



Meteorites grace every corner of Harvey Nininger's Sedona, Ariz., home. Now 75, he still enjoys hunting new ones.

Scientists took Harvey Nininger's work lightly—until the Space Age proved the importance of meteorites

He Chased Falling Stars

By THEODORE BERLAND

PEOPLE USED TO SCOFF at Harvey Nininger for chasing around the country looking for hunks of iron and stone that fell from the sky. But they don't laugh at his meteorite hunting any more.

Nininger, now 75 and living in retirement in Sedona, Ariz., came into his own with the arrival of the Space Age. Scientists then realized that meteorites are the only bits of matter from beyond the earth that they can analyze chemically in their laboratories.

At one time, nobody cared much that Nininger owned the largest and best private collection of meteorites in the world. But as the Space Age was born, the demand for Nininger meteorites grew—and in 1961 Arizona State University bought most of his collection for more than a quarter-million dollars!

Nininger first became interested in meteorites in 1923 when he was teaching biology at McPherson College in his native Kansas. The night of Nov. 9 he spotted his first meteorite, and the sight of that great ball of fire streaking across the sky thrilled him and stirred his curiosity.

He turned to books about meteorites. Soon he had read everything on the subject in the college library. But that wasn't much, since meteorites were not considered an appropriate subject for college study.

But to Nininger, meteorites were "the most interesting aspect of our universe." He wrote for books on falling stars. He looked for accounts of meteorites in newspapers, asked people he met if they had seen any lately, checked out every re-

port he heard about them, and combed Kansas farms for hunks of rock and iron that had fallen from the sky.

Before long, he was spending more time with meteorites than with his college classes. In 1930 he quit teaching entirely and set up a meteorite-hunting headquarters in Denver. His name became known all over the West, and reports of meteorite falls came to him from everywhere.

Although getting reports of falling stars was no longer a problem, locating them was. Because meteorites travel thousands of miles per hour, they cover a lot of territory and often are seen in several states.

At the report of a sighting, Nininger (and sometimes his wife Addie) would crank up the car, rattle down gravel roads, and stop and talk with every eyewitness available. Most often, the "eyewitnesses" had gotten their information secondhand or third-hand.

Only by doggedly traveling and interviewing could Nininger glean enough verifiable facts to chart a meteorite's fiery path on a map. Then he would estimate where it fell and search that area for a crater and scattered fragments.

IN A FEW YEARS, he had such a formidable collection that he decided to open the American Meteorite Museum in Sedona, Ariz., not far from the most fabulous meteorite crater in the world. The giant hole—formed when a concentration of meteorites or a comet smashed into the desert some 50,000 years ago—is almost a mile in diameter and deeper than the Washington Monument is high.

The Arizona Crater became a rich source of meteorite fragments for Nininger's ever-growing collection. And before long, his meteorite museum had become a popular tourist stop.

His scientific visitors gave him his prickliest moments. Their most frequent comment was: "Hmmm, rather interesting, Mr. Nininger, but of what use are these meteorites?"

But Nininger's day was to come. As the Space Age dawned, scientists at leading research centers began asking him to sell bits of meteorites that they could analyze.

In the past few years, meteorites have provided clues to life elsewhere in the solar system. They have been used in establishing the age of the earth at 4.5 billion years. And they have taught engineers how to design rocket nose cones that will survive the blazing re-entry into the earth's atmosphere.

THE FINAL vindication of Nininger's meteorite-hunting career came in 1961 when Arizona State University purchased most of his collection with National Science Foundation funds.

Thousands of specimens were catalogued meticulously by Mrs. Nininger and shipped to the Tempe campus, where they are displayed as the Nininger Collection.

Today, Harvey and Addie Nininger live in a new home on a small rise in Sedona. Around the house are meteorites on end tables and meteorite book ends, reminders of their star-chasing days.

The Niningers say they just want to enjoy their nine grandchildren and the scenery. But Harvey has a small laboratory attached to his garage, where he still experiments with bits of meteorites. They both occasionally sneak out to the Arizona Crater nearby to hunt more fragments—and even go off on a wild meteorite chase once in a while.

It's impossible to retire completely when you have hitched your wagon to a falling star.