

Miss "Minnie" Schweite: The Eyes and Ears of Keokuk

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Introduction:

At the Holy Cross History Association Conference in the Summer of 2022, I delivered a paper¹ of two parts: first, a biographical sketch of Brother Columba O'Neill (1848 - 1923); second, an exposition of the correspondence between the cobbler and his friend, George Giglinger (1868 - 1957), pastor of St. Mary's Church in Keokuk, Iowa. With much work being done at present to expand research into the life of Columba by Rick Gribble, CSC, my task at present is to develop a character I introduce in passing in my analysis of the Giglinger correspondence.

On page 23 of my 2022 paper, I introduced the character of Minnie Schweite, who lived from the years 1846 to 1943. She died at the age of 97, getting her longevity, perhaps, from her father, the German-born Charles Friedrich Schweite (also spelled "Swade") who died in 1912 at 83 years of age, which was well above the life expectancy of 51 for that year. Minnie's mother - Ann or Mena Antonette Meissl, also a German immigrant - was shorter-lived, herself dying at 50 and Charles becoming a

¹ Edwin V. Donnelly, CSC, "Brother Columba: Humble Cobbler" (Notre Dame, IN: Holy Cross History Association, 2022), 1-31.
<https://holycrosshistory.com/hcha/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-4.pdf>

widower at about the same age in 1880. What, then, is the connection of this daughter of Charles and Antonette to Brother Columba, and why is she important to us today?

Minnie was an active parishioner at St. Mary's in Keokuk, Iowa – the parish at which Giglinger, about whom I spoke in my 2022 paper, was pastor. But for now, let us be reminded that Giglinger's friendship and correspondence with Columba testify to the sanctity of the humble cobbler. Furthermore, Minnie, about whom there is no evidence of marriage, seems to have been an old maid who wrote reports – in an 8th-grade level of prose – on Columba's baby brother Dennis (1852 - 1891), who married Minnie's sister Elizabeth (1859 - 1922).

Moreover, recently-discovered letters between Fr. Morrissey (then provincial of the United States Province) and Miss Schweite further support the thesis that Minnie never married. Namely, it appears Schweite requested in a June 20th, 1920, letter to Columba that 30 Masses be celebrated at Notre Dame for the repose of Mrs. Mary Schweite, who had been dead at the time for 8 years. Learning that these Masses, which she "promised to give," could not be offered, Minnie wrote to Morrissey himself on July 9th requesting that the thirty-dollar check be returned so that she can try to "get the Masses at [the] Propagation of Faith New York" instead. She signs the letter "Miss Minnie Schweite," which is not her usual way of signing off the letters

we have in our collection – even if she is addressed as such in at least several letters addressed to her, an example being a 1927 letter from Sacred Heart College in Watertown, Wisconsin, wherein a Mrs. J. Gockel thanks Schweite for her contribution and purchase of 4 copies of “The Life and Work of Mary Gockel” (who was president of the Missionary Association of Catholic Women until her death in 1925).

Columba also had a sister named Eliza (1841-1925), who married Thomas McNamara (b. 1840) and to whom Giglinger referred in his letters as “Mrs. Mc [‘Mack’].” Thus, it seems the O’Neill footprint was deeply impressed upon Iowan soil, upon which, as Minnie’s missives demonstrate, the impact and influence of Columba’s prayers reached and offered healing to wounded souls.

Although genealogical research into 19th-and-20th-century migrants’ lives remains a challenge, Ethan Trobridge – also a presenter at this conference – has accessed and compiled census data from online databases; and to him I am grateful for gathering much of the raw material of this brief introduction. Likewise, this work would be impossible without the care with which Bro. Phil Smith, CSC, approaches his labor of love as Archivist to the Midwest Province. And while there will remain questions as to “who” Minnie Schweite is (such as whether the documented name “Minnie” is short for the German “Wilhelmina”), I am therefore uninterested in providing a *vita* of the old maid

of Keokuk. Rather, I am interested in what she herself has to say, being "a devotee of Columba's and a key participant in [Columba's...] devotions and healing ministry" (Donnelly, op. cit., 23). Thus, I turn now to an exposition of some of the "greatest hits" from Minnie's correspondence with Columba - which will demonstrate not only how Minnie is to Columba Keokuk's eyes and ears, but also how Columba's saintliness and devotion to the hearts of Jesus and Mary brought healing to the people of this town and beyond.

The "Greatest Hits" of the Correspondence:

We learn much of Minnie and her relationship to Columba from an early letter of hers. In this letter of March 4th 1915, Minnie Schweite asks for Brother Columba's prayers for a young bride to whom she was serving as a nurse. The bride of six weeks eloped with a man and attempted suicide because her family did not support her, and the husband soon after marriage indicated he did not want to remain married. Minnie reported to have encouraged the bride to return to Church - a request which was met with refusal and the dismissal of Schweite and her services as a nurse. Reporting that she was paid nothing, Schweite states simply and not without a light heart: "...guess it will be a case of charity [...] looks like it." The seeming cheerfulness and levity with which Minnie meets and writes about an otherwise

morbid and disappointing encounter indicates the old maid and the humble cobbler must have been kindred spirits with respect to forgiveness. Namely, Minnie's ability to forgive others their faults for the sake of charity and Columba's own devotion to the Sacred Heart – the locus of mercy par excellence – make for compatible conversation partners along the path to sanctity.

In the same letter of 1915, Schweite mentions "Mrs. Mack," who informed her that Columba had "the grippe" (that is, influenza). In addition to his congenital foot abnormality, which he would reluctantly have repaired by the request of Fr. Corby when he was provincial, Minnie's correspondence indicates that Columba was often falling ill and in need of recovery. When Columba would contract the Spanish Flu in 1920, Miss Schweite wrote to Columba on June 20th 1920, counseling the brother to "drink egnogs every day; they are good to build one up; that is what built me up after I had pneumonia. Hope you will be better and stronger when the weather is cooler." Whether or not Brother Columba heeded to Minnie and imbibed medicinal eggnog is hard to tell; but it is nonetheless the case that some form of influenza would ail Columba for the last years of his life until his death on November 20th, 1923. These findings in the Schweite correspondence support my earlier findings in studying Columba's life and, in particular, his correspondence with the aforementioned Fr. Giglinger.

On October 13th, 1918, Minnie Schwiete wrote to Columba a particularly interesting letter. It is filled with updates on her family and friends, as well as her own concerns and hopes. One of the most notable aspects of the letter is Minnie's enthusiasm for the cures being developed: she mentions that several individuals have reportedly been cured by his remedies, including an unnamed woman (perhaps because of her intimacy with the O'Neill family, Columba would have known exactly whom Minnie was writing about) and a man named Tom Conroy.

The letter also reveals the devastating impact of the Spanish Influenza pandemic on Minnie's and the world's daily life. Due to the pandemic, which infected at least a third of the world's population, all schools, churches, and public buildings have been closed, making it impossible for her to attend church.

Minnie's letter also highlights the struggles of her family members. Her 35-year-old niece Lyda (1883 - 1967), who was the daughter of Elizabeth and Dennis, began work at Lowitz - a family tailor shop² - and is earning more than when she lived in Burlington. Minnie's brother-in-law, Dennis, was making a record-breaking \$3 a day, which is equivalent to approximately \$45 per day in today's money. However, Minnie's greatest concern

² Letter; Lowitz; Keokuk, Iowa, United States; 1901 January 11; <https://colenda.library.upenn.edu/catalog/81431-p3w950s9q>

is her sister Elizabeth (whom she calls "Lizzie"), who is struggling with mental health issues due to her inability to receive confession from Father Giglinger.

Despite these challenges, Minnie remains hopeful and dedicated to her spiritual pursuits. She expresses her desire to support a seminarian who will be ordained in 1920 and plans to financially support his mission work in China. She also hopes to see the completion of Brother Columba's shrine, although she acknowledges that she may not live to see it finished.

As an aside, in recent years, with the opening of the cause for canonization of Servant of God Columba O'Neill, there has been renewed interest in the Brother Columba Apostolate, which lived on until the 1950s before being dormant for many years. Nonetheless, there are now efforts underway to revive it – especially with a new periodical, In Kind Love. Given the significance of the shrine at Sacred Heart Parish Center, the statue and location of which being fruits of Columba's labor of love, I can foresee this location being used as a pilgrimage site or for other purposes related to the apostolate and the propagation of our community's charism of hopeful trust amid life's crosses that must be borne.

Several key moments in the Schweite correspondence will showcase the effects of the simple novena which Columba suggested to those seeking God's healing through him. Including

badges of the Sacred and Immaculate Hearts, Columba suggested the following be said five times each day for nine days: "Sacred HEart of Jesus cure me (or the person for whom one is praying)." I highlight the following letters because, in addition to providing evidence of cures, they serve an aim of my paper: to establish Minnie Schweite, an intimate of the O'Neill clan, as the "Eyes and Ears of Keokuk." As has been seen above, the very form and content of these letters will speak for themselves and reinforce this observation.

The first of these final three exhibits is a letter from July 28th, 1915. In this letter, Minnie reports having received from a "Fr. Connor" Lourdes water - Columba's use of which has been covered in my 2022 paper, as well as in a 2011 paper of John VandenBossche, CSC. She laments that, while Columba instructed Minnie not to send money for the water, she could not entirely oblige because she needed to pay for the postage. She reports to have just completed the aforementioned novena to the Sacred Heart, and she has recovered from her bouts of being feverish. She writes, permitting herself the following run-on:

I haven't had any fever since I wrote you last[,] so I think your prayers are helping me also[,] now the last few days I haven't had but very little pain on my lung you cured the weak spot it never bothers me anymore I lay down and rest every afternoon and rest out of doors drink three egg-nogs every day [.] Doctor says I am getting along alright but that next winter I must sleep with my windows open as that lung has a little rattle in it now in the

summer I get plenty of fresh air well I will leave it all to God [who] knows best.

It seems most likely that Minnie had been suffering from long standing effects of the above-mentioned "grippe," or flu. It was common, on account of an 1892 article in *The Medical Brief*,³ in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to drink eggnog as an at-home remedy for influenza. Moreover, it is plausible that Schweite had tuberculosis (a theory supportable by her reference to fresh air), or typhoid fever, dysentery, diphtheria, stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea, flatulence, and just about, it seems, every other common illness in the book. Whatever the case, Schweite is in good spirits, and she is grateful to Columba, his prayers, and the novena - which she plans to make again in the month of August. She concludes her letter in gratitude for a recent visit from Lyda and Columba's recent correspondence with "Mrs. Mack," who "felt awfully blue because [Columba] hadent [sic] written" in a long time. Asking whether Columba has heard from "Father Gig" who had been traveling (perhaps to Germany), Minnie signs off her letter "with love from us all."

Concluding a letter of July 12th, 1916, with gratitude for a book Brother Columba sent and the cure of Sr. M. Alcantara at Blessed Sacrament Convent in Chicago (word of which came from a

³ *The Medical Brief: A Monthly Journal of Scientific Medicine and Surgery*, Volume 20, 1892. p. 187

certain Mrs. Vogt), Minnie spends the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of the letter commenting on her ongoing pulmonary complications and new gall bladder issues. And while Fr. Giglinger, according to Minnie, says she looks "bad and weak," it seems her correspondence with Brother Columba, her strong social network in Keokuk, her family, and her life of prayer enable Keokuk's eyes and ears to keep watchful vigil over the town until her death in 1943.

In the final letter of this paper, dated January 9th, 1923 (ten months before Columba's death), Minnie reports that she received Columba's recent letter and Sacred Heart badges. Minnie gave these badges and the formula for the novena to the Sisters at a local hospital, the superior of which "said [Columba] cured her of being...afraid of lightening [sic] [and] would like to meet [Columba]." Whether physical ailment or fear of lightning, Columba's prayers are efficacious in ways big and small, as reported by Minnie - whose pain in her side continues to subside, and who reports that one of the sisters in Peoria was lame, sitting in her chair for one year. This sister, who "used one of [Columba's] badges" was cured and can now walk. This same sister sent the badge she wore to her blind sister in Germany, who "wore it, made her novena, and got well. The doctors," Minnie says, "cannot understand it as her eyes were so bad and got well all at once." These are but two instances of the lame

walking and the blind seeing as we observe the life of Christ being lived out in and through Brother Columba.

The latest adherent of the eggnog diet is Columba's baby brother Dennis, who had lost much weight from dysentery; and "Mrs. Mack" was feeling lonesome at Columba's absence. But the youth of the O'Neill clan had great promise: for, as Minnie reports, Columba's 18-year-old nephew George, who is recovering from tonsillitis, shows great talent in his job as a mechanic and desires to work on the railroad; and Columba's nephew Charlie is shaping up to be a professional pitcher for Detroit. These are likely the children of Mrs. Mack (Eliza) and her husband Thomas, and further research is needed into this line of the O'Neill family tree and Charlie's probable career as a major league pitcher.

Conclusion:

This presentation, though partial and incomplete, nonetheless offers a fuller picture of the Iowan strand of the O'Neill family tree through the eyes and ears of Keokuk: Miss Minnie Schweite. In the introduction, I have contextualized my project by familiarizing the audience with major events and figures within the O'Neill family history. I also stated the major aim of this project, which has been to demonstrate how Minnie's devotion to Columba's life and ministry, as well as her

own experiences and perceptions of his sanctity, reveal the profound impact of Columba's prayers on the lives of those in Keokuk, Iowa, and beyond. A fruit of my analysis of the "Greatest Hits" from the Schweite correspondence has been an illustration of the significance of Minnie as a key participant in Columba's devotions and healing ministry – particularly through the novena, Sacred Heart badges, and Lourdes water. Finally, it is worth noting that there is no shortage of evidence as to the sanctity of Brother Columba. My audience can with ease make reference to the thousands of letters, congregational documents (both on the provincial and general levels), and the sources cited heretofore for the signs and wonders God continues to work today through holy men and women like Columba. As such, I conclude with an invitation: to continue to pray for the inspiration, mercy, healing, peace, and love of the Sacred Heart through our humble cobbler, our friend, our brother: Columba O'Neill, CSC.