

THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS



BRUCE WATSON





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In witchcraft's colorful lore, one episode stands out in black and white. Black: the witch's dress and hat, the Puritan garments, and the shadows of a town hunting its own. White: the bonnets of Puritan girls, the crowd of pasty faces on Gallows Hill, a silhouetted summer moon, innocence.

Until 1692, when they swarmed out of their dens and into history, the witches were a secret all over the village. Sarah Good was a witch. Her own husband said so. Penniless, broken, she smoked a pipe and begged from house to house. If anyone refused her, the craggy old witch went away muttering, and it wasn't long before trouble darkened the door. A cow died for no reason. A child screamed as if pinched. Fever came. Sarah Good was a witch, all right. But who else had signed Satan's book?

That Bishop woman, Bridget. Three husbands she'd had, and still she strode around the village in that bright red bodice. She owned an inn and "entertained" travelers and young people, drinking and playing games, "whereby discord did arise in other families, and young people were in danger to be corrupted." They said her specter came into men's houses at night and lay upon them so they couldn't breathe. All over town, there was talk.

Sarah Osborne, now there was a witch! Hadn't been to church in months and was said to be living in sin. And didn't old Martha Corey laugh at the very idea of witchcraft? One of these days, though, the witches would get their due. One of these days, the whole world would know the truth about Salem.

By February of its red year, something was gripping the young girls of Salem Village, something neither doctors nor ministers could divine. Betty Parris, the reverend's own daughter, was in a trance, hands frozen in place, uttering the most hideous gargles and growls. Prayers did no good. "Our father who art" - set her screaming. Soon her cousin Abigail began crawling around the house, under chairs, barking like a dog, stomping her feet. "Their arms, necks and backs were turned this way and that way," a minister wrote, "so as it was impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of any epileptic fits or natural disease to effect."

Satan was up to his old tricks. In Boston only a few years before, the tongues of innocent children were yanked to their chins, their jaws snapped open and shut, their limbs corkscrewed like branches. A witch, old Goodwife Glover, had been tried, hung, and all was calm. Now it was Salem's turn, and the fits quickly spread among the girls, only the young girls.

None dared call it witchcraft, but Salem's girls, curious about their futures, were up to some mischief. Thrusting a key into a Bible, they read the verse it touched as prophecy. They made makeshift Ouija boards and read palms until Abigail Williams spread the word of a better oracle. Come to the Parris kitchen and meet Tituba. She floats an egg white in a glass. It tells your fortune. All that winter, girls met with Reverend Parris's West Indian slave to learn "what trade their sweethearts should be of."

Among the futures in Tituba's glass, the milky shape of a coffin spread panic. Only a few weeks later, Dr. William Griggs, unable to find a medical cause for Betty and Abigail's fits, declared: "The evil hand is upon them!" Suddenly events quickened, and the girls were no longer mere girls. Ministers surrounded them, demanding, "Who torments you?" When the girls gave no names, names were suggested. On February 29, three women were charged with witchcraft. Then, as spring gave way to summer, Salem itself fell into a series of fits that has made its name synonymous with sorcery ever since.

More than 300 years after the most infamous witch-hunt in North America, covens of tourists still descend on Salem to hunt for history. With ongoing symposiums and exhibits, costumed Puritans walking the streets, and its own witch souvenir stores and museums, Salem has made the most of its haunted heritage. But the events Puritan minister Cotton Mather called "the wonders of the invisible world" remain a wonder.

For centuries, historians have branded Salem's witch-hunters as hysterics, fanatics, and liars. But does anyone understand why in one hellish summer the town filled its jails, turned a bucolic knoll into "Gallows Hill," hung nineteen people, tortured another to death and then, only five years later hung its head in shame? If this is witch-hunting, where should the hunt begin?

Begin here: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" - Exodus 22:18. Despite God's commandment to Moses, witches and wizards overtly practiced their craft from Biblical times until the Middle Ages. Only when the Medieval world began to crumble in the 1400s, with scapegoats needed and power up for grabs, did the hunt begin in earnest. In 1486, witch-hunting received its own bible, the "Hammer for Witches." Written by two Dominican scholars with full papal approval, the book became a bestseller of sorts by explaining in painstaking detail how witches torture, possess, and kill the innocent, especially children, and how authorities should judge and execute the wicked.

In one of humanity's darkest chapters, fires blazed beneath hundreds of thousands of witches throughout the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In England, where witchcraft was a crime against the state, not the church, punishment was more merciful - hanging. In Presbyterian Scotland where the hunts were especially rabid, witches were often hung, then burned. By 1660, the worst was over in Europe. But New England's Puritans, isolated in primeval forests, had their own demons to hunt. "If ever there were witches, men and women in covenant with the Devil," thundered Salem's Reverend Parris from the pulpit, "here are multitudes in New England."

On March 1, 1692, most of Salem Village took a holiday. Dressed in its Sunday black and white, an overflow crowd pressed into an icy, hardwood meeting house. Two stern judges had come from Salem Town to examine the accused. Amidst commotion and gossip, they set the bewitched girls on a bench and at last brought the first witch to the bar. Sarah Good was a witch, all right. Listen.

"Sarah Good, what evil have you familiarity with?"

"None."

"Have you made no contract with the devil?"

"No."

"Why do you hurt these children?"