

# WITCHCRAFT TERROR Like that of Old Salem STRIKES FEAR AMONG SOUTHWEST INDIANS



Ronald Jones, 36-year-old Yuma Indian, admitted in a federal court preliminary hearing that he killed John Stokes, a fellow tribesman, because he believed Stokes to be a witch.

By Mildred Gordon

IN old Salem, almost 250 years ago, the Puritan fathers hung witches on the scaffolds of gnarled oak trees. Only the tightening of the noose about the neck could garrote the magic of the evil eye.

Out on the hot desert lands this year the terror of witchcraft, thought dead for these many centuries, stalks through the hogans, the wicki-ups and the adobes of a primitive people.

As in Salem, here witches may kill their victims by just a glance. As in Salem, too, the death of a witch is the only salvation for the one who is cursed.

Only this time witches die to the roar of a shotgun or to the thud of a heavy ax.

It is murder as cold and relentless as in the days of the Puritan fathers that is bringing weather-beaten desert sleuths and Department of Justice agents riding through the sun-fire kingdoms of cactus and scraggly mesquite in a far-flung investigation into strange cults of witchcraft.

Medicine men are scurrying for cover and terror-stricken tribesmen are torn between fear of the sorcerers and the long arm of their Uncle Sam as the intensive search is centered on the Yuma Indian reservation. The entire reservation, a barren strip of dune country which stretches along the Colorado river from Boulder Dam to the Mexican border, is being sifted through a fine screen.

The ax-slaying of John Elee Stokes, a 58-year-old Yuman made the witches' brew boil over.

A motorist, bouncing along over the narrow "washboard" road that leads into the little river town of Parker, Ariz., noticed an Indian lying under a mesquite tree, just off the highway. Squinting his eyes against the glare of a blazing April sun, he saw that the man was stretched out with his face in the sand, and that there was an ugly gash on the back of his head.

Driving at full speed into Parker, he notified Deputy Sheriff James Washum, who in turn advised C. H. Gensler, superintendent of the Indian agency. In less than an hour, deputies were scouring the sandy desert trails and rocky bluffs in search of the killer.



There were bizarre accounts of murder in the night and bodies hidden where no white man would find them.

WHEN Deputy Washum and Justice of the Peace J. B. Roberts arrived a short time later, little groups of tribesmen had gathered. Although they grunted volubly in their guttural native tongue, their sun-blackened faces showed no traces of the good humor so characteristic of the southwestern tribes.

Searching the ground in the kleig-like brilliance of the desert sun, Washum and Roberts found only one thing that they thought might be a clew to the mystery. Perfectly imprinted in the hot sand near the body was a set of tire tracks. Washum did not overlook the fact that they might have been the tracks of any of a hundred passing cars, but just the same, he kept an image of them in his mind.

In questioning the Indians, the authorities encountered more than the usual reticence Stokes was well-known on the reservation, and from the great flow of Yuma words, the officers knew that excitement was at fever heat. Gradually the Indians became strangely silent, and fear settled over the crowd.

Washum had difficulty breaking the silence.

"Stokes was a witch," came the grudging admission from a chunky old chieftain, whose face was the color and texture of burned toast. The deputies turned to the other tribesmen. They nodded.

"The ancient one was filled with devils," declared another. "He caused the death of his own son."

"You mean he murdered him?" Washum asked.

"No," said the chieftain. "He bewitched him. He put the curse on him. He was angered because his son had married a girl who looked with scorn on the ways of our forefathers. So he made him die."

"But how?" the deputies insisted. The Indian shifted his weight to the other foot and shook his head.

"Who knows—who but witches?"

For years, wild fantastic stories had filtered through to white men from little villages lost in the sand dunes—tales of witches and fetishes and strange

deaths. There were bizarre accounts of evil ones murdered in the dark of night and of bodies hidden where no white men ever would find them.

When investigators began to talk to the Yumans about possible suspects, they found the lips of the braves sealed in the legendary stoicism of the Indian. Before, in other strange murders of the Indian land, that silence had almost balked some of the cleverest justice agents in the nation.

There was the time in 1933 when the beautiful Columbia university co-ed, Henrietta Schmerler, had been found on the Apache reservation, hacked to death with rocks. Many months went by before her fiendish slayer, Golney Seymour, an Apache youth, was trailed down.

Remembering such cases, the desert sleuths worked feverishly. From adobe huts to little shacks of cactus wood, went the leathery-faced riders, accompanied by Indian interpreter-guides, but everywhere only the shaking of heads answered their queries.

Then one day, while stopping cars along the desert roads leading into Parker, they saw one with tire treads similar to the impressions in the sand near the scene of the killing. The driver of the car was a handsome, wiry Yuman in his middle 30's.

The investigators, who had been joined by this time by W. E. Miller, a crack Department of Justice agent, found that the Indian was Ronald Jones, a hard-working farmer, who lived quietly with his wife and two children in an adobe house on the hot wastelands that stretch along the Colorado. "Sure, I knew Stokes," he admitted, talking along quietly in fluent English. "His son married a relative of mine."

THE lanky Indian hesitated for a moment and scuffed one toe of his shoe in the sand. "What's all this about Stokes being a witch?" someone asked. "The old man was a witch, all right," declared Jones gravely. "He was wild when his son married. And he put the curse on him to make him die a horrible, lingering death."

Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "I hated Stokes," he said. "He swore that he would bewitch my wife and put the evil eye on my children. And I knew he would."

A few weeks later, when Jones was taken into federal court in Phoenix for a preliminary hearing, he related the grisly details of how he killed Stokes with an ax.

THAT the eerie witchcraft-murder of John Stokes is not alone in the recent crime annals of the wastelands is believed by numerous archaeologists. In the backwash of the Indian country—the mountain-locked villages where the white man seldom, if ever, treks—bands of witch-doctors gather in caves at night to chant their hideous songs of death.

Up into the forgotten worlds of the Navajos recently went Richard Van Valkenburgh, trained for years in the ways of these nomads of the sagebrush.

Reporting to the Museum of Northern Arizona, at Flagstaff, for which he is a research worker, he told of the Untees (Poisoners).

"The price of initiation into a band



An Apache Indian executing the Devil Dance, one of the weirdest of all southwestern ceremonials, and rarely photographed.

of witches is the killing of a person dearest to you in your family," Van Valkenburgh wrote in a bulletin which was released by the museum.

"This fraternity or band of witches gathers and holds 'sings' in hidden caves. They make pictures on the floor of colored ashes of the person that they desire to be-witch. After the picture is made, usually the head witch and his assistants take a small bow and shoot a turquoise at the picture, and where the stone strikes, the person whom they wish to be-witch is affected there."

In the Apache wilds, where wicki-ups dot the mesas and valleys where Geronimo led his last war against the whites, federal authorities are sifting through the evidence in eight brutal murders of the last 18 months on the chance that sorcery might have played weird roles. The dances of the Apaches, where painted, masked dervishes whirl in secret, age-old rituals, also are being watched.