

BURNING WITCHES

Repeat the syllables

Before the lesson perforates the uterus:

Anna Rausch, burned 1628, 12 years old.

Sybille Lutz, burned 1628, 11 years old.

Emerzianne Pichler, tortured and burned together
with her two young children, 1679.

Agnes Wobster, drowned while her small son was forced
to watch her trial by water, 1567.

Annabelle Stuart, burned alive, 1678, 14 years old.

Veronica Zerritsch, compelled to dance
in the warm ashes of her executed mother,
then burned alive herself, 1754, 13 years old.

Frau Dumler, boiled to death in hot oil while pregnant, 1630.

What have they done?

~ROBIN MORGAN



BY IRIS WILDE

"Are you a good witch or a bad witch?"
~GLENDA OF OZ

Every Halloween we are besieged with images of the bad witch. Old, warty, toothless hags with black pointy hats, black cats, broomsticks and steaming cauldrons in which they cook children and puppies. They cast terrible spells and foretell doom and the murders of kings. Cackling and bent, they shriek out of every fairy tale.

The myth of the bad witch is an excellent example of how our knowledge and understanding of women's history has been distorted. From earliest times women have been witches. Witchcraft, or 'Wicca', the craft of the wise, was a pagan religion of Europe for centuries prior to the rise of Christianity, and was the folk religion of the peasantry for hundreds of years after Catholicism prevailed among the ruling classes of the West.

The old religion of witchcraft was an earth centered, nature oriented worship that venerated the Goddess, the source of life, as well as her lover/consort, the Horned God of animal life and of the hunt. The basic orientation of this religion was to the earth, to life, to nature, with no dichotomy between spirit and

flesh, no split between godhead and the world. Sexuality, fertility and nature were celebrated.

The magic of the witches was an imposing catalogue of medical skills and a sophisticated knowledge of telepathy, auto- and hetero-suggestion, hypnotism, and mood controlling drugs. The witches knew the medicinal nature of herbs and developed the science of organic medicine before there was a medical profession. Paracelsus, the most famous physician of the Middle Ages, claimed that everything he knew he had learned from "the good women."

As Christianity spread across Europe it attempted to convert the witches, a stubborn seesaw persistence that lasted for centuries, and which left evidence of an increasing mixing of the separate beliefs. Christianity prevailed, and the horned, cloven-hoofed pagan god was changed into the image of Satan. In the 13th century the Church began a 300 year persecution of witches that would take the lives of an estimated 9 million persons, 80% of whom were women. The torture and murder were extensive. Some villages after a witch trial were left with only one living woman. In one province 400 women were put to death as witches in a single day.

Many of those tortured and killed did not practice witchcraft. Any women suspected to be independent and free thinking was put on trial. The Church enforced the "Curse of Eve" (Genesis; Chapt. 3) by refusing to permit any alleviation of the pain of childbirth. To be a midwife was to risk the stake and fire. An acquaintance with herbs soothing to pain or healing was looked upon as having been acquired through diabolical agency. Here, to be noted, Jews and 'heretical' thinkers were persecuted; also, the use of the term "faggot" to describe homosexuals had its origin in the persecution of witches. When a woman was to be burned as a witch, men accused of homosexuality were bound and mixed with the bundles of kindling (faggots) at the feet of the witch, and set on fire "to kindle a flame foul for a witch to burn in."

The chief document used to suppress witchcraft, Kramer & Sprenger's *Malleus Malleficarum*, commissioned by the Pope in 1486, discusses the evil nature of women at length. According to this document, the main reason for women's frequent alliance with evil is that "She is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations...There was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib...and since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives...To conclude: all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable." The *Malleus* also asserts that women are intellectually like children, have weak memories, are liars by nature, and by nature are instruments of Satan. Anyone would be hard put to come up with a document more frenzied in its woman hating, or so destructive. The *Malleus* was in every courtroom and read by every judge. To disregard it, to challenge

its authority, was to commit heresy, a capital crime. And so some 9 million lost their lives.

Today women are reclaiming the word *Witch*, and with it some of their lost culture. The feminist movement, which began as a political, economic and social struggle, is opening to a spiritual dimension. More women are beginning to turn away from the image of God the Father and the sexist teachings inherent in the patriarchal church and are searching for spiritual fulfillment by investigating the female principle of the universe. Many women are becoming more aware of the moon as a female symbol and how its cycles of waxing and waning coincide with their menstrual cycles and mental states. Women are choosing to celebrate full moons, solstices and equinoxes like the witches of old and are finding the divine within themselves and the natural world. Midwives and natural healers are reviving the ancient arts, and while they no longer fear the flames, they have faced persecution from the established medical profession.

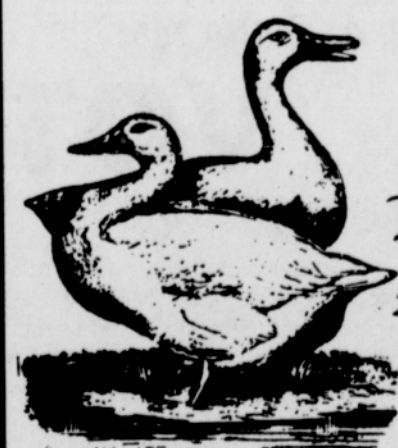
It is important for women and men to be aware of how the persecution of witches and the annihilation of an ancient religion has affected women's position today. The heritage, the culture, the knowledge of the ancient priestesses, healers, poets, singers and seers were nearly lost, but seeds survived the flames that will blossom in a new age into thousands of flowers.

Iris Wilde used to be a Cannon Beach waitress. She lives in San Francisco. Last heard from she was pursuing a doctorate in Women's Studies at the University of California.

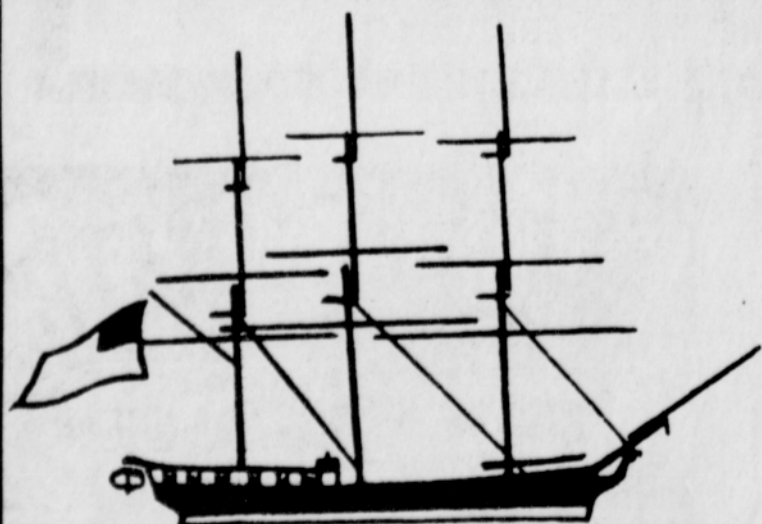


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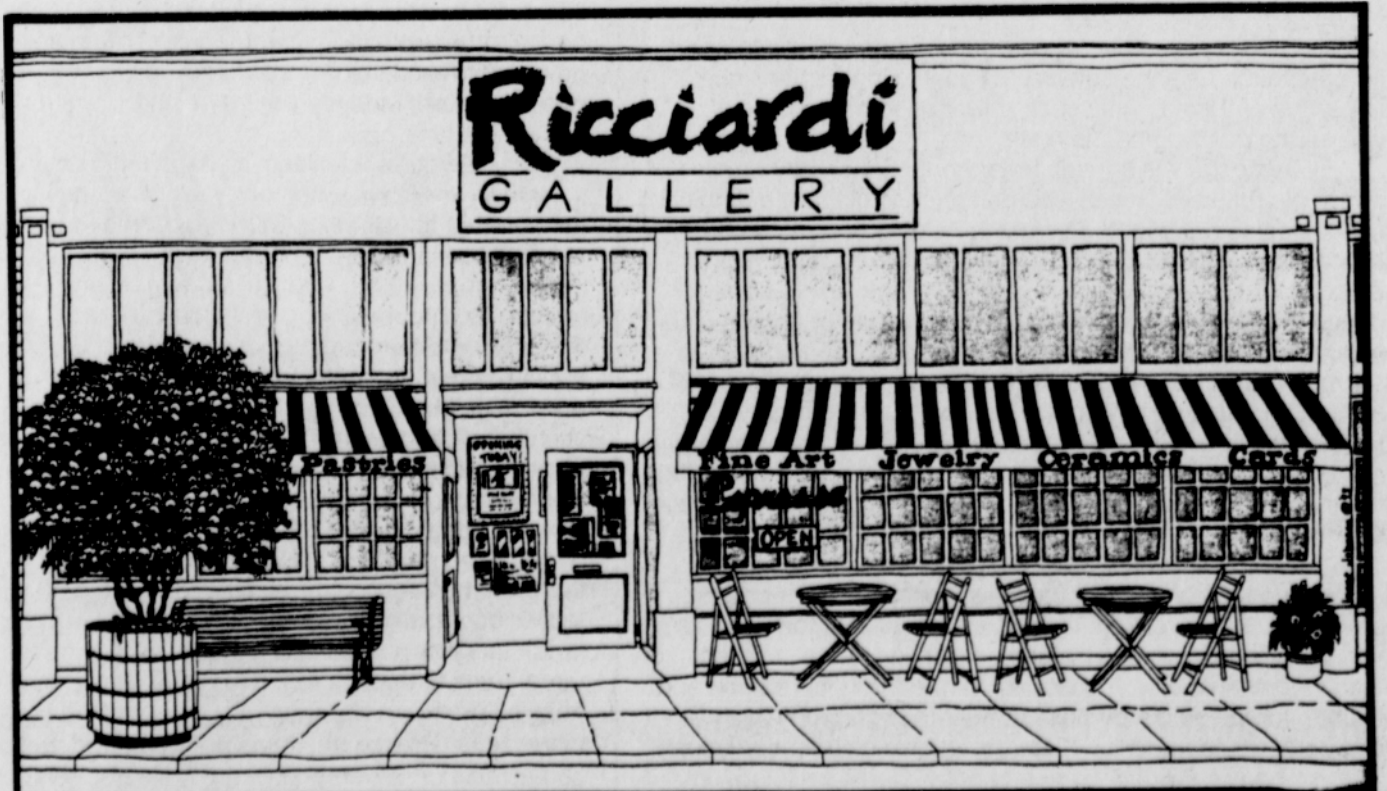


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