

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## Ann Hodges: Meteorite Victim

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*November 30, 1954, was a typical Tuesday in Sylacauga, Alabama. Homemaker Ann Elizabeth Hodges had completed her morning and noontime chores, and was taking an afternoon nap on the couch. Then, at 2:46 PM, her life changed forever, but not for better. She has gone, but the stone remains. (Apologies to Lennon and McCartney)*

Ann Hodges was awakened rudely when a 4 kg meteor punched through the roof of her home, bounced off the big radio beside her, and ricocheted into her side. Imagine the shock if you had been asleep in what you thought was a safe place and got hit by big rock, literally out of the blue! You'd be thinking a lot like [Chicken Little](#), too.

The meteorite's interior was still as cold as Space, so Ms. Hodges was not burned. But the bruise on her hip was quite impressive. So much so that a photo of her in the hospital, with her bruised hip, was deemed so newsworthy that [the photo](#) had wide circulation, including the nationally-popular *Life Magazine*, in spite of it showing the naked hip of a woman (this was 1954 in the Deep South, after all).

Remember: If it is in Space, it is a "meteoroid," if it is passing through the atmosphere, it's a "meteor," and if it makes it to the ground, it's a "meteorite."

A number of people across the area had seen the fall of the meteor. Folks close to the impact site came a'runnin'. Ann, and her mother, who was in the house at the time of impact, were trying to figure out what had happened. The first thought on everyone's mind, since this was well into the Cold War, was that the Russians were coming. But the object was obviously not a bomb or part of an airplane or rocket, so those fears quickly gave way to enjoying something different happening in their town.

Ann's husband came home from work to a chaotic scene. He immediately called the police and their local doctor, who quickly ascertained that Ann's hip, while awesomely-bruised, would heal OK. The magnitude of the developing story brought both the Sylacauga Mayor, and their Chief of Police, to the Hodges residence. A passel of reporters showed up, too, and the phone rang often; many calls were from concerned neighbors, but many more were from reporters.

At first, the Hodges liked the attention. Then money got involved.

If this event occurred today, the meteorite, the only one that hit a person in a very well-documented case, would be worth millions of dollars. After all, a car struck by the Peekskill meteorite fall in 1992 was a junker when its owner went to bed, but was worth much more

than a new Cadillac when she woke up the next morning. The car has its own [website](#), and is still on tour, making money, to this day.

But the impact wasn't today, it was in 1954. Everyone recognized that the meteorite had value, but it wasn't more valuable than gold in anyone's imagination.

A few years ago, a meteor fell on a doctor's office in Lorton, Virginia, early in 2010. It wasn't very big, but its fall was very well-documented. The problem was, the office was rented, not owned, by the doctors. The doctors tried to give the meteorite to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, but their landlord sued for ownership, saying it hit his property, not the doctors'. Legal wrangling ensued, with a [happy ending](#) for everyone but the landlord. NMNH got the [rock](#), the doctors got a NMNH check for \$10K, and the doctors gave the \$10K to Doctors Without Borders.

The Hodges did not own their home, they rented. Their landlord, one Birdie Guy, wanted the meteorite. Ann thought it was hers, after all, "I think God intended it for me. After all, it hit me!" Who's going to argue with God, right? The U.S. Air Force.

Air Force Intelligence showed up, and took the object away for examination, just to be sure it wasn't a Ruskie trick. They gave it to the Smithsonian for analysis, and there it stayed until the Hodges' US Representative got involved and forced its return to the Hodges.

Birdie Guy then sued the Hodges. The hole in the roof had not been permanently repaired. The Hodges wanted Guy to pay for the repair, but that strengthened Guy's claim, for after all, as she was quick to point out, if she had to pay for the repair because it was her house, then the meteorite had to be hers, too., because it was her house. The Hodges then threatened to counter-sue for the injuries Ann sustained.

Meanwhile, the Hodges enjoyed a great deal of publicity. The photo and piece on the event in *Life Magazine* was one of the biggest, but she also appeared on the then-popular *I've Got a Secret* TV show, and in a number of news publications. I wonder, given the publicity around Ann and the event, how many of Gary Moore's celebrities couldn't figure out the secret-keeper....

The potential money was significant. Pieces were seen to spall off the fireball as it came in, and a neighbor had sold the small piece he found for a lot of money. But by the time the legal dust had settled, the Sylacauga impact, and Ann, were old news, and their meteorite was no longer worth a lot of money (then). They tried to sell it to NMNH, but the offer was too low for them; the Hodges instead chose to donate the meteorite to the Alabama Museum of Natural History, where it sits to this day. The museum's website used to tout the meteorite prominently on their website; today, you have to search a bit to find this:

<https://collections.museums.ua.edu/2020/05/04/sylacauga>.

The meteorite had, in the end, been much more detrimental to the Hodges than beneficial. They did get some temporary popularity, but very little money or long-term gain. And all the attention and frustration would lead Ann's health to break down in 1964. Her husband left her, and she died alone in a nursing home in 1972. She was the meteor's victim twice; once when it hit her and again when its notoriety wrecked her health and marriage.

In addition to the links above, you can find out more about Ann Hodges, meteorites, and impact risk by following the links below:

### **Ann Hodges and the Sylacauga Meteorite**

*Smithsonian Magazine* story from 11/29/2019:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/1954-extraterrestrial-bruiser-shocked-alabama-woman-180973646>

The *Vintage News*: <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/04/27/cubas-classic>

*The Encyclopedia of Alabama*: <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1280>

AMNH 2018 (see page 20): [http://museums.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CHRONICLE\\_FALL2018\\_Final\\_pages.pdf](http://museums.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CHRONICLE_FALL2018_Final_pages.pdf)

### **Meteoritics**

The Meteoritical Society: <https://meteoritical.org>

Smithsonian NMNH Meteorites gallery: <https://geogallery.si.edu/meteorites>

NMNH Mineral-Sciences: <https://naturalhistory.si.edu/research/mineral-sciences/collections-overview>

University of New Mexico Institute of Meteoritics: <http://meteorite.unm.edu>

Arizona State University Center for Meteorite Studies: <https://meteorites.asu.edu>

Norton, O. Richard, *Rocks from Space, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, ISBN-10: 9780878423736

Norton, O. Richard, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Meteorites*, ISBN-13: 978-0521621434

### **Impact Risk**

NASA Center for Near Earth Object Studies: <https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov>

CNEOS Sentry Earth Impact Monitoring: <https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov/sentry/intro.html>

CNEOS Scout NEOCP Hazard Assessment: <https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov/scout/intro.html>

Torino Impact Hazard Scale: [https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov/sentry/torino\\_scale.html](https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov/sentry/torino_scale.html)

Palermo Technical Impact Hazard Scale: [https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov/sentry/palermo\\_scale.html](https://cneos.jpl.nasa.gov/sentry/palermo_scale.html)

Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System (ATLAS): <https://fallingstar.com/home.php>

ATLAS Understanding Risk: <https://fallingstar.com/danger.php>

NASA Spaceguard Survey: <http://impact.arc.nasa.gov/downloads/spacesurvey.pdf>

**Coda:** Terrestrial Impacts would, of course, cause devastation at/near the point of impact, and have caused regional- and even global-wide damage. For example, a really large impact can cause the immediate extinction of many species. Geologists have defined geological era boundaries in the geological record, largely based on abrupt mass extinction events. We now know that many of those boundary events, such as that between the Mesozoic and Cenozoic Eras, was due to an impact.

But what about a *non-geological* threat from impact?

The Cuban Missile Crisis, the closest we have come to an all-out nuclear war, was in late 1962, from 16 October to 20 November. The Russians were deeply concerned about their three

planned Mars probe launches scheduled for that time (*Sputnik 22*, *Mars 1*, and *Sputnik 24*). The two designated “Sputnik” failed to leave Earth orbit properly, and never had their names changed to reflect they were, in fact, Mars probes. *Mars 1* was the first probe ever sent to Mars, but contact was lost before it arrived there. The Russians let us know they were planning these launches ahead of time, lest the primitive system we had for early warning might cause us to think the Russians were launching an attack. Those were very tense times, indeed.

On February 15, 2013, a large fireball lit the sky over Chelyabinsk, Russia. Its arrival was a surprise, as it had not been detected on the way in. The Chelyabinsk impact took place only six months after the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Further, Chelyabinsk is only ~930 miles from Moscow, and only ~660 miles from the Baikonur Launch Complex in Kazakhstan. Six months is less than an eyeblink in cosmic time, and 1000 miles is nothing with respect to interplanetary distances. Can you imagine what might have happened if the Chelyabinsk event had occurred 50.5 years earlier, and a few hundred miles closer to two of Russia’s key strategic sites? Would I still be here to type about it?

One of my pleasures at the National Air and Space Museum was to create and operate some of their Discovery Stations, on-floor hands-on portable learning tools. My favorite was “Touch a Falling Star,” about meteoritics. Whenever I would have a multi-generation group at TFS, I’d tell the story of Chelyabinsk and 1962. I kept it short, because it would be blah-blah-blah to the younger folks in the audience, but the shocked looks on the faces of those for whom the Cuban Missile Crisis was a life experience was unforgettable.

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