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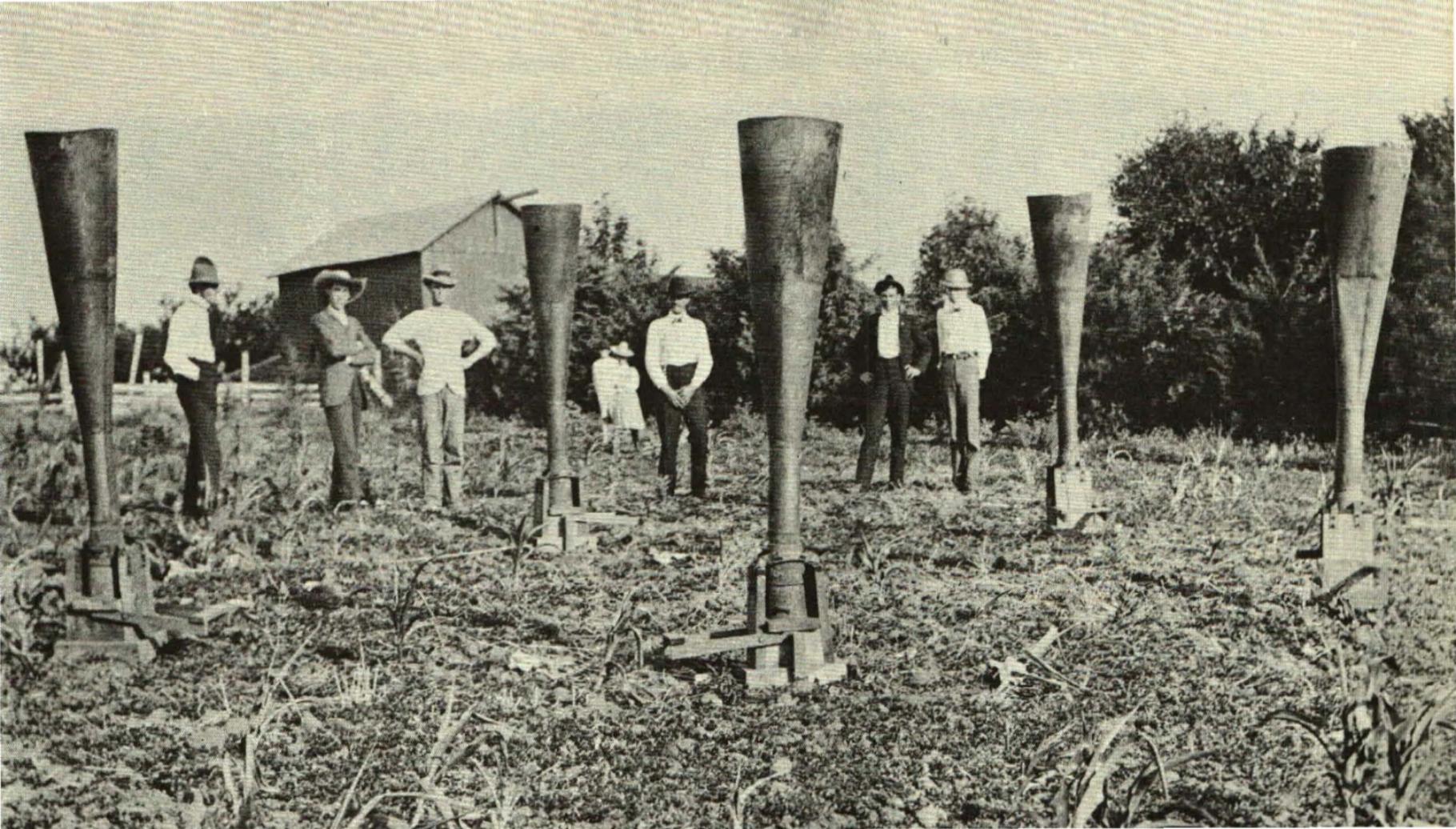
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Photographs / Images: Rain making equipment set up for operation.



# WATER-WITCHING, BODY-FINDING, AND GRASSROOTS LORE ON THE MIDWEST FRONTIER

WALKER D. WYMAN

## Folk Belief and History

Every age is influenced deeply by the unscientific and undocumented beliefs about the world. Europe was kept tightly locked by its lore for generations, for as long as the people believed that the world was flat or that sea monsters lay off the coast to devour any ships that sailed that way, there would be no discovery and exploration of the New World. The search for the Northwest Passage, the Fountain of Youth, and the Seven Cities of Gold—all creations of the imaginative folk mind—deeply influenced the growth of geographic knowledge and the course of history.

Tonight I want to tell you about some of the remnant folk beliefs that exist today which are a bequest of the old frontier: the legend about "Fisherman John", from the old lumberjack town on the St. Croix River, who specialized in finding drowned bodies; the belief in water-witching that takes issue with scientific geology; the belief in Evil Eye found among the Italian-Americans in the cut-over country of Wisconsin; and other incidental lore that offers relatively little chinking between the logs of history.

*Dr. Wyman, President of Wisconsin State University, Whitewater, Wisconsin delivered this paper at the annual dinner meeting of Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln, September 26, 1964.*

Fisherman John, "the Body-finder".

One of the first stories I heard when I became a Wisconsin resident over thirty years ago was about "Fisherman John" or John Jeremy, the body-finder of Stillwater, Minnesota. This story has never yet appeared in sober print. Sometimes he was referred to as "Indian John", but always the story was the same: he had a secret that enabled him to find drowned bodies in lakes and streams. What was his secret? That was closely held in the family, but of course, most everybody had his own explanation of the "secret." Those people who had read Mark Twains' *Tom Sawyer* knew that "Fisherman John" merely put mercury in a loaf of bread — just as Tom Sawyer's people did — and this caused the bread to sink just over the drowned body. Others called attention to the fact that "Fisherman John" always carried something wrapped in an old gunny sack, held tightly to his chest, as he went to work. Furthermore, he would never work in the presence of any one — not even the relatives — and worked only at night. Surely, said some people, "Fisherman John" had a trained muskrat or mink that had the unusual power of locating a dead body under water. Others said that Jeremy was a gifted water-witch who used a forked twig to locate the bodies. Some who were inclined to be critical said that he was just a skilled observer of currents in the river and weedbeds in lakes. It was a great and good secret, and all "Fisherman John" ever said about it was that he had learned it from the Sioux Indians. If secret there was, it has never been patented, though it is said to have been written down at one time. As the grandson said to me: "My grandfather just let them wonder." And so does the grandson who now possesses the secret if such there be.

Before John Jeremy, Sr. came to an untimely end in 1918, he had recovered 104 bodies between the swamps of Florida and the Columbia River of the Pacific Northwest. He once said to reporters that if they knew as much about body-finding as he did, they would not have to work the rest of their lives. When relatives offered rewards running from \$50 to \$500, this was a profitable business for an ex-

pert. No wonder "Fisherman John" had a professional card thus inscribed: "John Jeremy, Expert Recoverer of Drowned Bodies."

John Jeremy, Sr. was succeeded by his son who was soon locating drowned bodies all over the United States. When John Jeremy, Jr. died in 1926 leaving no son to follow in his footsteps, the *Stillwater Gazette* remarked that the end of line had come, for John Jr. had taken the secret to his grave with him. However, this proved to be in error and underestimated the strength of both legend and the business of body-finding.

John Jr. had a premonition that death might be near, and well he might, for he was involved with an affair of the heart that had considerable dimensions. Consequently, he is said to have gone to an attorney for legal help in passing on the secret to his young grandson, George Thompson, then fourteen years old. In this contract, which I have never seen, the secret was bequeathed to a friend, Emmett McLear, a commercial fisherman, who would train young Thompson "until he became old enough and skillful enough to conduct business."

After several years, George Thompson became the official body-finder, and began a career that took him all over the country until his retirement in 1951. It was Thompson who was called to find the body of Horace Dodge, son of the automobile manufacturer, who had drowned in an Ontario lake and the combined efforts of native Indians, tugboats, and helicopters had been unable to recover the body in four days search. The twenty-four year old young man from Stillwater, Minnesota, using either his grandfather's Indian secret, a trained muskrat, a mercury-loaded loaf of bread, or other devices, and working only at night, located the body within a few hours.

Thompson's last recovery was made in Gray's Lake, Iowa, in 1951. He is now retired and lives in Arizona, and assures me that he is no longer in the business of body-finding. However, I give it to you as legend and history,

and submit that it stands as the most authentic piece of lore in the Midwest.

### The Evil Eye

In the study of social history and folk belief, I have had many surprises, not the least of which came to me in the Italian-American settlement of Cumberland in the Wisconsin cut-over country. Among these people I can report that the belief in "Evil Eye" persists among some of them and even a belief in witches has not disappeared.

What is "evil eye"? If you have a tired feeling, back-aches, and fever, lasting from two to four days, similar to what medical doctors call a cold, flu or an infection, it is probable that you have the "evil eye." One of my younger informants says that the "evil eye" has the symptoms that "you would take alka seltzer for." One of the four "evil eye doctors" in town — that is, one of the four who can help you get well — says that horses, cows, and pigs can also be given the "evil eye." He says that he can successfully cure them in a few days, but "it may take weeks unless you know how to get rid of it. You may even think the veterinarian has helped!" His method is secret, but it is one that he learned from his mother.

Among my Cumberland friends, I learned that there are variations in this illness. If a child is born on Christmas night, the mother may have "evil eye" and can make anyone ill just by looking at him. One woman told me that when she worked in the local factory, she often became ill because those who envied her nimble hands doing piece work gave her "evil eye." She always went to one of the "evil eye doctors" and was soon well again. A young man says that one woman who has two daughters just his age often gives him "evil eye." He has been told by his grandmother, who emigrated from Italy, that he could ward it off by crossing his legs in their presence.

Even a garden or a cornfield can be given the "evil eye." However, there are ways of warding off this disease that

makes plants wither away within a few hours. A small horn buried with the pointed end sticking out is positive assurance against it.

The common method of detecting and combatting "evil eye" is the use of oil drops on water. This great secret has been explained several times to me, but only one "evil eye doctor", a mature woman with an elementary school education, ever demonstrated it to me. Mrs. D. learned it from her mother-in-law. She says that she is not supposed to believe in all of this—"against my religion, you know"—but she does. However, she accepts no fees for her work. The person who suspects that he may have "evil eye" does not have to be present when the diagnosis is made, but a lock of his hair or a piece of his clothing must be.

It was a pleasant winter afternoon when Mrs. D. demonstrated her cure to me. She brought a basin of water and some olive oil into what she called the "parlor." Nine drops of oil were dropped into the water, in the form of the Cross, and as she dropped the oil, she said the "Sign of the Cross" prayer. If the drops of oil spread over the water, you have "evil eye." If the drops remain intact on top of the surface, forming a cross, then you do not have such an affliction. Instead, you may just have plain, ordinary, every-day head-ache, or perhaps nothing is wrong with you except your imagination. But when the diagnosis shows that you have "evil eye," then the water is thrown on the doorstep or front walk so passers-by will tramp out the devil that is there. In a short time, the afflicted feels well again.

I hasten to add that upon this occasion I did not have "evil eye." The college student daughter who was present told me that she really did not believe this, but on the other hand, she had seen the treatment work many times. The previous spring, when she arrived home for the Easter Holiday, she had a headache, she said. This turned out to be "evil eye." Her mother immediately used the oil on water process, and according to my student friend, she was well within thirty minutes.

## Stragés

I have also learned that among the older Italian-Americans, who have always lived outside the tradition of education, a belief in human witches, or stragés as they call them, lingers on. At least a half dozen adult people told me of cases they have heard of. No one had ever seen one himself, but each could report an encounter between a member of the family and a stragé.

One farmer told me that he doubted if stragés ever came into his barn. True, he had found horses with their manes braided in the morning, and some of them looked as if they had been ridden all night, but he believed that the horses did it themselves by rubbing against the stall. (This farmer also had a strong belief in the potency of eggs in stimulating sexual desire, and mixed eggs with the oats he fed his mares and the swill he gave to his sows.)

Are there stragés in Cumberland today? I found none. I asked one educated Italian-American whether she believed in them, and she replied that she could not since it was contrary to her religion — "superstition, you know" — then said: "But it is terrible when stragés pick on your family. We have heard these stories all our lives. I have seen with my own eyes the legs of a girl with the marks left where the stragé sucked her blood. I do not want to believe it. . . ." Here, her voice trails off into the inaudible.

## Water-Witching

Let us now turn to one of the most ancient problems that has vexed mankind, that of finding water. Long before there was a science of geology that indicated the rock strata where water, oil, and minerals may be found, there was the folk art of witching, or dowsing, or divining to locate these things. Though there is a science of geology flourishing today, there still lingers the folk belief in the ability of some people to determine the location and depth beneath the surface of water and minerals through the use of the forked stick, the metal rods, or swinging pendulum—or in some hands, a pair of pliers, a saw, or even a crowbar.

Divining or dowsing probably precedes the dawn of recorded history. In the Scriptures (Numbers Ch. XX, verses 10-11), it is recorded that Moses "lifted his hand, and smote the rock twice; and water came forth abundantly . . ." To the dowers, this proves that Moses was a water-witch. Herodotus and Marco Polo mention it. Martin Luther condemned it as violating the first commandment "Thou shall have no other gods before me." Witching spread to England in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and came to America with the early colonists. Every group of immigrants to America has had in it a number of people who believed in the forked twig. The Midwestern pioneer hoped to find a pretty piece of land near a spring, but if he could not find such a location, he had faith in the folk art of water-witching to solve his problem. What happened to the art when the dry plains were settled is generally unknown, and I would hope that the University of Nebraska might do some research in this field. However, it is known that many Nebraska pioneers, who had served in the Civil War armies, knew that great battles were always fought in the rain. Obviously, the rain was caused by the effect of bursting shells on the moisture-laden clouds. This led to the rain-making attempts by shooting cannon balls into the clouds.

If anyone had asked me ten years ago where a water-witch might be found, I would have known only one man, the Yankee witch about whom the late Kenneth Roberts, the distinguished historical novelist, wrote a book by the title *Henry Gross*. Over the years, I have acquired the friendship of a number of these folk artists, have carried on an extensive correspondence with them, and can now say without fear of contradiction that in the Midwest, I could locate one or more dowers in every county if I had a day or so to roam around the area.

In England, there is the "British Society of Dowers" and it publishes a quarterly journal. There are also associations of dowers in France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy. The governments of India and the Province of British Columbia in Canada have employed official dowers in

their departments of agriculture. In 1919, the French government commissioned a dowser to locate the caches of ammunition buried by the retreating German armies. During the North African campaign in World War II, the German Army used diviners to locate water in that sparse land. At least a half dozen large companies of well drillers in England use dowsers, and though "they would like to give little publicity to the fact, they have found," according to Dr. Barney Emmost (*Atlantic Monthly*, July, 1952), "that the dowser can usually save them time by locating the point where the water rises to the surface of the ground . . ."

A few years ago, when I was a professor of history and lore,—and what professor of history doesn't pass on a lot of lore as history—there was a student named William Urban in my senior seminar. He came from the Polish settlement of Thorp in north central Wisconsin. He chose the topic: "Is there any evidence to prove or disprove the validity of water-witching?" Imagine the excitement when he announced that he not only believed that water-witching was more reliable than the geologists in locating water, but that he himself could locate water with a small forked twig. Interest in the subject of water-witching increased greatly after that announcement. Urban gave a demonstration and we saw this strange and unusual happening: the forked twig not only turned down over a place where there was a known water main, but it turned and turned until it twisted off in his hand. Other students tried the twig, and some sensed nothing while others somewhat reluctantly admitted that they possessed this strange power. Imagine my surprise when I also saw the twig turn down in my hands though I held it so tightly that my fingers ached. In subsequent tests, I learned that one in five will believe that the forked stick turns down in their hands, at certain places. However, I have seen no holes drilled to prove or disprove the forked twig as a device that finds water.

Over the years I had occasionally heard of the use of metal divining rods being used by city water departments

in the location of underground water mains and sewers. The rods crossed over water mains, said my informants. Frequently, small towns have no maps of their underground pipes and must use considerable guess work to locate them, or else use the divining rods.

One day I stopped at the Barron, Wisconsin, utility building, and asked the manager if he had ever heard of the use of such rods. Without replying to me he pointed back of him, and there were six pairs hanging on the wall. He said that they used them all the time, and that only one man on the crew refused to use such a device. Since then, I have called on many water departments — mostly small cities, but also St. Paul, Minnesota — and have found in every city — except one — someone in the water department who used the rods. These rods have been sold in Wisconsin by salesmen who offered them at \$14.50 a pair, and guaranteed success or your money back. In my researches, I have found that nine out of ten people will believe the rods cross over (or under) pipes, underground logs, and possibly veins of water.

It is doubtful if many well drillers really believe in dowsing for water. Perhaps, some are like the Martell brothers of Somerset, Wisconsin: they do not believe in it, but do it anyway. My brother, who has a wholesome respect for the world of science, used a dowser when he built a new house, saying that he had little faith in this folk art, but when well drilling cost \$5 a foot, it seemed wise to use all means at hand to find water at reasonable depths. Though dowsers exist in numbers even today, perhaps few people have the faith of the pioneer Illinois settler who was told by a water-witch that he could find water at *sixty-nine feet*. The farmer dug down sixty-eight feet, then hoisted all the shovels, picks, and bars out of the pit. The brick mason then began to build a brick wall seven feet in diameter — with still no evidence of water. "When the casing was completed," says Professor Warren S. Walker in the *Midwest Folklore Magazine* (Winter, 1956), "one of the diggers was again lowered. With a sledge hammer and bar he drove the last foot of rock and brought in

a gushing stream of water that would have made all work in the shaft impossible had they waited until then to build . . ."

Do I believe that this ancient folk art opens a door denied to modern geology? No, I do not. Neither do I believe that the psychologist's explanation of the art as extra-sensory perception is adequate. Do I believe in the efficiency of the brass rods in locating underground pipes? Yes, I do, after having seen them used by so many people — but I have no knowledge of any scientific principles that cause them to behave as they do. In my opinion, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is sound in the conclusion to its article on the subject: "This subject requires further investigation . . ."

### Nationality Foods

Let me close with a reference to foods. Of all the subjects that might have enriched our folklore collections, I find that food, excepting recipes, has largely escaped attention. This is strange when you consider how rich our culture is, gastronomically speaking, because of the contributions of nationality groups. To the meat and corn dishes of the old Midwest frontier — mush, hominy, succotash, Johnny cake, and others — have been added the German and Scandinavian contributions: the coffee cake, cookies, hamburgers, meat balls, and even the great spread, the smorgasbord itself. Though lutefisk is one of the most important and unique Scandinavian foods, I have only one good yarn about it. This was told by the editor of the Galesville, Wisconsin, *Republican* a few years ago, and goes like this:

Among the venerable traditions which I trust will be stopped by our entrance into the atomic age is that of serving lutefisk, a sort of dessicated codfish eaten during the holiday season by the Swedes and Norwegians, and any one else they can browbeat into eating it.

How this lutefisk business got started I don't know, but I think it all began several centuries ago when a couple of starving Swedes, adrift on a raft in the middle of the Baltic Sea around Christmas time, were faced with the choice of either eating a fish which had leaped aboard

and died the week before or melting some old snow for nourishment. Their minds being unsettled by the ordeal, they chose the fish. How they ever talked anybody else into eating it is a mystery. There was the problem of blackmail involved.

They tell me lutefisk is prepared by taking a codfish, beating it to death with a club, and letting it lie out in the open until rigor mortis has set in. It is then sliced and placed in barrels of formaldehyde or some other preservative for six months, at the end of which time it is carefully examined for vitamins, proteins, carbohydrates, or any edible portion whatever.

If none remain, the fish is packed and foisted off on a bunch of screaming Swedes the world over. After having been soaked in water to the decomposition point, it is cooked and served with cream sauce and mustard, and tastes like warm cotton batting, only without flavor."

A few years ago the *Melrose Chronicle* ran this spritely paragraph on food:

It is reported that one of the fastidious newly married ladies of this town *kneads* bread with her gloves on. This incident may be somewhat peculiar, but there are others. The editor of this paper *needs* bread with his shoes on; he *needs* bread with his shirt on; he *needs* bread with his pants on, and unless some of the delinquent subscribers to this "Old Rag of Freedom" pony up before long, he will *need* bread without a damn thing on, and Wisconsin is no Garden of Eden in the winter time.