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## Auction of piece of "sacred" meteorite miffs Oregon tribe

By **LARRY McSHANE**  
*The Associated Press*

NEW YORK — The Willamette Meteorite is a sacred icon to the Oregon-based Clackamas Indians. The tribe has its own name for the massive space rock, Tomanowas, and holds an annual religious ceremony with the meteorite in its home at the American Museum of Natural History.

Now a chunk of the 10,000-year-old meteorite is up for auction, and the tribe is denouncing its sale.

But the owner of the fragment, noting the vast majority of the 15.5-ton meteorite remains untouched, said his sympathy for the group's complaints would not halt next month's sale. The 30-pound piece, sliced from the renowned rock's crown nearly a decade ago, is expected to bring in more than \$1 million.

"We are deeply saddened that any individual or organization would be so insensitive to Native American spirituality and culture as to traffic in the sale of a sacred and historic artifact," said Siobahn Taylor of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, which includes the Clackamas.

"As a tribe, we do not participate in such sales and auctions," Taylor said Thursday. "We view them with dismay."

The piece of the Willamette is the biggest draw at the upcoming auction of meteorites and related memorabilia at the Bonhams auction house. The meteorite is the largest ever discovered in North America.

Darryl Pitt, owner of the slice of the rock, said he understood the Grand Ronde's concerns.

"I'm saddened by their being saddened," Pitt said. "While I regret the Grand Ronde has taken offense, the bottom line is that a portion of the meteorite is simply changing hands."

The meteorite belongs to the Museum of Natural History, which swapped with Pitt the small piece up for sale

in return for his half-ounce piece of a meteorite from Mars. The deal occurred in 1998, before the Grand Ronde group staked its claim to the Willamette.

According to Pitt, about 20 pieces of the Willamette are in the hands of private collectors.

The meteorite was discovered in 1902 in the Willamette Valley by a part-time Oregon miner, who removed it from land belonging to a local iron company. The miner charged a quarter to view the meteorite until a court order compelled him to return it to the iron company in 1905.

A New York philanthropist then paid \$20,600 for the rock and donated it to the Manhattan museum.

In September 1999, the Clackamas tribe made a claim for ownership of the meteorite, which the tribe believes was sent to earth by the Sky People. The Grande Ronde Tribal Council and the museum agreed to keep the Willamette in New York.

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