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**How a local boy found his destiny in the stars**

**Meteoric tale forged friendship, cemented interest in astronomy for future scientist**

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By **CAROL SMITH**  
P-I REPORTER

KIRKLAND -- In one of those chance collisions rampant in a random universe, a bit of space debris crashed into Jeffrey McClintock's life half a century ago and propelled him in a direction he might never have imagined.

McClintock, then 13 years old, picked up his morning paper that January day and got so excited his brain felt like a bottle rocket with a lit fuse.

A meteorite had streaked from outer space straight into the backyard observatory of a Kirkland man, nearly setting his house ablaze before embedding itself in an old astronomy text. It was 1955, two years pre-Sputnik, and space fantasies consumed many a burgeoning telescope geek, including the skinny McClintock, a Popular Mechanics devotee and would-be stargazer.

McClintock, who is now senior astrophysicist at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Mass., and an expert on black holes, was so impressed he had to see Luther Hawthorne's meteorite hit for himself.

His quest was such a pivot point for McClintock that the scientist recently embarked on a voyage back in space-time -- real, not astronomical -- in search of those early scientific roots.

"I seek your help," he wrote the Seattle P-I. "While in junior high school, I read on your pages what remains the most astonishing newspaper story that I have encountered in my 64 years."

But as sometimes happens when looking back through the ages with a more powerful lens, the universe isn't what it seemed.

**Adventure in Kirkland**

Back in 1955, McClintock, who lived with his parents, two brothers and a sister in Port Orchard, dredged up Hawthorne's phone number and wrangled an invitation to visit him in Kirkland, then a "sleepy, rural place."

He caught the little ferry to Bremerton, then the big ferry to Seattle, then a Greyhound bus to Kirkland, which is where his adventure truly began.

"There, old Mr. Hawthorne picked me up and drove me the rest of the way in his DeSoto, which had a distinctive meteorological seal prominently displayed on its doors. He was all over the road, and I saw the locals pull off into driveways and fields to avoid a possible collision," McClintock recalled. "His eyesight was dim, and his hook hand at first disturbed me."



The Seattle P-I's Jan. 18, 1955, edition reported Luther Hawthorne's story about two meteorites that crashed through his backyard observatory.



Justin Ide / Harvard University News Office

Hawthorne, 72 at the time, was an amateur astronomer, certified weather spotter, former machinist and ex-Scout master who lived alone. A diabetic, he was in failing health, which likely accounted for the missing hand. In McClintock, though, he'd found a fan.

Jeffery McClintock's interest in astronomy ultimately led him to become senior astrophysicist at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Mass. (Justin Ide / Harvard University News Office)



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Luther L. Hawthorne in his backyard observatory.

At his home, Hawthorne showed the dumbstruck kid the punctured dome with bits of meteorite driven into the metal.

Standing there under the jerry-rigged metal lid of the homemade, mini-Mount Palomar, McClintock was captivated -- but by something else entirely.

"I remember staring at his refracting telescope," said McClintock, who had lusted for just such a device poring over magazines at home.

McClintock already had tried two home-built versions, himself, the first an 8-foot linoleum tube tricked out with a \$1 pair of lenses he'd seen advertised in Popular Mechanics.

But telescope lust is no small force of nature, and no sooner was that one built than he wanted a bigger one, more powerful than the last.

The second was a 6-inch Newtonian reflector fitted with a mirror he'd made himself.

"My first discovery was that everything looked upside down," he said.

He would poke the lens out his attic window and marvel at the way he could read the letters on a blue car lot sign across the bay. But mostly, he would stare at the moon.

It would be the end of the decade before the U.S. named its first astronauts; the end of the next before it put a man on the moon. To the teenage McClintock, though, just the sight of the moon up close filled him with awe. He would aim his viewfinder to catch the sun sweeping off its peaks, which looked as near to him as the Olympics. His hobby made him feel "a bit of an oddball." No one in his immediate family or at his school shared his enthusiasm for the night sky.

Despite the lack of encouragement, he pressed on.

At the time he met Hawthorne, he had just begun work on a 4-inch refracting telescope using a commercial lens, but he was stymied about how to build a mount.

He knew the mount for the scope was as critical as its optics if it were to be useful. Hawthorne, who must have sensed a kindred spirit in the teen, offered to help McClintock build such a stand. Over the next nine months, McClintock would trek to Hawthorne's house and hang out in his tool-stocked shop. "I had never seen metal cut by anything except a hacksaw or a torch, and to see his lathe peel off metal like it was a potato skin was astonishing," said McClintock.

They made the mount out of pipe fittings and bronze rods, and in the process, forged a friendship. Hawthorne showed him his binocular microscope and other technical gear. He spoke about the world and the planets, which his grandfather had first pointed out to him through a rudimentary telescope when the young Hawthorne was about 10 years old.

About Mount Copernicus on the moon, he once said, "You could drop a pair of Mount Rainiers into the crater -- think of that!"

Hawthorne also quoted the Bible liberally and held strong views on space travel. Man could never travel in space, he told McClintock, because he would not be able to go to the bathroom while weightless.

"He was wrong on that point, but about so many other things he was right on," McClintock wrote in his letter. "I was young, and of course when he was gone I imagined that I would meet more Mr. Hawthornes in my life, but I never have."

## Questionable story

This is where the mystery deepens.

Who was Mr. Hawthorne, really?

Early newspaper stories support McClintock's recollections.

As reported in the P-I on Jan. 18, 1955: "A loud blast, like dynamite exploding, shook the house, about 40 feet from the observatory, at 11 a.m. Hawthorne told the paper. The blast cracked a kitchen window, he added."

Did such a blast occur?

Hawthorne, in fact, had been trying to draw attention to his homemade observatory for some time. In a story three years earlier in the East Side Journal, Hawthorne referred to himself as the general manager of the Alice Hawthorne Memorial Observatory on Rose Hill, and the paper noted he'd been trying for years to get people to come look through his telescope.

On that occasion, Hawthorne offered up an explanation for a mysterious explosion that occurred in late December 1952. Hawthorne claimed he and two friends saw a light race across the sky "like a searchlight beam" and a second later felt a blast that shook "most of Seattle and surrounding areas."

The blast was likely a meteor that had exploded after racing across the sky, he told the paper. (The story ran on New Year's Day, though fireworks were never mentioned.)

There had been other missives to the press.

He would send the paper notices of meetings of the Kirkland Chapter of the Amateur Telescope Makers of America and highlight upcoming astronomical events, "like double crescents when (the) moon and Venus eclipse one another, sun spots and things of that nature," the paper said.

"Hawthorne's communiqués are brief and full of degree signs, equations and occasionally a biblical quotation, but the editors have had trouble deciphering," the newspaper noted.

The story pointed out that most of the visitors to Hawthorne's observatory were children, "and there's little doubt that they know more about what goes on in outer reaches of space than their parents."

"In fact," the paper pointed out, "A lot of them got space suits for Christmas."

Hawthorne wouldn't be the first or last to be scorned by those who didn't share his vision of the heavens. Perhaps it drove him to more creative extremes.

On Jan. 18, 1955, Hawthorne reported that after the meteorite strike, his house filled with smoke and a "peculiar, metal-like gas." One of the fragments smashed the clock on his observatory wall, he told the reporter, then it landed in one of his many volumes on astronomy, setting them on fire. Hawthorne called the Fire Department but put the fire out himself before the chief of Kirkland's volunteer department arrived.

The chief did note that the two fragments, the larger one about the size of a medium-sized oyster, were still warm when he arrived. Hawthorne allowed the meteor fragments to be examined by photographers and later experts at the University of Washington.

And that's where the story would have ended.

Except, it wasn't true.

Decades later, when scientists were preparing an exhibit of known Washington meteorites, they learned that the Kirkland pair actually came not from outer space, but from Arizona.

"The two pieces he provided were fragments of a meteorite called Canon Diablo, named for a river valley near Meteor Crater, Ariz.," said Tony Irving, lecturer in Earth and space sciences at the University of Washington, who specializes in meteorite forensics.

Meteorites, especially iron ones such as those Hawthorne claimed to have found, have distinctive metallurgical fingerprints. And his didn't match.

News travels fast in meteorite circles, and the Kirkland pair was denounced as a fraud. Now meteorites-non-grata, the ignominious rocks were never displayed at the University of Washington's Burke Museum. Their whereabouts today are unknown.

No one knows either what Hawthorne's motive might have been -- a lonely man looking for attention? A dreamer who fell under the spell of one of his own delusions? A profiteer hoping to strike gold by selling his space rocks?

His motives have long since disappeared over the event horizon of his life.

Hawthorne died at age 80 in 1964. Three months later, the Fire Department razed his dilapidated property, including the remnants of the observatory at the request of the new owner. The Fire Department used it as a drill to teach new recruits how to control a blaze, so Hawthorne was still teaching, which no doubt would have pleased him.

According to Hawthorne's obituary, which appeared in the East Side Journal, he was a tool and die maker for the Ford Motor Co. before moving to Kirkland in 1944. He died in the Veterans Administration hospital in Seattle, leaving four adult children scattered around the country. Census records indicate he was born in Illinois. His two claims to fame were the meteorite find and having his Rose Hill home designated an official weather-recording station. He also was reportedly adopted by a Sioux Indian tribe in South Dakota when he was 12 years old and had a vast understanding of ancient Sioux customs.

Or so he had said.

As for McClintock, his trajectory is better known. He got his doctorate in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1969 and built a career detecting the mass and spin of black holes, key measures for testing Einstein's theory of relativity.

He joined the Smithsonian Institution, part of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, in 1985. Ten years ago, he and his colleagues supplied some of the first evidence that black holes, until then only theoretical constructs, really existed.

Periodically, he would marvel at the size and complexity of the telescopes in use today, from huge ground-based radio arrays to the orbiting Hubble Space telescope, and think back to Hawthorne's humble version.

"I'm so excited about some of the work we've been doing in the last few years, it awoke my curiosity about that early encounter," he said.

Today, he still uses a gift from Hawthorne as the nameplate on his office door -- his own name written with calligraphic flourish by Hawthorne long ago.

"He has always been an inspiration to me," he said. Not long ago, he bought a piece of a meteorite to give to his own grandson, passing along some of Hawthorne's passion.

Informed recently that the meteorite hit that started it all was faked, McClintock remained unfazed.

"I was 100 percent bamboozled," he said by e-mail. "But I don't mind one bit."

One fact about the great Kirkland meteorite hit remains certain. There was a collision that day back in 1955, of two active imaginations -- an old man's and a young teen's.

And it sent one of them into orbit.

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