

DIRECTIONS: Read passage and answer questions on a separate sheet of paper.

## THE SALEM TRIALS

In my town no one was burned at the stake. We were hanged or crushed beneath heavy stones. The twenty people executed in Salem have always seemed a small number when compared with the millions who suffered in Europe, but proportionally those killed, those still in jail, and those accused but not yet arrested were a sizable percentage of the population for a sparsely populated area. It was a true hysteria. People from all walks of life had been accused: a minister who had graduated from Harvard and owned a large estate in England; the wealthiest shipowner in Salem, Captain John Alden, the son of John and Priscilla, the legendary lovers of Plymouth Colony; even the wife of the governor of the Bay Colony. No one was safe.

It all started in the Reverend Paris's kitchen, where Tituba, a slave woman from Barbados, entertained the Reverend's daughter and her girlfriends during the cold winter months of 1691. The girls asked Tituba, who knew methods of divination, about their future husbands, a normal concern of most young girls around puberty. In time the girls began to have fits, showed extreme moodiness, adopted odd postures and gestures, and had visions. (A generation later in Northampton, Massachusetts, the same type of behavior among young people would lead the Reverend Jonathan Edwards to declare that a spiritual "quickening" was occurring and thus

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would begin the first "Great Awakening" in the history of American religious revivals. In Salem Village this same behavior was interpreted by church leaders as the work of the devil.)

Hearings were held over the next few months at which the girls and others who became afflicted with the same behavior (it had become a kind of teenage fad) accused adult members in the community of tormenting them. They had bizarre fantasies of otherwise respectable people engaged in lurid activities with the devil. As the winter turned into spring, natural misfortunes were blamed on the devil working through certain members of the village. According to the theories of the day, the devil could work only through someone with that person's cooperation. Someone who had made a pact with the devil. Someone who was a "Witch."

Accusations were made, people arrested, hearings were held, and by spring the jails were overflowing. Then it spread. "Witches" were discovered in Beverly, Topsfield, Andover, Ipswich, Lynn, and virtually every town in Essex County. In Andover there were actually more arrests than in Salem Village. Authorities in Boston sent representatives to conduct trials.

In June the first trials began, and Bridget Bishop was hanged after having been in jail since April. Events moved quickly. In July, Rebecca Nurse, Sarah Good, Elizabeth How, Sarah Wild, and Susanna Martin were hanged. The August trials found John Willard, John and Elizabeth Proctor, George Jacobs, Martha Carrier, and the Reverend George Burroughs guilty. All were executed, except Elizabeth Proctor, who was pregnant and given a stay of execution until her baby was born. The September trials sent Martha Cory, Alice Parker, Ann Pudeator, Mary Esty, Margaret Scott, Mary Parker, Wilmot Reed, and Samuel Wardwell to the gallows. Martha Cory's husband, Giles, was pressed to death beneath the weight of

stones. And as the gruesome summer ended over a hundred people were still awaiting trial, and several hundred others had been accused.

Finally cooler heads began to prevail. Increase Mather preached in Cambridge that the issue of acceptable evidence for "Witchcraft" rested on very shaky ground, especially the notion of spectral evidence, or the devil's ability to take the shape of someone in the community. While not denying that the devil could assume the shape of a man or woman, "proving" that he or she had made an initial pact with the devil was rather difficult. Could the devil not assume the shape of an innocent person as well? Some people were beginning to think so. Finally, Increase Mather argued that it would be better for one "Witch" to escape execution than to put ten "innocent" people to death. His arguments carried the day, and the Witch-hunt soon ended.

A question that often comes up about the twenty people executed and the hundreds accused is: Were they really Witches? Historical evidence is sketchy. I am sure that some or many of them, like their counterparts in Europe, still retained many of the Old Religion's practices—herbalism, special potions, divination, natural healing techniques. Some may have even celebrated the old nature holidays. We know that Massachusetts settlers at Merrymount erected a Maypole earlier in the century. But the question of whether they were Goddess worshippers or not has never been proven. Surely there were Witches among their ancestors, but they themselves may not have been Witches in the sense that they were our co-religionists. Most were probably devout Christians. Nevertheless, I think we must claim them as Witches. Certainly they died for our freedom. They refused to admit that they had committed any crime. (Interestingly, not one of those who confessed to Witchcraft was hanged. They repented and were admitted back into the

community. We could also ask whether those who confessed were really Witches or did they confess to save their own lives? Much is lost in the pages of history.)

If the victims of the Witch-hunt in Salem and nearby towns were not Witches, then the Witch Museum a few blocks from my house is not really about Witchcraft and visitors who tour it by the thousands each year are not really learning the truth about who we are or what we practice. Over the years Salem Witches have protested this to the board of the museum and we finally arranged for them to alert tourists to this fact. What visitors learn about on their tours of the museum is not the religion of the Goddess, but about what can happen to a Christian community that succumbs to an irrational fear of the devil and projects this evil image onto members of the community.

As the eighteenth century progressed people grew more skeptical about Witchcraft. The spirit of the times—the rationality of the Enlightenment—convinced people that magic was hocus-pocus and people who practiced it were practicing self-delusion. The new era was also more skeptical about religion in general and less zealous in persecuting unbelievers. The wrath that had fueled the Witch-hunts subsided. In 1712 the last person was executed for Witchcraft in England, although the anti-Witchcraft laws stayed on the books until the twentieth century. In Scotland the last execution took place in 1727 and the laws were repealed in 1736. Of course all over Europe and in America there were sporadic trials, and executions from time to time. In Hungary in 1928, for example, the courts acquitted a family who had beaten an old woman to death on the suspicion that she was a Witch. With or without the laws and the civil or church authorities to back them up, people continue to harass Witches and often do them serious physical harm.

A photographer once asked me if I would pose for a

picture beside the tombstone of Judge Hathorne, one of the magistrates who persecuted Witches in Salem and nearby towns in the seventeenth century. I agreed, and now whenever I look at that photo I say to Judge Hathorne and his cohorts, "We survived. We're still here."

1. How did the witch hysteria start in Salem village?
2. Was anyone burned at the stake in Salem?
3. Underline the names of the accusers.
4. Underline the names of the accused.
5. Were there really any witches in Salem?  
What does the author think?  
What do you think?
6. What unique perspective does the author have?  
How do you know this is true?

Please list these on your homework paper