

# StarTribune

## Win Borden: Reinventing a life, one 'like' at a time

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Win Borden talks to his wood stove -- or mostly answers it, since the stove initiates most of their conversations.

The stove tempts him with walleye fillets and venison chili, and chides him for his excesses, as well as his caprices. "Rumor has it you have been walking around trying to catch snowflakes on your tongue," the stove says.

"Oh, my," Borden replies. "She has my number again."

These conversations play out on Facebook. ("Of all things!" one imagines the stove sputtering.)

The social networking site has become Borden's equivalent of a parson's pulpit, a porch's swing, a therapist's couch. He has more than 4,500 online friends -- people in politics, arts, media, business, religion, along with neighbors in his hometown of Merrifield, Minn., north of Brainerd, where he moved seven years ago after leaving prison.

In 2004, Borden pleaded guilty to failing to pay income taxes. His conviction made headlines, given his public profile as a former DFL state senator, lawyer, entrepreneur, lobbyist -- a real mover and shaker -- but also because his unraveling seemed so inexplicable.

Today, Borden grows vegetables, flowers and herbs at the end of Borden Road, where his family homesteaded in the 1880s. He lives there with two guiltless cats, a cacophony of geese, gaudy hens that bolster his egg coffee and, through Facebook, one more chance to get it right.

### Facebook update:

*Change is my constant companion in life. Often I try to ignore her, but she is always there. Oh, yes, sometimes I love her, more often she frustrates me, and some days she creates fears in my mind and even anger. ... I have done and said a lot of stupid things in my life. Oh, my, yes. Very slowly, over decades, I have learned that I should be slow to judge others because I have not walked in their shoes. We think we know ourselves and others, as well. If the truth be known, at least in my case, I do not know myself well enough.*

"I love trees," Borden said, leaning on a cane carved from one. "Each of these guys has a history. This white ash here is 62 years old, and I know that because my dad brought it up from the swamp when I was 7 -- which was also the year my dad bought me a hatchet. The very first thing I did was chop down that tree. I've rarely seen my dad so mad, ha-HA-ha-ha-ha! Luckily, it grew back."



Win Borden walked away from visiting an almost 200-year-old white pine at his farm north of Brainerd, Minn. The tree, known as Grandma Borden's tree, was spared when Borden's family cleared the field to farm. About 25 years ago the tree was struck by lightning, killing the top. Now, its flat top makes a perfect perch for eagles and hawks.

Vickie Kettlewell, Special to the Star Tribune



Win Borden held Marcus the cat as he talked about his wood stove, made famous in his Facebook postings. The stove has been in its place since 1931.

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The distinctive laugh tumbled from a snub-nosed face that calls to mind nothing so much as a leprechaun.

"Let me show you this one," he said, pointing out a blown-over maple whose roots, retaining just enough purchase on the soil to survive, enabled its limbs to make a wrenching turn in a determined reach for the sky. "I tell the kids, if trees can fight for survival against all odds, people can, too."

Borden, 69, doesn't duck the topic of his downfall; his farm website's bio page notes, plain as day, "He is also a convict." But that sentence concludes a paragraph that notes he is an Eagle Scout with three college degrees "and has shared the speakers podium with Henry Kissinger, Sam Donaldson, and a host of others."

A newspaper profile once described Borden as "a smart, brash college student of the 1960s who seemed destined for great things." Even Borden allowed that his first legislative race in 1970, a stunning upset over longtime senator Gordon Rosenmeier, had something to do with "my being a trifle arrogant." The campaign office was home to two pet doves, named Peace and Freedom.

But Borden also was a fresh face, a 26-year-old speaking about the need to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, to establish the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, to provide better workers compensation. He was re-elected in 1972, and the Minnesota Jaycees named him one of the state's 10 outstanding young men.

He was elected a third time, then surprised many by resigning to become president of the Minnesota Association of Commerce and Industry, later renamed the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce.

Borden puts a survivor's slant on his decade in that post. "It was like being in public office: a wonderful experience which I would never want to repeat, ha-HA-ha-ha-ha!"

Pete Holste, who has known Borden since their college days in St. Cloud, said Borden's driven nature contributed to his roller-coaster dive into alcoholism and depression.

"He had been living a very competitive life, with his days filled with a lot of heavy-hitting work," said Holste, of North Oaks, a former journalist who now consults on writing and editing. "In the process, he got into repeated and incessant social situations where there was an open bar. I didn't know, and I don't think there were a lot of friends who had a clue, that he was putting himself at risk.

"The emotional idea of Win coming apart at the seams -- that try as he might, he couldn't pigeonhole and put everything in its proper place -- it was the drinking that affected his judgment, and that's how the taxes went by the wayside."

Borden received treatment at Hazelden in 1993, but also alluded to some mental health issues, sharing the story of someone who once witnessed Borden introducing himself to another man, only to realize that the man was Borden's son.

"When I was in prison, the psychologist there told me that most people have film in their mental cameras, but mine must have run out a long time ago," Borden said. "That's why I never say, 'Pleased to meet you,' because I probably already have. I just say, 'Good to see you.'"

The Internal Revenue Service found that Borden owed more than \$200,000 in taxes from 1992 to 2002. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of failing to file tax returns over a three-year period, and served a year at the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, S.D. While there, he read "every word Hemingway wrote."

### **Facebook update:**

*... In the distance I hear the geese honking and am reminded that it is time for my morning walk to the pond. As I walk my mind travels through the decades. I think not about what might have been, could have been, or should have been in my life. Rather I focus on what I have to be grateful for. There is much. I write, just to remind myself, that gratitude for the joys about us is a lot better way to start the day than regrets about the past or fear of what may lie ahead. At least for me.*

Borden joined Facebook at Holste's urging, posting entries he deprecates as "buckets of syrup." Many of his followers have never met him, and know him only as the guy who talks to his wood stove.

"The Facebook experience is vast and weird," said Barbara Nims Miller, a writing consultant in Eagan who can't for the life of her remember how she ran across his page. "I did vaguely remember the name, but had no details. I Googled him because I was so curious, and then became a little skeptical: Can this be real? Because he was a mover and a shaker."

Miller resists the notion that Borden reinvented himself on Facebook. "How I experience him is somebody who has dug right into his core and found out who he really is," she said. "I think he's worked at this really hard. This life of great simplicity was not forced on him, but neither is it how he envisioned his life playing out.

"Somehow, this little man has managed to bring out the best in us, as well."

Holste said that prison proved "a watershed moment" for Borden. "He was able to reconcile himself to what being in the here and now means.

"A lot of people see that he can put things in perspective, and have the kind of rational discussion we need to have about wide-ranging issues," Holste said. "And when you approach these issues from a sense of community, like Win does, it touches people. Facebook suits him quite nicely."

### **Facebook update:**

*Why is it we think we will live forever? To my knowledge it hasn't been done. Yet my attitude in life has been to never give up. The wood stove at the farm is serving bowls of savory chicken wild rice soup with crusty French bread for dinner. And then I will watch the [election] returns in my little farm office. That will provide hope, tragedy, exhilaration and abundant humor tonight. I hope. I trust this day for you was filled with a big dose of humor. Mine was.*

Borden's readers love his wood stove, a literary device with an attitude. ("Old man, you are just a crack pot. Do you relish your imperfections?")

The stove still warms the kitchen of the childhood home where Borden lives, his marriage having dissolved while in prison. Their three kids live in the Twin Cities, Boston and New York City. His original family is here in Merrifield.

"I have a brother who lives two blocks in that direction, and my sister lives two blocks the other way," he said. "The other brother is a foreigner; he lives a mile away, ha-HA-ha-ha-ha!"

Why did he move back?

"There's a certain comfort and tranquility," he said, as Marcus, the more insistently social of his two cats, poked his face into a mug of egg coffee. "I always thought if I could grow old with a sense of humor, and without bitterness, that would be a good life.

"Life," he continued, "has a way of grinding people down. They become bitter, resentful – even hateful. I'm not judging them. We don't know, you see, if they had an abusive spouse, or an illness that they didn't anticipate, or finances that they couldn't control. But the bitter road to death is not one I will travel."

Borden is facing serious health issues at the moment, scheduled for surgery later this month to remove a malignant kidney. Yet he spent a recent morning planting tulip bulbs, and after a few months' respite from the rigors of the summer, plans to spend as much time as possible in the big greenhouse, starting seeds and then transplanting their seedlings in anticipation of spring.

"It takes a whole Social Security check to heat it, but I have so damn much fun in there," he said. "I farm so I can make enough money to buy seeds for the next year, ha-HA-ha-ha-ha!"