

## **DOWSING: PUTNAM WOMAN COMMUNICATES WITH THE DEAD**

By Megan Trotter

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Betty Stark of Putnam County first learned the art of dowsing from her great-uncle, using a branch from a peach tree. It's an ancient practice that has shown up in records and images from Egypt, Greece, China and even in some cave paintings in Africa. It's a



technique used to locate anything from ground water to gemstones; however, Stark says she has learned from her family how to take it one step further — communicating with the dead.

“Some people think it’s crazy. I didn’t believe in it either, but it works,” she laughed.

(Betty Stark uses dowsing rods to locate unmarked graves in

the Putnam County Farm Poor House Cemetery in Cookeville).

Traditionally, dowsing involved using a tree branch in the shape of a Y. The person performing the dowsing would hold the forked part of the branch in their hands, while the long single branch pointed straight ahead. When the person passed over what they were hunting for, the branch was supposed to dip toward their find.

Today, dowsing rods are often made out of a pair of L-shaped metal rods. The dowser holds the short ends — one in each hand — and lets the long end point out away from their body. When they find what they’re looking for, the rods are supposed to rotate on their own and cross to form an X. Stark uses the modern metal rods; however, her technique is a little different than what is used for water dowsing.

### The cemetery

When Stark arrived at the Putnam County Farm Poor House Cemetery this past week to practice her dowsing technique, she found only a couple of gravestones in the small graveyard. However there are at least 118 people buried in unmarked graves there. The site, located on Tennessee Tech’s Shipley Farm off of Gainesboro Grade, holds the bodies of those who lived and worked at the “Poor House.”

“Before the 1930s, when Social Security and other social programs didn’t exist to help the poor and indigent, counties used to take care of the poor in a different way,” Putnam County Archivist Glenn Jones said. “When people could not pay the taxes on their

property and had no one to care for them and no food to eat, the county would forcibly remove them and institute them at the County Farm Poor House.”

There, they would receive free food and living quarters in exchange for working on the farm, either in the fields or inside the house. However, not all residents were there willingly. In fact, county records often referred to them as “inmates” or “patients.” They were often the old or infirm whose families did not want to take responsibility for them.

Carol Bradford with the Putnam County Archives remembers her mother talking about the time she was asked to help transport an elderly woman to the facility.

“When they arrived at the Poor House, the man took the old woman inside,” Bradford said. “The woman realized that she was being institutionalized, and she began to cry. The man came back and told my mother that ‘Aunt Mint’ was going to live there the rest of her life.”

Jones says that his mother also had memories of the facility.

“My mother said that several people would bring food to their relatives who were at the Poor House. She said she felt really sad for the people there. She would see really old and frail women working in the fields in the hot sun. The women who weren’t able to work in the fields were made to work in the kitchen — some were blind, some couldn’t stand. She said they were pitiful.”

When these residents passed away, sometimes their families came to retrieve the bodies for burial in their own family cemeteries. However, if the residents had no family, or if their family refused to claim the body, the people were buried in one of the unmarked graves at the Putnam County Farm Poor House Cemetery.

The talking dead

It’s in this grim setting that Stark has chosen to try to reach out to the dead for her demonstration.

She walks carefully over the leaf-strewn area with her rods held out in front of her. “Oh, here’s a man here,” she says as her left rod suddenly swivels to cross over her right one. She keeps going, calling out the genders as she goes. “There’s a body about every four feet here,” she says.

She chooses one of the unmarked graves at random — a woman, she says — and decides to ask her questions. “Did all the people buried here in this cemetery live in the Poor House?” she asks. While she holds her hands perfectly still, one of the wires swings to cross over the other — a positive answer, she says. “Is Sydney Cotton buried here?” she asks. Another affirmative answer. Bradford, who has come with her as an assistant, checks the list of the names of the people known to be buried here. She nods. That name is on the list.

“Did Jesse Payton Stewart live at the Poor House?” Stark asks. Another affirmative. “Is he buried here?” No movement. She looks up and smiles. “That’s my great-grandfather. He lived here, but he’s buried in the Stewart Cemetery.”

She asks a few more questions and then ends the session by saying, “Thank you. God bless you. Go back to sleep.”

Stark’s cousin, Ralph Chaffin, was the one who first showed her how to use the metal dowsing rods to try to talk to the dead. She’d always felt like she was sensitive to the supernatural — often getting “premonitions” that came true — so she wasn’t too surprised to find that she was a natural with the dowsing rods. She’s been doing it for years now, and has had many different experiences.

“We went to this one cemetery and found this girl — she had something like seven kids,” Stark said. “She wouldn’t answer me. ... So I walked over to where her mother was buried, and her mother answered every one of my questions,” she laughed.

There was another time that she was in a graveyard and stepped down into a dip in the land and suddenly found tears running down her face.

“The lady I was with said, ‘What’s wrong, Betty? Are you okay?’ I said, ‘I don’t know! I don’t know! But whatever it is is making me cry.’”

She had stumbled into an unmarked grave. After she got out of it and calmed down, she went back and brought out her rods. She started asking questions of the person buried there.

“We found out that it was a child,” Stark said. “The best we could get out of him was that he was in a fire.”

Stark also recalls the first and only time she felt like she was touched by a spirit. It was at Double Springs Cemetery, early in the morning, when she was walking over a line of unmarked graves.

“I’m walking, you know, and the wires crossed and told me it was a male. And then all of a sudden I got hit on the leg. There wasn’t anything at all around my feet. I must have jumped three feet in the air,” she laughed. “That cemetery is down by where Fort Blount was, so we think that whole row of graves could be soldiers.”

Despite the occasional scare or spirit with a sad story, Stark says she enjoys dowsing and will do it for as long as she is able. She has been volunteering at the Putnam County Archives since 2008, when it was first established. She has researched, mapped and documented Putnam County cemeteries for more than 20 years, and published multiple books about cemeteries.

“I first met Betty when I was on a field trip with a local historical group,” Jones said. “Betty was demonstrating her dowsing skills at a cemetery that was thought to be covered up by a large building. When she brought out her dowsing rods, a family with homeschooled children took off running for their lives,” he laughed. “The way they responded to this demonstration caused me to pay more attention, and I found it quite interesting. I can’t say that I am a believer in the process, but when Betty does this, it brings comfort to many people whose loved ones she can identify that are buried in a cemetery in an unmarked grave.”

\*Read more about the history of Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at:  
<http://www.ajlambert.com>