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## From Salem to Eden: Satanic Ritual Abuse and American Law

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# From Salem to Eden: Satanic Ritual Abuse and American Law

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## **Abstract**

The American justice system has been plagued for centuries by false imprisonments, racial discrimination, and corrupt law enforcement. However, an often overlooked example of this injustice has been present for nearly 300 years, from Salem, Massachusetts to Edenton, North Carolina. This issue can be identified as scapegoating as a result of religious mass hysteria, central features of both the Salem witch trials and the Little Rascals Day Care sexual abuse trial. By examining the case files of several legal journals and the conclusions of religious studies experts, I argue that a combination of change-related fear and witness coercion are ultimately the causes for these infamous trials. This, coupled with the introduction of new media platforms created an unalterable surge of Evangelical fervor across the United States, not dissimilar to the strict religious standards and regulations of the Puritans in Salem. Why were these heinous accusations made? Why did they have to be “satanic?” By reviewing the lessons that the Salem Witch trials failed to instill in the American justice system, I answer these questions and explain how they still disrupt the integrity of our fundamental right to a fair trial.

*Keywords:* Coercion, Satanic, Evangelical, Ritual, Spectral Evidence, Materiality

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Beginning in 1989, the town of Edenton, North Carolina was struck with the gruesome news of local children being abused. Even worse, the perpetrators were purported to be the

owners of a day care center in the community, affectionately called “Little Rascals.” Although the name of the day care center sounded innocent enough, the accusations brought against it gave it a sinister reputation that permeated the nation’s media. In 1692, several Massachusetts towns were struggling with similar instances of child endangerment and abuse, the most famous of these being Salem. What ensued was a literal witch hunt that split the community into factions that were intent on targeting enemies, neighbors, and even friends who dared trifle with Puritan tradition by tainting it with occult practices. Both of these cases represent 300 years of American legal history, ranging from the colonial era to the end of the millennium. Although they have achieved national attention, they have developed infamous reputations for their notorious oversight of facts, their absence of logic, their clear agenda-based bias, and their negative influence on children through manipulation. I plan to compare these two cases, specifically to examine the role that religion played in the not only the accusations made, but also the notoriety the cases received and how that may have impacted the result of the trials. Furthermore, I will discuss the manipulation of children by the triers of the fact, not the alleged perpetrators. This will include false witness testimony, how that testimony was created and encouraged, and how mass hysteria allowed it to be believed despite contradictions and outrageous claims made by those children testifying. Despite their separation by time, the Salem witch trials and the Little Rascals Day Care case reflect how the fear of Satan, manifested in the form of social change and unexplained events, has impacted the American legal system in dramatic and unforgettable ways.

To begin, I would like to discuss the Salem witch trials, a series of trials, convictions, and executions that took place in the vicinity of Salem, Massachusetts during the 1690’s on the basis that members of the community were committing the crime of witchcraft. The inhabitants of Salem were Puritans, a very strict and principled sect of Protestant Christians that had migrated

to New England in hopes of religious freedom. Therefore, the crime of witchcraft was not only religious, but also had a strict legal backing amongst Salem's citizens (Moriarty 43). The controversy began when several neighborhood girls began displaying symptoms of an unknown ailment, often resulting in "strange fits" (Young 237). When the attending physician was unable to give a diagnosis, which is understandable considering the limited medical knowledge available at the time, especially in a "New World," he declared that the girls were suffering from the effects of some sort of evil, potentially as a result of witchcraft (Young 237). Since witchcraft was a punishable offense under the law, the girls were put under immense pressure to divulge who had attacked them and caused their afflictions (Young 238). They singled out estranged members of the community, which began a train of confessions and accusations resulting in the imprisonment of 156 individuals, some of whom were executed while others were denied a trial (Moriarty 44).

The Little Rascals Day Care case began nearly 300 years after Salem's, springing from a string of accusations that began in 1989 (Twiddy). The small town of Edenton, North Carolina became paralyzed with fear after several families began reporting sexual abuse to their friends, despite the fact that forensic evidence and medical examinations were absent. Furthermore, this sexual abuse was not only sinister in its own right, but was supposedly connected to "Satanic rituals." The number of accusers skyrocketed, and even Chris Bean, the attorney for the Kelly family, the owners of the day care, began questioning his opinion on the matter because Bean and his wife started "losing their friends" (PBS). When Bean was told that his son had been named by other small children as an abuse victim, Bean retracted his services and became part of the growing number of parents that were hostile to the Kelly family. What followed consisted of several grueling years of trials for a total of 7 people that had some association with the day care.

One of the first factors that I considered when comparing these cases involved the accusing parties, who were they? In the case of Salem, the community was almost entirely Puritan, and the first major concerns about witchcraft came from the local physician. In Edenton, the accusations came from parents and friends of the Kelly's, although the details on who made the first claim and why are muddled. The Edenton community was largely Evangelical, and therefore their claims concerning ritual abuse gained a religious element, stating that the abuse was done for "Satanic" purposes when no other explanation could be found or created. In both cases, it is interesting to note that it was not the local minister or other religious leader that first brought in a religious issue, rather it was a lay person. In fact, Young states that in the case of Salem "the Puritan ministers were probably the most rational group throughout the progression of this sad affair" (241). So why were the laity so prominent in pushing a seemingly religious agenda? I think the main reason for this is the simple fact that the laity has a higher population. Although they do not share the authority that a minister would have, the lay inhabitants of small communities like Edenton and Salem hold enormous sway over how friends and family think. Part of this is because of shared beliefs and values, thereby making a minister's opinion moot because of how ingrained certain beliefs are in the minds of the population, allowing them to come to their own conclusions without seeking guidance or assistance from the more "qualified" community leaders. However, this can turn radical very quickly, ultimately leading to mass hysteria if not properly contained. After all, a community that believes its values are threatened by an outside force may react in an extreme and nonsensical way.

Elaborating on the subject of mass hysteria, I want to examine the role it played in the Salem community (Moriarty 49). At this time, Massachusetts and thereby Salem were in a developing part of the colonial world. This means that they were undergoing consistent change

with new migrants, local leaders, etc. Furthermore, the Puritans of Salem were far from their mother country, and had to not only adapt to a new environment, but to an entirely new hemisphere. This included the construction of their own community, the system of laws governing it, all while being under the control of the distant English monarchy who had authority over their charter and therefore their autonomy. After all, it was the Massachusetts governor William Phips that called for the end to the witch trials, not the laity of Salem. This reveals that the Puritans were likely undergoing an identity crisis, because although they had enough autonomy to have their own distinct community governed by their religious principles, it was still subject to the scrutiny and authority of the English crown and its regent officials. Thus the drastic societal transformations and the uncertainty of what the future would hold left the Puritans with a hidden but very real fear of the unknown. The Salem witch trials are simply an example of an event that triggered the release of that fear, which eventually left neighbor accusing neighbor.

There are other reasons that the Salem community accused people of being witches, and it is based on their very real belief in witchcraft. According to Moriarty, the Puritans believed that “witchcraft could affect strange and bizarre physical symptoms, illness and even death in people and animals” (45). This coincides directly with the first accusations made by the attending physician, who, when he could not diagnose an illness, claimed it must be a spiritual attack through witchcraft. “For its witnesses, the Salem witch crisis confirmed the reality, and proximity, of the invisible world of spirits” (Trigg 37). As I stated previously, the residents of Salem were in a relatively unknown world, and part of these fears expressed themselves in both material and immaterial ways. Trigg’s assessment is that these unexplainable illnesses could be explained through the immaterial, and therefore not only confirmed their reality, but also the

frightening threat of evil spirits. Although I use the term “mass hysteria” to describe the events at Salem, it is important to remember that this is a very common and very human phenomenon. This confirmation sparked this hysteria very quickly, but it was not unreasonable to the residents of Salem whatsoever. Furthermore, denying the reality of the situation could lead one to becoming accused of being a witch as well, promoting a new fear amongst the already frazzled population. Another part of this fear actually stemmed from Salem’s belief in the devil and how he interacted with witches. Since the witches had to have made a pact with Satan in order to interact with his evil powers, the Puritans believed that he witches were not only tormenting innocent people, but were also attempting to lure others so that they may “join them in damnation” (Trigg 38). However, the question persists, how could you possibly try a case based on claims of spiritual manipulation?

To explore the issue of evidence and its reliability, it is necessary to discuss what is often called “spectral evidence” as noted by Trigg and Young. Spectral evidence is separate from physical evidence, as it lacks any materiality whatsoever and instead consists of apparitions and word-of-mouth testimony. As Young notes, the issue with this evidence was not based on its relevance to the court, but rather lacked probative value, meaning it was not reliable. However, the rules were bent in Salem’s case because of the limited legal standardization and modernization, as well as the religious bias that made spectral evidence permissible (244). If this evidence did not exist physically, how do we have records of it? Interestingly enough, records of material objects were made by the Puritan courts, because witnesses described seeing them in spiritual form (Trigg 38). Therefore, the witnesses claimed that these spiritual objects were actually physical ones that were manifested as or in accompaniment to apparitions. This description does not solidify the existence of such “physical” objects, but rather explains how the



Puritans understood certain items to be material despite being seen in purely spiritual encounters. One object in particular that was identified was a black codex, which was supposedly the “devil’s volume” (Trigg 38). This text contained the witches’ signatures and they appeared to their victims holding it, so that the afflicted may be tempted to sign their name and give themselves over to the devil. In the minds of the Puritans, this proved the existence of not only the devil, but of witches since there was a physical document, though no one could find it, belonging to Satan himself. The consistent testimony about this codex affirmed their suspicions, despite the fact that the account could have simply been carried over by people who had been in previous trial hearings. However, the Puritans could not rely on spectral evidence alone to convict. Some Puritans assumed that Satan may have wanted innocent people convicted, and even still Governor Phips eventually placed harsh restrictions on the use of spectral evidence in Puritan courts (Young 244-245). Thus, the Salem community employed tests based on superstition, or more accurately and to avoid negative connotation, religious folk tradition. One of these included the “witch’s tit” test, or the examination of an accused witch in order to find a blemish or mark that may indicate their guilt. These marks could have included moles, warts, scars or anything that could possibly be regarded as supernatural. Examiners often disagreed on what these marks looked like, but if they were not present upon a second examination then it was used as evidence of witchcraft (Young 245-246). This clearly shows not only the paranoia, but also the illogical association between the physical and spiritual realms. That is not to say that these beliefs were completely ill-founded, but it demonstrates how anyone could be accused as a witch and successfully convicted. In some cases, members of the community were not tried whatsoever, as obtaining a confession was more important. Yet even these confessions were unreliable, as sometimes they were coerced and other times came from not the accused, but

another confessor. In this way, these supposed witches began believing themselves to actually be part of this Puritan coven (Young 253-254). In any case, the Salem witch trials encompassed layers of fear, hysteria and coercion that shaped the American legal system by convincing Governor Phips of Massachusetts that stricter regulations were need in order to achieve justice.

The Little Rascals Day Care case was not very different from the Salem witch trials, as it also revolved around the idea of evil forces being present in the community. To understand how this idea became prominent, it is most beneficial to look at the social environment of the time to see what could have sparked such controversy. First, we must consider the time of the incident, specifically the late 1980's and early 1990's. Several historical changes were occurring, including Operation Desert Storm, technological advances, and a general cultural shift with the near-end of the Cold War. However, two events most importantly affected the Little Rascals case: the spread of Evangelicalism through the media and the deconstruction of the traditional American nuclear family. The role that media played in this case of sensationalism came to prominence in the 1970's. As Hughes notes, "the satanic panic was a physical manifestation of the media's accelerated coupling of evangelical conceptions of suburbia with the occult during the 1970s, made possible in part by the simultaneous rise of tabloid television" (66). The "satanic panic" Hughes is referring to here encapsulates a broad phenomenon of hysteria that overtook the United States during this time. With the rise of media-fueled Evangelicalism, rumors of a satanic conspiracy flurried across the country, leading to several court cases involving the ritual murder and sexual abuse of children nationwide. Such cases included "the 1985 Country Walk Babysitting case of Miami, Florida, the 1984 Fells Acre Daycare case of Malden, Massachusetts, the 1987 Gallup Christian case of Roseburg, Ohio, and the 1991 First Presbyterian case of Mansfield, Ohio" (Twiddy). With these concerns at hand, it was only a matter of time before a

group was targeted as a scapegoat for these supposed ritualistic crimes. That target became day cares, a relatively new social institution that came with the dissolution of the nuclear family model (Hughes 66). Women were beginning to have increased significance in the workforce, dual-family income became a popular trend, and even single parents were more common than they had been before. However, it is not easy to leave your child with strangers, or at the very least other people, and therefore it is not unreasonable to sympathize with the concerns these parents were facing.

Despite the natural fears and anxieties of parents nationwide, their end result left innocent people to be tried and convicted for horrendous, but very imaginary crimes. When it comes to the Little Rascals Day Care case and its counterparts, Lotto reminds us that “comparisons are made to the European witch hunts of the 15<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Salem witch trials, and the persecutions of the McCarthy era. This comparison also parallels with the infamous ‘blood libel’ accusations in medieval Europe in which Jews were said to sacrifice Christian children and use their blood as part of the Passover ritual” (374). Thus there is a set precedent for this type of hysteria, and it is not difficult to find the similarities in the cases. In all of these cases, there is a certain group that is, or at least begins as the target of the accusations, ill-founded or not. In Salem, we saw that it was outcasts that began as the first suspects. In Edenton, the supposed perpetrators were also the most suspicious; they were the caretakers of many of the children in the town. If one of these children were hurt, news spread rapidly, rumors began, and explanations were haphazardly given, often turning neighbor against neighbor. The peer pressure was of course dramatic, and as we have already seen, the attorney Chris Bean could not fathom the reality of the rumors until he felt personally attacked, after which he quickly flipped his loyalty. “The panic pitted nuclear families in communities against a surrogate one who ran

daycare centers, demonstrating that, by the 1980s, many individuals in suburban neighborhoods fundamentally accepted and upheld definitions of the family anchored in conservative evangelical religion” (Hughes 76). This problem of conservatism demonstrates that the existence of a social system does not exclude resistance to it. Families all over the United States projected their fears of parent-child separation onto institutions like the Little Rascals Day Care Center. The cases that followed were thus tried on very little evidence, but were certainly initiated by a broader trend of Evangelical hysteria, media exploitation, and fear of social and technological change not dissimilar to the “New World” experiences of the Salem community.

Before we begin to discuss the role of “Satan” in this case, it is important that we highlight not only the charges filed against the Kelly family but also the credibility of the witnesses and their testimony. Focusing on Bob Kelly, of the 7 total defendants, he was tried for an outrageous 100 offenses, 99 of which he was convicted for (only to have them overturned years later; PBS). The sheer number of charges filed is enough to raise eyebrows, but the fact that all of the accusations came within months of one another was an egregious rush to judgment. The first accusations have a muddied history, likely started by rumors in the community over a child’s comments (PBS). However the effects were profound, and nearly 30 children in total were sent to 4 therapists, all paid by the state, and all firm believers in the reality of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) sweeping the United States in an almost apocalyptic epidemic (Twiddy). The issue that the Little Rascals Day Care case involved itself with is exactly the same of that of Salem - unreliable witnesses. In this case, the witnesses called were almost wholly children, and as loveable as children may be, their testimony is as compelling as it is worthy of skepticism. In fact, testimony from children was even employed in the Salem witch trials, and it was children who were first afflicted by the “witches.” Most remarkably was the confession of a girl by the

name of Dorcas Good, whom by the age of 4 had already spent 8 months in jail, had lost her mother to execution and had also grieved the loss of her infant sibling. Even still, the community trusted the reliability of this girl's confession to being a witch (Moriarty 44). The Little Rascals case employed a dichotomy slightly different than those at Salem, believing children to be innocent and solely trustworthy victims. Twiddy cites a source that explains this dichotomy more accurately: "The alleged offender was depicted not just as a person who intends harm, but as evil; the alleged victim was seen not just as naive, but as innocent and thoroughly traumatized, and thus worthy of more than just sympathy and support, but of rescue and protection' (DeYoung 10)." The innocence of children was an effective means of convincing a jury of the prosecution's story, and even influenced the jury's ultimate decision. For many, it was the factor that decided the entire case (PBS).

What is so wrong with using children to testify? Inherently, there is no wrong in it. However, the claims made by the children of Edenton were widely believed to have been coerced by leading questions from the aforementioned biased therapists, who had their own agenda. So drastic was this coercion that even some parents came to believe that their children had not been abused at all (PBS). Lotto describes incidents in which children regularly create false memories for any number of reasons, proving the unreliability of their testimony (378). The children likely began suffering from "honest liar syndrome," or "the psychological phenomenon in which a person, after experiencing a certain event, is told something that allegedly occurred during the event, something that the person did not in fact witness" (Twiddy). According to PBS's article, even the parent's began believing certain details about events they had previously said never occurred. This is once again an example of mass hysteria, partially taking the form of a widespread false memory syndrome that swept the community as they tried to figure out the

details of the story they had told themselves. I should reiterate that I do not necessarily believe malice was directly involved, but every person involved in the prosecution of the Kelly family had some agenda to fulfill, whether it be to spread Evangelical beliefs or maintain community reputation. Another extremely telling factor about the children's testimonies were their outlandish and truly unbelievable narratives. In a similar case called the McMartin Preschool Trial, Twiddy notes that testimony recalled that children "had been abused in secret underground tunnels as well as on occasional hot air balloon rides, that some of the alleged abusers could fly, and that they had flushed children down a toilet." Although this is a separate trial, many of the same accusations were made in the Little Rascals Day Care case, showing not only the ridiculousness of the allegations, but also the common thread of coercion that infected the methods of the Evangelical therapists involved. Interestingly enough, the therapist likely did not even know they were pushing these false traumatic memories onto these children. Twiddy recalls that "the popular belief was that God would protect the innocent, and that torture was a test that would determine a person's innocence or guilt. In Edenton, the preschoolers' symptoms developed as a result of the traumatic impact of the inquisitorial process, which could not be distinguished from the symptoms of child sexual abuse" (Shopper 524). In many ways, it was the therapists themselves that afflicted these children and their parents, much less the wrongly convicted parties.

The last facet of this case that must be reviewed is perhaps the most obvious, why "satanic?" In the case of Salem, we saw that the community began associated certain aspects or traits with Satan and his coven, including supernatural markings and spectral evidence such as the devil's black codex. The Little Rascals Day Care case is not nearly as clear, because there seems nothing that signifies any ritualistic abuse, much less for the purposes of worshipping or

acting in the name of Satan. Furthermore, the use of the word “Satan” or “satanic” implies a belief in the Christian devil, limiting the scope of who these cultists could be and what the “real” religious landscape of the world is. Let us begin with the evidence that hinted toward satanic abuse. After all of my searching, I was only able to uncover an obscure abstract from *The Atlanta Constitution* newspaper that describes the testimony of a 7-year old boy who claimed to see day care workers “praying to the devil” (Turnage). Other than this witness testimony, no evidence was ever produced except what may have been suggested by the prosecution and the attending therapists who were paid by the state. It is necessary that we ask simple questions such as, how does a 7-year old know what satanic prayer looks like? Do we have evidence of these supposed ritualistic killings and hot air balloon rides? Are there any cultic artifacts that would point to some strange occult practice, at least strange for a small North Carolina town? None of these questions were ever raised, and if they were the jury chose to ignore them. Why Satan? I believe it rests solely with the widespread epidemic of Evangelical mass hysteria that had been circulating around the nation for over a decade prior.

In the same way that the Salem physician William Griggs “willed” the devil into being by associating him with the unexplainable afflictions of three poor girls, the media-crazed Evangelical community, frightened by rapidly changing societal standards, encouraged children to accuse local Edenton residents and the residents of numerous other towns of heinous crimes despite a sufficient lack of evidence (Trigg 39). Both cases resulted in a multitude of convictions, and many wrongly accused citizens were unforgivably imprisoned, executed, and exiled. Although these cases are 300 years apart from one another, they prove that the American legal system is incredibly fragile and is capable of collapsing with the slightest panic, be it “satanic” or not.

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