

Elizabeth “Lizzie” Irons Folsom Fox (1862-1935)

Elizabeth “Lizzie” Irons was born in about 1862 in Peoria to Charles and Ettie Maria English Irons. She was their only child. Lizzie’s father Charles was a colonel and commander of an Illinois regiment during the Civil War. Lizzie and her parents moved to Bloomington when she was a young girl. She graduated from Bloomington High School in 1879. Unfortunately, Lizzie had been born with poor eyesight as her mother and her maternal grandparents had all battled blindness as well. Doctor’s determined that she had opaque spots on the lenses of her eyes. This problem would continue to get worse throughout the rest of her life (although at the time, the doctors had assured her that her condition would not get worse). For the last twenty years of her life, Lizzie’s mother, was near blind which eventually caused her general health to fail and led to her death in 1911.

Lizzie married her first husband, Percy Folsom, on June 1, 1881 at the age of 19. Percy was the advertising manager for the *Daily Pantagraph* newspaper in Bloomington. This was how she came to be acquainted with the publisher of the newspaper, W.O. Davis, who would help her get a job there later in her life.

After being married for about 19 years, sometime in 1900 Lizzie and Percy separated for unknown reasons. They had no children. Lizzie was quoted later in her life that it was due to “untoward circumstances” that forced her to join the workforce. The fact that she no longer had a husband to provide for her would force her to have to get a job. Another reason which most likely contributed to her need for employment was the fact that she was caring for her mother who was almost completely blind during the last years of her life. Lizzie would have needed some form of income to support both herself and her mother. She and her mother lived at 510 West Washington Street which was only two blocks from the *Pantagraph* building.

Lizzie went back to W.O. Davis who was still the publisher of the newspaper and got a job as a court reporter. Later in her life she was quoted to have said that when she was first hired as a court reporter, she did not “know the difference between a plea and a demurer,” which made her job more challenging.¹ She knew that she could not do her job honestly and efficiently unless she knew what was in legal parlance. She decided to enlist the help of a county judge who was a friend of hers to help educate her in the law over the next four years.

Her job as a court reporter was not an easy one, especially for a woman. The job entailed sitting through days of disillusioning drama, “of seeing life laid bare to the bone, of having all the Pollyanna burned out of me and something else, harder, colder, more sophisticated and bitter burned in.” Lizzie would often have to go out at 3 a.m. in the morning to get the details of a murder case or try to catch a cab or walk in the middle of the night to report a fire miles away from her home at the center of town. But, Lizzie often said that these years were “a necessary foundation” for her writing to develop in the years to come.² She would join the ranks of other well-known Bloomington writers like Christian-moralist author Kate Hamilton, and Rachel Crothers, a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright.

¹ “Near Blind Wins Prize,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1924

² “Near Blind Wins Prize,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1924

However, after 14 years as a court reporter for the *Daily Pantagraph*, Lizzie quit her job. Even after several more surgeries which attempted to correct her vision, during the last few years of working for the newspaper Lizzie's eyesight continued to grow worse. It was getting harder for her to see and it became increasingly difficult for her to get around on her own which her job often demanded. She felt that she could no longer perform her job as a court reporter to the best of her abilities. She decided to try her hand at writing short stories which was a job that would not require her to go out on the street.

Lizzie often recounted that she had written her first short story while traveling to Chicago by train in 1914. An idea struck her during the journey and she put it to paper. When she arrived in Chicago, she sent it off to Munsey's Magazine in New York City (an all-fiction monthly magazine) and they bought it. She had no serious expectation of getting the story published and only thought of this as a way to pass some time on her train ride. Munsey's sent her a check and with that check, a request for more stories. Her next eight stories were sold to that magazine. It was after this that she decided to go to New York City to try her luck at establishing a writing career.³

Even though her eye sight was very bad when she first arrived in New York, this did not stop Lizzie from pursuing her new chosen career. She found a hotel room near the headquarters of Munsey's and when she walked out into the street, she waited for someone with a light coat to pass by her and she would follow that person across the street safely. While in New York, Lizzie had yet another operation performed in the hopes of returning some of her sight. The lenses of her eyes were replaced with glass lenses, which did help her sight improve. While she was in the hospital recovering, she wrote two stories for a book of short stories published by Walter B. Pitkin. She wrote the stories in longhand on a note pad resting on her chest. Even though the writing criss-crossed the page and ran into each other, a patient typist got them into shape for her making them ready to publish.

She did not just write one type of story; she published stories on a variety of topics. She described the way she wrote as one which used real people "with unusual personalities and a real setting, but the rest was fictional." She even used court cases which she had reported on during her time as a court reporter for inspiration for some of her stories. Furthermore, she wrote the last paragraph of one of her stories first and when "a story germ arrived," the opening paragraph arrived with it. Her stories never fell throughout the writing of them because she always knew how they would end, first. She also maintained a list of "musts" and "don'ts" against which she compared all of her stories as her "final test."⁴

She was very persistent in getting publishers to review her stories and publish them. One of her stories was rejected 35 times before it was published by a magazine that had rejected it before. In the first five years of her career as a fiction writer she published about 60 short stories which included "Striking of the Clock," "Bain Twins and the Detective," "High Cost," "Kamerod," and even a fictional story about Abraham Lincoln based upon an article which appeared in the *Daily Pantagraph* years before. She also enjoyed writing novels publishing her first one in 1925 entitled "Free," but her forte' remained writing short stories.

³ "Mrs. Folsom Tells How She Writes Stories," *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 3, 1919

⁴ Karen Ament. "Elizabeth Irons Folsom," *Bloomington-Normal Magazine*, November 1979.

In 1919 she became a member of the Pen and Brush Club in New York. This was an organization of professional women writers, artists, and musicians. Some other famous members of this club were Ida Tarbell, who was the club president for many years, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

The highest point in her career happened in 1924 when she won an O'Henry Award in the category of Best Published Short Story Under 3,000 words for "Towers of Fame." The story appeared in the August, 1923 edition of *McClure's Magazine*. The honor was bestowed upon her by the Society of Arts and Sciences at a dinner at the Hotel Astor in New York City. Her award made headlines across the country and all of her friends and family back in Bloomington took great pride in her achievements.

In the summer of 1928 Lizzie returned to Bloomington to visit some friends which she did as often as she could. During this visit they persuaded her to teach a one time class on writing fiction. A small ad was placed in the pages of the *Daily Pantagraph* announcing the class. So many people responded to the ad and signed up for the class that two sessions had to be held in order to accommodate all those who showed up. The classes were held at Withers Public Library. The best short stories from those classes were even printed in the *Daily Pantagraph* with each author receiving an award of \$5.00. The most important point she taught her class was that for a story to be "saleable, it must catch the reader's eye with an intriguing title, snare his interest with a strong narrative hook...and leave him completely satisfied with a perfect denouement [conclusion]."⁵ After the classes were finished, those who attended decided to continue meeting where they would gather and critique each others work. They called themselves the Elizabeth Irons Folsom Club and eventually in 1931 they expanded to include poems and plays and changed their name to the Quill Club.

In August of 1930 when Lizzie was about 68 years old, she married a second time. Her second husband was William Fox, a stockbroker. They were married in a small ceremony at the office of Judge Pomeroy in Chicago, Illinois.

Lizzie did not do very much writing in the last years of her life. She was completely blind during those last few years and because of that her health began to fail. The last year and four months of her life were spent at Kankakee State Hospital which was at that time a mental hospital. It is unclear why Lizzie was a patient at this hospital because she was not mentally ill. It may have been because of her extremely poor health and blindness that her husband, who was still living in Chicago, could no longer care for her or they could not afford private care for her.

On March 2, 1935 Lizzie died at the age of 73 at the Kankakee State Hospital. Her body was brought back to Bloomington for burial in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the family plot of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Braley, who were intimate friends of both Lizzie and her mother (who was also buried in the Braley family plot). Many friends and former associates whom she worked with at the *Daily Pantagraph* attended her funeral.

By: Candace Summers, 2008

⁵ Karen Ament. "Elizabeth Irons Folsom," *Bloomington-Normal Magazine*, November 1979.