A meteoric find on campus

Discovering a space rock in the Doheny Mansion's backyard

By Phillip Jordan

Russell Thomas '18 MFT spent his childhood summers pointing his telescopes to the stars, dreaming of a big discovery. Those dreams didn't fade as he grew older, even now, as he studies marriage and family therapy in Mount Saint Mary's Graduate Division, and works as a behavioral specialist with L.A. schoolchildren who are on the autism spectrum. Thomas still spends much of his free time looking up, studying the heavens.

Last summer, he finally made his big find — not by gazing skyward, but by going for a swim at the University's Doheny Campus pool.

Tucked in a corner of the grounds surrounding the pool, hidden behind some landscaping, Thomas noticed a large, odd-sized rock. He'd been on the hunt for meteorites lately — even adding "find a meteorite" to his bucket list. And this pockmarked, rust-colored rock at the Mount certainly looked like one.

It had the signature "thumbprints" most meteorites have — smooth holes that form when it would have burned and melted passing through the earth's atmosphere. Thomas brought a magnet back one day and it stuck to the rock. He brought a small metal bar another day and tapped on the rock; the bar vibrated in his hands.

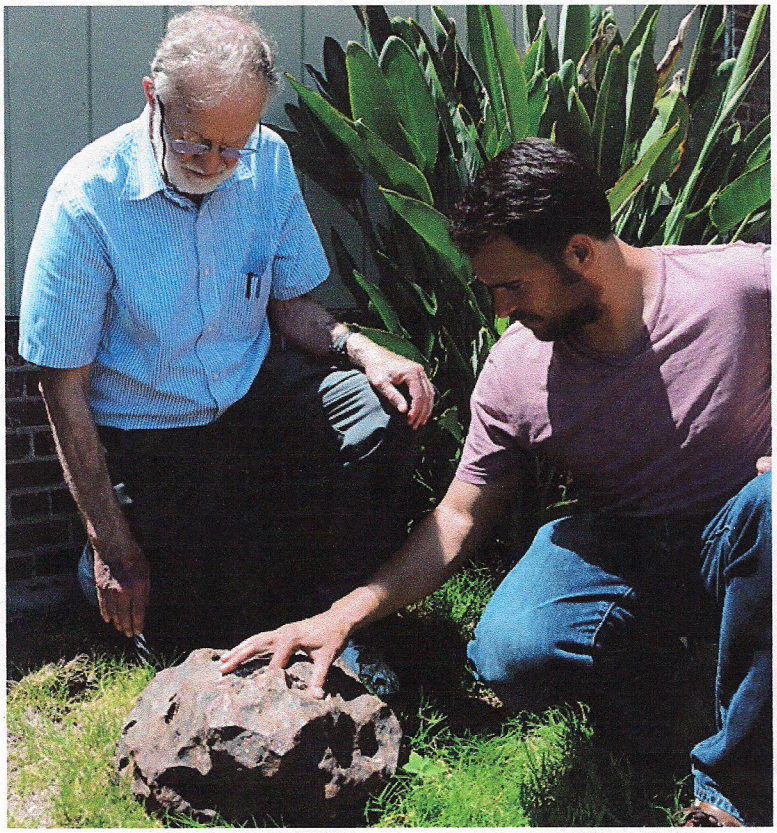
"I'd seen meteorites in museums, and I knew this looked and felt like one," Thomas says, "but it didn't make any sense that a meteorite would just be sitting right here on campus."

It was. Thomas had identified an estimated 150-pound iron meteorite that had broken off from the giant Canyon Diablo meteorite — one so massive that, when it smashed into what is now northern Arizona some 50,000 years ago, it created a crater almost three-quarters of a mile in diameter and nearly 600 feet deep.

We know this because a sample of the meteorite has been examined and tested by the best-known classifier of iron meteorites in the world, John Wasson, PhD. Wasson is a professor emeritus in UCLA's Earth, Planetary and Space Sciences department and curator of the UCLA Collection of Meteorites.

What we don't know is how this space rock wound up at the Mount.

Thomas, of course, is not the first person to have discovered the rock. It has likely been "discovered" many times over — by Native Americans, miners, perhaps by geologists. And, most likely, by



Meteorite expert John Wasson of UCLA and Russell Thomas '18 MFT inspect the meteorite discovered near the Doheny Campus pool.

Edward L. Doheny, the oil baron whose family gave the Mount's #8 Mansion and downtown L.A. campus its name — and its land.

"Doheny was a mining prospector before he hit oil in California," says Victoria McCargar, University archivist. "He had worked for the U.S. Geological Survey in his youth and traveled around the Southwest."

She thinks Doheny likely picked up the meteorite on one of those trips, or on a later trip when he and his wife Estelle rode across the southwest in their own rail car (named The Estelle). Back home at the Mansion, exotic palms and rare botanical specimens once surrounded the Dohenys' swimming pool, all housed under a glass-and-steel enclosure to form a greenhouse-bathhouse combo called the Palm House. Perhaps Doheny staged the meteorite there and then, after his death, the rock was left, forgotten.

Over time, the Palm House was cleared out, its greenhouse façade decayed, the swimming pool area restored for the University. Through it all, the rock must have stayed. Facilities employees often saw it through the years, wondering if it was indeed something like a meteorite, says Carlos Garcia, the Mount's longtime facilities manager. But until now, the hidden rock had never been brought to light.

"That's what makes the story so fun," Thomas says. "There's still so much mystery to it. How did Doheny get it here? How many people have walked right by it, not knowing it's something from outer space? It's crazy to think something so unique and so valuable has been sitting right there for so long."

Next for the Mount's meteorite: Certification and naming by the international Meteoritical Society, followed by a viewing for the University community. Then, the meteorite will likely be on the move again. This time, on long-term loan to the UCLA Collection of Meteorites, where it will take its place among one of the largest collections of certified meteorites in the United States.