

Malevolent Maine

Episode 7: The Witch Tree of Woodland Valley

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

INTRO

A summer camp with a history of losing campers. An impossibly tall cryptid prowling the White Mountains, and a doctor who has been making housecalls for over two hundreds years. These are some of the stories we're working on for future episodes. We research these stories and make this podcast because we can't sleep at night. If you can't sleep, consider becoming a Patreon supporter. By supporting us you'll have early access to episodes, exclusive content like our side story, *The Black Tarot*, and special gear not seen anywhere else. That's patreon.com/Malevolentmaine. Thank you.

The tree twists its way up to the sky, like a hand bursting from a fresh grave. Its thick, knotty trunk has fallen in on itself, revealing a hollow just the right size for a person to climb into. And you want to climb into it, don't you? Even though this tree looks like it's ready to eat you alive, you can't help but want to step into its cool confines, because really, what could possibly be waiting for you in the dark?

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?

We're back MMers, and we've got a story for you about the woods. Maine is covered with woods and forests. 17.6 million acres to be exact. That amounts to 89% of the land area of the state. While there are dozens of forest stories we could tell, today's story deals with a specific forest, or more accurately one specific tree.

Around the town of Limerick in southern Maine there is an area the old timers will tell you is known as Woodland Valley. Limerick is an old town with lots of old families who have lived there for generations. And like a lot of old New England towns, its roots can be traced back to the Puritans.

Nearly every American will remember learning about the Pilgrims who sailed from England to avoid religious persecution. The Pilgrims who came across on the Mayflower were a part of a larger religious group - the Puritans - who believed in a back to basics, literal approach to religion. They took the Bible as black and white fact and sought to purify themselves from the more ostentatious in their opinion Anglician Church.

Most people will recognize the Puritans from the famous Salem Witch Trials of 1692. Twenty victims in Salem, Massachusetts were executed for witchcraft all because of the testimony of several of the village girls.

So what do the Salem Witch Trials, the town of Limerick, and that one single tree have to do with each other?

The answer is a woman named Isabelle Houser.

Back in the late 1690s, not long after the witch trials ended in Salem, Isabelle Houser was arrested, and later convicted, for practicing witchcraft. An important historical note here. At the time, many of the Puritan settlers in New England truly believed in witchcraft. It had yet to become as sensationalized and a part of pop culture as it is now. The Puritans *believed* in witchcraft just as they believed that the witches who practiced it gained their powers by signing their name in the Devil's Black Book and consigning their souls to him.

Here is a passage from Reverend Jeremiah Horne's diary on the subject of witches. He was the local minister in Limerick at the time of our story. It is dated May 25th, 1697. I've asked fellow investigator Tom to read it:

TOM: A witch is a thing most insidious. A damned woman (or man) who has given himself over to the Devil's grace. To suffer a witch is to suffer a poison in one's well - from it, all things will become corrupt and die. It is the job - nay the calling - of a Minister to do the work of God on this Earth and to root out these evils wherever one can be found. And it is the work of all good men and women to aid in this, the Lord's work.

The Puritans despised witches and believed through them the Devil was attempting to corrupt their soul. However, like many things regarding the Puritans, there was some hypocrisy when it came to witches.

On one hand witches were agents of the Devil, put here to spread sin and evil. On the other hand, the Puritans often relied on these people for cures and remedies their primitive doctors could not cure. Often a witch was a term synonymous with a medicine woman, someone who knew herbal cures.

Also Puritan-era witches were known to concoct so-called "love potions" for the young women of New England who were looking for a prospective husband. They also cast cleansing rituals or

blessings on farms, lifted curses that might have been placed on an unfortunate victim, and gave glimpses of the future.

While not accepted by society, a witch's place in that society was, if not honored, then at least tolerated. It wasn't until 1692 and the hysteria that grew out of Salem that all of a sudden witches were something to be hunted.

Which brings us back to Isabelle Houser.

Houser was the local witch to the Woodland Valley region. By all accounts, she was an old woman, maybe 60-65, though as we'll see a little later, that number may be in question. She lived on the outskirts of the village, some say in a cabin out in the woods. She hadn't been in the area long, maybe five years. There were rumors she had come from Salem, Massachusetts, just before the hysteria had settled in. The people of Maine were made of hardier stuff than their neighbors, and while Houser was not well-liked, she was accepted as part of the growing area.

That all changed in the fall of 1698.

Ten year old Caleb Warren, son of a local farmer, went missing. It was not uncommon for people to go missing in pre-Colonial America, but by 1698 it was becoming less so. A party was formed and the woods around the village were searched extensively. The boy could not have gone far, the village leaders reckoned. After three days of searching, Caleb Warren's body was found washed up along a nearby stream bed.

It was easy to assume the boy had gone for a swim and drowned, or perhaps slipped and hit his head. In fact, that was the very story the minister told the concerned population. The truth was far different.

Here's Tom again, reading another passage from Reverend Jeremiah Horne's diary. This was from the day after the body was discovered:

TOM: Twas the Warren boy, there could be no doubt. His own father knew his son the moment he was fished from the creek. He was found with not an article of clothing about his person, naked as the day he was born. Strange markings covered the boy's body. They looked like the ink sailor's use to tattoo their bodies, though these were unlike any I had ever seen before. Strange symbols that made my head swim as if I had been in the sun for too long. I knew not what they were, but I understood them to be profane. His eyes had been removed and his eyelids sewn shut with a thick black cord. There were holes in each of the boy's ankles large enough for a man to stick his little finger into. The body was pale and completely drained of blood.

Reverend Horne understood the panic that would ensue if the small village learned the truth, so he kept the truth a secret. The family of the boy kept quiet out of grief and according to Horne's journal, he paid the man who found the body, a town drunk, with three bottles of brandy to keep the story secret. And for a while, the area knew peace.

That was quickly shattered in March of the following year when seven year old Mercy Glover went missing.

This time Reverend Horne couldn't keep quiet when the body was found in the same condition as Caleb Warren's, same strange symbols tattooed on her skin, same eyes sewn shut, same wounds on her ankles. She was even found in the same stream not far from where Caleb Warren had been, discovered by a fisherman who had hoped to pull a few spring trout.

Two weeks later eleven year old Temperance Cole, Reverend Horne's own niece was discovered, killed in the same manner as the previous two children.

It was clear to the people of Woodland Valley that they had a witch on their hands, and they knew exactly who to point the finger at. Who else, but Isabelle Houser, the woman who knew where to find the herbs to cure boils and who could brew up a potion to make a man fall in love. It did not help that her

cottage was only a mile or so upstream from where all three bodies had been discovered.

Elias Lynton, a clerk of the court, took four strong men with him when he visited Houser's home on April 13, 1699. They came at noon, when the sun was at its highest and the Devil's magic would be weakest. They brought heavy iron chains because everyone knew a witch's powers could not work if their skin was touched by pure iron. Even still, the men carried with them clubs, knives, and one of them brought a rifle. A witch was a serious problem and one they meant to take no chances with.

They approached Houser's cabin. At first glance everything looked perfectly normal, a typical Puritan home, but the closer they got, the more the men began to feel uneasy. The ax thrust into the chopping block was rusted over. The plants growing in the small garden near the door didn't look like any the men had seen before. The two windows at the front of the cabin appeared to be boarded up.

And it was silent. Before the day had been alive with the sounds of the world - birds sang in the trees, squirrels scurried in the woods, insects buzzed about the warming air - but as the men approached the cabin the sounds seemed to fall away, leaving a heavy silence about the place. Even the men's footsteps didn't seem to make a sound as they neared the front door.

Houser was nowhere to be seen, but one of the men became certain he could hear some sort of chanting or muttering just below the silence. The man, identified as Thurgood Bratcher, later testified to the court about what he heard. I've asked Lucas, one of our lead investigators to read the man's testimony:

LUCAS: It was quiet as a church in prayer when we started up to the house. Then all of a sudden, I could hear it, real low. It sounded like a woman saying something, but I couldn't make out the words. I know it doesn't make any sense, but it was still silent out in the woods. I could hear it though, low, like it

was coming from inside my ears. I knew it was coming from inside the cabin and I knew it was the words of the Devil.

The men approached the door and with one shaking hand, Lynton knocked three times. "Isabella Houser?" he called. "I am come from the court and I have here a warrant for your arrest. Please come quietly."

The men waited for a reply. By now, they could all hear the chanting. Lynton himself would later swear in his deposition that whatever words Houser was speaking, they weren't any he had ever heard before, not in English, or any other language.

Lynton called again, banging on the door, but again there was no reply. The chanting grew louder, more frenzied. It was inside their heads now, somewhere between a whisper and a tempest. Here's Thurgood Blatcher's testimony again:

LUCAS: It was in my head. Like she was shouting in there, but also whispering. I know it don't make any sense, your Honor, but that's exactly what it felt like. And I didn't know the words, but then I almost did. Like they had come to me in the middle of some black night, from a dream the Devil had sent to snare me. I looked at Mr. Lynton, there, and at John and Silas and all of a sudden a rage come over me. Like I wanted to take the club in my hand, or better yet, the rusty ax from the block and smash it into their faces again and again. I didn't, of course. I'm a good man, Your Honor. I got to Church and say my prayers every night, but in that moment, I understood how close I was to the Devil.

Summoning his courage, Lynton shoved open the door to Houser's cabin.

It was just a single room, but it was as dark as night in there, and despite the springtime sun, it was as cold as winter. Lynton even claimed he could see his breath as he crossed the threshold into the cabin, from light to dark.

None of the men could explain what they saw, so they could only do their best to describe it.

Houser was sitting on the floor around a guttering fire, naked except for a dozen or so necklaces she wore, dangling with bits of bone, carved sticks, and stones. She swayed back and forth, eyes closed over an old black pot that poured a thick smoke into the cabin. There was a smell none of the men could identify, like dirt and unwashed bodies, but something else, something almost cloyingly sweet. One of the men said it was like spoiled milk and rotten meat mixed with summer harvest and honey.

And the fire! Lynton would write in his deposition that the flames were not natural. They flickered in strange colors, first green, then dark purple, like a bruise, then blue like the ocean.

Isabelle Houser was chanting, that rhythmic, hypnotic litany that stirred violence in the men's hearts. One man claimed he felt as if his blood was boiling and another thought his insides might simply burst outward through his skin.

Elias Lynton reckoned it was no more than ten strides from the door to the center of the room where Houser huddled, but after he took his first step he said he became confused. He felt like he had lost his way, that every step he took forward became more and more hesitant like a man who is almost certain he has become quite lost.

It should have taken no more than five minutes to cross the room and arrest Houser, but by the time the men emerged, Houser bound in iron chains, two hours had passed. They bundled her up into the back of the wagon they had come with and chained her to an iron ring sunk deep in the wood.

Lynton claimed he did not want to go back into the house, and had the other men not looked to him for leadership, he most likely would not have. In the end though, Lynton was a clerk of

the court and had been ordered to discover whatever evidence he might find.

"It is my greatest regret," he wrote, "that I went back into the home of Isabelle Houser. What I discovered will haunt me forever."

Lynton found dolls made of straw, many made up to look like several well-known members of the community. There were ones that resembled Reverend Horne and his wife, Elizabeth, and another that looked like Francis Deekes, a wealthy landowner. He found bones that had been sharpened to lethal points, strange symbols carved into their surface. He found a pail of large rusty nails and a heavy hammer. There were the mummified remains of two cats and a chicken placed in corners of the room. Beneath Houser's bed he found a jar full of preserved eyeballs.

That was enough for Judge Winthrop Moulton to order Houser locked up pending her trial for witchcraft, but it wasn't enough for Reverend Horne, who along with the fathers of the slain children returned to the cabin several days later.

The men thoroughly ransacked the place, turning out the entire home. Behind a cabinet they discovered more of those strange symbols that had been tattooed onto the children's skin, written on the wall of the cabin in what appeared to be blood. They also found several buckets that looked as if they had been used to collect some rusty brown liquid that was most likely blood. Not far from the cabin, near the same stream where the bodies had been discovered Reverend Horne found what he believed to be the slaughter grounds.

TOM: I believe she used her powers to lure the young boy and girls out into the woods, pierced their ankles with rusty nails, and hung them from a tree. Using the devices found inside the home, she would mark their skin with her demonic symbols then drain the blood from her victims. I believe she did this under the direct orders of the Devil himself in order to preserve her life and continue to sew his evil.

The court documents at the time list Iseballe Houser as being between the ages of 60 and 65, however according to written articles discovered in the home, it is believed she was much, much older than that. It took some digging, but we at Malevolent Maine believe we have traced a woman named Isabelle Houser back to London, England in 1591. This would mean that Houser was over 108 years old at the time of her arrest.

Was Isabelle Houser a witch and was she performing occult sacrifice rituals in order to extend her life? Reverend Horne seems to believe so. At her execution he was reported as saying that an unnatural long evil life was finally coming to an end.

Isabelle House was found guilty of witchcraft, murder, and other unmentionable crimes. It was decided that she herself should hang from the same tree she had drained the life of the children from. As she stood on the makeshift gibbet the villagers had hastily erected, she was reported to deliver her final words, the first she had spoken at all since she had been arrested.

I've asked our new producer Megan to read Isabelle House's final statement. Making a podcast is hard, and Megan has come on to make sure all i's get dotted and t's crossed when it comes to the digital side of things. Here she is, reading Houser's reported final statement:

MEGAN: The Eye sees. The Ear hears. The Black Heart *knows*. Take my life, but you stand on cursed ground, and Death waits not long for you. You cannot unmake what the Master has made. You cannot kill what cannot die.

Then the noose was readied, and Houser was hanged by the neck until death.

Witches were not buried in Puritan New England. To perform a burial was to give the dead a Christian blessing, and no executed witch deserved the grace of God. In Salem, for instance, the bodies of the nineteen hanging victims, were

dumped into a low spot beneath the ledge at Gallow's Hill. Locals claimed to hear grieving family members sneak down to the crevice in the middle of the night to give the bodies a more appropriate burial.

That was not the case with Isabelle Houser. There was no one to claim the body and none who wanted anything to do with the convicted witch and child-killer. In the end, her cabin was burned to the ground, encircled by men of the village to make sure no spirit or witch's animal familiar escaped. The body of Isabelle Houser was left hanging from the tree where she had died.

By the next spring, the body had disappeared, whether cut down by a villager or dragged off by a wild animal, none could say. The noose, still perfectly preserved, swung from the branch where it had been tied, but little else remained the same.

The tree had swollen in size. Now it would take three large men with their hands linked to surround the trunk and its branches had grown gnarled and warty. The tree never bloomed again, never grew or shed leaves, and yet somehow it remained. Some say it seemed to vibrate or hum with an evil energy. Others said that on nights when the moon was full the tree would glow with a sickly red energy. More than one village claimed to have heard strange whispered chanting coming as if from somewhere deep inside the tree itself.

The site of the killings became a worrisome ground best avoided by the people of the newly formed Limerick township. All remembered the heinous crimes that had been committed there and the dying witch's final words.

Not long after the execution, Elias Lynton was kicked in the head by a horse and soon after died. Within a year Thurgood Bratcher fell sick and never recovered. Reverend Horne left the Woodlandvalley area not long after the horrific events of 1698, attempting to relocate to Barbados and become a merchant. In the

winter of 1701 his ship sank off the coast of Virginia. There were no survivors.

But time has a funny way of forgetting, or at least sanding down the edges. Over three hundred years later and the Witch Tree of Woodland Valley has become something of a local landmark. If one is clever enough, it's not difficult to find the spot where Houser was executed. The tree is still there, though the noose has long since rotted away. And time has left its mark on the so-called Witch Tree as well. It has seemingly been ripped open, revealing a hollow, black core, as if something inside had finally torn itself free. A recent trend has found individuals posting pictures of themselves inside the tree on social media using the hashtag #witchtreenme. It seems the dire warnings of Isabelle House have been forgotten.

One final update before we end this week's episode. Our original story ended there, but after we teased this episode on social media, we received some disturbing new information.

We were asked to contact a person who had a story to tell about the Witch Tree by one of our listeners who posted to the site. We reached out to the man, who asked that he not be identified, and he told us about his experience with the Witch Tree from just last year.

The man claimed he and his fiance, Britney, went to find the Witch Tree. Small towns have plenty of secrets but the Witch Tree isn't a very deep one. It doesn't take much to find the tree if you know where to look. They had seen the pictures on Instagram of others in the tree and since Britney was a big fan of all things pagan and witchcraft - they had even gotten engaged beneath the statue of Samantha, the character from the old tv show, *Bewitched*, in Salem - they decided to find the tree and take pictures.

"When we got there," the man said. "Something just didn't feel right. It was mid-July and the sun was shining down on the tree,

but it felt cold. I don't know how to explain it, but it was like there was a bad vibe to the place."

The man said he decided not to take a picture in the Witch Tree, but Britney didn't seem put off by whatever he was feeling. "She thought I was being silly, that I had just spooked myself," he said. "She teased me and called me a **chicken**, but she laughed when she climbed into the tree and made me take her picture."

Britney's fiance says he took several pictures of her in the tree. He agreed to send them to us to look over. In some of them she's making silly scared faces. In a few she's trying to look serious. In one she's doing what can only be described as a "witch pose." In the end, she chose one to post to her Instagram account.

You can still find the picture of Britney in the Witch Tree online, if you know where to look. In it she's wearing a black tank top, with her sunglasses perched on her head. Her white sneakers stand out against the shadowed interior of the tree. She has a skeptical little smile on her face, like she knows this whole thing is a little ridiculous, but she's willing to play along.

There's nothing overtly sinister about the picture. No orbs or ghostly figures. It's not a particularly amazing photo either. Just a picture of a young woman posing inside a hollowed out tree on a summer's day. The tree itself, however, is yawning open, like some cavernous mouth just about to snap shut on an unsuspecting victim. It has that same look as a Venus flytrap just before it springs closed. If a tree could be described as hungry, this one might be it. Still, there is no sign of the horrors that occurred here, other than the tree itself.

Britney died six days after the picture was taken. At the time of this episode the cause was unknown. Her fiance says he woke up early to go to work, got ready, and came into the bedroom to say goodbye to Britney who was still sleeping at the time. He

says she didn't really wake up but muttered something in her sleep.

"She said you can't undo what's been done, or something like that," he told us. "Just dream nonsense, I assumed. I think I laughed and told her, 'okay.' Then I went to work just like any other day."

When he got home that evening, he found Britney dead in the corner of the bedroom. There were no signs of struggle, nor of forced entry into the house. She was curled up in a ball in the corner of the room, almost childlike. They found no injuries on her body except two small punctures, one on each ankle, each about the diameter of a man's pinkie.

If you go looking for the Witch Tree of Woodland Valley and you hear a strange noise, smell the scent of freshly spilled blood, or even feel something brush against your shoulder, you should leave the woods before it is too late.

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.blogspot.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.