Before Salem, There was Ipswich

A witch actually being arrested in the nearby town of Ipswich was a very big deal indeed. And although it was not uncommon to come across stories of the odd witch creating hardship in localized areas, actual confrontation was indeed rare.

This was a good number of years before the mass state of delirium (caused by ergot poisoning in rye bread, coupled with superstitious and greedy neighbors), which would become known as the Salem Witch Trials would occur. And accusing a neighbor of witchcraft hadn't yet become fashionable to the people of Salem Town, Andover, the aforementioned Ipswich, , and my home town of Salem Village. (As I think back on this whole experience, I often wonder if the whole Ipswich witch ordeal affected the brash decisions of what would follow in Salem.)

So, at this point, a witch was a witch, was a witch. Simple as that.

Being all of thirteen, I had two close friends, a red haired, scrappy chap by the name of Tenacious Barebone, and a much more conservative, bespectacled fellow, by the name of Creedence Makepeace. Between the three of us overhearing bits and pieces of the events leading up to, and the actual apprehension, of the witch, we came to know and believe the following:

The witch had been an absolute terror to Ipswich, and its neighboring communities, for a great many years. (Even if neither Tenacious nor I had ever heard of her, Creedence insisted that he had.) And although she was rarely actually seen, she was known to make the odd late night trip to the village well.

An actual visual of her wasn't necessary to prove her presence, as there were numerous other indicators to show that she had been around.

For instance, depending on the weather, either the dusty dirt, or mud around the village well would show sets of footprints, one foot having seven toes. The well itself would have an oily coating on the water, making it undrinkable for days, until the sheen would finally dissolve. On more than one occasion, it was discovered that she had left several eels in the well, and they would have to be fished out.

The haggard old woman would often take different routes into the town, as if to try to confuse the locals. But it was always easy to tell which direction she came from, as there would be the tell tale signs of dead dogs, cats, chickens, or even cows along the way. No doubt the unlucky animal, being unschooled in the ways of witches, would stare a moment too long and incur her wrath.

The witch, in her travels, was known not to be able to pass by a cemetery, without stopping in to confer with old allies, and perhaps even dig up a grave and snack on some rotting flesh of someone's recently departed loved one.

The witch did not even have to come all the way into town to create misery.

The odd hunter, in the search for local wild life, or tree cutter, plying his trade, would occasionally go into the woods, never to return. This, too, was blamed on the witch, for it was common

knowledge that she hated her woods disturbed. When a hunter would stray a bit too far from home, it was he, not the deer, that wound up disemboweled and hanging upside down over a crackling fire.

Mind you, not every victim of the witch ended up in pickled food jars, or witch's potions. There was another fate that could be in store for people she encountered, depending on her mood. Where it was commonly known, almost laughable, that witches flying on broom sticks were silly child tales, no doubt concocted to keep active kids in their beds at night, there was another tale of witches that was known to be absolutely true. This was the act of transforming a person into a frog, to spend the rest of his days roaming the woods floor. This was even proven, when days or weeks after someone would go missing, a frog would occasionally be seen afoot throughout the village, until a distressed wife would come to take him home.

Crop failures were yet another hazard of having a witch in the vicinity. It was a common understanding , that a witch did everything on her power to hinder the amount and quality of the area's crops on an annual basis. Some years, her magic worked. Fortunately, some years, the magic didn't take as well.

Such was life when a witch was afoot. There is no need to recount more tales of hardships, as by now I'm sure you get the understanding of what pure evil can do.

Despite the hardships endured by the people of Ipswich, they were indeed endured. Fear can be a powerful motivator.

It was only when young Harold Temperance, a boy our age, died, that it was decided something had to be done. Poor Harold's life had been cursed from the beginning. Born deaf, in a bad crop year to a local judge and his wife, he was no doubt the victim of witchcraft. With extremely poor communication skills, young Harold was seen as more of a liability than an asset by his "heavy handed prick" of a father. (Tenacious's words, not mine.)

On a recent day where the father and son had gone into their wood lot to prepare some wood for the upcoming winter, only the father returned. Young Harold was never to be seen again. When repeatedly asked what exactly had happened with young Harold, Justice Temperance would only say, "The witch. She must be destroyed."

Ipswich citizens had had enough. Being prompted by an authority figure was all it took for them to start openly discussing their frustrations with their lives, the problems all being blamed on the witch. As the groups got larger and louder, the thoughts of action seemed to become more and more sensible. Heck, they couldn't all be wrong, could they?

The local priest, who understandably was in well over his head with an actual witch, was able to acquire, through the friend of a friend, a religious book of sorts dealing with such situations.

Hence, a plan was formed, and men did night shifts around the town well, in groups of at least six per shift.

It was a few weeks later, when the witch finally appeared. With one man nervously distracting her, another came up quietly behind her and was able to club her in the back of the head, momentarily stunning her.

At this point, a large rope was bound to each ankle and wrist, and a large horse was tasked to pull on each rope with all their might, so that a limb was going in four different directions, and the witch was lifted about four feet above the ground. Despite the fact that the energy exerted by the horses would have been enough to tear a house apart, they could not break the witch.

As the book directed, before she became fully conscious, a horse farrier's tongs, which had soaked in holy water, were used to get a grip on the witch's tongue and pull it hard out from her mouth, so that she could not clearly enunciate her curses at those who opposed her.

Every day at noon, after having his thumb soak in holy water for three hours, the priest would approach the witch from the direction of her head, so that she could not see him directly. Putting his thumb on her forehead, he would ask three times each day, "If you are witch, do you yield your curses, and wish to repent your sins?"

Every day, for eight days, the answer was a defiant, "No!"

Until finally, on the ninth day, the witch had finally had enough, and answered, "Yeth! Yeth!" (It was the best she could say, as her tongue was still being yanked out of her mouth.)

Her magic being temporarily deemed unusable, the witch was then taken for a pretrial test at a nearby pond. A large long pole was hinged at its center to a wheeled axle. The whole contraption resembled a very crude see saw of sorts. On one end of the pole, the witch was bound hand and foot. The contraption was then wheeled to the water. The pole end opposite of her was then raised, thereby fully submerging the witch into the water for one minute. Then, the priest's end of the pole was pulled down, thereby lifting the witch back out of the water, where she gagged and gasped for much needed air. After a two minute rest, the priest's end was again raised, forcing the witch again into the water, this time for two minutes. . Once again, the priest's end was lowered, lifting the witch up, again gasping for air. This procedure went on most of the day, with the rest times and the submerged times both increasing drastically, to the point that the witch had been fully submerged under the water for over two hours straight, and, once brought back above the surface, found to be gagging and gasping the same as if she had only been under for the one minute.

This was considered definitive proof that the witch was definitely in possession of magical powers, as an innocent person would surely have drowned.

Still wet, she was promptly thrown into the local jail to await trial. Upon being found guilty, which was almost a certainty, she would be hanged. (Burning witches at the stake was a barbaric British custom that hadn't followed the Puritans over the ocean.) Once dead, with each limb severed from her body and everything burned separately, the ashes would be scattered in all corners of the district, in an effort to thwart off other witches. Lastly, as per local custom, her worldly possessions would conveniently be divided up amongst those she had perceivably wronged.

So, there you have the build up and capture of the witch of Ipswich. I'm sure you understand how the next logical step to a group of thirteen year old boys was to go see this witch for ourselves. Therefore, we devised a plan.

Telling our parents we were going to a new fishing hole we wanted to try, we left right after church on Sunday, to have as much time as possible on the near twenty mile trip. As soon as we were out of eyesight, we took to the woods to avoid being seen, and ditched our poles.

At this point, I should explain that Tenacious and Creedence didn't get along particularly well. Tenacious was what one could call a "loose cannon". We were never really quite sure what kind of antics or shenanigans he would be up to. And, he certainly didn't disappoint on this trip, for as soon as we were in the privacy of the woods, he opened his water flask and took a big drink. He then offered us a drink, which was strange, as we all had our own matching water flasks on us.

"Trust me. You want to try this," he said, handing it to me. It almost sounded like a dare, so I took a drink.

Moments later, I was spitting the bitter contents on the ground. "What the heck is THAT?"

"Japanese Gin." He was literally beaming. The last time Tenacious had tried to make Japanese gin, he had let it ferment too long, and the whole thing had exploded under his bed. Fortunately, he had been the only one home at the time, and was able to clean up the mess without detection. Which was good, because he would have been killed by his parents.

This was how Tenacious lived. Always pushing boundaries and doing things half assed. It was a running joke amongst us that when we were doing something with less than the adequate resources, or without the proper skills that were needed, we were doing it "bareboned."

That was perhaps why Creedence wasn't particularly fond of Tenacious. Being the son of a councilor, Creedence was all about doing things right. He was always on time, always well dressed, and always conducted himself "as if he were trying to act like a gentleman", to use Tenacious's words. Which, in turn, Tenacious found Creedence to be quite irritating.

Creedence was always on edge when Tenacious was around, because he was constantly afraid of getting caught up in Tenacious's poorly thought out plans. Tenacious knew this, so he would always try to be even more crazy than normal.

As for me, I found both friends to be quite entertaining, and saw myself as a happy medium between the two.

We had gone on for quite some time through the woods, when Tenacious and I decided the woods walking was way too much work. Outnumbering Creedence on the vote, we opted two to one, to make our way to the road, for easier travel. (Whenever a decision came to an actual vote, Creedence and Tenacious always voted against each other, if given the chance.)

Hours into the trip, we decided that even walking the road was too much work, and decided to hitch a ride with one of the wagoneers that travelled with goods between towns.

It didn't take long to catch a ride towards Ipswich, and Creedence sat in the front with the rider, trying to carry on a conversation that two adults would have. Which was quite entertaining to me, as Creedence would occasionally use words that he had no idea what the real meaning was.

By now, Tenacious was visibly quite drunk, even slurring his speech somewhat. As he would speak, the wagoneer would glance back at him, to the point of actually asking Creedence if his ginger friend was okay. I didn't have much faith in Creedence's answer, for I could see him starting to stammer somewhat. Before he could say much, I cut in, "He's a bit slow. He got kicked in the head by a horse when he was only seven." With this, I elbowed Tenacious hard in the ribs. He understood it was time to stop talking.

By the end of the trip, I was somewhat starting to wish that I was drunk also. The rider, whose name was Jebidiah Hoffa, had been going on for great length, and in great detail the importance of the horse delivery system, and the tight bond its wagoneers had. Which I'll point out, which is exactly how every tradesman or general worker happens to view their own profession.

At last, the time came to be dropped off, and with a firm handshake by Creedence thanking Jebidiah for the ride, we set off into the town of Ipswich. Making our way amongst the strangers, we experienced prolonged glances from the locals.

I suspected it was mostly due to us being outsiders. Creedence blamed it on the fact that we had a hammered thirteen year old with us, who, despite trying to look sober, could barely walk straight. And Tenacious blamed everything on Creedence, who, despite the fact that he was the only person in the whole town doing it, insisted on tipping his hat at every woman or girl that walked by.

Town wells are a common gathering spot, so we thought we would try there first, to figure out where to go from there. Eavesdropping on several conversations, we learned that the witch was still indeed in town, and locked up the jail. Also, that the jail was located near the stocks, which we had already passed walking through town.

We made our way back to the stocks, and found an unmarked building we decided must be the jail.

Being comfortable that no one was watching us, we each individually made our way along the back of the building as if we needed the washroom. (In Tenacious' s defense, he really did need the washroom.

The back of the jail was crowded with bushes and apple trees. On the wooden building itself, were two barred windows, nearly eight feet off the ground, and spaced about twelve feet apart. Beyond the windows, from our vantage point, were black abysses of uncertainty.

By the time tested trial of "rock, paper, scissors", Tenacious had originally been the first selected to go have a look. Unfortunately for him, he had to withdraw from this part of the adventure, as he had begun to feel quite ill. Lying down on the ground beside us, he was trying to get his surroundings to stop spinning.

That left Creedence and me. Winning him in another contest, he was obligated to go down on his hands and knees and allow me to have the first glance. As earlier planned, if anything did end up going catastrophically wrong, it was every man for himself. Stepping on Creedence's back, I put my hands on the outside walls of the window. We had discussed the possible danger of placing fingers around the bars, perhaps allowing the witch to forcibly separate our fingers from our hands.

Cautiously, I peered through a barred window.

Half expecting a scary old face come flying at me against the bars, I kept a distance at first, gradually bringing my face closer and closer to the bars. Nothing happened.

My eyes began to adjust to the dimly lit room. It seemed to be virtually empty, except for what seemed to be a lone, solitary figure laying on the bare ground floor.

Creedence anxiously asked what I was seeing, but I couldn't answer. I was trying hard to figure out if the figure on the floor was looking at me or away from me.

After what seemed like minutes, I was about to offer Creedence a look, when the figure on the floor asked me if I had any water. So startled, I almost fell, and despite myself, found myself desperately clinging onto the bars.

I answered that we did indeed have water, and told Tenacious to throw me my flask. Catching it, I nervously passed it through the window, still keeping my hands well on the outside. God only knew how strong the witch was, if I were to be foolish enough to give her my arm.

Since I had momentarily looked at Tenacious, my eyes had to get adjusted again to the darkness, and although I couldn't see her, I could hear her lightly get up, and shuffle her way towards the window.

Instead of a warty, gnarled hand, I could see what looked like a smooth young woman's hand gingerly grab the bottle from me.

The bottle disappeared into the darkness, only to come back out a moment later.

"That's Japanese Gin," she informed me. She sure didn't sound like a witch.

I took the flask, and threw it as hard as I could at Tenacious, for mixing up bottles like that. I could have killed him. I asked Creedence to give me his.

Stumbling through an apology, I handed her the second flask through the window. As she came for it, I was able to get a momentary glance at her face. She sure didn't look like a witch, either.

"Sorry. I think we may have the wrong prisoner." I began to apologize.

"Who were you looking for?"

"The witch," I answered, somewhat embarrassed.

Glancing down, I could see that Creedence was motionless, listening with great interest. Even Tenacious was now sitting upright, paying attention.

"I'm afraid you are going to be disappointed, for there is no witch here. Even if I am indeed the person being accused of being one."

By now, Creedence was indicating that it was his turn to take a look, but I threatened to kick him hard in the ribs if he tried to move.

I could see the lady was shivering, and offered her my rolled up long sleeved shirt, which she eagerly accepted. Folding the shirt up, I stuffed it in between the bars, and in the process, my arm went into the window much more than I would have liked.

I felt absolute terror as a warm weak hand grabbed my wrist, then quickly let it go.

"Thank you," she said," but why are you helping me?"

It was a question I couldn't really answer. So, instead, I asked her if there was anything else we could do for her.

She explained that she had been awaiting a visit from her sisters, but they hadn't come yet. That she had planned on getting them to look for a brooch that had been a gift from her grandmother when she was young. When everything had happened at the well, she had noticed it fall off, but was able to quickly cover it up with dirt before anyone saw. That was really all she wanted. Whatever the future trial had in store for her, having a family heirloom like that would give her the courage she needed. And then she added that a cinnamon bun would be nice too.

So, the three of us set off to the well. On the way, Creedence was completely against finding the pendant for her.

"This woman, right or wrong, is in jail for witchcraft. Witchcraft is punishable by DEATH." He added, as if he had to exaggerate the word death to emphasize its importance. "What in the world do you think will happen to us if we get caught aiding her?"

"We are not warlocks," I countered.

"Nor is that woman likely a witch. Which, by the way, is completely irrelevant, if the town is full of madmen and lunatics bent on a guilty verdict."

He had a valid point, so we took another vote. Once again, Creedence was outvoted. By now, we were at the well again.

As we took turns drinking, the other two would mill about, as if in conversation, all the while kicking loose dirt around. We were starting to be noticed by locals, when at last I felt my foot brush against a small hard piece of metal. Bending down to tighten my shoelace, I picked up the brooch, and mentioned to my friends that I was hungry. Pooling our change together at a bakery, we were able to purchase half a dozen cinnamon buns. They did indeed look delicious.

We walked in the opposite direction of the jail, and ducking down into side alleys, were able to backtrack towards where we really wanted to go. Tenacious, feeling only marginally better, was indifferent to interacting with the woman. But was still willing to go on his hands and knees for me to give her the stuff she had requested. Creedence had opted to remain as a lookout .

The woman was delighted that we were able to find her brooch, and quickly pinned it inside her ragged and torn dress. She ate one of the cinnamon buns faster than I have ever seen anyone eat one, tucking the rest away into a corner of her cell. We had refilled my flask with water, and I gave it to her to keep. She needed it more than I did.

Telling me that she truly appreciated our help, the woman told me that she was afraid we would be seen, and end up in the jail beside her. That we should leave.

Before jumping off Tenacious's back, I asked the woman her name.

"Constance," she answered with a smile.

I was about to tell her my first name, when she said, 'Thank you, Ezra of Salem Village."

I hadn't recalled giving her my name or where I was from.

I left the woman at that point, and it was a great many years before I would see her again.

We caught another ride home, and the return trip was quite uneventful compared to how the trip had started. I ended up deciding to walk the last five miles on my own. I just needed the personal time. It was getting dark when I made it to my house, and I explained to my parents that the new fishing hole we had tried hadn't panned out. The only two fish we had caught between the three of us had already been eaten.

It was a few days later, when I overheard my father tell my mother, that the witch of Ipswich had escaped.

It had happened during the night of our fishing excursion. There were a number of footprints found outside in the back of the building, some perhaps belonging to young men. The only sign of tampering with the building itself a five inch diameter hole, roughly made through the back wall. Too rough to be made by a saw, whatever caused the hole had been quite powerful., as part of the hole had punched right through a six by six inch post as easily as it had the wooden planked walls.

There were numerous footprints walking away from the building, and some of the prints in the mud had seven toes, some had eight toes.

Walking side by side, the strange footprints vanished into thin air a hundred feet from the building.

There were no witnesses.

Now, whether or not, Constance was indeed a witch of any sort, is not for me to say. It's certainly not something I'll speculate on out loud. You can make your own decisions. I will, however, mention a few things that you can consider as you formulate your own opinion.

For instance- was it mere coincidence that for the next three years, Ipswich faced the worst harvest yields, and severest of localized storms, in its entire history? In contrast, my home of Salem Village had the joy of harvesting bumper crops, and the mildest of winters.

Then, there is the fact, that at thirteen years of age, and nearly six feet tall, I had to stand on the back of a hunched over friend, to look into an eight foot high window, whereas the woman inside the jail was able to meet me face to face without any structures in the room to stand on. I know this, because as I grew older, I came to understand that prisoners had absolutely nothing in the cells. Not like it is now.

Then there is the fact that shortly after our encounter, I found that with great concentration, I was able to levitate myself upwards of twenty to thirty feet in the air. Now, relax, it's not as if I can fly. I can only go straight up and down, with the slightest of lateral movements as dictated by the prevailing winds.

Lastly, consider this. Despite the fact that I am recounting this story to you first hand, it happened nearly four hundred years ago. This should be somewhat easier for you to believe, as I'm now levitating for you.

And now, without further adieu, I would like to introduce you to my wife.