

Museum 'posse' rounds up state's meteorites

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Seventy-five years later, the boom and smoke of a sizzling fireball are as clear to the witnesses as on the hot July day when it slammed into the ground next to a dirt road.

"It was along in the afternoon," recalled Charlotte Beeten, who was 13 when the infamous meteorite put the northern Colorado farming town of Johnstown on the map.

Beeten was in her front yard, helping put her visiting sister's suitcases in the car. "We heard this horrible roar and we looked up."

With a thick tail of smoke, the most-dazzling meteor in Colorado's history cracked the hot air with a sonic boom — a sound no one had heard before — and then buried itself across from Beeten's house.

As Jack Murphy collects information on meteorites, he also collects tidbits about the history and people of Colorado. Murphy, curator of geology at the Denver Museum of Natural History, delights in the information for its own sake as much as he appreciates how it helps with hunting meteorites.

"I really hope to find a scrapbook of family photos with the meteorite," Murphy said. The information helps him locate and

study meteorites — chunks of asteroid left over from when the solar system was formed 4.5 billion years ago.

Murphy has been putting together a catalog of Colorado meteorites and hopes to publish soon. The museum's collection of iron, stony-iron and achondrite meteorites is used by scientists and some specimens are part of an exhibit that has traveled the state.

In approaching people on whose land meteorites might have fallen, Murphy has found it helps to show them the samples and educate them about the chunky bits of space debris.

A trained group of museum volunteers

— called the "meteorite posse" — does a lot of the legwork. They talk with witnesses as they try to plot on maps where the meteorites might have landed. Farmers and ranchers also are consulted.

Murphy said the farmers then think to call the museum if they turn something up as they plow their fields.

"We make it clear that we don't want to trespass and if a meteorite fell on their land, it's theirs to keep," Murphy said. "But it helps science if we can study and test it. If they (the finders) don't follow scientific procedures, then we can lose track

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of the meteorites."

Usually, the first time the posse sees a meteorite, it's on the hood of a car or in the back of a pickup truck. Those scenarios frequently are played out on the state's Eastern Plains.

Only three meteorites have been found on the Western Slope and there are a few others from the mountains. "It's next to impossible to find meteorites in such rocky areas," Murphy said.

A meteorite chunk found in 1908 by two cowboys near Guffey, a tiny Park County town, is an exception. At 685 pounds, it was a little hard to overlook.

The museum meteorite posse was out talking to people in Weld County when they discovered there are several living witnesses to the Johnstown meteorite, including Beeten and Bob Brown.

As Beeten's father grabbed a shovel and ran toward the landing site, Brown's family saw the smoke trail. Brown, who was 8 at the time, remembers the smoke and

boom. His family piled into a truck and drove 3½ miles.

The town's undertaker, H.A. Clingenpeil, abandoned the funeral for John Moore Sr. in the nearby Elwell Cemetery to race to the scene. He was known to wear a top hat and tails for the somber services.

Brown and Beeten said the men dug down several feet and found the still-smoking, bushel basket-sized meteorite.

"It was very frightening," Beeten said. "I'm sure I was hanging on to my mother's skirt."

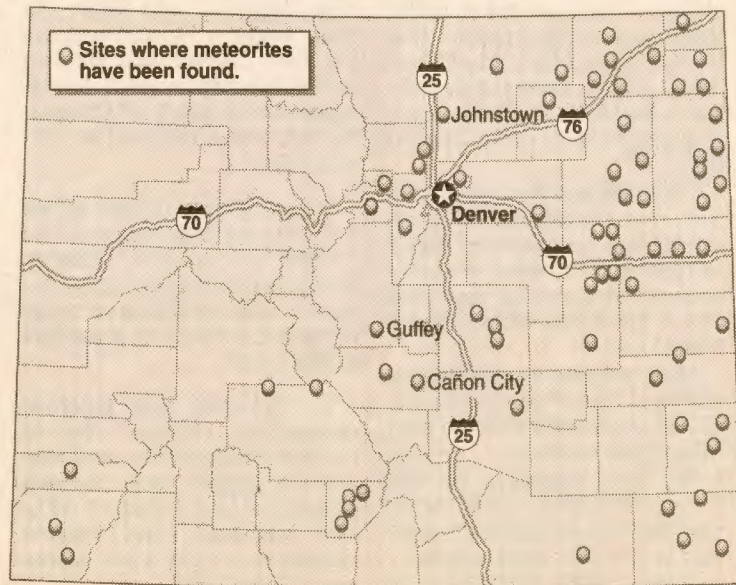
Brown said the undertaker warned as the kids leaned to look in the hole: "Stand back, boys, it might explode."

They dug out the meteorite and Clingenpeil took it into town, possibly in his new motorized hearse, where it was displayed. It ended up in the American Museum in New York City, although the Denver museum has pieces of it on display.

Last week, Beeten and Brown got to touch the meteorite. After all those years, Beeten said, "it's black like I remembered."

Meteorite madness

Meteorites have been found over a wide area of Colorado, although more have turned up on the Eastern Plains. The Denver Museum of Natural History is in the midst of cataloging the finds.



Source: Denver Museum of Natural History

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