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Salem Witchcraft Trials - Cliff's notes summary of what happened, and how it effects the modern day

The Salem Witch trials showed a hideous and violent side of the early American settlers who migrated to the North American continent supposedly to escape religious persecution.

Here are the facts: In 1692, Salem, Massachusetts, three little girls related to the Reverend Samuel Parris started showing symptoms of an unknown illness. They screamed, threw things around, uttered strange sounds and even pretended to fly around the room. The frightened onlookers could find no reason for this behavior. As the number of children afflicted with this behavior increased, the children were asked if they knew of any reason for their afflictions.

They pointed out three poor and helpless people including their family slave Tituba who used to take care of them. Tituba was originally from Barbados and used to entertain the children with strange stories from her home country. The three originally accused were helpless human beings, shunned by society and with no one to stand by them.

All three women were accused of hurting the girls using witchcraft and jailed. As the children realized how much power they had, they started accusing different people, including church members and other respected community members. Soon there were more than 150 people who were accused of practicing witchcraft and jailed.

The first person to be tried was Bridget Bishop. In a single day, she was found guilty and hanged on June 10, 1692. More people were tried and then hanged. A total of nineteen people (fourteen women and five men) were hanged and one was crushed to death because he refused to stand trial. Many died in the





prisons. A 4 year old was forced to give testimony against her mother who was subsequently jailed for being a witch.

This ghastly mockery of justice has left a lot of people puzzled as to how something like this could have happened. Some say that girls and women in general had very little self-respect because of the conditions of living in those times. Boys were able to enjoy life outdoors with the men, going fishing, swimming or just playing games while the girls were imprisoned in their own home, barely seen and not heard at all.

When humans are stripped of any power that they have and treated as slaves, their behavior is usually dictated by instinct, rather than cultural mores. There are many herbs and roots that are poisonous and these could have made the children behave in strange ways. The girls were alone at home with no adults around and it is possible that they ingested something that behaved like a psychedelic drug. America was a new, uncharted and strange country to the pilgrims.

The townsfolk, in their puritanical mania immediately saw Satan as a reason for the children's behavior. The children quickly found that their words were sharper than knives and strong enough to kill anyone they didn't like. It was like a violent, psychological game for them. As the number of people targeted increased, the remaining townsfolk knew that it was a matter of time before these children targeted them.

As more people were arrested in that small little town, even the accusers had turned against each other. People were afraid to be seen by the girls. They would point out the people they did not like and accuse them of being witches. Satan is a mythical figure that was invented by one particular religion to keep its followers perpetually petrified and unable to even consider any other way of life. However, this case shows how such a hoax can backfire and cause people to kill each other.

Although many people assumed that the dark ages were over, there are still pockets of the world where man turns against his brother or sister with hate in his heart and fear in his mind. Recently, this year (2008) we have had incidents in Africa, Saudi Arabia where someone accuses others of witchcraft and the people immediately respond by arresting them!

As we can see, it was the fear of the people and the lack of real faith in each other that led to this macabre plot that killed so many innocent women and children. Even though Anne Putnam, one of the accusers later recanted her story and blamed it all on the Devil (of course!), most of the accused who were jailed either did not survive or lived the rest of their lives in poverty, sickness and mediocrity.





These incidents increase the importance of having a faith that believes in the goodness of people and the common thread that runs through all of humanity. It is up to each one of us to personally take that as a goal and work towards bringing the world together with love and joy.

Just Reading about the Salem Witch trials makes my heart weep for the loss of those innocent souls who were killed in various ways by those who claimed to be righteous and on God's side. Only the ones who have true faith know that God doesn't condone killing his creation for any reason. Unfortunately, however, there are many who claim to know God and act like they do not even have a soul.

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