

Lizzie carved out her niche in history

Like it or not, Fall River forever associated with Borden murders

By KATHLEEN DURAND
Herald News Staff Reporter

FALL RIVER — Love it or hate it, Lizzie Borden is the woman who put this city on the world map.

A jury found her not guilty of butchering her father, Andrew Borden, and stepmother, Abigail Borden, in their modest home on Second Street on a steamy Aug. 4, 1892. No one else was ever charged with the double murder, so it remains an unsolved mystery that continues to fascinate people worldwide.

Lizzie, who died June 1, 1927, was a 32-year-old, well brought-up, church-going spinster in 1892. The jury apparently could not believe that such a woman could commit such unspeakable crimes.

Many, many books have been written about the case and tons of theories have been put forth, suggesting that the murders were committed by Lizzie's older sister, Emma; the maid, Bridget Sullivan; a tramp; the visiting uncle, John Vinnicum Morse; a neighbor; or someone else.

Some of the authors, of course, make the case that Lizzie was guilty and got away with murder.

People flocked to Fall River from near and far in 1992, when

a symposium was held on the 100th anniversary of the infamous deeds. They came from all across the United States and as far away as England, Scotland and Australia. They attended lectures at Bristol Community College and visited the Borden graves at Oak Grove Cemetery, the Fall River Historical Society, the Borden house on Second Street — now a bed and breakfast — and Maplecroft, the house on French Street in which Lizzie lived after she was acquitted.

Some of the symposium-goers, so fascinated by the case, spent a week's vacation here. Many of them had high tea with a Lizzie Borden impersonator at a Victorian Cafe set up in the Central Cultural Complex on Rock Street, now the home of the Abbey Grille.

The late Florence Brigham, former curator of the Historical Society, was the daughter-in-law of Mary Brigham, who knew Lizzie and was a character witness for her at her trial in New Bedford Superior Court.

Florence Brigham once told a reporter, "When I was growing up, if we asked about it, our parents always gave the same answer: She was tried and acquitted and you don't talk about it."

Lizzie was not welcomed back by Fall River society after



Herald News File Photo

This photo, taken in 1980, shows a display at the Fall River Historical Society featuring artifacts from the Borden home and evidence used in the 1893 trial of Lizzie Borden — including forensic photos of Abigail and Andrew Borden's skulls.

her trial. Brigham said there was talk that Lizzie committed the crimes because she feared her tightwad father would leave

his fortune, estimated at \$250,000, to her stepmother's family.

In her book, "Women Who Kill," Dr. Ann Jones asserted

When Lizzie died of pneumonia at age 67 at Maplecroft, her obituary in *The Herald News* summarized her life after the murders this way:

10 days after Lizzie's death. Emma moved out of Maplecroft and the state because she supposedly disapproved of Lizzie's lifestyle

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In her book, "Women Who Kill," Dr. Ann Jones asserted that Agnes DeMille "came closest to the bone of Lizzie Borden's existence when she created her ballet, 'Fall River Legend.'"

Jones wrote: "Lizzie's life consisted mainly in things that didn't happen." It was, she wrote, "a constricted life, passed in too narrow a house."

Lizzie Borden has been featured on A&E's "Biography," the History Channel's "History's Mysteries," and other television programs. The case was also the subject of a movie, "The Legend of Lizzie Borden," made in 1975 starring Elizabeth Montgomery. The History Channel documentary, which aired in 1999, looked at forensic, historical, legal and psychological aspects of the case.

It seems that there are endless developments in the Lizzie Borden saga to keep people speculating about what really happened. In 1997, for example, there was a mock retrial at Stanford University in California, with U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor presiding. An audience of more than 700 people

served as the jury and found Lizzie not guilty in about 60 seconds. In the real trial, the jury deliberated for about 90 minutes.

The defense in the mock trial argued that Lizzie was "a lady to the core." It argued that Lizzie had no motive, no blood was seen on her and no certain death weapon was found. The prosecution cited evidence implicating Lizzie, including the fact that she burned a dress after the killings.

When Lizzie died of pneumonia at age 67 at Maplecroft, her obituary in *The Herald News* summarized her life after the murders this way:

"She went on an occasional visit and received a few intimate friends, but to the general public she was almost unknown."

The obituary began blandly: "Miss Lisbeth A. Borden died last night at her home, 306 French St., succumbing to an attack of pneumonia of about a week's duration, although she had been in failing health for some time. Miss Borden, who was in her 68th year, was a native and lifelong resident of this city. Her funeral will be private."

With quite a dash of discretion, the obituary observed that

'I know that I am innocent, and I have made up my mind that, no matter what, I will try to bear it bravely.'

— Lizzie Borden, to a *New York Recorder* reporter in 1892



Lizzie's death "would recall to those of another generation one of the most shocking and mysterious tragedies in the history of Massachusetts."

Most people are aware that Lizzie was fond of animals. She left money to animal shelters in her will. And Fall River has to acknowledge that Lizzie has made it famous and brought it many visitors.

Emma Borden died at her home in Newmarket, N.H., just

10 days after Lizzie's death. Emma moved out of Maplecroft and the state because she supposedly disapproved of Lizzie's lifestyle.

Interviewed by a writer whose article appeared in the *New York Recorder* several weeks after the murders, Lizzie said: "I know I am innocent, and I have made up my mind that, no matter what, I will try to bear it bravely."

The writer, Kate McGuirk, was associated with Lizzie in the work of the Fruit and Flower Mission at Central Congregational Church. McGuirk visited Lizzie in the Taunton jail and described her as having "eyes red from long nights of weeping." Lizzie was wearing "a pretty plum-colored gown, with a dainty white apron." According to McGuirk, she was "dressed as any lady would be who expected to receive callers."

Lizzie told her visitor that the hardest part about being in jail was "the night, when there is no light. They do not even allow me to have even a candle to read by, and to sit in the dark all evening is very hard; but I do not want any favors that are against the rules." She said she spent her days reading and sewing and writing letters.

According to McGuirk, Lizzie said, "There is one thing that hurts me very much. They say I don't show any grief. Certainly I don't in public. I never did reveal my feelings and I cannot change my nature now. They say I don't cry. They should see me when I am alone or sometimes with my friends."

Kathleen Durand may be reached at kdurand@herald-news.com.