# Witches Trapped in Amber: Panic over Satantic Activity in the Twentieth Century

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In 1692, following a period of massive religious, political, and geographic upheaval, a group of young girls in Salem Village, aged nine to seventeen, came under an affliction that could only, at the time, be explained as witchcraft. This kicked off the Salem Witch Trials, the greatest witchhunt and archetype for such events in the United States. Only a fraction of the accused were executed for the crime, but over one hundred fifty people were tried for witchcraft in Salem and the surrounding area.[1] Nearly two hundred years later, another trial in Salem, this one ending in a dismissal by the judge, is widely considered the last witchcraft trial in the United States.[2]

In 1983, following a more acute period of sociocultural transformation, faculty and administration at a preschool in Manhattan Beach, California, were accused of a variety of sexual and abusive acts. They were mostly alleged to be perpetrated against the children in their care. Over the next decade, dozens of similar trials took place, with the accusations ranging from child molestation, to ritual orgies in worship of Satan, to human sacrifice. Although the name and some of the elements were changed to suit the time, analysis of the accusations makes it clear that they were in fact nothing less than witchcraft.[3]

Both of these periods of persecution had been preceded by changes in the role of women, challenges to the dominance of patriarchal family life, in addition to a restructuring of the legal and religious institutions governing daily

[1] Richard Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011), 1.
[2] Joseph Jastrow, *The Psychology of Conviction* (Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2009), 200.
[3] Darren Oldridge, "Witchcraft, Satanic Abuse and the Myth of Pure Evil" (paper presented at the Second Global Conference on Perspectives on Evil and Human Wickedness, Prague, March 2001).

life.[4] Economic anxiety, fear of changing culture, and beliefs about religious as well as public duty, defined both the witch hunts of the seventeenth century and beliefs about diabolic sexual abuse in the twentieth century. While the public perception is that the Salem witch hunts were a unique, almost erroneous moment in United States history that ended in 1878, the series of trials beginning in Manhattan Beach made it clear that this is not the case.

## Social Instability in the Colonies

The social atmosphere of witchhunts in the Colonial Era was heavily influenced by religious culture at the time. The Protestant Reformation led to increased tensions in a variety of ways. Hostilities erupted between Catholics and Protestants; with Protestants at times accusing the Catholics of idol worship toward the Virgin Mary, which breaks one of the Ten Commandments of Christianity.[5] Protestant beliefs tended to remove the comforting theatricality and rituals associated with Catholicism, while simultaneously emphasizing the threat of diabolic forces; leaving the populace feeling more vulnerable than ever to the danger presented by witches.[6] In addition to these changes brought on by differing beliefs, challenges to authority never fail to threaten the status quo and often cause people to walk on egg-shells. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, no less than eight factions of Christianity sprung up, causing those invested in the authority of the Church as an institution to have a reason to fear for their authority.[7] Not only did tensions between sects influence fear of witches, but differences within the legal and political landscape of the factions caused Protestants to convict accused witches at a higher rate than Catholics.[8]

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[4] Examples of these changes in the Early Modern Period are described in Allison Coudert, "The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women: The Case of the Witchcraze," in *The Politics of Gender of Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert, and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1989), 313-314; for early late twentieth century, Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedecker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2001) Kindle edition, Ch. 1.
[5] Coudert, 319-320.
[6] Coudert, 311-314.
[7] "Denominations," Introduction to Protestantism: Examining the Protestant Faith, accessed December 13, 2017, http://protestantism.co.uk/denominations; in chronological order: Lutherans, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Calvinists, Congregationalists, Episcopals, Baptists, and Quakers;
[8] Coudert, 321.

This time period also exacerbated gender strains. Though some official policies may have changed to favor women to a greater extent, Allison's Coudert's "The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women" gives reason to doubt that this did little more than heighten conflicts between men (trained in the intellectual inferiority of women) and the women perceived to be taking freedoms beyond their station.[9] Although "spiritual equality" between men and women may have existed in theory, women such as Anne Hutchinson were a testament to the fact that such equality was extended only as a courtesy and that attempting to practice it was tantamount to treason.[10] During Hutchinson's trial, the act of women even leaving home without their families was considered offensive: Governor Winthrop claimed "it would not well stand with the commonwealth that families should be neglected for so many neighbours and dames and so much time spent."[11] Despite the allegedly secular government and laws, the role of the Church in both daily life and in enacting the law meant that even non-crimes, such as heresy could and would be prosecuted under legal titles like "sedition."

Gendered expectations can be clearly seen in both the arguments and context used in accusing witches. To defend against accusations, Ann Cole is described as being "married to a good man, [having] born him several children, and in her constant way approved herself truly godly to the charity of all observers."[12] Similarly, while the devil or "the evil one" was described as having plans to "afflict her body, [and] spoil her name," these plans were said to include "hinder her marriage."[13] Clearly, a strong marriage is associated with God and a weak marriage (or, by extension, a lack thereof) is associated with Satan. This premise is further supported by the fact that John Godfrey, who was accused multiple times of witchcraft, happened to be unmarried.[14]

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[9] Coudert, 314.
[10] Thomas Hutchinson, "Trial and Interrogation of Anne Hutchinson (1637), *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1767), 2-3.
[11] Hutchinson, 3.
[12] David D. Hall, ed., "The Hartford Witch-Hunt (1662-1665)." In *Witching-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England*. (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 149.
[13] Hall, 149.
[14] David D. Hall, ed., "One Man's Many Accusers (1658-1669)." In *Witch-Hunting in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 115.

Women in the Workforce and Men in the Day Care

Despite the fact they may seem to be very different time periods, the late twentieth century experienced much of the upheaval as the earlier period. As it did during the Reformation, the role of women changed drastically during the twentieth century, much to the chagrin of those who held to older traditions. The sexual revolution, having begun in the 1960s, would continue to have ripple effects throughout the ensuing decades. After women flooded the workforce during the World Wars, it became more and more common practice for women to work away from home. In order to accommodate this changing family structure, day cares for younger children became increasingly common.[15]

This change led to return of old fears as a result. Even after changes in values throughout the centuries, one of the key elements in publicly accepted femininity was motherhood.[16] Mary de Young observes that, while only a small percentage of day care workers were male at the start of the ritual abuse panic, a significantly greater proportion of those accused of abuse were male.[17] Attorneys and witnesses at the McMartin trial made a point to recognize how strange it was for a man to be working at a day care center and, in the case of four accused who would become known as the "San Antonio Four," the fact that the defendants were non-heterosexual was brought up early and repeatedly throughout the court process.[18] Just as being an outspoken or unmarried woman was unacceptable and ungodly in the days of Salem, so too was it unacceptable for childcare to be handled by anyone other than a (straight) woman in the days of McMartin. This focus on sexual orientation is nothing new. Kramer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* describes an old woman who entices

[15] Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, Ch. 1.
[16] Leslie J. Lindenauer, "The Substitute Mother in the Nineteenth Century," in *I Could Not Call Her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture, 1750-1960* (Lanham, ML: Lexington Books, 2014), 35-45; motherhood was idealized to an extent that even the infertile and widowed could achieve it.
[17] Mary de Young, "The Devil Goes to Day care: McMartin and the Making of a Moral Panic," *Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 1, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1997.00019.x, 24.
[18] Douglas O. Linder, ed., "Testimony of a Mother of Two McMartin Students," *Famous Trials*, accessed November 27, 2018, http://www.famous-trials.com/mcmartin/918-mothertestimony; *Southwest of Salem*.

virgins with promises of "young men unknown to all the townsmen" to get them to follow her home unsupervised.[19]

## The Religious Right

In addition to changing gender roles, the secular government of the United States began to give more and more room to religious authority. In 1980, televangelist Jerry Falwell organized his colleagues, including over seventy thousand members of the clergy with a budget of over four million dollars, to become political; lead letter campaigns to politicians, and to "endorse candidates, right there in church on Sunday mornings."[20] This was a marked change from evangelical policy of the previous decades in several ways. The first is that Falwell himself, who organized the movement, had a change of heart. He had opposed such action fifteen years prior, but now claimed, "[…] I'm convinced this country is morally sick, and will not correct itself unless we get involved."[21] In addition, Falwell's movement learned from previous failures, in which the Federal Communications Commission had penalized church figures for using charity funds to support political causes, by claiming the endorsement was only a personal one. The Internal Revenue Service confirmed this was allowed, "as long as it's a personal opinion and not the endorsement of the entire church."[22]

Religious fundamentalists of this time period, some claiming to be experts in the occult and to have witnessed or been involved with witchcraft or the summoning of demons, directed their followers to attack sources of societal change. For example, tabletop role-playing games, which they claimed to be work of Satan.[23] While skeptics question beliefs of the reality of Satan in the so-called more "enlightened" post-Industrial era, these claims of demon summoning's

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[19] Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, translated by Montague Summers, transcribed by Wicasta Lovelace and Christie Rice (Saint Petersburg, FL:Windhaven, 2001), http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/downloads/MalleusAcrobat.pdf, 203.
[20] George Vecsey, "Militant Television Preachers Try to Weld Fundamentalist Christians' Political Power," *New York Times*, Jan 21, 1980, A21.
[21] Vecsey, A21.
[22] Vecsey, A21.
[23] Gavin Braddeley, "Dicing With the Devil: The Crusade Against Gaming," In *Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s*, edited by Kier-la Janisse and Paul Corupe (Godalming, Surrey, England: Fab Press, 2016), 49-50; Paul Corupe, "How Jack T. Chick Was Drawn into the RPG War," In *Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s*, edited by Kier-la Janisse and Paul Corupe, (Godalming, Surrey, England: Fab Press, 2016), 72.

by the same people accusing Satan of acting through these activities indicate that, even if few would admit it, such a belief held fast. In fact, national polls found that from 1964 to 1973, the number of people who reported a belief in Satan as an entity (as compared to an abstract concept) increased from thirty-seven to fifty percent; that number would continue to climb.[24]

## New Allegations

When it comes to the personal accusations though, accusers didn't stop at allegations of simply being involved with satanic activities. In his essay "Witchcraft, Satanic Abuse and the Myth of Pure Evil," Darren Oldridge discusses the allegations of satanic rituals made against day care workers, teachers, and family members throughout the panic. He critiques the claim made in 1984 by Christina Larner that a modern-day witch hunt was unlikely because "[t]he social backing essential to the effective performance of *maleficium* simply is not there" in the twentieth century.[25]

Oldridge fails to address this claim that social backing is lacking, instead focusing on other elements of the accusations, but this premise is flawed from the start.[26] This assertion can certainly be questioned in a literal sense; several religious leaders at the time insisted that this social backing existed, and the success of works such as *Monsters & Mazes* lends credence to the idea that it existed in such a way as to not be dismissed out of hand.[27] More to the point, if one were to replace the ritual described by Larner with one of sexual assault, or particularly sexual assault of children, the hot-button crime of the time, then such fear becomes no less rational in Larner's day than the fear of losing a child due to an angered witch was, in the days of the Salem trials.[28] Those accused of satanic ritual abuse of children would refer to it as "the most horrible crime you

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[24] Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 875.
[25] Oldridge, 1
[26] *Social backing* is used in this case to describe a cultural belief in the seriousness of a phenomenon. For more context, see footnote 26.
[27] Baddeley, 49-58.
[28] Larner, 83; Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 339-343; "If ten covens were to write to me on the publication of this essay to inform me that my name was being pronounced backwards while they danced widdershins around a casket containing a milk tooth from my younger son, a hair from the underbelly of my cat, and sealing wax from my desk, I would not be unduly dismayed: nor would I be any way remarkable for not being dismayed. The social backing essential to the effective performance of *malefic[i]um* simply is not there."

can accuse somebody of," which is almost certainly how faithful seventeenth-century Puritans conceived of performing acts of harmful magic with the devil's aid.[29]

Larner's own findings support this. According to the accounts connected by Larner, witchcraft and sexual crimes appear to have always been linked. Sixteenth century accusations of witchcraft were often linked to cases of incest (such as those the San Antonio Four were accused of), adultery, sodomy, cannibalism, and infanticide (such as that described in the ostensibly true – but later recanted – *Michelle Remembers*). Larner also suggests that accusations of witchcraft and infanticide are linked to growing female (relative) independence, in that crimes committed by women were initially considered to be the responsibility of the men in their lives prior to the wide-scale appearances of these crimes in the courts.[30]

Witchcraft accusations can be categorized as one or more of *Type A* (*maleficium*, or harmful witchcraft), *Type B* (the diabolic pact), or *Type C* (participation in the Sabbath). All three of these types of accusation were present in the American colonies in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. In the 1980s, accusations of Type B and Type C were certainly present; if we maintain that sexual misconduct is the twentieth century's version of *maleficium*, then Type A is equally present. [31] This contradicts Larner's assertion that *maleficium* is the missing aspect of witchcraft in her day, which appears to be based entirely on a literal interpretation of practices as they were believed to exist in the seventeenth century.

The accusations made in the 1980s included sacrifices, worship of Satan, orgies, and child abuse which (Oldridge believes) were brought to the modern era by Michelle Smith and Lawrence Pazder's *Michelle Remembers*. Many of these accusations tie back into descriptions of the witch's Sabbath from medieval times; in fact, many are even older, from claims leveled against Jewish

[29] *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four*, directed by Deborah Esquenazi (FilmRise, 2016), https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01NASBDUF.
[30] Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwood, 1984), 60; Michelle Smith and Lawrence Pazdan, *Michelle Remembers* (New York, NY: Congdon & Lattes, 1980), 91, 109.
[31] Larner, 80-83.

people. Even child abuse, while not appearing as often in descriptions of witchcraft (unless it was the specific charge against the witch) could be found in medieval lore.[32]

Oldridge found the combination of *maleficium* charges with those of participating in covens of witches and the Sabbath to have been particularly harmful, as the implication that witches worked in groups transformed cases that otherwise targeted a single defendant into hunts for accomplices.[33] This marks a clear connection to the panic of the 1980s: exactly what role *did* the belief of a nationwide ring of satanic cults play in the relentless search for the next teacher, caretaker, or group of such to accuse? Considering that child abusers don't typically have a reputation for getting their friends involved, it's likely that it played a large one.

## Nobody Wants to Go Against a Child

Outside of the similarities in setting and accusations, the satanic ritual abuse cases themselves are further linked to witch hunts; in particular, the most famous of them all. In Salem, the first accusations in 1692 were leveled by several teenaged and preteen girls. So too, were the accusations in the ritual abuse cases. Because these were seen as crimes against children before they even went to trial, the levels of panic were heightened. Anna Vasquez, convicted of satanic ritual abuse in 1998 as a member of the "San Antonio Four" before being exonerated in 2016, described it, "My attorney said that I would lose because of the charges – because nobody wants to go against a child."[34]

When the first child, Matthew Johnson, accused his schoolteachers of abuse, it was not clear to the public that this was spurred on by a mother who refused to take no for an answer and, like the girls in Salem, was diagnosed by medical staff who lacked proper training and understanding of his condition.[35]

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[32] Oldridge, 3-4.
[33] Oldridge, 3.
[34] Associated Press, "'San Antonio Four' Exonerated in 1990s Sexual Assault Cases," *NBC News*, (Nov. 25, 2016), https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/san-antonio-four-exonerated-1990s-sexual-assault-cases-n688371; *Southwest of Salem*.
[35] Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 1665-1685.

Patterns such as these repeated throughout the ritual abuse trials. During the McMartin trial (which ultimately led to no convictions), a mother of two alleged victims described how her children's "responses were all negative" until they met with Kee MacFarley, who then claimed that the children had been victimized.[36] Stephanie Limon, whose testimony led to the conviction of her aunt and three other San Antonio women, would later describe how her father and grandmother pressured her into describing abusive acts being performed on her and her sister.[37]

Like any moral panic, both the Salem and the ritual abuse cases included those who only wanted to help. The doctor who examined the girls in Salem, and likewise the majority of the magistrates and others involved in the case, only wanted to do what was best within their knowledge to help the victims and prevent further offenses. Unlike the Salem doctors, however, Nancy Kellogg lived to see advances in science that affected the testimony she gave in court, allowing her to take the stand years later and recant, ultimately resulting in the exoneration of the San Antonio Four.[38]

The doctor wasn't the only person to recant. Child testimonies at both the Salem trials and the ritual abuse trials were wildly inconsistent. The San Antonio Four described the testimony against them as having "so many mistakes – they were caught in so many inconsistencies and they were questioned constantly about Liz's trial against [that of the other three defendants]."[39]

## Witch Hunts in the Future

It is clear from understanding these series of events that, tempting as it is to dismiss mass panic, witch trials and other such concepts as belonging to a more "barbaric" past, time has not changed human nature. In 1692, the events of Salem were not commonplace; the Puritan understanding of the world and

[36] Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 2214-2215; Douglas O. Linder, ed., "Testimony of a Mother of Two McMartin Students," *Famous Trials*, accessed November 27, 2017, http://www.famous-trials.com/mcmartin/918-mothertestimony.
[37] *Southwest of Salem*.
[38] *Southwest of Salem*.
[39] *Southwest of Salem*.

power structure meant that the wrong people in the wrong time led to a perversion of ideals that would not always be replicated elsewhere.[40] While most would deny that, in 1984, a belief that witches among us were destroying the fabric of society permeated Western or even American culture, mass communication made it possible for a similar panic to be held on a much wider scale. Despite these superficial changes, everything that was needed for a small panic in 1692 was able to be reproduced on a national scale in 1984.

It is clear that all of the elements are in place for future panics to occur. It is only through the combination of understanding these events, constant vigilance for them and analysis of future claims, and luck that they can be prevented in the future. The last of these elements can never be accounted for, but any widespread viewpoint that suggests that such hysteria is related only to fixed points in an exotic past, trapped in amber to be witnessed safely and unrelated to the present, removes the first two from the equation entirely and almost certainly contributes to future hardships.

[40] For an example of similar circumstances with drastically different results, see Richard Godbeer, *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1962* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).