

Not all legends are mere myth

According to legend, if it wasn't for my grandfather's dexterity as a dowser, a brewery in Auckland's Newmarket might never have grown to become one of the country's biggest booze makers.

That's probably a stretch, but you know how it is with family stories. The thing is, Henry Warner (my Mum's father) made a living with a water divining rod (wire, in fact) as the key bit of gear in his toolkit.

The water from underground streams beneath Khyber Pass Rd had been coveted for beer-making since the 1850s when Henry was employed in the 1920s to find a new water source for one of the expanding breweries.

Employing a bent bit of fencing wire (he could also use grass stems, even his fingers, such was the electricity in him) he found a place where two streams intersected several hundred feet underground.

He set to work with his well-drilling gear, which was basically lengths of galvanised iron pipe joined together, with a bit at the bottom and a hose attachment at the top. He went down a few hundred feet, but found nothing.

He asked himself – could his divining powers be slipping? To find out, he got the family together for a session of what he called “table rapping”. Everyone sat around a small table and spread their hands palms-down and joined in a circle, with thumbs together and outer little fingers touching the next person's either side.

My mother was there and swore what happened next did actually happen: on being asked, the table rose a couple of inches and proceeded to rap one leg on the floor - five times. Henry went back to his worksite next day and kept drilling. Another hundred feet down, he found the water - at 500 feet (150m).

His feats were not all mythical. In New Plymouth, he divined a stream about thirty feet (10m) below our back garden and drilled down to provide us with an alternative water supply. I saw that one with my own eyes.

He reckoned as a young Aussie lad (he was born near Melbourne) he could earn an easy quid in the pub by challenging anyone to stop his divining wire turning. He held the single strand end of the rod and offered the double-bent end (twice the purchase) to challengers. None ever stopped it moving.

Granddad reputedly tested any house his family was about to move into by walking through with his divining wire to make sure there were no underground

streams beneath the bedrooms, since he claimed that would disturb the occupants' sleep.

He found granny's lost wedding ring under the carpet one day, just by steeping his two index fingers, walking the room, and stopping to search where his fingers suddenly pointed down to the floor.

As children, we thought this was magic, and even more so when he was able to transfer the power to us by digging his thumbs into our wrists while we held the wire.

Then I discovered I could do it without him. When just a teenager, I stayed on a farm near Feilding and helped my host beat a drought by finding an underground stream he was able to tap.

For a while, I used divining as a party trick, but stopped when men with a few under their belt started getting stropky in their disbelief. I still have a wire hanging in my toolshed, though, and have checked the bedrooms of every house we've lived in.

I was prompted to write about this after reading the views of a respected colleague, Peter Griffin, an accomplished commentator on matters of scientific interest...and certainty.

He was certainly scathing about water divining in his column on how much the government funds what he dubs "pseudo-science", things like osteopaths, chiropractors and acupuncturists (\$54 million in 2015).

Beginning with an concession that he's only once seen a water diviner at work (unsuccessfully) and recounting second hand the sight of Wellington City Council contractors searching for underground water pipes with copper rods, Griffin says we're on a slippery slope buying into practices not sufficiently backed by evidence.

I agree, but I have a suggestion: since so much folklore seems to exist around water divining and other fringe "sciences", why not push for scientific research into them to settle the matter.

If popular pressure is forcing governments to subsidise their use already, academically controlled inquiry could hardly be called a waste of money.