take him home and care for him there. He was not able to swallow anything and only lasted about 10 days. All of his 14 children but Betty were present when he breathed his last on 24 Apr 1974. Once it was certain that he had passed on, Bea stood up and told the children, "Come on, let's get busy. We have a lot of work to do." She seemed to accept the inevitable loss of her husband of 45 years and delayed mourning for many months. Tom was 66

years old. He was buried in Calvary Cemetery in Decatur.

The first Christmas after Tom's death was especially hard for Bea. She distracted herself from her grief and loss by going on an extended Christmas shopping spree. She bought each one of her children and grandchildren just the right gift. This homemade therapy seemed to work for her.

Bea loved to travel and would go to Milwaukee, Florida, Oregon, etc. at the drop of a hat. She traveled to Hawaii with a cousin in 1977. She also attended the birth of many of her grandchildren, taking over household duties to relieve the new mother. Jim and Dorothy remember her month long visits to North Carolina with great appreciation for her help caring for the girls and house.

In 1984 Bea decided to sell her home at 475 Sheridan Dr. and move into an apartment for the elderly. After 50 years living in this house, which Tom had enlarged and remodeled 3 or 4 times, it was hard to move out but too much to maintain. None-the-less, she took all the memories and began a new phase of her life at Monroe House, an apartment complex for elderly independent living. She told her children she wanted to live her own life. "I will call you if I need anything," she told them.

She got involved in crafts and the social life of Oxford House. Her friends and neighbors began to depend on her help in sickness and disability. She often chided others for sitting around complaining and encouraged them to become active. Besides canvas knitting, she got very busy with quilting and stitching ornate pillow covers.

Bea developed adult onset diabetes in her later years but continued to remain very active. She gradually had to give up her independence, first her car, then her apartment. She moved in with Sylvia and Jack in 1997. However, she remained independently minded and tough. Although she fell often, she never broke any bones. Her mental capacities began to decline from 1998 on. In May 1999 after a few weeks in the hospital recovering from a head contusion, she entered the Lincoln Manor Nursing Home where she continued to remain physically well but mentally unable to recognize her family and friends.



Bea celebrated her 90th birthday with family and friends in a miraculous day of awareness, recognizing everyone who came to greet her. It was her swan song. She quickly started to fail with a flair-up of diabetes. After 3 days of hospitalization her kidneys failed and her systems began to shut down. She died in Decatur Memorial Hospital at 1:05 AM on Sunday, May 7, 2000⁵ with 7 children and 6 other relatives present. Her funeral was held at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church on May 10 and she was laid to rest in Calvary Cemetery next to her husband. She had been a widow for 26 years.



Seated: Sylvia, Tom, Cathy, Bea; standing: John, Don, Jim, Bob, Marilyn, Carolyn, Jean, Joe, Bill, Virginia

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(to be continued)

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⁵ Death Certificate