The History of Mt. Cuba’s Lunar Sample Program

On March 10, 1978 Lemert E. Wade Jr., Mt. Cuba Observatory Manager, contacted Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center. His hope was to obtain lunar samples to use for youth programs. He was sent a Display Agreement and a Security Plan to fill out. He was approved and granted a loan of Lunar Sample Disk #3.

In July of 1978, Mr. Wade was invited to attend a briefing on the Lunar Sample Education Project. This program took place at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland on August 11, 1978. After completing the workshop, he received a certificate and was ready to embark on his new endeavor.

Anyone involved in handling or showing the samples had to be trained by Mr. Wade and sign a waiver agreeing to follow procedure. Security of these samples was extremely important. Unless they were being used the samples were kept under lock and key. They were kept in the office in a filing cabinet with a steel bar and a combination lock securing it.

Mr. Wade put an advertisement in a local paper on September 20, 1978. And so began some very interesting and educational public nights and a long relationship with NASA. It was a great success. He was able to give suggestions to his contacts at Lyndon B. Johnson Space center to better the program. The public nights contained videos, slides and actual examination of the Lucite encased materials under a microscope. Mr. Wade started adding some other details to the program to better suit our audience. In lieu of the movie film that he was sent, he started showing a movie on Apollo Fifteen which went right along with the slides and samples. The public’s interest peaked and the public night attendance grew.

Starting in February of 1979 a new program was started at the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, involving samples of meteorites. Now not only were we able to show Lunar samples but now we could obtain a disk with Meteorite samples. This was a very exciting time for the observatory. Starting on June 19, 1979 we started our new and improved program utilizing both of the samples, and it was a huge success. Our original 90 day loans turned into 9 month loans and then yearly loans. It was a roaring success for the observatory. Mr. Wade was able to provide feedback to NASA in 1982 that was astounding. In a 12 month period we had between 2200-2300 guests pass through our doors to attend the programs about the samples. That is an astonishing amount of guests for a program.

In 1982 a new secretary, Grace Quirk, came on board at Mt. Cuba. Besides all of her other official duties, she was responsible for keeping the samples locked in a filing cabinet in the office. The security remained the same since the inception of the program, with the steel rod and combination lock in place unless they were being used for a public night.
Mr. Wade stayed a constant supporter of these programs until the time of his passing in 1986. At that time the torch was passed to Mr. Leo Glasser. Mr. Leo Glasser was one of three founding members of the Mount Cuba Astronomical Observatory. He took the torch and kept it burning. From 1986-1990 he kept the moon rocks and meteorites coming back for the public to learn from and enjoy.

The next gentleman to take over was Mr. John Rogers Jr. From 1990 until 1994 Mr. Rogers became the manager, and he also made sure that the program continued without a hitch.

Then in 1994 Dr. Emil J. Volcheck took the reins. Another great man who had a rich history at the observatory. He was the man you procured the spot for the Sawin Observatory for the DAS, before Mt. Cuba had even been built. He kept the program on track as it was in the beginning. Until August of 1998, when the NASA curators office requested we return our Meteorite sample ASAP. The disks had been on loan to NASA from an outside source and that source wanted them returned. With great sadness on August 26, 1998 the Meteorites were returned. But all was not lost. We continued to be loaned the Lunar samples, so a part of the program continued.

From 1999 through 2003 we still did the occasional public night with the Lunar samples. But after the Meteorite samples left it seemed the interest fizzled out a bit. But we didn’t let that discourage us. In 2003 the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center gave us a new loan. This one far exceeded our 1 year contracts of the past. We were given a 5 year loan period. No need to return or renew until 2008. For the first 9 years of the Meteorite and Lunar Sample program we were sent many different sample numbers. But starting in 1985 we kept the same samples and just resent the loan paperwork. Lunar Sample #064 and Meteorite Sample #003(until it was sent back in 1998) became fixtures at Mount Cuba.

In 2005 a rough period began here at Mt. Cuba. Emil Volcheck and Grace Quirk both had some health issues to battle. But they did their best to keep things running as smooth as possible with the help of our trustees and volunteers. They both fought valiant efforts against their illnesses and never let their struggles take away their love for their jobs at the observatory.

In July of 2007 Grace seemed to feel that the office had become too busy of a place for Lunar sample #064 and decided to secure them in a safer place. She had moved them to the dark room in a filing cabinet with a lock, which previously held Jack Fisher’s photography developing chemicals.

In 2009 Emil Volcheck lost his brave battle with his illness. He was such a strong man. Even when he should have been home resting he would have his loving wife Diana drive him to work to make sure things were running the way they should.

From 2009 until 2010, Hank Bouchelle took over as acting manager. At this point we hadn’t held a public night with the Lunar samples in years and so no one was looking for them. And unfortunately, Grace’s battle with Parkinson’s made it more difficult for her to remember things that once came so easily to her. In 2010 Greg
Weaver took over as observatory manager and a representative from NASA requested we return sample #064. At this point with illnesses and absences the whereabouts of the sample became a mystery. So at this point to NASA and the public, it looked as if Mt. Cuba had lost the moon rocks. The search began, everyone looked for the sample. The building was searched multiple times by various members and always the same results, NOTHING!!

In December of 2014 Grace Quirk passed away suddenly after spending years battling cancer and Parkinson’s. She had worked up until a few days before her passing. She always had great respect for her job and those she worked for and with. She took great pride in her position at Mt. Cuba. It was always a running joke that when Grace retired her daughter wanted to jump in and have the job her mother had always loved and had praised for letting her have time with her family.

In May of 2015 I began my journey at Mt. Cuba. My name is Kim Green. I am the daughter of Grace Quirk. Dave Groski, Board Chairman, asked me, if during my time here if I could help track down the whereabouts of Lunar sample #064. Who better to decipher 30 plus years of my mother’s memos, notes and daily planner entries? So that is what I did, and this is what I found.

In a memo written in 1998 Grace made a notation about Moon Rocks being sent back. When in actuality it was the Meteorites that were sent back, false alarm. Than after sifting through daily planners from 1982-2007, I came across a notation in July of 2007 stating that she had moved them to the dark room. After sifting through 30 years of paperwork I had finally caught a lucky break. I ran up to the dark room and found the locked cabinet. After finally getting the cabinet open, I found SAMPLE # 064!!! David Groski was able to call NASA and give them the great news. And Mt. Cuba was able to return the sample to the NASA curator. It felt wonderful to be able to have the weight lifted off the shoulders of all the past and present dedicated members of the Mount Cuba Astronomical Observatory.