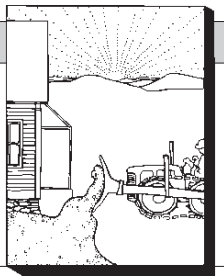

The Fine Art of Dowsing

by Taffy Todd

Water witch, dowser, diviner. The names conjure up images of old men with Y-shaped branches wandering the fields and hills in the old days searching for water far underground. But the fact is, they found it—and men and women today still are finding it by following the twists and turns of divining rods, the tools of the trade.

In the northern section of Vermont, close to the national headquarters of the American Society of Dowsers in Danville, it goes without saying that you don't drill a well unless you've had it dowsed first. Throughout the country, people gradually are beginning to learn the expensive lesson that dowsing for a well before calling in a driller is more likely to produce water on the first try.

A professional dowser can tell you at exactly what depth you will hit water, predict exactly how many gallons per minute the well will produce, and guarantee that the water will be potable. A well driller, on the other hand, proceeds in a rather hit-or-miss fashion according to geological theories, not knowing the depth of the well or the rate and quality of the water until the water vein is reached. Today, in fact, more and more well drillers are asking to have a site dowsed—or they themselves are learning to dowse—before boring a hole. This is quite a turnaround from a few years ago, when one of the largest drillers in northern Vermont flatly refused to drill in an area that had been dowsed.

Contrary to what many people once believed, there is nothing "magical" or "evil" about dowsing (which, incidentally, is referred to in the Bible and depicted on Egyptian tombs). It is a talent virtually all of us have. By concentrating and tapping into the abilities hidden in the subconscious mind, most people can feel the pull of the rods toward water (or whatever is being sought) and lead the way.

When dowsing a site for a well, the dowser stands at the edge of the property, rods in hand, and concentrates on what is being sought—a vein with a 10-gallon-per-minute flow of potable water at a depth of less than 50 feet, for example. Unless the dowser has such specifics as these firmly in mind before beginning, he or she will pick up every vein of water at any depth and with any flow. When the general area is determined, the dowser walks back and forth until the rod is forcefully wrenched downward. For some dowsers, this reaction can be strong enough to strip the bark from the rod.

Modern dowsers have many more tools to choose from than the standard forked stick, but many still swear by the stick and will use only the kind they believe will work for them.

In some areas of the country, proud old dowsers insist on a branch only from a hazel bush or a cherry tree. Others carry long "Y" rods made of plastic in their back pockets at all times. But it is the dowser, not the tool, that does the work; the tool is simply a means of turning subconscious ability into visible action.

"L" rods are another common instrument used for finding water and tracing veins. These are simple rods bent into the shape of an "L"; when the dowser walks over the water vein, they either open out or cross each other. As with any tool, the movement depends on what the dowser expects.

The final tool, a pendulum, is not quite as useful for finding water, but it is perhaps the easiest tool for a beginner to master. The dowser attributes a "yes," "no," and a neutral to each of the pendulum's movements (back and forth, clockwise and counterclockwise) and uses it to answer simple yes-and-no questions—such as whether the gallon-per-minute flow is 20 or 30, whether it is worthwhile to divert a vein back into an old well, or simply whether a course of action is correct.

It takes practice, concentration and knowing what to ask to dowse a well properly, but there's more to successful dowsing than locating the source of underground water; it also requires a knowledge of drilling procedures. Most water veins are very narrow, and they all have a direction of flow. An improper drilling procedure can cut into the vein and stop the flow—and missing a location even by only a few inches can mean drilling to China without finding water. The professional dowser also can recommend how to dig a shallow well with a backhoe without cutting off the flow and coming up dry.

Professional dowsers also may be able to help reclaim old wells that have stopped providing water. It is possible for veins supplying a well to move from their original position for a number of reasons: increased traffic on a nearby road, blasting for construction in the area, or simply imperceptible shifting of the earth over time. In cases such as these, a dowser may be able to divert veins back into the well so it can produce water once again. The same procedure can be used to divert water veins from under a building site.

The diversion process seems even more incomprehensible to some than dowsing, but it has proved successful in many cases. At a point determined by the dowser, a four-foot-long iron bar is hammered into the earth along the water vein that is to be moved. Next, a sledge hammer is tapped against the side of the bar that lies opposite to the direction of the desired flow of water. The results then are confirmed by dowsing.

In some cases—including veins that previously caused water to collect in basements—improvements can be seen within a few days. I have seen 10 to 12 veins diverted around a newly dug, man-made pond that lacked enough water to fill it after many months of waiting. One dry summer week later, it was full. ■

Taffy Todd is director of operations for the 3,500-member American Society of Dowsers, which will hold its annual convention and dowsing school in September (nonmembers are welcome). For more information, contact the American Society of Dowsers, Danville, Vt. 05828; phone 802/684-3417.