and this is coming from a guy who’s spent the night in an abandoned prison in West Virginia, at Lizzie Borden’s House in Fall River, Massachusetts, and in all kinds of graveyards—all the places that ghosts are supposed to be, and there isn’t even a single experience that’s even twistable into a real paranormal phenomenon.”

What he likes about the “Dana Ghost Town,” among the communities disincorporated to construct the Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts, is walking through the forest and finding a stone marker: “SITE OF DANA COMMON 1801-1938 To all those who sacrificed their homes and way of life.” Only cellar foundations remain, he explains, but many are posted with placards and images of the buildings that comprised a thriving community—the church, school, and blacksmith. “So it’s another family-friendly place, where you can wander around and understand what was there,” he says. “Some of the cellar holes even have doors you can walk through.”

STAFF PICK: The Air of Contentment

When Jonathan and Grace Fairbanks were invited to live in Contentment, a Puritan community formed in 1636 (now Dedham, Massachusetts), it was likely because of his crucial skill: spinning-wheel maker. Every family needed at least one wheel, to spin flax and raw wool into thread for weaving cloth, says Leslie Griesmer, business manager at the Fairbanks House historic site—“the oldest wood-frame structure still standing in North America.” It is open for guided tours through October, and hosts an annual fall festival, this year on September 29.

Walking around the dark, low-ceilinged dwelling that includes a warren of rooms added over time, it’s easy to imagine hunkering down there on what was then a frontier. The homestead ultimately accommodated eight generations of Fairbankses, who changed very little before turning it into a museum in 1904. To site curator Dan Neff, therefore, it “feels a lot more like a home than many house museums.”

Photographs, furnishings, farm tools, and dishware reflect the lives of previous occupants, giving the interior a ghostly air. A beautiful gateleg, flame-maple table built in the 1650s remains, Neff says: “It’s a giant piece of wood—there aren’t trees here big enough to make this table anymore.” There’s also a pack saddle and a yoke for oxen that are likely from the 1600s, he says, along with a sundial and eight spinning wheels. Whether any were made by a Fairbanks is unclear, but contemporary craftspeople demonstrating spinning, and other traditional skills, will be at the fall festival, along with historic re-enactors portraying soldiers, farmers, doctors, and others who were essential to keeping colonial communities alive.

He typically doesn’t get scared, at least not anymore. Perhaps as a secondary gain from founding OTIS, Ocker has inured himself to common human fears, such as mortality—or small, tight spaces. A big guy, he confesses to having claustrophobia, yet he boarded the pioneering research vessel USS Albacore, now installed on land and open for tours in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Used from 1953 to 1972, the submarine’s design helped revolutionize the capabilities of underwater military maneuvers. “It’s much smaller than those giant nuclear subs,” he reports, “and it’s terrifying. You see where they slept, on shelves on top of each other, and even just walking around is hard.” One section holds a few multipurpose, foldout tables with checkerboards; “You squeeze yourself out from some tiny slot, and you get to go play checkers. That’s what keeps you from going bonkers,” Ocker says. “It takes a certain special mindset to do that job.”

Over the years, he has become increasingly cautious, traveling to isolated or potentially dangerous places only in the daytime—and he does not condone trespassing or other illegal urban-exploring activities; even so, he has been escorted from a few sites. It’s legal to scramble around Skull Cliff, the ghoulish 2001 mural painted on a 30-foot rockface on a ridge in Saugus, Massachusetts. “To get to it you have to go through car dealerships on Route 1,” Ocker says, “but at the top you can look out over an old quarry and see the Boston skyline.” He plays with “pushing beyond the fear” factor at many site visits, and knows that getting active outside on weekends and learning something new about the world benefit himself and his children. Not long ago the family explored the “Clinton Train Tunnel,” built in 1903 near the Wachusett Reservoir, goes “from nowhere to nowhere.”