

Museum News: Guy Fenley, the Boy with X-ray Eyes

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Everybody likes a good ghost story, as evidenced by my previous story, "The Ghost in Room 6." Whether it's sitting around a camp fire telling stories to entertain the young folks or using a story as a child management tool to elicit desired behaviors, ghost stories and folktales in general serve a purpose in our society to pass on oral history or simply scare the wits out of the naive. And, every time the story is told it gets another layer of embellishment, as is true of the best folktales.

Whether it is New York City or Toadsuck, Texas (that really is a place!) every community has strange stories that exist as just that, unsubstantiated tales.

And then there are the somewhat factual stories based on actual observation...the Marfa Lights, UFO stories (seems like everyone has a personal UFO story...I have four!) St. Elmo's Fire and other eerie things witnessed by one or more persons.

The next level of weirdness is one I like to call the Big Bend Tale of the Third Kind, one that has physical evidence or seemingly irrefutable, documented "proof" of actual incidents. And therein is the tale of Guy Fenley.

This story features another Fenley brother. You already know of George, the first Terrell County sheriff and Jim, owner of White Man, the famous horse. There were more Fenley brothers back home in Uvalde. A third brother, Green B., stayed at home and eventually became county judge. The fourth brother, Guy Oliver Fenley, however, achieved world-wide notoriety with a special gift he claimed ... Guy was a water witch with an extra-special power!

When Guy was a very small child at Uvalde on his family ranch, he discovered that he could "see" water flowing under the ground! At play with other children in the yard, he claimed he could see glowing, shimmering rivers of water, streams and pools flowing near the surface, even down thousands of feet. And besides that, he could see all the strata of rocks, dirt and gravel...and identify them...all the way to the water. Of course the family chalked it up to overactive imagination and thought nothing about it.

One day as he walked with his father they passed a well that had recently gone dry. His father remarked that he would have to drill another well to replace the dry hole. Guy, however, argued that the only problem with the well was a large rock that was sealing the hole. His father asked how he knew this and the boy claimed he could "see" the rock. Guy insisted so fervently that his father decided to drill deeper and see if his son's claim was true. Digging through twelve feet of solid rock, the driller discovered a good supply of water, convincing the father that his son had a true gift.

Local doctors examined his eyes and could find no abnormality, nothing out of the ordinary. He seemed to be just a typical fourteen-year-old kid, yet his success was undeniable.

In West Texas we have plenty of stream and creek beds, just no water to go with them. The history of drilling water wells in West Texas is a long, sad story punctuated with dry holes. But, Guy seemed to overcome that with his special gift.

His ability only worked on dark, moonless nights. With his brothers' help he tracked through the darkness until he spied a shimmering stream of water (under the ground.) He walked along the "bank" of the stream until he met an obstacle, where he appeared to jump the "stream" to the other "bank" and continue his journey, marking the spots where the water was closest to the surface. Each spot he indicated later produced a bountiful supply of water. Guy predicted every strata of rock and soil they encountered, and he was correct every time. He was only a few feet off on his depth estimates, though.

And, his gift was not just limited to finding liquids. A neighbor injured his hip in a horse wreck and could not walk. There didn't seem to be a broken bone, but the man was paralyzed by pain. Guy looked at the man's hip, but had trouble describing what he saw, since he had never studied anatomy. He described a round bone attached to a flat bone, and the flat bone had a crack in it. Taken to a doctor in New Orleans and x-rayed with the then-new piece of technology, it was discovered that the man had a cracked pelvis. Guy described it, he just couldn't name the bones.

Word spread and he soon was swamped with requests to find water from ranchers and entrepreneurs all over Texas, and other states.

He came to his brothers' ranch in Terrell County and discovered enough water to take care of their needs. He dowsed for water in Uvalde County, Brewster County, Edwards County...in fact, many places, but he wouldn't take a dime for his services! One rancher offered him \$500 (or, \$12,500 in 2014 dollars!) for finding water on his ranch, but the good looking, blue-eyed blond fourteen-year-old refused all rewards.

But, the physical exertion of midnight forays took their toll on him. If he pushed on too long he became exhausted and sleepy and would fall into a deep, almost trance-like sleep.

Guy's work attracted the interest of scientific researchers who wished to ascertain the origin of his gift. In 1926

scientific researchers Barrett and Besterman investigated the evidence in the case, including the psychic implications. The body of evidence was overwhelming and they had to draw the conclusion that it was a bona fide ability on Guy's part, but, as expected, could offer no reasonable theory as to how it came about or even operated. But Guy never claimed to be a psychic, he just "saw" the water and reported the best place to drill, simple as that.

One day, unexpectedly, Guy withdrew from the public eye. There is no evidence that he stopped dowsing, but he greatly curtailed his publicized activities. He married and moved to Zavala County south of Uvalde where he served as county clerk for many years. He spent a long and happy life there after his early notoriety, and passed away in 1968, just short of his 80th birthday.

As a footnote to this story, Fenley's great-niece called the museum last year, having found a previous article about her great-uncle in an earlier *Museum News* newsletter. She was happy that the article was factual, but she had a bit of knowledge for me that made the story seem all the more human.

According to Guy's niece, the real reason he gave up dowsing for water was that his father began to take money for his services. I had read that the elder Fenley had forbidden his son from profiting, since the gift was God-given and he himself had seen drought-filled times as a rancher with no water for his livestock. It did not seem right to charge for what God freely gave. Even though Mr. Fenley was wealthy and did not need the money, it did not appear that he was saving the fees for Guy. Upon discovering the situation, Guy promptly "lost" his power, forever ending a fascinating sidebar in water witching phenomena.



Guy Oliver Fenley, the Boy with X-Ray Eyes. Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie