

NASA searches for loot that went from space into another void

MANNY FERNANDEZ

HOUSTON, JANUARY 23

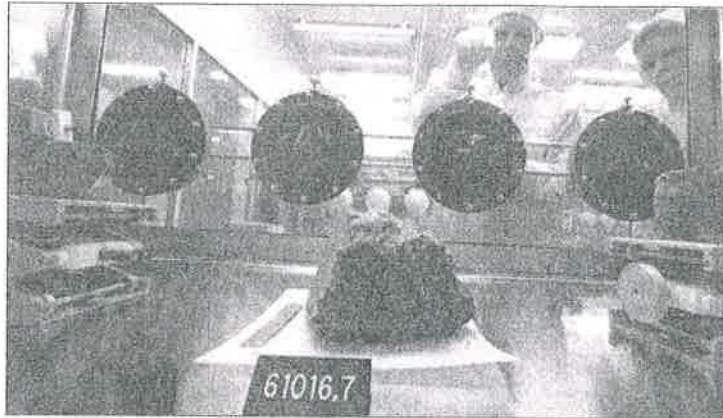
WEST Virginia lost one, until it turned up one June day on a bookshelf in the basement of a retired dentist. New York has one in a vault at a museum in Albany, but another one given to the state for safekeeping was not kept very safe, because it appears to be missing, though the attorney general's office has started looking into the case.

A long-lost one in Colorado resurfaced at the home of a former governor, and another one in Arkansas was found among former President Bill Clinton's memorabilia. Somebody swiped one from a museum in the island country of Malta, and somebody else who got his hands on one in Honduras tried to sell it in Miami to an undercover federal agent.

Rare art? Priceless jewels? Nothing so terrestrial.

All of these items were literally out of this world: moon rocks, meteorite samples and other so-called astromaterials that were lent to researchers by NASA or were offered as gifts to American and foreign leaders.

Hundreds of moon rocks and other space objects have been lost, destroyed, stolen or remain unaccounted for, some of which American astronauts and presidents presented to dignitaries around the country and the world decades ago and others that NASA officials lent for education, research and public



An office at Johnson Space Centre maintains NASA's collection of 1,63,000 astromaterial samples, including these lunar rocks. NYT

display. The objects survived in outer space for ages and include some of the first samples ever returned from another planetary body, but after just a few short years on Earth they met the same fate as a set of car keys or a 29-cent postcard.

Six meteorite samples lost in the mail in 2004 were headed to a lab at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington and have never been seen since. In 1978, NASA lent a lunar sample disk to the Mount Cuba Astronomical Observatory in Greenville, Del. By the time NASA inquired about the disk more than 30 years later, the manager responsible for it had died and the disk — a six-inch diameter disk with soil and rock materials from the moon — was gone. NASA says the observatory could not locate it, but a member of

the observatory's board of trustees maintains that the manager sent it back to NASA.

A piece of the moon weighing 1.1 grams — among lunar samples collected by Apollo 17 astronauts in December 1972 — was given to the governor of West Virginia more than one year later. Its whereabouts were unknown in recent years, until the fragment resurfaced in June 2010, in a box in the basement game room of Robert T. Conner, a retired dentist.

The only connection between him and the governor who was presented the lunar fragment, Arch A. Moore Jr., was Conner's brother, who died in 2002. The fragment was about the size of a dime, encased in a Lucite ball and mounted on a wooden plaque, and Conner had never given it much thought. "It was not eye-catching at

all, that's for sure," said Conner, 76. "I've seen better-looking bowling trophies."

Last month, NASA's inspector general, Paul K. Martin, determined that 517 moon rocks and other astromaterial samples that were lent between 1970 and 2010 had been lost or stolen. A report issued by Martin's office found that 11 of the 59 researchers in the Houston and Washington areas who were audited could not account for all of the samples NASA had lent them, or the agency found other discrepancies, including researchers who had items that according to agency records either did not exist or had been lent to others. The space agency had also failed to update its records for 12 researchers who had died, retired or relocated, in some instances without returning the samples. One researcher, the report noted, still had lunar samples he had borrowed 35 years earlier though he never conducted research on them.

The report found that Johnson Space Centre's Astromaterials Acquisition and Curation Office in Houston, which maintains NASA's collection of 1,63,000 astromaterial samples, lacked sufficient control over its loans of moon rocks and other items for research, education and public display. Spokesmen for NASA in Washington and Houston said the losses reported by the inspector general represented only a small fraction of the tens of thousands of astromaterial samples the space agency had lent to scientists. NYT