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‘We were sure somebody fired a rocket at us’: Bruderheim to celebrate meteorite 55 years later

By Marty Klinkenberg, Edmonton Journal March 1, 2015

Professor Chris Herd, University of Alberta Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, holds the first rock found from many pieces of the Bruderheim meteorite crash 55 years ago this week.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser , Edmonton Journal

EDMONONTON - Stew Hennig was startled awake early in the morning March 4, 1960, as a huge fireball barrelled over his family’s farm near Josephburg, a tiny hamlet just east of Edmonton.

“I remember it is as clear as yesterday,” says Hennig, 63, a member of the city council in Fort Saskatchewan. “It was low enough that it shook the house and lit my bedroom up as it passed.

“My father and I ran around looking out the windows trying to figure out what was going on. We were sure somebody had fired a rocket at us.”

It wasn’t the Russians, but a meteor hurtling toward Earth at 150,000 kilometres per hour. It crashed a half-second later about 20 km away, scattering debris in farmers’ fields just north of Bruderheim.

Formed during the birth of the solar system 4.5 billion years ago, nearly 700 fragments of the stony meteorite weighing more than 300 kilograms were recovered, the most significant find of its kind in Canada.

“It is one of the things we can hang our hat on,” says Karl Hauch, the mayor of Bruderheim, which has adopted the meteorite as its symbol and is holding a 55th anniversary celebration Wednesday.

Pieces of the meteorite will be placed on exhibit in the town’s community hall, a presentation will be made by University of Alberta professor Chris Herd, and a space-themed costume contest is planned.

“Anybody and everybody is welcome,” Hauch says. “Martians or whatever.”

Occurring three years after the launch of Sputnik and shortly after the creation of NASA, the crash of the Bruderheim meteorite was cause for great excitement within the scientific community. Composed primarily of the minerals olivine and hypersthene, with some iron and nickel mixed in, specimens from the meteorite are in collections at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Peabody Museum at Yale, and the Department of Earth Sciences at Cambridge University in England.

Herd, the curator of the University of Alberta meteorite collection, he first saw specimens recovered from Bruderheim as a kid in Ottawa, where his father was the keeper of the national collection.

Herd now oversees the world’s largest accumulation of Bruderheim fragments, including a single chunk that weighs more than 70 kg.

Recruited by the University of Alberta while he was doing his PhD at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Herd arrived in Edmonton in the fall of 2003. He visited Bruderheim for the first time on Easter weekend the following winter.

“I had a picture taken next to the sign, but I was dismayed because there was nothing that mentioned the meteorite,” Herd says. “As far as I was concerned, it was one of the most significant events in Canadian history.”

In 2013, Bruderheim officially adopted the meteorite as its claim to fame and this week will celebrate it for the first time.

“I am absolutely overjoyed,” Herd says.

“Most of the time, these things are only seen by guys sitting on tractors and don’t get this type of recognition. It’s a perfect opportunity.

“You could say the planets aligned for us.”

Source: http://www.edmontonjournal.com/were+sure+somebody+fired+rocket+Bruderheim+celebrate+meteorite+years+later/10852964/story.html