

American Scene

In Vermont: Is Dowsing Going to the Dogs?

The white-haired man is deep in concentration. In his hands, he grips a pair of L-shaped metal rods, holding them at waist level like a pair of six-shooters. Slowly and deliberately, he walks across the village green, heedless of the knot of spectators. "Please indicate a vein of good drinking water," he says, almost as an incantation. "It should flow at a rate of at least five gallons per minute and should not be more than 20 feet deep." He takes a few more steps, repeating the formula. And, lo, the rods swing 180° apart, forming a single line at right angles to his line of march. "It's here, all right," he announces without a trace of surprise. "Right under us there is a vein of free-flowing water."

A gnarled, 89-year-old man with a face like Robert Frost's, Gordon MacLean of South Portland, Me., looks exactly like what he is, one of the country's foremost practitioners of an ancient and mysterious art that science sneers at and country people swear by. He is a dowser. As people all over the back hills of Vermont will tell you, dowsers can find water in the ground when almost no one else can—literally at the drop of a forked branch or the twist of a metal rod. No one knows how dowsing works, if indeed it does work. Yet as MacLean displays his baffling powers even a visiting skeptic and would-be apostle of science is impressed.

But what else is going on at the 13th annual gathering of the American Society of Dowsers Inc. in the picture-book town of Danville, Vt. (pop. 2,000)? Well, over in the American Legion hall, a psychic healer from Arizona is lecturing about how he knits up broken bones by gently running his hands over the injured area. He also performs exorcisms. In a classroom at the Danville high school, a retired Texas Instruments engineer, Edward Jastram, is busily attributing illness and depression to mysterious "entities" that invade the body, "like mischievous angels." Says Jastram: "Psychedelic drugs especially expose you to such invasions."

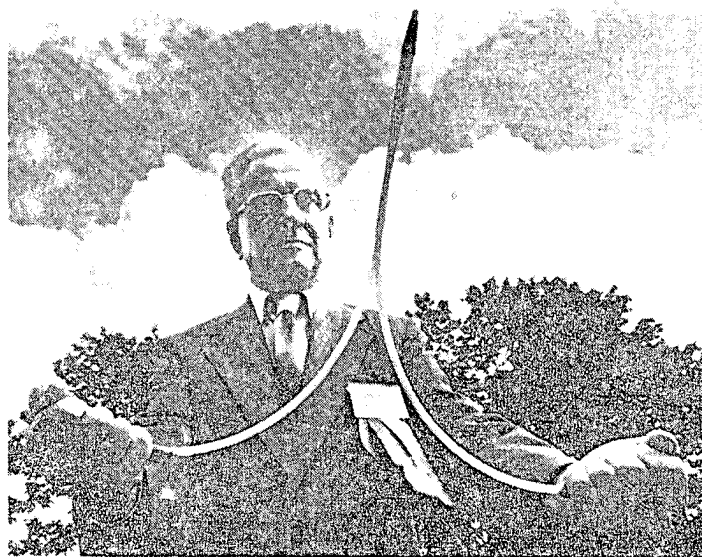
In the porticoed town hall, Peter Harmon asserts that he has a knack not only for finding water but also for stranger things, like out-of-the-body trips. "I've been to the moon," he announces with utter solemnity. Then, before a skeptical visitor can mutter "Really?" Harmon explains that he once encountered a moon-walking NASA astronaut at a meeting. "The fellow said to me, 'My gosh, didn't I

meet you somewhere before?'" Harmon chuckles. But the apostle of science, shaking his head, does not laugh. Because Harmon clearly believes his own story.

Is dowsing going to the dogs? Not at all, bemused residents of Danville report. What was once a local meeting of workaday dowsers has now turned into an autumnal rite as garish as Vermont's fall foliage. In the 18 years since it was founded, Dowsers Inc. has gone subliminal—as well as international. From as far away as Alaska and New Zealand, nearly 600 people have descended upon Danville. Some come to find water, of course. But just as many others are in search of panaceas for depression, mysterious cures for stubborn ailments. Says Society Spokesman Ted Kaufmann: "It's the spirit of

there ever have been. Nearly 2,000 of them are card-carrying dowsers, all of whom belong to a group that is now incorporated under Vermont state law as a full-fledged "nonprofit, educational and scientific society." The organization's elders claim no special credit for the dowsing revival. Nor do they cite a renaissance of American gullibility. Their official explanation: dowsers came in demand again with the exodus to the suburbs after World War II and the need for more drinking water. Commenting on skeptics, Norman Leighton, of Portland, Me. says: "If thick-headed clods would rather have laughter than water, it's all right with me."

At Danville, there are abundant signs of how far—and how far out—dowsing is reaching. In the clapboard churches and



Raymond Willey, of the Society of American Dowsers, and divining rod

meeting halls, the talk is all about body auras, universal grids, Jastram's entities, and illnesses that seem beyond the ministrations of ordinary medicine. At the dowsing convention headquarters in the Danville town hall, piles of books on the occult are offered for sale, from the works of Edgar Cayce to studies of UFOs and the Bermuda Triangle. Dowsing buffs can also buy every kind of tool, from little plastic rods (at \$1 a pair) to miraculous electronic black boxes (price: \$65) that purportedly "discharge toxic vibrations from your mind, emotions and etheric body." Explains Raymond Willey, the society's secretary and a retired General Electric engineer: "Dowsing for water is only the bottom rung of the

ladder. Now these powers are used for everything from determining what foods to eat to finding lost objects and people."

Remarks like that clearly make some traditional dowsers a bit uneasy. Robert Monicoll drove in his camper all the way from Mesa, Ariz., not because he is interested in "all this psychic stuff" but because "I want to improve myself in my hobby—treasure hunting." A splendidly coiffed blond commodities broker from New York City allows that dowsing helps her cope with, if not actually predict, a fickle market. Ira Denbar, a young mail-order and advertising man from Providence, is trying to shake off the painful effects of a divorce. "Dowsing helps me keep my head together," he says. "It plugs me in to the universe."

The gathering is decidedly middle-aged and Middle American. Yet the society's rolls list people of all ages and more

the times, a great belief in things that science can't seem to explain."

The society's historians insist that Moses himself showed the first dowsing skills when he rapped on that rock in the desert and got water. In 19th century America, "water witches" grew as plentiful as traveling medicine men, ready, for a fee, to point out a potential water hole. As handy as dowsers seem to have been for many a parched landholder, the practice eventually fell victim to the new scientific age. Science abhors a mystery, especially one with a maddeningly practical application. Modern hydrologists and the U.S. Geological Survey long ago rejected talk of water "veins" as nonsense and declared that dowsing was about as reliable as a roulette wheel. Dowsers naturally began to feel a bit beleaguered.

No more, apparently. By the society's estimates, there are now some 25,000 dowsers in the U.S., probably as many as