

The Real Smiling Rock



2017

Go to www.ebay.com.

Navigate to a category called “Everything Else.”

Within it are categories like “Weird Stuff”, “Totally Bizarre” and simply “Other”.

These are the outer limits of eBay, a place for items that defy categorization.

Set your minimum bid relatively high, at \$1,000, for example.

Now you are scrolling through the crème of the dregs of online auctions.

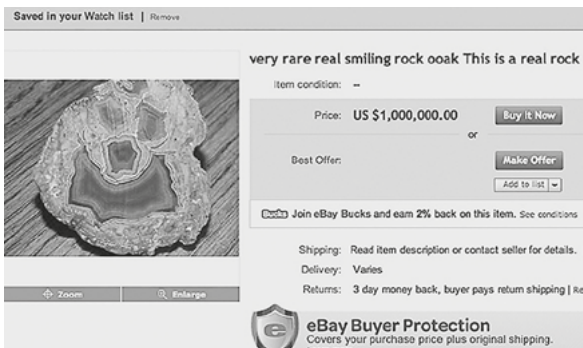
This is where The Smiling Rock resides.

The Smiling Rock is a small agate geode for sale on eBay.com. Buyers can use the Buy It Now function to purchase The Smiling Rock for \$1,000,000 or they can suggest a lower price, which the seller can accept or reject.

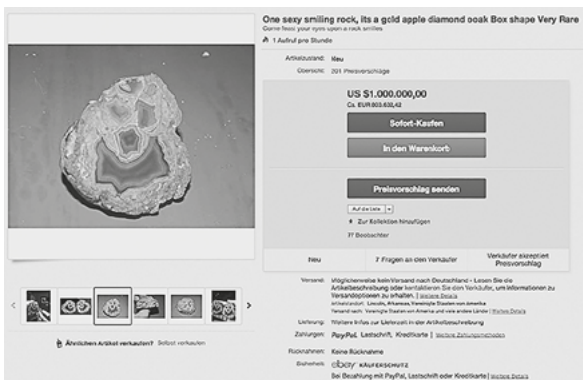
The Smiling Rock has been listed on eBay for more than seven years. It has been viewed more than 28,000 times and 97 people currently have the listing saved in their Watch Lists. Nearly 200 offers have been made to purchase The Smiling Rock for amounts less than \$1,000,000 and none of them have been accepted.

I have kept The Smiling Rock in my eBay Watch List for five years. The eBay listing has evolved over time as the images, title, and item description have changed.

In November of 2012 the eBay listing read: *very rare real smiling rock oak This is a real rock*. The price was \$1,000,000 with the option to offer a lower price.



In November 2014 the listing read: *one sexy smiling rock, it's a gold apple diamond oak Box shape Very Rare*. The price and buying options were the same and the listing had new photos of The Smiling Rock.



Last updated February 11, 2015, the description now reads:

***** Update *** it is still smiling ***This is a rock that smiles I hand cut this rock open and I seen it was looking back at me. I have been cutting rocks for yrs and never seen anything like this before "it scared the shat outa me" This would make any person happy since it always smiles back i came to**

realize over the years never once have i seen that a frown on ether rock. This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real Natural Rock. THIS ROCK HAS BEEN FEATURED ON FRONT PAGE OF BIDMONKEE in 2011. :) I Enjoy all the people that looks at it cause where its at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people. It would always smile for someone if they had it, right now if i went where I have it stored at, it would give it a big smile like always " If Who ever was to buy it It would never frown once it would keep smiling.

The eBay seller is called guitarpickman.com. He has primarily sold guitar picks that he shaped and polished from stones and coins. He currently has a positive Feedback Percentage of 100% and a Feedback Score of 188. Outside of www.ebay.com, he has also sold his guitar picks from his Etsy store and his website www.guitarpickman.com. Most of the picks were sold at a set price of around \$20, which buyers could purchase using PayPal. Sometime between 2013-2014 his website went offline, and for reasons unknown, the URL now redirects to a sushi catering business in Arizona.

In 2012 I made my first offer on The Smiling Rock for \$100 and it was immediately rejected. I made several more offers that year, the last and highest being \$1000, which was also rejected. In late 2012 I saw that The Smiling Rock had been sold for \$10,000. Somehow, I couldn't believe it so Heartbroken, I contacted guitarpickman.com to ask if it was really sold. He replied to my eBay message saying that the rock was not sold and that it was being relisted. I never found out exactly what happened, but I presume that someone made an offer in error, in haste, or in jest.

I thought about The Smiling Rock from time to time and would check in on it, revisiting the eBay listing to see what was new. One update included a modification to the title claiming that it was "sexy" along with the usual descriptors like "rare" and "oak" (one of a kind). Another update was a new picture of a child holding The Smiling Rock next to her face. Presumably, this photo was meant to demonstrate scale and compare smiles, but it also changed the tone of the eBay listing. While still being rare and sexy, this smiling rock was also a wholesome family type.

Then a breakthrough came during the summer of 2013.

I was telling the tale of The Smiling Rock to a friend when she asked a question so obvious and so crucial I could not believe I had never asked it myself.

What about the other half?

This changed everything for me. The eBay listing had thus far only pictured one half of the rock, but obviously there had to be a second half. Its inner smiling face was only discovered when someone happened to cut it in two.

I had a lot of questions.

Where was the other half? Was it destroyed? Was it a perfect mirror copy? Was it included in the auction? Did both halves when purchased together cost \$2,000,000? Could I buy one half of one half for \$500,000? Coincidentally, the listing was updated soon after and a photo of the other half was uploaded.

The second half was different. It leaned to the right rather than the left. The top of its face was less pointy, making it seem shorter. Its left eye was cloudy. It was missing the indentation marking the left temple. And it had a mineral deposit curving down its right cheek that looked like a big, grey scar.

To me, it seemed inferior. The physical quality of the specimen was comparable, but something felt off, almost counterfeit. I imagined that when the rock was cut open, the original smiling rock (that is, the first half) was the first to look out onto the world and witness the shock on guitarpickman.com's face. The second half was like an afterthought, the younger twin tardy to the miracle of its own birth.

At this point, I began to realize that I had become involved.

I felt offended by the second half, as if its existence made the first half less rare, although I knew this wasn't exactly logical since the two halves were once a single stone. The first half seemed to have distinct personality and the item description was in its voice, even if it was written by guitarpickman.com.

The Smiling Rock (the first half) is "always smiling" and has a "smile that will last forever." It was a charmer, an optimist, a people person, but the second half was never described. Was it moody? Was it arrogant? Was it insincere? Why did guitarpickman.com reveal the existence of the second half so late?

In June 2013 I decided to find out more about guitarpickman.com. From his website I found that his name was David Melton and he was likely living in Arkansas. A Google search didn't reveal much, so I paid \$2.00 for an online background check. I now had his current and several previous addresses, phone number, and next of kin. I looked up satellite images of his house on Google Earth and wondered in which room he kept The Smiling Rock. Was it prominently displayed in his

living room? Was it on his bedside table to greet him every morning? Was it stored away in a box? Were both halves together?

Guitarpickman.com wrote once on eBay, "Where [The Smiling Rock is] at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people." The rocks calling was to make people smile, but few people saw it in this small town in Arkansas. The eBay listing provided a stage for this tragic clown to shine and it functioned as a platform for the development of The Smiling Rock's online identity. The listing allowed many people to own The Smiling Rock in the sense that the eBay Watch List is a kind of virtual collection of objects. My Watch List is full of things I will never buy, but simply want to bookmark for the possibility of collection.

My feeling of ownership over The Smiling Rock eventually made me aware of how precarious that was. Items sold in eBay auctions will only remain in a Watch List for 60 days after the auction closes, so if The Smiling Rock ever sells, the listing would disappear shortly after. Perhaps as a way to assert my own agency in this narrative, I decided to write a short story about The Smiling Rock and an eBay user much like myself.

The narrator describes The Smiling Rock, much like I have written here. The tiered categories of "Other" set the scene of a murky eBay landscape and The Smiling Rock as a treasure in this littered marketplace, but one that is quickly deemed to be infinitely out of reach. The story profiles guitarpickman.com as a sadistic eBay seller who has no intentions of selling The Smiling Rock, but merely wants to taunt prospective buyers. He teases admirers by updating the listing, calling The Smiling Rock sexy, uploading photos of The Smiling Rock cradled in his hand. He writes that he enjoys all the people looking at the listing. He wants them to know that he enjoys it. As the story continues, The Smiling Rock is sold for \$10,000 and the distraught narrator suspects foul play, asking, "Was The Smiling Rock ever even real?" The story ends with a dubious assertion, and the last line quotes guitarpickman.com's item description: "This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real."

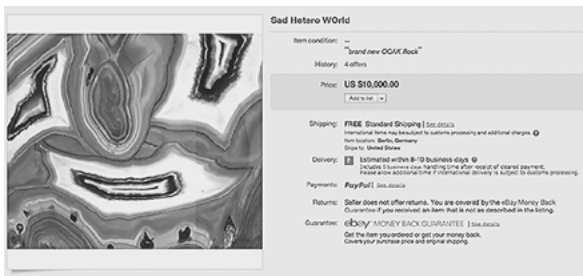
So, the story ends. But then what?

I started to write a film script that focused on the character of the narrator. Her initial intrigue evolved into an obsession with The Smiling Rock. The fact that her offers were denied only fueled her bidding fever. But then there was a twist...

The eBay buyer joins an online dating site and there she meets someone who looks like The Smiling Rock. Specifically, their profile picture is the

image of The Smiling Rock from the eBay listing. She contacts this “smiling rock” on the dating site and they begin a correspondence.

During the autumn of 2013 I began working on an exhibition that would feature digital prints and sculptures spawned from this developing script. The prints were 3D models of virtual smiling rocks that I designed, one of which was used as the image for online invites and the press release, which was an eBay listing selling a virtual model of a smiling rock for \$10,000.



The text in the item description was almost identical to that of the “real” Smiling Rock (as of December 2013) with the addition of the date and time of the opening. It reads:

very rare real smiling rock Ooak This is a real rock This is a rock that smiles It's a goold apple diamond box shape 4 gift its sexy x cool This Rock is not painted it is 100% Real Natural Rock .THIS ROCK HAS BEEN FEATURED ON FRONT PAGE OF BIDMONKEE in 2011. :) It was hand cut open and seen it was looking back. I Enjoy all the people that looks at it cause where its at right now it sees nobody and would love to be seen by people. Give This SEXY oak ROCK SMILING ROCK a loving home. Found it in teh ground and thought it was nothing special. Prob Laid there for yrs b4 it got found. ITS sexy smile will be looking out at you for yrs and yrs. If Who ever was to buy it It would never frown once it would always smile back Friday, December 6

The exhibition was titled *Sad Hetero World* and opened December 6, 2013 at Gillmeier Rech in Berlin, Germany. One of the exhibition reviews appeared on rhizome.org on January 17, 2014. It contained a link to the press release eBay listing for my virtual smiling rock as well as a link to the listing for the “real” Smiling Rock.

On July 22, 2014 David Guitarpickman (his Facebook username) shared a link to my press release eBay listing with the comment “#lawyer.” He wanted to find legal representation to sue the person who he said had switched the picture, but was using his “song and dance” on another eBay listing. The same day he contacted the rhizome.org

reviewer via Facebook to say it wasn’t right to use his words to sell another “crappy rock they want to say is a smiling rock.”

I deliberated what to do. It seemed likely that Guitarpickman would understand my intentions if I simply wrote to him, but my unease in breaking the communication seal made me hesitate. It was becoming so real.

On July 30, 2014 I contacted David Guitarpickman on Facebook to introduce myself, explain the press release, and ask if he would like to be involved in the project. He responded quickly and was still unsure if my press release eBay listing was a fake listing, but he indicated that he would be happy if his “real” listing was used. Before I could respond, he wrote again seven hours later. He admitted that he first thought I was “messing with him”, but then saw things differently. Now he was “speechless and in kinda shock and aww” that his rock had inspired me. He wanted to participate in the project, saying it “would bring great joy in [his] crazy hillbilly life.”

Two months later he wrote, “Help me sell my rock lol.”

Now as his Facebook friend, I had much more access to David Melton’s life. The child holding The Smiling Rock in an early eBay picture was Melton’s daughter who had grown up quite a bit since the photo. There were many photos of his guitar picks and he also shared photos of stained glass he had made himself. Melton had his own metal roofing business and regularly went out to collect rocks. He often found arrowheads and once found a ring near a creek, but couldn’t tell if the gemstone was real. He is fond of doughnuts and live action role-playing. He got a puppy in the spring of 2014 that grew into a large German Shepherd. He went to Red Lobster on May 3, 2014 and got a bad sunburn on August 4, 2014.

In the summer of 2014 I finished my script, which had expanded into a feature-length film and immediately went into production. Guitarpickman.com had become a character in the film and the soundtrack would feature guitar prominently, so I thought that it would be perfect if David Melton could contribute to the soundtrack somehow. I asked if he played guitar. He wrote that he did not.

On October 12, 2014, I received an invitation to exhibit my work during Reed Arts Week in 2015 at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

I finished shooting principle photography in Berlin on November 17, 2014 and flew to New York for an extended trip on November 18, 2014.

I planned to produce a new work during my travels in the U.S. and I eventually proposed that

I show the “real” Smiling Rock during Reed Arts Week. I wrote to David Melton on Facebook (he had since switched his last name from Guitarpickman to Melton) asking if he would be interested in loaning me The Smiling Rock to show in an art exhibition. He responded the same day: “Hello yes I’m interested ☺”

The terms of the loan were drafted and a rental contract was made. David Melton would be paid an honorarium and the costs of shipping and insurance would be paid by Reed College. The actual value of The Smiling Rock is not yet determined because it is a unique item that has never been sold. David Melton was asked to declare the value of The Smiling Rock so that Reed College could acquire the appropriate insurance in case of damage, loss, theft, etc. He initially gave the sum of \$1,000,000, then \$50,000, and finally a lower sum that both parties agreed upon.

Because Melton was having trouble sending emails from his account, his correspondence with one of the Reed curators had to resume on Facebook. David Melton and I now have one mutual Facebook friend.

On February 4, 2015 I flew back to Berlin and was unable to attend the exhibition during Reed Arts Week on March 3-7, 2015. I would not see the real Smiling Rock.

Lindsay Lawson, February 14, 2015

On February 17, 2015 David Melton wrote me a Facebook message saying he couldn’t find one half of the rock. He had drunkenly misplaced the better half somewhere in his house. I had no other choice than to accept that only the second half would fly to Portland for the exhibition. Then I started to think the second half was actually the better half. And although it was obviously David Melton’s fault, I couldn’t entirely convince myself that the first half wasn’t somehow standing me up.

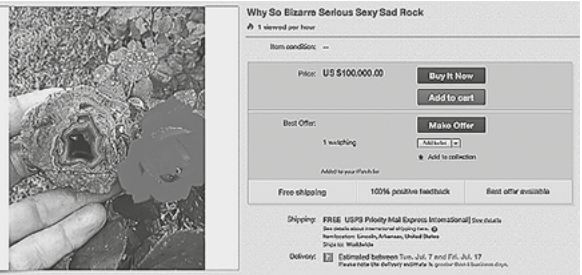
That same day David Melton and I had our most personal conversation yet. We Facebook chatted about his life in Arkansas. He told me that he had never left the state and that he had never been on a plane. He had not bothered to look at my Facebook pictures before and he said he thought I was beautiful. Then he asked if we were supposed to meet saying it would be “very strange and cool” if we met because of a rock. He apologized in advance if I was married or “taken for” and I told him I had a boyfriend, but that maybe we would meet someday.

The second half of The Smiling Rock showed up on time and in good spirits to Reed College, although the curators were distraught thatz it had arrived in only a paper envelope with no bubble

wrap or any other protection. Concurrent with the exhibition, I gave a Skype talk about The Smiling Rock that ended with 20 minutes of questions, mostly coming from me as I asked the Reed students and professors what The Smiling Rock was really like IRL. The Smiling Rock was shipped back to David Melton along with a copy of the exhibition catalogue.

On April 10, 2015 David Melton emailed me a picture of the first half of The Smiling Rock. It had been found! He had put out a \$50 reward for its safe return. Apparently, it had ended up in a trashcan full of Mexican opals that were about to be turned and polished. David took The Smiling Rock out for Mexican food to celebrate.

On June 6, 2015 David Melton sent me a Facebook message containing only one link. It was for his eBay listing of a sad rock. This rock would only cost \$100,000.



The item description reads:
This is the saddest rock on earth no matter what happens this rock is still sad. I took the rock to dinner and a movie “still sad,” “let it smell some flowers “still sad, let the rock have an elephant ride “sumbitch still sad.” Liquored up his azz, “sad” took it to Colorado “ingrate bastard was still sad” I don’t know what to do he is still sad I even let it visit with the famous smiling rock...didn’t help any, stayed sad

Lindsay Lawson, May 20, 2015

I received an email from John G. Hampton on March 5, 2015 inviting me to participate in an exhibition about rocks. I decided to make a 16mm film which would function as a screen test of The Smiling Rock. I animated its face to blink, smile more, and smile less. The simple act of setting the face in motion made it astonishingly life-like even though it was clearly an animated image. I shared a clip of the animation with David Melton, who responded saying it was “sooo cool!!!!”

In the Spring of 2015, I was contacted by A. E. Benenson about showing The Smiling Rock in an exhibition he was curating with Kristen Chappa at 221A in Vancouver. I emailed David Melton on September 29, 2015 to ask if he would like to loan The Smiling Rock again. This time it would be travel-

ling internationally. He immediately agreed, signing his email as Dragon Slayer. Another contract was written including a loan agreement, an honorarium for Dragon Slayer, and insurance for The Smiling Rock. This time the insurance was slightly higher, but still significantly less than \$1,000,000.

On October 22, 2015 David Melton sent a Facebook message asking how I was doing. He just wanted to chat because he couldn't sleep. It was 1:30am in Arkansas and 7:30am in Berlin, so we were both chatting from bed. He said it was sad I still hadn't seen The Smiling Rock and asked a string of questions because he thought I knew a lot about him, but he knew little about me. He asked if I smoke, if I drink, what I like to eat, and if I ever had moonshine. Apparently, David Melton loves moonshine.

He said he also loves pizza, eats lots of steak, and a little bit of raccoon and squirrels. I told him I did not believe he ate raccoons and squirrels and he admitted he did not. He sent a picture of himself holding his pet raccoon named Rocky. I wondered if he had been presenting himself as more of a rural countryman than he was. He had previously mentioned that he had never left the state of Arkansas, but his eBay listing for The Sad Rock said he had taken it to Colorado. David Melton clearly perpetuates a playful fluidity in his online identity, so his conflicting statements left me unable to draw any conclusions.

On October 25, 2015 David Melton sent me an audio message on Facebook. He had recorded himself playing his first song on the guitar.

The Smiling Rock was sent to Vancouver on October 28, 2015. For the second time, I would not see The Smiling Rock.

Lindsay Lawson, October 31, 2015

On May 14, 2016 David Melton emailed me to say hello. We had not had contact since The Smiling Rock was exhibited in Vancouver. Aside from being busy at the time, I had some other undefined hesitation in responding. I sensed a delicate balance of correspondence versus intrigue might be lost if we became too casual as pen pals. The following day he messaged me on Facebook: "Wake up darling ain't no time for sleeping in ;) hope all is going well in your world."

On November 3, 2016 I emailed David Melton to say hello. He responded the same day. He had a good day playing on a roof and he was still waiting for somebody to buy his rock. He asked if I would be making any more movies about The Smiling Rock and said that he would like to be a part of it if I did. David Melton signed the email as Dragon Slayer.

I received an email on May 5, 2017 from Gabrielle

Jenks inviting me to produce a project for Abandon Normal Devices, a new cinema and digital culture biennial. She was specifically interested in commissioning a new iteration of the real Smiling Rock.

David Melton joined Instagram and posted his first photo (of a cat) on June 27, 2017. His handle changed numerous times until finally settling on the username the_white_diablo. On July 15, 2017 he posted a photo of The Smiling Rock with a can of Coke. On July 16, 2017 he posted a photo of The Smiling Rock with a bottle of Kiwi Strawberry Snapple.

I emailed David Melton on July 3, 2017 to ask if he would like to loan The Smiling Rock again for the AND Festival. I explained that I would make an installation to house The Smiling Rock and that the festival would be situated in a system of caves for the 2017 edition.

He responded the following day saying:

Hello yes that would be neat to see it travel and to be seen again wish I could go with it now that would be cool :)

David Melton sent me a Facebook message on July 7, 2017 with many questions about the project: When would I need the rock? What ideas did I have for the presentation? How much would he be paid? Would there be a publication? He particularly liked seeing the publication from a previous exhibition of The Smiling Rock and hoped there would be another.

Cat Shaw took over coordinating the logistics of getting The Smiling Rock shipped from Arkansas to Manchester. On July 11, 2017 she started an email correspondence with David Melton, who signed all his emails as Dragon Slayer.

On July 23 David Melton posted an image on Instagram. It was a screenshot of an eBay bidder offering \$1,000 for The Smiling Rock. He declined the offer as evidenced by his hashtags: #no #deal. He posted a video of The Smiling Rock on July 31. It was wet in his hand as he manipulated the rock the way a model might pose to show off the angles of their face.

The video currently has 10 views and he included the hashtags: #rock #gem #pictureoftheday #instalike #pictures #instapic #instamood #love #beautiful #instagood #forsale #not #cheap #1 #million #obo #smile #happy

On August 1, 2017 David Melton wrote a Facebook message to say hello to me. I asked how he was doing. He replied: "About to go crazy :P I'm bored here and want to leave with nowhere to go."

Throughout August and September of 2017, I made plans to exhibit The Smiling Rock during the

AND Festival. Since the location would be a series of caves in Peak District National Park there were several locations presented to me, but only one cave space ended up being suitable for regular visitors. That cave was easy to enter as it was relatively above ground, but it was also quite small. After a long deliberation I decided the space to show The Smiling Rock needed to be more substantial, specifically because it would be the first time in all these years I would see the rock in person. Together with the AND team, we agreed on Peveril Castle as the location to display The Smiling Rock. This would be the first time I see The Smiling Rock in person.

Lindsay Lawson, September 18, 2017

On September 13, 2017 Cat Shaw had received a text message requesting the she call DHL urgently because the package was pending customs clearance. She called DHL and was told that 300£ needed to be paid at customs.

David Melton messaged me on Facebook on September 14, 2017 to say DHL had called him and The Smiling Rock had been lost. It was picked up from his home address on September 11, 2017. He had wrapped it in a paper grocery bag and two old towels. I emailed Cat Shaw that the rock was missing, but she had already spoken with David Melton.

The same day David Melton posted on Facebook: *#dhl shipping lost my rock and going Lto give me a freaking \$2400 piddle shit of insurance when I had it listed on eBay for a crap load more...*

Cat Shaw accessed the waybill of The Smiling Rock with the following information:

The package was picked up in Springdale, Arizona September 11, 2017 at 1:01PM. It departed Springdale that same day at 7:45PM and arrived at Tulsa, Oklahoma at 9:57PM. On September 12, 2017 at 1:49AM it departed Tulsa and was put on hold in the Cincinnati hub at 5:30AM. The package departed the Cincinnati hub on September 13, 2017 at 7:25AM. The customs status was updated the same day at 1:16PM in East Midlands, UK. It cleared customs and arrived at the East Midlands sort facility the same day at 8:08PM and departed the facility

ty at 10:42PM. The package arrived in the Manchester facility on September 14, 2017 at 4:09AM. It was delivered by courier to the Abandon Normal Devices office in Manchester the same day at 1:09PM. Catherine Waddington signed for the package.

She immediately opened the package, unwrapped the towels, removed the paper bag, and found no rock was inside.

Cat Shaw emailed me and David Melton regularly to update the unchanging status of the missing Smiling Rock. She phoned David Melton on September 14, 2017 to reassure him they were doing everything they could to recover the rock. Cat Shaw noted that he had a mild Southern drawl and his demeanor was relaxed and concerned about the rock being found in time for the AND festival.

On September 19 I skyped with Cat Shaw and Ruth McCollough to get an update about the missing Smiling Rock. They told me that the package had actually arrived, but the rock inside was missing. The package appeared to have been opened and repacked using DHL tape.

David Melton posted on Facebook on September 20, 2017:

I wish I was happy...

And later the same day he posted:
Want a balloon



David Melton received a bunch of balloons in the mail on September 21, 2017. He posted a Facebook video of the balloons while he punched at them.

On September 21, 2017, seven days after the rock was reported as lost, its whereabouts were still unknown. DHL has a policy that requires seven days for them to locate missing packages before the customer can take further action. Since The Smiling Rock seems to have been removed from its packaging during transit, it is believed that it was stolen. For this reason, a police report and investigation will be mounted.

Lindsay Lawson, September 21, 2017

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