

Crossing London Bridge With Jim Kriegh

by
**Geoffrey
Notkin**

I wouldn't be out there at that very moment. He introduced me to Mike, and meteorite hunters Ruben Garcia, Sonny Clary, Twink Monrad, and Suzanne Morrison as well as numerous other characters, many of whom became comrades and hunting companions. If it were not for Jim and his circle of friends—who also quickly became my friends—I may never have left New York to begin a new life in Arizona. Tucson was, after all, an unlikely destination for a boy who grew up in damp old London, regularly trudging across London Bridge, its cobblestones slick with gray rainwater, to visit my father's office after school.

Without Jim's promise that I could be trusted with the location of a secret new strewnfield, I would not have joined the 2004 expedition which led to my all-time favorite article: "Lingua Franconia: Deciphering Arizona's Meteorite Graveyard" (*Meteorite*, August, 2004). I wouldn't have seen the lonely green marble quarry hidden away in between low mountains near Dragoon in the southeastern corner of Arizona. My rock garden is now made up mostly of white and chartreuse striped

stones which Jim and I hefted out of the abandoned earthworks and transported home over dry washes and nearly invisible dirt trails.

James D. Kriegh died on October 11, 2007 shortly before his 79th birthday. He was born in Kansas, but Arizona had been his home since the 1960s. Jim was a slender man, likely due to his penchant for long distance running during the middle decades of his life, and always smartly dressed—even in the field—with his trademark trilby hat and plaid shirt. Heart trouble eventually forced him to give up running, and wishing to help a friend find new outlets for his energy, Tucson gold hunter John Blennert suggested they try prospecting. While looking for nuggets in Mohave County, they accidentally found meteorites—weathered L4 chondrites. The new stone meteorite was classified at the University of Arizona's Lunar and Planetary Laboratory in Tucson, given the name Gold Basin, and for two years Jim's team kept the find secret while they meticulously recorded the location of every find. Jim invited his neighbor Ingrid "Twink" Monrad to join the hunt and one

A few days before this article was due in the hands of *Meteorite's* hardworking editorial team I found myself, once again, dragging a heavy metal detector and rock pick across the hills of northern Arizona in search of meteorites, in the company of my friend Mike Miller. A determined and resilient field man, Mike seemed impervious to the below-freezing temperatures. After four years in the Sonoran Desert, my appetite for brisk weather has disappeared.

Writing a farewell to a close friend is not an easy task, or a pleasant one, and I procrastinated for weeks, particularly troubled over how I might begin the essay. As I swung my detector back and forth over frozen ground I realized that, without Jim,

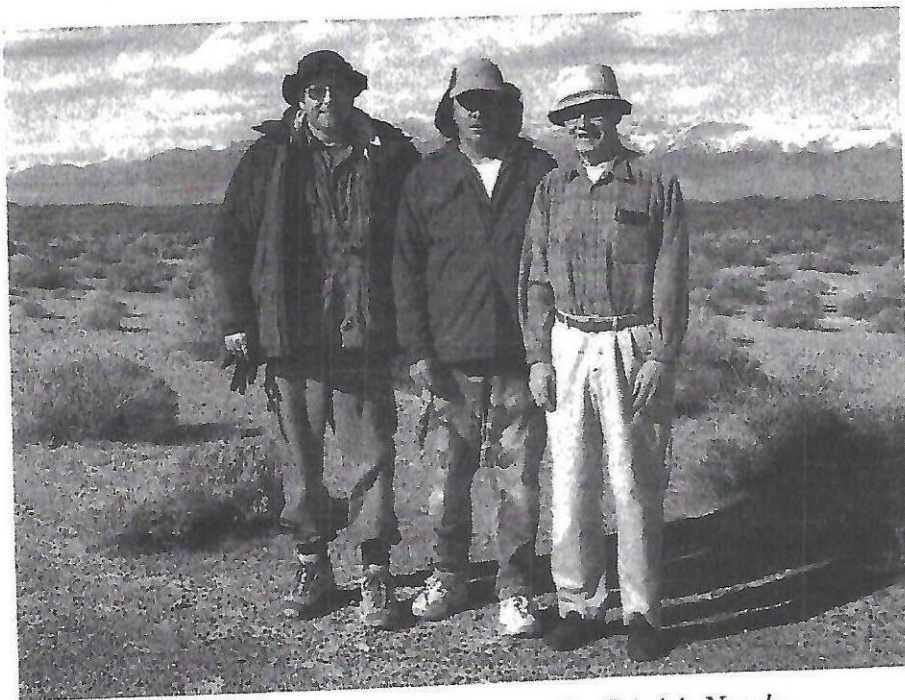


Figure 1. The author, Sonny Clary, and Jim Kriegh in Nevada.



Figure 2. Jim Kriegh in Gold Basin



Figure 3. Jim Kriegh and the author in the back of Jim's Toyota 4WD in Franconia.

of the great meteorite hunting teams of modern times was born. As a result of their work Gold Basin has been described as one of the best mapped strewnfields in history.

The public announcement of the Gold Basin discovery came early in 1998. I happened to be on my way to Tucson for the annual gem show. I believed Jim's story would make for a fascinating article and our first brief conversation took place from a phone booth at the Midland/Odessa International Airport, when I called to ask for an interview. Jim enthusiastically agreed and my expedition partner, Steve Arnold,

drove with me to Jim's house a week later. Twink was there too, wearing a Gold Basin pendant. They both sat behind Jim's grand desk, recounted the history of the discovery, showed us their finds, and even unfurled the cryptic strewnfield map. The following year Twink said: "Jim must have liked you right away because he never showed that map to anyone."

The interview and subsequent expedition were recorded in "The Great Gold Basin Rush," (*Meteorite*, May, 1998). A year later Steve and I received a prestigious invitation to join Jim and Twink at their

campsite in the strewnfield, and that produced another favorite article: "The Midas Touch: A Return to Gold Basin," (*Meteorite*, August, 1999).

After that we were just friends.

Jim once said that without meteorites he wouldn't have met people like me and that he felt very lucky. I was flattered because it was actually the other way round, *we* all felt lucky to know *him*. I never knew a man more universally respected by his peers. Another admired member of our field, Bob Haag, confided to me that "Jim was our admiral," and there would never be another like him.

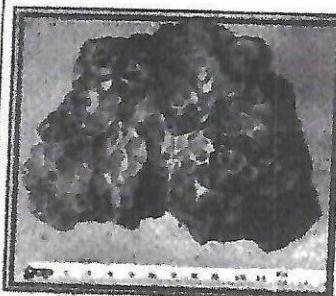
Twink believed Jim's interest in meteorites literally saved his life. He survived repeated rounds of major heart surgery and the outdoor exertion required by relentless meteorite hunting surely allowed us the pleasure of his company for those extra years.

Jim was full of surprises. His meteorite friends were amazed to learn that he spearheaded the incorporation of his adopted home town, just north of Tucson, and was forever after known as "The Founder of Oro Valley." Jim's engineering colleagues were bemused to discover that he was a famous citizen of the meteorite world, had discovered space rocks previously unknown to science, and was as much at home conversing with top researchers as he was digging in the bottom of a dry wash—always with one eye open for rattlesnakes. We were all a little jealous that he and Blennert were skilled nugget shooters and had filed gold claims across Arizona. And everyone was bewildered by the news that he had been a rising star in professional baseball during his youth. Jim was also a university professor, a father and a grandfather, a devoted pet owner, and the prime mover behind the Oro Valley Historical Society.

Jim went everywhere in an old Toyota 4WD. He treated his equipment with the same respect he gave to people and kept that truck as clean and functional as an antique pistol. He often traveled alone to remote places and carried a spare battery and tow chain, replacement fan belts, maps, a backup metal detector, and every kind of tool a prospector/adventurer might need. "That extra battery saved me more than once," he

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told me. I ended up buying a Toyota too because I was so impressed by the way Jim maneuvered it through rough terrain. He was a much better off-roader than I, and once had to tow my vehicle out of a ditch during a hunt for Arizonites—mysterious volcanic glass fragments sometimes mistaken for tektites.

Jim wouldn't pay somebody to make repairs when he could do a better job himself. He changed the motor oil in his trucks, built an extension to his house, replaced his roof, upgraded a malfunctioning water system, tested suspected space rocks for nickel, cut and polished Gold Basin slabs, and designed and printed his own Meteorite Hunter's Log Book. He even silver wrapped meteorite jewelry.

When I moved to Tucson I settled in the Northwest, partly because I was drawn to the uncomplicated frontier style houses on big lots, full of tough old cacti and home to Gambel's quail, Gila woodpeckers, and antelope squirrels, and partly because Jim and the Monrads lived just up the road. When I arrived, alone in a strange new world, I turned to them for all sorts of help and advice. After asking how a swamp cooler (a rooftop convection cooler common in areas with low humidity) worked, and what company I should call to have mine fixed, Jim said, "I'll be right over." He arrived with a ladder and a big bag of tools in the back of the Toyota. We climbed on top of my hot tar-covered roof, stripped the cooler down, and had it working in no time. Jim could fix just about anything.

The memorial service was held in a park, named in Jim's honor, which lies directly across from his house. It's a measure of the esteem in which he was held by the community that the Mayor of Oro Valley presided over the ceremony. Local police and fire departments provided a color guard, and a uniformed piper played "Amazing Grace." Perhaps one hundred people attended and it was as beautiful a sunny day as anyone could have wished for.

The diversity of guests paying their respects represented the many facets of Jim's life: politicians, engineers, rockhounds, journalists, musicians, scientists, and family members all sat together in the shade, and listened to reminiscences by those who knew

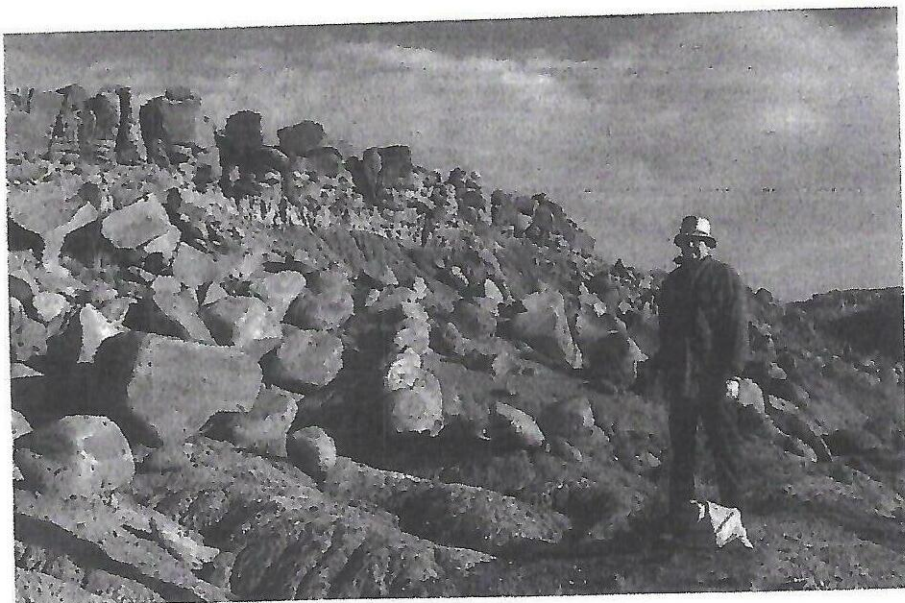


Figure 4. Jim Kriegh near Holbrook.

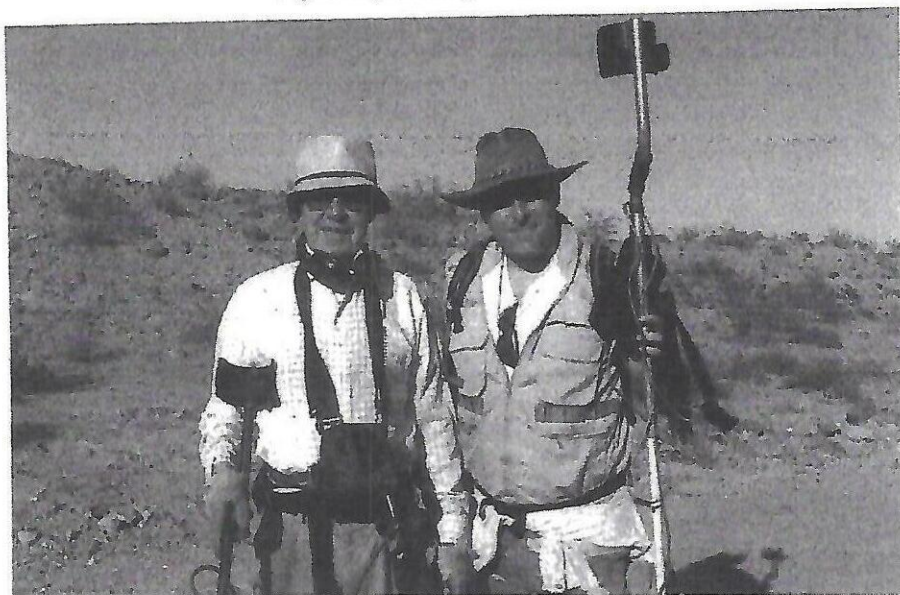


Figure 5. Jim Kriegh and the author in Franconia.

him best.

I was the last person to speak at the service. "I'm one of the meteorite guys," I said, which brought out some gentle laughter. "Meteorites are valuable and very difficult to find, and we're a secretive bunch."

Except for Jim.

I described how welcoming he had always been to amateurs and academics alike, and how willing he was to share information and techniques. On my first visit to his house, Jim took me out to the driveway and demonstrated exactly how to calibrate my detector so I'd have the best chance of success in his Gold Basin strewnfield. Meteorite hunters don't do that. They keep their tips and tricks to themselves. Several people sitting in front of me in that crowd

found their own first meteorite, and learned meteorite hunting skills, directly because of Jim's kindness and generosity.

I also recounted an anecdote from that second Gold Basin venture. It was mid-February, immediately after the annual Tucson show. Steve and I were preparing for our first full day in the field, and Jim warned us—sensibly and firmly as was his nature—to go carefully because there were rattlesnakes, and to carry plenty of water. I laughed to myself, thinking how amusing it was that this man in his early seventies, nearly twice my age, was telling me I should take it easy.

It wasn't so funny, come lunchtime, when tough and burly Steve Arnold and myself were cowering in the shade of Jim's



Figure 6. Jim Kriegh standing on London Bridge in Lake Havasu City.

truck. I had a wet towel over my head and was dreaming of cold sodas, when Jim materialized at the top of a nearby hill. He walked quickly and nimbly along the crest of a ridge, effortlessly swinging his Goldmaster III, with his happy dog Kristy trotting behind. He breezed down to us, displaying a slightly disapproving expression: "Are you two fellers tired out already?" He casually produced a beautiful, complete 200-g stone meteorite and put it in my hand. "I found this one just over there on the side of that ridge."

I never could keep up with Jim, and that's how I like to remember him, moving briskly from wash to hillside, black headphones clamped around his narrow-brimmed hat, stopping every now and then to drop another meteorite into the small canvas sack attached to his belt.

I often wondered why a speculator purchased the London Bridge I'd known as

a child, and transported it, stone by stone, across the Atlantic Ocean to Arizona. I imagined the sad old structure, neglected, ignored, and probably fallen into decay somewhere in the dusty wilderness. So, on our way back from Franconia, when Jim asked if I'd like to stop in Lake Havasu City to see the bridge, I almost said no. But we were in no hurry, and I was somewhat curious to see what had become of the structure I'd known so well as a kid.

Imagine my surprise when I saw it, not forlorn at all, but arcing majestically over a turquoise-blue man-made lake, complete with London phone booth and a double-decker bus. Pleasure boats zipped around below and it was quite the idyllic scene. How very odd to walk across those polished cobbles again, but under the rich Arizona sun instead of London drizzle.

We stood near the center, took some photos, and enjoyed the moment.

"You must be one of very few people who walked across the bridge on two continents," Jim observed.

This was just one more thing I would have missed if it weren't for Jim. Thanks for everything. We sure will miss you.

Geoffrey Notkin was born in New York City, raised in London, England, and now lives in Tucson, Arizona with one eccentric cat and no children. He has been actively involved in meteorite hunting for well over a decade. In addition to being a science writer and photographer, he owns a graphics and web development company, Stanegate Studios, which specializes in natural history projects. He is currently working on a book about his adventures as a meteorite hunter.

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