By Tom Soboleski

Sympathy for the Devil

THE CONNECTICUT 'WITCHES'

Our bizarre history of witch trials, killings, and efforts to absolve the innocent

Around this time of year, trick or treaters don witch costumes to gleefully mimic gnarled and wicked woman of evil power. Nowadays it's just a bit of fun. But in Connecticut 360 years ago, it could be a death sentence.

Salem may be infamous for its witch-hunts, but Connecticut has the dubious distinction of holding the first known trial of an accused witch in North America—and the first execution.

The hanging of Alse (Alice) Young of Windsor in 1647 was followed the next year by the hanging of Mary Johnson of Wethersfield. Of the latter, a jury found "by her own confession she is guilty of familiarity with the devil."[1] Among other accusations, Johnson "confessed that she had murdered a child and committed uncleanness both with men and with devils."[2]

An award-winning 1958 children's novel, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, is inspired by these events.

There were nine more victims sent to the gallows between 1651 and 1663. What triggered this frenzy in the dark woods of Connecticut 40 years before Salem had its own murderous moment? Why were these people killed? And does the state owe them (and their descendants) an apology? Some say yes. But getting the pardons issued has been another matter.

In colonial Connecticut, religion's role and influence dominated society. With it came the widespread belief that women were somehow inherently evil, and could use sexual power to intimidate. A woman possessed had supernatural powers. She was capable of anything.

In 1662, 8-year-old Elizabeth Kelly died while screaming, "Goody Ayres chokes me!" Elizabeth had taken ill the night after she walked with Ayres on her way home from church after visiting her grandmother. She believed that Ayres had cast a spell on her, and cried out to her father, "Help me! Help me! Goodwife[3] Ayres is upon me. She chokes me. She kneels on my belly. She will break my bowels. She pinches me."

Three nights later, Elizabeth had another attack and died. An autopsy found a broken gall bladder and a tightly constricted gullet. This was the first autopsy ever performed in Connecticut. Fearing for her life, Ayres and her husband fled the colony.[4]

Accusations and charges were broad. When dairy or beer got spoiled, when livestock and chickens didn't function normally, or a neighbor's crops were damaged, often the suspected cause was a woman under Satan's spell. There was pervasive fear that the devil was recruiting them.[5] It ran so deep that a capital law established by the General Court of Connecticut in 1642 stated: "If any man or woman be a witch, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death."

NO REST FOR THE 'WITCHES'

While Massachusetts has since forgiven its so-called witches, Connecticut has yet to do so. In 2008, the state senate considered a resolution that acknowledged the prosecutions and executions of that era as based on "community-wide hysteria and fear" and "no disgrace or cause for distress should attach to the descendants of these accused and convicted persons...."[6] A similar resolution was presented in 2009. Neither has ever been adopted.

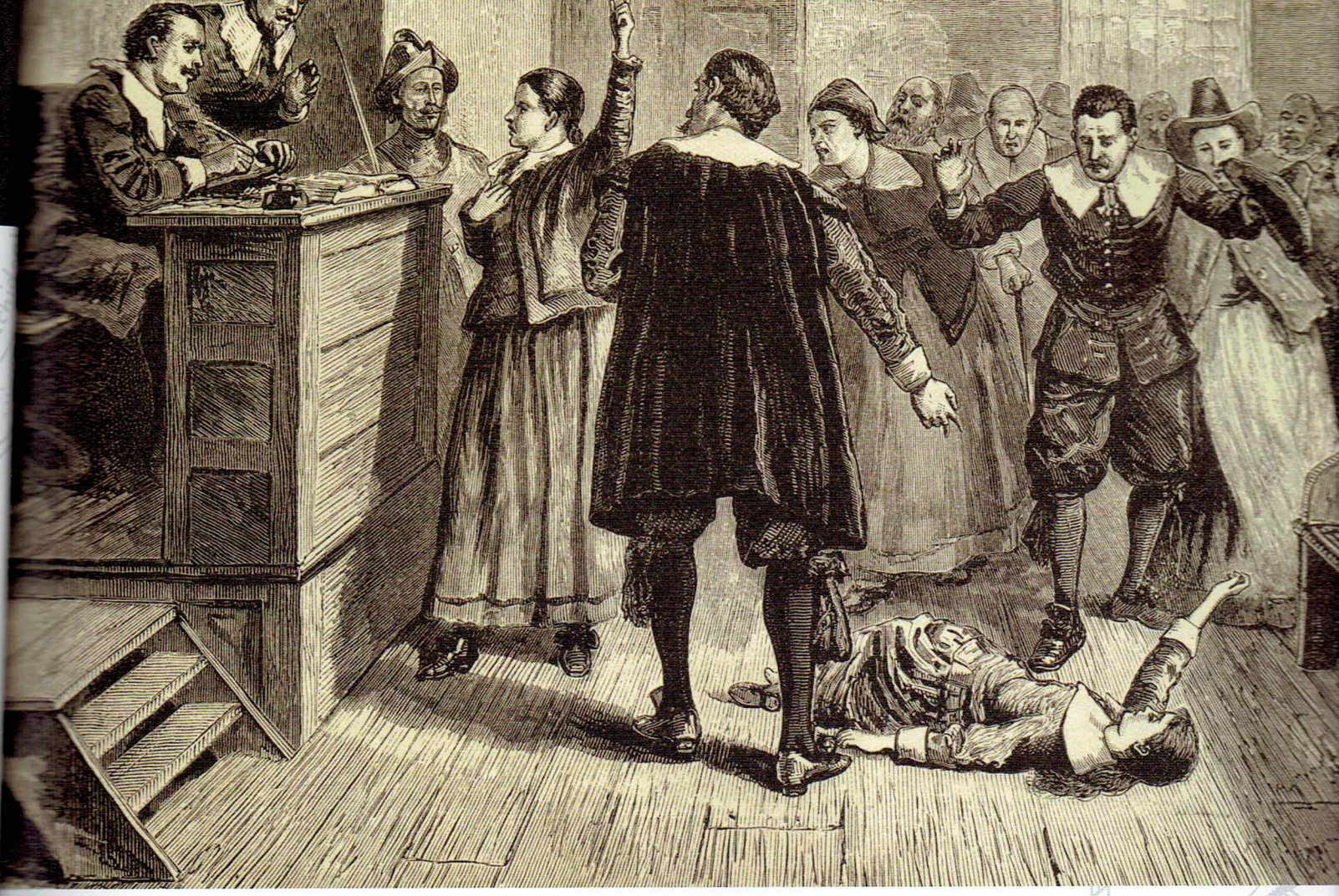
The 2008 resolution, SJ 26, received a public hearing by the Judiciary Committee. Testifying at that hearing were three women who traced their ancestry to accused witches who were hung: Debra and Adelaide Avery, mother and daughter, who are eighth and ninth generation descendants of Mary Sanford; and Laura Barber Cayer, whose eighth great aunt was Lydia Gilbert. As part of their testimony, the Averys and Cayer submitted detailed charts to prove their lineage.

Cayer says her interest in tracing her ancestry began "when I was about 14 and *Roots* was on TV. After watching Roots I started digging, getting books on genealogy, got the family involved." When she discovered her relation to Gilbert, she says, "I felt very bad for her, her case is awful. The man killed was a next-door neighbor who boarded with them. She provided food and clothes for him."

The man killed was Henry Stiles, in 1651, by the accidental discharge of the gun of Thomas Allyn during militia exercises. Allyn confessed to negligence and was found guilty of "homicide by misadventure" and was fined and banned from bearing arms. Three years later, his 20-pound fine was remitted and Gilbert became suspected. Cayer says we can only speculate on the reason, but it could be that Stiles owed Gilbert money for her boarding services. Gilbert was convicted of putting a spell on Allyn, causing his gun to discharge. The court ruled, "Lydea Gilburt, thou . . . dost give entertainment to Satan ... and by his help hast killed the body of Henry Styles, besides other witchcrafts, for which ... thou deserves to die."[7]

Whatever evidence was presented to the court is not documented. In those times, there was a lot of finger pointing and little proof. And, as Cayer says, "Women had no power, no property. It was very easy for her to be blamed. I really feel sorry for her." Cayer was "very disappointed" that the resolution she testified on was never adopted. "We were told they ran out of time and they weren't going to bring it up later in the session."

Debra Avery, eighth generation granddaughter of Mary Sanford, said they would revisit the issue. "It's about these people, not witches or whether they were witches. I don't know if they were practicing witchcraft. If you look at it, it was political. It's about recognizing an injustice. I doubt our grandmother was



A woman protests as one of her accusers, a young girl, appears to have convulsions. A small group of women were the source of accusations, testimony, and dramatic demonstrations.

practicing black magic." Mary Sanford was found guilty in 1662 of entertaining familiarity with Satan "and by his help hast acted and come to the knowledge of secrets in a preternatural way beyond the ordinary course of nature, to the great disturbance of several members of this commonwealth ... and ... thou deserves to die."[8]

Connecticut state Senator John Kissel chaired that 2008 hearing, and is still a member of the Judiciary Committee. He says, "There was not enough support to put it to a vote," and he doesn't foresee support in the legislature for a pardon or apology because, "the concern would be that folks would criticize the effort. With so many other issues—people losing jobs, the economy, etc.—they would say, 'Why are we spending time on this?' "

Efforts to obtain an apology are being kept alive by Anthony Griego, a member of the Connecticut Wiccan & Pagan Network. After hearing a talk on the subject of colonial witches and the failure of the 2008 resolution, "I picked up the ball," he says. He drafted a proclamation asking Gov. Dannel Malloy to apologize. "He never acknowledged or responded to me," Griego says. He then circulated a petition asking for an apology, gathering 550 signatures, and presented it to his state representative, Mike D'Agostino. "He never responded," Griego says.

Griego has since started a campaign to raise funds to put up a memorial to recognize the 11 who were hung in Connecticut. "We would like to clear their names first," he says. Asked if he believed those colonial women practiced witchcraft, he said, "I can make an educated guess and say no. They were Christian women and they just got caught up in this. It was not witchcraft as we know it today. These eleven people lost their lives because of fear and intolerance."

CARNALITY AND SEX WITH THE DEVIL

Sexuality was a prime consideration when accusing women of witchcraft. It is well established that the Puritans believed in the devil's power to tempt and seduce. The foundation of this belief is rooted in a text published in 1486 that soon became a source of dogma for Puritan clergy.

Malleus Maleficarum (The Witch Hammer), written by Heinrich Kramer, a German churchman, declared that if anyone doubted the existence of witches, they could be labeled a heretic. It stated, "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable."[9] To build justification for *Malleus*, Kramer convinced Pope Innocent VIII to issue a papal bull (declaration) to warn of the threat of witches. It stated that people "have abandoned themselves to devils ... and by their incantations, spells ... and other accursed charms ... hinder men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving ... perpetrating the foulest abominations..."[10]

Puritan clergy argued that if Satan wasn't successful in recruiting women to sorcery through bribery, he would often appeal to erotic instincts: "... it was ... the devil himself who seduced female

bodies and promised to satisfy women's carnal desires."[11] "Anxious to dominate their souls, Satan harassed his victims' bodies first."[12] "The feminine soul thus was insatiable, driven by almost physical desires ..."[13] "The witch might also be expected to yield her body sexually to the devil's imps."[14] "Witches' bodies no longer belonged to themselves; Satan could take them wherever he pleased to use as he wished."[15]

Witches were also suspected of seducing men. "Implicit in these tales of witches' night wandering is not just that they forced themselves sexually on unwilling men but that witches' carnal appetites were both internally uncontrolled and externally uncontrollable."[16]

Of the 11 Connecticut people who were hung, nine were women, two were men. Both men were hung with their wives; John and Joan Carrington of Wethersfield, and Nathaniel and Rebecca Greensmith of Hartford. Rebecca was accused, among other things, of having sex with the devil, declaring "the Devil first appeared to her in the form of a deer or fawn, skipping about her, wherewith she was not much frightened, and that by degrees he became very familiar, and at last would talk with her. Moreover, she said that the Devil had frequently the carnal knowledge of her body."[17] Her husband Nathaniel had a record of theft, battery, and lying to the court. Rebecca testified against him and, in January 1662, both were hung on "Gallows Hill" in Hartford, in the vicinity of today's Trinity College.[18]

THE FAIRFIELD PANIC

The bulk of Connecticut's obsession with witches occurred between 1647 and the early 1660s and was centered on the Hartford area. There were some accused in New Haven and Old Saybrook, but those cases did not lead to convictions or executions. Fairfield also had several cases, with two hangings in 1651 and 1653, and a major panic in 1692 that coincided with the Salem craze. Six women became the focus of charges—one, Mary Staples, has been traced as an ancestor of Winston Churchill.[19] Staples was accused by neighbors but not convicted.

Two other Fairfield women, Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson, feeling the charges against them were weak, asked to undergo the water test. This procedure involved being tied to chairs and thrown in a pond. The Puritans' belief was that the purity of water would accept you if you were innocent but reject you if you were evil. Acceptance meant you would sink into the water and were innocent. If you floated on the water, the belief was the pure water was rejecting your evilness. Both Disborough and Clawson floated.

However, after lobbying by friends and neighbors, the reliability of the test and the evidence in their case came into question. The case was ultimately transferred to the General Court in Hartford, and they were acquitted by virtue of insufficient evidence.

LEGACY OF MOB RULE

Connecticut's struggles with witch executions reflect a dark period that some think best left to history books. Today's legislature appears to think the issue is unworthy of its time. Senator Kissel, who chaired the 2008 hearing, says any movement on it would require "a champion" to push it beyond a public hearing, get the support of enough legislators, and move it to a vote.

Kissel says "the hearing was held as an accommodation" to the petitioners and families. For those families whose ancestors were hung on flimsy evidence, it is a matter of lifting a stigma that can be carried for generations.

Debra Avery says this is not just a question of lineage on a chart. "It's in our DNA. If Mary Sanford hadn't lived, Addie and I wouldn't be here today. This has nothing to do with anybody's religious beliefs. It's a justice issue." She testified in that hearing: " ... today we recognize that those convictions were unfounded ... Mob rule has left its ugly mark many times during social unrest in America, from the colonial witch hunts to the lynchings in the segregated south. The term 'witch hunt' is still used today when we perceive an unjust search for the truth."

Avery says the colonial governor, John Winthrop, Jr., was sympathetic to the accused witches. She plans to appeal to Governor Malloy's sense of gubernatorial descent to elicit an apology.

The Puritans who settled Connecticut were courageous, hearty people who had to carve lives out of rugged wilderness. The unfamiliarity of their surroundings meant they had to be tight knit to survive many rigors and threats. Conformity strengthened the group.

But this atmosphere was also an incubator for fear and religious intolerance. A threat to one was a threat to all. Belief in Satan and his power to control someone for sinister uses was common. Denying witchcraft was tantamount to denying the existence of God.

Though Myra Gulch keeps the image of wicked witches alive, our belief in them has long vanished. "Times have changed," writes Norman Pattis, a prominent Connecticut trial lawyer who writes an online blog on various legal issues. In 2012, he posted "Why No Pardon for Connecticut Witches?" which said, "We still believe that evil stalks the world; we are less inclined to believe that the devil can possess a soul, and turn it to dark and sinister service. We call ourselves the Land of Steady Habits in Connecticut. Let's hope our habits are not so steady that we cannot grant long overdue clemency."Pattis indicated in an email to *Coastal Connecticut* magazine that he would consider helping the families seeking the state pardon.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, Particular Court, 7 Dec.,1648
[2] The Blue Laws of New Haven Colony, Base; Tiffany & Co., Hartford, 1838, chapter on Witchcraft, pg. 317
[3]In colonial times, "Goodwife" or "Goody" was how common women were addressed. The term "Mrs" was reserved for wives of ministers or public officials.
[4]Witchcraft Trials of Connecticut, by R. G. Tomlinson, pgs 27-29
[5]The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, by Carol F. Karlsen, W.W. Norton, 1987, pgs. 4-5
[6]Connecticut Senate Joint Resolution No. SJ 26, February 2008
[7]Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut, 1639-1663, Indictment- Nov., 1654, pg. 131
[8]Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut, 1639-1663, Indictment- June 13, 1662, pg 251.
[9]Malleus Maleficarum, by Heinrich Kramer, 1485, Part I, Question VI, pg. 3
[10]Papal Bull of Innocent VIII, 1484
[11]The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, by Carol F. Karlsen, W.W. Norton, 1987, pg. 135
[12]Damned Witches, Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England, by Elizabeth Reis, Cornell University Press, 1997, pg. 111
[13]Ibid, pg. 106
[14]Ibid, pg. 114
[15]Ibid, pg. 115
[16]The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, by Carol F. Karlsen, W.W. Norton, 1987, pg. 137
[17]An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences, Increase Mather, Chapter 5, Boston, 1684
[18]The Witchcraft Delusion, by John M. Taylor, pgs. 96-100, Gramercy Books, 1995
[19]Witchcraft Trials of Connecticut by R. G. Tomlinson, Bond Press, 1978, Appendix pg. 72

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