

Witchcraft in Salem

Trial by Madness

Although several isolated instances of witchcraft had been reported in the American colonies during the 17th century, none compared to the witch-hunting madness that had seized Europe ~ until the bleak New England winter of 1692 in Salem.

1692 was a year of political uncertainty throughout the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Colonial leaders feared that Puritan domination was nearing an end, and with it, a once cohesive society.

In the kitchen of the Salem parsonage, a West Indian slave named Tituba amused the minister's 9 year old daughter, Elizabeth Parris, and her excitable 11 year cousin, Abigail, with tricks and spells and tales of the occult. Sometimes Tituba told fortunes by studying patterns of egg white in a glass, a pastime that to the 17th century Puritan was devilry, but one that captivated the adolescent neighbor girls who visited Tituba's kitchen.

As winter wore on, the girls began to behave bizarrely; Elizabeth had frequent fits of sobbing, and Abigail would race around the house on all fours, barking like a dog. The other girls had seizures, and one day 12 year old Ann Putnam told of a frantic struggle with a witch who tried to cut off her head with a knife. When the village doctor could find nothing physically wrong with the girls, he concluded that "the evil hand is on them."

In vain the Reverend Mr. Parris begged the afflicted girls to name the witches who tormented them. When he learned of a "witch cake" concocted by Tituba's husband (of rye meal baked with urine from the children), he raised such a cry that Elizabeth blurted out Tituba's name.

The other girls quickly added the names of Sarah Osborne, who had scandalized the village by living openly with a man before marriage, and Sarah Good, a despised pipe-smoking beggar.

At a hearing in early March, Tituba confessed she was indeed a witch, and she ~ or rather her spectre ~ had attacked Ann Putnam with a knife. What's more, she claimed she was only one of many witches living in the village, and that "a tall man from Boston" had shown her a book listing all the witches in the colony.

With that, the Salem witch hunt was on. Precocious Ann Putnam and her mother accused 71 year old Rebecca Nurse of infanticide. Susanna Martin was accused of bewitching a neighbour's oxen following a quarrel. The Reverend George Burroughs, the former village minister, was named as the witches' ringleader, and Captain John Alden was identified as Tituba's "tall man from Boston".

In seven months, 7 men and 13 women were executed, many on the basis of the "testimony" of ghosts and spectres. The Reverend Mr. Burroughs was hanged on August 19, and 80 year old Giles Cory, who refused to testify, was slowly pressed to death with heavy stones.

When the frenzied accusations reached the apex of colonial society ~ even the president of Harvard University was accused ~ public opinion turned. Within 18 months of the start of the episode, Governor William Phips had pardoned all the suspected witches who had not been executed. Ultimately, even the executed were exonerated, though the name of Salem endures as a symbol of societal madness.

UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY OF THE WITCH TRIALS

There are many possible explanations for the frightening witch craze of late-seventeenth century New England. No one factor alone completely explains this tragedy of early American History. Therefore, one must examine all theories and consider the possibility that many forces combined shaped the events that occurred. Among these are possible physical illnesses such as ergotism or encephalitis, one of which very well may have sparked the beginning of the frenzy. Possible psychological disorders such as mass hysteria may have lent fuel to the fire. In addition, misogyny played a key role in the turmoil. Finally, you cannot ignore the obvious socio-economic and political problems present in their oppressed Puritanical society which helped maneuver the bizarre witchcraft trials.

First, to consider the possibility that ergot, a grain fungus which is characterized by violent muscle spasms, vomiting, delusions, hallucinations, crawling sensations on the skin, and a host of other symptoms may have been to blame for the supposed victims of witchcraft afflictions. In the 1970's, Linda Caporeal, a psychology student, noticed the key accusers in the Salem witchcraft trials had complained of most of these symptoms and proposed the theory that ergotism was the causative agent involved.

The swampy, warm environment in Salem where they grew their staple rye crop would have been ideal conditions for the fungus to thrive. "When Caporeal examined the diaries of Salem residents, she found that these exact conditions had been present in 1691, therefore, the grain supply they were consuming in 1692 would have been contaminated. However, arguments against ergotism suggest that this theory is inadequate in explaining why entire families did not suffer equally if they were eating from the same grain supply.

Also, the lack of certain symptoms, such as vomiting and diarrhea, which are rampant among sufferers of ergotism, tends to cast a shadow of doubt on Caporeal's explanation. In addition, Laurie Winn Carlson puts forward a question if colonists themselves knew what ergotism was (it had been identified sixteen years earlier) and were trying desperately to discover the source of their problems, it seems unlikely that they would not have investigated the rye supply.

Another physical factor which may explain the eruption in colonial New England is the disease, encephalitis lethargica, which would certainly explain the symptoms complained of by the accusers since they mirror exactly the symptoms of encephalitis patients. Encephalitis was not yet discovered by medical science at the time. The simple medicine available to the residents of Salem could not even begin to explain the bizarre symptoms experienced by members of their community. "The Puritans lived in an era of belief in the devil as a physical being who was incarnate, there to seduce them from the path of righteousness. Bewitching was a generally recognized phenomenon in the 1600's. Therefore, they automatically believed the sufferers were being attacked by some evil entity. This is a strong argument, since encephalitis is "an inflammation of the brain" with various symptoms to include "headache and fever, followed by confusion, hallucinations, paralysis on one side of the body, memory loss, difficulty in speaking, drowsiness, possible coma, epileptic seizures, loss of hearing, sensitivity to light, stiff neck, difficulty controlling the eye muscles, pupils of different sizes, double vision, and personality changes."¹ These frightening symptoms displayed could not be explained by their limited knowledge of disease, so their deeply imbedded religious beliefs about Satan came into play which led to the infamous witch trials that ended in twenty innocent lives lost and one hundred-fifty imprisoned.

Another explanation offers that misogyny, the prejudice against women, was to blame for the witchcraft trials in Old and New England. Deep in the psyche of the inhabitants of Puritan society was a stigma surrounding the potential of women to become cohorts of the Devil. Sexual prejudice linked witchcraft to females, and specific social circumstances made certain kinds of women particularly liable to witchcraft prosecution.

Female sexuality was associated with evil, stemming from the biblical depiction of Eve tempting Adam in the Garden of Eden. The sensual power of women was feared since she had the ability to corrupt upstanding Puritan men and lead them into paths of wickedness. Fourteen of the twenty hung as a result of the witchcraft trials were women who refused to confess to witchcraft. Puritan women were oppressed, expected to be subdued, limited to the domestic sphere, checked by their pious peers regularly, be

submissive to their husbands and never venture to think independently or be innovative in any way. Anyone who did venture beyond these expectations was suspect.

Women were considered “the moral and intellectual inferiors of men, sexually depraved, continuously dissatisfied and thus easily tempted by Satan. Most of the accused women stood to inherit property, and feminists see the frenzy as a backlash against unconventional women, or those climbing the economic ladder. Also, there was a disdain for women too old to bear children and too poor to fend for themselves which led to many of the accused being these very unlucky women.

Finally, the viewpoint that a mass hysteria was produced from the oppressed Puritan society where the inhabitants simply “cracked” from a lack of self-expression, and feelings of guilt were somehow alleviated by the witch trials. The frustration brewed over time as more individuals desired to assert themselves in a society that viewed confidence as self-glorifying and associated with evil. The communal Puritan society required regular visitation to neighbours, believing this practice would reduce the temptation to fall into sin. After all, if you are being watched constantly, you are less likely to sin. The concern was so great because they believed if even one member of the community sinned, God would punish the entire village and everyone would suffer the consequences. The consequences could be a plague of illness or failing crops so everyone felt responsible for keeping the righteousness of their neighbour in check. Also, because of the concern for the spiritual integrity of the community, confessing ‘witches’ were asked to name confederates, adding fuel to the fire of accusations. The only way an accused person could avoid being hung was to confess to the witchcraft and accuse another. The only ones hung were the ones who refused to confess. So naturally, this led to more and more accusations until the craze ended when the wife of John Winthroppe was accused and Increase Mather petitioned Governor Phipps to close the court in late October, 1692.

We may never know for sure what happened in the late-seventeenth century to cause such a devastating turn of events. But there are certainly many factors to consider when attempting to decipher the madness and make some sense out of the calamity. Whether it was encephalitis or ergot poisoning, we will never know since the bodies can no longer be effectively autopsied. Whether mass hysteria, misogyny, or socio-economic factors had a hand in the mass eruption of these small villages, we cannot say for sure. We can only study the documentation and try to understand it considering their stringent religious beliefs and limited medical science. But one thing is for certain, the witch trials will not be forgotten too easily. There will be plenty of speculation for years to come in an attempt to unravel the mystery of the witch craze.

Ergot Poisoning in France

Ergot

1.

Rev. Steve Hulford

ERGOT.... ‘Claviceps purpurea’, a fungus that affects cereals, especially RYE. It is a toxic alkaloid that causes convulsions and hallucinations.

It is believed to be the cause of the illnesses ‘St. Vitus Dance’ and ‘St. Anthony’s Fire’. And as we shall see ‘Bewitchment’.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Essex was a main growing area for Rye, as was Salem, and the parts of Europe where witch hunts were most prevalent.

Witch hunts were rare in places that did not grow rye as a staple food. In Ireland where oats were the main grain, there were only four witchcraft trials. While in Scotland, the trials were most common in areas where rye was grown, while in the Highlands they were absent.

This pattern seems to appear throughout England and Europe, as well as Salem, where 'Bewitchment' only appeared in the parts of the town that relied on rye for their bread.

Ergot thrives in a cool, wet growing and harvesting season and even today small amounts of ergot are to be found in rye crops. And where records are available, it seems that the worst witch hunts occurred, following these weather conditions.

In 1943, in Switzerland, Prof. Albert Hoffman was working with extracts of ergot, when he spilt some on his skin, causing hallucinations. This led to him developing something more well known....LSD.

In 1976, Prof. Linnda Caporael realised the similarities between the details of bewitchment at Salem and the symptoms of a bad acid trip.

This caused her to do more research and she not only found that rye was the staple diet for the parts of Salem affected but the weather conditions were ideal for ergot.

Following up on this research, Prof. Mary Matossian, studied seven centuries of demographics, weather, literature and crop records.

She points out that throughout history, drops in population have followed diets of rye bread and damp weather.

During the early years of the Black Death 1348 on, conditions were ideal for ergot.

Many symptoms of ergotism and plague are similar. The worst plagues occurred where ergot suppressed the immune system. Records of deaths show large regional variations, possibly showing areas of rye farming.

In August 1951 (only 50 years ago), 'Pont St. Esprit' a small town in France, was struck by ergot poisoning, following a local bakery selling rye bread contaminated with ergot. Four people died, and a large number suffered 'possession' or 'bewitchment'

The bakery was actually believed to be possessed by the Devil and was exorcised by the local bishop.

Witnesses still alive today recall the symptoms.....

Thousands of pin pricks on the skin / insects crawling under the skin

Seeing all sorts of wild or deformed animals

Visions of fire and blood running down the walls

Violent convulsions

etc

Ergot poisoning also affected animals, causing sickness and death. A good example and comparison of cases is this....

France 1951.

A dog was fed small scraps of rye bread. He soon started running round in circles, gnawing on rocks so hard that he broke his teeth, and finally dying.

Salem 1693.

Tituba and her husband John Indian were asked to bake a witch cake - made of rye soaked in the accused's urine - which was then fed to a dog. The dog became bewitched and died, thus proving the guilt of the accused.