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Science People

Tiny Tomb

Deep in the vaults of the Royal Society in London they had been waiting more than 300 years to be discovered. Finally, this summer, the oldest microscope specimens in the world came to light—and some of them came literally to life. Said **Brian J. Ford**, an author and microscope expert who discovered the ancient algae spores and bacteria, "It's a microscopic Tutankhamen's tomb."

The tiny tomb consisted of nine packets of folded paper attached to three letters by **Anton van Leeuwenhoek**, the great 17th century microscope builder, naturalist, and father of microbiology. Though the letters, along with the rest of Leeuwenhoek's prodigious correspondence, have been much perused by scholars over the centuries and even contained references to the specimens, the packets were small and nondescript enough to have escaped notice. Acting on a hunch, Ford decided to examine the letters for himself, and found the little envelopes.

In all but one were perfectly preserved microscope specimens, among them an optic nerve of a cow, algae filaments, cotton seed, and slices of cork and elder. The remarkable precision with which the specimens were cut and prepared—some were a mere hundredth of a millimeter thick—discredits the idea that Leeuwenhoek and other founding microscopists studied nothing more than "chunks of stuff hacked off with a knife," says Ford. So well kept were the live samples, in fact, that a few spores from the algae began germinating after they were put under Ford's own microscope.

The delicacy of Leeuwenhoek's specimens does justice to a man who spent most of his time peering into his homemade pioneering microscopes. He studied spermatozoa, water fleas, and every other type of what he called "animalcules." Says Ford, "What he did was to recognize for the first time ever that there were other worlds that you couldn't see. He was what you might call the father of microscopic consciousness."

Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723)

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Watt Bears All

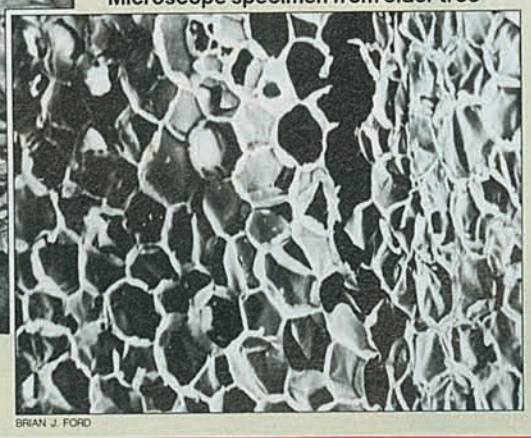
On an August hike through Alaska's Katmai National Monument, Secretary of the Interior **James Watt** encountered his most grizzly adversary since the National Wildlife Federation called for his ouster: camped out on the trail was a lean and hungry bear. It sniffed once at Watt and his hiking party, then trundled away. Said the Secretary, "That must have been a pro-Watt bear. It didn't growl or complain or ask me to sign any petitions."

Watt appears to be quite fond of the ursine family; lately he has been trying to cultivate a Teddy-bear image for himself. As he confided to reporters in Anchorage, "I am warm and cuddly. I'm just easy to get along with."

Whale lovers consider him a pussycat. While in Alaska, Watt signed an administrative decree limiting the number of motorized boats that may enter the feeding grounds of the endangered humpback whale around Glacier Bay National Monument. He also speeded up the process by which the state may claim its lands from the federal government.

By avoiding confrontation, Watt did indeed melt the hearts of the glacier state's citizens. "They welcomed me like a conquering hero," he noted, because, after all, "Watt came and left, and Alaska is still there."

Microscope specimen from elder tree



BRIAN J. FORD

Saturnalian Serenade

Through the ages, Earth's solitary moon has inspired a cacophony of lovers' laments, bardic ballads, and coyote croons. But the largest moon of Saturn claims the distinction of having inspired the formation of a rock-'n'-roll group. Last November, Voyager 1 photographs showed that, for still-mysterious reasons, the northern hemisphere of cloud-shrouded Titan is darker than the southern. The peculiarly clean line of demarcation was dubbed "the Titan equatorial band," so who could resist? "The name came first," admits **Jonathan Eberhart**, space editor of *Science News* and leader of a rock band named after the Titanian feature.

Inspired by the far-out handle, a few musically inclined science writers and Jet Propulsion Lab scientists got together to play for a Saturday-night bash at a Caltech lounge in Pasadena during the Voyager 2 fly-by of Saturn in August. The Titan Equatorial Band had not had much practice, but it nonetheless managed to belt out reasonably recognizable rock classics like *Satisfaction, Twist and Shout*, and a few spacy ballads written by Eberhart, like *Lament for a Red Planet* (referring to Mars).

Among scientists who danced and drank till moonset were **Bradford Smith**, Saturn imaging team head, and **James Blinn**, king of computer graphics. Earlier, Blinn had dazzled Voyager voyeurs with a film of a computer-animated journey around Saturn, which incorporated the scientific data from last fall's encounter. Blinn, who had largely abandoned JPL for a three-month stint as a special-effects artist at film maker George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch (see DISCOVER, March), is back at the lab full time. Says Blinn, "I decided I'd rather make real space movies than fake ones." ◙