

The Great Gold Basin Rush

by Geoffrey Notkin

With all the cosmic debris that has crashed into Arizona, you might think that somebody up there has it in for the Grand Canyon State.

Picture a solitary traveler on his way through Arizona in 1912, perhaps a Civil War veteran near the end of his life, or a young prospector drawn by stories of the Wild West. Such a person might have disembarked from the Atlantic and Pacific train in the small railroad town of Holbrook on July 19 – barely three months after Arizona became the forty-eighth state in the Union – in time to witness a torrent of 14,000 celestial stones raining down around the unsuspecting town.

Continuing west, and reflecting on the rarity and strangeness of this phenomenon, our traveler would have covered less than sixty miles before passing the site of another extraordinary meteoritic event: that most famous and erroneously named of all impact structures – Meteor Crater. Perhaps our adventurer then headed northwest into Mohave County to try his luck searching for gold, where he wandered unknowingly, like many prospectors that were to follow, among the remnants of another great meteorite fall – a field of ancient extraterrestrial stones that would one day be recognized by an amateur gold hunter, classified as Arizona's thirty-first meteorite discovery, and named after the picturesque concave valley that lies between Garnet and Senator Mountains – Gold Basin.

The Desert Gold Diggers, a prospectors' club in Tucson, once played host to meteoriticist Dr. David Kring from the University of Arizona. Dr. Kring talked about meteorites, and about the possibility of finding one while searching for gold nuggets. It must have been an illuminating lecture

for Gold Digger Jim Kriegh, because he started finding meteorites – first the Greaterville, and then in November 1995, the Gold Basin strewnfield.

It was two years before the world heard about Jim's discovery – two years spent secretly mapping the strewnfield, collecting samples, and preparing data for the University of Arizona. When we did hear about Gold Basin I was preparing for the annual Tucson Gem and Mineral Show. Amidst the excitement of bartering with meteorite dealers from France, Russia, China and the United States, my thoughts constantly returned to the new discovery. With the strewnfield only inches away on that Arizona road atlas it was inevitable that I'd once again find myself on the road with two metal detectors, three cameras, and my comrade – the dauntless Steve Arnold.

As we drove out of Tucson on a bright Sunday morning, the city fell

away into rolling undeveloped land under the shadow of the Catalina Mountains. Here, in a secluded and shady house, we were welcomed by Jim Kriegh, and his vivacious neighbor and prospecting partner, Ingrid "Twink" Monrad.

Evidence of Jim's former career as a University of Arizona civil engineering professor is everywhere: shelves filled with textbooks, articles and scholarly publications. Among them are eclectic meteoritical books by H.H. Nininger and others, and it became plain to me that this clear-eyed and vigorous man had not settled quietly into retirement, but rather had immersed himself in the new occupation of meteorite hunter. Jim set out several of his finds for us to examine, but one of the best was already displayed around Twink's neck. Wrapped in a silver band was a beautiful Gold Basin slice – white chondrules and silvery flecks clearly visible within the gray matrix. The unusual piece of jewelry had been made by Jim himself.

Gold nuggets first tempted Jim Kriegh up to Mohave County, and the



Twink Monrad and Jim Kriegh refer to the Gold Basin topographic map in Jim's study.

unexpected discovery of meteorites kept bringing him back. He and Twink have been making the 800 mile round trip, once a month ever since. Over the years, other gold hunters had left excavated "hot rocks" (terrestrial stones with metallic content) on the surface, and Jim thought some of those hot rocks might be meteorites. He took them to Dr. Kring who described them as L4 ordinary chondrites, containing olivine, pyroxene, pigeonite and augite in "a variegated gray to black silicate interior [with] obvious inclusions of metal." Carbon-14 analysis suggested that the fall took place approximately 20,000 years ago.

"The area's been heavily hunted in the past with detectors," Jim told me. "We found some meteorites sitting right up on top, put aside next to holes that people had dug looking for gold. They thought they were ordinary hot rocks."

Once they had confirmation from Dr. Kring, Jim and his partners began compiling detailed records of new finds, carefully marking the location of each on topographic maps. "David wanted this information," Jim continued. "And we tried to help him. Sometimes we'd find sixty or seventy in a day. Maybe as much as one hundred at a time."

"I'm new to this," Twink smiled. "I counted up the ones that I've found, and there are only one hundred and eight." We all laughed.

The current total rests at approximately 2,200 stones with a total weight of 87.8 kg – the kind of figures that can start a new gold rush. But these numbers don't take into account the fruitless hours spent searching through harsh terrain. "We may hunt all morning and only find one piece or even none," Jim added.

But as new meteorite fragments kept turning up it became clear that mapping the extent of the strewnfield would not be easy. "It's gotten so big," Jim explained. "David thinks we might have found only one tenth of

the recoverable samples. It could take years to find everything." Dr. Kring speculated that the Gold Basin field "may eventually rival the Holbrook fall in the number of specimens recovered," and believes it to be the oldest known strewnfield outside of Antarctica.

Jim showed me a particularly large Gold Basin sample, destined for the Smithsonian Institution. Some were donated to the Flandrau Science Center, others have been sold privately, and are making their way into the collectors' market.

"Word around Tucson was that Gold Basin might sell for \$3 a gram," Steve mentioned. "A high price considering how much is going to come out over the next few years."

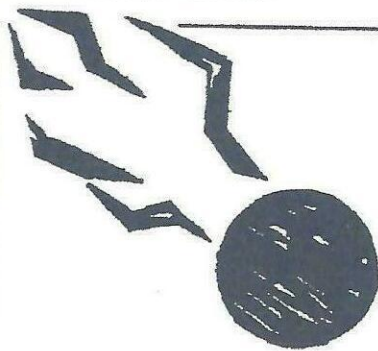
Later, as Steve and I prepared to depart – eager to see Gold Basin for ourselves – Jim presented us each with a stone from his personal collection, and advised us on calibrating our metal detectors. With brand-new meteorites fresh from the hand of the discoverer, we

jumped into our rented Grand Am, and amid promises to diligently record all pertinent information, waved goodbye and headed for Route 93. We drove hard all day, passing gorges, red sandstone cliffs, and crags of volcanic rock that gave suddenly onto fields of saguaro cactus, their arms pointing at crisp desert skies. But the scenery was of little interest to us. In our minds we were already digging into the floor of Gold Basin. "Get a move on people!" Steve yelled once, as a sluggish motorist

slowed us down. "Don't ya know there's meteorites waiting for us?"

Kingman is the only sizeable town near Gold Basin. We arrived there well past dark, but after stopping for supplies (Ziplock bags, and a ruler to place next to finds during photographing), we pressed on for another hour. "We'll stay at that small motel near the site," Steve said. "And maybe do some hunting in the dark tonight," he added, laughing.

We crept along a deserted road, past billboards advertising "Your own Arizona ranch for \$79 a month!" to a crooked and dimly-lit motel. Perhaps presentable in the '50s, it appeared desperately seedy now – even to the two of us, dressed in army boots and dusty T-shirts. But we had driven nearly 400 miles, and any kind of bed would be agreeable. A stooped and crusty old man peered at us from inside, refusing to open up. Steve pounded on the locked door until someone finally shouted, "No rooms!"



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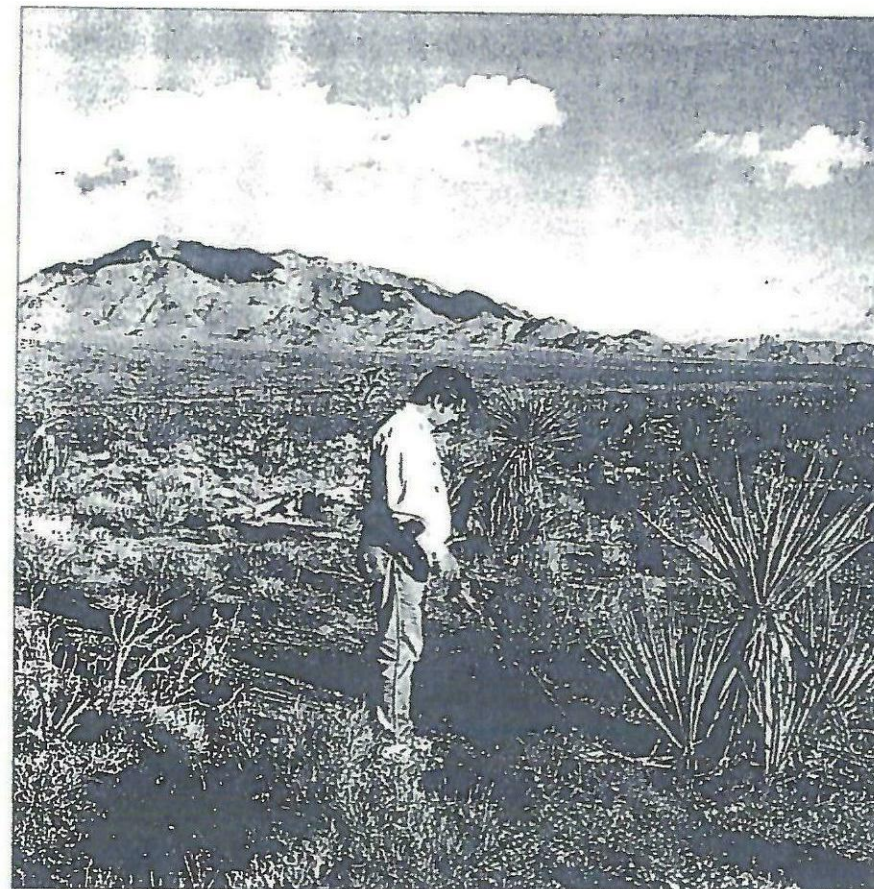
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Steve gets to work with his Goldmaster.

We crossed the road to the general store and asked for help.

"Is there another motel?" I asked. "That one is full."

"Which one?"

"Across the street," I said pointing into the dark.

"Oh you can't stay there. The people . . . they, you know, stay there all the time."

Steve looked at me knowingly, and whispered, "Prospectors."

"Is there anywhere else?"

"I think there's a place all the way up by the lake."

"Do you have their phone number?"

"No."

"Well, do you know the name of the place?"

"No idea."

And so it was that we drove all the way back to Kingman, where Steve consumed a large steak, and I drank a large Tennessee whisky before disappearing into sleep.

Monday greeted us sunny but cold. "High of only 48 degrees," the Weather Channel warned.

We crossed a wide alluvial plain, and wound along dirt roads through low hills dotted with Joshua trees — angular and awkward like stunted monkeys. I remembered Jim showing us a topo map, and pointing to this very spot. "We found meteorites on both sides of the road, here and here," he'd said. Steve pulled over, and as if by silent agreement, he took the

south side while I headed into a broad gully to the north. Almost immediately I got a strong reading, "Oh it can't be this easy," I thought. I dug down an inch or two and found a muddy ball that leapt happily onto my magnet. I was about to yell out, "I've got one!" when I noticed the Earth-bound quartz crystals. So I filled in the small hole I'd made, and tried again. Another signal, and a few more minutes of rapid digging produced a useless ten pound hot rock. Dozens of other finds included rifle cartridges, barbed wire, nails, and lead slugs. Oh yes, and lots of hot rocks.

"Maybe this Gold Basin stuff is worth three dollars a gram," Steve grumbled after hours of unsuccessful searching. We continued well past sunset, trying several different locations, but finding nothing. At last we abandoned our plan to camp, and instead drove seventy miles through the mountains to Las Vegas, where we obliterated our disappointments among the casinos of "The Strip."

The next morning I peered through steamy windows as gray sheets of rain pummeled the city streets. Steve was delighted by the appalling weather. "Ha! We would've put our tents right at the bottom of one of those dry gullies," he boomed, rocking with laughter. "To keep out of the wind. We would've been washed all the way to the Hoover Dam!"

Wednesday arrived clear, so we returned to Gold Basin. Our new strategy was to hit as many spots as possible, making a quick survey of each. If we found something, we'd concentrate our remaining time there. Our first discovery was a "No Trespassing" sign in front of a shanty town of trailers, trucks, and barbed wire.

"More gold prospectors," Steve speculated. "Well, this is one way to stake a claim."

"I don't get it," I said, nodding at the trailers. "Everyone's worried about a few meteorite collectors, and meanwhile all these prospectors are living up here."

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Other visitors have had similar thoughts. A friendly and enthusiastic amateur meteorite hunter, who uses the screen name Bolidechaser, set up a web page (<http://members.tripod.com/~bolidechaser/index.htm>) that chronicles his two visits to Gold Basin. Bolidechaser later received an official request to "avoid the site in order to maintain its scientific integrity."

I asked Dr. Kring how he felt about private individuals hunting at Gold Basin:

"In addition to laboratory analysis, our goal is to map out the distribution of fragments and their mass so that we can calculate the height at which the Gold Basin asteroid exploded. This will tell us the strength of the asteroid. We do not understand the strengths of asteroids. This makes it difficult to assess the collisional hazards of these objects and to assess different techniques that might be used to deflect asteroids in collisional orbits. Since the Gold Basin strewnfield may help us in this, it is very important that we preserve the site until we have enough information for the necessary calculations."

Bolidechaser volunteered to join the field team. His request was not approved, so he visited Gold Basin alone. "I met some members of the Desert Gold Diggers up there, and some campers," he told me during a telephone interview. "There were a lot of people around, and a local guy drove by and said, 'What in hell is going on? Has there been a strike or something?'" "Soon they'll need a parking lot and a shuttle for all the 'prospectors.' If they're really interested in finding all these fragments, they're going to have to use amateur meteorite collectors as field workers."

As Steve and I searched through a clear and silent afternoon, it was hard to imagine a crowd of hunters descending upon Gold Basin. Our sole companion that day was a stealthy one that we knew only by the marks of her passing — mountain lion tracks, recently imprinted

in damp sand, elegantly followed the curve of the riverbed, reminding us how far we were from civilization.

Again we worked late, half-filling a bucket with worthless hot rocks almost identical to the meteorites Jim had given us. But Jim had the advantage of a stone cutting saw and generator that he transported to Gold Basin the previous year. Cutting is sometimes the only way to tell desert-varnished hot rocks from authentic chondrites.

As the sky darkened, we headed east for the first time in ten days, disappointed that Gold Basin had not given up any of its secrets. But while we were in Vegas, Steve had cleaned up at the Caesar's Palace black jack tables, so we did leave with some gold in our pockets.

Author's Note: The Gold Basin strewnfield lies on both private and Federal land. Meteorites found on Federal land in the United States belong to the Smithsonian Institution. Any information concerning finds in Gold Basin should firstly be sent to Jim K r i e g h (kriegh@azstarmet.com) 40 East Calle Concordia, Oro Valley, Arizona 85737. However, Jim does not want people contacting him for permission to hunt in the area. Anyone wanting to hunt there should make their own arrangements.

The meticulous records kept by Jim Krieger and his colleagues, together with the specimens they donated to museums, demonstrate that amateurs and professionals can work together effectively within the me-

teorite community. "It was a joy to have them on the project," Dr. Kring told me. "They took it seriously and did a wonderful job. They produced first rate data." A fine example for all.

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