

Salem's Scandal

BY SUSAN GOODMAN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF PERKELL

The 500th anniversary of Columbus' expedition is just one of this year's momentous commemorations.

The 300th anniversary of the Salem witchcraft trials is also in 1992.

Just as some historians are busy redefining the voyage captained by Columbus, others have been debunking the old witchcraft recipe

that mixed straitlaced Puritans with weird old crones to produce mass hysteria.

Revisionist historians have traded these ingredients for a new view of Salem, a picture

of a litigious society bubbling over with factions and resentments. Although this description may sound more like the makings of an "L.A. Law" episode, it is firmly rooted in the events that took place 300 years ago.

Times were tough — and tense — for Salem Village in 1692. Jealousies were festering between the Village of Salem and the bordering Salem Town. Many "town" families were growing rich off the seaport and its related businesses while others in the

Three centuries after it all happened, modern historians are adding some new interpretations to the Salem Witch Trials

Village's farming community grew poorer as each generation's inheritance divided a family's lands into increasingly smaller plots.

Add to this mix 1691's paltry harvest followed by a fierce winter. Then stir in the Puritan belief that everything — including good luck and misfortune — was a sign from God. All this volatile community needed was a spark — which was provided in February.

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A few girls gathered in Rev. Samuel Parris' kitchen in Salem Village, for the very un-Puritanical pastime of gossip and fortune-telling. Tituba, the household's West Indian slave, could float an egg white in a glass and, from this makeshift crystal ball, learn "what trade their sweethearts should be of." /

When one of the futures in Tituba's glass shaped the egg white into a coffin, the girls panicked. Somehow those quickened heartbeats escalated into fits: When attending physician Dr. William Griggs couldn't find a medical cause he turned to supernatural ones. /

Belief in witches and Satan was as much a part of Puritan America as turkey. Community elders, eager to understand what had gone wrong with the girls — as well as their town — pressed for names. /

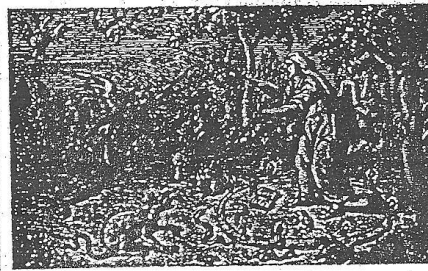
On February 29, three women were charged with witchcraft. One was poor, another didn't attend church, the third was Tituba the slave. Drawn from society's fringe, these candidates were the same marginally acceptable types as others accused in witch trials throughout the colonies. /

But then something unusual happened. Salem Village itself went into fits and a single witch trial mushroomed into a witch hunt. In this explosion of suspicion and fear, close to 200 people were accused of witchcraft. Several died in jail awaiting trial, 19 swung from the gallows and one, Giles Corey, was pressed to death for refusing to enter a plea.

The witch hunts in Salem took less than nine months. But these events have sentenced the town to be synonymous with witchcraft for the past 300 years. They have clearly sparked the imagination of the covens of tourists who come each



Above: Direct descendants of Rebecca Nurse, one of the victims of the Salem witchcraft trials.



Left: Original witch trial artifacts and documents will be on display at the Essex Institute in Salem.

year to visit Salem's museums and to buy more black cats and broomstick-witches than you could possibly imagine. And these events have also invited generations of historians to wonder why.

Interestingly, the resulting theories often say as much about the times in which they are formed as they do 17th-century Salem. In the 1940s and '50s, for example, the Freudians blamed Puritanical repression for the mass hysteria.

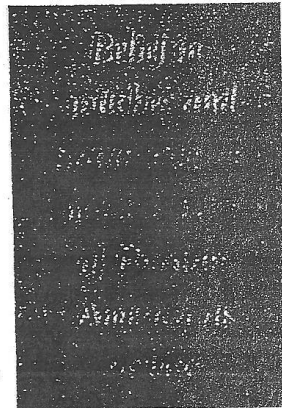
One author, Marion Starkey, likened the girls in Parris' kitchen to a pack of "bobby-soxers" who, with no "legitimate outlet for their natural high spirits, found relief for their tensions in an emotional 'orgy' of accusation."

In the late '60s, one fashionable theory proposed that some hallucinogenic fungus infiltrated Salem's food supply.

While recent theories reflect today's concerns, they also sound the death knell for the old stereotypes of tight-lipped Puritans and cackling hags. Unlike their predecessors, current historians no longer build upon the rumors and conclusions passed on by previous generations. These newer scholars have done their homework: unearthing diaries, tax logs, deed registries, accounts of Salem's daily life before, during and after the trials. Thanks to their efforts, 17th-century Salem has re-emerged as a community of very real people divided more

by downward mobility than devils, sexism than sorcery.

"The story of witchcraft is the story of human interaction, tension between neighbors or groups of people," explains Dr. Carol Karlsen, professor of his-



tory at the University of Michigan.

When Drs. Stephen Nissenbaum and Paul Boyer, authors of *Salem Possessed*, looked at who accused whom in Salem, the answer told a story of shifting loyalties and fortunes.

Evidently, the year 1692 saw two major, local struggles peak and converge. First was the fight about whether Salem Village should remain a part of the more prosperous Salem Town or declare its independence. The second was a longstanding feud between two families: the Porters, whose rising fortunes and influence were linked to Salem Town, and the Putnams, genteel inland farmers on the decline, who were tied to the move for independence.

Come 1692, these resentments found an outlet. Three Putnam girls, part of the clutch meeting in the kitchen of their family's ally, Rev. Parris, started the ball rolling. As the hysteria grew, they were joined by parents, in-laws and cousins.

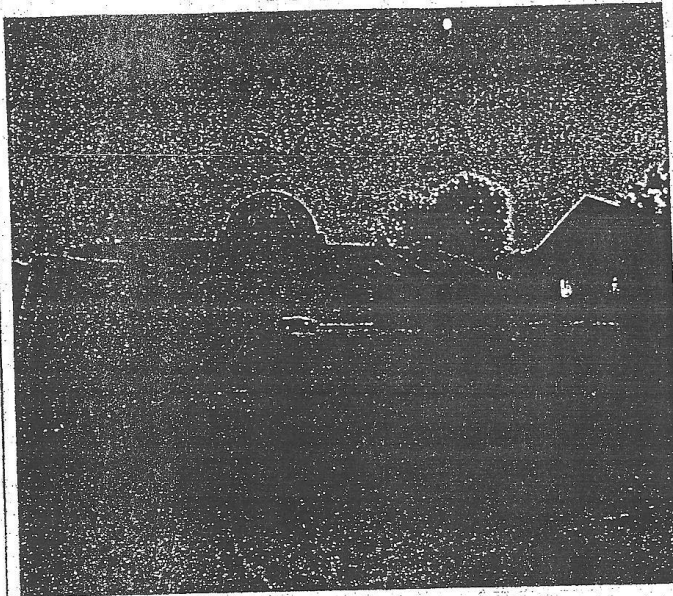
By careful research Nissenbaum and Boyer showed that eight Putnams testified against at least 46 accused witches. And, at least 19 of these accused were from the Porter camp.

"Not one Porter was ever accused," notes Dr. Nissenbaum. "They were, in and of themselves, just too powerful. So the Putnams went after Porter allies — their relatives, dependents and in-laws.

"Despite all this, I don't think it was a conspiracy of revenge using the cover of witchcraft," he adds. "These people sincerely believed in witchcraft and were sincerely frightened. At the beginning, the young girls were pressed for names. And when they finally produced

some, they came up with names they knew would be acceptable."

In Salem, as in most places hosting witchcraft accusations, the "acceptable" names were mostly female. When Carol Karlsen chose to take an in-depth look at why women were



A granite wall at this Salem memorial lists the victims of the witchcraft trials.

accused in particular and why particular women were accused, she made an amazing discovery. She had known, due to a study by John Demos of Yale University, that most Salem witches were women over 40. As she began piecing together the evidence she realized that, even more important than their age, these mid-life women were past their childbearing years.

The other common thread that linked them was mindboggling. Women from families without male heirs made up 76 percent of the women found guilty in New England witch trials. They also made up 89 percent of the women who were executed.

"The Puritans had a very hierarchical society. Their model woman was submissive, a helpmate who deferred to her betters in class and gender," explains Dr. Karlsen, who authored *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*. "So these women who stood to inherit were often a double threat. Not only would they take resources out of male hands, but they were also potentially independent."

In fact, Karlsen's studies also showed that men leveled three-fourths of the accusations and any woman who strayed too far from her place in Puritan society was in danger. Rumor had it that Sarah Osbourne, one of the first three women accused, lived with her much younger second husband before marrying him. Tavern-owner Elinor Hollingworth took on a nontraditional role and, even worse, succeeded in it.

This past summer, Salem unveiled a memorial on a small parcel of land adjacent to the Charter Street Burial Ground

where, among others, Martha Corey was buried after being hanged for witchcraft. A wall of granite bears the names of the victims and their protests of innocence, the words cut off in mid-stream as were the accused themselves. Thinking about these names, these words, it's hard to store Salem's trials on the dusty shelves of history. ■

Susan Goodman is a Massachusetts-based freelancer.

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