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Posted on Fri, Nov. 11, 2005

In Kansas, meteorite hunter finds a gem

 BY BECCY TANNER
 The Wichita Eagle

In a flat field in western Kansas, former Wichitan Steve Arnold may have found a big piece of the sky.

Two weeks ago, Arnold, a professional meteorite hunter now based in Kingston, Ark., uncovered a 1,400-pound meteorite.

It may well be the largest of its type yet found in the United States.

One of the largest previously known such meteorites is in the Celestial Museum at the Big Well in Greensburg. Arnold's was discovered in the same area of Kiowa County, more than 7 feet underground.

"It is aesthetically the type of meteorite that makes collectors drool," Arnold said. "It's what a meteorite ought to look like. It's going to make first-graders go 'Wow!'"

Science writer and meteorite collector Geoffrey Notkin, who was with Arnold when the discovery was made, said the size alone makes it extraordinary.

"By sheer mass, it has to be one of the largest finds in decades," Notkin said.

The meteorite is classified as an "oriented pallasite." Only two other meteorites of that type and magnitude are known: one that weighs 3,100 pounds, in Australia; and one that weighs 1,500 pounds, in Argentina.

Pallasites are a type of meteorite that has olivine crystals embedded in iron-nickel alloy.

And the fact that it is oriented, meaning it fell through the Earth's atmosphere without spinning and formed a conical or bullet shape as its surface melted, makes it rare.

Meteors are pieces of asteroids from deep space. When they intersect with Earth's atmosphere, they become the "shooting stars" people have been enchanted with for years. Most burn up in flight.

Meteorites are the survivors, the remnants of those shooting stars that make it to the Earth's surface.

Richard Stephenson, manager of the Big Well in Greensburg, said the majority of meteorites found in Kiowa County come from a two-square-mile area in Brenham Township.

The meteorites of Kiowa County are known throughout the world for their gemlike olivine

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Steve Arnold, right, found a meteorite on the far of Allen Binford, left, near Haviland. The meteorite is the biggest of its kind yet found in the United States.

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Kamulet Brown, 7, leans into her mother during a candlelight vigil for survivors of domestic abuse.

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crystals, which look almost like stained glass when cut.

"We get regular reports of meteorites," said Rex Buchanan, associate director of the Kansas Geological Survey. "People see them, and they bring them in. A normal size is anywhere from the size of your fist to a grapefruit."

But a 1,400-pound meteorite found in Brenham Township would be a big deal, Buchanan said.

According to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, centuries ago the Brenham meteorite exploded over the Kansas prairie, scattering more than three tons of meteorite fragments.

Prehistoric Indians were attracted to the rust-colored stones and used them as sacred objects, making them into earrings, knives, chisels and even buttons and beads.

In the 1920s and 1930s, one of the world's foremost meteorite hunters, Harvey H. Nininger, examined a large depression that locals thought was a buffalo wallow. It turned out to be an impact crater.

The last big find at the site was in 1949 when meteorite collector H.O. Stockwell used a metal detector to discover the 1,000-pound meteorite now in Greensburg.

Arnold, who has hunted for meteorites around the world, used a metal detector mounted on top of a three-wheeler. Before he found the meteorite, he came up with junk.

"I must have pulled up a hundred pounds of junk," he said. "Wrenches, horseshoes, broken plows and wagon wheels."

But when Arnold came upon this meteorite, he knew it would be a record-breaker.

"It's valued in the seven figures," he said Thursday.

He won't keep it, he says. He wants to sell, preferably to a museum or to someone who will keep it intact.

"It won't be cut to reveal its inner beauty," he said. "It's awesome enough from the outside."

Reach Beccy Tanner at 268-6336 or btanner@wichitaeagle.com.



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