

# WATER WITCHING

Many modern sciences started as superstitions or myths; however, many of these myths have died. In today's world of laser technology and penetrating sound waves, the idea of dowsing for water has almost been laid to rest. But in Adair County there are a few old-timers who say water witching is not a superstition. They say it works!

Witching is the practice of using different instruments to locate water underground. The historical team of Barrett and Besterman estimated that witching has been in use for at least 500 years. Some people think that Moses was the first person to witch water when he brought water from a rock with a stick, but Georgias Agricola, a town physician in Bohemia, was the first to keep any accounts of water witching when he recorded his experience in 1556. His works were published in the book *DE RE METALLICA*.

Witching is used to find various underground objects. Traditionally it has been used to find water, but recently the uses have grown to encompass numerous hidden substances. A dowser sometimes tries to find minerals, water pipes, and even lost jewelry.

Most witchers throughout the United States use a fork-shaped stick. Almost any kind of stick will work, but the most prominent is that of a fruit tree. Peach and apple are quite popular while the hazel and elm limbs enjoy lots of success also.

A bent copper rod is another device used to locate hidden objects. A curved piece of No. 9 wire is also used, but not as

often. It seems that most people think that No. 9 wire will not work for them, so they never try it. In the case of the bent rod and forked stick, there are many different ways to use them.

To actually dowse for water, learning a method to operate the different tools is the first step. The forked stick ranges in size from small to large. After finding a stick, the extra foliage is stripped from the forks. The stick is then held with a fork in each hand. It can be held with the open end pointing toward the dowser or the ground. Holding the sticks tightly, the dowser walks over the area of ground in which he would like to find water. When the witcher is near a vein, the stick starts to go down. This continues until the stick is pointing straight into the ground, which means the vein is directly underneath.

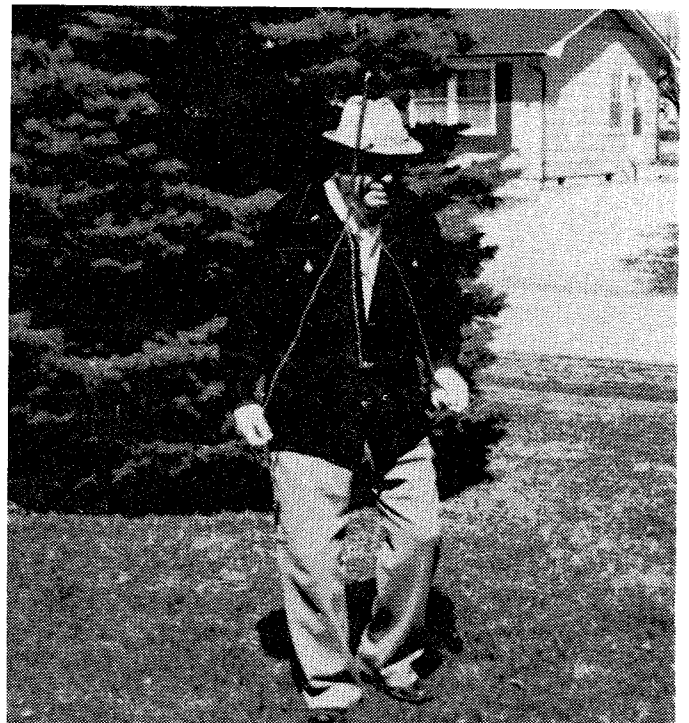
The use of the No. 9 wire is quite similar to that of the forked stick. The wire is slightly rounded but otherwise straight. It is also held with two hands. As it is passed over a vein, it will bob up and down, but then it will be pulled toward the ground.

Many plumbers use the copper rods to find where water pipes are. One or two rods are used, with the rods bent at right angles. When one rod is used, it is held with either hand. The free hand is then cupped around the first hand. As the dowser passes over water, the rod turns in the dowser's hand in the direction the vein runs. When two rods are used, the same happens except the rods point toward each other and then cross.

A few men and women in Adair County have used dows-



*Ivan Peterson, witcher for 60 odd years, illustrates the forked stick method of water witching. Mr. Peterson stops over a hidden pipe in his yard. The stick has started to move toward the ground.*



ing in their lifetime. In the 1800s and the early to mid-1900s, many of the wells in Adair County were found by witchers.

Ivan Peterson, a retired farmer who now resides in Kirksville, could be classified as an experienced witcher. He has been witching ever since his grandfather showed him how he found water in his native Sweden. Mr. Peterson was in high school at that time and "all the kids in the neighborhood wanted to know how it worked and what it was." People started asking him if he could find water for them. "In the drought years, I probably witched 60 or so wells for people," he recalled. Mr. Peterson uses a forked stick to locate the water. "As a general rule, I walk from southwest to northeast when witching. Sometimes when the stick turns down the bark will come off right in your hand."

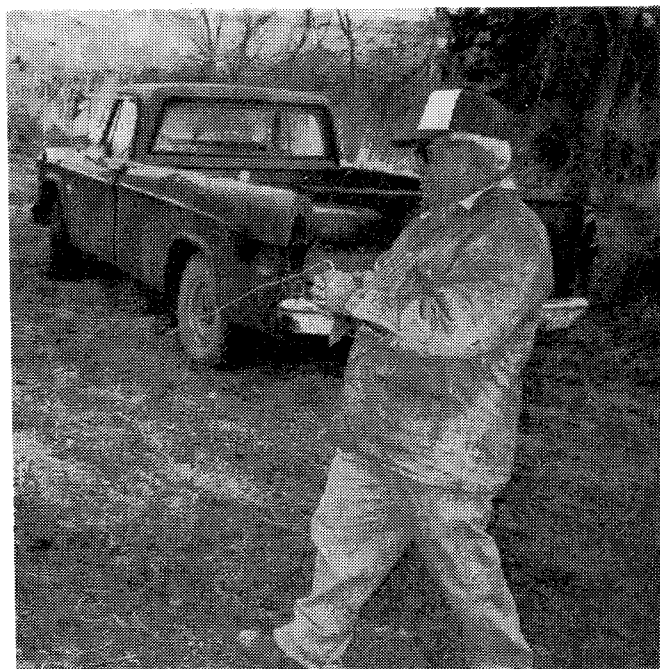
"I did a lot of witching," he said, "but I never charged anybody." Most witchers do not charge to find water. Some do, because it is their job and part of their livelihood. "I've always heard that if you charge people, you could not find water anymore," said Wayne Morehouse. Mr. Morehouse lives north of Sublette and has witched ever since he saw a neighbor doing it some 40 years ago. "When he left I probably walked around for an hour, trying to see if it would work for me." Mr. Morehouse generally uses a piece of No. 9 wire, but sometimes he uses a copper rod. Mr. Morehouse recalls the time he found a buried water pipe for a Kirksville city worker. "I watched him drill for half an hour. Finally I went up to him and said, 'For a case of beer I'll find that pipe.' He asked me how I was going to find it and I told him that that was my business. I got out my wire and walked to where he had been digging. There were holes all over. After a couple of minutes my rod started bouncing up and down. I told him to dig four feet and he would find his pipe. He dug for about ten minutes before looking at me and saying, 'Looks like I just lost a case of beer.'" Mr. Morehouse also uses his rod to tell how deep a vein is. The number of times the rod bobs is how many feet deep the water is.

Gordon Collett has witched ever since he learned that it would work for him. "I was in college, when one day my dad and I were trying to find water for the horses. I had never done it, but I had read about witching. Dad got a stick, but it didn't work for him. I tried and it worked. We found three springs that day." The Collett farm has a historical spring where Chief Keokuk and his braves drank when they came down the Chariton River. Mr. Collett, through witching, has found three other springs joining to form that one. In the 1940s Mr. Collett found the well that is located in the Girl Scout Camp west of Kirksville, "That well is the deepest I ever found. It was 243 feet deep." Mr. Collett finds the depth of the water by multiplying by nine the distance from when the stick first moves until it is completely down. He also witched a well for Edward Polovich of Route 3. "Gordon witched the well for us 20 years ago," said Mr. Polovich. "We dug 13 feet and hit limestone. After we dynamited the rock the water was running everywhere. We dug four more feet and found enough water to supply the house ever since." The stick does something somewhat strange for Mr. Collett. "When I am over dead water, water in a pipe or a pocket underground, the stick turns up instead of down."

Most scientists think that there is nothing to water witching. "At this time there is no scientific explanation whatsoever," said Dr. John Hoffmann, Kirksville High School science in-

structor. He has had people try to locate water for him, but they have failed. Others say it has to do with electrical currents found in a person's body. "Not all people can find water," said Mr. Morehouse.

This author was twice invited to try to locate water, once with a forked stick and once with a copper rod. Although I could not find any with the stick, I was able to locate a vein with the copper rod. This doesn't mean that water witching works, but, along with seeing others witch, it sure made me stop and wonder.



*Wayne Morehouse located a water vein on his farm. Notice the rod has turned downwards, pointing toward the vein.*

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**by John Hill**

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