

# STRANGE BUT TRUE STORIES

## LIZZIE BORDEN— DID SHE OR DIDN'T SHE?

*Lizzie Borden took an axe  
And gave her mother forty whacks.  
When she saw what she had done  
She gave her father forty-one.*

(Anonymous)

It happened on August 4, 1892, in Fall River, Massachusetts. It was a warm summer's morning, a little after 11:00 A.M.

Lizzie Borden called out to the family maid, Bridget Sullivan, telling her to come quickly. Then Lizzie showed the maid a gruesome scene. Lizzie's father, Andrew Borden, was lying dead on the sofa in the downstairs parlor. The man had been brutally murdered.

Abby, Lizzie's stepmother, was later found dead in an upstairs bedroom. She and her husband had been hacked to death with either a hatchet or an axe.

Contrary to the legend, Abby had died from 18—not 40—blows to the head, and Andrew died from 11 blows.

After a one-week investigation, the police arrested Lizzie. She was kept in jail for almost a year before her trial began. The trial lasted only two weeks—but it was a coast-to-coast sensation. More than 40 newspapers from across the country sent reporters to cover the story. On a local playground, school children began to sing, “*Lizzie Borden took an axe . . .*”

The evidence against 32-year-old Lizzie was largely circumstantial. When the police arrived at the Borden home, Lizzie had no bloodstains on her. And the exact weapon was never found.

Lizzie claimed she’d been in the barn for part of the morning. A witness came forward to state that he had seen a woman emerging from the barn. Another witness claimed to have seen a wild-eyed man fleeing from the house. But were the witnesses believable?

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The prosecution, however, insisted that there was good reason to suspect Lizzie. At the time of the murders, the maid was outdoors washing windows. Lizzie's older sister was out of town, and a houseguest was out visiting relatives. At the time of her stepmother's death, Lizzie had been the only person in the house.

And Lizzie had a motive! Her father was one of the richest men in Fall River—but he was tight-fisted. No matter how Lizzie begged, he refused to move the family to a better neighborhood. And Lizzie desperately wanted to live on The Hill. There, she hoped to become part of Fall River "society."

Lizzie hated her stepmother, Abby. Did she want to kill her father and stepmother so she would inherit their money? Then a friend testified about what she saw three days after the murders. She watched as Lizzie burned a dress in the kitchen fire! Lizzie claimed it

was an old dress stained with paint. But was it really paint—or was it blood?

The problem for the jurors was this: Abby Borden was killed at 9:30 in the morning. Andrew Borden died an hour and a half later. If Lizzie committed the murders, how did she clean herself up after Andrew's death? After all, she'd called to the maid shortly after 11:00. That was just minutes after Andrew had been murdered.

But how could an outsider have committed the murders? Where had he or she hidden for the hour and a half between the killings?

In the end, the all-male jury acquitted Lizzie. They simply could not believe that a refined young woman who taught Sunday school could commit such horrible crimes.

After the trial, Lizzie and her sister bought a huge house on The Hill. Sadly, the townspeople didn't welcome Lizzie into society. Even though she had been

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found not guilty, many people believed that she was.

Today, the Borden house at 92 Second Street is a bed and breakfast inn. Guests can spend the night in the room where—now more than 100 years ago—Lizzie's stepmother was slaughtered. They can sit on a replica of the sofa where Andrew Borden was hacked to death. They can also enjoy the same breakfast that the maid served to the Bordens so long ago. By all accounts, the rooms are booked for months in advance!

What's your opinion? Did Lizzie get away with murder? Your guess is as good as anyone else's!