

Elizabeth “Lizzie” Irons Folsom Fox (1861-1935)

Elizabeth "Lizzie" Irons was born in September 1861 in Peoria, Illinois, to Charles and Ettie Maria (English) Irons. She was their only child. Her father, Charles, was a colonel and led an Illinois regiment during the United States Civil War. When Lizzie was a young girl, her family moved to Bloomington, where she graduated from Bloomington High School in 1879. Lizzie was born with poor eyesight, a problem that ran in her family, as her mother and grandparents had also struggled with blindness. Doctors said her eyesight wouldn't get worse, but it did over time, and she eventually became nearly blind. Her mother also lost most of her sight and passed away in 1911.

Lizzie married Percy Folsom, an advertising manager for the *Daily Pantagraph* newspaper, on June 1, 1881, when she was 19. After about 19 years of marriage, they separated around 1900. Lizzie never had children, and after the separation, she had to find a job to support herself and care for her blind mother. She worked at the *Pantagraph* as a court reporter, a job she found challenging, especially since she didn't know much about the law at first. Over time, she studied the law with the help of a county judge.

Being a court reporter was tough, especially for a woman. Lizzie had to attend difficult court cases, sometimes late at night, to gather details for stories. Despite the challenges, she said these years helped her writing skills grow. She joined the ranks of other well-known Bloomington writers, including Kate Hamilton and Rachel Crothers.

After 14 years at the *Pantagraph*, Lizzie had to leave her job because her eyesight worsened. She decided to focus on writing short stories, which didn't require her to go out into the streets. In 1914, while traveling to Chicago, she wrote her first short story and sent it to *Munsey's Magazine*. To her surprise, they bought it, and she went on to sell more stories to the magazine.

Lizzie moved to New York City to pursue a writing career, even though her eyesight was poor. She stayed in a hotel near the magazine's offices and followed people across the street to avoid accidents. After another eye surgery, her vision improved, and she continued writing stories, sometimes on a notepad while resting in the hospital. She wrote a wide variety of stories, often using real people and events as inspiration. She also created a list of rules to guide her writing.

Lizzie was persistent in getting her stories published, even when they were rejected multiple times. In her first five years as a writer, she published about 60 short stories. One of her stories, "Towers of Fame," won an O'Henry Award in 1924, which was a major achievement in her career.

In 1928, Lizzie returned to Bloomington and taught a writing class, which became very popular. Her students formed a group called the Elizabeth Irons Folsom Club, which later became the Quill Club.

Lizzie married for a second time in 1930 at the age of 68. Her husband, William Fox, was a stockbroker. In her later years, Lizzie's eyesight completely failed, and her health declined. She spent the last months of her life at the Kankakee State Hospital, where she passed away on March 2, 1935, at the age of 73. 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 of her friends and former colleagues from the *Pantagraph* attended her funeral.