

Water, water everywhere

Water witching, the Harold Middlebrook story

BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Harold Middlebrook of Milton isn't a witch by any stretch of the imagination, but he is someone that can definitely witch for water. Known as dousing, divining – or just plain quackery depending on your perspective – this is a skill that only a small number of people are blessed with.

When he was growing up Harold didn't consider that he was among the select few that had what he describes as "the gift" for finding water. But somewhere, deep down in his very being – lying there maybe like an underground stream – was a latent ability that would not surface until later in his life.

His education in witching though began early. If Harold wasn't actually locating well water, he was watching someone doing the locating – in this case, his father, the late Leslie John Middlebrook. In those days, Harold and his family lived on a farm in what is today Etobicoke. The farming land there is now crisscrossed by highways, traversed by traffic, built over with homes. You can hear airplanes overhead as flights come and go from Toronto International Airport. The cemetery where Harold's great grandfather is buried is situated between the overpasses for Highway 427 and it's not that easy to spot unless, as Harold says, you're travelling south on Highway 427 just south of Eglinton Avenue. Known as Richview Cemetery, it's not the easiest place to get to either. Harold's wife Elva, who has been married to him for 55 years, says you can only access it by going east on Eglinton Avenue.

Harold and Elva grew up close to one another. She was brought up near Islington Avenue at a time when there were farms from Royal York Road to what is now the airport. Harold's family had a small mixed farm – 100 acres with dairy cows, hogs and chickens a few roads away from Elva's home. Harold, who turned 79 on September 16, remembers farming as different back then. "It was on a small scale when com-

pared to today. Things have changed a lot."

Harold and Elva's lives were intertwined. Rural communities were places where everyone knew everyone else, Harold says. Even though they didn't attend the same schools or even go to the same church their families knew one another. One thing led to another and the two of them decided to marry. Maybe it was the card playing that they both took part in that led to the courting. Who knows? They can't explain what happened. It just did.

Water witching was something you didn't question either. But somehow witching became something associated with Harold's dad. Harold's ancestors came from a small county called Rutland in England. They arrived in what was then British North America in the early 1800s. They started out as surveyors but ended up as farmers when the Middlebrooks were granted a piece of land by the British government as a reward for their surveying work.

Rural traditions and rural life became part of their family history. They also became known for dousing thanks to Harold's dad, Leslie. Leslie, who was born in 1899 and died at the age of 95 in 1994, had "the gift," as Harold says. "He had four brothers but not one of them could do it (divine for water)."

Harold's dad was different in other ways, too. For some reason, he couldn't wear a watch. Time would stand still, as it were, for his father. Harold figures it might have had something to do with his gift. "Dad couldn't carry a watch because of the electricity in his system. Electricity helped him do the witching."

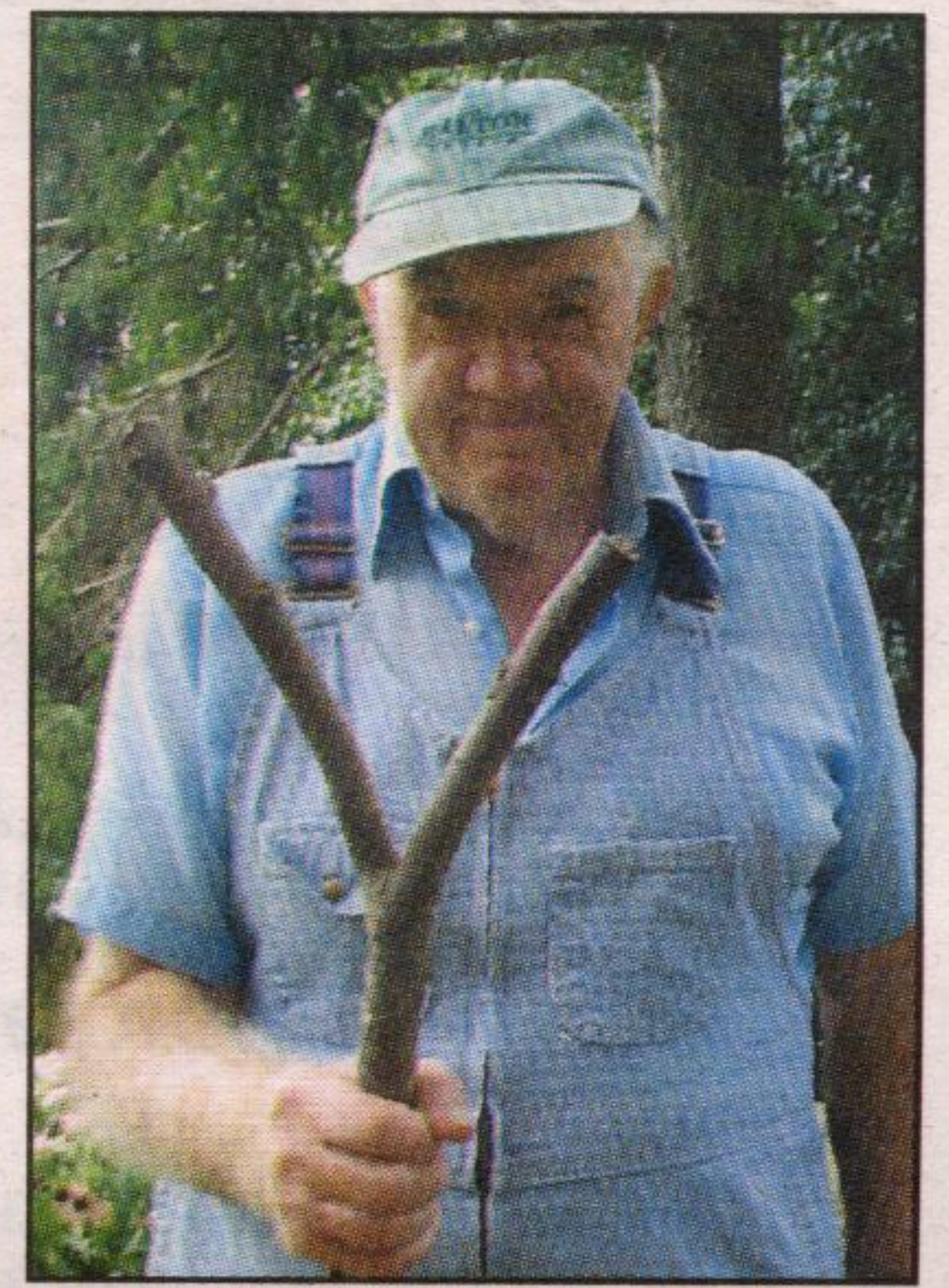
Harold knew that his dad used only a certain type of dousing rod – that all important tool, whether it's a branch of a tree or a coat hanger, that a diviner holds while walking over a site in search of water. Leslie used nothing but the forked branch of an apple tree for this purpose. But it worked. With one hand on either side of the forks of the branch, he would walk over a

place where water was located holding the rod downwards. Then, as if by magic, the branch would move upwards – a sure sign that water was lurking somewhere below the surface. Harold, who has experienced this himself, says the turning of the dousing rod is a force unto itself. There's no sense in fighting it. "I don't care how strong you are. You can't keep it from turning."

Harold's dad became known as someone who could witch for water. And there are stories of his successes. Harold figures he has assisted about 10 to 15 people in finding water, a small number compared with what his dad was able to accomplish. Once Leslie was asked to find water at a farm located in north Etobicoke, at the site of what is now Woodbine Racetrack. It was quite a challenge, and the work was not going well. As Harold recalls, they had gone down 30 feet without finding water, and they were going to quit. "Dad went down the well and used a crowbar. They were trying to get through the shale rock." The plan was to insert a stick of dynamite in the shale to get through to the water. But once they pierced a hole in the shale they didn't need the dynamite. "The water just shot out."

While growing up Harold figured he didn't have the makings of a water diviner. But he would surprise even himself when he found water on his own farm in what was then Nelson Township. Later it would be swallowed up by the city of Burlington. Today,

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The Town of Milton is now accepting applications for the

2004 MILTON COMMUNITY FUND

Application deadline: October 4, 2004 at 4:30 p.m.

The Milton Community Fund was established to distribute a portion of the funds received from the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (Mohawk location). The Town of Milton will consider proposals for cash grants from non-profit organizations or individuals for activities that add to our quality of life or enhance the image of the town.

Guidelines for the application procedure, including criteria for funding and application forms, are available at the following locations:

- Town Hall, 43 Brown Street
- Milton Sports Centre, 605 Santa Maria Blvd.
- Downloadable from the Town's website (under "Grant Programs")

Applying for travel funding

Please contact staff to review timelines as the deadlines for travel fund requests are variable.

Have questions or need help with your application?

Contact Joy Anderson at 905-878-7252 ext. 2604 or joy.anderson@milton.ca

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