

The Much Maligned *WITCH!*

Witches—witch hunts—witch burnings...They're all part of the history of Western Civilization. Although many of the characteristics we attribute to witches are incorrect (we've confused witchcraft with sorcery), our general view of witches is based on Medieval beliefs, even though witchcraft trials (and executions) continued well into the 1700's. Here in America, of course, we had the famous Salem witch trials in the 1690s.

Accusations of witchcraft were generally used to stop anti-social behavior in the community. People who were rocking the boat, not specifically breaking the law but causing problems all the same. Witchcraft beliefs were also used to explain the unexplainable—Why did little Johnny break his leg walking down the path that he's walked a thousand times before? Why does that person have a birthmark? So, even though we stress individualism today, the last thing you wanted to do in the Middle Ages was be 'different.'

There were professional 'witch-testers' who went from town to town administering tests to people in jail awaiting trial in order to help determine if those prisoners were actually witches. Because they got paid on commission, many of these witch-testers rigged the tests so they would get positive results and thereby get paid (good for the witch-testers; very bad for the 'witches').

One of the main ideas behind the Church's dreaded Inquisition was to identify and get rid of witches. When that witch-tester administered his tests, there was usually an Inquisitor there to verify the results.

One of the interesting beliefs associated with Witchcraft was the idea that it could be inherited, thus making it entirely possible for a person to honestly not *know* she was a witch. And, that, coincidentally, would also account for the apparent sincerity of denials, even through torture.

Although women were predominantly the victims of witchcraft accusations, men could also certainly be witches. They were generally referred to as "warlocks", although modern Wiccans [see below] don't use that term but simply refer to both men and women as 'witches'.

The idea of a witch flying on a broom appears first in 1453 (same year that the Middle Ages ended). The notion of the pointy hat came from one of the mildest punishments inflicted on someone convicted of witchcraft.

Are there 'witches' today? You bet! There are various covens scattered across the country. They even have their own websites! These modern witches adhere to what is described as a type of neopaganism, called "Wicca". This modern witchcraft has been formalized into a religion which traditionally worships a god and goddess. Wicca was first introduced to the public at large in 1954 by Gerald Gardiner, a British civil servant.

Wicca is heavy on ritual, and observers have noted that the emphasis on ritual is what attracts some people into the belief system (or it could be that many of the rituals are performed in the nude).

Well, happy Halloween!

