**THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS 1692**

**THE BACKGROUND TO THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS**

Belief in magic is as old as mankind. People have always believed you could use magic to improve your crop or heal illnesses. In Greek and Roman times belief in magic was widespread. People believed they could use magic to harm by causing sickness or misfortune.

From the end of the 15th century, people thought some could actually make a contract with the Devil. In return for power they used magic to harm crops, animals and people.

In the 16th and 17th centuries most people firmly believed in an evil supernatural power as well as a good one. They also believed that some human beings joined the evil power. The thought that your seemingly ordinary neighbor was secretly working for the devil was very frightening.

In 1688 a woman named Mary Glover was hanged in Boston. A man named Cotton Mather was involved in this case. Mather was convinced of the reality of witchcraft and he became involved in the events at Salem. From 1689 he was the minister of a church meeting in Salem Village.

The witch mania began in Salem Village. In 1692 Salem Village had about 600 inhabitants. Officially it was part of nearby Salem Town. Some of its citizens wanted to become separate from Salem Town and some did not. There was fierce disagreement between them.

The witch hysteria in Salem began in January 1692. It led to the deaths of more than 20. Altogether 19 people were executed by hanging. In most of Europe witches were burned but in England and the North American colonies the punishment was hanging. Another man, named Giles Corey was pressed to death. He was accused of being a witch but before the trial could proceed he had to plead guilty or not guilty. Corey bravely refused to plead. To try and force him heavy weights were placed on him. The unfortunate man eventually died from this torture. Four people died in prison while awaiting trial.

The witch mania began when two girls, 9 year old Betty Parris and her 11 year old cousin Abigail Williams tried fortune telling. The two were staying with Betty's father, Reverend Samuel Parris. During the winter they and their friends experimented with fortune telling by cracking eggs into a glass and interpreting the shapes that were formed. The family owned a slave called Tituba. She *may* have been present when the fortune telling took place. It has also been suggested that Tituba told the girls tales about witchcraft and so influenced them.

The two girls began having strange fits. A doctor was called but he was unable to explain the fits. He claimed the girls were bewitched. Unfortunately, he started a chain of events. Later several other girls began to have fits, 18 year old Elizabeth Booth, 20 year old Sarah Churchill, 17 year old Elizabeth Hubbard, 19 year old Mercy Lewis, 12 year old Ann Putnam, 18 year old Susan Sheldon, 16 year old Mary Walcott, 20 year old Mary Warren. There were cases in England of girls having fits and then accusing people of witchcraft but what was unusual in Salem was the scale of the accusations.

A woman named Mary Sibley persuaded Tituba to bake a witch cake. It was made from rye and the urine of the two original girls, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams. In those days people believed that if you suspected a person was bewitched, you could make a witch cake and feed it to a dog. If the dog then behaved like the afflicted person, it was proof that witchcraft was the cause. The dog was given the cake and its behavior afterwards was said to be like that of the afflicted girls. This was taken as evidence that witchcraft was indeed responsible.

The girls then identified those responsible. They blamed three women, Tituba, the slave, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. Significantly all three women had low status. If the girls had accused respected members of the community, they might not have been believed. Tituba was looked down upon because she was a slave. Sarah Good was poor and sometimes begged for food. Sarah Osborne had not been to church for a year. That earned her disapproval from many of her neighbors.

The three were arrested. Judge John Hathorne and Judge Jonathan Corwin examined them. Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne denied the charges but Tituba confessed. Perhaps she felt that if she denied the charge she would not be believed, after all she was only a slave. She may also have hoped that if she confessed she would be spared. She was correct. Tituba was imprisoned for a while but she was not executed. Once the witch hysteria was over Tituba withdrew her confession.

One of the strangest parts of the witch hysteria was that if you were accused and you confessed your life was spared. However if you were accused and you denied the charge but where then convicted you were hanged. The two other women denied any involvement in witchcraft. Sarah Osborne died in prison while awaiting trial.

More and more people were arrested.

In her confession, Tituba claimed that she met a tall man from Boston (the authorities believed he must have been Satan). She said she was forced to sign a book, which had other named written in it. That convinced the authorities that there must be other witches in Salem apart from those originally arrested.

Ann Putnam accused a woman named Martha Corey of being a witch. Then an old woman named Rebecca Nurse was accused. Soon so many people were arrested that the governor set up a special court to deal with them all.

The first person to be executed was called Bridget Bishop. She had been married three times and she ran two taverns. Worse, she had been tried for witchcraft before. It was said that dolls with pins in them were found in her house. Despite the lack or hard evidence the unfortunate woman was convicted and hanged.

If the evidence against Bishop was weak, the 'evidence' against other people was absurd! The afflicted girls claimed that they could see the accused persons spirit attacking them even when the accused was not physically present. Naturally only they could see the spirits. Judge William Stoughton insisted on admitting this as evidence.

5 more were tried and were hanged.

The trial of Rebecca Nurse was a joke. She was an old lady of good character and the jury let her go, however; the girls who accused her of being a witch had fits or fainted. Incredibly the judge, William Stoughton, 'invited' the jury to reconsider their verdict. This time they found her guilty.

Many people were having increasing doubts about the guilt of the accused. 6 more were tried and found guilty.

John Proctor was a farmer aged about 60. He was an outspoken man who was openly skeptical about the witch trials. Nevertheless, it was his wife Elizabeth who was accused first. John Proctor bravely defended her and as a result *he* was accused of being a witch. John Proctor wrote a letter to the Boston clergy denouncing the unfairness of the trials. His letter probably did have some effect but unfortunately it did not save his life.

Elizabeth Proctor was spared because she was pregnant but the others were hanged. Before John Proctor died he said the Lord's Prayer, without making any mistakes. Witches were not supposed to be able to do that and he sowed seeds of doubt in many people’s minds.

Giles Corey was pressed to death. Finally 8 more were hanged.

**THE END OF THE WITCH SALEM TRIALS**

Public opinion was now turning against the witch trials. So many people were being accused of witchcraft it started to seem absurd. People could not believe that so many of their neighbors were witches. People were worried that innocent people were being executed. There were doubts about using spirits evidence. Finally the court refused to allow this type of evidence.

The Governor pardoned all those in prison (either convicted or awaiting trial). In 1696 some jurors admitted they made a terrible mistake. In 1697 a day of praying for forgiveness was held. One of the judges who presided over the witch trials publicly apologized.

**ANSWERS**

So what caused this tragedy? Nobody is certain but a number of theories have been put forward.

It has been suggested that the people of Salem felt insecure and this was a contributing factor to the hysteria.

* They were afraid of Indian attacks and afraid of smallpox.
* The winter of 1692-93 was also harsh adding to people's anxiety. Perhaps that made the people more susceptible to outbreaks of hysteria than usual.

There were conflicts between the wealthy families in Salem village. There was also conflict between Salem village and Salem town. The witch hysteria was really an excuse for one group to attack another.

Perhaps there was some psychological explanation. The girls enjoyed the attention and power they received and the whole thing got out of hand.

After Salem, nobody else was executed for witchcraft in America.

One of the 'afflicted' girls, Ann Putnam, later apologized to the members of her church. She blamed the Devil for the deaths of many innocent people.

The General Court of Massachusetts overturned the convictions for witchcraft and granted compensation to the relatives of the victims bringing the whole sorry episode to an end. In the early 18th century belief in witches died out.

Finally in 1992 a memorial was built to those who were wrongly executed at Salem.