

## Divining guidance

By Billy Cox (billy.cox@heraldtribune.com)

If he were meant to heal himself, well, yeah, John Ames probably would've done it already, and he wouldn't need a broken coat hanger to find the cure.

Plucking the plastic oxygen cannula from his nostrils, the 69-year-old retiree, who is recovering slowly from pneumonia, says his mind these days is swamped by oil. From the hills of Kentucky to the shores of Florida, Ames wants a cut of the action.

He doesn't even have to go on location anymore. Just unscroll a topographical map, maybe dip his fingertips in a dash of oil, take a whiff, visualize, and -- with a little luck -- there it is: black gold. Texas tea.

"Dowsing's a mental function. It's all in your mind," he says.

"This county's full of oil," adds Joe Todd, Ames' 83-year-old buddy, business partner and fellow Manatee County resident. "We've found one well alone that can produce 275 barrels a day. Forever," he contends. "We don't have to go to the Gulf of Mexico for this stuff."

The other thing Ames and Todd have in common -- besides mutual stakes in small oil-drilling operations in Kentucky that have yet to pay off -- is membership in the 15-year-old Manasota Dowsers Club.

Adherents of an ancient practice initially designed to locate subterranean water or minerals with wooden sticks, today's dowsers contend their instruments -- which can swivel, rotate, tug, steer, or otherwise affirm positive hits -- are extensions of intuitive abilities.

But as the plethora of tools and agendas suggests, the highway to revelation can resemble a rush-hour parking lot.

Seekers employ spring-loaded bobbars, pendulums, L-shaped metal rods, bent coat hangers or even ordinary baubles to help find the right doctor, identify a pet's pain, locate missing objects or people, create freshwater wells and select vitamins, not to mention ideal dosage.

Jackie Miller, who founded the Manasota Dowsers in 1991, says a Sarasota chiropractor uses dowsing in his practice as a diagnostic accessory.

"He touches each vertebra and uses a (glass) lens for feedback," Miller says. "But he doesn't want his name used because he doesn't want that sort of publicity."

No wonder.

Dowsing has attracted an equally diverse set of critics, drawing condemnations from the likes of Pope John XXII in 1326 and Martin Luther in 1518. Not to mention potshots from contemporary detractors such as Gary Posner, founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, a humanist group.

"It's nice to believe there's supernatural powers -- it's somewhat related to religion," says Posner, whose club has a long-standing \$1,000 reward for anyone who can validate paranormal activity. "But dowsing has been thoroughly debunked; it's not repeatable. Just because a dowser might spend a couple of days in a field and hits a water vein isn't proof of supernatural ability."

John Ames, a Navy Reserve veteran who lives in a Bradenton trailer park, says Posner is right about dowsing's failure to meet repeatability standards.

"It's very hard for people to dowse if there's no real need, like a test," says Ames, who says his dowsing appearance at a Bradenton bookstore several years ago provoked protests by Christian groups. "But there's no definitive answer for how the mind works, either. I think people are beginning to realize scientists don't have all the answers, and religious people don't, either."

If dowsing is a myth, Ames adds, then someone should ask local utility workers why they carry L-rods in their trucks.

At the Manatee County Utility Operations Department, water division manager John Zimmerman concedes that some employees do augment their metal detectors and ground-penetrating radar with dowsing techniques.

"They'll do anything to help find a waterline so they don't have to dig up the whole world," Zimmerman says. "But I don't know how much confidence I'd have in it."

Manasota Dowzers president Ed Straight has been dowsing for 14 years and still calls himself "a student." For that reason, he doesn't "feel comfortable" telling folks where to dig for water. "It costs thousands of dollars to drill a well, and I'd hate to give people bad information."

On the other hand, some dowzers, such as Craig Alberghini of Arden, N.C., advertise in the Yellow Pages. Alberghini, whose business is called B's Well Witching & Drilling, claims a 90 percent success rate when it comes to finding water in the North Carolina mountains.

"That's based on the feedback I get from customers, and I probably do two or three jobs a month," says Alberghini. "I don't hear from everybody, but I guarantee you they call me every time they don't get water, and that works out to about 10 percent."

Just for the record, Alberghini cautions, the term "'Water witching' comes from when they used to dowse with branches from the witch hazel tree, which is a lot more responsive than willow or peach. It's not from the occult."

Alberghini, a Christian, prefers to call his tools divining rods. "Actually, I use (dowsing) as a form of witnessing, because I pray to God before I do a job."

But unlike other dowzers who contend they can ascertain well depth, volume and flow simply by posing a series of yes and no questions to their instruments, Alberghini makes no such promises to clients. "Who would you ask these questions to?" he wonders.

"You ask the vibrational frequencies, the Kabbalah, the system, whatever you want to call it," says Lea Kachadorian, an environmental activist in Woodstock, Vt.

"This is an art form; it is not a science. It is subjective, and it is not testable. Dowsing is a very ethical thing, which means you can't just go brazenly charging ahead and search for, say, somebody who's missing. They may not want to be found. You need to ask permission first before you do your work."

Kachadorian is a former board member of the American Society of Dowzers, the umbrella group for the Manasota Dowzers. With headquarters in Danville, Vt., the ASD, founded in 1960, counts some 3,100 members in more than 80 clubs across the United States.

Kachadorian says she fell into its orbit after dowsing rods directed her in 1978 to an artery pumping 55 gallons of water atop a ridge in Vermont.

"Visualization is the key," says Kachadorian, who dowses with pendulums and coat hangers. "I'll visualize a place before I'll ask to see a map, and if my visualization is backwards, I'll ask to get another dowser."

Ames has visualized complete oil reserves in the Bradenton area of roughly 7 million barrels -- which puts him at odds with science.

Dr. Mark Stewart, a geology professor at the University of South Florida, says oil companies thoroughly drilled the local coastal regions from the 1940s to the 1960s and drew deflating results. The Sunniland Trend formation, he says, has the most oil-friendly geology, but it runs from Sarasota southward and its prospects are limited.

"Don't even ask me," he warns, "about dowsing."

Ames, who only occasionally uses coat hangers to dowse these days, is certain history will absolve him about Bradenton oil. As for his disinclination to use dowsing to heal his chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and diabetes, the New York native remains sanguine.

"As far as I know, we all have a certain path to follow," he says. "In this life, I'm limited physically with what I can do. Maybe I'm not supposed to be healed."

To search for a source of water or minerals by walking about with a divining rod (dowsing rod).  
-- Webster's New World Dictionary

Try it yourself:

To test your own dowsing skills, try this, adapted from [healing.about.com](http://healing.about.com): Have someone hide an object in your home or backyard. Bend two equal lengths of coat hanger wire into an L shape, then grip one segment in each hand loosely enough to allow it to swivel. Focus on your desired outcome -- finding the object. Follow the direction the rods point, and when the rods cross like an X or point out in opposite directions, the object should be nearby -- theoretically.

### **The good, the bad and the ugly**

The pros and cons of dowsing have long been debated. A good site for exploring the debate is Eric Krieg's dowsing page, [www.phact.org/e/dowsing.htm](http://www.phact.org/e/dowsing.htm), which has links to articles on both sides. Pro-dowsing opinions can be located at [www.dowsers.org](http://www.dowsers.org). Anti-dowsing materials can be accessed at [www.randi.org](http://www.randi.org)  
Interested?

The Manasota Dowsers Club meets on the fourth Tuesday of the month in the South County Library, 6981 26th St. W., Bradenton. Call 722-6556 for meeting locations in October (elections) and December (holidays).