

The Estherville Meteorite



Late on a Saturday afternoon, May 10, 1879 many persons in and around Estherville were startled by a terrific explosion in the sky.

The earth trembled, china shifted on cupboard shelves, doors and windows jarred, and window panes were broken. The explosion was followed by thunderous sounds, and the appearance of what seemed a ball of fire, traveling from southwest to the northeast. Three persons north of town, more than half a mile apart, saw dirt flying into the air. A METEOR HAD FALLEN!

The largest Meteorite known to have fallen in North America fell three miles north of Estherville on the Lee farm. It burst as it neared the earth and was seen to separate into three large pieces weighing 431, 151, and 106 pounds. It was composed of Iron, Nickel, Phosphorus, Sulphur, and a previously unknown metal, now dubbed Esthervillite.

Reports of its light came from wide radius. A civil engineer surveying a railroad near Jackson, Minnesota, 15 miles northwest saw the heavenly body emerge, "brilliantly white", from a storm cloud in the west. Estimating its height at 40 miles and its speed at three miles per second, he said it seemed to draw portions of the cloud after it.

Two people crossing the prairie in the open rig near Superior, Iowa 6 miles west of Estherville, found themselves directly under the mass when it exploded. They reported that the three large pieces took separate direction, traveling ribbons of vapor, which formed crow's foot in the sky. A herdboye near Superior reported that falling stones had caused his cattle to stampede, and other boys at Four Mile Lake said the placid waters had been peppered with small pebbles.

The largest piece of the meteor fell in a six-foot hole on the Sever Lee farm two miles north of Estherville. On May 11, eight young men of the neighborhood vainly attempted to raise it from the mud and water, where it lay buried 14 feet below the surface. Lee's seeming indifference to the meteorite induced the boys to call a well digger, George Osborn, to raise it. Weighing 437 pounds and measuring 27 x 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 inches, "its fearful rough" black surface was broken with a metallic glitter.



The lively interest manifest at Estherville led the farm boys to realize the commercial value of the meteorite. Loading it into a wagon, they set out across Minnesota, displaying a large sign that read: "I am the Heavenly Meteor. I arrived May 10th at 5 o'clock. My weight is 437 pounds. from whence I came nobody knows, but I am enroute for Chicago!"

Hearing that their ownership was being questioned, the boys returned to Estherville, wrapped their treasure in quilts and buried it in Osborn's cornfield. Later, feeling secure in their ownership, they moved it to the home of one of the group, Chester Rewey.

Charles N Birge, an attorney from Keokuk, through Lee's temporary default in payment on his farm purchased from the railroad company, made claim to the land. On the strength of this, he obtained a writ of attachment on the meteorite, which permitted him to take it away from Rewey's farm. Later he sold it to the British Museum for a reputedly large sum. In the following October, the Lee's were deeded their farm by Birge.

The second meteorite was found on the A.A. Pingrey farm, following its descent. Weighing 151 pounds, it was buried four and one half feet on a dry knoll two miles west of the first find. Pingrey, unaware of its value, gave the stone to the neighbor, John Homer, an act later regretted. Horner hid his treasure in a cave on the land of Abe Ridley, where by the glimmer of a lantern, the transaction took place by which the University of Minnesota became owner of the other piece.

The Pietz Brothers trapping in February 1890 found the third large portion, 92 ½ pounds. It had dropped into a dry slough four miles southwest of the first find, and had penetrated five feet. Birge ultimately purchased this piece.

That spring, following the prairie fire, "gathering meteors" became a diversion of picnic parties and Sunday expeditions participated in by hundreds of people. Some 5,000 of the sparkling bits were found, ranging from trifles the size of a pea to lumps weighing a pound. Many finger rings were made from larger pieces; today some are unpurchaseable keepsakes of local citizens.

With a total weight of 744 pounds, the Estherville Meteor is the largest and from a scientific standpoint, the most important. The center slice of the meteorite, weighing eight and a half pounds, came from the 151 lb piece now at the University of Minnesota Museum and is currently displayed at the Estherville Public Library.

In 1980 the Estherville Area Arts Council held Estherville Sculpture Competition with the theme of the Estherville Meteorite. The winner of the competition was Tom Gibbs, a Dubuque sculptor. The sculpture was titled "Estherville Meteorite" and the Estherville Area Arts Council purchased the original model. The sculpture was placed in Library Square.

