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HISTORY; Working to Clear Ancestor's Name, 300 Years After Her Execution

By ELIZABETH MAKER

New Preston

IT started rather amusingly, 14-year-old Addie Avery recalled. She was sitting at the patio table at her home here, chatting with her family about their neighbors: one, a few houses down the hill, was related to an accused witch executed in the Salem witch trials; the other, across the street, had written several books about witch hunts.

"We were just sitting here," recalled Addie, "having this funny conversation about 'the witches on the hill,' when our cousin Bill said, 'Well, it looks like you're one of them. You have an ancestor who was hanged as a witch in Connecticut in the 1600s.'"

Cousin Bill -- William Wardock of Virginia -- has become the family's genealogist since retiring as a Pentagon official several years ago, and has tracked down their lineage to Mary Sanford, Addie's maternal grandmother nine generations before, who was convicted of witchcraft in Hartford in 1662.

"It all seemed almost comical at first," Addie said two years later during a recent interview at the same patio table. "Little did I know at the time that this fact would wind up consuming me whole."

Then, on Halloween 2005, Addie and her mother, Debra, attended a lecture about the Hartford witch hunt by Walter Woodward, the state historian and an assistant professor of history at the University of Connecticut.

"We get in there," Addie recounted, "and all of a sudden up pops the name 'Mary Sanford' on his PowerPoint presentation," among the 9 women and 2 men executed for witchcraft in the 17th century in Connecticut.

"It was insane," Addie said. "I almost screamed out loud. My mother stood up and asked if any of them had been exonerated, and the answer was no."

The Averys have since buried themselves in research about the Connecticut witch craze and are lobbying the state legislature and the British government to pass official exoneration of all the people convicted of witchcraft and killed in the New England colonies.

Addie, who is home-schooled by her mother, has turned the topic into an independent study project. She has corresponded with Connecticut legislators and Gov. M. Jodi Rell,

and she has written to Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Charles, the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, and the British Embassy.

Her work captured media attention and is now being featured in a theatrical performance called "The Witching Hour" at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford from Thursday through Saturday, and at Eastern Connecticut State University on Nov. 7. (Information at jdpe.info and ctlandmarks.org; for tickets, 860-249-1207.) On Saturday, there will also be "A Day of Witchcraft History," with a walking tour of Old Wethersfield, which was the setting for the children's book "The Witch of Blackbird Pond" by Elizabeth George Speare.

Historians believe Mary Sanford, who had five children, was hanged at Gallows Hill in Hartford at age 39. Her big offense, Addie said, rolling her big brown eyes, was that she danced around a tree and drank from a bottle of sack (liquor).

"I would have been killed in a heartbeat back then," Debra Avery said. "If you dared to wear colorful clothing, if you spoke your mind, if you were an herbalist or midwife, or a female property owner, that's it, you were done."

At a recent rehearsal of "The Witching Hour" at Trinity College in West Hartford, the performance's creator, Judy Dworin of the Judy Dworin Performance Project in Hartford, said it was Addie's story that inspired her to write a revival of a play she had created 12 years ago about the New England witch craze, titled, "Burning."

Sheryl N. Hack, executive director of the Antiquarian & Landmarks Society in Hartford, which is collaborating with Ms. Dworin to present "The Witching Hour," said, "Addie is the bridge between the 17th and 21st centuries."

In the performance, Addie plays herself, sitting at a desk, researching the rampant terror of the era that claimed so many lives. Seven women in Puritan dress dance to an ominous drumbeat and act out the lives of several convicted Connecticut witches, including Katherine Harrison, who was deemed guilty in Wethersfield after envious neighbors attacked her for inheriting a large farm when her husband died.

Giant puppets made by Anne Cubberly loom darkly in the background, representing Puritan men chanting their oppressive edict, "We must see sin clearly."

Addie sat somberly after the rehearsal, choked up like most of the small audience who watched it. She is scheduled to meet with State Senator Andrew Roraback and State Representative Michael P. Lawlor next month to discuss introducing legislation for the exoneration in the spring 2008 session.