

Calling Upon the Water Witcher



PART FOLKLORE, PART SCIENCE, SETTLERS IN EARLY AMERICA RELIED ON DOWSERS TO LOCATE THE WATER SOURCES OFTEN NEEDED FOR SURVIVAL.

By Gregory LeFever

Following ancient patterns of human settlement, Europeans coming to the New World in the 1600s built their first homes and communities along the seacoast, and then along pristine waterways weaving through the wilderness to the Atlantic. Then they pushed farther inland where of necessity they searched for new sources of water.

Springs, lakes, and rivers were vital for slaking the thirst of people and livestock alike, for cooking, and for cleanliness. But an abundance of fertile land continued to beckon these early settlers farther and farther inland – often some distance from the streams, rivers, and lakes – to where water sources lay hidden underground.

To find the water – whether beneath rolling prairie lands or deep in mountain hollows – settlers sometimes depended on water witchers – more commonly known today as dowsers.

The witcher – usually using only a forked tree branch – was skilled in locating sites for wells that would produce water necessary for survival. Everyone knew that digging wells by hand, shovel, and bucket was always excruciating, but never more than when those hard-wrought holes in the ground failed to produce water.

While using a water witcher to determine where to dig a well may sound like common practice in early America, in truth dowsing was frequently shrouded in secrecy because certain parts of society viewed water witching with deep suspicion.

An Underlying Mystery

Dowsing for water and minerals has a long and venerable history in Europe, even though dowsers over the centuries suffered run-ins with both the Catholic and Protestant churches. It was only dowsing's widespread use in mineral mining that ensured its social acceptance. Coming out of the Middle Ages, German dowsers were remarkably good at using their forked sticks to locate valuable mineral deposits – so successful in fact that England's Queen Elizabeth in the 1500s enlisted dowsers to locate mines in Cornwall and Wales.

But in early America, the strong influence of the strict Puritan faith – especially in the northern colonies – made dowsing considerably more suspect in the New World than in Europe. In the minds of many colonial church authorities, dowsing was linked with sorcery, which put its practitioners at risk of being tried for witchcraft.

“Water dowsing seems to be a mainly European cultural phenomenon, completely unknown to New World Indians and Eskimos,” according to an informational pamphlet the federal Department of the Interior's Geological Survey group published recently. “It was carried across the Atlantic to America by some of the earliest settlers. Although the published record was very slight at first, water dowsing or witching began to be mentioned after 1675 in connection with witches and witchcraft. Two articles condemning it appeared in the 1821 and 1826 issues of the American Journal of Science and are among the first in a long line of treatises on water witching.”

The reason for this persecution was that nobody, then or now, knows exactly how dowsing works.

Water dowsing involves using a forked stick, metal rods, pendulum, or similar device to locate underground water, minerals or other hidden or lost substances. The traditional water-dowsing device is a forked branch from a willow, peach, or witch hazel tree. Most commonly, the dowser holds one fork of the stick in

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Mrs. J. Spurgeon Allaby of Maine holds her water-witching tool in an unusual manner as she walks through a grove of trees in search of a suitable site for a well. (Photo courtesy Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine)*

LEFT: *Englishman George Casely holds a forked hazel branch as he dowses to find water for digging a well on his Devon farm, in this 1942 photo.*



Show Me Yes

Getting started with dowsing is simple. And once you've seen the first movements of your L-rods or your pendulum, you're ready to explore a more comprehensive book on the topic, of which there are literally thousands. Here are your first steps:

1. Obtain a set of L-rods or a pendulum. Hold the rods in front of you with your hands several inches apart. Hold your pendulum in front of you, with from two to four inches of string between your fingers and the weight.
2. Relax and clear your mind so you can enter a restful state.
3. Mentally tell your dowsing instrument, "Show me Yes." Be patient and continue with the gentle command until your rods crisscross or your pendulum begins to move in a circular manner, usually clockwise.
4. Let the rods return to "neutral" or the pendulum to stop moving. Then mentally tell your tool to "Show me No." The rods may extend to a wide position. The pendulum may swing in the opposite direction, usually counter-clockwise.
5. Practice "Show me Yes" and "Show me No" until the dowsing tool responds easily. You are programming your mind, body, and the dowsing tool to act in a unified, coordinated manner.
6. Begin practicing with questions. Be sure your questions are answerable by "Yes" or "No" and contain no vagueness. You're also ready to begin using your dowsing tool for finding unseen objects, such as underground water or lost objects.
Please note that your rods or your pendulum might react differently – such as a counter-clockwise movement for "yes" with the pendulum – which is acceptable. You're programming the tool to match what your mind is receiving and communicating to your muscles.
As with many things, the more you practice dowsing, the better and more accurate you'll become.

each hand, palms upward. The bottom end of the "Y" is pointed skyward as the dowser walks back and forth over the land until the fork stick mysteriously pulls downward over the water source.

As America spread westward and its land became more populated through the 1800s, the water witcher maintained a role similar to other characters immortalized in our folklore who have been tainted by association with the occult. Unconventional medical healers, herbalists, and water witchers remained on the fringe of frontier society, but still were called upon to heal the sick or injured or to find the earth's pure waters.

"Despite almost universal condemnation by geologists and technicians, the practice of water dowsing has spread throughout America," says the government's U.S. Geological Survey Department. "It has been speculated that thousands of dowsers are active in the United States, many members of the American Society of Dowsers."

Knowing It Works

In the past century, the scope of dowsing has grown enormously. It now goes far beyond physical manifestations such as water and metal. Today, dowsing's advocates use rods and especially pendulums to presumably test, measure, and manipulate positive and negative energies that crisscross the earth or even inhabit people.

Water witching continues to be performed on all scales, from occasional (but seldom discussed) use by corporations to the more familiar use in rural America, where digging a well always has been a formidable project.

"It was a big undertaking," the late Harold McCoy – one of America's foremost dowsers and psychic healers – wrote in his book *Power of Focused-Mind Healing* in recalling his 1940s rural Arkansas childhood. "Nobody wanted to start digging this big hole in the ground unless

somebody said there was water down there. So, the water witcher came. He found a peach tree, cut a forked stick from it, and walked back and forth across the area. Pretty soon, the end of the stick would point toward the ground. He'd say, 'Dig here and you'll find water.' And the amazing thing was, they always found water. Everyone knew that water witching worked."

Nearly fifty years ago, Mother Earth News magazine interviewed a dowser named Arthur Lee Brown, who at the time was the best-known dowser in Wake County, North Carolina. Back then, Wake County boasted more than a dozen experienced water witchers.

"Not everybody can do it, you know," said Brown, who favored a branch from a peach tree for his witching. "It just works for some folks. There's a streak of water down under the ground, and if you take even one step off to the side, the stick won't move. You have to be right on top of the water."

Another Wake County water witcher named William Barham told the magazine: "I don't know what makes it work. But if you find somebody who does, I wish you'd tell me. All I know is that I can't hold that sprout still when it gets over the water. I reckon I've found more than a hundred wells around here, and I've never missed once."

Responding to the Unseen

How does dowsing work? There is no shortage of theories, and they multiply and evolve as scientists and researchers learn more about subatomic particles, energy fields, consciousness, and the paranormal.

Certainly forked sticks, metal rods, and pendulums have no special powers, but are only tools that move according to tiny movements of muscles in our hands. The real question is, what's telling those muscles to move? There are several candidates, the most popular being our subconscious minds. But where is the subconscious mind getting its information about the course of an underground stream?

The federal Geological Survey folks articulate the position of modern science when they state: "The natural explanation of 'successful' water dowsing is that in many areas water would be hard to miss. The dowser commonly implies that the spot indicated by the rod (or branch) is the only one where water could be found, but this is not necessarily true. In



This drawing from Georgius Agricola's book "De Re Metallica," published in 1556 shows men with forked sticks dowsing for the locations of metal ore deposits. This is one of the earliest depictions of dowsing.

a region of adequate rainfall and favorable geology, it is difficult not to drill and find water! Some water exists under the earth's surface almost everywhere. This explains why many dowsers appear to be successful."

Then the federal agency lowers the boom:
"Numerous books and pamphlets have been written on the subject of water dowsing. Some of these publications report on scientifically controlled experiments and investigations. From these findings, the U.S. Geological Survey has concluded that the expense of further tests of water dowsing is not justified."

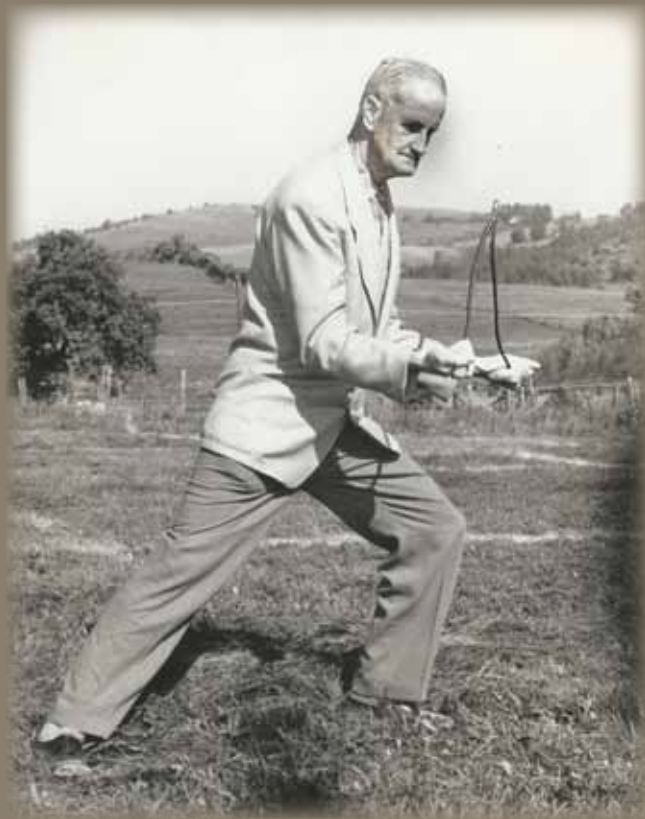
But the public's thirst for dowsing information continues to grow. A search on Amazon.com now brings up nearly 4,000 books on the topic of dowsing. At the other end of the spectrum from the federal government is this statement from author and researcher Elizabeth Brown from her 2010 book *Dowsing: The Ultimate Guide for the 21st Century*: "To attempt a definitive theory of how and why dowsing works would be premature, bearing in mind the accelerated advancement of scientific discovery. But I am utterly confident in suggesting that it is indeed a tangible manifestation of the human body's response to both electromagnetic and quantum fields. Or, in the elegant words of Dr. Jude Currivan, 'Dowsing is a conscious attunement to the field of consciousness that non-locally connects each and every one of us with the cosmos as a whole.' A gift that is given to us all."

Enjoying the Mystery

This is a bountiful time for anyone interested in developing skills in dowsing. Never has more information been at our fingertips.

You can buy dowsing rods and pendulums – from inexpensive to quite spendy – or make your own from coat hangers or a weight and piece of string. Most "how-to" books agree on at least the beginning steps in gaining proficiency before branching off into more esoteric uses of dowsing. There are plenty of instructional videos online, as well as lectures on dowsing.

And, if you're a group-oriented person, there are plenty of resources available through the 55-year-old American Society of Dowsers in Danville, Vermont, which sponsors a large annual conference and has chapters across the country. There's also the active organization Harold McCoy founded in Fayetteville, Arkansas, called the Ozark Research Institute, which also sponsors workshops and other educational activities.



As he strides through a Vermont pasture, the unnamed dowsing rod user in this historical photo awaits the telltale tug on his forked stick, showing him the location of an underground water source. (Photo courtesy of the American Society of Dowsers)