

# 'Insensitive' auction saddens Tribe

By Dean Rhodes

*Smoke Signals editor*

The scheduled Oct. 28 auction of an almost 30-pound piece sliced off Tomanowos almost a decade ago has re-ignited Tribal ire regarding the trafficking in pieces from the sacred meteorite.

Darryl Pitt, a New York City-based meteorite collector, plans on selling a part of Tomanowos, also known as the 15.5-ton Willamette meteorite, at an auction conducted by Bonhams' Madison Avenue location in New York City.

"We are deeply saddened that any individual or organization would be so insensitive to Native American spirituality and culture as to traffic in the sale of a sacred and historic artifact," said Siobhan Taylor, Public Affairs director of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

"As a Tribe, we do not participate in such sales and auctions. We view them with dismay."

Pitt obtained the piece of Tomanowos in 1998 when he traded New York City's American Museum of Natural History a half-ounce piece of a meteorite from Mars. The trade occurred before the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde staked a claim to Tomanowos in November 1999, citing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990.

Tribal representatives argued that Tomanowos should be returned because its place of origin was on ceded Tribal land. Grand Ronde ancestors believed Tomanowos was a holy object that brought messages from the spirit world.

In June 2000, the Tribe and museum reached an agreement,

signed by then-Tribal Chairwoman Kathryn Harrison, which allowed the brownish iron meteorite to remain at the museum. The museum installed a display explaining the meteorite's history and Native American religious significance, and agreed to an annual visit by Tribal members to hold a spiritual ceremony with Tomanowos.

Before that agreement, however, pieces of Tomanowos had been sliced off over the years and sold or traded to meteorite collectors. The museum has housed the meteorite since 1906.

It's not the first time the auction of a piece of Tomanowos by Pitt has upset the Tribe. In February 2002, he sold a six-inch, 3.4-ounce piece for \$11,000.

"In a perfect world, we would like to see Mr. Pitt return that piece of meteorite to the Tribe," Taylor said about the upcoming auction piece. She attended this summer's Tomanowos ceremony held in New York City.

"If he did, we would welcome him and it would be a cause for great celebration," Taylor added.

Tomanowos fell from the sky more than 10,000 years ago and Tribal members consider it a spiritual and sacred artifact. In olden times, Clackamas Chinook Tribal members believed that Tomanowos created a union between the sky, earth and water when it rested in the ground and collected rainwater in its crevices and basins.

Early 20th century court testimony by Wasco Tribal members tied, through oral histories, Tomanowos to Clackamas Chinook Tribal Chief Wochimo and other members of the Tribe. The Clackamas were

one of the more than 20 Tribes forcibly moved to the Grand Ronde Reservation in the 1850s.

Taylor said the Grand Ronde Tribe could not stop the auction and would not consider becoming a bidder because it does not believe that any piece of Tomanowos should be sold or exchanged.

Although Pitt was originally quoted as saying that he did not intend to offend the Tribe, he later told *The New York Times* that the Tribe should "recognize the possibilities for science that the subdivision of meteorites creates."

"The Grand Ronde is such a small fraction of the story," Pitt said to *The New York Times*. "This is a conspicuously missing piece that is being offered for sale. ... The beliefs of the Grand Ronde should not preclude science or the commerce of meteorites."

Attempts by *Smoke Signals* to contact Pitt through Bonhams were unsuccessful.

Denton Ebel, curator of meteorites at the American Museum of Natural History, said that when meteorites go up for sale at auctions, it is difficult for most museums, especially non-profits, to buy them.

Published estimates say that the 28-pound piece of Tomanowos might fetch more than \$1 million



Photo courtesy of the Macovich Collection

**Tomanowos, also known as the Willamette meteorite, on display during the Lewis & Clark Exposition in Oregon in 1905.**

at auction.

"Our hope is that many private collections eventually become part of museums," Ebel said, adding that he thinks Pitt's hyping of the controversy in selling part of Tomanowos is designed to increase the auction sale price.

Taylor said the Tribe considers each sale of a Tomanowos fragment disturbing, and added that the Tribe is not upset with the museum, which no longer sells or trades Tomanowos pieces and houses the sacred meteorite in a respectful manner.

"At the time, the museum did not appreciate the significance to the Grand Ronde of this meteorite," said museum spokesman Stephen Reichl in *The New York Times*. "Once we realized that significance, everything changed. There is no way we would do any harm of any kind to that meteorite." ■

*Includes information from The Associated Press and New York Times.*

## Tomanowos timeline:

### More than 10,000 years ago:

Tomanowos falls from the sky, most likely landing in the Pend d'Oreille region of Idaho. The Great Missoula Flood eventually transports Tomanowos to a spot near the falls of Willamette River.

**1850s:** The Clackamas Chinooks, along with more than 20 other Tribes from western Oregon and northern California, are relocated to the Grand Ronde Reservation, separating them from the sacred site.

**1902-05:** The miner charges 25 cents for people to view Tomanowos.

**1906:** New York philanthropist Mrs. William Dodge buys Tomanowos for \$20,600 and donates it to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

**1999:** The Confederated Tribes of Grade Ronde, citing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, seeks return of Tomanowos. The museum counters, asking a judge to declare it Tomanowos' owner.

**2002:** Pitt sells a six-inch, 3.4-ounce portion of Tomanowos at auction for \$11,000.

**Billions of years ago:** Scientists believe Tomanowos was the iron core of a planetesimal that was shattered in a stellar collision.

**10,000 years ago to 19th century:** Tomanowos' resting place becomes a sacred site for western Oregon Indian Tribes, particularly the Clackamas Chinooks, who believe it was sent to Earth by the Sky People.

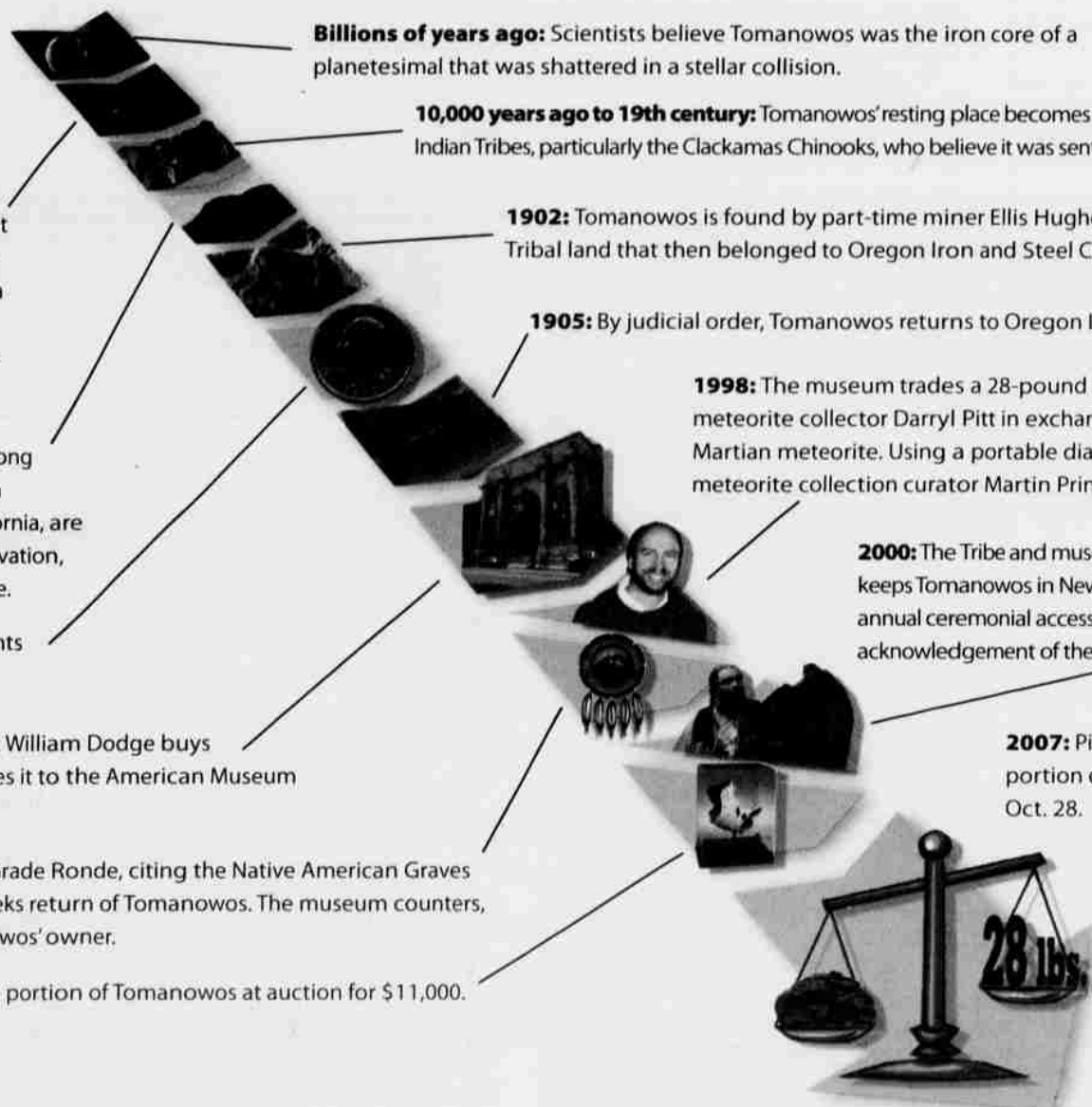
**1902:** Tomanowos is found by part-time miner Ellis Hughes, who removes it from ceded Tribal land that then belonged to Oregon Iron and Steel Co.

**1905:** By judicial order, Tomanowos returns to Oregon Iron and Steel.

**1998:** The museum trades a 28-pound piece of Tomanowos to meteorite collector Darryl Pitt in exchange for a half-ounce piece of a Martian meteorite. Using a portable diamond saw, Pitt and longtime meteorite collection curator Martin Prinz cut off a piece of Tomanowos.

**2000:** The Tribe and museum reach an accord that keeps Tomanowos in New York City and provides annual ceremonial access to Tribal members, as well as acknowledgement of the meteorite's religious importance.

**2007:** Pitt proposes selling a 28-pound portion of Tomanowos at auction on Oct. 28.



Graphic created by George Valdez