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MANITOU'S METEORITE

IRON 'PURE AS POSSIBLE, AND SONOROUS AS AN ANVIL,' RECORDS MISSIONARY

By Mark Lowey
(Herald writer)

Legend told of a fireball from the sky, of a stone that had lain on the land longer than time.

Native people called it Manitou Stone — the stone god. They offered prayers and gifts to the sacred Manitou prior to hunting or war expeditions.

Scientists now call the ancient stone the Iron Creek meteorite. Found in eastern Alberta, it's a 145-kilogram (320 pounds) chunk of pitted and polished iron whose shape reveals the profile of a native face.

The Iron Creek specimen is Canada's second-largest iron meteorite.

But John Howell says that the meteorite is only a piece of the fireball that thundered from the heavens eons ago.

Howell believes the biggest chunk is still out there, waiting to be discovered, not far from where the first meteorite was found. If he's right, this second, missing meteorite would tip the scales as Canada's largest space rock.

Howell, 75, has been on the trail of the mysterious second meteorite since 1970 when he lived in Alberta.

"It's a huge meteorite," says the amateur astronomer, who now lives in British Columbia. "I'm positive that it should be found."

Howell's second-meteorite theory is

misfortunes, and that war, disease and death of buffalo would afflict the tribes ...," Butler said.

The Rev. George McDougall, despite the medicine man's warning, ordered the iron stone removed and taken to the Pakan Mission near Smoky Lake, about 135 kilometres northeast of Edmonton. It was stolen away, likely on a sleigh during the winter.

McDougall, in a letter in 1869, acknowledged that the stone's removal "roused the ire of the conjurors," who worshipped what he called the idol.

"They declared that sickness, war and decrease of buffalo would follow the sacrilege. Thanks to a kind of Providence these soothsayers have been confounded, for last summer thousands of wild cattle grazed upon the sacred plain."

Within a few months, however, all three evils afflicted the native people.

The Cree and the Blackfoot, although historical enemies, fought like never before. A smallpox plague further decimated the tribes. And within two decades, the buffalo that once numbered 40 million would disappear from the Western plains.

By 1886, the Iron Creek meteorite had been moved from the mission in Alberta to Victoria University in Cobourg, Ont. From there, it went to



Photo courtesy Provincial Museum of Alberta

STONE GOD'S FACE: The profile of Manitou, the native Great Spirit and Provider, is visible (right side) in this view of the Iron Creek meteorite. Until the mete-

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Howell's second-meteorite theory is backed by Robert Folinsbee, professor emeritus of geology at University of Alberta. "I'm convinced," Folinsbee says. "The other one was supposedly buried by the Indians and has never been found."

But Bill Peters Sr., 81, insists there's only one meteorite. The Calgary amateur historian has been researching the Iron Creek meteorite's sometimes tragic story since the mid-1960s.

"There's no evidence of anything else. None whatsoever," says Peters, a member of the Historical Society of Alberta.

History records that the Rev. Thomas Woolsey, while visiting with Cree Indians in 1859-60, "visited the locality renowned for having a large piece of iron there."

The iron stone was near a lake and rivulet or small creek named, respectively, Iron Lake and Iron Rivulet, the Wesleyan Society missionary wrote in his diary.

Woolsey estimated the stone's weight at about 200 pounds, the iron "pure as possible, and sonorous as an anvil." And he noted that the stone was on the summit of a mound.

There's still an Iron Creek in Alberta, but Iron Lake has vanished from the map. Iron Creek is the English translation of the Cree, pi-wa-pisk-oo or Ironstone — the name given to the stream before the white man entered the country.

Iron Creek joins the Battle River about 6½ kilometres northeast of Hardisty. The town is near the Alberta-Saskatchewan border, about 400 kilometres northeast of Calgary.

Lieut-Gen. Sir William Francis Butler, in recording his travels through the area, wrote that the Indians venerated their stone god. The natives believed the iron stone grew heavier each year, and that it attracted lightning.

"Longer than any man could say, it had lain on the summit of a hill far out in the southern prairies," Butler wrote.

"No tribe or portion of a tribe would pass in the vicinity without paying a visit to the great medicine . . .

"The old medicine man declared that its removal would lead to great

trouble, and the stone would disappear from the Western plains.

By 1886, the Iron Creek meteorite had been moved from the mission in Alberta to Victoria University in Cobourg, Ont. From there, it went to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

In the mid-1960s, amateur historian Bill Peters Sr. learned of the meteorite's existence in a library book brought home by his son. After he discovered Alberta's meteorite was in Ontario, Peters presented his findings in 1970 to the Calgary branch of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada.

That presentation sparked the interest of John Howell, then living in Calgary and an executive member of the astronomical society. The two men's research focused public attention on the Iron Creek meteorite.

Finally, in 1972, the Iron Creek meteorite was returned to Alberta, more than a century after it had been removed from its original location. Since then, it has been on display at the Provincial Museum in Edmonton.

"The face of Manitou can be seen quite clearly," says Ron Mussieux, the museum's curator of geology.

The meteorite is on long-term loan from Ontario's Victoria University, he says. "I don't expect for it to be asked back."

As for the mysterious second meteorite, Mussieux says that an expedition went looking for it in the Hardisty area in 1971. On that hunt were Don Taylor, the museum's former curator of geology, and U of A's Robert Folinsbee.

They found nothing to corroborate the second-meteorite theory, Mussieux says.

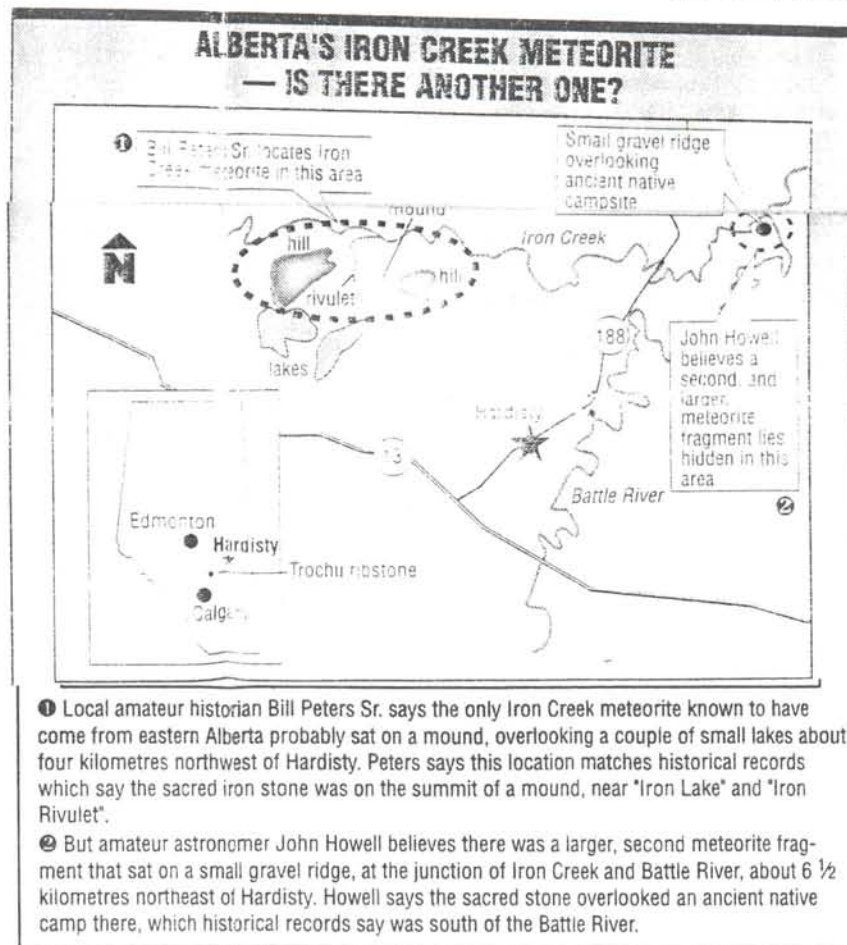
The case for a second meteorite rests mainly on a note, written in 1964 by former Provincial Museum geology curator Don Taylor.

Taylor reported meeting with Bill McDonald, a longtime resident of the Hardisty area. McDonald said "the larger fragment of Iron Creek was still in place on the Battle River in 1900, and that he himself saw it as a child of about 7, and that his brother, who was 17, often saw it," Taylor wrote.

"All around the Manitou stone were bags of beads, some with the leather still around them, left as oblations . . . The ground was strewn with beads of all ages . . .

McDonald said his brother estimated the stone's weight at 1,500 pounds

STONE GOD'S FACE: The profile of Manitou, the native Great Spirit and Provider, is visible (right side) in this view of the Iron Creek meteorite. Until the meteorite was surreptitiously removed by a missionary, natives venerated their stone god, offering prayers and gifts prior to hunting and war expeditions.



① Local amateur historian Bill Peters Sr. says the only Iron Creek meteorite known to have come from eastern Alberta probably sat on a mound, overlooking a couple of small lakes about four kilometres northwest of Hardisty. Peters says this location matches historical records which say the sacred iron stone was on the summit of a mound, near "Iron Lake" and "Iron Rivulet".

② But amateur astronomer John Howell believes there was a larger, second meteorite fragment that sat on a small gravel ridge, at the junction of Iron Creek and Battle River, about 6½ kilometres northeast of Hardisty. Howell says the sacred stone overlooked an ancient native camp there, which historical records say was south of the Battle River.

Herald Graphic

— almost five times heavier than the known Iron Creek meteorite.

Bill McDonald also told curator Taylor that the bigger meteorite chunk disappeared from a little ridge overlooking the Battle River in about 1903.

"It was said the Indians buried it, or carried it away into a lake . . . Bill and his brother think they dug a hole, topped it in and left it."

Howell and Folinsbee speculate that, because the missionary McDougall took away the smaller sacred iron stone, the natives feared their larger stone also would be stolen.

Bill Peters Sr., however, says there's

no mention in the historical records of another meteorite — other than the McDonald brothers' recollections. "This is hearsay," Peters says. "If there was such a thing, there'd be other references."

He says the stone the McDonalds saw could have been a completely different native sacred site, including a type of Indian rock carving called ribstones found in the area.

But geology professor Folinsbee gives a lot of weight to the younger McDonald's recollection of a second, larger meteorite.

Folinsbee says McDonald went on to



Rob Galbraith, Calgary Herald
METEORITE TRACKER: Bill Peters' research convinces him there is only one meteorite which likely sat on high ground near Hardisty

become a topnotch geologist and field observer. McDonald would know, even in recalling when he was a child of 7, the difference between an iron meteorite and other rocks, he says.

Iron meteorites often break up into many fragments as they plunge through Earth's atmosphere, Folinsbee points out.

"I'd just love to have this as Canada's biggest meteorite," Howell says. "I think it deserves to be found and put on display."

(Additional research from "The Iron Creek Meteorite" by Allen Ronaghan, published in the Alberta Historical Review)

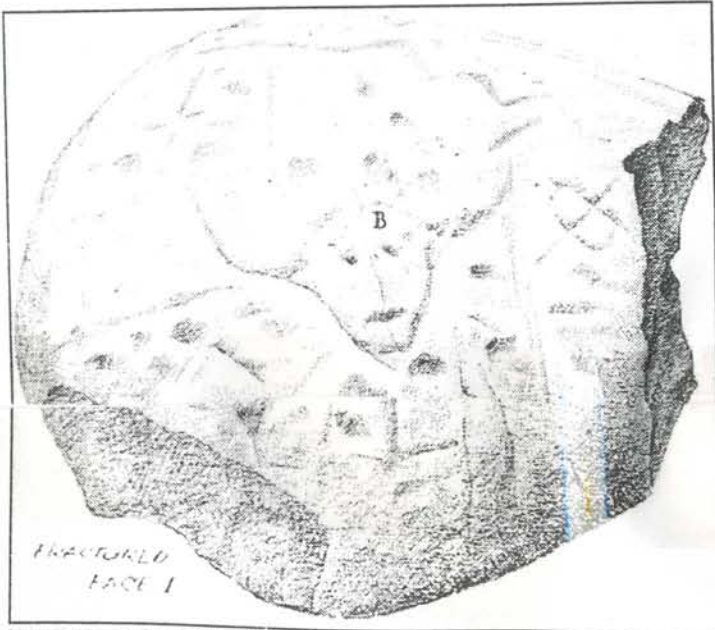
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Line drawing by Selwyn Dewdney, courtesy Glenbow Archives (Deb Thorne-Latta photo)
INSPIRED IMAGE?: To honor the spiritual protector of buffalo, natives carved buffalo-like heads and radiating ribs on 'ribstones.' Indentations resemble those on the Iron Creek meteorite.

'Ironstone' linked to sacred carvings

The Iron Creek meteorite might have inspired sacred native rock carvings that once protected the buffalo and still dot the Alberta landscape.

Called ribstones, the pockmarked-carved rocks are clustered in the area where the Ironstone — as natives called the meteorite — was located.

"The sort of depressions that are apparent on that Ironstone are suggestive of some of the little cupules, or the little depressions that we see on some of the ribstones," says Calgary archeologist Gloria Fedirchuk.

On the Iron Creek meteorite, the indentations or "thumbprints" were formed as the space rock heated up while plunging through Earth's atmosphere, says Ron Mussieux, the Provincial Museum's curator of geology.

The front surface of the meteorite melted. This material — under atmospheric pressure — passed toward the rear of the meteorite, "becoming detached as liquid drops and vapor" and forming the thumbprints, Mussieux explains.

On the ribstones, however, the circular

indentations have an Earthly origin. Some were apparently randomly ground into the surface by natives. Other ribstones appear to have been deliberately selected for their pockmarked appearance.

Some ribstones show a carved horned head resembling a buffalo's. Most have a serpent-like centre carving, with rib-like grooves emanating from it.

Native legend says all ribstones are descendants of a single original stone. Ribstones are found from southwestern Saskatchewan to Montana. But their distribution focuses in the Viking-Red Deer-Finnegan-Hardisty region in Alberta — near where the Iron Creek meteorite originally lay.

"We would suggest that the origin and diffusion of the ribstone complex is closely tied to the Ironstone," Fedirchuk and archeologist Ed McCullough say in a paper in the *Alberta Archaeological Review*.

Their research develops an idea first put forth by Robert Kidd of the Provincial Museum. They note that historian Hugh Dempsey also sees a connection between

the Ironstone and ribstones.

Dempsey, in his book about Cree chief Big Bear, says when the first buffalo of the season was killed, a holy man would take a choice morsel to a nearby hill to give thanks to Old Man Buffalo, the spiritual protector of the herds.

"If the hunters happened to be near an ancient monument, a pilgrimage was made during prayers of supplication."

The monuments, although many kilometres apart, were on high hills usually within sight of each other, "so that a man standing beside the Iron Stone near the Battle River could see the hill holding the Rib Stone far to the southeast.

"These monuments were like sentinels on the prairie, each one a tribute to Old Man Buffalo, guardian of the herds," Dempsey adds.

Ribstones, like the Ironstone, are generally found on elevated ground, says Fedirchuk.

Writes Dempsey: "Of all monuments dedicated to Old Man Buffalo, the Ironstone was the greatest and most venerated."