HISTORY This Week EP 404: A Meteorite Hits Ann Hodges
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. November 30, 1954. I'm Sally Helm.

What I am about to tell you—I want you to keep in mind that the chances of it happening are so low that I don't know how you would even calculate them.

At about 12:45 in the afternoon, a space rock comes plummeting through the roof of a house in Sylacauga, Alabama. It bounces off a standup radio, ricochets around the living room, and then strikes a woman who was, up until a moment ago, napping on the couch.

Ann Hodges is declared the only known person to ever have been hit by a meteorite. It’s happened to a few other people since then, and there may have been others before too. But in 1954, newspapers are saying: “experts agree unanimously that Mrs. Hodges was the first person known to have been struck by a meteorite.” The only recorded person ever to be so lucky… or so unlucky. We're going to tell you today about her life—what happened to it after her cosmic encounter. But first...let's just spend a moment on the life of the meteorite.

Julia Cartwright: Let me put my meteorite hat on.

Sally Helm: Here to give voice to the meteorite is Dr. Julia Cartwright. A geologist and planetary scientist… and a meteor expert.

Sally Helm: Let us live in this meteor's mind for a moment. It doesn't have a mind. I know, but let's live in its world because it truly was born at some point in time that we were not present for. So, what, I mean, tell me like if you're this meteorite. How does your life begin? Like where are you born?

Julia Cartwright: So, I guess my life begins with heat.

Sally Helm: The solar system itself is just beginning. It's all heat and dust. And some of the swirling particles start to condense. Sort of the way a dust bunny comes together in the corner of your house.

Julia Cartwright: This is happening 4.568 billion years ago, so a very long time ago. So, I'm very old.

Sally Helm: Yeah. You're very old.

Julia Cartwright: Very, very old.

Sally Helm: This cosmic dust bunny gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

Julia Cartwright: You kind of get runaway growth. And, I can't really say how big I was. It's not something I remember.

And then, at a certain point.
A crash of some kind, probably. Maybe an asteroid. It hits this bigger space rock. And our meteoroid is knocked loose. To float around on its own. And then, as this space rock might describe it:

**Julia Cartwright:** I was on a trajectory around the solar system. I probably was out there for a few million years, floating around, doing things, minding my own business and then, in 1954 as our calendars go, I was on a collision course with the Earth.

**Sally Helm:** Earth's atmosphere is much denser than the vacuum of space. When the meteoroid hits, there's an uproar. High speeds. Fire. Melting, molten rock.

**Julia Cartwright:** I would say that that might be like a teenage phase cause so much stuff happens in a very short period of time. But really, I'm a very, very old thing at this point.

**Sally Helm:** This ancient space rock breaks through our atmosphere and finds itself on a flight path over the Earth. It passes oceans. Continents. A mountain range or two. It's falling quickly. Getting closer and closer to land. It starts to see forests. Then individual trees. And then finally, it crashes through a roof in Sylacauga, Alabama, and hits a sleeping Mrs. Ann Hodges.

**Julia Cartwright:** And then there was all sorts of a fuss after that.

**Sally Helm:** This is making me feel that it's an odd life to be a meteorite because you don't really have any say over where you go. It

**Julia Cartwright:** No.

**Sally Helm:** You're just getting pulled around.

**Julia Cartwright:** Yeah, I think that's also quite, that has a really interesting segue as well, because Mrs. Hodges did not choose to be impacted by a meteorite at all.

**Sally Helm:** Any more than the meteorite chose to be there.

**Julia Cartwright:** No, I don't, exactly, this had a massive effect on her life, and she had no choice in this matter. It happened to her, and it is unique. And I just, I don't know. Like what is, what is the effect? What does happen to you when you are subject to something totally beyond your control?

**Sally Helm:** Today: Ann Hodges meets a meteorite. What happened to this space rock after it plummeted to Earth and found itself thrust into very human affairs? And what happened to the human beings whose lives were upended by this rarest of rare events?

[SAD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Sylacauga, Alabama is a small town about an hour's drive from Birmingham. Surrounded by pine trees, which get turned into newsprint at a nearby plant. There's also a textile mill—mostly makes denim. And living in a little one-story wooden house just outside Sylacauga proper are Ann and Eugene Hodges. Right across the street is a movie theater.
Billy Field: You can't make this part up. There was a drive-in movie theater, and it had a marque next to it, and it said, Comet drive-in movie theater.

Sally Helm: Billy Field grew up in Sylacauga. He's now a professor at the University of Alabama, and a Hollywood writer. He’s written a screenplay about this story.

Billy Field: And it had red comet that shot toward the sky

Sally Helm: That was like the logo of the movie theater?

Billy Field: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But it but it lit up at night

Sally Helm: You're right if you put it in a novel or something, people would say, ‘That's too on the nose. You can't have the meteor going over the Comet Drive-in.’

Sally Helm: You can think of Billy Field as the director of our story. He reminded me a few times while we were talking that the South is a storytelling culture. Which, I gotta say, that’s hard to forget when you're talking to Billy Field.

Billy Field: You wanna hear a story?

Well, lemme tell you a story,

There's a good story about that.

I wanna tell you one other story.

I wanna tell you a story about the

He's another whole story, believe me, another whole story.

Sally Helm: While Field was writing his screenplay about the Hodges, he tracked down many of the people involved, and interviewed them or their living relatives. Ann Hodges had already died by the time he started looking into it. But her husband, Eugene, was still around.

Sally Helm: What was it like to meet him? What's his energy like?

Billy Field: Eugene, was a, tall guy about six foot four. He was a tree trimmer for the telephone company. He kept the limbs off the telephone lines and, he was, the boss of the room he, had a temper. According to Eugene, in those days, if a woman worked outside the home, it meant the husband didn't make enough money and he didn't want that.

Museum Archival: Most times she taken care of the bills.
**Sally Helm:** That's Eugene, talking to the Alabama Museum of Natural History in 2004 about the way he and Ann handled the bills.

**Museum Archival:** *I said, 'I'll make sure money's in the bank to cover 'em. You make sure they get there.'*

**Sally Helm:** Ann Elizabeth Hodges is a southern girl through and through. Born and raised in Alabama, on a farm. Living in Florida when she met Eugene. Married him in Mississippi. People described her to Billy as shy. Maybe a little melancholy.

**Billy Field:** I'm certainly not a doctor, but I think she was probably a little depressed. And I don't know this, but I like to say that she laid down on the couch one day and prayed that God would send her something that would make her life more exciting.

**Sally Helm:** The 1950 census had Ann working as a counter girl in a drug store. But at least on this particular Tuesday—November 30, 1954—she's at home in the afternoon. Lying on her couch, napping. She’s sick with a cold. Buried under two heavy quilts. Her mother had moved in with the couple, and she’s home too, sewing in the adjoining room. And at a quarter to one, a meteoroid that has been knocking around space for billions of years crashes through the roof of this one-story house in Sylacauga, Alabama.

**Julia Cartwright:** It first ricocheted off of her standup radio.

**Sally Helm:** That's Dr. Julia Cartwright again.

**Julia Cartwright:** The radio itself has got a really lovely dent on the top of it, which is really impressive. And then it ricocheted off of the radio and it made its way across the room to Mrs. Hodges as she was lying down having a nap on the sofa.

**Sally Helm:** And it hit her!

**Julia Cartwright:** Yeah, in the abdomen or like thigh-ish area. And the bruising is, wow. It's really quite substantial. It looks like the same sort of injury you might see if you were in a, in a car accident. Like it's a really severe, clearly a lot of like internal bleeding going on there.

**Sally Helm:** Dr. Cartwright has actually examined the rock itself in her work as a geologist at the University of Alabama. She told me, it weighs almost nine pounds. About as much as a gallon of milk. And it has fallen from space…by the time it reaches the Hodges’ home, it’s traveling at hundreds of miles per hour.

**Julia Cartwright:** It's a beast of a rock. It's pretty, I can, I've got it here. I can get it out.

**Sally Helm:** Can you?
Julia Cartwright: Yeah. Yes. It might take me a little while. It's a fairly, it's in. Nice big secure suitcase.

Sally Helm: She had brought the actual meteorite with her. I could see her, on a screen, pulling out this beige suitcase.

Julia Cartwright: Alright, so those are my gloves going on cause, you don't wanna put like your finger grease and stuff as well.

Okay, here it is.


Julia Cartwright: So, it's, it's about the size of, I'd say, a very large grapefruit.

Sally Helm: I cannot believe how cool it is to see this.

Julia Cartwright: Yeah. So here we go. It's kind of like gray. This more darker surface that you can see, is, the result of it having come through the atmosphere and then it basically kind of melts the very outside surface of the rock so we end up with this beautiful sheen, it looks like nail varnish. It looks like someone has gone painted on your rock. It's like it's quite shimmery. Um, I'm gonna put this down just for a sec. It’s a bit heavy.

Sally Helm: It's heavy!

Julia Cartwright: Yes, it is heavy. Gosh. This must have really hurt.

Sally Helm: It did. Ann Hodges jumps up from the couch, and she later writes, "it was then that I felt the pain flaming up through my left hand and alongside my hip."

Billy Field: As Forrest Gump would say, right on the buttocks.

Sally Helm: Ann is still in a kind of half-sleep. It all feels a little like a dream. She’d been awakened by this sound like a bomb going off. She still doesn’t know what hit her.

Billy Field: Her mother walked into the room and said, ‘what happened? What was that? What was that?’ And Ann said, ‘I think the chimney is falling down.’

Sally Helm: The two of them look around the room, maybe scanning for chimney pieces. That’s when they notice the eight-and-a-half-pound black rock.

Billy Field: And then they looked up and saw this hole through the roof, and then they both moved to the center of the room and hugged each other, embraced each other like, Oh my golly, what is going on?
Sally Helm: Ann's mom runs to the phone and calls up the fire department. *Something came through the roof and hit my daughter!*

Billy Field: And the fireman said, ‘Well, maybe this is the thing everybody's calling me about.’

Sally Helm: People all over Alabama have seen this thing in the sky. Including a five-year-old Billy Field.

Billy Field: Actually, I remember it quite well. I was in the backyard hanging up clothes with my mama. And in Alabama in fall, you can get really blue skies, very deep blue skies. And we were hanging up clothes in the backyard and a giant rocket of smoke shot across the sky. And then about halfway down it exploded and blew up into, what I remember is two rockets, two rockets of smoke that came down toward town.

Sally Helm: People in Sylacauga look up to see these black plumes of smoke. From further away, the smoke looks white. Little Billy Field thinks, maybe it was a plane crash. Maxwell Air Force base isn’t far away. Other people think that, too. In fact, dozens of planes set off across three states, to go out and search for survivors. Everyone is trying to figure this out.

Billy Field: Nobody knew what, what had happened. People were, you know, you could hear screen doors slamming and people saying, ‘What was that? What was that?’ You know?

Sally Helm: Some of them call the fire department. Including, of course, Ann Hodges’s mother. Pretty soon, fire trucks are swarming around the Hodges’ house.

Billy Field: And the fireman comes in and the mayor comes in and they, you know, all the police—

Sally Helm: The mayor comes?!

Billy Field: Oh, the mayor comes. Yeah. This is like, this is a big deal. I mean, everybody in town, everybody from miles around saw this.

Sally Helm: There happens to be a geologist in town, working on a new dam. The mayor calls him up and he takes a look at the rock.

Billy Field: He smiled and said, ‘It's a meteorite. She was hit by a meteorite.’

Sally Helm: And the town goes wild. Before you know it, everyone has heard the story.

Billy Field: The traffic is just like, a homecoming football game. The traffic is go all the way down the street and people are parking their cars. And Ann was in her bed, laying down, resting.

Sally Helm: Sure!
Billy Field: The people are coming through, is like at a funeral home or something when you're viewing the, they're coming through the front door. They pause at her bedroom, look in there, she's layin' there in bed, and then they walk on and out the back door. I mean, nobody even gave them permission. They just started doing it. And just sitting there with her mother holding her hand, and she's layin' in the bed. People just pause, look at her and move on.

Sally Helm: Wow.

Billy Field: In the meantime, the Air Force has picked this up on their radar and they're like, 'What's this, what's this?' You know the Air Force wants to get involved and they fly to Sylacauga in a helicopter, they land on the football field of Comer High School and the police, take the meteorite to uh, the Air Force.

Sally Helm: So, we've got Ann Hodges, layin' in her bed as all of Sylacauga parades past to peer in at her, and up at the hole in her roof. The rock that made that hole is gone, whisked away by the Air Force to be studied.

Billy Field: Cut to Eugene—

Sally Helm: In his car, driving home from his tree trimming job, south of Sylacauga.

Billy Field: He’s coming down Broadway and he turned to head out to his house and somebody on the corner yells out, ‘Hey, Hodges, something come through your roof and hit your wife.’ And he said, ‘Oh, what, what?’ And the guy ran off. So, Eugene, you know, he puts the pedal to the metal and goes roaring through town not very far, I mean a mile and he tops the hill and looks down and there's traffic just backed up, at least for a mile.

Sally Helm: He’s like, what happened? I gotta get home.

Billy Field: So, he gets on the shoulder of the road and drives down through there pulls up in his front yard. People are filing through the house. And Eugene, the big guy, gets out of his car and goes up and breaks in line and starts to go through the house. And some guy says, Hey buddy. Go to the back of the line and wait your turn like everybody else.

Sally Helm: Eugene told Billy Field that story.

Billy Field: Eugene said that I picked up that guy under his arms and I threwed him off that porch. And I went in my house.

Sally Helm: He told the Alabama Museum of Natural History, too.

Museum Archival: You can tell by my size I wasn't a little fell and I pushed my way in. I pushed some of 'em outta the way, but I got in.
Billy Field: And he said, ‘I walked in there and there was Ann in the bed. And I went and sat down next to her, and she said, well, honey, looks like we've had a lot of excitement around here today.’

Sally Helm: She tells him: it was a meteorite. From space.

Billy Field: And so, after the conversation a little bit, and Eugene says, well, where's the meteorite? You know…

Museum Archival: Said it hit that radio that it hit me, and it rolled out in the floor and said the policeman picked it up… and left with it.

Billy Field: Now the plot thickens because Eugene is not happy. This is their meteorite came to them. What's the Air Force doing taking it away?

Sally Helm: Later, looking up at the gaping hole in his ceiling, he tells a newspaper reporter, "I think I could get enough evidence that the thing fell in my house."

But...it actually fell somewhere else, too.

Billy Field: If you remember I said when the explosion happened, there were two rockets of smoke that arched toward town. Right?

Sally Helm: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right when you saw it.

Billy Field: Okay. So, Mr. JK McKinney is a wood cutter. He cuts firewood for people. That's how he makes a living.

Sally Helm: Julius McKinney is a Black man living in Sylacauga. He's driving home from a job. And there are slightly different versions of the timing of what he did next but here is the basic story:

Billy Field: He's got a wagon and two mules named Penny and Pearl, and he's out on a dirt road. Somewhere heading home. And they go around a little bend in the road, and then they stop just dead still. And he whips 'em again, ‘Come on, let's go, let's go.’ And their ears go back. Which means they're scared he can't get them to move. And he looks up ahead and he sees something black in the middle of the road.

Sally Helm: He thinks, maybe it's a snake. So, he picks up a stick, moves towards it cautiously… and pushes it off the side of the road. And…it doesn’t move like a snake. It seems to be just a rock. A black rock.

Billy Field: He gets back on the wagon and Penny and Pearl go home, that that was the thing they were scared of.

Sally Helm: The next day, Mr. McKinney is reading the paper. And a story catches his eye. It says:
**Billy Field:** It was a meteorite. The explosion over Sylacauga was a meteorite. It came down and it hit Mrs. Ann Elizabeth Hodges. crashed through her roof and hit her.

**Sally Helm:** Mr. McKinney is thinking, *huh. So that's what that smoke in the sky was all about.* He keeps on reading. And the paper describes the meteorite—a black rock.

Mr. McKinney wonders…and he doesn’t just stay there wondering. Instead, he goes back to that dirt road.

**Billy Field:** And he finds it and he puts it in the back of the wagon, and he brings it home and he sneaks it in the house and he puts it under the bed. Doesn't tell anybody, he doesn't even tell his wife. Because had he gone in the next day with it, said, ‘Look, ladies and gentlemen, look what I found.’ It's 1954, Jim Crow South, that African American man didn't have any rights. They would've said, ‘Well, you found it, the road, it, you know, doesn't belong to you.’

**Sally Helm:** Let’s leave Mr. McKinney there for now, with a mysterious black rock stashed under his bed.

Meanwhile, over at the Hodges', it's been chaos. Reporters everywhere. Ann later said, "It was too much for me. All the people, the noise, the excitement and the pain. My hand and hip were worse now, so they took me to the hospital in a state of shock.”

**Billy Field:** They took her to the hospital and Life magazine sends a photographer, and the, the photographer says, ‘Hey, Doc, where'd it hit her?’ And without asking her permission or anything, he just pulls back the blankets and there's this giant bruise, and she's looking up like, shock. Like what? Like, and he takes the picture and that becomes the Life magazine the next week.

**Sally Helm:** Wow, that's such a good encapsulation of what's going on for her, that people are just looking at her and she doesn't even want that.

**Billy Field:** Yeah. I mean, she was shocked. Like, you can see it. The photograph is, shows, places that, people wouldn't want.

**Sally Helm:** When a reporter asks Ann how she feels about being the first person to be hit by a meteorite, she responds matter of factly: "I feel bruised."

Eugene doesn't mind all the attention. Because people are starting to say… this meteorite could be worth something. Any meteorite has value, but this one? This historic one? It could really make them some money.

And so, Eugene has a goal in mind. Get that meteorite back. To help him out, he calls up a local lawyer.

**Billy Field:** Huel Love, who is a major character in the story.
Sally Helm: Huel Love is well-known in Sylacauga. Field says, he was once in a kind of 24-hour diner in town, and he overheard some guys in a booth saying that, if you get into some trouble, but you’re innocent… book this one lawyer in town, not Huel.

Billy Field: But now if you've done it, you needed to get Huel Love. Well, I knew Huel he was smart, conniving. he was gonna win for his client no matter what.

Julie Love: He was young then. And incredibly handsome and trouble. People would've said he looked like Leonardo DiCaprio.

Sally Helm: That's Huel Love's daughter, Julie. Who is herself an attorney.

Julie Love: My mother would say, ‘if you can't afford to hire Huel to defend you in a case that you better pray to Jesus cause he's your last resort.’ People used to actually come out during lunch and sit and watch him try cases because he was just very dynamic. I mean like an old southern preacher, which, you know, good trial lawyers and good preachers, they walk hand in hand. They’re storytellers. And there was one occasion that a juror actually shouted ‘amen’ from the jury box. So, I wasn't surprised that they contacted him immediately when their meteorite got taken from them.

Sally Helm: By the very next day after the meteorite hits, Eugene Hodges has booked Huel Love. And Love starts working his magic. He gets in touch with people he knows in DC. And within a few days the Air Force has said fine, come and get it.

Julie Love: From the time I was a child, we always knew that daddy went to Washington to get the rock back and that, you know, there are all these pictures where my sister Patty was playing with it.

Billy Field: Huel knew the value of publicity. And so, there's a picture in some big magazine of Huel getting off the airplane with the meteorite. Like he'd gone to Washington, he’d overcome the big powers of big government and he got them their meteorite back cause it belonged to them.

Sally Helm: At least…that’s what they say. And they want to cash in by selling this meteorite. Soon enough…someone reaches out to buy it. The Smithsonian Institution. Big prestigious museum in DC. One of their curators writes to Ann Hodges: “The US National Museum has the largest collection of meteorites in this country… Thus, we hope to see this specimen and have the opportunity to make an offer of purchase.”

Great news for Eugene—here’s the big money he’s been hoping for.

But there's about to be a wrinkle in that plan. And it takes the shape of a little old lady.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: By mid-December 1954, the Hodges seem set. Ann's out of the hospital, cleared with x-rays that say she's just badly bruised. Eugene's got the meteorite back. And their lawyer, Huel Love, is corresponding with the Smithsonian about a purchase.
Billy Field: Now they have their meteorite, they're all excited about it. They're ready to sell it to the Smithsonian. But who lives across the cow pasture? Mrs. Birdy Guy.

Sally Helm: Mrs. Birdie Guy is the Hodges' landlady. They don't own the little house across the street from the Comet drive-in.

Billy Field: They're renters in the house. So, Birdie Guy comes along with her attorney. They file suit saying, the meteorite doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the owner of the house.

Sally Helm: Birdy Guy's lawyer finds some case in Oregon where the court ruled that a meteorite belonged to the company that owned the land where it was found. Not the person who found it.

Billy Field: What the court ruled was that anything that falls from the heavens belongs to the owner of the property that thing comes to rest. Okay?

Sally Helm: Wow. It's amazing that there's a precedent about that. That's perfect for Birdie Guy.

Billy Field: In all fair and people like to make out. Birdie is a, is a bad guy. But she just wanted the, her roof fixed. You know, she just wanted, wasn't trying to take advantage of them. She believed, well the law is, it belongs to the owner of the property where it comes to rest. And it came to rest on my property.

Sally Helm: But, Ann Hodges says, it came to rest on my body! One newspaper wrote, "Mrs. Hodges had no precedent to cite except maybe the custom that gives a baseball to the fan who catches it or gets hit by it."

Julie Love: I do have a letter from the Smithsonian and a reply that my dad had sent them that said, ‘Unfortunately at the moment it's tied up in litigation. We're not expecting it to free up until the first part of next year.’

Sally Helm: The Smithsonian isn’t the only one. According to Huel Love, the Hodges are getting offers of up to $20,000.

Julie Love: Ms. Hodges got letters from people that were not only given her advice, but just like fan mail, like someone would reach out to you today on Facebook. Like one lady said, ‘Dear Mrs. Hodges, I sincerely hope your bruises well. May I say that you have pretty features and beautiful hands.’ Because there's a picture of her in Time Magazine. I mean, she got poems. One church asked her to donate the meteor so they could use it for sermons. One fellow wanted to make a replica of it to make a ring for his wife.

Sally Helm: Field says, Ann Hodges really can’t stay out of the limelight. Even if she wants to.

Billy Field: There's a famous song called “Stars Fell on Alabama.”

Stars Fell on Alabama Archival: Stars fell on Alabama...
Billy Field: People started singing, stars fell in Sylacauga. It was her 15 minutes of fame.

Sally Helm: She even gets an offer to appear on the national game show, "I've Got a Secret."

Billy Field: And I'm sure Ann didn't want to because she's shy, but I'm sure that you, Eugene probably said, well, this will be good for us.

Sally Helm: So, Ann flies out to New York, walks onstage, and whispers her secret to the host: "I was hit by a meteorite."

Billy Field: The celebrities would get to ask questions and have to guess who you were.

*I'VE GOT A SECRET* Archival: Mrs. Hodges. Was it a happy event? I would say, uh, it was one of mixed blessings. Not too happy at the time, but it's, uh, turned out not to be too unfortunate later. Huh. Okay.

Was there an object involved? Yeah.

Sally Helm: Eventually:

*I'VE GOT A SECRET* Archival: You're not the lady that the meteor fell on, are you?

Sally Helm: And—on national television—the Hodges get some good PR for their case.

*I'VE GOT A SECRET* Archival: I understand there's also litigation involved. Uh, who claims they now own the meteorite? Well, the man lady says it's hers. So, cause it came through her roof. Yeah. It landed on your hip, didn't it? That's right. Well, I tell you what, I probably shouldn't take any sides in this. I ain't no lawyer, but I claim if you're lying-in bed and a meteorite comes along and hits you, but it happened to me, I'd say it was my meteorite is the way.

Sally Helm: It seems like this TV audience, at least, is on her side. But Birdie Guy isn't letting up. And neither are the tourists, pouring in to stare at the Hodges’ house…and at Ann herself.

Julie Love: They couldn't get people to stop lining up like they were going to Mecca to come through and see where it happened.

Sally Helm: By June, seven months after this vanishingly rare cosmic visitation, Ann Hodges is telling reporters, "I wish it had never happened."

But she is not in control here. And the story just keeps unfolding…

Julie Love: In kind of a weird little, I guess you'd say a twist:
Billy Field: While these white folks are fighting over who owns this thing, Mr. McKinney has the other piece under his bed. The audience has to understand that in 1954, an African American man, he wouldn't have had a chance if he'd come out and said, ‘Well, now, I've got the other piece.’

Sally Helm: But Field says McKinney has a friend, a white man, he thinks he can trust. He tells the man about his encounter with the meteorite, and that...

Billy Field: He had the other piece of it.

Sally Helm: We know from records at the Smithsonian Institution show that Mr. McKinney sells his space rock to a man named Stuart Perry. Perry is a newspaper publisher by day... who has a passion for collecting meteorites and donating them for research. And that is how Mr. McKinney’s rock ends up at the museum in May of 1955.

So how much money do Mr. and Mrs. McKinney earn from their private sale of the rock found in the road? Field says he doesn’t know the exact amount. But it was...

Billy Field: Enough to buy a new house and a car.

Sally Helm: A few months later, Huel Love settles the Hodges’ case out of court. The Hodges agree to pay Birdie Guy $500 of whatever they make off the sale of the meteorite. They're expecting the bulk of a big payout to go to them. But by this point:

Billy Field: Here comes a little yellow telegram from the Smithsonian saying, ‘We're no longer interested in buying your meteorite.’

Sally Helm: They were like, we, just need one. We're outta the market.

Julie Love: As time went on, people lost interest in it.

Sally Helm: Not just the Smithsonian. Also, those other fans—who had sent Ann letters and poems. Who’d lined up to see the Hodges’ home like it was some kind of sacred spot.

Julie Love: I have a telegram from one fellow who had made an offer and sent a telegram to my dad that said he's withdrawing the offer there's just too much publicity, so the Hodges wound up for a period of time using it as a doorstop.

Sally Helm: A door stop. This heat-scarred rock, which started forming alongside the solar system itself, and traveled around the universe for billions of years…it became a doorstop. In a little house in Sylacauga, Alabama. The kind of thing people would walk past every day … and barely even see.

Eventually, Ann Hodges donates the rock to the Alabama Museum of Natural History. In exchange, they get just enough money to repay their debts: $500 for Birdie Guy, and another $250 for Huel Love, to reimburse his air fare from that meteorite recon trip to DC.
This whole meteorite media firestorm takes a toll on the Hodges.

**Billy Field:** She was depressed, and Anne had a lot of anxiety and the doctors put her on pills which ended up screwing up a lot of people’s lives in those days. And then later on she was divorced from Eugene. And Eugene said it had something to do with the, the meteorite.

**Museum Archival:** She never did completely recover.

**Sally Helm:** Eugene again, talking to the Alabama Museum of Natural History.

**Museum Archival:** You know, she had that nervous breakdown and all of that and she, she never was the same person after that. She just went all to pieces.

**Sally Helm:** Billy Field says, just like with so many parts of Ann Hodges’ story, the rumor about her breakdown went around Sylacauga. He remembers hearing, when he was a teenager, that she lived in an apartment above a local drug store.

**Billy Field:** So, we'd pass that, in high school, driving around at night, we'd pass that. I'd look up there and think, ‘Yeah, she's up there. What, what? You know, what's she like? What's she thinking? You know? How did that meteorite make her crazy?’

**Sally Helm:** Ann Hodges would die a few years later, of kidney failure, at age 52.

And we don’t know what she was thinking in the years after her brush with the cosmos. Whether she blamed all her troubles on the meteorite, or came to love her new doorstop, or what. But undoubtedly: she had had a dramatic encounter with one of the fundamental facts of life. That you just can’t control what it brings you. You never know what might come crashing through the roof.

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what’s on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests: Dr. Julia Cartwright, planetary scientist at the University of Alabama. Billy Field, professor at the University of Alabama and screenwriter. And Julie Love Templeton, attorney in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Dr. Cartwright is involved in a number of art/science collaborations to engage and educate the public about meteorites and planetary science. You can find out more on her website.
Keep an eye out for Billy Field’s latest project, The Story Acorn.com, which launches in January 2023. The website will feature history from the Civil Rights movement, told by those who lived it. The website teaches students to gather stories from their own communities and share them with the world.

Thanks also to Mary Beth Prondzinski, and to the Alabama Museum of Natural History, whose interview with Eugene Hodges you heard throughout the episode. If you’re passing through Tuscaloosa, drop in to see the Hodges meteorite for yourself! I can attest, it is pretty mind blowing.

Sally Helm: I knew that this might happen, but I'm surprised by how amazing it is to see it. It really, really is amazing.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens, Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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