The great New England vampire panic: two hundreds years after the Salem witch trials, farm communities became convinced that their dearly departed relatives were returning from the grave to feed on the living

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Children playing near a hillside gravel mine found the first graves. One ran home to tell his mother, who was skeptical at first--until the boy produced a skull.

Because this was Griswold, Connecticut, in 1990, police initially thought the burials might be the work of a local serial killer named Michael Ross, and they taped off the area as a crime scene. But the brown, decaying bones turned out to be more than a century old. The Connecticut state archaeologist, Nick Bellantoni, soon determined that the hillside contained a colonial-era farm cemetery. New England is full of such unmarked family plots, and the 29 burials were typical of the 1700s and early 1800s: The dead, many of them children, were laid to rest in thrifty Yankee style, in simple wood coffins, without jewelry or even much clothing, their arms resting by their sides or crossed over their chests.

Except, that is, for Burial Number 4.

Bellantoni was interested in the grave even before the excavation began. It was one of only two stone crypts in the cemetery, and it was partially visible from the mine face.

Scraping away soil with flatedged shovels, and then brushes and bamboo picks, the archaeologist and his team worked through several feet of earth before reaching the top of the crypt. When Bellantoni lifted the first of the large, flat rocks that formed the roof, he uncovered the remains of a red-painted coffin and a pair of skeletal feet. They lay, he remembers, "in perfect anatomical position."

But when he raised the next stone, Bellantoni saw that the rest of the individual "had been completely ... rearranged." The skeleton had been beheaded; skull and thigh-bones rested atop the ribs and vertebrae. "It looked like a skull-and-crossbones motif, a Jolly Roger. I'd never seen anything like it," Bellantoni recalls.

Subsequent analysis showed that the beheading, along with other injuries, including rib fractures, occurred roughly five years after death. Somebody had also smashed the coffin.

The other skeletons in the gravel hillside were packaged for reburial, but not "J.B.,” as the 50ish male skeleton from the 1830s came to be called, because of the initials spelled out in brass tacks on his coffin lid. He was shipped to the National Museum of Health and Medicine, in Washington, D.C., for further study. Meanwhile, Bellantoni started networking. He invited archaeologists and historians to tour the excavation, soliciting theories. Simple vandalism seemed unlikely, as did robbery, because of the lack of valuables at the site.

Finally, one colleague asked: “Ever heard of the Jewett City vampires?"

In 1854, in neighboring Jewett City, Connecticut, townspeople had exhumed several corpses suspected to be vampires that were rising from their graves to kill the living. A few newspaper accounts of these events survived. Had the Griswold grave been desecrated for the same reason?

In the course of his far-flung research, Bellantoni placed a serendipitous phone call to Michael Bell, a Rhode Island folklorist, who had
devoted much of the previous decade to studying New England vampire exhumations. The Griswold case occurred at roughly the same time as the other incidents Bell had investigated. And the setting was right: Griswold was rural, agrarian and bordering southern Rhode Island, where multiple exhumations had occurred. Many of the other "vampires," like J.B., had been disinterred, grotesquely tampered with and reburied.

In light of the tales Bell told of violated corpses, even the posthumous rib fractures began to make sense. J.B.'s accusers had likely rummaged around in his chest cavity, hoping to remove, and perhaps to burn, his heart.

Headquartered in a charming old schoolhousehouse, the Middletown Historical Society typically promotes such fortifying topics as Rhode Island gristmill restoration and Stone Wall Appreciation Day. Two nights before Halloween, though, the atmosphere is full of dry ice vapors and high silliness. Fake cobwebs cover the exhibits, warty gourds crowd the shelves and a skeleton with keen red eyes cackles in the corner. "We'll turn him off when you start talking," the society's president assures Michael Bell, who is readying his slide show.

Bell smiles. Although he lectures across the country and has taught at colleges, including Brown University, he is used to people having fun with his scholarship. "Vampires have gone from a source of fear to a source of entertainment," he says, a bit rueful. "Maybe I shouldn't trivialize entertainment, but to me it's not anywhere as interesting as what really happened." Bell's daughter, 37-year-old Gillian, a member of the audience that night, has made futile attempts to tempt her father with the Twilight series, but "there's Buffy and Twilight, and then there's what my dad does," she says. "I try to get him interested in the pop culture stuff, but he wants to keep his mind pure." Indeed, Bell seems only mildly aware that the vampire--appearing everywhere from True Blood to The Vampire Diaries--has once again sunk its fangs into the cultural jugular. As far as he's concerned, the undead are always with us.

Bell wears his hair in a sleek silver bob and has a strong Roman nose, but his extremely lean physique is evidence of a long-distance running habit, not some otherworldly hunger. He favors black sweaters and leather jackets, an ensemble he can easily accentuate with dark sunglasses to fit in with the goth crowd, if research requires it. A consulting folklorist at the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission for most of his career, Bell has been investigating local vampires for 30 years now--long enough to watch lettering on fragile slate gravestones fade before his eyes and prosperous subdivisions arise beside once-lonely graveyards. He has documented about 80 exhumations, reaching as far back as the late 1700s and as far west as Minnesota But most are concentrated in backwoods New England, in the 1800s-- startlingly later than the obvious local analogue, the Salem, Massachusetts, witch hunts of the 1690s.

Hundreds more cases await discovery, he believes. "You read an article that describes an exhumation, and they'll describe a similar thing that happened at a nearby town," says Bell, whose book, Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires, is seen as the last word on the subject, though he has lately found so many new cases that there's a second book on the way. "The ones that get recorded, and I actually find them, are just the tip of the iceberg.

Almost two decades after J.B.'s grave was discovered, it remains the only intact archaeological clue to the fear that swept the region. Most of the graves are lost to time (and even in the cases where they aren't, unnecessary exhumations are frowned on by the locals). Bell mostly hunts for handwritten records in town hall basements, consults tombstones and old cemetery maps, traces obscure genealogies and interviews descendants. "As a folklorist, I'm interested in recurring patterns in communication and ritual, as well as the stories that accompany these rituals," he says. "I'm interested in how this stuff is learned and carried on and how its meaning changes from group to group, and over time." In part because the events were relatively recent, evidence of historic vampires isn't as scarce as one might imagine. Incredulous city newspaper reporters dished about the "Horrible Superstition" on front pages. A traveling minister describes an exhumation in his daily log on September 3, 1810. (The "mouldy Specticle," he writes, was a "Solemn Site.") Even Henry David Thoreau mentions an exhumation in his journal on September 29, 1859.

Though scholars today still struggle to explain the vampire panics, a key detail unites them: The public hysteria almost invariably occurred in the midst of savage tuberculosis outbreaks. Indeed, the medical museum's tests ultimately revealed that J.B. had suffered from tuberculosis, or a lung disease very like it. Typically, a rural family contracted the wasting illness, and--even though they often received the standard medical diagnosis--the survivors blamed early victims as "vampires," responsible for preyin upon family members who subsequently fell sick. Often an exhumation was called for, to stop the vampire's predations.

The particulars of the vampire exhumations, though, vary widely. In many cases, only family and neighbors participated. But sometimes town fathers voted on the matter, or medical doctors and clergymen gave their blessings or even pitched in. Some communities in Maine and Plymouth, Massachusetts, opted to simply flip the exhumed vampire facedown in the grave and leave it at that. In Connecticut, Rhode Island and Vermont, though, they frequently burned the dead person's heart, sometimes inhaling the smoke as a cure. (In Europe, too, exhumation protocol varied with region: Some beheaded suspected vampire corpses, while others bound their feet with thorns.)

Often these rituals were clandestine, lantern-lit affairs. But, particularly in Vermont, they could be quite public, even festive. One vampire heart was reportedly torched on the Woodstock, Vermont, town green in 1830. In Manchester, hundreds of people flocked to a 1793 heart-burning ceremony at a blacksmith's forge: "Timothy Mead officiated at the altar in the sacrifice to the Demon Vampire who it was believed was still sucking the blood of the then living wife of Captain Burton," an early town history says. "It was the month of February and good sleighing."

Bell attributes the openness of the Vermont exhumations to colonial settlement patterns. Rhode Island has about 260 cemeteries per 100 square miles, versus Vermont's mere 20 per 100 square miles. Rhode Island's cemeteries were small and scattered among private farms, whereas Vermont's tended to be much larger, often located in the center of town. In Vermont, it was much harder to keep a vampire hunt hush-hush.
As satisfying as such mini-theories are, Bell is consumed by larger questions. He wants to understand who the vampires and their accusers were, in death and life. During his Middletown lecture, he displays a picture of a man with salt-and-pepper sideburns and weary eyes: an artist's reconstruction of J.B.'s face, based on his skull. "I start with the assumption that people of past generations were just as intelligent as we are," Bell says. "I look for the logic: Why would they do this? Once you label something 'just a superstition' you lock off all inquiry into something that could have been reasonable. Reasonable is not always rational." He wrote his doctoral dissertation on African-American vampire practitioners in the South who cast love spells and curses; it's hard to imagine a population more different from the flinty, consumptive New Englanders he studies now, but Bell sees strong parallels in how they tried to manipulate the supernatural. "People find themselves in dire situations, where there's no recourse through regular channels," he explains. "The folk system offers an alternative, a choice." Sometimes, superstitions represent the only hope, he says.

The enduring sadness of the vampire stories lies in the fact that the accusers were usually direct kin of the deceased: parents, spouses and their children. "Think about what it would have taken to actually exhume the body of a relative," Bell says.

The tale he always returns to is in many ways the quintessential American vampire story, one of the last cases in New England and the first he investigated as a new PhD coming to Rhode Island in 1981 to direct a folklife survey of Washington County funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. History knows the 19-year-old, late-19th-century vampire as Mercy Brown. Her family, though, called her Lena.

Mercy Lena Brown lived in Exeter, Rhode Island--"Deserted Exeter," it was dubbed, or simply "one of the border towns."

It was largely a subsistence farming community with barely fertile soil: "rocks, rocks and more rocks," says Sheila Reynolds-Boothroyd, president of the Exeter Historical Association. Farmers heaped stones into tumbledown walls, and rows of corn swerved around the biggest boulders.

In the late 19th century, Exeter, like much of agrarian New England, was even more sparsely populated than usual. Civil War casualties had taken their toll on the community, and the new railroads and the promise of richer land to the west lured young men away. By 1892, the year Lena died, Exeter's population had dipped to just 961, from a high of more than 2,500 in 1820. Farms were abandoned, many of them later to be seized and burned by the government. "Some sections looked like a ghost town," Reynolds-Boothroyd says.

And tuberculosis was harrying the remaining families. "Consumption," as it was called, had started to plague New England in the 1730s, a few decades before the first known vampire scares. By the 1800s, when the scares were at their height, the disease was the leading cause of mortality throughout the Northeast, responsible for almost a quarter of all deaths. It was a terrible end, often drawn out over years: a skyrocketing fever, a hacking, bloody cough and a visible wasting away of the body. "The emaciated figure strikes one with terror," reads one 18th-century description, "the forehead covered with drops of sweat; the cheeks painted with a livid crimson, the eyes sunk ... the breath offensive, quick and laborious, and the cough so incessant as to scarce allow the wretched sufferer time to tell his complaints." Indeed, Bell says, symptoms "progressed in such a way that it seemed like something was draining the life and blood out of somebody."

People dreaded the disease without understanding it. Though Robert Koch had identified the tuberculosis bacterium in 1882, news of the discovery did not penetrate rural areas for some time, and even if it had, drug treatments wouldn't become available until the 1940s. The year Lena died, one physician blamed tuberculosis on "drunkenness, and want among the poor." Nineteenth-century cures included drinking brown sugar dissolved in water and frequent horseback riding. "If they were being honest," Bell says, "the medical establishment would have said, 'There's nothing we can do, and it's in the hands of God.'"

The Brown family, living on the eastern edge of town, probably on a modest homestead of 30 or 40 stony acres, began to succumb to the disease in December 1882. Lena's mother, Mary Eliza, was the first. Lena's sister, Mary Olive, a 20-year-old dressmaker, died the next year. A tender obituary from a local newspaper hints at what she endured: "The last few hours she lived was of great suffering, yet her faith was firm and she was ready for the change." The whole town turned out for her funeral, and sang "One Sweetly Solemn Thought," a hymn that Mary Olive herself had selected.

Within a few years, Lena's brother Edwin--a store clerk whom one newspaper columnist described as "a big, husky young man"--sickened too, and left for Colorado Springs hoping that the climate would improve his health.

Lena, who was just a child when her mother and sister died, didn't fall ill until nearly a decade after they were buried. Her tuberculosis was the "galloping" kind, which meant that she might have been infected but remained asymptomatic for years, only to fade fast after showing the first signs of the disease. A doctor attended her in "her last illness," a newspaper said, and "informed her father that further medical aid was useless." Her January 1892 obituary was much terser than her sister's: "Miss Lena Brown, who has been suffering from consumption, died Sunday morning."

As Lena was on her deathbed, her brother was, after a brief remission, taking a turn for the worse. Edwin had returned to Exeter from the Colorado resorts "in a dying condition," according to one account. "If the good wishes and prayers of his many friends could be realized, friend Eddie would speedily be restored to perfect health," another newspaper wrote.

But some neighbors, likely fearful for their own health, weren't content with prayers. Several approached George Brown, the children's father, and offered an alternative take on the recent tragedies: Perhaps an unseen diabolical force was preying on his family. It could be that one of the three Brown women wasn't dead after all, instead secretly feasting "on the living tissue and blood of Edwin," as the Providence Journal later summarized. If the offending corpse--the Journal uses the term "vampire" in some stories but the locals seemed not to--was discovered and destroyed, then Edwin would recover. The neighbors asked to exhume the bodies, in order to check for fresh blood in their hearts.
George Brown gave permission. On the morning of March 17, 1892, a party of men dug up the bodies, as the family doctor and a Journal correspondent looked on. George was absent, for unstated but understandable reasons.

After nearly a decade, Lena's sister and mother were barely more than bones. Lena, though, had been dead only a few months, and it was wintertime. "The body was in a fairly well-preserved state," the correspondent later wrote. "The heart and liver were removed, and in cutting open the heart, clotted and decomposed blood was found." During this impromptu autopsy, the doctor again emphasized that Lena's lungs "showed diffuse tuberculous germs."

Undeterred, the villagers burned her heart and liver on a nearby rock, feeding Edwin the ashes. He died less than two months later.

So-called vampires do escape the grave in at least one real sense: through stories. Lena Brown's surviving relatives saved local newspaper clippings in family scrapbooks, alongside carefully copied recipes. They discussed the events on Decoration Day, when Exeter residents adorned the town's cemeteries.

But the tale traveled much farther than they knew.

Even at the time, New England's vampire panics struck onlookers as a baffling anachronism. The late 1800s were a period of social progress and scientific flowering. Indeed, many of the Rhode Island exhumations occurred within 20 miles of Newport, high society's summer nucleus, where the scions of the industrial revolution vacationed. At first, only people who'd lived in or had visited the vampire-ridden communities knew about the scandal: "We seem to have been transported back to the darkest age of unreasoning ignorance and blind superstition, instead of living in the 19th century, and in a State calling itself enlightened and christian," one writer at a small-town Connecticut paper opined in the wake of an 1854 exhumation.

But Lena Brown's exhumation made news. First, a reporter from the Providence Journal witnessed her unearthing. Then a well-known anthropologist named George Stetson traveled to Rhode Island to probe "the barbaric superstition" in the surrounding area.

Published in the venerable American Anthropologist journal, Stetson's account of New England's vampires made waves throughout the world. Before long, even members of the foreign press were offering various explanations for the phenomenon: Perhaps the "neurotic" modern novel was driving the New England madness, or maybe shrewd local farmers had simply been pulling Stetson's leg. A writer for the London Post declared that whatever forces drove the "Yankee vampire," it was an American problem and most certainly not the product of a British folk tradition (even though many families in the area could trace their lineage directly back to England). In the Boston Daily Globe, a writer went so far as to suggest that "perhaps the frequent intermarriage of families in these back country districts may partially account for some of their characteristics."

One 1896 New York World clipping even found its way into the papers of a London stage manager and aspiring novelist named Bram Stoker, whose theater company was touring the United States that same year. His gothic masterpiece, Dracula, was published in 1897. Some scholars have said that there wasn't enough time for the news accounts to have influenced the Dracula manuscript. Yet others see Lena in the character of Lucy (her very name a tempting amalgam of "Lena" and "Mercy"), a consumptive-seeming teenage girl turned vampire, who is exhumed in one of the novel's most memorable scenes. Fascinatingly, a medical doctor presides over Lucy's disinterment, just as one oversaw Lena's.

Whether or not Lucy's roots are in Rhode Island, Lena's historic exhumation is referenced in H.P. Love-craft's "The Shunned House," a short story about a man being haunted by dead relatives that includes a living character named Mercy.

And, through fiction and fact, Lena's narrative continues today.

Part of Bell's research involves going along on "legend trips," the modern graveside pilgrimages made by those who believe, or want to believe, that the undead stalk Rhode Island. On legend trips, Bell is largely an academic presence. He can even be a bit of a killjoy, declaring that the main reason that "no grass grows on a vampire's grave" is that vampire graves have so many visitors, who crush all the vegetation.

Two days before Halloween, Bell and I head through forests of swamp maple and swamp oak to Exeter. For almost a century after Lena died, the town, still sparsely settled, remained remarkably unchanged. Electric lights weren't installed in the western part of Exeter until the 1940s, and the town had two pound keepers, charged with safekeeping stray cattle and pigs, until 1957. In the 1970s, when I-95 was built, Exeter evolved into an affluent bedroom community of Providence. But visitors still occasionally turn a corner to discover the past: a dirt road cluttered with wild turkeys, or deer hopping over stone fences. Some elderly locals square-dance in the summer nucleus, where the scions of the industrial revolution vacationed. At first, only people who'd lived in or had visited the vampire-ridden communities knew about the scandal: "We seem to have been transported back to the darkest age of unreasoning ignorance and blind superstition, instead of living in the 19th century, and in a State calling itself enlightened and christian," one writer at a small-town Connecticut paper opined in the wake of an 1854 exhumation.

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An early Nor'easter is brewing as we pull into the church parking lot. The heavy rain will soon turn to snow, and there's a bullying wind. Our umbrellas bloom inside out, like black flowers. Though it's a somber place, there's no immediate clue that an accused vampire was buried here. (Except, perhaps, for an unfortunately timed Red Cross blood drive sign in front of the farmer's grange next door.) Unlike Salem, Exeter doesn't promote its dark claim to fame, and remains in some respects an insular community. Old-timers don't like the hooded figures who turn up this time of year, or the cars idling with the lights off. They say the legend should be left alone, perhaps with good reason: Last summer a couple of teenagers were killed on a pilgrimage to Lena's grave when they lost control of their car on Purgatory Road.

Most vampire graves stand apart, in wooded spots outside modern cemetery fences, where snow melts slower and there's a thick understory of ferns. But the Chestnut Hill Cemetery is still in use. And here is Lena. She lies beside the brother who ate her heart, and the father who let it happen. Other markers are freckled with lichen, but not hers. The stone looks to have been recently cleaned. It has been stolen over the years, and now an iron strap anchors it to the earth. People have scratched their names into the granite.
How did 19th-century Yankees, remembered as the most pious and practical of peoples, come to believe in vampires—especially when the last known vampire panics at the time hadn’t occurred since 18th-century Europe? Some modern scholars have linked the legend to vampiric symptoms of diseases like rabies and porphyria (a rare genetic disorder that can cause extreme sensitivity to sunlight and turn teeth reddish-brown). Exeter residents at the time claimed that the exhumations were “a tradition of the Indians.”

The legend originated in Slavic Europe, where the word “vampire” first appeared in the tenth century. Bell believes that Slavic and Germanic immigrants brought the vampire superstitions with them in the 1700s, perhaps when Palatine Germans colonized Pennsylvania, or Hessian mercenaries served in the Revolutionary War. “My sense is that it came more than one time through more than one source,” he says.

The first known reference to an American vampire scare is a scolding letter to the editor of the Connecticut Courant and Weekly Intelligencer, published in June 1784. Councilman Moses Holmes, from the town of Willington, warned people to beware of “a certain Quack Doctor, a foreigner” who had urged families to dig up and burn dead relatives to stop consumption. Holmes had witnessed several children disinterred at the doctor’s request and wanted no more of it: “And that the bodies of the dead may rest quiet in their graves without such interruption, I think the public ought to be aware of being led away by such an imposture.”

But some modern scholars have argued that the vampire superstition made a certain degree of practical sense. In Vampires, Burials and Death, folklorist Paul Barber dissects the logic behind vampire myths, which he believes originally arose from unschooled but astute observations of decay. (Bloated dead bodies appear as if they have recently eaten; a staked corpse “screams” due to the escape of natural gases, etc.) The seemingly bizarre vampire beliefs, Barber argues, get at the essence of contagion: the insight that illness begets illness, and death, death.

Vampire believers “say that death comes to us from invisible agents,” Barber says. “We say that death comes to us from invisible agents. The difference is that we can get out a microscope and look at the agents.”

While New England’s farmers may have been guided by something like reason, the spiritual climate of the day was also hospitable to vampire rumors. Contrary to their Puritanical reputation, rural New Englanders in the 1800s were a fairly heathen lot. Only about 10 percent belonged to a church. Rhode Island, originally founded as a haven for religious dissenters, was particularly lax: Christian missionaries were at various points dispatched there from more godly communities. “The missionaries come back and lament that there’s no Bible in the home, no church-going whatsoever,” says Linford Fisher, a Brown University colonial historian. “You have people out there essentially in cultural isolation.” Mary Olive, Lena’s sister, joined a church just two weeks before she died, her obituary said.

In place of organized worship, superstitions reigned: magical springs with healing powers, dead bodies that bled in the presence of their murderers. People buried shoes by fireplaces, to catch the Devil if he tried to come down the chimney. They nailed horseshoes above doors to ward off evil and carved daisy wheels, a kind of colonial hex sign, into the door frames.

If superstition likely fanned the vampire panics, perhaps the most powerful forces at play were communal and social. By 1893, there were just 17 people per square mile in Exeter. A fifth of the farms were fully abandoned, the fields turning slowly back into forest. In her monograph The New England Vampire Belief Image of the Decline, gothic literature scholar Faye Ringel Hazel hints at a vampire metaphor behind the westward hemorrhage: The migration “seemed to drain rural New England of its most enterprising young citizens, leaving the old and unfit behind.”

As Exeter teetered near collapse, maintaining social ties must have taken on new importance. An exhumation represented, first and foremost, a duty to one’s own kin, dead or dying: the ritual “would alleviate the guilt someone might feel for not doing everything they could do to save a family, to leave no stone unturned,” Bell says.

Even more significant, in small communities where disease could spread quickly, an exhumation was “an outward display that you are doing everything you can to fix the problem.” Residents of the already beleaguered town were likely terrified. “They knew that if consumption wiped out the Brown family, it could take out the next family,” Bell says. “George Brown was being entreated by the community.” He had to make a gesture.

The strongest testament to the power of the vampire myth is that George Brown did not, in fact, believe in it, according to the Providence Journal. It was he who asked a doctor to perform an autopsy at the graveyard, and he who elected to be elsewhere during the ritual. He authorized his loved ones’ exhumation, the Journal says, simply to “satisfy the neighbors,” who were, according to another newspaper account, “worrying the life out of him”—a description with its own vampiric overtones.

Perhaps it was wise to let them have their way, since George Brown, apparently not prone to tuberculosis, had to coexist with his neighbors well into the next century. He died in 1922.

Relatives of the Browns still live in Exeter and are laid to rest on Chestnut Hill. Some, planning ahead, have erected their grave markers. It can be disconcerting to drive past somebody’s tombstone on the way to his or her home for a vampire-oriented interview.

On a sunny Halloween morning, when Bell has left for a vampire folklore conference at the University of London, I return to the cemetery to meet several Brown descendants at the farmer’s grange. They bring, swaddled in old sheets, a family treasure: a quilt that Lena sewed.

We spread it out on a scarred wooden table. The cotton bedspread is pink, blue and cream. What look from a distance like large
patches of plain brown fabric are really fields of tiny daisies.

It's the work of a farm girl, without any wasteful applique; Lena clearly ran out of material in places and had to scrimp for more. Textile scholars at the University of Rhode Island have traced her snippets of florals, plaid and paisley to the 1870s and 1880s, when Lena was still a child; they wondered if she used her sister's and mother's old dresses for the project. Perhaps her mother's death, too, explains Lena's quilting abilities, which are considerable for a teenager: She might have had to learn household skills before other girls. The quilt is in immaculate condition and was likely being saved for something—Lena's hope chest, thinks her distant descendant Dorothy O'Neil, one of the quilt's recent custodians, and a knowledgeable quilter herself.

"I think the quilt is exquisite, especially in light of what she went through in her life," O'Neil says. "She ended up leaving something beautiful. She didn't know she'd have to leave it, but she did."

Lena hasn't left entirely. She is said to frequent a certain bridge, manifested as the smell of roses. She appears in children's books and paranormal television specials. She murmurs in the cemetery, say those who leave tape recorders there to capture her voice. She is rumored to visit the terminally ill, and to tell them that dying isn't so bad.

The quilt pattern that Lena used, very rare in Rhode Island, is sometimes called the Wandering Foot, and it carried a superstition of its own: Anybody who slept under it, the legend said, would be lost to her family, doomed to wander.

Read about other suspected American vampires at Smithsonian.com/vampire

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