

City Astronomer Meteor Authority

BY BLAIR JUSTICE

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The name of Oscar Monnig, amateur astronomer, has appeared for years in Fort Worth newspapers.

Whenever a fireball or bright meteor flashes across the night sky—as one did two Saturdays ago—or there is some other notable celestial sight, Monnig is the man who gets consulted and questioned.

Few of the people who query Monnig—including the reporters who get him out of bed at all hours—realize that they are talking to the man who has the largest collection of meteorites in the United States.

FEWER STILL appreciate what this means.

It means that the Fort Worth department store executive has more evidence of objects from outer space than any other individual in the country.

It means that government scientists are very much interested in Monnig as they are in the objects he hunts.

Monnig may be an amateur astronomer but he is a "meteoriticist" of the first order.

And with the rapid dawning of the space age, scientists are taking a renewed, and acute, interest in meteorites.

On May 30 there was a meteorite fall at Harleton, near Marshall.

Scientists from the U. S. National Museum in Washington were on it like greyhounds after a rabbit.

There was only one man ahead of them—Monnig. He identified an 18½-pound meteorite from the fall but deferred to the national museum on purchase of it from the man who found it.

The government was willing to pay a big price for the object since it was the only known meteorite fall that had occurred this year in the entire country.

WHAT DO meteorites tell scientists that is so interesting?

Only the researchers doing the work know the details, but for one thing, meteorites provide clues on what happens to objects entering the earth's atmosphere from outer space.

Hints are given as to the action of the air on the object, the friction encountered and other bits of data that could be very

useful to a nation that intends to send and return space ships to and from worlds beyond.

Monnig, as a layman, has sustained a 27-year interest in meteorites, for three simple reasons:

"They satisfy an inquisitive instinct, they are the only material to be had from outside this earth, and they are one way for a man to achieve some degree of recognition."

Monnig had the second-ranking collection of meteorites in this country until fairly recently when his chief competitor, Dr. H. H. Nininger of Arizona, finally sold his collection to separate buyers.

THE SIZE of Monnig's collection is something he himself can't accurately estimate "unless you give me about two

months off to take an inventory."

A portion of it is on exhibit down the main hallway of the Children's Museum.

In one part of the display, he attempts to point out how meteorites can be distinguished from rocks and objects of earthly origin: They are solid, irregular, heavy for their size, black or brown, all or partly metallic iron and they are "different from country rocks."

Monnig is well aware there are notable exceptions to these pointers. For instance, the biggest thrill he's had as a meteoriticist was in acquiring a meteorite that was all white. Some other meteorites, he notes, are neither stony nor iron—they are like glass and they are called tektites.

"I have some locked in the

vault at Monnig's," the dry goods merchant said.

IN ANOTHER portion of the exhibit at the Children's Museum, an attempt is made to explain the origin of meteorites. One leading theory holds that at least two planets collided eons ago and bits of these planets went into orbit around the sun.

Whenever the earth's orbit intersects the orbit of the remnants from other planets, our atmosphere catches the remains and we call them meteors. Most burn up from air friction before they reach the earth. If they do land, they are called meteorites.

Monnig's current meteorite search centers on the fireball that streaked over North Texas Sept. 10.

He thought he had the fall pinpointed at a few miles north-east of Sherman but door-to-door inquiries last week-end still left the question unanswered as to where the object struck earth.

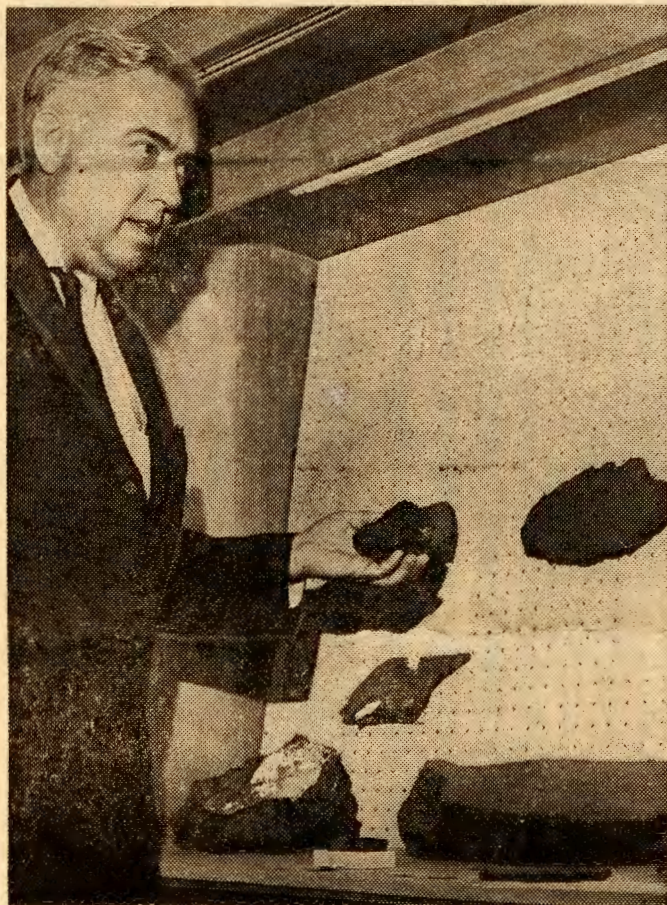
MONNIG AND his two long-time companions on meteorite hunts, Robert Brown and H. H. Morse, are used to such frustration. They've spent up to a year—on week-ends and vacations—trying to pick up products of a fall only to come up empty handed.

But persistence and "going door to door like vacuum cleaner salesman" usually pay off, Monnig has found. Sometimes, however, a person who has already found a meteorite doesn't want to give it up even when Monnig offers to pay.

"I've been trying to get one from a man in West Texas for years. He keeps it under his bed but he won't sell it." Another recalcitrant meteorite owner is a woman in San Antonio who keeps hers in a closet.

MONNIG HAS scouted just about all of Texas and many parts of the United States in his meteorite hunting. He has driven over meteorites, walked within 10 feet of them—but always someone else has been the lucky person actually to find the celestial object. Monnig has had to settle for talking people out of them, buying and trading for them.

In other words, the largest meteorite collector in the country has yet to find one himself. "I still have hopes," he said.



—Star-Telegram Photo

OSCAR MONNIG . . . leading meteoriticist