

1957, March 26

Mr. Paul R. Engle,
1601 Whitewing Drive,
McAllen Texas.

Dear Mr. Engle:

A farmer at La Villa has found a meteorite, and Paul R. Engle has helped turn up the first recorded meteorite from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas! Let me do some checking before you announce this as an absolute fact, but I now think the closest thing ever found to you is an old stone I have from Uvalde.

From your description verbally, I had some doubts because of your "egg-shaped" characterization, but as soon as I saw the chip I felt encouraged, and when I examined it with a 10x lens I felt 95% sure. I have now ground it on a wheel and find metallic iron particles exposed, so that I am quite certain. This is a chondrite, which 90% of the stone meteorites are--the most common class. The chondrules are little roughly spherical bits of minerals, often composed of olivine or of enstatite, two forms of magnesium silicates. With a hand lens you can see some of these as little bumps on the broken surface--some do not break with the matrix. I can see one larger chondrule which is apparently olivine, since it has a greenish-yellow tinge often shown by that mineral (whence its name). On a ground surface you see little circular or oval cross sections of these chondrules, mostly under 1 mm in diameter. Then there are a very few tiny scattered flakes of metallic iron, looking like specks of silver.

Paul, I would like to try to buy this meteorite if possible and if you have no objections. But this is a delicate task and must be handled with careful maneuvering. Owners become suspicious that the buyer will make a huge profit out of the piece, or they recall some wild story they have heard of a meteorite bringing huge sums. Sometimes they just plain get cantankerous and refuse to part with the object. So I am going to suggest that you say very little about this right now, until we get a chance to exchange a letter or two and decide on a plan of action.

I do not particularly want to take it away from your region, but it is really necessary to own something in order to be able to do what you want. It would be well to get a piece or two cut off for classification, etc., but for a piece this big you need saws such as are available at only a few places. LaPaz has equipment, but frankly I prefer the U. S. National at Washington.

My thought is to try to acquire it, by purchase. If I could, then I would for the time being leave it on exhibit at your college, assuming we could put it there in a case where it wouldn't be hacked on or chips stolen. In due course, after a year or two, I could decide whether it would be worth while sending it anywhere to have it sectioned in part. In the meantime, it would serve as excellent bait to stir up interest and might result in the possible finding of other meteorites. I could even furnish a few more to exhibit with it, showing other types--about 3 or 4 is enough for the average person, who otherwise becomes hopelessly confused.

Now, an individual is at a decided disadvantage in such matters, simply because people always suspect you of doing everything for your own profit and advantage. They cannot conceive you are interested only scientifically, unless you are connected with some kind of an institution. That is one reason I use the name "Texas Observers", and there is actually a non-profit corporation of that name under Texas laws, chartered in 1936, but we never did really activate it.

So, it would help if you would vouch for me locally and give me good standing as a truly interested amateur without profit motive. The newspapers are friendlier that way, and we need their publicity a little later in announcing the find, running pictures of it and the finder, etc. But please don't jump the gun on me, as none of this should be done until the meteorite is bought, if possible. Otherwise, you'll have Mininger, LaPaz, U. S. National and a horde of rock collectors writing the woman for the meteorite--I believe you said it was a she--and your troubles will have just begun.

Before the war the standard price for old stones was a dollar pound, as set by Mininger. Depending on the circumstances and attitude of this finder, it would probably be necessary to offer anywhere from \$50 to \$100 to buy the piece, but I prefer to begin a little low to leave room for trading up. Legally it belongs to the owner of the land on which it is found, and it would be well to learn whether this is a tenant farmer or an owner of the land where it was plowed up. Sometimes you can get by with buying from the finder even if he is only a tenant, but sometimes you have to pay twice or even have a scrap with the landlord.

So give me all the facts that you think will bear on the acquisition of this piece, keep quiet in the meantime, and maybe I can then come down there for a visit and we can close a deal. I prefer a purchase to a donation, because if they offer to give it, they would probably want to give it to the school or fix it in some way so we couldn't do what we wanted with it. I like to have my hands free.

Sincerely,