



# THE DEVIL LIVES IN LAWRENCE: A Study of Kansas Witchcraft

by Jane Mobley

When I was a little girl, “witch” was what you dressed up as on Halloween and “medium” was a word grown-ups used for steaks in restaurants when the waitress asked “how do you want it cooked?” My first contact with anyone who called herself witch came the year I lived with two high school girls as a sort of foster parent. The eldest, then 17, became interested in witchcraft as a way to combat the boredom she felt in school as well as a way to set herself apart from her fellows; drugs were becoming ordinary but witchcraft was special, she explained to me. She made a black robe, gathered a small group of friends and studied the “craft” from books found in the public library. The group began to utilize ritual—some learned and some ad lib. For two months it was the guiding factor in her life, but her enthusiasm waned when she developed a serious infection from dancing barefoot on graves where stinging nettles grew. The group broke up in a panic after they cast a death spell on a local drug pusher and he was found asphyxiated in his car the following week.

During the year when I was a teaching assistant in folklore I talked to many students who professed belief in witchcraft but who were not practicing themselves. I learned from them that common talk around the country at the time carried the notion that Lawrence was one of the three places in the world where the devil could incarnate himself; the other two were the Swedish Blocula and the Black Forest center in the Hartz Mountains. The latter two are traditional witches’ meeting places, the first famous as the site of Elfland, and the second immortalized by Goethe, but the students seemed surer of the devil’s presence in Lawrence than at these other, better-known locations. During this time I developed a profound respect for the sway the occult

has over people, and I became, if not a believer, at least more willing to credit others their belief in various supernatural experiences.

One summer I was teaching American Folklore at Ft. Leavenworth as a part of KU Continuing Education and as is my custom I asked students to fill out cards with pertinent information about themselves, particularly including an occupation or hobby which would distinguish a folk group to which they belonged. In flipping through the cards I read the usual secretary, nurse, elementary school teacher, student, army officer, practicing witch—practicing witch? In talking with the girl after class I found she was serious. A part-time student and full-time secretary who had been having psychic experiences since she was eight, Kim (the name she asked me to use) was a practicing white witch. Fortunately she spent a lot of time traveling to further her involvement with the craft and when I met her had just returned from the West coast where she had discovered that Satanism was “not her bag.” My information here is based partly on interviews with her, and partly on interviews with other Kansans, witches and non-witches, on the matter of popular witchcraft in Kansas today. Therefore, this paper attempts no historical orientation, nor any real conclusions. The observations I offer are only suggestions about the state of popular witchcraft in Kansas at this time.

In considering popular witchcraft, one needs to focus not only on the witch but on the witch's public as well. The popular appeal of witchcraft is enormous even to those who do not believe in any active sense. This appeal may be partially attributed to what some have called the “occult revolution” of the late sixties and early seventies, a movement which has cultivated and capitalized on the fascination the supernatural has always held for man. I find in my literature classes that any hint of the supernatural draws immediate interest; in one class while studying Edward Albee's “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf” we began to consider the last act which Albee calls “Walpurgisnacht.” In explaining the term, I found myself sidetracked and spent an hour answering questions about witchcraft. George and Martha were forgotten, for as one student said after class, “Fights are typical. Hell, my parents fight like that all the time. But witches are neat.” Popular receptivity to witchcraft and other occult phenomena is also evidenced in the rash of television programs, films, and fiction appearing on the market now. However, though many are called by an interest in the occult, relatively few choose the discipline of witchcraft at its most rigorous.

Finding witches in Kansas is easy. Finding those who practice as a serious discipline is difficult. My chief informant classifies witches in two groups: the quick-gimmicky sort and the serious ones. The first are

those people who dabble in the craft completely on their own with little or no instruction. They may be mail-order witches as a variety of pushers of the occult now offer kits to give one instant witch status. Serious witches, on the other hand, are highly secretive about their membership, rituals and activities. My informant revealed herself to me because she thought that if I were going to teach about witchcraft I should have known a witch, and because as she said, "if you teach about us with respect then perhaps more people will stop thinking of witches as though they were only ugly old women on Halloween cards."

Witches are of two types, black and white. White witches use their powers primarily for meditation, as an instrument for learning about the universe, and for healing. Black witches are more eclectic and use their powers for harm and wrongdoing as well. A real white witch never brings her power to bear against another living creature unless that creature is a threat to the forces of good. They believe that all wrongdoing will follow them not only into the next cycle of life, but will be returned to them threefold in this existence. The majority of witches in Kansas, insofar as my informants know, are white witches although black witchcraft is practiced.

The kind of people who are witches in Kansas are perhaps more varied than one would think. Witchcraft is not confined to college students as some have suggested, but involves people in all kinds of work and of all ages. Kim has been having psychic experiences since she was eight and studying since she was twelve. She estimates 10-15% of the population in Kansas has dabbled in witchcraft or magic of some kind. Contrary to common belief, most witches are not women. Rather the division is nearly equal, with perhaps a few more men than women in this area. About half of the people in covens are married or living with a partner. Many coven leaders—high priest and priestess—are married couples. However, Kim believes that women are easier to train than men, and she attributes this to what she calls "greater Psi powers"—the woman's intuition about which so many jokes are made.

Of witches under thirty years old the greatest concentration is in areas around colleges. These people are often the most serious students of the craft and their approach is highly disciplined and historical. A large group of witches between ages thirty and fifty exists in Kansas, but in this age group one most often finds the dabblers, according to my informant. These are, she says, very often people who feel that life has passed them by in some way, or who have lost something out of their lives—children are grown, or they have lost jobs, or spouses have died. Many of these are widows; in this age group people who try witchcraft are most often women. Kim reports they are terribly

susceptible to fads and try to use the craft for specific short-term results instead of as a lasting orientation. They wind up using only a few hours and a lot of money and get very little for it, she thinks. However, some in this age bracket are serious practitioners, and many have been studying for years. In the group of persons fifty years and older there are understandably fewer witches. Kim reports that there are in Kansas about thirty of these people who are very advanced in their studies and who usually practice in a solitary fashion. However, they stand as sort of spiritual advisors to covens and are helpful in teaching novices. She says they are spread throughout the state in almost uncannily ideal locations, so that most serious covens have access to an older advisor.

What do witches do? They practice magic, both as a meditation and geared toward results, in covens and singly. The covens, according to Kim, are chiefly useful for training novices and raising major power. Advanced witches often practice primarily on their own; however, they keep in touch with a group and can join it for festivals and for big problems. Kim says if one is meditating primarily for personal needs, one would do it alone; if someone else needs help it is best to get a couple of other people to join in the



power-raising. For combating evil a whole group is necessary. If a black witch gets a group together to make magic, a solitary white witch cannot stop him. Though both black and white witches believe that white magic is by nature stronger, the effectiveness of the magic depends partially on the talent and will of the individuals, so that to insure the triumph of good magic over bad it is safer to have more white witches raising power.

If one wants to become a witch one begins by reading and learning on one's own. Then the potential witch "kind of waits around." Kim says, and "before long someone will pop up who knows someone who can help you." This person is not usually involved in a coven—more often it is someone who has decided to branch out from a group—but he or she will put an interested party in contact with a group and provide a recommendation. The group investigates the interested person and accepts or rejects him; generally applicants are accepted. Once in the group, the novice undergoes three to six months of intensive training. Sometimes as much as a year is required. During this period they study the history ("Even if you are a good witch you

ought to know what the other side has been doing,” says Kim) and fundamentals of the craft. The last step in being a novice is “getting it together with yourself.” After the period of formal instruction, the novice spends some time meditating and deciding if the craft is a way he can follow with dedication and integrity. Once this is accomplished the novice becomes an initiate. Once a year initiation ceremonies are held—sometimes twice if there is an unusually lucky conjunction of planetary signs. This is the big ceremonial occasion for the coven and if they have ceremonial finery they use it. At this point, Kim remarked sadly, “There are poor covens, you know, who can’t afford the fancy stuff.” The entire coven meets and utilizes a full ritual complete with magic circle drawing and consecration of tools, dialogues between the initiate and high priest and/or priestess with the congregation following, wine (at the last initiation Kim attended the wine was Boone’s Farm Strawberry), and knighting with the ceremonial sword. After this the initiate’s studies are not over, but he can begin to practice.

Coven ceremonies in Kansas are not usually conducted in the nude. Kim thinks this is partly Bible-belt conservatism, and partly a backlog of stories in the witch community of people caught in embarrassing predicaments in some farmer’s field. However, at the Halloween ceremony, the grand finale of the witches’ year, she reports, inhibitions are usually put aside.

Drugs are used in coven meetings primarily by the thirty-and-under age group and then by only about half the groups. Older witches tend to be skeptical of the value of drugs to the ceremonies. Those who use drugs are more often the dabblers who don’t care if they get through the whole ceremony. Serious practitioners sometimes use drugs as a sort of communal warm-up—like smoking a peace



pipe—but the effects are gone by the time one works into serious meditation.

Sex in meetings is used mostly by the gimmicky fad witches. However, some serious groups do use sexual ritual and report it effective for certain kinds of magic. Usually groups who employ sexual ritual are covens made up of couples already married or living together and pairing is done only with those partners. Those groups who do use sexual ritual do not use it often, and these rituals are not the orgies that people might like to believe.

Kansas is coming alive to psychic power, Kim believes, and is a particularly good place for witches. She cites a number of reasons for this. Meditation in an urban area is difficult and almost impossible for a novice because there are so many conflicting signals. People are tense and anxious about so many things that the air is filled with what Kim says is comparable to radio static and that a clear reception is almost impossible even for a very skilled person. Also the study of the craft involves astronomy and she says that the wide open fields are obviously better for achieving a sense of the rhythm of the stars than areas which force one to see through city lights. Too, the craft is integrally related to nature and the novice must study animals, particularly herd animals, and other natural phenomena not readily available in the city. Many witches are coming to Kansas for these reasons and because there is already a large witch population here. This is helped by the fact that there are no anti-witchcraft laws still on the Kansas criminal statutes whereas some other states do outlaw various practices of the occult.

From talking with Kim, and others, I would say that witchcraft in Kansas is a form of popular religion, usually an alternative to other forms of organized religion. It is another attempt to answer the great questions that plague man and simply, in this area, exchanges the crucible. Still, witchcraft does offer explanations and beliefs about the natural and supernatural, about this life and the next. It is a highly structured moral discipline (even black witches have strict codes of behavior) which gives guidelines for every phase of life, and which operates as an exercise in spiritual growth. Popular witchcraft in Kansas appears to be an amalgam of the "Old Religion" (historical witchcraft or *wicca*) and various meditational disciplines, along with a touch of the Gothic and some down home ad lib. In the rituals, terms like "karma," "psi," "Adonal," "essence," and "God," are cheerfully bundled together. Witchcraft is a religion of power and it appeals to people in an age of anxiety when the feeling of personal powerlessness can be overwhelming. A vote against Nixon was not enough for the members of one coven, so they worked a spell. C.G. Jung suggests that

the figure of the Wizard or Magician is an image which lies dormant in the minds of men and comes to the fore in times which are unbearably anxious, occasions when the times seem out of joint. Witchcraft's reemergence illustrates this. Always a strong underground, witchcraft is now becoming a more steadily public phenomenon. The occult promises action in a world where many feel suspended in a kind of limbo. Witchcraft in particular emphasizes developing natural abilities, and promises not a radical cleansing of personality as do some religions, but rather growth and added experience.

In John Fritscher's *Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch's Mouth*, he suggests that witchcraft has developed in relation to Christianity in this country and cannot be understood apart from it. This is certainly true in Kansas, where my informant freely admits Bible-belt standards govern much of the thinking of herself and her associates. Many have tried other religions before coming to the craft, and many will go on to others later. One informant reported, "I was a witch—but I've moved beyond that now." Many see the craft as an early state of a serious meditational metaphysic.

Witchcraft, Kim says, taught her compassion, sympathy for her fellow creatures, and freed her mentally. She does not find it a comprehensive enough answer for all her personal Great Questions and is steadily looking for ways to increase her knowledge and reduce her own anxieties. Even if she does stop practicing the craft, she will not give up the meditational disciplines she has learned from it. And the craft still does hold promise for her, since in the tape she mailed me reporting that she might be giving up witchcraft, she closes with, "If there is anything you need, let me know. I just might be able to help you." Whether my own fortunes have been affected by this witch, or whether anyone's can be affected by the craft at all, and whether or not the Devil really does live in Lawrence, are not points on which my investigations have yielded any surety. But certainly I have found that Kansas witchcraft is stronger and more widespread than I would previously have believed, and that it is a popular phenomenon deserving of study.