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Water Witching

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Water Witcher
Jim Richardson

WATER WITCHING

Back during the drouth of the 1950s we were able to nurse our well at the house just enough to get by, but the windmill in the corral by the barn was having trouble keeping up with the horses and mules, so Dad decided to have another well drilled.

By the time it was all over, drillers had put down five holes for us, including three in nearby pastures. The trouble is that here in the Flint Hills veins of ground water are unpredictable. Some produce plenty of water, others only a trickle. In order to try to find a good vein, Dad called upon Chester “Doc” Danby to witch a well. Doc ran a filling station in Cassoday and was also the local water witch.

Water witch, water staker, diviner, dowser, finder, locator — water witches have answered to various names throughout history. Water witch, a uniquely American usage, derives not from a link to demons but to the colonial practice of using branches from witch hazel for divining rods. Various types of trees are favored by diviners. Some specify apple or peach branches of just the right thickness, about twice the circumference of a pencil. Others swear by willow, hazel, ash, oak, myrtle, or other deciduous trees; conifers are not used.

Employing instruments ranging from the familiar forked stick to welding rods to coat hangers to pieces of number nine wire to pendulums to bobbers (a weight dangling from the end of a single stick), dowsers have over the centuries located not just

water but also tin, copper, gold, other ores, petroleum, buried pipes, dead bodies, unmarked graves, and even criminals.

The earliest surviving detailed written account of divining is a 1556 document written by Georgius de Agricola that describes how illiterate German miners used forked sticks to seek out ore deposits. The Roman historian Tacitus (died c. AD 120) described how the Frisians used cuttings from fruit trees to find out murderers, while the Greek historian Herodotus (died c. 425 BC) tells of the Scythians using willow sticks to detect perjurers. And in northwest Africa there are 8,000-year-old petroglyphs in the Atlas Mountains that appear to show a dowser plying his trade.

When most people think of a water witch, a Y-shaped, forked stick that looks like a wishbone most often comes to mind. Think of a kid's slingshot, only the "legs" are much longer than the "foot" of the Y. The dowser grips the forks firmly at chest level with his up-facing hands, then walks over the ground until the water underneath his feet causes the tip to dip sharply down. The pull of the water is so strong that it can rub the skin off the hands of the dowser. If the water witch is using metal rods instead of a forked

stick, he or she holds them out straight in front and they will cross over each other to indicate the water below. Or the water pipes, the minerals, or the corpses — whatever is being sought.

Whereas the forked stick is gripped tightly, if metal rods are used they are held loosely. Rods are first bent into an L-shape, with the hand-held part much shorter than the part extending out from the dowser's chest. In fact, many dowsers place the rods into short pieces of pipe and hold the pipe so that the ends can move freely.

Some diviners claim to be able to tell the depth of the water they have located, and some will specify the strength of the well. Some just look at a piece of land from the roadside and point out the spots where water can be found. Some even claim they can hold their forked stick over a map of the world and tell wildcatters where to dig for oil.

Does dowsing really work? Scientists scoff, but satisfied landowners who have successfully had a well witched say it does. But how? Back in seventeenth century Europe explanations tended toward either heavenly or demonic forces behind the phenomenon. But colonial Americans were more practical and ruled out magic



River 1
Lisa Grossman

as an influence. The amount of water that comprises the makeup of the human body, after all, ranges from 50 to 75 percent, with the average adult being made up of 60 percent water. Some dowsers think that might be a factor. Other members of the craft, however, credit electromagnetism or radioactivity. And some think any attempt to explain it is pointless: if one has the gift, don't question how it works, just use it.

I personally don't have the gift, but when those who do have put their hands lightly on the backs of mine as I held a divining rod, it dipped.

So how did the wells that Dad had drilled back in the mid-50s turn out? All five produced water, but not enough to forestall our need to haul water from Fox Lake in order to keep the livestock from going thirsty. The volume in one well was miniscule, but three promised enough to merit windmills. Their production, however, was disappointingly small.

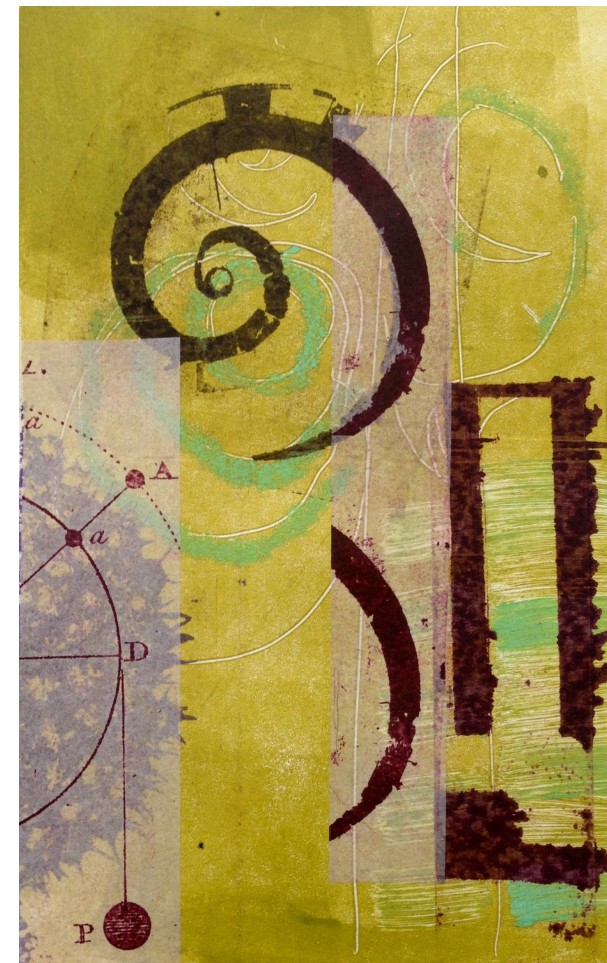
For the fifth well Dad imported a water witch/well driller from Sumner County. I don't remember this fellow's name, but I do remember the countless wads of spent chewing tobacco that littered our yard for months. He guaranteed that there was water over the spot he had witched, lots

of it. And he was right. The problem was depth. Once he had drilled seventy-five dry feet, Dad told him he might as well stop because if he went deeper he would hit salt water. The Sumner Countian insisted on going on, however. At 125 feet he hit water, salt water.

As mentioned earlier, water veins in the Flint Hills are not easy to find. One female water witch from the Wichita area, who usually charged about twenty-five dollars for her services, turned down a one thousand dollar offer from a Flint Hills rancher to witch a well because she didn't think she could find one for him: "Water is as scarce as hen's teeth up there."

With the advent of rural water districts fewer water wells are being drilled in the Flint Hills than in past decades, but given the slim odds of hitting that odd vein of water underneath all that rock, I doubt the water witch will disappear from these bluestem pastures.

Jim Hoy, a Flint Hills native and author of *Flint Hills Cowboys*, is Director Emeritus of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University and a former Board Chair of Symphony in the Flint Hills.



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