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Meteorite hunter: Find near Aquilla nets \$10,000



Tuesday, March 17, 2009

By Ken Sury

Tribune-Herald staff writer

Mike Farmer has spent about a month now in West, searching for pieces of the meteor that blazed a fiery trail in the Central Texas skies and broke apart over southern Hill County and northern McLennan County last month, depositing meteorite rocks across a swath of countryside.

Farmer calls the meteorites "money from the sky," noting that they are prized by collectors, universities and museums. And he should know. Farmer has made a living chasing meteorites. What he hasn't been able to find, sometimes he'll buy from somebody who did find one and is willing to sell.

Farmer now possesses the second-biggest rock that he is aware of from the West meteorite. It's a 4-pound piece of chondrite, and while it is the most common form of meteorite that falls to Earth, Farmer paid a man more than \$10,000 for that hunk of space rock.



Meteorite hunter Mike Farmer, who came to Central Texas a month ago after the fireball broke up north of West, holds the 4-pound meteorite for which he paid more than \$10,000. (Duane A. Lavery photo)

The Tucson, Ariz., resident won't disclose the actual sale price, but the man he bought the meteorite from was equally secretive, meeting Farmer at a gas station where the meteorite hunter peeled off \$100 bill after \$100 bill to meet the man's asking price.

"He can probably buy a new subcompact car," Farmer said.

The man would tell Farmer only that he found the meteorite in the Aquilla area on the day of the fall, Feb. 15. Those are the types of meteorites collectors love, Farmer explained, because they are in pristine condition and haven't been subjected to any weathering by the elements.

Though the iron content is low in such a stone meteorite, rainfall will cause oxidation, or rust, to form on the exterior, he said.

Farmer said he has seen — and would love to buy — a slightly larger meteorite from the West fall. But that individual is holding out for more money than Farmer is willing to pay, he said.

"That's fine, but what he has to remember is that this is supply and

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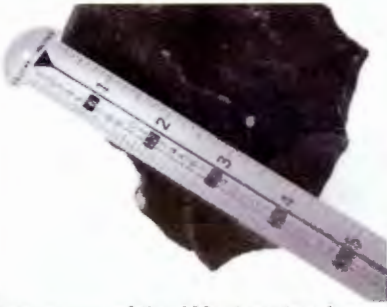
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This piece of the West meteorite that Mike Farmer bought from an area man is 4 inches wide and weighs 4 pounds. It shows the typical look of a chondrite, or stony meteorite. (Duane A. Laverty photo)

demand," Farmer said. "While it may be worth more than \$10,000 now, if someone finds bigger pieces later . . . and there will be more pieces found, the market could collapse, and he's left holding the bag."

Prices for meteorites

That larger meteorite is only about 200 grams heavier than the rock Farmer bought, but for meteorite buyers willing to pay \$5 to \$10 per gram, that's an extra \$1,000 to \$2,000. Some West residents received e-mails from across the country offering to pay that price, or higher, if they found a meteorite and were willing to sell.

One e-mail came from a man who identified himself as a clergyman from the Midwest who didn't want to take the time come down and hunt himself but was willing to pay a hefty sum for a meteorite.

Farmer is far from the only meteorite hunter who descended on the West area, though the numbers have dwindled since the days right after the fall.

Farmer estimates there are still five or six fellow meteorite hunters whom he knows in the area. He estimates that they have collected between 200 and 250 of the chondrite meteorites, ranging from pea size to the one he purchased.

Using Doppler radar images for the first time, Farmer said they did a pretty precise job of pinpointing the strewn field, the area in which the meteorites fell. As the meteor broke apart, the Doppler radar picked up the falling pieces, much like it would measure precipitation, Farmer explained.

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The smallest pieces are generally around Penelope and Birome in southern Hill County, while larger rocks, which travel farther because of their mass, can be found generally on a path westward toward Aquilla.

Most of the meteorites have been found east of Interstate 35; Farmer has collected two rocks west of I-35, not counting the one he bought.

Farmer said he understands farmers and ranchers being reluctant to allow strangers on their land to hunt for meteorites, especially at this critical planting season, but he doesn't quite get why they won't search the land themselves, particularly because of the possible payoff.

"I had one farmer telling me how tough it is; that he spent \$5,000 this year on fertilizer," Farmer said. "I try to point out that if you find a meteorite like this, you've got two years of fertilizer paid for."

Enterprising landowners

Some landowners have been enterprising, Farmer said. He knows of at least one West-area resident who was charging meteorite hunters to scour his land, he said, and then they paid him for the stones they found. But for those hunters, it was worth it, Farmer said.

"In all reality, I believe the farmers will find (most of the meteorites)," Farmer said, adding that depending on the area, one could find 10 to 20 small rocks per acre, while for larger pieces, it might be one meteorite for every 50 acres.

Farmer estimates tens of thousands of meteorite pieces have settled on the Central Texas countryside from last month's event.



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Pieces from the West meteorite already have been shipped to Europe to private collectors and museums, Farmer said. He knows another rock is in Japan.

[Meteorite hunter: Find near Aquilla nets \\$10,000](#)
Dots show generally where meteorite pieces have been found, according to meteorite hunter Mike Farmer. The largest concentration of smaller pieces has been around Penelope and Birome. (Scott Fagner graphic)

Farmer is about to wrap up his time in the West area, having eaten more kolaches than he can recall, but also losing three belt sizes from all the walking he did while searching.

He's thinking about heading to Denmark, because a meteorite that fell there recently is particularly fragile and, therefore, worth more money.

But just because the commercial meteorite hunters soon will leave the area doesn't mean those space rocks are all gone.

"They'll be finding pieces for years," he said.

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By maudyfish

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Pretty soon our museums will be full of this stuff just like Lotro and the bags full of stuff to horde. As long as this solar system exists there will be debris falling to Earth. Just hope they are always tiny!!

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