

Skeptic tries water witching

By Pat Davidson

Battalion Reporter

Dr. Ivan W. Schmedemann walked slowly through the moist green grass of the tree-edged pasture, each downturned fist tightly clenching one fork of a peach branch like the inverted handlebars of a bicycle.

As the uplifted common portion of the Y-shaped rod began to move, I fixed my gaze on the professor's hands: if he was manipulating the rod, it must have been by muscular ventriloquism, for his grip was steady and his hands unmoving, even as the branch turned a half-circle before coming to a halt pointing to the ground.

I had just observed a water witch in action. Now it was my turn to try.

Under Schmedemann's guidance, I tried to imitate his grasp of the tender green branch. I gripped the forks with my palms down, lifting the combined portion of the rod toward the blue sky, washed fresh and clean by rain earlier in the day.

Anticipation swelled within me as I began walking slowly across the field. I had seen it work for Schmedemann. Would it work for me?

"It's not going to work; I just know it is not going to work for me," I thought as I neared the spot where Schmedemann's effort had indicated water would be found.

So I wonder why I was disappointed when it didn't.

Water witching, the mysterious and controversial practice of locating underground water by using a forked twig or similar device, is a colorful part of Brazos County's rural water picture, although relatively unimportant here because of abundant groundwater.

Ray Robertson, a self-employed civil engineer who began water witching as a youth in West Texas, said the practice, also known as dowsing and divining, is most prevalent in areas where the chances of drilling a dry hole are greatest.

Water is often found in bands or veins 30 to 60 feet wide, Robertson said. So drillers who use maps of aquifers (underground water reservoirs) to determine where to drill may miss some sources of water that can be located by a water witch, he said. Robertson says he has a "100 percent success rate," having found water every time he tried.

Robertson, who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in civil engineering from Texas A&M University, said when he witches a location for a well, he is confident he will find water even if he has no prior knowledge of the drilling history of the land.

Carl Ryan, a water well driller for more than 40 years, said he didn't believe in water witching until he saw Robertson locate water in an unlikely spot. Ryan tried it for himself and was suc-

cessful; now both men turn to the Y-shaped branch whenever they have trouble locating water.

Texas A&M land economics professor Schmedemann, on the other hand, isn't as completely sold on his own ability to locate water using the forked peach branch.

"If you are rational, you are going to use all of the information you can" in determining

where to drill a water well, the Texas Real Estate Research Institute researcher and professor said. Pertinent information includes personal knowledge of the area, data recorded by previous drillers, groundwater resources maps and physical characteristics of the land such as rock formations and drainage patterns. The indication of a divining rod can be included in this list.

Schmedemann said he often witches for fun rather than to locate a well site; thus he declined to say he always finds water.

The controversy surrounding water witching is recorded in numerous publications, dating from as early as the 16th century.

Social scientists, physicists and geologists are among other researchers who have published attempts to discredit, explain or simply document water witching.


None of my research convinced me why Robertson, Schmedemann and Ryan can use the forked rod to find water, while other people, like myself, fail.

I saw the forked rod turned in Schmedemann's unmoving hands. And I felt it for myself as I held one fork while he held the other, and the branch turned despite my resistance.

So I believe there is some validity to water witching. But if I ever drill a water well, I think I'll heed Schmedemann's advice to obtain as much additional information as I can, instead of depending on a quivering stick.



Dr. Ivan W. Schmedemann uses a forked peach branch to locate underground water. His interest in water witching is just a hobby, he said. Photo by Nancy Andersen



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