

Lizzie Borden Took An Axe...Or Did She? A Look Back at the Crime and Trial of the 19th Century

On August 4, 1892, in Fall River, Massachusetts, prominent citizens, Andrew and Abby Borden, were brutally murdered, apparently with a hatchet. In the "trial of the century" which followed, daughter and accused, Lizzie Borden, was acquitted of those murders. Yet, a legend has developed which presumes that she was the killer. The debate over her guilt or innocence continues today.

At the time of the murders, Lizzie's father, Andrew Borden, had amassed a personal fortune that today would be the equivalent of well over 260 million dollars. Some time before his murder, Andrew gave his interest in some real estate he owned to Abby's half-sister. Lizzie and her sister Emma were shocked and furious when they learned of this through a friend. Later they learned that Andrew was about to sign over a valuable piece of farmland to Abby, despite the fact that the property was very dear to Andrew's daughters since their childhood.

There were many strange events uncovered during the investigation, beginning with the morning of August 3rd:

- Abby visited family physician Dr. Bowen across the street, feeling ill and fearing the family was being poisoned.
- Later, Lizzie attempted to buy 10 cents worth of deadly prussic acid in order to destroy moth eggs in a sealskin cape. She was denied the purchase.
- At about 3pm, Lizzie's uncle, John Morse, had arrived in Fall River from South Dartmouth, Mass. Andrew, apparently wanting John's advice on the will he was considering, invited John to spend the night in the guest room.
- That night, Lizzie overheard John and Andrew outline the conditions of his planned will, depriving the daughters of the bulk of his fortune. But, as of yet, a will had not been written.

The events of August 4 went something like this:

- Uncle John left the house about 8:45 AM.
- Andrew left about 9:00. About the same time, Abby instructed Bridget, the maid, to wash all the windows, inside and out. Abby went upstairs to straighten up the guest room.
- At about 9:30, Abby was struck from behind with a sharp, heavy instrument, such as a hatchet, suffering 20 blows that nearly severed her head.
- About 10:40, Andrew Borden, feeling ill, returned home, let in by Bridget. Oddly enough, all three locks were fastened on the front door.
- Lizzie explained that Abby had received a note asking her to go look after a sick friend, and then helped Andrew onto the sitting room sofa to rest.
- About 10:55, Bridget retired to her attic room to rest.

- About the same time, Lizzie apparently went out to the barn, searching for sinkers for an upcoming fishing trip.
- About 11:10, Lizzie returned, finding Andrew's mutilated body.
- Lizzie summoned Bridget, neighbors rushed over, including family physician Dr. Bowen from across the street.
- Around 11:30, Abby's body was discovered upstairs. The police arrived shortly after.

They set upon questioning Bridget and Lizzie, the only two in the house at the time besides the victims. Bridget panicked, but Lizzie clears her of suspicion by stating that after nearly 90 minutes of washing windows, Bridget had retired to her room. However, suspicion began to fall upon Lizzie.

But, the job of blaming Lizzie for the murders wasn't easy. There was no blood on Lizzie's person or her clothing at any time. And how could Lizzie have so cleverly hidden the murder weapon in such little time? But, with no one seeing a blood-soaked culprit fleeing the scene, the police reasoned this had to be an inside job.

At 3pm, the Borden corpses were placed on the dining room table. Dr. Dolan, medical examiner, began the autopsies. By 7pm, about the time sister Emma returned from visiting friends in Fairhaven, Mass., Sergeant Philip Harrington began to interrogate Lizzie rigorously. Unlike Bridget, Lizzie held her composure. After explaining her whereabouts that morning, she described overhearing an angry encounter some weeks prior between Andrew and a stranger. Andrew had refused to rent property to this gentleman. Lizzie couldn't identify the man. Despite this story, Harrington strongly suspected Lizzie.

By the next night, Fall River Marshal, Rufus Hilliard, reviewed the accumulated facts: no cries of distress were heard coming from the house that morning; no one was seen entering or exiting after Andrew left; Lizzie claimed to be doing chores at the time Abby was murdered, and was in the barn loft at the time her father was killed; police found no footprints in the dust on the barn loft floor; no one responded to a reward offered for the identity of the writer of Abby's note; and most importantly, Abby's body lay for over an hour upstairs. Could there have been a corpse and an assassin in the house for over an hour without Lizzie or Bridget knowing? Only Lizzie seemed to have an opportunity. Uncle John and Emma were away; however, no one thoroughly checked their alibis.

On Sunday the 7th, Lizzie's friend, Alice Russell, observed Lizzie burning a dress in the stove. Lizzie claimed it was an old dress with paint stains. Alice said, "The worst thing you could have done was to burn that dress!"

From August 9th - 11th, 1892, a coroner's inquest was held, presided over by Judge Blaisdell. Lizzie was charged with only the murder of her father.

On August 12th she was arraigned. She pleaded not guilty and was then held in the Taunton jail.

From November 7 through December 2, the Grand Jury heard the case against Lizzie as presented by Prosecutor Knowlton. Surprisingly, he invited Andrew Jennings (the Borden family attorney) to present a case for the defense. Jennings' statements might have swayed the Grand Jury to dismiss the charge against Lizzie, but on December 1, Alice Russell testified about Lizzie's burned dress.

The next day, Lizzie was charged with 3 counts of murder - her father's, her step mother's, and the murder of both.

The "Trial of the Century" began June 5, 1893 in New Bedford, presided over by three Superior Court Justices. The defense argued that Judge Blaisdell should recuse himself since he presided over the inquest. He remained on the panel. Lizzie's only testimony was given at the initial inquest. It was wrought with contradictions regarding her whereabouts. If included as evidence in the trial, it, along with Miss Russell's testimony about the dress burning, would have been completely incriminating. Fortunately for Lizzie, the defense successfully argued against having Lizzie's inquest testimony admitted during the trial, because Lizzie was sedated, and was never informed she was a suspect during her questioning.

The defense argued her innocence based on two main points; there was no blood found on any of Lizzie's dresses, and the murder weapon was never found. It proved impossible to determine if the burned dress was the same dress Lizzie wore the morning of the murders. A hatchet without a handle was proffered as evidence (the blade seemed to fit the cuts in both skulls). It was found in a dusty box along with two other hatchets. The head of the hatchet was oddly covered with ashes on both sides, and the handle break appeared fresh. It was eventually rejected as the murder weapon because no traces of blood could be found on the hatchet head. It was impossible for the prosecution to convince the jurors of Lizzie's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. They could not offer a viable theory as to how she could have committed the murders and not be covered in blood, and they could not explain what happened to the murder weapon.

Some time before Lizzie's acquittal, the Borden fortune was signed over to Emma. After Lizzie was freed, Emma gave Lizzie half of the inheritance.

After the trial, the case was closed, and remains unsolved to this day. The public began to turn on Lizzie. Theories abounded as to how she might have committed the murders. Some speculated that she didn't do it herself, but knew who did. Lizzie benefited financially from her parents' deaths and lived a lavish lifestyle. In her neighbors' eyes, she was guilty and had gotten away with murder. Emma, on the other hand, retired into a sequestered existence. Was Emma guarding a secret? Only Lizzie and Emma could say for sure.

In Boz and the Bard's "Miss Lizzie A. Borden Invites You to Tea," Lizzie does have much to say. Come hear the makings of a true horror story revealed. You might be thoroughly surprised by what you hear. Karen Asconi, of Jersey City, recreates the role of Lizzie A. Borden in this critically acclaimed one woman tour-de-force. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 PM (Q&A following Sat. performances), and Sundays at 2:00 PM, October 19-28, 2007, at the Fair Lawn Community Center, 10-10 20th St. (at the corner of Kipp St.), Fair Lawn, NJ. Tickets are \$20.00 in advance, \$25 at the door. For tickets call 866-811-4111 or visit www.bozandthebard.com for more information.

Boz and the Bard Play Re-examines Lizzie Borden Murders

“August 4th, 1892. Everything that’s been written about me and said about me for the past 21 years is legend and myth and not the truth.” So quips Miss Lizzie in Boz and the Bard Productions’ revival of their 2001 and 2004 hit, “Miss Lizzie A. Borden Invites You To Tea,” by Marjorie Conn.

So, is Lizzie proclaiming her innocence? Maybe so, but later on in the play, she graphically delivers a blow-by-blow (pardon the pun) account of how she committed the hatchet murders of her parents, and successfully got away with it. Is Lizzie taking credit for another’s deeds? If so, who’s? And why?

This is part of the investigation director Frank Avellino, of Hackensack, and actress Karen Asconi, of Jersey City, have toyed with each time they’ve produced the play. “It’s the same script, but it’s always presented us with different clues, different hints, and sometimes, all new explanations,” says Avellino. “So much behind bringing this play to life involves playing psychoanalyst.”

Performances of “Miss Lizzie” run Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 PM and Sundays at 2:00 PM, October 19-28, 2007, at the Fair Lawn Community Center, 10-10 20th St. (at the corner of Kipp St.), Fair Lawn, NJ. There will be a special Q&A after each Saturday performance. Tickets are \$20.00 in advance, \$25 at the door. For tickets, call 866-811-4111 or visit www.bozandthebard.com for more information.

Boz and the Bard Productions., Inc., a theater production company formed in 2000 that has worked in NYC and locally, announces their new affiliation, through a borough sponsorship, with the town of Fair Lawn. “We are thrilled to be working in this beautiful, professional new space,” says Frank Avellino and Steve Hess, Boz’s cofounders.

Robin Schamach, Corporate and Cultural Planner of the theater at the Fair Lawn Community Center, expressed an interest in this play when Avellino and Hess first introduced themselves. Schamach felt a play about Lizzie Borden would fit perfectly into the October pre-Halloween slot.

The Makings of a True Horror Story Revealed

That old poem about Lizzie Borden taking an ax has been recited virtually every day since the butchering of Andrew and Abby Borden on that Aug. 4, 1892, morning in Fall River, Mass. Lizzie was arrested, tried, and acquitted of murder.

In the play, Lizzie is an aging, lonely spinster in 1913. Twenty one years after the murders, the notoriety of her trial has waned and her celebrity status has faded. In this one-woman tour-de-force starring Karen Asconi, we witness Lizzie’s

powerful lust for freedom and learn how such a yearning can drive one to acts of unimaginable desperation. Asconi's "...fascinating, high-strung performance ... under Frank Avellino's taut direction ... is a worthwhile experience," wrote Peter Filichia, of "The Star Ledger," after seeing the 2004 production.

An Irresistible Mystery

Some compare the interest in Lizzie to the fascination with the O.J. Simpson murder trial. It's the stuff of contemporary thrillers: an elderly, respectable couple is surprised inside their home, in broad daylight, murdered possibly by their youngest daughter, a Sunday school teacher, who was home at the time. Lizzie was acquitted because of lack of evidence. The search for a murderer abruptly ceased; the case remains unsolved to this day.

At a recent rehearsal, Avellino began by asking Asconi, "So, did Lizzie do it?" After some thought, Asconi replied, "Yes, I believe she did." An in-depth chat ensued, examining Lizzie's early life; what could have been her motives, her psychological condition; why kill in this particularly violent fashion? When asked again if Lizzie committed the crimes, Asconi later conceded that she didn't believe so.

These revelations and new discoveries buried inside Lizzie's words help make the show unique with each remounting. As Avellino, co-producer Hess, and Asconi play detective with the case's facts and theories, new ideas become the "reality" for this latest retelling because of the plausible explanation it offers for the murders. Avellino said he enjoys overhearing the various debates as viewers exit the theater after a show.

Hess, of Hackensack, who is also a sign language interpreter, said some people come back years later to see the play again. He said there are so many clues to discover in the double meanings of Lizzie's words. He likens it to viewers watching repeats of the film, "Sixth Sense." "It's become a game, a challenge to watch the film specifically to find the hints to the surprise ending." Hess and the company's emphasis is on the rigorous interpreting of the script's words and their meanings, then the emotional and psychological motivations behind the lead character's actions.

The play also explores how single women of the 19th Century were regarded, and what was expected of them, as well as a view of how the legal investigation of a crime, whose primary suspect was a female socialite, was manipulated in part because of this Victorian view.

Boz and the Bard invites you to come hear the evidence and draw your own conclusions. You may be surprised by what you find in the end.