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# Dowsing (“Witching”): Is It Real or Superstition?

From the *Daily Gazette*, McCook, Nebraska; Saturday, May 21, 2005

## Dowsing for the Dead -- Genealogist searches out of respect for sacrifices of the pioneers

By Connie Jo Discoe

He doesn't know why it works. He just knows it does. It's not witchcraft. It's not black magic, or "the work of the devil."

He does it with respect, out of respect for those who have gone on before him - those who are lying in graves unmarked for one reason or another.

Tom Corey of McCook "dowses" for graves because of his interest in genealogy and history, and because of his respect for the lives and sacrifices of his ancestors.

On a Wednesday afternoon before Memorial Day, Tom and his wife, Nancy, located unmarked graves at Boxelder Cemetery, the small pioneer cemetery northeast of McCook that Boy Scout Troop 147 is cleaning up.

"You're gonna find unmarked graves," Corey said. "It's unfortunate."

A pioneer grave would generally be marked with a wooden cross, he said, that, with time and the weather, or prairie fires or predators, has not withstood the test of time. "Most of the time, it was for lack of money that families did not put up a permanent marker," Tom said.

No one really understands why and how "dowsing" works, and Tom will be the first to admit that. "It does work, and I can't tell you why it works," he said.

Researchers believe that perhaps the angled rods used by grave dowsers pick up an unexplained energy field emitted by buried bodies.

Maybe it's the nails or the hinges of a coffin that create a reaction, but, Tom said, many pioneers had to bury their family members wrapped in nothing more than a blanket.

Scout Leader John Zlomke of McCook, who accompanied the Coreys in the Boxelder search, said, "If I had to guess, I'd say, the earth has a magnetic field, and the disturbed soil (of a grave) causes a break in that field." The rods pick up that disturbance.

A dowser uses angled rods that are sometimes made from metal coat hangers. The Coreys use angled copper rods.

The technique, Tom said, is to hold the rods out in front parallel to the ground and each other; with forearms parallel to the ground, elbows at the waist. Beginners should start on a marked grave until they get a feeling for the technique.

Tom said the grip is not tight; he holds the rod handles loosely in a circle of his fingers and thumbs.



Nebraskan Tom Corey with dowsing rods in cemetery.

Tom walks across a known grave, and the rods cross over each other and pull back toward his shoulders. He stepped off the grave, and the rods straightened back up. The motion of the rods held straight up and down over the grave will indicate male or female, adult, adolescent or baby, he said.

Tom uses the same procedure walking a line between known graves. It's common sense that a line of graves would have been completed north to south, Tom said, so he's looking -- or feeling -- for unmarked graves between the marked graves.

The rods cross and uncross, time and again.

He talks, almost to himself, "I would suspect ... here. Because they'd be in a line."

"I have a strong male presence here," Tom said.

Further along, "This must be a very old grave ... there's not much rod movement. When they're older than 100 years, it gets harder to find them."

He walks on.

"Hmmm," he muses as he crosses a grave and glances at its tombstone. "She's not in the right spot ... she's past the stone."

"I can't believe how many children were lost ... " he says, sadly.

Tom completes a line of graves. John marks each discovered grave with a white wooden cross.

Records on Boxelder Cemetery are incomplete. The only information put together over the years was taken off existing tombstones, John said. There are 110 burial sites on a list, but there are no where near that many tombstones or grave markers.

Tom said to dowse the entire cemetery would be extremely time-consuming. He guesses Boxelder is a two-acre plot, set aside by an early settler who had family to bury. A strip through the middle, from east to west, also creates a little confusion, some unusual action with the rods. Tom said it probably indicates a water source, a spring leading to the Red Willow Creek that runs on the west side of the cemetery.

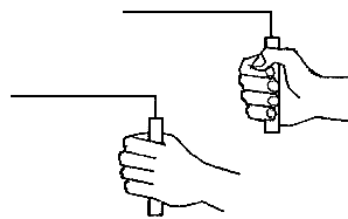
“When the rods cross and won’t remain still, it generally indicates water or a spring,” Tom said.

The rods moved, seemingly out in the middle of nowhere, near that east-west strip, but, Tom said, it would be unusual to find a single grave not in a line, out in the middle of an unused area of the cemetery. “It feels different,” he said. “It’s probably water.”

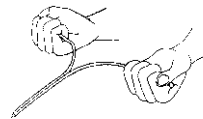
Tom knows people doubt dowsing, that skeptics have questioned it for centuries. He’s the first to admit it doesn’t have any basis in science.

Tom doesn’t know why dowsing works, he just knows it does.

And he feels good, knowing that a little white cross now marks the final resting place of someone’s ancestor.



Holding the Tools: Metal “L rods”



Metal “Y rod” or forked stick

From the *Daily News Record* newspaper, Harrisonburg, Virginia, Friday July 7th, 2006

## **Water Witching: Is Dowsing For Wells A Superstition Or An Uncanny Ability?**

By Martin Cizmar

Dowser Joe Will may not know why or how water witching works, but he’d use it again if he needed another well.

Joe Will walks across the hill, a fresh-cut fork of maple in his hands. He’s near where he drilled the 100-gallon-a-minute well pumping water to the chicken houses on his farm, and the stick seems to know it.

As he passes over a patch of grass — a patch that looks pretty much like every other patch on this 130-acre tract of land straddling the Augusta County border near Bridgewater — the end of the stick dives down. “I don’t know why the stick goes down,” he says, matter-of-factly. “I don’t know if it’s

something in your body or magnetic fields or what — I just know it works.”

Will is an amateur practitioner of water witching, also known as water dowsing.

Using a forked stick that dips or two L-shaped wires that cross, Will says he can pinpoint a vein of water. Bobbing another stick over the spot, he estimates how deep it is.

Will says he has no idea why witching works and, truth be told, he doesn't much care. Will is only worried about his chicken houses, and they have beaucoup water from a fairly shallow well.

“Everybody's entitled to an opinion but if I needed another well for myself or my family I'd have it witched,” he says.

Witching is a skill Will learned a long time ago, he says, and it's served him well.

And just as he's not sure how witching works, he's not sure why he can do it and other folks can't. “Some people can witch, some can't,” he said. “You either can witch or you can't.”

### **It's Not Just For Water**

In addition to witching for water, Will says he can find power lines and buried pipes. There are some people who take it a lot further, says Arvid Johnson, operations manager for the American Society of Dowsers. The Vermont-based organization has a few water dowsers, but most members are interested in dowsing for other objects. Sometimes, they just dowse for the answer to yes or no questions, watching what the stick does to get their reply.

“Dowsing is a way to discover subtle energy,” said Johnson. “[It] allows your body's innate or non-recognizable feelings to be sensed by an instrument.”

ASD members don't have a consensus opinion on how dowsing works, says Johnson, but most think it taps into energy in the human body, not by a dowsing rod that senses something in the “actual, physical realm.”

There's nothing about a sap-filled stick that senses water, he says. In fact, few members of the ASD use wooden sticks, preferring plastic. A few don't use any device at all, just their hands.

“We all have thought patterns and energy patterns in our body that we don't necessarily have the ability to contact directly,” he said.

### **Fooling Themselves?**

In a way, Joe Nickell, senior research fellow at the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, agrees with Johnson.

Nickell says science has shown dowsing works by energy in the human body — just not how Johnson claims.



Joe Will of Virginia, dowsing for water.

“What causes the dowsing rod to move is involuntary muscular control,” he said. “The dowsers are subtly moving the dowsing rod.”

Nickell, who worked as a magician and a private detective before landing his current gig as (so far as he knows) the world’s only full-time, paid paranormal investigator, doesn’t think most dowsers are setting out to trick anyone. “In general I’ve found them to be a colorful, likeable lot and generally sincere as far as I could tell,” he said. “They’re fooling themselves. They are unconsciously causing the movement.”

His theory is backed up by scientific studies, he said. When instruments have been attached to dowsers hands, they’ve shown movement and when dowsers have been asked to find water under carefully controlled conditions, they’ve failed.

“This is well-established science,” he said. “Anyone who says otherwise is not talking science.”

Nickell has personally conducted tests on gold dowsers in the Yukon and found nothing to back up their claims. “Although they agreed in advance to the test invariably when the control test shows that they do not have any

dowsing ability they begin to rationalize why the test was not quite proper,” he said.

Nickell points to a million-dollar prize sponsored by another skeptic, James Randi, offered to anyone who can prove dowsing ability.

“Randi has tested a lot of water dowsers and they haven’t been successful under carefully controlled circumstances,” he said. “It’s just a superstition.”

### **How Deep Is It?**

When Will witches, he isn’t relying on his stick alone. By using a geographic map that shows where underground water is likely to be found, along with a forked stick, Will says he’s able to find the right

spot for a well. “It’s just another tool,” he said.

Will also has another trick, one he says isn’t as common. By bobbing another green maple branch over the spot he’s found by witching, Will says he can estimate how deep it is.

He multiplies the number of bobs the stick takes before it stops by three, and that’s where the drill will hit water.

The well that feeds his chicken houses — at 100 gallons a minute it gives four times as much water as he needs for his house and cattle combined — is about 180 feet deep. Holding the stick just above the ground, he watches it bob.

“I’ve heard them say you can dig far enough down and you’ll get water anywhere,” he says. “Maybe you can, I don’t know, but this works.”

Cathy Rexrode, who has a farm in northern Augusta County, says Will guessed within 10 feet how deep her well would be, using that method.

Her well, which Will witched 14 years ago, is still going strong, she said, as is the one he witched for her father.

Rexrode wasn’t much of a believer in witching and she still isn’t completely sold, although she felt the stick move in her hand at one point. But, considering the cost of a new well, she said witching makes sense.

“I just figured when you spend all that money you need all the help you can get,” she said. “It couldn’t hurt a thing.”

### **What Do You Have To Lose?**

Will says he knows a few other farmers who can witch, but they don’t make a big deal of it. He even knows a well driller who uses the technique, though he’d never admit it in public, Will says, since most well drillers think it’s baloney.

Gary Burner of Burner Well Drilling in McGaheysville says his company is happy to drill wherever the customer wants, witched or not, so long as it’s all right with the health department. “We neither are opposed to it or promote it,” he said.

Burner said as many as 25 percent of the customers his company works with have their wells witched. People who believe in water witching are sincere, Burner said, but “I wouldn’t do it, personally.”

Either way, witching can’t hurt, says Will. He uses a geological map, so he’s starting in the same area any expert would. If you really can find water anywhere if you dig deep enough, what’s the harm with witching?

Nickell, the paranormal investigator, says it’s usually not a problem. “Nevertheless, any ignorance and

superstition begets other ignorance and superstition,” he said.

Will doesn't see it that way. He's seen too many informal tests where witchers have found the same spot to think there's nothing behind the phenomenon.

Besides, “It doesn't hurt to get the map and have someone witch it. What do you have to lose?”

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What do you think about dowsing or water witching? Why do you believe or not believe in it? Discuss your ideas with the other students in the class.