In Fall River, a legal ax to grind
Lizzie Borden site wins copyright bid

Lee-ann Wilber, owner of the Lizzie Borden museum, led a tour of the Fall River landmark. (Gretchen Ertl for The Boston Globe)

By Peter Schworm
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FALL RIVER - Mandy Webster had come all the way from Pennsylvania to visit the house where Lizzie Borden once lived, and she was not about to go home empty-handed. After touring the three-story clapboard house, the site of one of the most sensational homicides in American history, she hit the gift shop with purpose and vigor.

A coffee mug with Borden’s infamous image, to start. A $20 bobblehead Lizzie doll, of course. Finally, an “Everything I Need To Know About Anger Management I Learned From Lizzie Borden” T-shirt. The finishing stroke.

Webster, a 34-year-old who became fascinated with the accused ax-murderer as a preteen and today has a cat named after her, was not stocking up on any old souvenirs. These were exclusively trademarked tchotchkes, patented merchandise of the Lizzie Borden Bed & Breakfast, which in a marketing coup has just landed the rights to the Lizzie Borden name and her black-humored
brand.

The B&B, a popular downtown tourist attraction that draws up to 150 visitors a day, pursued the merchandising license from the US Patent and Trademark Office after a legal dispute last year with a Salem shop called The True Story of Lizzie Borden, which in a settlement agreed to change its name to the 40 Whacks Museum.

Owners said they hope it will dissuade competitors looking to capitalize on the unabated interest in the case, which thrills historians, ghost-hunters, law students, and fans of the macabre.

“We wanted to protect our franchise,” said Lee-ann Wilber, who has co-owned the museum since 2004. “We want to keep the name and Lizzie Borden merchandise local, so people know they are buying something that comes from Fall River.”

The trademark prohibits others from selling merchandise with the name Lizzie Borden, and allows the museum to pursue legal action to halt those that do. Wilber said that while she was pleased to have received the designation, she does not expect to immediately pursue companies using the name.

Webster and the several dozen others who toured the 19th-century Greek revival house early yesterday afternoon shared a morbid fixation on the wealthy 32-year-old spinster and the mystery that shrouds the unsolved 1892 slayings of her father and stepmother. Borden was cleared of the crime after a highly publicized trial, but has endured in folklore as a cold-blooded killer who “took an ax and gave her mother 40 whacks.”

Wilber scrambled yesterday to keep pace with a heavy midday rush, which included visitors from Florida, Wisconsin, Ohio, and other far-flung locales. Most were visiting the Boston area for the week, but had always wanted to see the site of the legendary slayings.

“It’s almost a sick curiosity,” said Joy O’Connor, a 50-year-old from outside Toronto who was browsing through the gift shop before the hourly, $12.50 tour of the home, which has been restored to match its 1892 appearance.

As O’Connor thumbed through several histories of the case, (books are not covered by the federal trademark), her 15-year-old daughter, Charlotte, picked up a plastic hatchet and made a chopping motion at her mother’s head, complete with a horror-movie screech.

“You’d like to, wouldn’t you?” her mother quipped.

The plastic hatchet was part of a theme that extended to silver hatchet earrings and hatchet suncatchers. Other memorabilia included “Did She Do It?” keychains and posters, a skateboard decorated with the victims’ autopsy results, even small bags of Johnny Cake Corn Meal.

“Part of the Bordens’ last meal,” Wilber said ominously.

Drawing the most chuckles was a display of $5 golf balls with the phrase “Keep Hacking Away.”

“After a few drinks it sounded good,” Wilber said of coming up with the idea.

Inside the forest-green house, built around 1845, a blond tattooed tour guide did her best to create an eerie mood, observing that the door frames and knobs...
dated back to the grisly crimes. Other touches, such as period furniture, floral wallpaper, and lace curtains, were added as part of a historical renovation, she said.

“If you touch one of the glass doorknobs, you might be touching something the Bordens actually touched,” said Jennifer Jette.

Borden fans were introduced to the subject in a range of ways. Those from New England grew up skipping rope and hopscotching to the Borden schoolyard rhyme, and others vividly recall watching a made-for-television movie on Borden starring Elizabeth Montgomery. More recently, documentaries about the crime have piqued interest.

The more paranormally inclined believe the house is haunted, a possibility that both thrilled and chilled the younger audience members.

“Yes!” exulted Julia Hoyle, a Borden enthusiast visiting for her 10th birthday, pumping her fist upon hearing the news.

Her brother, 13-year-old Andrew, took a warier approach.

“If the house is haunted, I don’t want to say anything bad about her,” he said. “She might still have that ax.”

Even Charlotte O’Connor, who laughed as she wielded a plastic hatchet, grew serious when her mother asked if she would want to read a book about the killings.

“No,” she said. “Nightmares.”

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