

A Witch in the Family

An Award-Winning Author Investigates
His Ancestor's Trial and Execution

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Chapter One: Witches Then and Now

Nobody broke the news to me—gently or otherwise—and I didn't find out by delving into family genealogy. As far back as I can remember, I've known I was descended from a witch—or rather, I was descended from a woman who was hanged as one. When I probe my memory, the first family discussion I recall on the subject had to do with the correct form of the past tense of the verb "to hang."

"Pictures are hung," my mother told me. "People are hanged."

My father died when I was young, and the only other male in the immediate family, my brother, went away to college when I was four. The result was my mother, grandmother, and five-years-older sister raised me. Surrounded by three of the feminine persuasion and hearing often about my seven-times-great grandmother who ran a farm by herself and was able to do things women weren't supposed to be able to do—and was hanged as a witch for it—it's no wonder I came to be what you might call an early feminist, believing a woman could do anything a man could do.

In recent years I've wondered if my ancestor really was a witch. Having studied transcriptions of as many original documents from the time of the New England witch hysteria as I could get my hands on, I'm almost certain at least some of the accused were practicing magic, or "witchcraft" as it then was called. I'll hold off until later to give an opinion about my ancestor's guilt or lack of it but will say my mother was convinced she was innocent. It was generally accepted in the Martin household that the words on her memorial in Amesbury, Massachusetts were true. She was, "An honest, hardworking, Christian woman. Accused as a witch, tried and executed at Salem, July 19, 1692. A martyr of superstition."

Perhaps as a result, my parents were what you might call staunchly anti Christian-fundamentalists.

Let me revise that statement. My mother was, which is perhaps a little strange since it was my father's side that had the witch in it. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure what my father felt because I was so young when he passed away. His two brothers were Methodist ministers, and I recall now my mother saying he'd wanted to be one, too, but she'd talked him out of it. She'd said she simply couldn't be a minister's wife. Maybe it had to do with her husband's six-times-great grandmother having been hanged as a witch. Or maybe it was something more than that. As an outward display of contempt for what she considered a narrow-minded and dangerously-superstitious world view, she insisted on naming my older sister "Susannah North Martin" after the family martyr, which makes me wonder now if the connection between my mother, whose name was Evelyn, and the first Susannah Martin wasn't somehow closer than it would appear at first glance.

Whatever the case may be, nowadays you'd think most people wouldn't care one way or the other if you had someone in the family who was tried, convicted, and executed more than 300 years ago for what was then the felony of witchcraft. It's probably true most wouldn't. But one time, when it came out in conversation I was descended from one of the Salem Witches, the mother of a girl I was dating gave me the strangest look. It turned out she was a staunchly Christian lady—what my mother would have called, with a hint of scorn in her voice, a "Bible thumper." Even in this modern age, this woman believed witches were real, evil, and to be feared and shunned.

I guess she never watched *Bewitched*.

Caution: This Book May Challenge Your Beliefs

What happened in New England long ago was tragic and horrific, which is why I suppose it still fascinates so many of us today. At the very least, it makes us think and wonder. And if someone you are directly descended from was caught up in it and actually killed by it—well, you might say having a witch in the family makes you look at things differently than you otherwise might. For one thing, you don't automatically assume people in authority know what they're talking about. In my own case, I almost always submit to an internal compass what is said by Church leaders, people in positions of authority in government or science, or in practically any discipline for that matter. My tendency is hold off on accepting what they say is true until some evidence or pattern causes it to

click into place in my gut. Even when things do resonate with truth, I remain open to the possibility that I, or they, might be wrong, or that whatever I had accepted as being one way might in light of new evidence be subject to revision, however slight. The result of this inherent skepticism is that I've been forced to change my world view many times over the years. This holds even for my mother's assumptions concerning the witch trials in New England, and our ancestor's guilt or lack of it.

Let's talk about belief systems. To me, you might compare one to stack of cans like you might see in a grocery store, containing peas or soup, that forms a pyramid. Each can represents an individual belief. All are in place and fit together to form a world view that makes sense because everything belongs where it is and holds the other cans in place.

What happens if hard evidence turns up that refutes one of the beliefs, especially one of the key supports near the bottom? Suppose if you remove or change that can, the whole stack will come tumbling down?

If you're honest with yourself, that can of peas will have to go, even though you may be left with a helluva mess. If you are a seeker of truth, you will be compelled to remove an erroneous belief even though your pyramid of cans will have to be reconstructed from the ground up.

The Case of the Great Sphinx at Giza

Let me give you an example of the reaction of a scientific community to new information which if accepted would have upset long and dearly-held theories. For many years the body of the Great Sphinx at Giza, Egypt, was covered with sand. The reason was that it is lower than the surrounding area. No one disputes that in its natural state the part of the Sphinx that's now the head was an outcropping of rock sticking out of the ground. The Egyptians, or perhaps some other ancient people, as we will see, thought this rock could be carved into the head of an animal or a king, and they did so. At some point, maybe at the same time, the rest of the rock was uncovered and carved into a body to go with it. Over the years sand storms covered it up again. But today the sand has been cleared away and the body is exposed.

Not long ago, a geologist happened to notice that the body of the Sphinx appears to have been badly worn by water. The rock is clearly eroded, and small gullies can be seen all over it. Other geologists were consulted. The type of rock the Sphinx is made of was compared with the same type of rock that indeed had been worn away by water. Sure enough, without doubt the Sphinx's body has

suffered water erosion.

How could this be? As we all know the Sphinx is located in the middle of a desert where it almost never rains. According to textbooks, Egyptologists, and tradition, the head of the Sphinx is a sculpture of King Khafre of Egypt who lived about 4500 years ago. During his reign was when the Sphinx is supposed to have been carved. Yet meteorologists who study ancient weather patterns say the climate of Giza was pretty much the same 4500 years ago as it is today. For there to have been enough rain to cause the type of erosion in evidence, the Sphinx would have to have been in existence for more than twice that long. Way back then—9,000 to 14,000 years ago—the weather of the area would have been similar to the African savanna with a season when rain poured down for several months each year. This would easily have caused the erosion.

When I learned this, my reaction was that the Sphinx must be a heckuva lot older than anyone previously thought. Some sort of civilization must have existed before the Egyptians, or at least a group of people smart and industrious enough to have carved the outcropping into a head, clear away and expose the base, and carve it into the body of the animal. Indeed, such a theory has been put forth. Close examination of the head reveals the current sculpture that resembles King Khafre may have been reworked from an earlier one that depicted an animal's head. It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to picture an ancient civilization of hunter gatherer people on the savanna digging out the outcropping and carving it into the shape of a lion, for example. Humans have had the mental ability to do this sort of thing for at least as long as the cave paintings have existed in France and Spain, and that's 30,000 or 40,000 years. It isn't hard to imagine the Egyptians coming along later and adapting an already ancient monolith for their own purposes.

What do you suppose was the reaction of the scientific community of Egyptologists to all of this?

Why, naturally, it was to reject it out of hand.

No kidding.

They have refused to listen—have totally rejected the whole idea. They have too much invested in the belief that Egyptians created the Sphinx. To admit the possibility of anything else would be to jeopardize Egypt's claim to be the first true civilization on earth. These scientists are simply not going to let something like water erosion on the body of the Sphinx cause them to rethink and let go of positions they hold dear. Accepting the erosion even exists would mean theories

they hold about how the Sphinx came to be would have to be revised. For most of them a matter of pride may be at stake since the majority are Egyptians themselves and feel good about their ancestors having produced the first civilization. And for some it may be a matter of religious faith. As followers of Islam they trace their lineage back through Abraham all the way to Adam and Eve. If one calculates how long humans have been around based on the number of generations listed in the Bible, the figure is approximately 4500 to 5000 years. No way the Sphinx could be older than that, right?

My objective in telling you this story is to put you on notice. Be prepared. This book contains information that may cause it to be necessary to reconstruct your world view. If this turns out to be the case, the best way for you to react is to be glad. You will be in closer touch with reality, even though your new world view may be out of sync with that held by many living now, in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Witchcraft in the Seventeenth Century

Let's take a look at New England in the late seventeenth century. It's not an exaggeration to say that in 1692 mass hysteria and rampant paranoia swept the New England countryside. People in the small village of Salem, and indeed across the whole of Essex County Massachusetts, were being accused of casting spells, of consorting with the devil, of being witches. This persecution was a relatively rare phenomenon in America. But there was nothing at all new about it in western civilization. Throughout France, Italy, Germany, and England, witch hunts had been going on and commonplace for 300 years. Some think millions may have been executed, but most historians now dispute this. According to reliable sources, from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people were executed. Many, like Joan of Arc, were burned at the stake.

Witches Were Condemned by the Bible

In those days, people believed what was written in the Bible was literally the word of God. This isn't hard to believe since plenty of Christians still do today, particularly members of evangelical churches. They call themselves "Bible inerrantists" and say they believe what the Bible contains is literally the word of God put down on papyrus or on clay tablets by Moses, the prophets, the disciples and others who were selected by God for the task. They hold that what is written is inviolable, infallible, and that we are to live by it on a daily basis.

Where does it say witches should be put to death?

The Ten Commandments are given in Chapter Twenty of the Book of Exodus, and are followed by a host of smaller commandments and the punishments to be meted out for breaking them. If someone steals an ox, for example, and slaughters it or sells it, and that person gets caught, he must pay back five head of cattle to settle the score. Stealing a sheep, on the other hand, only requires the pay back of four sheep. If a man seduces and sleeps with a virgin who is not betrothed, he must pay the bride-price, presumably to her father, and marry her anyway. And on it goes. Exodus 22:18 says, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." That's the King James translation, which is what our New England forefathers would have been familiar with. A more recent translation, the New International Version puts it this way: "Do not allow a sorceress to live." Either way, it's pretty clear what's to be done with people who conjure up spells and work magic. They are to be put to death, no doubt because they called on spirits other than Yahweh, the Old Testament God of the Jews. As you may recall from Sunday School, the Old Testament God is a jealous God and it was a big no-no to cavort with or worship others. "You shall have no other gods before me" tops the list of the Ten Commandments.

Despite this biblical condemnation, however, the record shows that early Christians were relatively tolerant of paganism and sorcery. The apostle, Paul, who was arguably the most prolific of the early Christian evangelists, spent the majority of his ministry converting as many gentiles as possible. Gentiles were pagans, and what in the seventeenth century would have been labeled "witchcraft" was rampant among them. Paul was a smart guy and realized that putting these heathens to death would not win friends or influence people in a positive way. As a result, he took a "when in Rome do as the Romans" approach and even persuaded other Church leaders of the time, including the top guy, Peter, that gentiles who wished to become Christians should not be required to follow Jewish dietary laws or be circumcised. This became Church canon in spite of Old Testament laws and commandments spelling out what was permissible and what wasn't. So you might say the new followers of "the way," as Christianity then was called, were selective about which commandments—after the big ten—they followed. They even ditched one altogether—remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy. As God had rested on the seventh day, Saturday, so were the Jews to rest. Christians moved their day of worship to the first day of the week—Sunday. But that was in the days the Church was reaching out for new followers. Some historians say that as the Roman Catholic Church began to consolidate its power—once it became the official state religion of the Roman Empire and, later, of other countries such as Spain and France, heretics were looked upon as enemies. By 1231 Pope Gregory IX instituted the Inquisition in order to expose and punish heresy, and from that

point forward the practice of magic and sorcery was dangerous business. After all, what it boiled down to was a religion in competition with Christianity, and a threat to the authority of the Church and its leaders.

In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII declared witchcraft a heresy, the punishment for which was death. Witch hunts often were conducted by superstitious villagers. Some historians think when animosities and tensions arose among people, a witch hunt was a way to get rid of real or imagined enemies. The authorities rarely did anything to stop them. Many people probably did believe their neighbors to be sorcerers and were afraid of them. And I'm willing to bet many actually were practicing magic. After all, some in our modern, twenty-first century world claim to be witches. Why wouldn't witches have existed then?

Witchcraft Today

In Chesterfield County Virginia, which borders on the city where I live, county meetings are opened with a prayer. Apparently the ACLU hasn't learned of this. Anyhow, the honor of giving the invocation is rotated among Christian and Jewish clergy. A resident of Chesterfield, Cyndi Simpson, is a Wiccan priestess, also known as a witch, affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations—a church that, according to its web site, does not require its members to subscribe to any particular creed. Cyndi asked the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors to add her name to the list of ministers, rabbis, and priests who give invocations at the meetings. Her hope, she said, was to give a generalized invocation "to the creator of the universe" in order to help rid the community of misconceptions about witches and Wiccans. You see, in Virginia, and probably in many other backward areas, Wicca and other neopagan religions are often associated with Satanism. According to Cyndi this is wrong. She is quoted in the local newspaper as saying, "I wasn't going to talk about the Goddess. I was going to call the elements, maybe offer up an invocation to the highest being— something that would be non secular. But they didn't want any of that. One of the board supervisors called Wicca a mockery."

Cyndi took her case to court and lost.

So, according to Cyndi Simpson and other Wiccans, modern witches are not, for the most part, devil worshipers. "Satanists" are. The web site of the Church of Satan says that the organization has about 10,000 members in the United States today.

But Cyndi says that organization is not to be confused with Wicca and witchcraft, which according a Wicca web site is "a pantheistic religion that

incorporates spirituality, divinity and nature." Wicca, it says, is a peaceful, harmonious and balanced way of thinking and life that promotes oneness with the Divine and all that exists. Because most modern witches, it says, believe every living thing springs from and has the Divine at its core, Wiccans do not believe in working evil spells, adding that most believe in the Wiccan Rede, which states, "An [sic] it harm none, do what you will." This web site goes on to explain the threefold rule: that anything a person does, any energy she sends out will come back to her, magnified. Do good and good will return to you. Do evil and evil will come back. Or, as the Apostle Paul wrote, "A man reaps what he sows."¹ On this, Christianity and most religions of the world agree.

Guarding Against Fallacious Witchcraft Accusations

Actually, perhaps Virginia is not so backward. In the middle of the seventeenth century a law was passed in what is now the Old Dominion to prevent people from arbitrarily charging others with witchcraft. Anyone who accused someone and could not produce substantial proof could be fined the amount of fifteen hundred pounds of tobacco.² That's the equivalent of a full year's production for a small planter.

But no such law existed in New England, and a number of folks in Salem Village sowed some pretty nasty stuff. It appears at least one individual reaped what he sowed. On July 19, 1692, five women, including my ancestor, Susannah North Martin, were hanged. When one of the women, Sarah Good, stood at the gallows ready to die, she was asked once more by Reverend Nicholas Noyes, assistant minister of the Salem Town church, to confess and in so doing save her soul. Rather than do so, she is said to have screamed, "You are a liar! I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink."

The curse came true. Twenty-five years later, as Noyes lay dying, he choked on his own blood.

Stay tuned. In the next chapter, we will begin to take a closer look at the life and the times of Essex County, Massachusetts in 1692.

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¹ Galatians 6:7, NIV translation

² *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in Colonial America*, Copyright 1997 by Dale Taylor, Writer's Digest Books