

The Lizzie Borden Mystery

I call Lizzie and her older sister, Emma Borden, by their first names. The step-mother's name was Abby. Like "Emma", it has two syllables and begins and ends with a vowel sound. If the reader never sees the name, "Abby", there is no need to separate it from "Emma". Confusion could take the form of 'Emmy' or 'Abba', respectively, a TV award and a Swedish '70s band. I call Abby, "the step-mother" and the father, "the father". I remind the reader, when I speak of that one victim, that she was not the sisters' real mother. I can't think of a succinct term to mean, 'both father and step-mother', except "the parents". The maid was named Bridget, but the sisters called her "Maggie", which was the name of the previous maid. (Watch for me to take a stab at why they did so.)

Diagrams of the house, are numerous on the web. Please refer to one as you read the first segment. Lizzie and Emma traded bedrooms, the year before the murder. I often call the sisters' rooms "new" or "old", but that gets a bit busy looking on the page. It will usually seem clear which room I mean, from the context.

I have cited references with footnotes in parentheses, at the point where they come up. If you see an asterisk, look to the end of the paragraph. I can't get to numbers 2 or 3, below, anymore. I'm not sure what I got from # 3. Any help you can offer, could be posted.

Lizzie, Spiering, Frank Random House, N.Y. 1984 ISBN: 0-394-51477-7

A TV news magazine type show (not on cable). Some time in the early, to mid 90s.

www.crimelibrary.com/lizzie/lizziemain.HTM

The Trial of Lizzie Borden; Linder, Doug (2004) url: [www?] law2.umkc.edu

Aug. 3 & 4, 1892 – The Borden Murders timeline; phayemuss.wordpress.com

Facts

The most arresting and well known claims are listed, below. Some seem to be more sound than others, which take as much support from repetition as from evidence. All come from observations and statements, made at the time.

Lizzie's father intended to make a will or change an existing one, to leave his daughters, out.

His ex-brother-in-law, the sisters' uncle, John, intended to help him do so, and they meant to do it, the day of the murders.

John stayed overnight, the night before the murders.

Neighbors said that even in the hottest weather, the doors and windows of the Borden house were shut tight.

The main door to the parents' room was blocked with furniture, from inside.

The attack on the father, was exclusively focused on his face.

There was a maid in or near the house, when the murders occurred.

Witnesses saw the maid outside, at about the time of the first murder.

Society women supported Lizzie until she was acquitted. Then, they ostracized her.

Emma was out of town, for several days before the murders.

Lizzie rented a room in a boarding house, a few days before the murders.

The parents and maid had experienced bouts of nausea over the weeks, before.

Motives

The Inheritance

The father's fortune was substantial. One account cites the figure, \$500,000. That's \$12,000,000, in 1984 dollars. (Spiering - p.8). That estimate looks like a claim by a neighbor or some such acquaintance. The figure, \$350,000 seems to be widely accepted.

I have heard a discussion of the father's money, which suggests that a time limit was about to make it impossible for Emma (or both sisters) to inherit. More common is the claim that the father was about to change his will to exclude her. He had already given his sister-in-law, his interest in another house he owned, and intended to give a farm to his wife. (Spiering - p.3)

The commonplace conjecture that the uncle was planning to help the father disenfranchise the sisters, could not have escaped Lizzie. From where could the rumor have emanated but within the household? Even if they were not the first to know the father's intention, it's impossible that it hadn't reached them.

People who have children, want money for their security, but when they attain fortunes, they want to secure the fortune by perpetuation. Their children become conduits of the money. How important it is to perpetuate fortunes, is seen in Primogeniture. Huge fortunes are transferred to the eldest son, rather than divided among all. In early modern times, the second son in great families, would most often go into the church. Emma was 41, Lizzie was 32. Both were unmarried and had no prospects. If the father intended to cut them out of his will, that might motivate his murder. The timing supports that surmise, if the purpose of the Uncle John's visit was to assist in making the will, but all claims about what transpired the night before, between the father and John, are suspect.

One aspect of this mystery, I cannot solve.* 1 } Even if the father's years in business had not educated him to handle such financial arrangements, himself, anyone must seem more

trustworthy for his purpose, than a real relative of his financial victims. Uncle John was the brother of Lizzie's and Emma's deceased real mother. The father was merely his ex-brother-in-law. Why would the father entertain a hope that a real uncle would take part in condemning his nieces to destitution? Why didn't he hire someone who handled such matters, for a living. His penny-pinching might be the answer, but that would mean that he didn't intend to pay John, for his help. 2} Why would a blood relative assist in disinheriting Emma and Lizzie. A] If John were going to get paid, at least he could conserve that much of the fortune for the sisters, but how much could that really amount to, if the father was too stingy to hire a specialist? B] Perhaps, John had a secret which the father had been using to control him, but why would anyone take financial guidance from someone whom he was holding under a blackmail threat. C] The only possibility which holds up for the time it has taken to set it down, in print, weird as it must sound to anyone without a wad to coddle, is that an uncle, apparently disinterested in his own right, was so uninterested in his nieces' welfare that he would adopt the uber-class concern to consolidate the father's fortune, beyond the life span of his heirless heiresses. {*Everything else about Uncle John's presence and the meaning of his actions, will be explained in another segment; not the next time he's mentioned under the major heading, **Possible Accomplices**, but under the heading, **Uncle John**. (That segment is complete but not available, here, yet.)}

Sexual Abuse

The method of murder, especially the number of blows, is inconsistent with the temperament of women. When women murder, they almost always prefer poison. Lizzie was not an exception. She had been poisoning the parents for some weeks, and attempted to buy prussic acid, the day before the murders. (Spiering - p.56) The immediate reason Lizzie killed the father, might have been pragmatic and financial, and, although that was not completely impersonal, the ferocious violence of her method, indicates a more powerful personal motive.

Experts on sexual abuse, agree that, in households where such abuse is chronic, doors and windows are kept closed, at all times, no matter how hot it is, and the Bordens' house was always buttoned up, like that.* {*Both facts were mentioned in a discussion of the case, on a TV news magazine type show, some time in the early to mid 90s.}

Emma's personality indicates some deep disturbance. "One encounters a pristin [sic] blankness, an ominous, puzzling vacancy about Emma. The few details ... suggest that she possessed no personality at all, that she was devoid of emotion. She was timid and invariably evasive." (Spiering - p.20) Total aversion and introversion probably indicate something traumatic, but the most telling and consistent with abuse causation, is that "She never married, never had a beau ..." Absolute alienation from men, must indicate something about her, which was not part of her nature, unless it's homosexuality, and even that might be the result of experiences in early life, in some cases. Prolonged sexual abuse, if it begins early enough, must affect the victim's relations with all people of the abuser's gender.

Emma's total lack of a courtin' history, at 41, means that she would not contribute to the perpetuation of her father's wealth, and, if the father's treatment of her, contributed to her

alienation from men, then his new will should be seen as punishing her, further, for the toll which his abuse had already taken. Although Lizzie would rather have used poison, the excessive violence of her action, once undertaken, must mirror the horror of that one motivating complaint, magnified through the lens of her father's financial vengeance. From what I have gathered, over time, the face of the rapist, is the victims' most vivid and revolting memory. In any interaction with others, we are really interacting with the face. The eyes, the mouth and the 26 muscles which encase them, are the media of the personality. They communicate the very 'personhood' of the person. "The eyes are the windows to the soul." So are the facial muscles and mouth. A woman who identifies closely with a rape victim, like a sister, might see an offender's face in the same light as the victim. If so, the obliteration of her father's face, pointed as it seems, in the absence of any other injury, supports the assessment of sexual abuse experts, on the family's 'closed door policy'.

In 1890, Lizzie went to Europe for nineteen weeks. That's four 1/2 months. I have heard of many people terminating much shorter vacations, sooner than they planned. They have pretty much done it all, the novelty has faded, and travelling to many destinations, is just tiring. (Staying at a single destination isn't so bad.) Brown uses the trip to contradict the claim of the father's miserliness, but, in the scenario which, I think, you must, now, accept, he sees Emma as just about over-the-hill. He wants one last grand, uninterrupted fling, so, he springs for Lizzie's distant, long term jaunt. Whether or not, she was bored or frazzled from travel, she came home, sooner than unexpected, and caught them at it.

Denial

I learned of the Bordens' 'Closed Door Policy' from the same TV news magazine article which connected that idiosyncrasy with abuse. Anyone who saw that show, has heard the basic explanation of the murders. It wasn't closed circuit, channeled only to my place! The only question is how many hundreds of thousands or millions of other people heard it. It isn't the first thing someone would think of making up, if only because it's too radical a departure from standard, popular understanding, and, if it is just idle nonsense, it should have provoked a response from the pertinent professions. It wasn't the last time I've heard the closed doors and windows mentioned in connection with the Borden case. Why hasn't the connection with abuse, been drawn in the documentaries, produced, since?

The entire complex of mechanisms, moral and legal, which vainly struts beneath the banners of "Society" and "Civilization", had succeeded so well, in denying the problem, that, eighteen years after the Borden murders, when Freud announced that 75% of his female patients had been molested by relatives, in childhood, the reaction was so vehement that he had to retract the claim, on pain of sacrificing his career. (His cave-in was dictated by the power of his adversaries. He was expensive and his clientele was aristocratic. He was accusing the most influential people in Europe!) If an activity is taboo, so is the very topic, and, if nothing can be said about it, that means, nothing constructive. How commonplace involuntary incest is, including child abuse, has been repressed for so long, only by pretending it doesn't happen, at all. The prohibition on discussion, enables violations to go unnoticed, indefinitely. There

should have been no need for Freud to mention the problem, but Denial had formed a crust over

it, which his ‘discovery’ never penetrated. How common it is, has only come to light since the press started to cover it in the ‘80s, and because of the web.

The Floor Plan & The Room Swap

There was no way through the house, except from one room to another. The father had redesigned some sort of railroad facility with a single large room, but he hadn’t bothered with hallways. When Emma turned forty, she and Lizzie changed rooms. “Originally, Emma’s bedroom led directly into the room, shared by Andrew and her stepmother.” (Spiering - p 21) From that diagram, two parallel lines, connecting the rooms, are not consistent with the format used to indicate the other doorways, but it’s hard to imagine what else it could be. Another diagram shows three doors into the parents’ room, as well as that ambiguous break in the wall.

One door of the parents’ room, was blocked with furniture, and, for some period, before it was blocked off, the father insisted on keeping that door locked at all times. “At one point, Andrew had piled furniture in front of the locked door which cut off his and Abby’s room from the rest of the top floor of the house ...” (Spiering – p. 11) Locking a door, and building a barricade, inside, indicates that something took place in the parents’ room, which they had to hide. The barrier also implies another door. There has to be an unobstructed door. The point of using furniture is that it’s too heavy to move, quickly enough for that door to be used with any regularity. Such a barricade could only have been conceived for the long term, and certainly not to be removed and replaced, daily or even every few days.

“Thus, when Mrs. Borden wanted to reach the front guest room from her own room, she had to go down the back stairs, walk through the first floor rooms to the front entry and then climb the front stairs.” (Spiering – p. 11) (Diagrams don’t indicate a third door. I can’t see how they got to the stairs, but the diagrams aren’t too elaborate.) After Lizzie had interposed herself between the parents’ room and Emma’s, by trading rooms with Emma, the parents could have used that long way, via the first floor, to bring Emma to their room. If Emma was so accustomed to tolerate the abuse, it’s not hard to believe that she could also be coerced to co-operate by going to face her ordeal, without the parents’ escort (through the guest room, down the stairs, through the first floor and up the back stairs). From Emma’s old room, Lizzie gained a new vantage point, onto that landing/hallway, which appears to be the only space like a hallway, on the second floor. By leaving the door open, she could monitor movement on the landing, and intercept any attempt to sneak past her room. The open door, in itself, might not guarantee that she would hear someone trying to pass her room, along that landing/hallway. That would depend on rugs, the condition of the flooring, etc., but all activity on and near the stairway landing, should have been easy to monitor with that door open and protected by a sound alarm. The hallway door to the guest room would also have some sort of noise-maker hanging on the knob, but it would be closed.

Emma's original room (labelled 'Lizzie's room' in the diagrams) was directly connected to the parents', and, although the sisters' rooms were also adjacent, no one had to pass or enter Lizzie's room, to reach Emma. When Emma was with the parents, her empty room served as an extra space to buffer sound, and was augmented by the extra wall between their room and the empty one. It was a moat between Lizzie's room and theirs. The piled furniture was a portcullis, before the father's fortress of turpitude. Lizzie forced the room change to interpose herself. Emma's new room was inaccessible, except through her old one (Lizzie's new room) or the guest room, and the latter could not be reached, except by walking between Lizzie's new room and the stairway. By moving into Emma's room, which had lain, impassable, before the parents' dungeon, Lizzie had turned that moat, into her own watch tower, from which she could supervise all traffic. She might have insisted on keeping the furniture barricade in place, as her own portcullis, before her sister's keep. 1} If the items composing the barricade, are big enough to be called, "furniture", it must be too daunting to dismantle and re-assemble it, each night the parents might want to get out. The placement and juxtaposition of several such objects, cannot be easily duplicated. It would take a few seconds of study, for Lizzie to absorb a mental picture of the furniture, so that she would only need to check it for changes, first thing in the morning and last thing at night. For the parents to defeat her protocols, they would have to take down the barricade, before she was in bed. From her bed, she would hear them doing it. 2} Putting it all back in place would definitely have to be done while she was in bed. 3} I don't know how many doors there were, to the parents' room, or which one was blocked, but, the parents did have, "to go down the back stairs", which means that the furniture blocked them from the upper level, except by way of the bedroom which Lizzie had taken over.

In Lizzie's new room, her bed was placed diagonally in the corner, formed by the wall, dividing that room from her parents', and the other dividing it from Emma's new room. Emma's bed probably hadn't been there. Lizzie placed hers there 1} to block that ambiguous break in the wall (so similar, but different than the doors in most diagrams) between her room and the parents', and 2} to better hear sound from either room. The value of that spot for the bed, was enhanced by the placement of Emma's bed, right up against the wall, shared by their rooms; in the corner, adjacent to Lizzie's bed. The hope was that sound coming from Emma's bed, would register on Lizzie, in hers. Lizzie must also have hoped to be able to hear any tampering with the furniture barricade.

Closed doors and windows, locked doors to the parents' room, the furniture barrier, the juxtaposition of rooms, the room swap and the placement of the daughters' beds, afterwards, especially Lizzie's, combine to suggest that Emma had suffered abuse. The room change marks Lizzie's discovery of it. If the abuse was frequent and took place in the parents' room, the stepmother must have been guilty in some way. From what I have heard about that type of crime, women sometimes just serve in a facilitating role, but, in Lizzie's view, there can be no difference of type or degree between the father's guilt and that of the step-mother. The coroner estimated that she received 19 strokes; the father, 11.

Lizzie could exit her original room, through the guest room. 1} It still seems amazing that she took so long to catch on, and only did because the parents took her absence for granted. The abuse must have been going on for a long time, even if not as far back as childhood, because it must have begun when Emma was still young enough to be profoundly damaged by it. Any person might have a retiring disposition, by nature, but Emma's is so extreme as to suggest that her abuse began very early, and recurred often. Victims of the worst violations, like gang rape and 'bunker' captivity, can 'put it in its place', so to speak, for the purpose of interacting with people. Some seem to retain no permanent personality disorders, even though they probably don't completely overcome it. 2} It's even more amazing that the parents didn't think it inevitable that Lizzie would catch on. If she ever noticed that Emma was not in her bed or downstairs, she would have looked for her, and anyone might have a reason to go downstairs, after bedtime. They had a modern toilet in the basement. Someone might crave a sarsaparilla, or require a poultice. (Ya' know, I really can't be expected to anticipate every necessity which might confront inhabitants of the 19th Century, in the middle of the night.)

I assume that, when they were in their original rooms, whenever they had no visitors, Lizzie would have used the guest room to reach the stairway. The parents had probably taught her to come and go, that way, even if they had no devious purpose, just so as not to wake Emma. As long as Emma's door onto the stairway landing was kept closed, Lizzie would pass Emma's room without noticing that Emma was missing. Only when the guest room was occupied, would Lizzie have to use Emma's room, after bedtime. The parents only had to refrain from abusing Emma when visitors stayed over. This case revolves around pathological passion, too compelling to resist, even in the face of such danger as the parents constantly did risk, but laying off Emma for an overnight stay, now and then, was probably not impossible for them. Emma was nine years older. If the abuse began when Lizzie was too young to think of such things, she could have been moved into the guest room, with an explanation containing part of the truth; so she would have a way in and out of her own room, independent of Emma's, even when visitors stayed over. The parents must have thought of it, but it would have meant that either Lizzie's or Emma's original room would have to be the guest room. Emma's original room was designated for the parent's access to her, and from Lizzie's original room, guests wouldn't be able to leave their room, except through one of the sisters' rooms.