Salem's Dark Hour: Did the Devil Make Them Do It?

Bruce Watson **Smithsonian Magazine** April 1, 1992

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 derisively 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 this terrible year, something was gripping the young girls of Salem Village, something neither doctors nor ministers could divine. Betty Parris, the local minister's own daughter, was in a trance, hands frozen in place, uttering the most hideous gargles and growls. Prayers did no good. "Our Father which 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," another 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 and hanged. Now it was Salem's turn, and the fits quickly spread among the girls, starting with 9-year-old Betty.

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. And they 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 the Rev. Samuel Parris' 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.

Three hundred years after the most infamous witch-hunt in North America, covens of tourists are descending on Salem to hunt for history. With ongoing symposiums and exhibits, costumed Puritans walking the streets, and productions of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and other dramas, Salem and nearby Danvers are commemorating the tercentenary of the trials. All summer, explanations and theories will fly like broomsticks. But by Halloween, when most of the goings-on are over, the events Puritan minister Cotton Mather called "the wonders of the invisible world" will be as much a wonder as ever.

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," hanged 19 people, tortured another to death and then, only four 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 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 of Witches*. Written by two Dominican scholars with papal approval, the book became a best-seller 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 tens of thousands of witches throughout the Protestant Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. In England, here witchcraft was a crime against the state, punishment was more merciful-hanging. In Presbyterian Scotland, where the hunts were especially rabid, witches were often hanged, then burned. By 1660, the worst was over in Europe. But New England's Puritans, still few in number and isolated on the edge of forests primeval, 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, wooden meetinghouse. Two stern judges had come from nearby

Salem Town to examine the accused. Amid 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?"
> "I do not hurt them. I scorn it."

Then why did she go away from the Reverend Parris' house muttering? Muttering her commandments, she replied. She spoke "in a very wicked, spiteful manner," the clerk noted, but in these grand jury proceedings, the judges needed more proof. They needed an evil eye.

Judge John Hathorne instructed the girls to look at Sarah Good. Casting their eyes on the twisted woman, Betty, Abigail and their friends screamed, writhed, swooned.

"Sarah Good," he asked, "do you not see now what you have done? Why do you not tell us the truth? Why do you thus torment these poor children?"

Clearly, something was torturing the girls. Sarah Good claimed that "it was Osborne" who did it. Sarah Osborne, ill and dragged out of bed into custody, claimed to be more bewitched than bewitching. In a dream, a "thing like an Indian, all black," had pricked her neck and pulled her out of bed. Everyone knew Osborne's thing." He was a celebrity in Salem, cursed by every tongue, the archnemesis behind every form of malice. But never did goodmen and goodwives expect to see Satan torture the innocent in the Salem Village meetinghouse. The crowd pressed closer as Tituba herself stepped to the bar.

Beaten by the Reverend Parris, the slave had learned to tell Puritans what they wanted to hear. "The Devil came to me and bid me serve him," she confessed. She told tales of blood-red cats, red rats, witches' Sabbaths, and demonic creatures kept by Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. Satan had offered Tituba a book to sign. Sarah Good's blood-red mark was in it, Sarah Osborne's too. And when Tituba signed, she saw six more marks.

In a world half the Devil's, half their own, lashed by storms, haunted by fear of Indians who seemed to some the Devil incarnate, the Puritans' daily lives were marked by hardship. In such a world, what today would seem trivial were deadly sins. Malice, envy, anger, pride, opened the door for Satan and his advance guards. Witches entered bedrooms late at night. A devil had sat at Christ's table, and now Tituba's magic had loosed the Devil among them. "We are either saints or devils," the Reverend Parris preached. "The scripture gives us no medium." Black or white. Once the Devil entered, it was time to choose sides.

To which side did the girls belong; Were they truly possessed, or merely possessed by fear of the spells and curses floating around Salem-, Were they "great actors," mischievously deceiving their elders, as a Salem mayor charged in his 19th-century history; Did they suffer from "mass hysteria"

caused by Puritan repression, as Freudlan analysts have suggested; Or did a hallucinogenic fungus in bad rye twist their arms and prick their skins, as a psychologist hypothesized in 1976? Each theory has its converts and its foes. Through history's milky glass, the real demon is no more certain than a specter. But modern historians, leaving the girls to their fits, are asking what possessed Salem itself. In a village of true believers, the Devil's door has many keys.

Witchcraft, writes Yale historian John Demos, was a gauge of "social strain." Historians have long noted that the Salem outbreak occurred during a time of trouble. A power struggle between the Puritan Colony and the king had left Massachusetts adrift, without a governor, a royal charter or any legal system. The faithful were shaken by epidemics, Indian wars, and ideological clashes between thriving merchants and simple Puritan farmers. Driven by such tensions, Puritans brought witchcraft out of the closet and into the courtroom, rounding up the usual suspects.

Portrait of a witch: old, twisted, warts on the nose, pointed hat, riding a broomstick and cackling, "Well, my little pretty!" Hollywood's image is hard to shake, but new colors are enhancing the portrait.

Most New England witches," Demos writes in *Entertaining Satan*, were poor women over 40. Some were healers or midwives who had lost a patient or miraculously saved one. They were abrasive, quarreling with families and neighbors, often involved in lawsuits. They were, in a word, misfits. The label fits Salem's first accused like a pointed hat. Sarah Good, a beggar, Sarah Osborne, a hermit and heretic, Tituba, a slave, were dragged into court where neighbors came forth to testify about their every evil deed. Elsewhere in New England, where more than a hundred were accused and 16 executed for witchcraft before Salem, a few bodies swinging from the gallows deeply etched the line between good and evil, and stabilized society, Demos writes. But Salem was not so easy. Something about Salem was different.

By mid-March, Abigail Williams was flapping her arms, shouting Whish! Whish!" and throwing burning logs around the Parris living room. In church she called out, "Look, there sits Goody Corey on the beam suckling a yellow bird betwixt her fingers!" The frightened gaze of the flock rose to the beam. Salem was jittery now, ready to believe in invisible wonders.

Accused and called before the judges, Martha Corey protested, "We must not believe these distracted children." But the distracted children did more than speak. When the witch shifted her feet, the girls shifted their feet. When she clenched her fingers, the girls cried that they were pinched. When she bit her lip, they screamed, bled and showed tooth marks.

Salem had been warned about specters. Because the devil might come clothed in anyone's shape, even Cotton Mather discounted the conclusiveness of purely "spectral evidence" in witch trials. A witch is proved a witch, Mather said, only by confession, possession of voodoo dolls, pins and "poppets," or witch's teats-flaps of flesh used to suckle Satan himself, searched for and found in the merest birthmark.

But Salem Village chose to believe its children. Through most of the trials, the judges took evidence as thin as a ghost as proof of the worst crime imaginable.

Once it became clear that anyone's specter could be blamed, anyone was fair game. Anyone. Rebecca Nurse was a pious, gray-haired churchgoer. "I never afflicted no child," she said meekly, "no, never in my life." But before the icy stares of her neighbors, she cried out "Oh, Lord help me!" spread her hands, and the girls swooned. She was jailed to await trial. Beside her was Dorcas Good, Sarah's daughter, whose specter had bitten the girls. Dorcas Good was kept in chains for nine months. She was 4 years old.

“Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft," Mather preached, and fearing the devil more than each other, Salem made rebellion tantamount to sorcery. A constable who refused to arrest more witches was accused and jailed. john Proctor said if the girls were not stopped, "we should all be devils and witches." Proctor and his wife were next. "Dear child, it is not so," Elizabeth Proctor pleaded to the accusing Abigall Williams. "There is another judgment, dear child." But the fear was contagious. Seeing specters, the girls called out in court, "There is Goodman Proctor going to Mrs. Pope," and Mrs. Pope fell into fits. "There is Goodman Proctor going to hurt Goody Bibber," and Goody Bibber fainted. The girls had won. The witch-hunt was on.

From out of their dens came neighbors renewing timeworn vengeance, settling old vendettas. In April and May, more than 60 people were accused, including an ousted clergyman, prominent merchants, anyone who had dared to make an enemy. In June, with the jails bursting, formal trials began. For those who could explain their specters, confess or escape, life might go on. For the rest, a sturdy gallows on a nearby hill was fitted with a noose.

Before Salem, New England witches had been the subject of rumor, gossip and an occasional trial. Why did Salem alone turn witch-hunting into a craze The answer, say two historians, lies not in Satan but in sociology: in 1692, there were two Salems. Salem Town was a prosperous coastal community with a thriving maritime trade, an established church and government, and stable families. But a few miles inland, Salem Village (now Danvers) was a troubled backwater where, as one villager said, "brother is against brother and neighbors [are] against neighbors, all quarreling and smiting one another." With no town government to arbitrate, village feuds festered. In 1687, three mediators from Salem Town, come to settle a church dispute, predicted that unchecked village quarrels might someday "let out peace and order and let in confusion and every evil work." Salem was no city on a hill, say historians Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum in *Salem Possessed*. Salem was an inner city on a hill.

At the heart of Salem's discord was a Hatfield-McCoy feud. Throughout the 1680s, the Porter family gained land and influence in the church while the Putnam family lost both and vowed vengeance. Come 1692, three "afflicted" girls in the Putnam household, together with parents, in-laws and cousins,

testified against at least 46 accused witches, many from the Porter camp. The feud, coupled with factions split by the contentious Reverend Parris, made Salem a house divided against itself.

By June, the Devil's door was wide open. All over Essex County, humble Puritans saw Satan under every bed, and God help anyone who saw differently. Witches were hunted down in Amesbury, Topsfield, Haverhill, Gloucester, Ipswich. In the raucous courtroom all summer, the storied girls fell into agony at the slightest glance. Neighbors testified to seeing shapes by night, teasing, tormenting, choking. The jury deliberated. Down came the gavel. Guilty, guilty, they were all guilty.

During that zealous summer, there were moments when reason might have triumphed. After Bridget Bishop was hanged on June 10, one judge resigned in protest. Boston ministers cautioned against spectral evidence, and neighbors signed petitions supporting the accused. At the next trial, despite testimony by several Putnams that Rebecca Nurse's specter had murdered six children, the jury returned with its verdict. Not guilty. Bedlam tore through the courtroom. The girls howled, their convulsed limbs snapped, until the startled judges ordered the jury to reconsider. After further questioning, the jury gave a different verdict. The governor, petitioned by Nurse's family, granted the old woman a reprieve, but when the girls heard about it, they fell into fits and were said to be near death. The reprieve was rescinded.

On July 19, Rebecca Nurse and four others rode a creaky oxcart past jeering crowds to Gallows Hill. With the noose around her neck, the muttering witch Sarah Good no longer muttered. "I am no more a witch than you are a wizard!" she shouted at a minister. "If you take my life away, God will give you blood to drink!" Legend has it that the minister drank blood years later, dying of a hemorrhage. The curse also haunted judge Hathorne's great-great-grandson Nathaniel who, after adding a w to his last name, used the threat of "blood to drink" as the linchpin of his novel about a Salem house with seven gables.

Following July's hangings, the Devil knocked on other doors. After the Salem girls were called to Andover to detect witches, more than 50 were jailed there, and a dog was executed for witchcraft. Crammed into jails, the accused dared not hope for justice. On the eve of their trials, a few escaped with the help of friends. Others, noting that Tituba still hadn't been tried, confessed and were spared. But the most devout believed that lies brought a more lasting judgment, and rode their innocence toward heaven.

On August 19, five more were hanged, another eight on September 22. "What a sad thing to see eight firebrands of hell hanging there," said a minister. "Sad" wasn't quite the word for Giles Corey's fate. Accused along with his wife, the bitter, iron-willed man would lose his land if convicted, land he had willed to his children. But if he refused to testify, the court couldn't pass judgment. So the 80-year-old Corey remained silent. Laid beneath a wooden plank, he was pressed with heavy stones. Would you talk now, Giles Corey; More and more stones were piled on. After two days, with his tongue pressed far out

of his mouth, his only comment was "More weight." Finally he was crushed to death, but his land stayed in the family.

In a society that believed in its own shining eminence, 19 had been hanged and one tortured to death. Three more had died in jail. Something beyond factionalism and tension must have possessed Salem, some other devil, perhaps in feminine form.

Three-fourths of Salem's accused were women, including 14 of the 20 executed. Witchcraft, writes Carol Karlsen, a University of Michigan historian, "confronts us with ideas about women, with fears about women, with the place of women in society, and with ... systematic violence against women." In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Karlsen explains how Puritans both constrained and exalted women. Woman was wife, mother, "helpmeet," handmaiden of the Lord, and those who did not fit this holy mold were surely handmaidens of the Devil. Among the accused throughout New England, Karlsen finds women who dared to fight for an inheritance, childless women, adulteresses, single women, women involved in lawsuits, and "troublemakers" like Bridget Bishop. Their common sin, Karlsen writes, was refusal to knuckle under to the Puritan patriarchy.

Accused men were most often witches' husbands or sons, but men themselves leveled three-fourths of the accusations. They told of dreams in which female figures sat on their chests, making it difficult to breathe. And girls, the most frequently bewitched, used witchcraft to vent their jealousies. Many of Salem's afflicted" girls, including Abigail Williams and other vehement accusers, had lost their fathers, Karlsen notes. Fatherless girls might wonder "what trade their sweethearts should be of," but having no father and therefore little or no dowry, they were mostly bound for spinsterhood. Claiming vengeance as theirs, they lashed out at targets named by their elders. It was an approved form of rebellion, Karlsen writes. Blasphemy led to whipping, but if the Devil made them do it, the young girls became the most important people in town.

"The little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom," Arthur Miller has John Proctor proclaim in *The Crucible*, "and common vengeance writes the law!" More accused might have gone the way of all devils had not Truth at last put on its boots.

Increase Mather, Cotton's father and president of Harvard College, believed in witchcraft but was skeptical about Salem. When a parishoner took his sick child to Salem for a diagnosis, the elder Mather had seen enough. "Is there not a God in Boston that you should go to the Devil in Salem?" he demanded. On October 3 his sermon condemned the trials. We ought not to practice witchcraft to discover witches," he said. "It is better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person should be condemned." In sermons, other ministers doubted that so many could "leap into the Devil's lap at once." During the trials as well, almost 300 citizens had signed petitions or testified on behalf of the accused.

The girls struggled to maintain their power, "crying out" on ministers' wives. But soon after they accused his wife, Gov. William Phips stopped the trials, on October 29. Of the remaining witches, 52 were tried in 1693 without the use of spectral evidence. Three were convicted but pardoned. The hunt was over.

After 1692, with most authorities loath to bring another Salem upon their town, the Devil again dwelt in rumors. England executed its last witch in 1712, Germany in 1775, Switzerland in 1782, but no more witches were put to death in the Colonies. Broomsticks, spells and witches' Sabbaths became the stuff of folklore rather than law.

When the bloodletting stopped and time soothed Salem's fears, the guilt poured forth. In 1696, first a judge, then 12 of the jurors publicly repented. Even Ann Putnam Jr., one of the most afflicted girls, apologized. In 1711, the state paid survivors of the executed sums of [British Pound]7 to [British Pound]150 and reversed the convictions of all but seven who, having no family come forward to demand a pardon, remain guilty on the records.

In Salem 1992, a.k.a. "witch city," time's alchemy has turned shame into tourism. Salem's Heritage Trail leads visitors to the Witch Museum, the Witch House and the Witch Dungeon. Souvenir T-shirts proclaim BE WITCHED IN SALEM and DROP BY FOR A SPELL. Even Salem's police cars have a witch emblazoned on their doors. But if Salem's panic is to mean more than this, there must be a lesson in its infamy.

Witch-hunts clarify good and evil wherever rapid change has muddled the moral waters. Cry "Witch!" or something equally scandalous, and suddenly malice has a human face and a bewildering world becomes simple again. "There were many levels of resonance," writes historian John Demos of New England's hunts. "There was the naming, the locating, the making tangible, of what had hitherto seemed obscure. . . . And there was, at the end, a decisive act of repudiation. The Devil is in Elizabeth, not in me. The evil is there, not here. Thus did the beholders sound their own depths, sorting the good from the bad. They emerged-one imagines-with a stronger, sharper sense of themselves. They were cleansed."

When social tensions mount and accusations fly faster than reason can counter them, the specter of a witch-hunt returns. The most notorious witch-hunt in modern America was led not by a preacher but by a politician hunting a devil in the shape of a hammer and sickle. By the early 1950s, tensions built by the Cold War and the Atomic Age needed a scapegoat. Along came Senator Joseph McCarthy with a long list, and out of the woodwork came the timid and the vengeful, ready to testify. Not from historical interest did Arthur Miller write *The Crucible* in 1953, but to blame his country and his countrymen for the injustices of McCarthyism.

Since then, the term "witch-hunt" has been used loosely by virtually anyone faced by a pack of accusers. Dissenting Congressmen tried to call Watergate a witch-hunt, but the evil seemed real enough

and the accusers too rational to make the term stick. Most recently, some have drawn parallels between Salem and the child abuse trials of more than a hundred teachers and day-care workers in the 1980s. Noting similarities-the testimony of children, the claims of ritual Satanic abuse, the indefensible infamy of the crime itself -all sorts of commentators have liberally referred to the trials as witch-hunts.

Three hundred years after the Devil came to Massachusetts, "witchcraft" is in revival. One group is Wicca, a neo-pagan religion that claims to revere Nature and to have no Satan, and wishes "to harm no one." Salem itself has more than 2,500 practicing witches with their own newsletter and five witch-supply stores, and Boston has a radio program for witches. Some say there is reason for concern. Satanic cults are sensationalized on TV talk shows, while several popular books on Satanism insist that devil worshipers sacrifice 50,000 Americans a year. "He who believes in the Devil, already belongs to him," Thomas Mann wrote, and a 1989 Gallup poll showed that 37 percent of Americans believe Satan exists. Doubters need only stroll past the red-and-black covers of drugstore paperbacks or descend into the horror section of a video store to find plenty of blood to drink.

Will these uncertain times bring more witch-hunts and public trials? For answers, we might consult Salem's Crystal Chamber, a downtown store offering fortune-telling and psychic readings. We might thrust a key into a Bible, even float an egg white in a glass. But given the denouement of Salem's dabbling in prophecy, perhaps it's best not to knock on that door.