CHAPTER 1

This Awful Thing

I hated to admit, even to myself, that I was excited by the prospect of interviewing Lewis Everett Peck, an Exeter, Rhode Island, farmer and descendent of Mercy Brown, who was probably the last person exhumed as a vampire in America. By 1981, I had been a folklorist for more than a decade and had hundreds of interviews under my belt, but no one had ever told me a vampire story based on personal experience. Of course, like most modern Americans, I have a familiar, comfortable relationship with vampires—but these are fictional vampires. Their existence requires us to suspend our disbelief, whether we're watching a movie, reading a book or looking at an ad for beer or batteries. Peck was going to tell me about a vampire who actually existed—a relation, no less—not some cardboard cutout, B-movie actor, or figment of an author's imagination.

Exeter is only a thirty minute drive from my home base of Providence; it seems light years removed culturally. Halfway into this short ride, I left Interstate 95 and began to notice the rubble stone walls stretching for miles in every direction. Overgrown and seemingly in the middle of nowhere, they are a silent reminder of the once-prosperous farms—true plantations, really, relying on the labor of black slaves and indentured Indians—that began to fade after the American Revolution.

Exeter is a wide town, bumping against Connecticut on its western edge and stretching eastward almost to Narragansett

Bay. Its northern border slices off the lower third of Rhode Island, identified as Washington County on maps but known by everyone as South County. In colonial times this "Narragansett Country" was a no-man's-land fought over by Rhode Island and Connecticut. When Rhode Island eventually gained control by royal edict, the colony gratefully named it King's Province, which yielded to King's County. Washington replaced King after the break with England, but the area was—and still is—called South County by the locals.

South County's climate is harsh but, moderated by the waters of Narragansett Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, conducive to good farming. Its rocky soil is among the most fertile in New England. Plantations that began to bloom in the late 1600s reached their zenith by the mid 1700s, occupying anywhere from 500 acres to twenty square miles each. The "Narragansett Planters"—gentlemen owners including the Hazards, Robinsons, Gardiners, Reynolds, and Congdons—grew crops of corn and hay for their large stocks of dairy cattle, sheep, hogs, and horses, all under the direction of a tenant "husband man" and his crew of paid laborers, indentured servants, and slaves. A typical agreement between owner and tenant might stipulate that ten acres be cleared for meadow each year and that stone walls be constructed.

On the same land that supported gentlemen farmers who bred the famous Narragansett Pacer—a marvelously light-footed saddle horse with an easy gait, extinct by 1800 because the breeding stock was sold to meet the overwhelming demand—isolated "Swamp Yankees" literally carved out their homesteads by hand. Stones that could be moved were hauled, with the assistance of animal power, to the perimeter of the field where they were eventually transformed into a dry (unmortared) rubble wall. Larger rock outcroppings remained, forcing the neat, straight rows of corn to temporarily break apart and coalesce on the other side, their undulations a visible reminder that nature can never be totally subdued. This fragmented landscape of fields framed by meandering stone walls emerged from the interaction between unrelenting natural forces and the tenacious Swamp Yankee. The

man I'm going to interview, known as Everett to friends and neighbors, is one of these tough, hard scrabble farmers whose work never seems to end. What they lack in formal education is more than offset by resourcefulness and plain common sense.

Like his South County ancestors, Everett is independent and self-sufficient, raising much of his own food. He has a large garden (which provides vegetables for canning), makes his own apple cider vinegar and elderberry wine, raises pigs (his brother slaughters them, he makes the sausage) and wild turkeys, and still uses many home remedies passed down from older generations.

As I pulled into the dirt driveway of Everett's isolated farm at the end of Sodom Trail, four St. Bernards greeted me, leaping and slobbering on my small car. I rolled down the window just far enough to ask if it was safe to get out. A middle-aged man of medium build, dressed in gray cotton work shirt and pants, pointed to one of the dogs and said, "Well, better let me get this one here." I was relieved when Everett put all four in the pen.

He led me into a cozy living room heated by the wood stove in the adjoining kitchen, much appreciated since it was chilly for mid–November. He motioned for me to sit on the couch, then eased himself down next to me. On a small table was a pile of clippings and other documents. Everett pulled out a yellowed clipping, containing printed text, photographs, and a map, and handed it to me, asking, "Can you find where you are?"

Why did I have the feeling that I was back in third-grade geography? My eye was attracted to a road outlined in red. "Is this Sodom Trail, down here?" I asked.

"Sodom? Oh, I got that in red? Yeah. What's it say there?" he asked, pointing at a photo caption.

I read from the clipping, "Half a mile from here, in a locality called Sodom, is the site of what is claimed to have been among the first cotton or woolen mills established in this state. Structures now as seen in the past. Only two families reside in the hamlet."

Everett broke in, "Yeah, and I'm one. Now, this is when?"

Locating the date at the top of the clipping, I answered, "1896."

"Well, in 1981, I happen to be the only one left," Everett said. He laughed and I felt I had just passed a test.

Everett's speech is forthright, with a snap and edge to it. Hearing him talk is the auditory equivalent of biting into a crisp, cold Macintosh apple. As I was soon to learn, he is also a wonderful raconteur, steeped in local history, with a repertoire that includes personal experiences and anecdotes, family tales, and local legends. Everett describes himself as a Swamp Yankee and jack-of-all-trades. I found out that Everett is a master of understatement—and as shrewd as any Yankee ever was.

What does he do besides farm? "Anything!" he exclaimed. "I hunt up boundaries. And boundary disputes—I got a couple lawyers I do research work for. Done it all my life! Write deeds myself. I'm a notary and everything. Done it ever since I was twenty years old, at least."

As far as Everett is concerned, he is simply carrying on with his family's traditions. He said: "We were a poor family. My family were farmers. That was the source of their income. But they also did logging and wooding. You had to get your money 'cause things was needed. For an example, water power ran the mills around here. But if it had a dry spell—no water—you didn't work in the mill. So you went out and picked blueberries or you did something else. Same with the whole family. We were farmers. But we did logging. We did woodwork. And we sold wood. And we cut posts. And we had cattle. And we had horses. We had everything. We were just regular New England farming, country people. On one side of my family they had a little money. On the other side they had nothing. And they all worked together."

This cooperative self-reliance extended to medicine, too. "If we had poison ivy, we got a herb, indigo. We steeped, we bathed in it. Or, if you cut your foot on a piece of tin or a piece of glass—'cause we were barefooted—you made a poultice. You didn't go down to the doctor and get a tetanus shot, or whatever they got down there to give, an antibiotic of some nature. We made poultices. Sometimes it was bread and sugar."

As an aside, Everett explained: "Today's bread won't do it.

You've got too many chemicals in it," before continuing with his contrast between then and now. "Sometimes they used salt pork. Wrapped a finger up. Salt pork and bread on it and it draws. We did our own medication, lots of times. And they did the same. They were experimentin'—same thing. Today everybody goes to a center somewhere, or they all got doctors. Everything is done, today, differently than it was then."

Swamp Yankee. Like other regional, racial, or ethnic labels, Swamp Yankee suggests a bundle of stereotypical traits: shrewd, penurious, independent, imaginative (often to the point of exaggeration), approachable, but curt and cantankerous. Playing it close to the vest, a Swamp Yankee overstates the mundane and downplays the extraordinary. Although a person like Everett may use the term to refer to himself or his family, and wear it proudly, he may resent its use by outsiders.

Theories about how the term came into use have faded into legend, varying from place to place. It has been suggested that Swamp Yankee is New England's equivalent of the Western "Squaw Man"—an insulting reference to a man who married a Native American or lived among them. Another supposition is that those addicted to drink had to pursue their vice outside the respectable confines of town, so they took to the swamps to indulge themselves. Their straight-laced and sober neighbors began calling them "Swamp Yankees." One explanatory story substitutes the weakness of fear for the vice of drink. In Thompson, Connecticut—or New York City, depending on which version you accept—several townspeople fled to the outlying swamps to avoid the invading British during the Revolutionary War. When they returned, the folks who stayed behind chided them as being "Swamp Yankees." The term followed these newly designated Swamp Yankees as they migrated to other parts of southeastern New England.

Some of the family stories shared by Everett are remarkably similar to these Swamp Yankee tales. "There's a place over here in Exeter," Everett began, pronouncing it 'Egster', "we call Ephraim's Bedroom. I had a relative—and I can't truthfully tell

you his last name, it could'a been Reynolds, but I don't know—but his first name was Ephraim, and he didn't want to go to war, so he hid. And he went up in the cave and he stayed there until the war was over. And his girlfriend would sneak him food, and he had a spring right there by the cave. And they've called it, in the family, Ephraim's Bedroom ever since."

I asked Everett which war Ephraim was hiding from and he responded, "What was it that was between the states here?"

"The Civil War?" I suggested.

"Civil War, yeah."

Everett's tag to the story also connects it to the drinking associated with Swamp Yankees: "The last thing that lived there, probably thirty years ago, was this great big bird. He had a wing spread about ten feet. Yup. And this great big bird . . . he laid this egg. And, of course, my people drink a little, you know. [So they] giggled and laughed about it and finally my old man went up and shot it. And he had it tacked up, with wings spread, on the barn door there for a while, and then they took pictures of it. I don't know where in the hell the pictures are."

Everett also shared some family information that completed his connection to all three speculations concerning the origin of Swamp Yankee. Late in our conversation, when we were discussing Native American sites in the town, Everett interjected: "Now! Be honest with ya, I'm part Indian. Not from here. Don't know. Couldn't tell ya. No way a findin' out. My great-grandmother was a full-blooded Indian. . . . You know, back when we were kids, if you had any Indian you weren't recognized too good, you know. People'd bother you. You didn't tell nobody you had Indian blood in you." Laughing, Everett matter-of-factly observed: "That's the way it was when we were little. They didn't like you too well."

One of Everett's anecdotes, which he shared after I had turned off the tape recorder, summed up his Swamp Yankee heritage. During the blizzard of '78, when Everett was serving as vice president of the town council, he learned that other members of the council, presumably vying for his position, were

gaining favor with local voters by riding on the town snow plows. Being snowed in, Everett couldn't take advantage of this publicity stunt, so he devised an alternate plan. Phoning people in town and asking them if the snow plow had been by yet, Everett was able to plot each plow's progress. Then he would phone people on the next road, informing them that the plow was on its way.

"They thought I'd sent it over. Never said I did—never said I didn't, neither," Everett explained. His smile and sparkling blue eyes showed he still relished the memory of how he claimed the other council members' share of goodwill as his own.

Everett thumbed through the pile of clippings next to the couch, pulled one out and handed it to me. A two-part headline topped the article, which had appeared in a local newspaper the week of Halloween two years before. The smaller type read: "They burned her heart . . . " and underneath, in large bold letters, was the question: "Was Mercy Brown a vampire?" Flanking the article was a photograph of Everett in his work clothes standing next to Mercy's gravestone, looking at the camera and pointing to his left. The caption reported: "LEWIS PECK of Sodom Trail, Exeter, stands at the grave of Mercy Brown (left) in the Chestnut Hill Cemetery, Exeter, pointing to the rock where the corpse's heart was burned in 1892. Ancestor's [sic] of Peck's performed the hideous act to rid the body of what they believed was a vampire." The caption reading "Lewis" instead of "Everett" revealed that its author was an outsider.

In a polished, self-assured performance that suggested he had told this tale many times, Everett began to tell me the story of Mercy Brown. "Mercy Brown was a relative. I can't tell you right now how we're related, but we are related. My mother's mother was a Brown. And it was told to me as a kid, you know, from my mother. Uh, Decoration Day was one of the big days, and Children's Day was one of our big days around here."

Everett, sitting next to me on the couch, turned his head toward me—an outsider—to explain how anyone could be enthusiastic over some minor holiday. "You didn't go very far

around here, you know." On Decoration Day, now known as Memorial Day, children accompanied their parents to the cemetery behind the Chestnut Hill Baptist Church to place flowers on the graves of their relatives.

"The Brown cemetery is at what we call Shrub Hill—Chestnut Hill, used to be. All the family is buried there, practically. And at that place there is the church and a Grange Hall. In them days, we had one-room schoolhouses. Graduation was called Children's Day at the Grange Hall. The various school districts, single-room schools, would meet in June for graduation, and it was called Children's Day. When we went to Children's Day, or when we went to any celebration there, we were instructed by our parents—mother—when we were playing, 'Don't go over the wall and don't go where that rock is. Stay away from there. Don't you touch it, now, because of this awful thing that took place years ago.' "

Everett paused—I think he was checking to see if he had my undivided attention, which he did—then continued: "So, anyway, over there was this stone and there'd been several in the family, they had, uh, come down with some disease. Young and old! All of a sudden! And anything that they did didn't seem to stop it. Even those that didn't even live here, as far away as Ohio!"

"In the same family?" I asked.

"In the same family. Brother! Was comin' down with the same sickness. So, there was twelve men, as it's told to me, of the family that was left. They got together and they figured it was all their turn. This is it! And they got together and they took a vote, what to do. And they dug up one grave, not several. They dug up Mercy. For some reason they picked her, because there was something there that led it to that. Then, they dug her up and she had *turned over in the grave*."

With his characteristic soft-spoken understatement, Everett interjected, "Well, right away, there's a lot of problems there," before continuing. "So they took her out and they cut her heart out. There was blood in the heart. Well, they decided they had to kill it, so they started a fire, not far from the grave—there was this

rock here—and they burnt the heart, took the ashes and done something with 'em. I don't remember that stuff there. Them rocks there is what I was told—and my brothers and sisters—don't go over there and play around. Stay away from there. Stay away from the whole thing! That was the attitude of my mother, bringing us children up. But anyway, it seems as if that's what took care of it."

Seeming to anticipate my next question, Everett jumped in with an explanation. "You know, years ago you didn't have medicines, you didn't have nothin'. You had to figure out your own. They were self-independent people, everybody that lived here. There was no such thing as relyin' on somebody. You did it yourself."

I think Everett also needed to explain without resorting to the supernatural, and as much to himself as to me, how Mercy might have turned over in the grave. "Now, let me say one more thing on this. During my time—not their time, you know—when I was younger, a lot of people was buried and they never was embalmed. Today, you're dead when you're in the ground, because if you're not, they finish killing you when they embalm you. Years ago, you wasn't embalmed. You're dead, you're dead; and you're down in the ground, buried. And then—I'm sure you've studied it—then, you know, a natural death doesn't happen in a few minutes. It sometimes takes years. For an example, your fingernails and your hair—an animal or a person that is not embalmed, but buried—will still grow. Hair will grow and so will fingernails. Now, when this Mercy Brown was buried, there was no embalming. It's possible she weren't quite dead when they put her in there. Why was she turned over? Everything today is different than it was years ago."

Everett took the newspaper clipping that had been resting on my lap and held it up as he continued. "Now they have gone further, some of these, and hunted up dates and different things that I wasn't told and I can't tell you whether it's . . . you know, but, anyway. That is, in general, what happened. They even found the names of the brother, Edwin, and the father's name and some of the pieces that I didn't even know."

Turning back to the clipping and shaking it for emphasis, Everett said, "Now, what they do here, they change this around as if *I* believe in vampire. Now, that ain't what I'm saying'. I'm just revealin' what *they* believed and how they had to handle their own problems, see?"

"Do I believe?" Everett asked rhetorically. "I believe my mother. I believe the family did what they did." "Do I believe in vampire?" he repeated, adding the crucial word. "No. No, I don't believe in that. I'm not sure they did, but they had to come for an answer. And it turned out that maybe that was the answer. And some of them old people probably died with that in their mind, that they did the right thing."

Everett handed the clipping back to me so that I could see for myself and confirm his indignation. It was obvious as I read through the article that its author had indeed "hunted up dates and different things." He also at least implied that Everett, and practically everyone else in Exeter—past and present—believed Mercy was a vampire:

> Rhode Island's past hides many dark things but few are as chilling as what they did to Mercy L. Brown—and why.
>
> Mercy died, apparently of tuberculosis, in January 1892, and her tombstone can still be seen among those of generations of Browns in Exeter's Chestnut Hill Cemetery.
>
> But the pious epitaph on Mercy's stone has been thoroughly and cleanly erased.
>
> Mercy was a vampire.
>
> So her family and fri[e]nds believed, at least, and what they did about it is a matter of public knowledge.
>
> Mercy's brother Edwin was a strapping young man of 18, known as a person not usually subject to illness of any kind.
>
> In the fall of 1891, however, Mercy and Edwin

both became ill. The boy went off to Colorado, where he recovered. His sister eventually was carried to her grave by the illness.

Edwin returned to Exeter still in weak health, and when his condition became worse and stumped the doctors, a council of family and friends was called.

Why was such a strong young man's life draining away? Why had the same thing happened to Mercy only a few months before?

Whether by blind ignorance or horrified piety or something of both, it was unanimously decided that something hideous was at work on the family.

Nothing less terrible than a vampire was sucking their children's blood and taking their lives with it.

Because it seemed that the Browns were the only family being preyed upon, they came to the conclusion that the vampire spirit must be inhabiting the corpse of one of [t]he deceased members.

With Edwin finally conceding to the plan, three bodies were disinterred and examined for signs of the vampire.

To their infinite horror, Mercy's body, which had been buried for nearly three months, still had blood and seemed unnaturally preserved, with color still in the cheeks.

With minds frozen, the Brown men removed the corpse's heart and burned it on a rock that can still be seen near the grave.

They considered this not only a destruction of the vampire spirit inhabiting the body but also as an antidote for Edwin, whose doctor had prescribed the ashes to cure his illness. Edwin died shortly thereafter.

Lewis Peck of Sodom Trail, Exeter, is a descendent of those who performed that act on a grey March day in 1892.

> "My grandmother was Brown," he says, "She and my mother always taught us never to touch that gravestone (Mercy's)."
>
> Peck tells visitors about Mercy Brown only if they ask.
>
> "I think almost everyone in Exeter today knows about Mercy. And a lot of people believe she was a vampire."
>
> He himself had a frightening experience at the grave in the early 1960s.
>
> "I was in back of the (Chestnut Hill Baptist) Church hall with a friend of mine. It was about 11:00 p.m. and suddenly we saw this great big ball of light right over Mercy's grave. I was scared to death—I've never seen anything like it before or since."
>
> Peck says he later heard that psyc[h]ic phenomena of this type take place when there has been violence done to a gravesite.
>
> "I don't know whether I believe she was a vampire or not," he says, "but my people did that awful thing.
>
> "I don't know what I believe."

Everett's indignation seemed justified. For one thing, his unsolicited defense of the Browns and their neighbors as independent and self-reliant rang truer than either of the newspaper's alternative explanations. Neither "blind ignorance" nor "horrified piety" fit what I knew about the character of Exeter Yankees. As for "a vampire was sucking their children's blood," nowhere in Everett's tale was such a scene depicted or even suggested.

Taking my cue from this realization, I asked Everett, "Did they call them vampires in the story when you heard it?"

"No! No, it wasn't designated as a vampire. It was just, you don't go over there handlin' it and you leave it alone because this awful thing that had to be done."

Everett paused and looked down at the floor for a moment; he seemed to be replaying some memory. "Oh, yeah, I've been in places, people say, 'Here comes the vampire man.' And they go all through it, and, 'Ha, ha, ha.' It doesn't bother me because I don't ask them to believe it. I don't care if they do or not."

"When did they start calling it vampire, anyway?" I asked.

"I don't even know that. No. No, my grandmother and my mother never mentioned the word. I'm fifty-two years old and I never heard anybody talk about vampire until we got into *this . . . stuff . . . here*." He provided emphasis by jabbing a finger at the words in the article.

Perhaps responding to the skepticism he had come to expect after countless repetitions of this story (even though I was *not* incredulous and hoped I didn't appear so), Everett volunteered some corroboration.

"And there's an old man livin' today who can remember one of the twelve. He's in his nineties. And his name is Brown. Reuben Brown."

Everett recalled being interviewed by a local television station some years back: "I told them just as it was told to me. So I said to the Channel 6, I said, 'If you really . . . think that I'm far-fetched here, well, there's one man livin' today that would tell you, 'cause my grandmother an' him is the same age (but she's dead).' But I says, 'You'd better call 'im, 'cause he may put you off the place. Maybe he won't talk to you.' So they call 'im and he says, 'Well, come on!' So they went down an'—an' he's in his nineties—an' he tol' 'em. He says, 'Yuh.' And they asked him if he *believed* in it and he said, ''Tain't what I believed in, it's what *they* did.' You know, that was his answer." The fact that this was also Everett's "answer" certainly wasn't lost on me.

There was no way I could leave without inquiring about the ball of light reported in the newspaper article. Did they get that right, or was it just journalistic hype?

Everett's response indicated that, although the article's dating of the incident in the early 1960s was too late, the other essentials squared with his memory.

"My mother died, 47 years old, on her birthday. I was fourteen," Everett began. "Years later—well, couldn'a been too many, I was a young fella—my brother and I, we were out riding around one night, with a Model A coupe, you know. And it leaked a little bit, so we went up there to the pump, water pump; pump up water and put it in the radiator. And we swung around just right between that Grange Hall and that church, and 'course there's your cemetery over that wall and there's Mercy, the Brown cemetery, there. We saw a ball of fire, about that size—the size of a football. It was so bright that it was blue tinted. And I'd say it'd been off the ground, maybe as high as this table. 'Course we got outta there. I don't know what it is. Doesn't make any difference. We start down the road to a farmer, which is a different cousin—they're all dead now—and we were quite excited and told about it. And they laughed and said, 'Yeah. Other people have seen it. Yeah, they've seen it. You must be up around Mercy Brown's cemetery.' And that's about as far as I understand it, to be truthful, authentic about the whole thing. I have told this to several. And I've been asked several times to tell it, and didn't tell it because I didn't feel like talking. So, we go from there."

"So, you're riding around in this Model A and you stopped to get water and you see this ball of fire. What were you thinking?"

"It was time to get out," Everett responded, with his restrained smile again hinting at understatement. "That was the first thing. You weren't going to stay there. We were—I could have been, I might have been sixteen. Not old enough to have my license. If I was old enough, I didn't have my license. Neither one of us. 'Course we had our father's car and we weren't supposed to have it. But you know how kids are. Kind of country folks, and there weren't many houses here in them days, you know, like there is now. So, we just take a little ride now and then. Well, we did go out, but the radiator kept leaking, see, that's why we was in there. There's a hand pump out there where you get water. That's how we spotted that light over the fence. But other than that, I have never seen nothing. I go there, quite often. I go there at Halloween times . . . watch

it [Mercy's gravestone], because somebody's gotta bust it, break off a hunk, tip it over. You know, Halloween time, I've gone there and set in the cemetery and wait for somebody to put their hand on it and I'd holler at 'em."

Everett was clearly angry and sad as he described some of the negative attention that Mercy's grave attracts. People were taking chips from the stone as mementos, and some were even placing tape recorders (which Everett referred to as "electronic soundin' devices") in her grave. Bewildered, this down-to-earth Yankee said, "They say they hear things. Well, now, damn, you ain't gonna hear nothin'. I don't imagine . . . there may not even be bones left!"

Everett shook his head and added: "Halloween night we had a cop there. This year, we had a cop up there. We had a town sergeant stay half the night. And people were comin' in around midnight to do something! Who knows what they're doin'?" (In 1996, Mercy's entire gravestone disappeared. What seemed most mysterious was that the stone was stolen in August, not October. Less than a week later, the stone was recovered.)

Everett then deftly tied together some of the threads that had been introduced but left dangling. With the following anecdote, he elegantly connected Halloween, legend trips (more about this later), supernatural occurrences, and journalists: "I had some reporters call me up one night, around Halloween. They wanted to know a whole lot about it, and I had decided I would explain a little. They wanted to meet with me, two girls. I met at the church. It was raining a little bit and they wanted to know if we could walk out and take a look at it. And I said, 'Sure.' So they walked ahead of me. And, when we got to the grave, they said, 'We don't see nothing wrong here.' And I said, 'Yeah, well look down and you'll see there's a light burning in her grave.' And, of course, they looked down. There was a light burning in the grave there, top of the grave. And they about panicked. Well, obviously, somebody had been there, prior, that night. And they had put in one of these little objects that glow at night—for a joke!"

I wondered if Everett knew of any other similar cases in the

area. He nodded and said: "There was another family that experienced this same thing. Which would be about, I would say, close to a mile east of where this other one took place. There was another one, I've been told—which I didn't know at the time. I've heard of this since these paper clippin's. 'Cause I get letters from everywhere."

Everett made it plain before I left that afternoon that I had been a privileged guest: he had shared his knowledge of Exeter and his family with an outsider. Although I knew I wasn't the "someone" he referred to in the following explanation, I still felt a sting of recognition. Silently I vowed that I wouldn't betray his implicit trust in me.

"See, we don't have no true history of the town of Exeter. Out in the safe I probably have got much as anyone, and I won't hand it out. I wouldn't hand it out for a lot of reasons. And, uh, one of the reasons is, it's against my grain to have someone come into town, be here six months and know the whole town. And when you go to explain something, they treat you as if, well, who's this guy? Who's that fat old guy, he don't know nothin'. You know, and that—that don't go good. And so I decided when they come here, I didn't tell everything, just enough to let 'em know we *did* know, and that's it."

Everett laughed and added a final, chilling comment in reference to a well-known radio personality and writer of local history. "Fact, this mornin's paper, the writer, found her dead, in this mornin's paper. And I says, 'Well, I don't wish anybody dead but I ain't gonna cry over that one.' " And he laughed again.

Driving back to Providence I was on automatic pilot with my mind turned inward. Was Everett telling me just enough to let *me* know that *he* knew? How much of Everett's incredible story was true? If based on fact, how widespread was this practice? Was it confined to just this one family—tainted as was Poe's House of Usher or cursed with a "family peculiarity" like the bosom serpent in Hawthorne's short story—or had it occurred in other families, as Everett vaguely suggested? My

folklorist's instincts—my academic training combined with years of fieldwork—told me that Everett's family tale grew out of an actual event, a conclusion reinforced by the newspaper clipping that Everett had shown me. I didn't have even the whisper of an inkling that the next two decades would find me absorbed, part-time but passionately, in an ever-widening search; that an amazing puzzle would evolve piece-by-piece, sometimes frozen for months, sometimes developing at a hectic pace. At this moment, my main concern was to find evidence of what really happened to Mercy Brown and her family in 1892. With a start, I snapped out of my trance as I realized I had arrived at the Old State House on Benefit Street, my home base. On the way back, I hadn't seen a single stone wall.