

Acres of Memory

BY D.A. CAMPBELL

July scorched the sandy soil and there was nothing left in the well except a muddy pool of water. The stone sides were green with slime where mosquitoes hovered in hordes. Water, that necessity of life which we took for granted, had become the most important factor for survival. Anxious eyes looked skywards for any small dark cloud which might promise an end to the drought. We made endless journeys to a small trickle of water we once called a creek, and scooped up the precious liquid into buckets, to carry it five or six hundred yards to the house.

"The old well has just about had the biscuit", I told Angus. "Do you think we should consider drilling for water?"

He thought for a moment and I knew he resented my interference - as a greenhorn, I was not supposed to know anything about wells.

"Nope", he said decidedly, "that 'ud cost a fortune - at least three or four dollars a foot. Might drill a hundred feet and still find nothing." He gave me an authoritarian look emphasized by a jerk of the head. "We 'ave ter know what's down there," he said, pointing to the earth. "Before we dig a spadeful, we jest 'ave ter know." As he limped away he said, "We need a 'witcher'!"

"What in the world is a 'witcher'", I called after him.

He stopped in his tracks, wheeled around and almost spat at me. "A 'witcher', Mister Smart Ass, is a man who can find water - an' I'm gonna git a 'witcher', so I am!"

It was final, and I was looking forward to meeting the superior being who was to bless the Hungry Hundred with an abundance of water.

The "witcher" turned out to be a little Irishman called O'Riley. He looked like somebody out of Disneyland - almost a leprechaun. His speech was the music of the "old sod", high pitched, excited and accompanied with wild gestures.

"This here," O'Riley said, holding up a forked stick, "was taken from a wonderful tree in Donegal." He waved it through the air in majestic fashion, like a wizard performing a mystic rite. "It has the magic of the little people in its fibre. I holds the stick like this and I walks in a straight line. When it gets over water, it turns and twists in me hands - a mighty powerful force it is."

"This guy is full of blarney, I told myself. What does he expect now, applause? You've got to be kidding," I said, in total disbelief.

O'Riley's face took on a hurt expression and Angus gave me one of his "keep yer mouth shut" looks. Since his demonstration had left me completely cold, the little man gave all his attention to Angus.

"Would you be havin' a little shot o' something as a starter - a drop of petrol to fire the power?"

Angus nodded his head in the direction of the barn. He glared at me without speaking but his eyes said, "who needs you anyhow?" They walked away from me, the little man still gesturing and talking excitedly and Angus limping and skipping to keep up with him.

I could picture the scene inside the barn. Angus producing a bottle of whiskey from its hiding place, and the crafty little "witcher" making a mental note of where the treasure had been concealed. Angus was not a regular daytime boozer, but I guessed that O'Riley would consume as much of the liquor as

Angus's generosity would allow.

It was about half an hour later, when Angus harnessed the team to a squeaky mowing machine, and set out to cut the poor looking hay on the south ten acres. O'Riley proceeded to perform his antics in the general vicinity of the barn.

During my trips between the creek and the house with a couple of battered buckets, I saw the little Irishman walking back and forth with his hocus-pocus stick. Whatever he was doing, he seemed to be happy at his work, stepping lively and whistling through his teeth.

As the afternoon wore on, however, I saw less and less of O'Riley. I suspected that he was drawn more to the hidden liquid in the barn than the precious water below the earth! When he did appear from time to time, he was no longer capable of walking in a straight line. He zig-zagged an unsteady course across the bewitched earth. Eventually, his mysterious powers and the strength of his legs deserted him completely, and he slumped beneath an old chestnut tree.

After my final trip to the creek, I concerned myself with the welfare of O'Riley - he was not in any pain! He was sprawled on his back with his mouth wide open. Lost in blissful sleep, he snorted and blew a noisy tune, his loose dentures moving with the music like two rows of yellow organ keys.

When Angus and the sweating team returned from mowing, I was sitting on the verandah. Angus stretched some life back into his painful joints and limped over to me. His shirt was clinging to him like a wet rag and his face was covered in dust.

"Where's O'Riley?" he snapped impatiently. "He's lying underneath the chestnut tree," I answered, trying not to laugh out loud.

"Did 'e find water?", he asked hopefully. "No!" I said in a tone of derision, "but he seems to have found lots of whiskey!"

"What do yer mean - talk sense." Angus was hot, tired and getting madder by the second.

"Go and look for yourself," I said, "your miracle man is as drunk as a skunk!"

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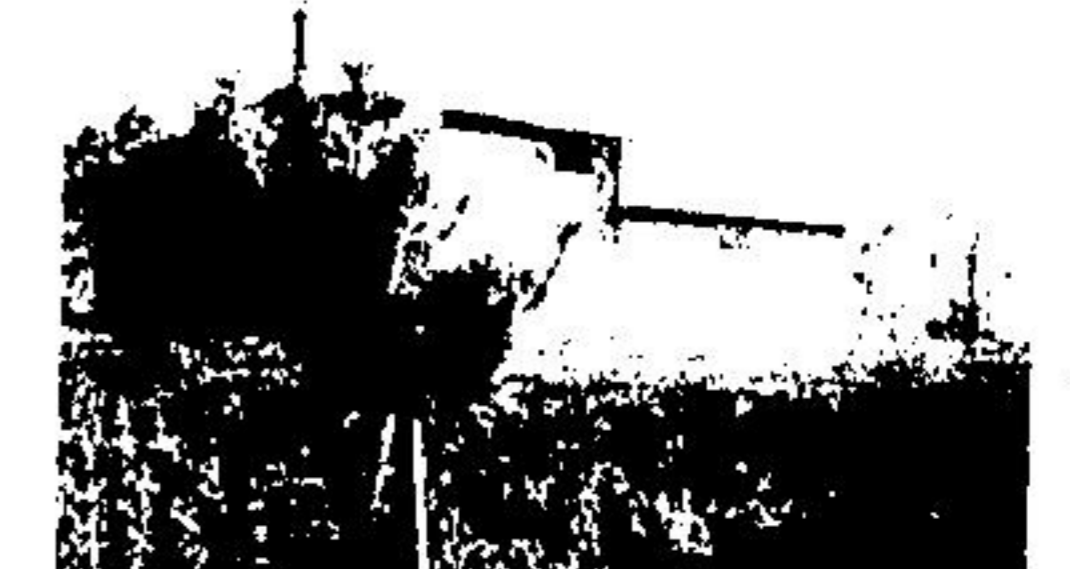


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Choose your neighborhood

There is a long string of decisions when you decide to move. Will you rent or buy? The suburban townhouse versus the downtown apartment. At the tail end of these considerations is one that doesn't often get the attention it deserves—the neighborhood.

The environment outside your door can prove as important to your contentment as the one inside. So what should you look for?

No neighborhood will make you happy if you have to fight your way to work or shopping. If you rely on public transit find out its frequency and reliability. Does it have direct routes to your office? And what does it cost?

If you drive, how congested is traffic? It is a good idea to do a dry run of the routes during rush hour. If you have to pay for parking, check out the costs.

Schools for your children are a major concern. Are they located within easy walking distance? If not, is there a bus service? Most importantly what is the quality of the education? It is a good idea to question school authorities.

Grocery shopping should not be a major excursion. Where is the nearest store?

And what specialty shops are close?

Well maintained streets and sidewalks make the neighborhood a pleasant place to live.

Take a good look around to see if homes are kept up. It is also wise to check the price of the home you are interested in against others in the area and look into the neighborhood's zoning; these factors affect property values.