

Howard Hickson's Histories

Moon Rock

Northeastern Nevada Museum, Elko – 1970

When NASA released several lunar samples for exhibition around the nation, the Nevada State Museum in Carson City applied. NASA doesn't ship their moon rocks so Pete Herlan, Curator of Biology, flew to Washington, D.C. to pick up one for display.

At that time, the rocks traveled in a black box. Pete was on board, sitting with the case on his lap. This was more than thirty years before 9/11 but airlines were always alert for unusual situations. A flight attendant stopped at Pete's seat and asked him what he had in the box.

Pete replied, "A moon rock."

Flight attendants are usually calm when dealing with difficult passengers. She said, "Sir, I'm serious. What do you have in the case?"

Pete replied, "I'm serious, too. I have a moon rock."

Thinking she had a real nut case on her hands, the attendant headed for the cockpit and came back with the flight engineer who asked him the same question.

Pete then explained fully before they decided to throw him off the plane. He opened the case and pulled out the lunar sample in its sealed container.

A year or so later, I applied for one to display at the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko. I contacted NASA and received permission from one of their officials. His business card was enclosed. On it, with his name, phone number and address was his title, NLSTESO. Curious, I called him and asked what it meant.

He told me, "National Lunar Sample Traveling Exhibition Scheduling Officer." It was, most certainly, too long a title for a small business card.

Procedures had changed since Pete's trip. I called all the airlines I traveled on and told them I would be carrying a lunar sample with me on the return trip. I picked up a large plastic case that contained the Plexiglas exhibit case, lighting, and labeling. The rock was in a bright blue case. Printed on the outside was: "Critical Space Material, NASA." That should have taken care of all potential problems, but it didn't.

Just before takeoff, a flight attendant came by and asked to see the moon rock. She said she had never seen one. I opened the box and removed the small triangular case. I held it up so she could get a good look.

She suddenly grabbed it and started up the aisle to show it to everyone on the plane. I was speechless. One of the provisions of the contract said I had to personally carry it and not to let it out of my sight. About five nervous minutes later, she brought it back and thanked me. Big sigh of relief.

We, the rock and I, made it to San Francisco where they told me that they could get me to Reno but not to Elko. A severe snowstorm was the reason. In Reno, I was informed that no planes were going east, not even charters.

I had to get the moon rock to the museum by 7:00 p.m. Invitations had been sent for a lunar sample celebration. After frantically calling around town, I found the only

transportation available was by Greyhound Bus and the next one to Elko was to leave at 6:00 p.m. Well, the rock wasn't going to make it on time for the party. I called the museum, thinking the event would be cancelled. It wasn't. Plans had been made, champagne was ordered, the celebration would go on - without the lunar sample and without me.

Dead tired by now, I knew I'd fall asleep so I put the case on the bus depot floor and put both feet on the case. Before I dozed off, a derelict stopped and asked me what I had in the box. I told him I didn't know, I was just a courier.

Finally, dejected, tired and grinding my teeth, off we went in a snowstorm across northern Nevada. It was probably the slowest trip the moon rock had ever made.

In Elko, a big party was going on in the museum. Dr. Tom Gallagher, a board member, with tongue-in-cheek, brought a stone from his house and set it on a display stand.

When I arrived in Elko in the wee hours of the morning, I took the sample home just to be on the safe side.

The moon rock took the place of the garden stone the next day. The display materials, left in San Francisco, didn't arrive for two days. Finally, though, the lunar sample was installed in its case.

I overheard a small boy say to his mother, "Why doesn't it go beep, beep, beep?"

Another woman, my mother-in-law Ruby, commented, "Looks just like some of the rocks I have in my backyard." The moon rock exhibited at the museum resembled very fine grained gray pumice.

Several thousand people saw the exhibit during the few weeks it was in the museum in Elko, a big event for a small community.

All too soon it was time to take the sample back to Washington. Remembering the trip to escort the moon rock and its exhibit case to the Northeastern Nevada Museum, I wasn't enthused about taking it back. Dr. Tom and Irene Hood, members of the museum board of directors, volunteered their daughter, Vickie, to do the chore. Good choice, she has my eternal gratitude for making the trip - without incident.

Sources: Author's personal experience and recent note from Vickie Hood Console, Topeka, Kansas.

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