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**Water Witching: Folklore, Freedom of Speech, or Public Practice of Geology?
By Todd Jarvis**

You know the competition is getting stronger when your competitor makes it into the Wall Street Journal. The August 3, 2007 edition ran the piece entitled “*In Race to Find Water, It's Science vs. 'Witchers'*”, where a California “dowser” charges \$200 an hour, plus \$10 for each gallon per minute produced in a well he has located, sometimes making \$7,500 in a day's work! The article reports a rush is on because Western states such as California and Arizona are experiencing a well-drilling boom, as a surge of new properties are being developed outside the boundaries of a municipal water system. The same type of rush may occur in Oregon regardless of the outcome of voting on “fixing” Measure 37 with ballot Measure 49.

While Oregon is famous for its diverse water landscapes, Oregonians have a rich history in dowsing and locating water and water channels. In the article “*Witching for Water in Oregon*” published in a 1952 edition of *Western Folklore*, Claude Stephens describes the diverse skills and tools used by water witches dating back to the early 1900s. In one of the most complete studies of the psychology and anthropology of water witching *Water Witching, U.S.A.* first published in the late 1950s, cognitive psychologist and retired University of Oregon professor, Ray Hyman, and anthropologist Evan Vogt show that nearly every tool imaginable has been used to “divine” water, from pitchforks, car keys hung as a pendulum from bibles, and pliers from a toolbox, to the classic “forked” stick. Stephens also reported an interesting array of equipment used in the hunt for Oregon groundwater, including one water locator's toolbox “a compass, several copper rods, the forked witch stick, a radio tube, a small bottle of water, several stakes, a block of wood, and a gold watch and chain.” Stephens also describes the method of a witch from Boring, who used a rawhide covered buggy whip.

Many drillers in Oregon also offer their services as “water finders”. Harold White is a well driller located in Creswell, Oregon who unlike many of his American counterparts, learned how to find water channels from his father. According to a 1956 article in *the Omaha World-Herald*, Harold's father was apparently one of the many dowsers contacted by Vogt and Hyman for *Water Witching, U.S.A.* Harold has been drilling wells and dowsing for water for over 40 years. Like his father, Harold prefers to be called a “water channel surveyor” as opposed to a witch or dowser because he believes he senses the electricity generated by water moving underground. Harold has built upon the skills learned from his father and indicates he can “see” different types of “energy” emanating from the ground surface, and that he does not need to use the conventional tools of the dowser such as bent rods or a forked stick to detect this energy. Interestingly enough, Stephens reported the same type of sensation for a water witch working out of Eugene from the early 1900s to 1950s. While Harold's brother is a geologist educated at the University of Oregon, the two respect the skills of the other – if Harold has a question on geology, he relies on his brother; if his brother has need to find water, he relies on Harold.

So who is right – the hydrogeologists or the water witch? According to Hyman and Vogt's *Water Witching U.S.A.*, there were approximately 25,000 practicing water witches in the late 1950s. Francis Chapelle, a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that this number had grown to approximately 60,000 in his book *The Hidden Sea* published in 2000. For comparison, Chapelle estimated approximately 4,000

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professional hydrologists were practicing in the US. University of Oregon Professor Ray Hyman reports that the many tests of a dowser's ability under controlled and double-blind conditions have failed to find any evidence that dowsing works. Many of the natural resource agencies with the State of Oregon proclaim that the USGS and the NGWA do not promote water witching due to a lack of science. My sources at the American Society of Dowsers indicate that efforts are underway to develop a national certification program for water dowsers much like the certification programs available to well drillers and geologists.

Whether water witches can offer their services as "professionals" remains debatable as the California Board of Geologists and Geophysicists in California won a permanent injunction against a water witch in 2004. In the *Wall Street Journal* article, George Dunfield, chief of the professional-standards unit with the California Board indicates that water witchers are protected by the First Amendment regarding free speech - a subject that the Oregon State Board of Geologists Examiners learned about the hard way just a few years ago when dealing with an unlicensed geologist. Dunfield says there have been a growing number of complaints recently from people who say they paid witches to find water and were led to dry wells. No complaints have been received by the OSBGE regarding water witches to-date.

So why should geologists care about witching? In the *National Driller's Journal*, editorials published in 1999 called water dowsing "bad news" for groundwater, yet offered that "Obviously it is an issue we must be cognizant of to be effective in our business, and to be better communicators with dowsers and our clients". Historical notes published in a 2002 issue of *Ground Water* indicate that "While hydrogeologists have a better track record at finding water, we must also win the client's favor and trust" implying that many people needing wells are more likely to believe in the success of a site located by a water witch than by a geologist. To underscore this conundrum, the water witch portrayed in the *Wall Street Journal* article was tasked with finding water for a Napa Valley golf course and estate homes project. He was apparently being paired against a hydrogeologist on the project. This particular witch believes that "finding water is becoming all too easy". Maybe so in California, but perhaps it is time to level the playing field in Oregon and start licensing and regulating the practice of water witches!

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