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## Experts calling meteorite hoax: Pocahontas rock's authenticity at issue

by george jared

POCAHONTAS — Is the "meteorite" in front of the Randolph County Courthouse a celestial body or just a piece of granite?

According to local legend it fell from the night sky in July 1859 and was retrieved by two locals. For generations, people in Randolph County have believed in the rock's otherworldly origin, but experts think it's likely it was formed in the bowels of the earth.

"I don't think it's a meteorite," renowned lunar meteorite specialist Dr. Randy L. Korotev said. "It looks like a piece of granite to me."

Meteorite criteria

The alleged meteorite doesn't have at least one smooth aerodynamic side and doesn't show any signs of fusion crust, which would be one of the criteria used to prove a meteorite's authenticity, Korotev, of Washington University in St. Louis, said. Fusion crust is formed when the outer edges of the meteor are superheated as it moves through Earth's outer atmosphere and then cools before landing.

Ironically most meteors, especially bigger ones, remain cold even as their outer crusts burn, Korotev said. Some larger meteorites have frost on their outer edges moments after impact, he said.

Dr. Stephen McMann, a biology teacher at Williams Baptist College and avid meteorite collector, told members of the Spring River Gem and Mineral Club Thursday the rock is a hoax.

All meteorites contain metal which rusts and degrades relatively rapidly when exposed to oxygen and water in Earth's atmosphere, McMann said.

The "Pocahontas Meteorite," as it is sometimes referred to, is not listed among prominent meteorite finds in Arkansas, said Korotev, who spoke from his St. Louis-based office. If it were authentic, it would be among the largest meteorites ever found in North America, he said.

More details

Meteors are rocks floating through space that sometimes hit our planet and are called meteorites after landing on Earth. Most meteors are the size of a grain of sand but still create a brilliant flash when falling to Earth.

A few meteorites have come from other terrestrial objects such as the moon or Mars, and they are extremely rare, experts say.

Some meteorites, known as chondrites, have been found with trace elements of carbon and amino acids, which are the building blocks of life. Finds with amino acids are extremely rare, McMann said.

The vast majority of meteorites are found in deserts such as the Sahara Desert or in Antarctica, McMann said. Environmental conditions protect the rocks from rusting and their unique black-glass appearance stands out against the natural

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background, he said.

A large cache of meteorites has also been collected in the southwestern United States.

Korotev said he has never actually seen the rock in person, but the photographic evidence against it being a meteorite was strong.

Just several feet from the suspected meteorite's resting place, lifetime local John Junkersfelt was pouring concrete steps as part of a renovation project at the courthouse. Throughout his life he was told about the legend of the rock.

Would it disappoint him if the rock weren't a meteorite.

"No, not really," Junkersfelt said. "We need to know the truth and find out about it. People need to know what it really is."

[gjared@jonesborosun.com](mailto:gjared@jonesborosun.com)

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