

Meteorite Fell Here in 1879

Those who saw the Estherville meteorite fall, and heard it explode that late Saturday afternoon of May 10, 1879, never forgot it. Thousands of words have been used in writing and telling of the experience.

Because of it, the town of Estherville has become known to scientists around the world.

According to the story told by eye witnesses, a heated argument over a baseball game in the north end of the public square was ended abruptly by a terrific crash from the sky. Out of a clear sky came an explosion that shook the earth, followed by a deafening, rumbling roar and punctuated by a second detonation of less violence than the first.

Those attending the ball game looked toward the west, whence came the awful roar. They beheld, against an almost cloudless sky, a long trail of whitish smoke "like that coming from a locomotive when under high speed," apparently passing from southwest to northeast, obliquely with the line of the horizon and no very great distance above the surface of the earth.

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There were other witnesses. S. W. Brown, a few miles north of Estherville, saw the explosion. It appeared to him that the meteor was passing from west to east, and that when it burst, there was a cloud at the head of the red streak which darted out of it like smoke from a cannon's mouth, and then expanded in every direction.

Mrs. George Allen and her brother were driving across the prairie near Superior in an open rig. They were almost directly beneath the exploding mass, and reported seeing it separate into three distinctly visible portions, each fragment following an independent course from southwest toward northeast.

The paths of the three pieces were marked by spectacular, pearly ribbons of smoke that seemed to radiate from the point of explosion and hang glistening in the bright sunlight, tracing the outline of a gigantic crow's foot in the sky.

The explosion was plainly visible for more than 100 miles distant. It was described as "brilliantly white as the light of the sun, and dazzling in its appearance, and seemed to be sputtering like iron heated white hot in a forge."

The detonation and accompanying roar were frightening to those in the Estherville area.

The explosion caused the earth to tremble, jarring doors and windows, rattling furniture, and in some instances shaking the dishes in cupboards. Window lights were broken in at least two houses. The concussion was heard for a distance of more than 50 miles, and the subsequent roar, as of a powerful tornado, was of indescribable proportions, deafening and shrill, producing a sensation of terror never to be forgotten by those who heard it.

The prairie between Estherville and Superior was peppered with a shower of stones. A herdsboy "frightened almost out of his wits," reported that it was "raining stones" on the prairie and his cattle had stampeded in every direction.

Several witnesses saw the largest piece hit the earth. They saw dirt thrown high into the air, and hurried to the spot where it had fallen, on the Sever H. Lee farm two and a half miles north of Estherville.

Mrs. Lee saw the dirt fly in a slough within a few hundred yards of her house.

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Several boys in the neighborhood rushed to the slough, and found a great hole in the ground.

The hole was funnel-shaped, somewhat irregular, 10 or 12 feet in diameter at the top, with the apex of the cone pointing toward the northeast, evidently away from the direction in which the meteorite had come. The bottom of the hole was filled with mud and water.

Surrounding the hole on every side, particularly toward the northeast, lay great chunks of earth and mud.

Small fragments of metallic, ore-like stones, foreign to the soil of this region, were seen on the ground, radiating out from the edge of the hole in streamers as far as a hundred yards.

Several young men, Sam, Bob, and Jim Weir, George and Charley Barber, Elmer Crumb, Elmer Barrett, and Chester Rewey began at once the project of retrieving the stone from the hole.

After digging all day Sunday with little success, they obtained the use of a well-digging outfit, a block and tackle and a windlass.

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A fragment, nine by 12 inches in size and weighing 32 pounds,

had been removed by Monday night. The following day what was supposed to be the main body of the meteor was recovered. It weighed 431 pounds and measured 27 inches in length, 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches in width, and 15 inches in thickness. It was found 14 feet in the ground. The surface was "fearfully rough" with jagged projections of metal.

A new fashion fad was born in Estherville, with the recovery of the pieces of the meteorite. Rings, stickpins, and ornaments of many kinds were hammered out by a local blacksmith and worn as keepsakes.

The big black stone was taken into town and exhibited on a dry-goods box in front of the Emmet House. It attracted such wide interest that some of the local boys decided to exhibit it for money.

They put it in a strong box, loaded it in a wagon and started out across Minnesota, displaying this placard:

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"I am the Heavenly Meteor
I arrived May 10th
at 5 o'clock
My weight is 431 lbs.
From whence I came
nobody knows
But I am en route for
Chicago!"

Being warned that there might be a question of the legality of their ownership, the boys returned to George Osborn's place, where they wrapped their prize in an old quilt and buried it in a cornfield, marking the spot with stakes. There it remained all summer.

Another large piece of the meteorite was found May 14 on the Ainos A. Pingrey farm two miles north of Estherville. It weighed 151 pounds and was about four feet beneath the surface of the ground.

It was not until Feb. 23, 1880, that the third large piece was found. The Pietz brothers were trapping in the sloughs, about midway between the spots where the two other pieces had been found when they observed a hole in the edge of the slough. They poked it with their rat

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spear, and detected a hard surface in the bottom of the hole.

Guessing what it might be, they dug down about five feet and found a piece reported to have weighed 101 pounds. Other, smaller pieces were found nearby.

The brothers disposed of the largest piece to Dr. E. H. Ballard and George Allen who later sold it to Charles P. Birge of Keokuk.

To his later regret, Amos Pingrey gave the second largest stone to a neighbor, John Horner, who concealed it in a cave on Ab. Ridley's farm. Later, when the value of the stones became apparent, Pingrey brought an unsuccessful suit to regain ownership from Horner.

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Dr. E. J. Thompson, professor at the University of Minnesota, was sent by Minnesota Gov. John S. Pillsbury with a blank check to obtain as much of the meteorite as possible for the University's museum. He bought the Horner stone.

Charles Birge of Keokuk managed to obtain the piece that was in the possession of Rewey and the other boys, and later purchased the large piece from Dr. Ballard and Allen, as well as more than 100 pounds of pieces that had been gathered from the prairie.

Eventually he sold the largest piece to the British Museum of

Natural History in London "at a splendid profit to himself."

The British Museum sawed it into three sections, keeping the larger portion, and exchanging the other with the Musee National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris and to Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Most of the important museums in the United States, including the Field Museum in Chicago and the United States National Museum in Washington, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Peabody museums at Harvard and Yale, and the meteorite collection at Amherst, are liberally supplied with small

fragments of Estherville's famous meteor.

Nearly a thousand pounds were gathered and distributed throughout the world yet there remains nowhere in Iowa a single collection that is worthy of the name.

A piece is on display at the Estherville public library, but of the hundreds of small fragments ranging in size from bullets to hen's eggs that were picked up in the meteoric field between Superior and Estherville, and of the ornaments once so popular, only a few remain.

A marker was placed in 1929 by the Daughters of the American Revolution on the approximate site of the fall on the Lee farm, two and a half miles north of Estherville.

Material for this narrative was taken from articles written by Ben Hur Wilson, for The Palimpsest and reprinted in the Estherville Daily News in June, 1958.