
THE BORDENS

"SHE IS VERY STRONG WILLED"

Exasperating as it is to admit, pitifully little is known about Lizzie Andrew Borden's life before the morning of August 4, 1892. Even the color of her eyes is an uncertainty. As notorious as Lizzie Borden's name is today, that may be hard to imagine, but consider this: more than 125 Borden families lived in Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1892, and until her parents' murder, Lizzie did not attract much undue notice.

SPINDLE CITY

By 1892, no city in the United States produced more cotton textiles than Fall River, Massachusetts. Some 597,850,000 yards of cloth rolled from its mills every year, earning it the nickname Spindle City.

A bustling city of 83,000 people, Fall River owed both its name and its prosperity to the falls of the Quequechan River, which tumbles through its heart. Stretching from North and South Watuppa Ponds in the east to Mount Hope Bay in the west, the Quequechan (pronounced "quick-uh-shan" locally) provided an abundance of free energy to the mills, factories, and foundries that sprang up along its banks in the boom years following the Civil War.

A tiny handful controlled the vast majority of the city's wealth. Among the seven families who ruled over Fall River was the Borden clan, whose claim to the Quequechan shores dated to the seventeenth century.

Fall River's royalty—like Lizzie's distant cousin M.C.D. Borden, the "Calico King"—also owed its affluence to

the tens of thousands of laborers who kept the great steam engines and looms running. From their estates on the Hill, the rich literally looked down upon the Irish, French Canadian, and Portuguese workers who crammed the tenements along the murky waterfront. In a town heavily prejudiced against Catholics as well as foreigners, these immigrants, though essential to Fall River's economy, found themselves doubly snubbed by its society.

Afterward there would be all kinds of rumors and speculations as the newspapers filled with so-called revelations about the Borden case. Everyone in Fall River—everyone in the nation—would soon have an opinion about what kind of person Lizzie Borden was. Here, however, is the scant handful of undisputed facts, bland though they may be:

Although police and newspaper reports often referred to her as a girl, Lizzie Andrew Borden was in fact a grown woman in August of 1892. She had been born thirty-two years earlier, on July 19, 1860, to Andrew Jackson Borden and Sarah Morse Borden, and christened Lizzie, not Elizabeth. When she was not quite three her mother died of "uterine congestion, 4 mos."—possibly a miscarriage—coupled with "disease of spine." Unlike her sister, Emma, who was almost ten years older, Lizzie grew up without the slightest memory of Sarah Borden. The only mother Lizzie knew was the thirty-seven-year-old spinster her father took for his second wife in 1865, Abby Durfee Gray.

The relationship between the new Mrs. Borden and Lizzie, however, was not especially maternal, even when Lizzie was small. As Lizzie herself explained, "I had never been to her as a mother in many things." When she wanted mothering, Lizzie

said, she always went first to her sister instead. It was not simply a matter of habit. As their mother lay dying, Emma Borden had solemnly promised to “watch over baby Lizzie.” The twelve-year-old could scarcely have imagined the implications of this pledge, but by all accounts it was a duty Emma never shirked.

“Baby Lizzie” grew up to become a cultured, reasonably well-educated woman, active in her church and community’s charitable works. She had a weakness for orange sherbet, a noticeable fondness for pansies, and a fine hand at needlework. In 1890, she spent nineteen weeks touring Europe with five other young ladies. She taught a Sunday school for Chinese immigrants and served as secretary of the local Fruit and Flower Mission and treasurer of the local Young Women’s Christian Temperance Union. If not considered beautiful, she was certainly not repulsive, with glossy nut-brown hair and eyes that were described as ice blue, light brown, or gray, depending on the source. Whatever color they were, Lizzie’s gaze was undeniably striking, almost unnerving, even in black-and-white photos.

But what about Lizzie’s personality? Never mind her favorite posy or how she spent her Sunday mornings, what was she really like?

Those who ought to have known her best left few clues. Mr. and Mrs. Borden had rarely spoken of family matters, and Emma Borden was so intensely private that she granted only one interview—more than twenty years after the crime.

So here is where things become slippery, where solid facts give way to the observations and impressions of those outside the Borden household: the friends, acquaintances, shopkeepers, and dressmakers who spoke out only after Lizzie Borden stood accused of committing a double axe murder in broad daylight. Imagine for a moment how that glaring circumstance might influence the details they chose to share.

Even keeping that in mind, two contradictory traits stand out: Lizzie's reserve, and her temper. Both of these aspects of Lizzie's personality pop up in multiple newspaper interviews and statements to police investigators.

Like her father, who simply "shut his teeth and walked away" when his opinions were challenged, Lizzie Borden tended from childhood to be aloof, particularly with new acquaintances. Neither was she one to make a spectacle of herself.

"A great deal is said about her coolness now," a friend told the *Boston Globe*. "That's exactly like her. Why, at the church sociable last winter, when the waiter that has been spoken about fell on her wrists—it was a heavy dumbwaiter filled full of dishes, so heavy that it took a strong man to lift it off her arms where it had fallen and pinned them under it—instead of screaming or fainting or doing anything that any other woman but Lizzie Borden would have done, she merely said in a low voice, 'Will someone come here?'"

Behind that cool exterior lurked a volatile temper. Lizzie's grammar school principal said it most gently, remembering her as "subject to varying moods." A former city marshal of Fall River, on the other hand, confided to a state police detective, "This girl Lizzie Borden is known by a number of people here to be a woman of a bad disposition if they tell what they know." Another Fall River citizen remarked to the same detective, "Lizzie is known to be ugly."

Ugly. Peculiar. Odd.

These words crop up again and again in the state detective's notes on the Bordens. Lizzie's uncle Hiram Harrington told police, "She is very strong willed, and will fight for what she considers her rights." In another interview he went even further, remarking on his niece's "repellent disposition." More than one informant suggested that Lizzie came by her forceful tempera-

ment naturally. "Mrs. Morse the mother of Lizzie Borden was a very peculiar woman," went one report. "She had a Very bad temper. She was very strong in her likes and dislikes."

Lizzie's friends, however, viewed the same traits in a different light. As they saw it, Lizzie's distinctive combination of frankness and fearless honesty created what one supporter called "a monument of straightforwardness. I never shall believe, even were she convicted of the deed, that she committed it," her friend continued, "unless she were to confess herself, and then the marvel would be greater to me that she had concealed her act than that she did it. That is her character. If she had a reason sufficient for herself for murdering those people, it would be like her to say she did it and give her reason."

And what about Mr. and Mrs. Borden? What might make anyone—much less their own daughter—want them dead?

You would not know it to look at him, but at the time of his death Lizzie's father, Andrew Jackson Borden, was worth close to \$500,000—a fortune that today would equate to nearly \$10 million. The medical examiner found \$81.65 on his body, a respectable amount of pocket change even now, but equivalent to \$2,000 in 1892. The son of a fish peddler, he was a classic self-made man, rising from cabinetmaking and undertaking to become president of the Union Savings Bank and a director of the B.M.C. Durfee Safe Deposit and Trust Company. He also served on the board of directors of two prominent local mills. Over the course of his nearly seventy years Mr. Borden had accumulated two farms in nearby Swansea, an entire corner of Main Street, and various other rental properties scattered throughout the area.

And yet he was not the richest man in town—not by a long shot. His house was not on the fashionable Hill at the north end

of Fall River, nor did it have running water upstairs. Like most others of his day, he saw no need for gas lighting when kerosene lamps were cheaper and safer. The Borden home did, however, boast the luxury of central heating, as well as a flush toilet in the cellar, though its presence never completely broke Mr. Borden of the habit of emptying his morning slop pail into the yard. It was just that kind of thrift and indifference to convenience that helped earn him a reputation as a hard and tightfisted old fellow.

SLOP PAILS AND CHAMBER POTS

Don't think for a moment that Andrew Borden was flinging raw sewage onto his lawn. Slop pails—unlike chamber pots—did not contain nightly deposits of urine (or worse). Because the Borden house had no running water upstairs, each bedroom was equipped with a pitcher of clean water, a basin, and a slop pail. After washing and brushing their teeth in the basin, the Bordens would empty the soapy water into the slop pail and carry it down to the water closet—or in Mr. Borden's case, the yard. What he dumped on his grass each morning was no dirtier than bathwater.

There's no denying that he counted every cent, but there was more to Andrew Borden than penny-pinching. He was also every inch a gentleman, an old-fashioned Yankee to the core. Temperate. Industrious. Courteous. Thin-lipped, with pale blond whiskers, his manner was such that even his "shocking bad hats" and threadbare ties could not interfere with his dignity. Above all, he

was unfailingly fair and upright in his business dealings, and expected no less than the same rigid honesty from others.

Then comes Mrs. Borden. Not a soul in Fall River had an unkind word to say about her. In fact, few had anything at all to say about Abby Borden. She was not much to look at, thickset and graying, and so thoroughly ordinary that her murder was perhaps more disturbing than her husband's. She had no personal property of any particular value. Abby Borden, to put it crudely, was not worth killing. Yet those who cared for her cared deeply. According to the *Fall River Daily Herald*, Mrs. Southard Miller "said that she had lost in Mrs. Borden, the best and most intimate neighbor she had ever met."

With those she loved Mrs. Borden was not stingy with her affections. "Sit right down," she had said to John Morse when he came unannounced to their door not long after the dinner hour Wednesday afternoon, "we are just through and everything is hot on the stove. It won't cost us a mite of trouble."

More than anyone in the world—more, perhaps, than her own husband and his children—she loved her half sister, Sarah Bertha Whitehead. "Bertie," as she was called in the family, was easily young enough to be Mrs. Borden's daughter—thirty-six years younger, in fact—and Mrs. Borden doted on her, walking the five blocks to the Whitehead house almost daily, sometimes with gifts of mince pies sprinkled with rose water, or cast-off clothing from Lizzie and Emma's closet for Bertie's struggling family. Bertie had even named her own little girl Abbie in Mrs. Borden's honor.

Like anyone else, the Bordens had their faults, but nothing that could begin to make such an act of butchery comprehensible.

“I DON'T KNOW JUST HOW TO PUT IT”

When questioned by police, most of Lizzie's neighbors were careful to declare they had never seen anything out of the ordinary among the Bordens. Even so, many of them leaked an acknowledgment of the unsavory rumors circulating through town.

Neither Lizzie nor Emma had ever cared much for their stepmother. Thanks to Lizzie's brusque tongue, her feelings had been common knowledge since her school days. Emma, though far more discreet than her sister in public, found it more difficult than Lizzie to be cordial toward Abby Borden in private. Her distaste for Mrs. Borden is easy enough to imagine. At twelve Emma promises her dying mother she will watch over her baby sister, and for two years she devotes herself to that promise. Then comes Abby—not only taking her mother's place alongside Mr. Borden, but jeopardizing Emma's motherly relationship with five-year-old Lizzie. There's no telling what kind of emotional tug-of-war Emma and Abby Borden might have waged for the prize of Lizzie's affection.

On the other hand, it is equally possible that Emma resented what struck her as indifference from her stepmother. Lizzie's childhood friend, Mary Ella Brigham, described Abby Borden as “not at all affectionate or calculated to draw the children to her. She was simply mild and good, and so long as things went smoothly she would have very little to say.” If young Emma had dared to hope that the new Mrs. Borden would ease her responsibilities, perhaps even mother *her* a little, she may have been sorely disappointed.

However much or little Abby Borden tried to win over her stepdaughters, she never succeeded. Emma and Lizzie, it was said, did not always eat from the same table with Mr. and Mrs. Borden. Instead, the Borden daughters kept to themselves, some-

times entertaining their friends privately in the spare bedroom upstairs rather than the downstairs parlor. Aside from the care of their own rooms, they left the majority of the household responsibilities to Bridget and Mrs. Borden. Neither of the girls called Abby Borden Mother. Emma called their stepmother by her Christian name, while Lizzie usually addressed her as Mrs. Borden, or Mrs. B.

This had not always been the case—at least, not where Lizzie was concerned. Although she was known to speak harshly of her stepmother behind her back, Lizzie herself had to admit that Mrs. Borden “never spoke or acted unkindly to either of us,” and so for most of her life Lizzie had been willing to grant Mrs. Borden the courtesy of calling her Mother. In 1887, the relationship began to falter.

That spring, Abby Borden’s own stepmother, the widow Gray, decided to move out of the Fourth Street duplex she shared with her daughter Bertie. Bertie’s family could not afford to pay Mrs. Gray \$1,500 for her half of the house, and the entire place was put up for sale. Abby Borden could not abide the thought of her beloved half sister being forced from her home, so in an uncharacteristic flourish of generosity, Andrew Borden bought Widow Gray’s share of the house and deeded it to Mrs. Borden.

It was an extraordinary kindness. With a scratch of his pen Mr. Borden had granted Bertie Whitehead the security of a home far above her indolent husband’s meager means and Mrs. Borden the assurance that her dearest relative would always remain within easy reach. The cost, however, would ultimately be more than Andrew Borden had bargained for.

Perhaps if they had heard of this arrangement from their father, or even their stepmother, Emma and Lizzie might have taken the news more gracefully. Instead, Lizzie said, they first learned of the purchase from “outsiders.”

Emma and Lizzie were incensed—jealous and wounded with an intensity that is difficult to understand. We can only guess why. Perhaps they had never seen their father do something so lavish, and resented watching others benefit from such a gesture. “[W]hat he did for her people he ought to do for his own children,” Lizzie had informed her stepmother. Most of all they seemed disturbed by the notion that Mrs. Borden had “persuaded” their father to buy the house. Perhaps they began to fear their stepmother’s power over him.

Capitulating to fairness, Mr. Borden gave his daughters the deed to their grandfather’s former home on Ferry Street. Emma and Lizzie would collect rent on the property for the next five years, until Mr. Borden purchased the home from them for \$5,000 just weeks before his death. But the rift did not heal. After the disagreement, Lizzie only seldom addressed Mrs. Borden as Mother. Emma’s relationship with Mrs. Borden, which by Emma’s own admission had always been weaker than her sister’s, continued to curdle.

Mrs. Borden’s family sensed the resentment. When Lizzie or Emma saw Bertie on the street, they refused to acknowledge her. Widow Gray also felt the cold shoulders of the Borden girls on the rare occasions she tried to visit Abby at the Borden house. When Mrs. Borden herself went calling, she never complained about the situation at home. It was simply not in her nature. “A very close mouthed woman,” as the widow Gray described her, Abby Borden “would bear a great deal, and say nothing.” Something must have betrayed the strain, though, for Widow Gray had once told Mrs. Borden she “would not change places with her for all her money.”

Maybe that was when the other rumors began seeping through Fall River. Despite the hundreds of dollars he’d spent to send Emma to a young ladies’ seminary and Lizzie on a grand tour of

Europe, despite the pretty studio portraits, the big closet over the stairs filled with fine dresses, the sealskin capes hanging in the attic, and the weekly allowances equivalent to nearly one hundred dollars today, local gossip had it that Andrew Borden was a miser; his stingy habits left his daughters seething with frustration.

There was likely a kernel of truth in it. "He was close in money matters," Lizzie remembered, but would give her nearly anything she asked for, "though sometimes I had to ask two or three times," she added. If there was anything she didn't want to request directly, Lizzie explained, "I would go to Mother, and she would always see that he humored me."

Ample though his daughters' small comforts and luxuries were, there is no way around the fact that Andrew Borden's fortune was capable of providing much, much more. "Mr. Borden," Alice Russell struggled to tactfully explain, "was a plain living man with rigid ideas, and very set. They were young girls. He had earned his money, and he did not care for the things that young women in their position naturally would; and he looked upon those things—I don't know just how to put it."

When a friend suggested it would please his daughters to move into more fashionable quarters, Mr. Borden had replied, "What is wrong with the house? It is good enough for me—good enough for any one to live in." And indeed it was—a pleasant, sturdily built place with airy rooms, an abundance of tall windows, and five bedrooms, all within easy walking distance of his business contacts in town. Much as they would have preferred an ornate house on the Hill, Lizzie and Emma both had to agree that living on Second Street was more convenient for their father, so they did not urge him to move. But that could not keep them from noticing how lavishly other less well-to-do businessmen indulged their daughters' expensive tastes.

Whatever the cause of Lizzie and Emma's discontent, it could

not be kept sealed behind closed doors. People noticed, and they talked. The Bordens were too well bred to quarrel in front of the maid, but like Bertie Whitehead and Widow Gray, Bridget Sullivan could not ignore the tension. Despite her light duties, Bridget had given her notice three times, staying first out of loyalty to Mrs. Borden and later after being offered a raise, likely out of Abby Borden's own pocket.

And there were other strange things about the household—"odd habits," Bridget called them. Those three locks on the front door, for starters. And that key on the mantel shelf in the sitting room. Mr. Borden was not the only one who kept his bedroom door locked—Lizzie did, too—but only Mr. Borden left his key in plain sight.

Just over a year before he was murdered, Mr. Borden arrived at the police station to report that someone had burgled his house in broad daylight with his daughters and the maid both at home, sneaking up the back steps, through the master bedroom, and into Mrs. Borden's adjoining dressing room. There the thief had broken open Mr. Borden's desk and made off with \$80 cash, \$25 to \$30 in gold, Mrs. Borden's gold watch and chain, and a number of horse-car tickets. A six- or eight-penny nail, likely used to pick the lock, was found jutting from the bedroom's keyhole. No other room in the house was disturbed, and no one else's property was stolen. Nobody had seen a thing—not the three women inside the house, nor any of the neighbors Inspector Dennis Desmond questioned.

However clever the thief had been about slipping in unseen, swiping the horse-car tickets was a mistake. Mr. Borden had once been a director of the Globe Street Railway Company, and these free tickets were a perk—specially marked and easily identifiable. Once the conductors were alerted, anyone attempting to use them would be immediately linked to the robbery. Eventually

there would be rumors that the tickets had indeed been used and traced to none other than Lizzie Borden, prompting her father to hush up any further investigation. Inspector Desmond, however, made no such claim in his report of the break-in. "So far as I know this robbery has never been solved," he concluded.

Why, then, with a thief still at large, would Mr. Borden triple-lock his front door, only to leave the key to his bedroom on the mantel shelf for anyone in the house to use? Some wondered if it was a subtle jab aimed at the real culprit—his way of silently proclaiming that the theft was an inside job.

But by the following spring, the barn had also been broken into—twice. The only thing of value inside was a flock of pigeons, but that did not change the fact that the Bordens' security concerns seemed to be mounting, nor did it quell the uneasiness spreading throughout the family as spring gave way to summer.

"LIZZIE'S" PIGEONS

Myths persist to this day that the pigeons in the barn were Lizzie's beloved pets. One day Mr. Borden beheaded them to punish her, the story goes, so a vengeful Lizzie hacked him to pieces with the very same hatchet.

There is no evidence, however, to suggest that the pigeons were anything more than livestock occasionally served at the Borden dinner table, and though Mr. Borden did slaughter them soon after the break-in—probably to deter future burglars—Lizzie herself testified that he'd wrung their necks.