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The Urban American Dowser

DOWSING IS A METHOD of locating objects with a forked stick or other instrument that is believed to move in response to the presence of the object one wishes to locate. In the United States dowsing has traditionally been viewed as a rural phenomenon, and earlier studies by Vogt and Golde,¹ and Vogt and Hyman² have focused on the country dowser. Additional research, however, has shown there is a second large group of dowsers in America—the urban dowsers.³ The existence of this group became known to us through an intensive study of the American Society of Dowsers (ASD).⁴ With headquarters in Danville, Vermont, this organization, founded in 1961, has approximately one thousand members and publishes a quarterly journal. We found no overlap between the twenty-five thousand rural dowsers in the United States and the members of ASD.

In this article we shall briefly characterize the urban dowser and point up some contrasts between him and the rural practitioner.⁵ Then we shall discuss a number of the folk beliefs held by the city dowser. It must be stressed that individual dowsers have quite diverse beliefs about the practice and that what we are presenting is a composite picture of the more common themes in this folklore.

The Urban Environment

The differences between urban and rural dowsers are striking. The great major-

¹ Evon Z. Vogt and Peggy Golde, "Some Aspects of the Folklore of Water Witching in the United States," *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 71 (1958), 519-531.

² Evon Z. Vogt and Ray Hyman, *Water Witching U.S.A.* (Chicago, 1958).

³ This project was supported by the Hodgson Fund of the Department of Psychology, Harvard University.

⁴ Our study of the members of the American Society of Dowsers has included three trips to the annual convention (held in Danville, Vermont), the interviewing of 40 members from various regions of the United States, the results of a pretest and test questionnaire returned by 134 members, and analysis of the *Quarterly Digest* of the Society.

⁵ Facts concerning rural dowsers in the United States are drawn from Vogt and Hyman.

ity of rural practitioners are adult males, with a grade-school education or less, who pursue farming as a primary means of livelihood. The majority of urban dowzers, as represented by ASD members, are also adult males; 89 percent are over the age of forty. However, 85 percent have finished high school, and 33 percent have completed college. Only 5 percent are farmers or retired farmers. Most urban dowzers are white-collar workers with an average annual family income between \$7,000 and \$14,000, and 18 percent have incomes over \$14,000.

Rural dowzers reside in or near communities with populations of less than 5,000. Seventy-eight percent of the members of the American Society of Dowzers live in communities of over 5,000. Of this group, 66 percent live in metropolitan areas of over 50,000. This tendency toward metropolitan residence is well illustrated by two states, California and New York. While these states contain 17 percent of the population of the United States, they account for nearly one-third of the total ASD membership. Twenty-one percent of the members live in California. Of these, 12 percent are found in cities of 5,000 to 50,000 and 77 percent in cities of over 50,000.

In terms of major metropolitan centers there are the San Francisco-Oakland area and the Los Angeles-Hollywood area, with 60 percent of California's dowzers residing there. Ten percent of the ASD members live in New York State. Of these, 6 percent are found in cities of 5,000 to 50,000, and 86 percent in cities of over 50,000. Of the total ASD members in the state, 63.5 percent live in New York City or on Long Island. Consequently, one of every five members lives in the San Francisco-Oakland, Los Angeles-Hollywood, or New York City metropolitan area.

The talents of the rural dowser are focused on the problem of locating water; it has been demonstrated that "water witching is employed more where water is difficult to find; the greater the problems involved in finding good underground water, the greater the number of diviners . . ." ⁶ Thus, in rural areas the need for water has given dowsing an important "practical" and "utilitarian" basis or rationale. The situation is quite different for the dowser living in an urban area. His needs and those of his neighbors and acquaintances are supplied by a city water system, and when he applies his dowsing ability in search of water it will either be in Central Park or his own backyard, where drilling is impossible. Although water dowsing receives considerable attention from the urban dowser its "utilitarian" basis is by and large nonexistent. In the urban milieu water has ceased to provide validation for the practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that the city dweller has found new uses for dowsing beyond the ken of his rural counterpart.

It would be impossible to list all the applications of dowsing; nonetheless, the following are widespread: (1) the location of underground resources—water, oil, and minerals; (2) the location of underground objects placed there by man—water and gas pipes, telephone cables, sewers, buried treasure, and graves; (3) the location of lost objects—golf balls, mislaid rings, watches, coats, runaway pets, and missing persons; (4) medical dowsing—detection of disease, determin-

⁶ Vogt and Hyman, 188-189.

ing which organ is infected, discerning cures, determining digestible and indigestible foods, predicting the sex of foetuses; (5) the prediction of future events—the date a new car will be delivered, whether or not a business deal is wise, whether a person will be home when a long distance telephone call is put through to him, and the winners of the Kentucky Derby; and (6) analysis of personal character—determination of honesty and dishonesty. These six functional categories by no means limit the uses to which dowsing is applied, and most urban dowzers believe their art has unlimited potential. While the first category of uses, the location of underground resources, involves some overlap between the urban and rural dowser, the remaining categories are almost exclusively characteristic of the city dweller, and these are the functions and uses that validate and give meaning to dowsing in its urban setting. Another interesting aspect of urban dowsing is its recent and rapid rise in employment by United States servicemen in Viet Nam, where it is used to locate underground tunnels, mines, booby traps, and the Viet Cong.

Given the uses to which the city dowser has put the practice and his great confidence in its potential, it is not surprising that he sees his art as a panacea for a number of world problems, particularly those involving health or famine resulting from lack of water. If the beneficent uses of dowsing have not received proper implementation, it has not been due to limitations of the practice in its current stage of development but to the reluctance of the scientific community to accept the imputed validity of dowsing. This attitude is well illustrated in a review of *Water Witching U.S.A.*, a work negating dowsing's various claims to an empirical basis. The review, appearing in the ASD journal, stated that the book and its failure to recognize the validity of dowsing constitutes "a road-block [to the acceptance of dowsing], contributing to the malnutrition, if not death by starvation for human beings, depriving them of water in drought-stricken areas."¹ Thus the skeptical scientist is pictured not only as harassing the dowser, but as furthering human misery.

The failure of dowsing to validate itself under conditions of controlled tests and experiments and the ensuing scientific skepticism have precipitated a number of reactions. The first of these is a deep-seated mistrust of the scientific community. Dowzers feel that science has by and large ignored dowsing due to its a priori conviction that there "couldn't be anything to it." Other dowzers are disillusioned with the basic tenets of the scientific method and claim science cannot validate dowsing because dowsing is subjective in nature. Placing dowsing in a sphere beyond the objective is but one means of rationalizing the failure of the practice itself under test conditions. There is a rich and elaborate lore to explain dowsing failures, particularly those occurring under experimental situations.

A second consequence of scientific skepticism is that the dowser has had to provide his own explanation for dowsing because the scientific community will not, or cannot, produce an explanation. Despite the urban dowser's mistrust of scientists it is characteristic of him to couch his explanations in scientific or pseudo-scientific terminology. It appears that those urban dowzers seeking a natural, versus

¹ *Quarterly Digest, American Society of Dowzers*, 8:1 (1968), 26.

a supernatural, explanation for their art are compelled to act as self-styled scientists offering "rational" theories that invoke a claim to legitimacy by the use of technical terminology. This is not typical of the rural dowser, who by and large is less sophisticated and much less compelled to try to validate dowsing with elaborate explanations.

The concern of the urban dowser with terminology extends beyond theories and explanations. In referring to the phenomenon, they most commonly use the term "dowsing"; this is followed in frequency by "divination." The European name "radiesthesia" is sometimes used, though it is primarily associated with medical dowsing. Terms more familiar to the rural dowser, such as "troying," "switching," and "doodlebugging" are known to ASD members but rarely employed. Although "witching" is the name most commonly used by the rural dowser, it is both avoided and denounced by his city counterpart because of occult connotations and implications of magic and sorcery. The urban dowser seems to fear that "witching" and allied terms will divest his practice of its legitimacy, and the ASD quarterly has offered its own etymology for a number of terms. "Sourcing" is maintained to have been the first name used, having its origin in the fact that the dowsing instrument was able to locate water sources. Disbelievers and skeptics soon termed the practice "sorcery" instead; consequently, early practitioners changed the nomenclature to "dowsing" or "dousing," this term having its origin in the dousing of the instrument in the presence of water. The ASD journal contends that the skeptic's response was to call the practice "witching" or "water witching" because in his ignorance and misunderstanding he assumed it to be associated with witchcraft. Thus "witching," because of imputed occult connotations, is carefully avoided by the urban dowser, though it is fully accepted by his rural counterpart.⁹

In contrast to the rural practitioner, the urban dowser is organization conscious. A number of the ASD members belong to the British Society of Dowsers, England's complementary organization, or to such associations as the American Society for Psychical Research. Membership in the latter type of society very likely correlates with a strong belief in powers of extrasensory perception among ASD members. Of the membership, 44 percent profess to have ESP or related abilities, another 18 percent suspect they have such powers, while an additional 27 percent who do not claim to have ESP recognize the ability in others. Although our data are not conclusive, they suggest dowsing is but one facet of a complex of beliefs held by the city dweller. At least two beliefs correlating strongly with dowsing, in addition to ESP, are the existence of unidentified flying objects and faith healing. Such a complex of beliefs may in part account for the relatively high membership of urban dowsers in peripheral organizations.

The rural practitioner has learned to dowse either by receiving personal instruction, seeing another dowser at work, or hearing of the practice. Beliefs concerning dowsing are passed by word of mouth. Thus, the existence and survival of the practice in its rural context is based on an oral tradition. A different situation is found among urban dowsers. Dowsing is not something the average city dweller

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:4 (1966), 7.

sees or hears about as a matter of course. Some urban practitioners were taught by other dowzers, but many more first learned of the phenomenon through reading, and the lore of the urban dowser is disseminated largely through publications. Over 75 percent of the ASD members joined the society as a result of learning of its existence in various magazines. Forty-four percent of the members first learned of the ASD through *Fate Magazine*, a periodical concerned with occult and supernatural matters, sometimes including dowsing. Forty-three percent of the society "always" read this publication, while another 22 percent read it "occasionally." Aside from articles and books, the ASD journal and to some degree the journal of the British Society of Dowzers constitute the most important means for communicating experiences, ideas, and beliefs. Thus, the existence and survival of dowsing in an urban context is largely based on a written tradition.

In pursuit of their art, dowzers exhibit a high degree of independence and individuality. Most practitioners prefer to work alone, or occasionally with a second dowser. They have a very high level of confidence in their own ability and are commonly given to hyperbolic accounts of their exploits and successes. We have yet to interview an urban dowser who is reluctant to discuss his own ability or to describe at length his successful dowsing feats. Dowzers gain great satisfaction from demonstrating their abilities and recounting their accomplishments. This tendency toward self-confidence and verbosity reaches the point where ASD members often regard one another as conceited. Mutual jealousies are particularly evident at the annual convention, where large numbers of dowzers vie with one another for the attention of novices and spectators. Enmity can and does arise. As the wife of one dowser interviewed at the convention said, "I've seen my husband and know what he can do, but most dowzers are fakes."

The dowzers themselves are by no means unaware of this individuality and independence. Two officers of the ASD blame the failure of the organization to establish regional chapters on dowzers' inability to get along and work together. (The only successful chapter to date has its headquarters in Glendale, California.) The tendency toward individuality and disunity also is evident in the membership lists of the society, which show a very high annual turnover of individuals. What keeps the society going and draws in new members is not fully evident, but for eight years the membership has been growing steadily. In part, we suspect, the dowser is drawn to the ASD because the *Quarterly Digest* and the annual convention allow for an exchange of experiences and thus reconfirm belief and provide the individual with further proof of the validity of dowsing. This is exemplified in the following passage from the *Digest*.

Before the first meeting of dowzers was held here in Danville, Vermont, it was a rare thing for a dowser to feel wholly confident of the dowsing power when placed before a public audience, large or small.

Many dowzers whispered their powers furtively, and more often than not, only to intimate friends. For many it was a "family secret," if not a skeleton in the closet. We can remember the lovely lady who came to the early convention and, at its conclusion, confessed her emotional relief at being able to talk to other dowzers, exchanging experiences which, therefore, she admitted, she had not dared to relate fully "even to members of her own family."⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:1 (1966), 42.

The Ability to Dowse

Much folklore exists about the ability to dowse, and most urban dowsers have definite beliefs about who can and who cannot dowse. While these beliefs are numerous and varied, they can be grouped into four categories. First, opinions about ability can be divided between those ascribing it to all individuals and those restricting ability to only certain people. These two groups can be subdivided on the basis of whether dowsing ability is seen as a natural or as a "God given" talent.

That only certain individuals within the population at large have the ability to dowse is by far the most prevalent belief. The factors limiting the potential to particular people depend on the informant's views as to the source of dowsing ability. If the supernatural is directly involved, then selectivity is variable and dowsers will cite figures of from one in twenty to one in one thousand individuals. The criterion for supernatural selection also is variable. Clean living, high morals, good intention, regular church attendance, and prayer are cited. A corollary belief holds that it is necessary for the dowser to acknowledge the source of his ability. In cases where success brings conceit and lack of humility, a loss of ability will follow. Where dowsing is held to be a natural phenomenon, and divine selection is not involved, it is generally believed that some sort of physical or chemical affinity exists between the dowser and the thing being dowsed. In this category of beliefs the ability to dowse depends upon heightened physical development of all or certain aspects of the human body. Individuals without sensitive brain waves, neural receptors, body chemistry, or the like do not possess the potential to become dowsers.

When the ability to dowse is potentially ascribed to all human beings, a problem arises when the forked stick simply will not react for many individuals. A common explanation is that the individual is skeptical and lacks confidence in the reality of the phenomenon. This is to say, belief in dowsing is necessary before the potential will become evident. In the category of beliefs where the supernatural is involved, lack of prayer, poor morals, or evil and selfish intent are cited as factors inhibiting individuals from realizing their ability. In the category where dowsing is considered a natural phenomenon, poor physical or mental health, lack of sleep, fatigue, and overindulgence in food, tobacco, or alcohol are reasons why an individual cannot realize his dowsing potential.

Many dowsers consider their ability to be inherited, passing, for example, from grandparent to grandchild. Analogies with Mendelian laws of heredity exist insofar as the trait may be manifested by one close relative but not by another. All theories are simple, however, and there is no recourse to the jargon of the geneticist. Among the four categories of beliefs about the ability to dowse only one specifically calls for a theory of heredity. This is when the ability to dowse is viewed as a natural development, dependent upon the heightened physical or mental faculties in particular individuals. When the source of ability is attributed to God or when the source is a natural endowment common to all mankind, a theory of heredity is not necessary. Surprisingly, however, heredity theories are associated with all four categories. An informant will state, "Every individual has the ability to dowse" or, "God chooses those who will dowse" and then goes on to say, "My grandfather was a dowser and I inherited the ability from him." There

is no awareness of the fact that to legitimately invoke heredity the source of the ability to dowse must be explained in terms compatible with genetic transmission. In spite of a concern with science the urban dowser apparently sees no connection between the source of ability and the inheritance of ability, and he construes these as separate, unrelated problems.

Dowsing Equipment

While the rural dowser prefers the traditional Y-shaped stick, the forked stick is but one of a wide range of instruments utilized by the urban dowser. These instruments are of two main classes—rods and pendulums. Rods include forked rods, angle irons, and straight rods. The forked rod is the most popular device and can be made of nylon, plastic, metal, or whalebone, as well as of any type of wood. Nylon and plastic are the materials most frequently employed by city dwellers. Unlike wooden rods these materials do not dry out or lose their shape. Rods range from about six inches to two or three feet in length. Short instruments have the advantage of being easily transported, frequently being carried in a coat pocket. Consequently, the dowser is not caught without his equipment and can rise to any unexpected call for his services. Individuals using wooden rods do not express marked preferences for particular types of wood. Unlike dowsers of the seventeenth century, they seem to have no special cutting procedures, incantations, or other practices involving the acquisition of new wooden rods.

To use the Y-shaped rod, one fork is held in each hand. The palms are upward, and the forearms are extended with the elbows close to the body. The end of the rod is pointed forward in a horizontal or slightly raised position. Although this is the most common dowsing position, it is not without variation. The end of the rod may be held in a vertical position, or the palms of the hand may be turned down rather than up. A few dowsers hold the rod above their head, claiming this increases sensitivity and accuracy. The end of the forked rod bends down to indicate the presence of the desired object or to answer a question. Questions are phrased so that the downward movement indicates an affirmative answer. For a few individuals the rod turns upward rather than down. This is unanimously believed to indicate that the dowser has an Rh-negative blood factor.

Angle rods, or irons, are L-shaped tools generally made of metal. They may vary from simple pieces of bent wire or tubing to instruments with swivel handles. The latter are reputed to be of great sensitivity. The angle irons are used in pairs, one for each hand. The short leg of the rod is held in a vertical position, the long leg projecting forward from the top of the hand in a horizontal plane. Normally the projecting legs cross to indicate the location of an object; however, for many individuals the legs swing outward. This variation in leg movement is not linked with blood factors.

The third type of rod is a straight piece of nylon, plastic, or whalebone, wood and metal seldom being used. The straight rod is from three to five feet in length and often is the terminal end of a fishing rod. To use this instrument one end is grasped with both hands, held close together. If the rod is tapered, the thin end is held. Projecting in a horizontal plane, the rod bobs up and down to convey information. This tool has the specialized function of determining the depth of

underground elements, indicated by the number of bobs the instrument makes, and is sometimes called a "depthometer."

Pendulums form the second main class of dowsing instruments. A pendulum is a small weight—often spherical or top-shaped and made of almost any material—and is suspended from a string or chain. Simple versions may employ a button or ring, while elaborate models have hollow chambers or spheres holding a sample of the substance being sought. The string or chain is usually held between the thumb and first finger. Occasionally the pendulum is held in the teeth, hung from an ear, or suspended from a toe. To indicate the presence of an item or to answer a question, the weight will gyrate or swing back and forth in an arc. Direction and type of movement is often said to be controlled by the sex of the diviner as well as by his blood type. Generally speaking, for men with Rh-positive blood the weight will gyrate clockwise to indicate a positive reaction, whereas movement in the opposite direction indicates a negative response. A male with Rh-negative blood can expect a reverse set of gyrations. For a female with a positive blood factor the pendulum will generally swing in an arc paralleling the dowser's arm to indicate an affirmative reaction. The weight will not arc, but rather gyrate clockwise or counterclockwise for an Rh-negative woman.

Other devices have occasionally been used by dowsers. Lacking a forked rod, an open pair of pliers can be pressed into service. Not having his pendulum at the time, one resourceful dowser used his hearing aid. Dangling the receiver from its cord, he was able to get an accurate and satisfactory response.

With the possible exception of straight rods, involved primarily in determining depth, all dowsing equipment is interchangeable and unspecialized as to function. Forked rods and pendulums are the tools most commonly employed. In the search for underground and lost items forked rods seem to be preferred, while pendulums predominate in the field of health and medical dowsing. Many individuals are able to use all types of instruments; it is not uncommon for them to own a variety of equipment. For some, however, only the forked rod or the pendulum will work. Frequently a dowser possesses a favorite or special tool that works best for him, and use of this instrument by another person may result in contamination of the device. This is due to the instrument's being exposed to bodily vibrations or radiations of a different velocity or strength from those of the owner. Some dowsers claim that use by another person permanently ruins their instrument. For others the contamination can be remedied by special treatment, such as "grounding" the tool, or by waiting a sufficient length of time for the contamination to dissipate.

Some urbanites maintain they do not require special equipment for dowsing. These diviners receive the dowsing reaction through various parts of the body. Hands and arms are most commonly involved. A dowser may stand with one or both arms extended in a horizontal plane, palms upward. The palms will turn over to indicate the presence of the element being sought. The movement is always said to be uncontrollable. For some dowsers a powerful force acts upon the hands; for others their hands become lighter and seem to float. Another method of dowsing is to hold the hands together with the fingers interlocked. Here the fingers tighten and become inseparable when the desired item is present. In other ap-

proaches, twitching or uncontrollable flipping of the fingers against the palm of the hand can signal a positive dowsing response. Other parts of the body, such as feet, legs, neck, and back, are also employed in dowsing. Foot dowsers experience violent stabs in the soles of their feet; the leg dowser is propelled, often at an uncontrollable run, to the object dowsed; and twitching accompanied by visible jerks of the back and neck are responses cited for the upper torso. Dowsing without equipment has its merits. First, the practitioner need not worry about having his equipment handy. Second, working without the emblems of his profession he avoids harassment by doubters and skeptics.

Among rural dowsers it is generally believed there is an affinity between the implement and the item. Thus, it is sometimes said a forked stick moves because it is "thirsty" for water. This concept of affinity between the instrument and the item being dowsed is atypical of the urban practitioner. The majority of city dwellers believe an affinity exists between the dowser and the item and consider the human body as the key element in the dowsing reaction. For some individuals this makes equipment unnecessary, but for the majority of others instruments remain important, serving as pointers, indicators, or "receptors." The instrument is generally seen as moving in response to forces flowing between the dowser and the sought item or to forces solely within the body of the dowser, such as subconscious muscle movements.

While the acknowledged role of the dowsing instrument is less important among urban dowsers than it is among rural practitioners, city dwellers have a much larger inventory of dowsing devices. Some of these, such as pendulums and rods, contain chambers or other means for holding samples of the element the dowser is attempting to locate. Our data on the role of these substances in dowsing lore are incomplete; yet, they suggest that the samples increase the "sensitivity" of the instrument and imbue it with a degree of affinity for the desired element. We do not know how this belief is rationalized by those dowsers who also contend that the human element is the key factor in dowsing.

How Dowsing Works

When rural dowsers are questioned as to why the rod moves and how dowsing works, a majority will say, "I don't know, it just does." This is not typical of the urban practitioner. Practically every ASD member has some sort of explanation, and this is one of the richest aspects of dowsing lore. The diversity of beliefs is tremendous, with few individuals giving identical explanations. In part at least, variation is due to the fact that urban dowsing is a highly complex phenomenon. Unlike the rural practitioner, whose prime concern is the location of water, the urban dowser uses his talents for a variety of purposes, from the location of objects or diagnosis of illness to the prediction of future events. It is not a simple matter, therefore, to explain how dowsing works. As one ASD trustee said to an audience at the annual convention, the purpose of the society is, in part, to serve as a forum for the investigation of the mechanism of dowsing. In his view there are as many explanations of how dowsing works as there are practitioners. No single theory is completely right or wrong; each contains some element of truth. These fit into a larger picture, and when all bits and pieces of truth are gleaned and

fitted together it may be possible to obtain a workable explanation.¹⁰

The great variety of concepts about how dowsing works precludes a detailed discussion in this article, but several of the more common categories of explanations may be touched upon. It should be pointed out that vague and general explanations are the most common. These account for more of the varied functions of dowsing than do detailed and technical theories. Theories invoking scientific and pseudoscientific models of electricity, radiation, and the like are most often used to account for the dowser's ability to locate physical elements, as opposed to explaining predictive powers.

A great many urban practitioners maintain that dowsing is an aspect of extrasensory perception. Both ESP and dowsing are beyond the ken of science, and it is not illogical to believe in a relationship between the two. Within the ASD interest in ESP is acute, and some 62 percent of the members claim to have, or suspect they possess, such powers. A dowser's extrasensory perception may either be a "God given" gift or the product of a highly developed body or mind. Where the supernatural forces are not invoked, other explanations for the dowser's extrasensory perception are used. These theories tend to focus on the physical and mental abilities of the individual. This focus is also common in explanations where dowsing is not viewed as ESP-related.

Numerous theories about the way dowsing works envisage invisible rays or waves as creating an affinity between the dowser and an object. Sometimes called "matter-rays," these may be magnetic, electromagnetic, radiational, cosmic, or the like. Either nature or the hand of Providence has imbued all elements with such rays; however, their intensity, frequency, or wave length varies from one element to another. Thus, each item has its own code and is recognizable by the dowser. The relation of the dowser to such waves is variable. He may be able merely to sense and detect them, being likened to a Geiger counter when confronted with radioactivity. Alternatively, the dowser may emit his own rays and be surrounded by something akin to a force field. When the dowser's rays come in contact with those of the element being dowsed a forceful reaction occurs. This reaction is what generates the movement of the dowsing instrument.

Another group of somewhat related explanations sees electricity as the means of communication between the dowser and an object. Here various elements possess distinct electrical properties and forces. The dowser is also electrically charged. This stems from an innate ability to store electricity within his body, also due to a "low skin resistance." When the dowser comes in contact with the element being sought, the rod acts as a transmitter, and an electrical disturbance moves the instrument. Sometimes it is said that as the instrument dips the projecting end glows. This glow, varying from blue gray to dark red, is believed to be an electrical discharge passing off the tip of the instrument. On occasions a shock may pass through the body of the dowser just before the rod bends.

Some theories liken dowsing to the homing instinct of pigeons and to the ability of animals like dogs and cats, lost great distances away, to find their way back to their masters' houses. This ability, called the "searching instinct" is highly

¹⁰ An address to the members of the American Society of Dowzers, September 9, 1965.

developed in the dowser. In man the dowsing or searching process starts with a mental question. This question is transmitted to an internal level beyond awareness and the conscious scope of human senses. At this level faculties inherited from animal ancestry begin the search that serves as a stimulation for the dowsing reaction. Though this explanation begs the question as to how dowsing actually works, it gains an aura of credibility by citing examples of the searching instinct within the animal kingdom.

Dowsing and Health

There is complete agreement that an individual must be in good health, both physical and spiritual, in order to perform successful dowsing. Those believing dowsing is a natural ability emphasize the physical health of the person. Diviners considering a higher being as the source of their dowsing powers stress the importance of spiritual health. Lack of physical health is the result of disease or injury or of immoderate eating, drinking, or smoking. Lack of spiritual health is due to lack of faith in God and insufficient prayer. All dowsers acknowledge that dowsing must be done with good intent and that the dowser must maintain high morals. Poor health can be remedied by curing the illness, moderation, improvement of morals and intent, and prayer.

The act of divination reputedly exerts considerable strain on the dowser's health. This influence can be either beneficent or detrimental. Improvement of health, for example, can result from short dowsing experiences. These events of short duration are described by diviners as "revitalizing," and the accumulation of such dowsing episodes over a long period of time strengthens the individual's constitution. After dowsing for several months many individuals say their general health is improved. On the other hand, long spells of dowsing without a break or extensive dowsing during several continuous days has an adverse effect resulting in nausea, fever, and vomiting. Besides physical illness, which can last from a few hours or days to several months, the temper is affected, causing the dowser to feel impatient and nervous.

Factors other than dowsing itself actually cause the malady. These may be telepathic doubts and "autosuggestions" from skeptics, muddled questions, or fears about the dowsing ability that cause stress on the subconscious mind. Rays emerging from the substance dowsed may disturb the body, particularly the circulatory system. These rays affect all people to some extent, but dowsers most sensitive to rays are the ones who suffer illness. Needing less time to perform a dowsing operation, experienced dowsers absorb fewer rays than novices and suffer less illness. Because of intensive radiation, the divination of large quantities of water causes more fatigue than small water veins. Radiation from a water dome is likely to cause the dowser to collapse or to be unable to straighten up. Oil, mineral, and gold dowsing are the most exhausting. Supposedly, the pendulum has less adverse effects than the rod, inasmuch as it transmits fewer rays into the diviner's body.

Leaving the accumulated radiation in the body may be injurious. Dowsers who immediately rid themselves of radiation suffer few or no adverse effects. Methods of eliminating these rays are (1) prayer, (2) hot baths, (3) bashing the ground

with the back of a spade six times, (4) lying flat on the back with the arms and legs outspread and the palms of the hands pressed hard on the ground, (5) having the spine aligned by a chiropractor, and (6) walking barefoot through dew-laden grass. One dowser has a rather unique method of "deraying" himself. Taking a ten-foot length of copper wire, he "grounded" one end by attaching it to the water tap in the bathroom sink.

Then each time I did any stream dowsing, I would go to the bathroom, strip off, put the wire between my legs, up my back and over my head and down the front and connect it to the wire from the tap, so that my body was in a complete loop of wire, then taking my pendulum I would hold it over the wire and as the radiation started to flow back down the wire, the pendulum would spin at a great rate, and when the radiation was all gone it would stop quite suddenly.¹¹

Water Dowsing

Procedures and beliefs in water divination represent an important area of dowsing lore, and understanding how dowsers visualize underground water is crucial. Dowsers reject the idea of a ground water-table and instead believe water flows in underground streams called veins, which may be pencil small or reach the proportions of rivers. These veins are fed from "domes" of water that well up from the inner layers of the earth. From the domes, many veins of water radiate in all directions. Only occasionally do the veins break the surface, as is the case of Old Faithful; usually they spill back into the oceans far out on the continental shelves. The underground depth of a vein may vary from three or four feet to hundreds of feet. Veins are not unmoving but may change to new underground routes. A small number of dowsers consider their power so extensive that upon occasion, if it is for a good purpose, they can "will" an underground stream to a new course. This folk topology of water veins and domes is probably the only belief held universally by all dowsers, rural and urban.

Thus, determining the location of water is not dependent upon the depth of the water table but on the location and depth of a water vein. Searching for water the dowser walks until he receives a dowsing response. The rod will draw down only upon approach to a stream, never as the dowser leaves it. The rod moves when the diviner is either directly over the stream or at its edge. By walking from the opposite direction to the point of the rod's movement, it can be determined whether the center or an edge of the stream has been located. Should the rod respond in the same place, it is the center of the vein. If the rod moves before reaching the first spot dowsed, this is the width of the stream, and midway between the two points is the stream's center.

Once a vein's location has been established, the dowser may determine its dome origin. To accomplish this, he asks the rod the direction of the dome. When held over the vein, the rod snaps upward when facing upstream and down when facing downstream. After finding the direction of flow, the dowser walks along the course of the stream. As he walks upstream with the rod in a horizontal position, it will move upward if the dowser should start to wander from the water's path, and it will turn down when the dowser reaches the stream's point of origin. This point is usually the origin of more than one vein, and the number can be determined by

¹¹ *Quarterly Digest*, 6:1 (1966), 40-41.

the number of times the rod turns down. The total number of separate movements, until the rod no longer responds, is the total number of veins. The drilling of a dome is considered undesirable, since it could ruin the source of water for some already existing well. Rather, a location along one of the veins is preferable. One of the other veins flowing from the dome may prove to be more productive or more conveniently located than the vein used to find the dome.

After locating a suitable vein, the dowser determines the depth of the water. This is normally accomplished by one of five methods.

1. Holding a forked rod, the dowser may begin counting. When the rod twists downward, the last number spoken is equal to the water's depth.

2. The dowser may employ the straight rod called a depthometer. When the dowser asks the depth of the stream, the rod begins to bob. When it stops, the completed number of bobs corresponds to the number of feet of depth.

3. From the center of the vein, with the rod in the dowsing position, the diviner walks rapidly (either forward or backward) away from the vein. At some distance the forked rod will turn down or the straight rod will bob. Marking the spot, the dowser repeats the procedure walking in the opposite direction. The resulting two marks should be equidistant from the center of the vein. The distance between either mark and the center of the vein is equal to the depth of the vein.

4. The dowser moves far enough from the vein so that no reaction to the vein is felt. On approaching the vein again, the rod will give a slight pull. The distance from this point to the center of the vein is equal to the depth.

5. A less common procedure is to call the center of the vein "point x." From this point the dowser walks in any direction, except upstream, until the rod moves again. This spot is called "point y." Returning to point x, the diviner proceeds in the direction of a right angle from point y's reading. When the rod responds, this is "point z." The dowser then adds the distance from point x to point y and the distance from point x to point z. This total multiplied by three gives the depth. Except for the remark, "It works," no one has given any explanation for the use of the number three.

Once the location and depth have been established the diviner is ready to determine the amount of flow. Not all dowsers profess to have this faculty. Among those who determine the flow, only a few procedures are known. The relative flow can be established by the relative pull on the stick. A small twisting force is caused by a small volume of water. The violent movement of the rod, sometimes causing it to fly from the diviner's hands, indicates a large volume of water. The exact quantity is found by asking the rod the number of gallons of water that are flowing per minute. As the dowser counts, the response of the rod to a number indicates the number of gallons per minute. Another method is to place an object directly over the center of the stream. Circling the object, the dowser can determine the flow by counting the revolutions made before the rod dips. The number of revolutions is equal to the number of gallons of water per minute.

It is interesting to note that whereas all the procedures to indicate depth are in feet for the American dowser, the same procedures give readings in meters for his Continental counterpart. When determining the amount of water, the

American rod responds in terms of gallons and the European rod in liters, thus indicating the universal adaptiveness of the dowsing operation.

The dowser may have already determined the quality of the water. During the process of locating the vein, impure water may cause a bad taste in the mouth or a bad smell in the nose. Should the diviner's cranial nerves not be sensitive to water impurities, he asks his instrument whether the water is contaminated, salty, or for some other reason unfit for drinking.

Map and Photograph Dowsing

Some dowsers do not find it necessary to be physically present at the area they are dowsing. The location of any underground item can be dowsed on a map in a process often termed "telesthesia." Experienced map dowsers claim they are able to determine not only the best location for drilling a well, but the amount of water to be found, as well as its depth and quality. The procedure in map dowsing is simple. The dowser places the map on the table and slowly moves his rod or pendulum over the map until it indicates a particular spot. This point is the best location for a well, the site of a buried treasure, or whatever else the dowser is locating. Topographic maps or other maps drawn to scale are preferred, but they are not necessary for accurate results. Photographs of the area will work, as will hand-drawn maps.

The dowser need never have been to or seen the area dowsed. Map divining is possible because the radiations emerging from an object can reach the dowser no matter how far the dowser is from the object. The map acts as a catalyst to bring a reaction between the source of the rays and the dowser's tool. The following is one member's description of map dowsing in which he used his hand instead of equipment.

... I made a sketch of my piece of property. 122 by 190. I drew in my house and the hand pump in the back yard. All that I have except for the trees and bushes. Then waiting for a time when the house was perfectly still, I set the sketch on the kitchen table. Relaxing completely, I began in one corner and slowly moved my forefinger (right, being right handed) along the edge of the paper, feeling for veins of water running under the property. It has to be done slowly, and if you become tense, relax for a few minutes and start again where you left off. . . . When you come to a vein of water, you will feel a tightening in between the eyes, which becomes almost a click. After a few tries, you will come to recognize this [dowsing reaction] at once. I found a few small veins of water that way that I had missed with my rod. I checked it out by going out with my rod after I found them on the paper.¹²

A talent similar to map dowsing is portrait dowsing. While in England it is frequently used to determine the fate of a missing person, portrait dowsing is rarely practiced by ASD members. Dowsing over a person's photograph can give information about the character and health of the individual. Even if the photograph is covered or the dowser blindfolded, it is possible for him to determine the sex of the individual, his age, the kind of metal in the jewelry he is wearing, and other particulars. If a painting is being divined, however, the dowser will dowse not the sex of the individual portrayed but the sex of the artist.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6:2 (1966), 31.

Medical Dowsing

Medical dowsing, or radiesthesia—more common in Europe than the United States—is familiar to all the society members though not practiced by all. According to medical diviners not all dowsers are able to practice this specialized form of dowsing. A dowser can easily determine whether or not he has this ability. Taking the pendulum and dowsing over a small area of healthy skin on his arm or leg, he will obtain a positive reaction. The dowser then slaps this area. Dowsing the spot again, if he still receives a positive reaction he lacks the potential for medical dowsing. The pendulum of the medically sensitive diviner should be able to determine the small amount of damage to the skin caused by the slap, and the dowsing reaction should reverse.

The diviner holds the pendulum over the patient's body and slowly moves the instrument. When the injured or diseased part is reached, the pendulum will cease to give a positive reaction, gyrating negatively. Besides dowsing over the patient, practitioners may determine the illness by divining over a few drops of saliva, a drop of blood, or the urine of the person. Should none of these be available because of the absence of the patient, diagnosis can be made from the patient's handwriting or photograph.

A major theory of the origin of illness is that it is due to loss of body radiation or to body rays that have become deformed. Radiation not only is the cause of illness but can be the cure as well. A medical dowser, having an abundance of personal radiation, uses his rays to heal. One common practice is for the diviner to place his fingers over the spot where the radiation is "leaking out" of the patient's body. The radiation from the diviner's fingers then starts a self-healing reflex action in the patient's body. As in diagnosis, the patient need not be physically present for treatment. A photograph or hand-drawn sketch is sufficient, and a few dowsers claim to be able to practice their abilities without any of these.

Compassion for the person seeking help increases and intensifies the dowser's ability to heal. This personal factor acts as an "amplifier." If the diviner is not in sympathy with his patient or considers him a hypochondriac, he is not in harmony with the person and therefore not on the same wave length. Consequently, the pendulum will not react to the source of illness, or the mental attitude of the diviner may prevent his body radiation from exerting its healing faculties. Though sympathy is essential to the diviner's work, it also lowers his resistance to the patient's radiation. During treatment the dowser receives rays as well as transmits them. It is important for the medical dowser to rid himself of the harmful radiations he has absorbed from his patient. The more sensitive an operator, the greater his danger of absorbing rays. Dowsers who have not learned sufficient self-protection methods frequently suffer temporary discomfort from the forces they are fighting. After treating the patient they may be afflicted with the same symptoms. Neuritis, for example, may afflict a diviner whose nerves have absorbed radiations from the nerves of a patient. Since most radiations enter the practitioner through his hands, immediate washing in cold water cuts down the adverse effects of contact with harmful rays. Flicking of the fingers to "throw away" the unwanted emanation is another method of neutralization.

Medical dowsers trace the second main cause of illness to unfavorable external

influences coming from the earth. These contaminated influences from the ground are sometimes called "noxious rays" or "earth rays." Noxious rays stem from contaminated streams of water or other underground pollution. People who are in poor health or who have had long exposure to such rays suffer the most. Quite often the illness is cured by the patient's leaving the areas affected by these rays. An ill person may discover that his bed was located over a source of noxious rays. The cure may be effected merely by moving the bed, sometimes only a foot or two, from the original location.

After locating the origin of noxious rays, some dowsers have the ability to neutralize or deflect them. The neutralization or deflection of noxious rays does not influence the emanation of normal rays by the same substance. Methods of deflection include hammering a piece of metal into the ground in the area contaminated or laying coils of wire over the affected area. There are various claims about the size of the area these methods can neutralize. The deflection of noxious rays may save a family whose house was completely engulfed by rays from the necessity of moving. Plants and animals are also affected by rays. The neutralizing of a garden will result in healthier, more productive plants. The produce of such plants is also healthier for human consumption than the fruits of plants exposed to noxious rays.

A more common facet of this area of divination, and one which all dowsers have the ability to practice, is food dowsing. Certain foods are indigestible, cancer-causing, or in other ways harmful. The reverse action of the pendulum indicates the adverse effect of some foods. The effect of food appears to vary among individuals, and each person who practices food dowsing must establish for himself what is not healthy for him to consume.

Medical dowsers believe that their inability to practice medicine—because they lack medical licenses—contributes to the death of many patients whose ailments are wrongly diagnosed by licensed doctors or who are not given proper treatment.

Rationalization of Dowsing Errors

The percentage of failures in dowsing is not determinable because much of dowsing is either unchecked or uncheckable. Incorrect results are caused through human error—the dowser's or another person's—or by natural factors. In the first instance, when the dowser assumes the responsibility for failure, he believes he has committed a personal error in his dowsing operation. These errors can be of an internal or an external nature. Internal faults are the results of improper function or action by the dowser's body or mind. External faults are personal errors unrelated to body or mental functions. Internal faults are mostly of eight types.

1. The dowser failed to dowse accurately because he was in poor health at the time of the dowsing operation. This can be a lack of either physical or spiritual health.

2. The dowser failed because of fatigue resulting from too much dowsing during too short a time span.

3. The dowser was after "easy money." Some dowsers explain that when dowsing is for personal gain or to make a profit it fails because the dowser becomes a vested party and loses his objectivity, therefore obtaining poor results. Others be-

lieve God punishes the dowser who seeks personal gain. "When all factors appear favorable, there are still moral and spiritual mysteries to ponder. About the time success seems consistent, some form of control intercedes to spoil the fun. Greed and frustration are compatible with each other but not with the divine aspect of dowsing."¹³ Dowsing should be for the good of humanity. There seem to be unlimited uses for the rod's potential, provided it is used for need and necessity.

4. Dowsing may be without purpose. This accounts for failures in scientific tests of dowsing. Demonstrations or experiments are not a true quest; dowsing without a genuine search results in failure.

5. There may be a lack of concentration. The mind must be completely blank except for the dowsing question. A mind occupied with unfinished work or problems unrelated to the dowsing problem will hold off the dowsing force. The diviner may not have been able to concentrate because of surrounding noise, particularly if it included comments by skeptics.

6. The dowser did not have complete confidence in his ability. The slightest suspicion or doubt about his dowsing abilities will certainly result in failure.

7. A time lag between the moment when the subconscious perceives the object and the instant when the instrument moves can result in error, since the dowser may have passed beyond the desired point during the interval. Walking faster decreases the time lag because the response to the underground item is sharper than when walking slowly.

8. The dowser did not ask specific questions. An illustration of the need for proper questioning is found in the following passage.

It is nice to give your dowsing instrument a name, such as "Mike," or the name of some friend you have faith in, and talk to it just as if you were talking to your friend.

Mike, your friend, can talk back to you in a regular conversation using signs but you must understand the signs and not guess at any unusual movements. If there seems to be confusion, rephrase your questions until the answers come to you in clean-cut motions.

The questions that you ask Mike must be complete. For instance, "Is John at home?" does not say which day. "Is John home today?" could suggest that he would have to be there all day. "Will John be home at six o'clock?" We have a morning and evening six o'clock. A better question would be, "Will John be at home today at six o'clock this afternoon?"¹⁴

Personal errors of an external nature, not as frequently adduced as those of an intrinsic quality, are caused by something outside of the dowser's organism or mental processes. The dowser may explain his incorrect results by suddenly remembering that on the day he was dowsing he wore rubber-soled shoes, which acted as insulation blocking off the dowsing rays. He may have discovered a knife in his pocket that short-circuited the electrical responses. Faulty equipment is often blamed for failures; for example, a wooden rod may have been too dry.

A second type of failure with a human origin may be caused by another party. In any type of dowsing operation failure can be caused by "autosuggestions" from doubters and skeptics. A person who concentrates on making the dowser fail usually proves successful. Not infrequently this concentrating person is an envious fellow dowser. Failure may also result from defilement of equipment through use by another person. In water dowsing the most frequently blamed second party is the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5:4 (1965), 20-21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:2 (1966), 14.

well driller. The driller may cause failure by driving the casing ahead of the drilled hole, thus sealing off the water supply; he may fail to use a sufficient supply of water while drilling so that cuttings form a pasty mud, sealing off the water-bearing crevices; or he may use a back hoe that drives the water source down. These, however, are secondary to the driller's main fault: he fails to drill where told by the dowser. Sometimes this is because the spot dowsed was not convenient to be drilled, but dowsers state that drilling in a different location is often an attempt by unscrupulous drillers to discredit competent dowsers. Occasionally the landowner will change his mind about drilling the divined spot, usually because it is inconvenient for his purposes.

The dowser has no control over natural factors causing incorrect dowsing results. These natural phenomena are of four types.

1. Influences outside the earth's crust may cause false dowsing reactions. The movement of the planets affects all dowsing operations. The stages of the moon, particularly the day before a new moon, influence the movement of underground water. On the day preceding a rainstorm underground water disturbances cause even dried-up or weak veins to react with a strong dowsing force.

2. Buried items can cause dowsing obstructions by changing the substance's normal radiations or wave lengths. The presence of such things as clay, sand, limestone, tree roots, or buried telephone cables can alter radiation intensity and therefore be responsible for incorrect dowsing. Of particularly damaging effect is the "loadstone," which is also called an "electro-active stone" or a "mischievous rock." This stone, which may be of any rock type, causes dowsing reactions for almost any substance being sought. Reactions occur because the rock emanates rays in the same frequency as the dowsed item.

3. A water vein may run under another vein. In such case the diviner may receive responses from the wrong vein.

4. A failure for which the dowser can find no reason at all is due to "residual effects," also termed "traces," "remanence [*sic*]," "ghost readings," "phantom images," and "parasitic images." This deception is a common excuse for incorrect dowsing results. When a substance—water, oil, gold, archeological remains, old tin cans—is present in the ground for a period of time and then is removed, the place thereafter retains "traces" of the substance for a period equal in length to the time the substance was actually present. These traces seem to be produced by a subtle force field of some sort. The dowser responds to these traces in the same manner he would to the actual item. A dowser who works fast and has a great deal of confidence in his ability is less influenced by such images. Gold gives off the most images, making it the hardest substance to dowse. Some diviners describe gold as having "a kind of punkish [*sic*]" delight in deceiving the dowser. It surrounds itself with ten to twelve false images. Some dowers claim that at certain times during the day (usually 9 A.M., noon, and 5 P.M.) these images come together to form a vertical column. The column is directly over the gold and can be dowsed.

One method for checking on residual effects is for the dowser to place a compass on the ground where he received a dowsing response. Walking around the compass, the diviner holds his tool in a dowsing position over it. A dowsing re-

sponse at each of the four cardinal points indicates the dowsed item is no longer present. When the dowser circles the compass he should not receive any response if the desired substance is actually below the compass.

Summary

Divination exists in the continental United States on two levels: rural dowsing with its survival and existence in oral tradition, and urban dowsing with its strongest basis in written tradition. For the rural dweller the practice is an acquired talent because the person becomes a dowser only after witnessing a performance by another dowser. As has been pointed out, this is far from the case with the urbanite, whose first encounter is almost always through the printed page. The group of metropolitan dowsers is represented by the American Society of Dowsers. In its attempt at scientific acceptance this group uses a technical vocabulary that appears to be understood by all members, and it employs a range of "scientific" explanations for the practice. There exist extensive theories regarding individual ability to dowse and incorrect dowsing results. Because of the multiple variations in dowsing theories, this paper has not covered all of the known explanations given by diviners. Instead, only the most prevalent theories have been discussed. For the metropolitan dweller, the tradition of water dowsing has survived, although it serves no immediate need or use. Besides water divination, however, dowsing has taken on numerous other functions, including the search for lost items and prediction of future events.

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