Dowse for Water

Water for people and animals was another problem for settlers all over the West. The first homesteaders took up the land along the streams and rivers, so those who came later had to settle away from these water sources. Those who didn't live too far from the stream hauled water in barrels in a wagon. But most settlers were too far from water for that. They had to dig wells. That had been easy enough to do in the East where a shovel and bucket could be used to dig a deep hole. But in many places in the West the water was more than one hundred feet below the surface. That meant hiring a well driller with a steam powered drill. This was very costly, so people wanted to be sure they were drilling in a spot where water was likely to be underground.

People known as switchers traveled around the country locating underground water for people. They were also called dowsers and would dowse for water. They would search for underground water by walking around holding a forked stick or wire out in front of them. If water was beneath the ground, they claimed the stick (called a water witch) would mysteriously pull toward the ground. Water switchers claimed a high skill and were paid well. They didn't always locate water, but when they did people were grateful.

Materials
Forked stick, about 2 feet long (dowsers claim hazel or willow wood are best)
or
Wire coat hanger

Bend a coat hanger into a "Y," or find a forked stick.
Unwrap the twisted ends of the coat hanger and bend it into a “Y” shape. Hold the 2 ends of the forked stick or the wire, and hold the other end out in front of you. Walk slowly, holding the wire steady. Watch the end and you should see it begin to bend or quiver if you are standing over underground water. Try it, and see if you think it works. Some dowsers even claimed to be able to locate buried treasure!

Hold the stick steady and watch it. Dowsers say it will dip down toward underground water.