

HARVEY NININGER'S 1948 PETITION TO NATIONALIZE METEOR CRATER

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At the June, 1948 meeting of the American Astronomical Society, Harvey Nininger petitioned it to pass a motion in support of nationalizing Meteor Crater. Speaking to the motion, he argued that the mining efforts of the Barringers, who held title to the Crater, were leading to mutilation of the Crater rim and removal of meteoritical material without proper documentation. Nininger then went on to make the unauthorized—and false—claim that the Barringers would be receptive to a fair purchase offer for the Crater.

Only one person—Lincoln LaPaz—spoke against the motion, and it passed on a near unanimous vote, with only four persons voting against it: LaPaz, Frederick Leonard, Clyde Tombaugh, and one unidentified individual. The Barringers, who had not been given advance notice of the petition and were not present at the meeting, felt ambushed. They quickly notified Nininger that his rights to exploration and research at the Crater were being terminated, and soon thereafter they gave exclusive rights to his arch rival, LaPaz.

Intrigued by a letter that Dorrit Hoffleit wrote to Gene Shoemaker, we joined her in puzzling over what lay behind Nininger's curious and self-defeating behavior. Based on a close reading of the voluminous Nininger correspondence, we conclude that it was rooted primarily in his complex relationships with Leonard and LaPaz, and his fervent desire to establish a national institute for meteoritical research with them.

But Nininger's falling out with Leonard and his vicious cat-and-dog fight with LaPaz brought his proposed institute plan to an end, and forced him to act on his own. In 1946 he established his American Meteorite Museum on Route 66, some five miles from the Crater. He hoped to move his museum to the Crater itself, but knew that was not possible, as the Tremaines, whose Bar-T-Bar cattle ranch owned the land surrounding the Crater, had plans of their own for establishing a tourist center there.

Running out of options, Nininger wondered what would happen if the Crater was acquired by a federal agency and made into a public park, with an accompanying tourist center and museum. With characteristic élan, he could picture himself at the head of such a facility—in essence the administrator of the Crater—with a secure salary and adequate space to exhibit his meteorite collection. In the hope that he could bring such a favorable prospect to fruition, Nininger self-assuredly—if naively—presented his petition to the American Astronomical Society to nationalize Meteor Crater.

But Nininger's plan did not work. The Barringers forcefully rebutted the allegations in his petition, and made it clear they had no intention of relinquishing their title to the Crater. They argued that any nationalization of the Crater would end scientific exploration there, simply leading to its sterile preservation. They considered themselves as stewards of the Crater, who were acting as trustees for the advancement of scientific knowledge. As of now, four generations of Barringers have provided ample proof of the wisdom, success, and generosity of their stewardship.