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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: April 29, 2008

MAY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH STONE BALL MYSTERY ARTIFACT

The Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month for May is a large stone ball collected by Sheldon Jackson. There are three of these stone balls in the collection but the documentation on them is sketchy. There is some evidence as to where they came from but no clue as to their use, if they were used for anything.

From 1890 to 1900, Jackson kept travel diaries of the regions and villages he visited. 1890 was the first year he traveled to the Arctic regions of Alaska and Siberia on the Revenue Cutters. While he was in Siberia in 1891 he made this entry: "Wednesday, September 9, 1891; Cape Yagnakinone, Siberia; 'Bought a large round stone 2 feet in diameter.'" Either Dr. Jackson didn't note the stone's size correctly or that particular stone is no longer in the collection. The largest stone in the collection has a diameter of 15" and the other two are 10" in diameter.

A mention of stone balls appeared in the November of 1890 North Star, the newspaper published by the Sitka Industrial and Training School. The paper printed the minutes to the meeting of the Alaskan Society of Natural History and Ethnology which listed all of the donations that had come in during that year. The article stated that Jackson had donated around 700 objects for the "Sitka Museum," among them "beach stones, 2" from Cape Thompson which are assumed to be two of the three present in the collection.

Many visitors reported seeing this mystery of perfectly round balls in other parts of the world. They were found in abundance in Costa Rica and a study of these balls was done there in the 1950s. The group concluded that some of those balls were man-made and must have been used for some "religious or ceremonial purpose." As a visitor to a museum in central Washington, the Sheldon Jackson Museum's Curator, Rosemary Carlton, saw large round stones exhibited as having been used by the local Native American groups. It was said that once a man could no longer lift one of the balls, he was then an "old man." At one time, among the Makah and southern British Columbia Native groups, the balls were used in ceremonial contests – sometimes the balls were greased to add to the lifting competition.

Whether the stone balls were manmade or a manifestation of nature, they demonstrate the curiosity and extent of Dr. Sheldon Jackson’s earnestness in preserving the objects he collected – maybe in hopes that someday someone could answer the question raised in his mind as he instructed the crew of the Revenue Cutters to haul the hefty stones onto their ships.

The stone can be seen in the museum gallery May 1 through May 31. Winter hours continue until May 10 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Winter admission is \$3. Summer hours begin May 11 and are daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with \$4 admission. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

The stone can also be viewed on our website at http://www.museums.state.ak.us/sheldon_jackson/artifact_of_month.html.

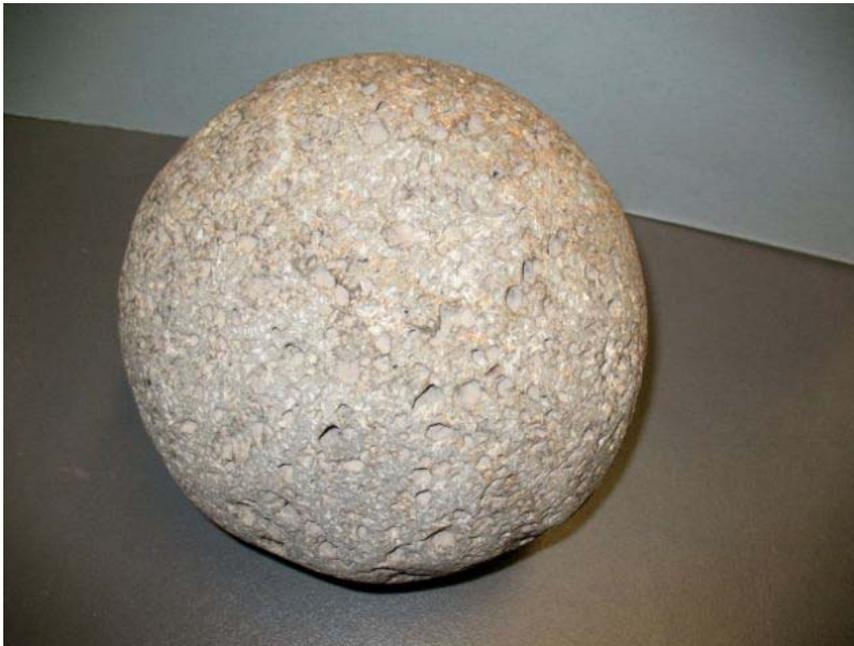
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STONE BALL MYSTERY ARTIFACT



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