

Malevolent Maine

Episode 6: Saco River Sara

Malevolent Maine is a horror podcast, and may contain material not suitable for all audiences. Listener discretion is advised.

INTRO

A tree that is said to contain the spirit of a long dead witch, a summer camp with a penchant for losing its campers, and a giant creature haunting the Mahoosuc Mountain Range. These are the stories we'll be bringing you in the next couple of weeks. We're going to keep investigating the paranormal because we can't help it. We have to know the truth. If you'd like to help us dig deeper into the dark truths around us, we would appreciate your help. By supporting us on Patreon at www.patreon.com/malevolentmaine you're making sure that any ghost, cryptid, or alien encounters happening in the state of Maine will get reported. You'll also get early access to our episodes and stream our newest side story, *The Black Tarot*. Again, that's patreon.com/malevolentmaine. Thank you.

A picturesque river meandering through pristine woods. It's the perfect spot to go fishing, canoeing, or swimming. It's also the perfect place for murder. And for the ghost of the victim to come back for revenge.

This is Malevolent Maine.

Guys, what was that?

I saw it with my own eyes

No, seriously, what was that?

It's just not scientifically possible.

I can't explain it.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

This stuff is wild, man. It's real wild.
But... what was that?

Let's go, MMs! Today's story deals with one of Maine's most famous locations - the Saco River - and the spirit that has come to be known as Saco River Sara.

The Saco River is 136 miles and runs generally southeast starting in New Hampshire, before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean in Saco Bay. It is one of Maine's most popular summer recreational spots, drawing up to 7,000 people per summer weekend. There are many sandy beaches and campsites along its banks, as well as being a popular destination for canoeing and fishing.

FROST: It's a beautiful stretch of water. You won't find a prettier river in America. That's my God honest belief.

That's Bill Frost. He's a tour guide on the Saco River. He's been taking groups of tourists down the river in canoes and rafts for the past twenty-five years. I sat down for an interview with him and he was gracious enough to allow me to record his response.

NARRATOR: So you know the Saco River pretty well?

FROST: Oh, ayuh. I know it just about as well as anyone can.

NARRATOR: You know all the good spots for pictures?

FROST: You could say so.

NARRATOR: I bet you've got some stories to tell.

FROST: Sure do. There's the time I was taking a group of Boy Scouts down the river. We come around a bend, just south of Fryeburg, right about the Split Rock Rapids -

NARRATOR: Rapids?

FROST: Oh, they're just Class 1s, not much faster than a regular stream. It's more just a name than anything. Anyways, I'm coming around the bend and there, lounging in the river is a group of about twenty... uh... I think they're called naturalists.

NARRATOR: Nudists?

FROST: Yup. They're all splashing and frolicing in the water just as nekkid as the day they was born, and here I am with about twenty thirteen and fourteen year old boys. Needless to say, those Scouts had quite the trip.

NARRATOR: What about, uh, darker stories?

FROST: Oh, The Saco's got its fair share of danger. Every year there's two or three drownings. They caught a meth dealer up here a few years back. Oh, and there was that guy who kidnapped his ex and held her hostage up at a cabin along the river.

NARRATOR: What about Saco River Sara?

FROST: [long pause] I don't got nothing to say about that.

Saco River Sara. It's one of Maine's most famous ghost stories. There was even a low budget horror movie loosely based on her story, though I'm not sure too many people saw it. Anyone who spends some time in Maine is sure to hear this story at some point or another. There are variations of the story, of course, but we're going to try to stick to the ones we can prove, or at least, not easily disprove. It's a story, like many, with a relatively simple premise.

The story starts in 1941. A high school junior at Fryeburg Academy, Sara Martin, was attending the prom with her date, a senior named Mark Temple. Mark and Sara were named the Prom King

and Queen, much to the chagrin of many of the senior girls who thought it should have gone to one of them instead.

After the prom, as the story goes, Mark took Sara out to a popular party spot along the Saco River. There, they and a group of friends did what young adults often do on prom nights all across the country - they drank, they smoked, and they continued the celebration. At one point, slightly drunk from a bottle of whiskey, the small group of high school students passed around, Sara stumbled off into the darkness, promising to be right back.

But she never came back.

They searched for Sara Martin for a week, checking the woods around where the kids had partied. They searched up and down the river. There was no trace of Sara.

ELLISON: Two months. Two months! That's how long it took them to find Sara Martin.

We were sitting on Marcia Ellison's back porch, looking out over a lazy stretch of the Saco River in the town of Baldwin. It was a small ranch style house, painted bright purple with bright flowers painted on it. Dozens, maybe a hundred windchimes hung from hooks on the covered porch, tree branches, and nearly every conceivable surface. Many of these were handmade. Shells, beads, even some brightly-painted house keys dangled and clanged together in the gentle breeze.

Marcia Ellison was retirement-aged, with thick, owl glasses and a head of snowy white hair. She was matronly in a comfortable way, wore bright pink Crocs, and lots of rings and dangling bangle bracelets. She looked like a cool, hippie fairy grandmother.

She is also the leading expert on Saco River Sara. Her book, One Night in May is a compilation of generations' worth of

anecdotes, extensive research, and a healthy dose of campfire scare stories, all focused around the central subject of Sara Martin and her disappearance.

ELLISON: They found her body at Ferry Beach State Park, at the mouth of Saco Bay in Biddeford. That's over fifty miles from where she had been drinking.

NARRATOR: And that's impressive?

ELLISON: Well, it's impressive for a couple of reasons. First, it shouldn't have taken two months for her body to travel down the river. If you hiked along it, even at a good pace, it wouldn't take you much more than two, maybe three days. But even that's not that strange. Maybe the body snagged on a low hanging branch or a rock. Maybe it caught along the bank somewhere for a time before a rain storm knocked it free again.

NARRATOR: Okay...

ELLISON: Even with all the police and wardens and just regular citizens looking for her, it's still *conceivable* that the body would remain undiscovered for two months. What *doesn't* make sense is the condition they found the body in.

NARRATOR: What do you mean?

ELLISON: Well, not to get too graphic -

NARRATOR: Oh, I think that's okay for this podcast.

[They both laugh]

ELLISON: Okay. Well when a person drowns, they typically sink as the air in the lungs leaves the body. Decomposition starts almost immediately with the bacteria beginning to break down the internal organs. Now, when this happens, gasses are formed. These tend to inflate the body, causing it to swell up like a balloon or maybe a puffer fish is a better description. When this happens the body begins to float.

NARRATOR: Okay, you weren't kidding about graphic.

ELLISON: Haha. Sorry. Should I stop?

NARRATOR: No, keep going.

ELLISON: My research has brought up a lot of rather gruesome details. So, the other thing that happens to bodies in water, even moving water like the Saco River, is that, well, scavengers start to eat away at the body. Fish, turtles, even some birds, start to pick at the body.

NARRATOR: And this wasn't the case with Sara Martin?

ELLISON: No, not at all. The body was dead, of course, and there was some decomposition, but not nearly as much as you would imagine. She looked as if she had been dead for days, not months. And then of course there were the carvings.

Sara Martin's body was found, almost perfectly preserved, hundreds of miles from where had last been seen. Carved across her upper chest in jagged, capital letters was the word, "REVENGE."

BEN TEMPLE: Yeah, he talked about her. I mean, not a lot, but every now and then he would.

Ben Temple is in his eighties. His father was Mark Temple, the boy who took Sara Martin to the prom in 1941.

TEMPLE: Of course he was a suspect. Maybe the prime suspect until they found her body. After that the attention shifted a little... because of what was written or cut into her. It stuck with him though. For years, he had a bad reputation because he was associated with Sara Martin.

NARRATOR: So he moved away?

TEMPLE: Yup. He moved to Ohio. The Canton area. That's where he met my mother, settled down and raised a family.

NARRATOR: But he would still talk about Sara?

TEMPLE: This was later, much later. I think I was thirteen or fourteen the first time I heard the name

Sara Martin. It wasn't until I was grown and had a kid of my own that he actually talked to me about it.

NARRATOR: So what did he tell you?

TEMPLE: He said he didn't do it! He said he liked Sara a lot. He was a senior and she was a junior. He knew he wasn't going to settle down with her; she was just a nice, fun girl to take to the school dance. He was just as shocked as she was when they won prom king and queen. He never would have hurt her.

NARRATOR: Did he have any idea who would?

TEMPLE: He always thought it was one of the girls.

NARRATOR: Girls?

TEMPLE: The senior girls. The ones who thought they should have won prom queen. There was that one girl...

NARRATOR: You're talking about Mary Lamb?

TEMPLE: Yes. Dad always said that Mary was angry that he had asked Sara to the prom and not her. When they fished her out of the water, and saw that word carved into her, well the police turned their attention to Mary.

Full disclosure, we tried to contact several of the girls who had been at the river that night, including Mary Lamb. All of them have since passed away.

Mary was a senior at Fryeburg Academy, the captain of the cheerleading squad. She was pretty with blonde hair and a terrific smile. Looking at her old yearbook picture, she's the kind of girl that's supposed to win Prom Queen.

It's logical, if a little cliché, to assume that Mary Lamb got jealous of Sara winning prom queen. She waited until Sara got drunk, jumped her, carved her up, and dumped her in the river. Case closed, right?

Well, it's not that easy. We know for a fact that Mary left the river early that night. She and her friend Jessice left well before midnight. They spoke with Mary's parents when they got

this home. As near as the police could tell, Sara was still alive at this point.

Then there's the fact that investigators didn't find any scrapes or bruises on Sara's body. There was no indication of any sort of blunt trauma. The official cause of death was drowning. In fact, the coroner wasn't able to accurately determine whether the word "REVENGE" carved on her chest was done before or after she drowned.

Up to this point, the story of Saco River Sara sounds a bit more of a true crime story than our typical Malevolent Maine fare. Who killed Sara? Why? And maybe even to a lesser extent, how?

But the story doesn't end there. Here's where we come in. We spent a Saturday afternoon at Lone Pine Acres, a popular campground along the Saco River, a spot not too far from where Sara Martin disappeared.

NARRATOR: Have you ever heard of Saco River Sara?

MAN 1: Saco River Sara? Oh yeah. Every year she kills someone on the river, right?

MAN 2: My cousin used to tell me that ghost story when we were kids. Really scared the <beep> out of me.

WOMAN 1: Saco River Sara? Yes! 100%. Three summers ago, we were camping out along the river, and I swear to God we heard her out in the woods.

NARRATOR: So, are you worried about coming out on the river?

WOMAN 1: No. I mean, maybe I should but, but not really.

MAN 2: No. That's just kid's stories, right?

MAN 1: She wants to come for me, I say let her. I think I can hold my own.

How Sara Martin, sweet, innocent, Prom Queen became Saco River Sara the terror on the river is the key that makes this story still so powerful almost a century later.

The legend maintains that every year, sometime between May and August, the ghost of Sara Martin returns to claim another victim. The victims are usually young women, between the ages of 16 and 24. The victims drown in the river and are washed downstream, though not nearly as far as Sara herself.

When you deal with stories like these, it's important to maintain objectivity. A healthy dose of skepticism goes a long way of distinguishing the real paranormal stories from the campfire tall tales. So, the Saco River is a fairly long stretch of river. People drown in rivers all the time. Is it that strange that there would be one every year since 1941?

About 25 people in Maine die each year in drowning related accidents. However, the Saco River is not considered a relatively dangerous river. The current is usually fairly slow, and in many places it's not very deep. Still, the sheer number, all falling during a relatively short time period, all of the victims in a small age range is a statistical anomaly.

And of course, that doesn't take into consideration the strange marking. We'll get to those in a minute, but before we do, we were actually able to track down several people who claim to have seen Saco River Sara.

We found a woman named Olivia while doing research on victims of Saco River Sara. She didn't want to give her full name and she declined to appear on the podcast, but we did exchange several emails. In the summer of 2012 she had just finished her junior year of college at Bates College in Lewiston. She was originally from Vermont, but she and her roommates, Emma Staples and another girl were staying in Maine for the summer in their new apartment.

Olivia admitted that there wasn't much to do in Lewiston, Maine in the summer. The girls were all 21 for the first summer and she admitted they did quite a bit of drinking that summer. But even the temporary allure of alcohol couldn't stave off boredom

for long. They decided to have a summer adventure and booked a rafting and camping trip on the Saco River.

If you are unfamiliar with these kinds of trips, you typically show up to guide service on a Friday or Saturday morning, load your camping gear into a truck that the company brings to a camp site down river. Then you and your friends climb into some inflated tubes and float down stream until you reach the campsite. You camp for the night, wake up, pack up, float some more until you reach the end spot and the company picks you up and shuttles you back to your car.

Olivia told us it seemed fun and the girls each packed a few cold beers into their floats, something she says the company turned a bling eye to, but couldn't technically endorse for insurance purposes. She said there were two guides, a man and a woman, both not much older than they were. She said one floated at the front of the group and the other at the back, sandwiching the group - about twenty-five campers - between them.

They kept trying to get the group to do those call and return chants, the kind of thing that is popular at summer camps throughout the world. Some of the group played along and some didn't. As the trip went on, more and more people got infected with the silly, fun nature of it.

Olivia said at one point, later in the afternoon, she and Emma fell towards the back of the group. She said the line gets pretty stretched out as the day goes on. The male guide - Ben or Barry, she couldn't remember his name - was at the front of the group, and somewhere back behind them was the female guide. She couldn't see her, but Olivia wasn't too worried about it. They had drunk a few beers and were looking forward to a few more cold ones when they reached the campsite. They were having a good time. Maybe they hit a slow spot or just lagged behind, but Olivia wasn't concerned. It was pretty hard to get lost, and as long as they didn't get behind the rear guide, they'd get to the camp eventually. Every now and then they'd hear either the front guide or the rear guide call out with some nonsense chant.

Olivia said she remembered the guide in the back kept calling out the intro to Spongebob Squarepants.

They went around a little s-curve in the river and at least for the moment they were completely alone. Olivia said she was enjoying herself. Emma was not far behind her. She closed her eyes, lounging in the sun. Suddenly she heard some splashing from behind her. Her first thought was that Emma had dropped something, so she called out, "Are you okay?"

There was no response and suddenly Olivia felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. That's when she opened her eyes and looked behind her.

Emma's tube was empty. Olivia thought she might have jumped out for some reason, even though they had been told not to. They were all wearing life jackets as a safety precaution so Olivia told us she wasn't that worried...yet.

Then she saw *her*.

There was a woman standing waist-deep in the water, which should have been impossible. The river was at least six feet deep at that spot in the river, but the woman stood as if it had been just off the shore. Her dark hair hung damp about her face, hiding her eyes. She was wearing a gown of some kind. Olivia said it looked old fashioned. It hung heavily on the woman, weighing her down. There was something on the woman's upper chest, just below her neck. At first Olivia thought it was red marker and that someone had written something there, but as she looked closer she realized what it was - blood. Someone had carved the word "Revenge" into the woman's chest.

The woman was holding something under the water. There were bubbles and splashes and Olivia knew, she *knew* it was her friend Emma. She screamed and jumped off her float. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she had to help her friend.

The woman and Emma hadn't moved with the current but Olivia had drifted farther from them before she jumped in. She had to swim against the current, and she admits she wasn't in the best frame of mind. It was a difficult task, but by the time Olivia got there the woman in the dress was gone. There was no trace of her. It was as if she had never been there at all. One minute she had been standing there, holding Emma Staples beneath the water, then Olivia's own head ducked under, and when she came back up the woman was gone.

Emma bobbed to the surface. That's when Olivia started screaming. Eventually the tour guides heard her. They rescued her from the water and radioed in for help. They pulled Emma Staples' body from the water. She was dead.

Olivia admits that both she and Emma had been drinking that day. She also said they smoked a little marijuana just before they started their rafting trip. Some might argue that Olivia wasn't in the right frame of mind. Perhaps her friend *did* try to get out of her float and slipped somehow. Perhaps she got tangled with the tube and drowned. Perhaps Olivia's altered frame of mind, coupled with the tragedy unfolding before her eyes, caused her imagination to embellish the events. After all, it's not like the story of Saco River Sara isn't well-known

But that doesn't explain the strange marks we mentioned earlier.

Each of Saco River Sara's alleged victims have a mark on their body somewhere, a cut, that looks like one of the letters from the word 'revenge.' Over the years, they have gone in order the word, starting with an R, then the next year it's an E, and so on until the word is spelled. Then it starts over.

It sounds unbelievable, we know, but We saw the pictures, each a close up of a wound on the body of a young dead woman, pulled from the Saco River. We didn't have eighty years, but there were enough to get the point across. It is hard to deny, looking at the stack of crime scene photographs, that these weren't the

letters of the word revenge. Maybe one or two could have been something else, like the scrape of a twig or a rock, but all together it was impossible to ignore. Even the coroners have ruled out accidental scraping.

The cycle started again in 2019 when Charlotte Porter drowned. They found an R carved into her abdomen. In 2020, Leah King was found with an E carved behind her ear. When they recovered twenty year old Hannah Westin's body from the Saco River last August, they found a bloody V sliced into her abdomen.

That means this year some unfortunate young woman is going to be pulled out of the river with an E carved into her body.

BREAK

Here's what we know. Sara Martin drowned in the Saco River in 1941. Somehow, her body traveled the length of the river before being found at Ferry Beach in Saco, Maine. The word revenge had been carved into her body, which had strangely not decomposed as much as it should have. Since then, every year, a young woman "drowns" on the Saco River with a new letter carved into her skin. Emma Staples, the drowning victim in 2012, whose friend Olivia claims to have seen Saco River Sara, was found with the letter R sliced into her upper arm.

So why is Sara doing this? If it really is her spirit, coming back to haunt the place where she drowned, why does she keep killing young women? Maybe it has something to do with the word they found carved into her body, a word that they couldn't determine whether it had happened before or after she had fallen into the river.

What if it wasn't the killer who carved the word onto Sara Martin? What if she wasn't killed to get revenge, but her spirit or ghost is the one seeking it. What if it wasn't a message, but a prophecy?

We looked back through the case files on all of the victims. Was there anything they had in common? All of them were young, around the same age as Sara when she died. All of them were pretty in the traditional sense. Not all of them were blonde, but a fairly large proportion of them were. Lastly - and we could only really confirm this for the last decade's victims - all of them seemed to be popular in that they were well-liked by their peers, outgoing, in a higher social category than many of their contemporaries.

Is it possible that the ghost of Sara Martin is coming back to get revenge on the type of girl that killed her?

ELLISON: Sara was a well-liked girl, I believe, though maybe not as popular as some of the other girls. Especially not the senior girls who felt a junior shouldn't have won Prom Queen.

That's Marcia Ellison, the expert on the Sara Martin case.

ELLISON: She wasn't popular, and I think a lot of the older girls were jealous that she went to the prom with Mark, and then that she won prom queen. It seems silly to us now, but think back to when you were seventeen, eighteen years old. Think how big the world of high school felt.

Could that jealousy drive someone to kill a young girl? Maybe. And could the need for revenge be so strong that it could defy the laws of nature, could defy death itself?

The Saco River remains a popular destination each and every summer despite these dark rumblings. Despite the stories, thousands of people will flock to its banks to enjoy the sun and the water. However, it would appear at least one angry specter stalks its banks, seeking revenge for a wrong done long ago.

If you're going out on the Saco this summer, remember to stay safe out there, Maine.

Malevolent Maine is Lucas Knight, Tom Wilson, and myself, Chris Estes.

If you'd like to read more about our investigations check out our website at malevolentmaine.weebly.com

While there, don't forget to check our merch store. And, if you're so inclined, support us on Patreon at patreon.com/malevolentmaine

Thank you for listening to Malevolent Maine.

And as always, stay safe out there, Maine.