

Putting A Face On The Connecticut Witch

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DANBURY, Conn. — Five women who were accused of witchcraft in the state during the 17th century were brought back to life on March 24 during a one-woman performance at the Danbury Museum and Historical Society.

The women, according to Virginia Wolf of Her Story Theater, were among more than 40 people accused of witchcraft in Connecticut from 1642 to 1693 -- a period that began more than 30 years before the famed Salem witch trials.

About 10 of the women, including some portrayed by Wolf during Saturday's performance, were hanged at the gallows for witchcraft, a crime in the state that was punishable by death until 1715.

"The men at my trial had no wish to hear what I had to say," said Wolf, while portraying Mary Barnes, one of the last women in the state to meet her end at the gallows after being accused of witchcraft.

"My husband and I agreed that he wouldn't speak up for me, out of fear it might put him and our children at risk."

Barnes, Wolf explained, was one of several women named by a young girl suffering from "fits" in 1692 who claimed witches were tormenting her.

It was Barnes that Wolf began portraying at Stanley-Whitman House in Farmington, when she realized the woman was only one of many who were accused of witchcraft.

Wolf's research into the witch trials led to the creation of the one-person performance.

"I hope people come away with a real appreciation of the experience women had during the time period that nurtured this kind of hysteria," she said.

It was a time, Wolf said, when settlers were plagued by death and disease, surrounded by dark forbidding woods and nervous about their future.

"People were looking for reasons to explain what was going on around them," she said.

The program, which is part of the museum's Locally Grown series, sponsored by the Savings Bank of Danbury, was attended by more than 125 people from throughout the area.

Michele Donaty, a city resident who brought her two young daughters to the program, said the women accused of witchcraft seemed to be those who were outspoken or who fell out of the norm.

"Unfortunately it's something that still happens today," she said. "People who are different still get targeted."

That's why, Donaty said, she teaches her daughters to be tolerant and accepting of others.

"It's important to me that they aren't afraid to be themselves," she said, "and that they speak up when others are treated unfairly."