

Water's where you find it



Andy Malatesta's been dowsing for water for more than 50 years.

Photos by Kurt Ellison

And the water witch knows where it is

By ETHAN BARON
STAFF WRITER

Deep beneath the fertile soil of the Pajaro Valley, the life-blood of farmers' crops flows through aquifers to the Pacific. But it does not run evenly in one vast underground sheet, and in order to bring water to the surface the farmer has to find it first. A grower can spend tens of thousands of dollars sinking a well, and have it come up dry.

Enter the witch. Heavy work shoes leaving deep imprints in the dirt, he tramps slowly across a freshly rototilled field, a steel car-antenna in his fist.

The antenna dips and the water witch stops as the tip begins to bounce. The length of wire whips up and down, slicing through the air, and the witch's lips move as he counts. Each dip is a foot, he says. After 213 dips he's hit water, and the wire starts moving back and forth.

Again he counts, lips moving, his sturdy body still except for the thumb and forefinger of his empty hand that pinch together with his count. At 240, the antenna stops moving, indicating that the aquifer is 240 feet from

top to bottom, the witch says.

Andy Malatesta, 79, has been dowsing for water since a water witcher from Elkhorn lent him a willow wand near the Corralitos bridge in 1936, he says. Nowadays, Malatesta gets about \$300 to find water for residential use, and about \$1,000 for agricultural wells, he says.

"Nature gave me the power," he says, tapping his chest with thick, calloused fingers. "It's a small amount of electricity that I have in me."

One person in a thousand has the ability to find water with a witching wand, Malatesta says.

He started with a willow branch, but discovered 15 years ago that using a metal wand produced a more accurate reading. The tip of his car antenna is bent into a "V", and he holds the bend in his fist like a nutcracker while the wand extends out from waist level, the threaded mount at the end bobbing slightly as he walks.

When the antenna dips and starts bouncing, Malatesta's hand and wrist move with it. It's impossible to tell whether the wand is moving the hand or the hand is moving the wand.



Malatesta's dowsing grip

In other words, is this guy for real?

"He's something else. He's got the gift," says Bill Hagins, a sales agent for C&V Farms in Watsonville. The company has hired Malatesta to dowsing for water a couple of dozen times over the years, Hagins says, and every drilling site Malatesta found produced water. "When it comes to water in this area, Andy's the guy," Hagins says.

Most scientists, however, view dowsing with a good deal of skepticism, says Luna Leopold, professor emeritus of geology at U.C. Berkeley. "This kind of magic simply does not appeal to a scientist," he says. "There's

no scientific validity to it at all."

Scientists who study groundwater see dowsing as an art, a skill that water witches learn through experience, Leopold says. "They know a lot. They don't realize they know a lot, and they think it's magic," he says.

Malatesta says the decades he's spent water-witching from Southern California to Oregon, from the California coast to the Nevada desert, have given him a great deal of knowledge about how water systems work in the western United States.

California water, he says, comes from the Rocky Moun-

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tains, and in spite of what water-management officials say, there's as much fresh water in the Pajaro Valley now as there was when he moved here in 1923.

"There's water all over. All you got to do is walk around and find it and see what you got," he says. "Yep, there's water all over the county."

Malatesta gets about \$3,000 a year from dowsing jobs, but derives most of his income from farming lettuce and broccoli. Like many local growers, he is angry that the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency is going to make farmers pay \$30 per acre foot for water drawn from their own wells, starting in January.

"This water's nature's water; everybody can have it," he says. "What are we gonna get back from those (water management) people? We're gonna get nothing."

Water-management officials contend that farmers have been pumping too much water out of

their wells over the last 50 years, lowering the water table.

"It is very, very clear that this area has significantly less water than it did in the 1950s," says Mike Armstrong, general manager of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency. "We believe it is because of dramatically increased groundwater pumping."

With less fresh water flowing through the aquifers, seawater intrudes inland beneath the ground, contaminating the water supply for farmers and communities, Armstrong says.

"I don't buy that one g-d---bit," Malatesta says. He blames faulty drilling practices and old wells for contaminated well water.

On his farm near Pajaro Dunes, saltwater runs beneath the ground between 35 and 70 feet, he says, while fresh water is much deeper. Old well pipes can get rotted through at the seawater level, letting saltwater mix with fresh water in the pipe. Malatesta says his witching wand can't differentiate between salt and fresh water, so he has to rely on his own knowledge of the levels at which the

different waters run.

But Armstrong says Malatesta is fortunate to farm in an area where geological conditions keep the fresh water pure.

A mile to the north and south of Malatesta's farm, saltwater has contaminated the freshwater aquifers, Armstrong says. Beneath the Malatesta ranch is a "confined pressure aquifer" containing water from the Santa Cruz mountains and the foothills around Corralitos that flows under the pressure of a thick cap of clay, Armstrong says. The pressure, he says, keeps seawater from flowing into the aquifer.

Malatesta operates under a different set of geologic assumptions. He believes the Pajaro Valley's water starts off in the Rocky Mountains and flows westward in underground rivers and streams to the Pacific Ocean.

"The water climbs the mountains. I don't know how it does it, but it does climb the mountains," he says.

He sees the Pajaro Valley as the last spot to tap into the underground rivers and streams before they run out into the Pa-

cific.

Water-agency officials believe the water beneath the Pajaro Valley comes mostly from local rainfall, with some water seeping into the ground from the Pajaro River in winter, Armstrong says. Monthly, semi-annual and annual monitoring of Pajaro Valley aquifers shows a direct correlation between local rainfall and the level of the water table, he says.

Scientific evidence indicates that water in this valley does not flow in underground streams, but is more evenly dispersed through three major aquifers which run at different depths, Armstrong says. Some areas of each aquifer flow more quickly and easily than others, Armstrong says.

While he disagrees with Malatesta about seawater intrusion and aquifer flow, Armstrong respects the water witch's skill, as do others in the area, he says.

"There are a lot of people, a lot of learned people, educated people who will not do much about drilling a well without consulting a dowser," he says.