

THE HAMMER MUSEUM, HAINES

By Stacey Becklund, former Director, Kodiak Historical Society/Baranov Museum

Can a museum ever be too small? Too specialized? Too much a novelty? What makes a museum? Who defines it? According to the American Heritage Dictionary, *A museum is a place or building in which works of artistic, historical, and scientific value are cared for and exhibited.* There is no mention of size or context defining what items may be exhibited. In this day, the definition is evolving to encompass a broader meaning, one not only including public trust to ensure the protection of the objects, but the idea that those items need to have a value other than just being the objects that they are.

In Haines, I found many treasures while engaged in the *Museums Alaska/Alaska Historical Society 2003 Conference: Celebrating Our Past, Planning Our Future*, from the Sheldon Museum's vast multicultural collections, to a couple of *Tsirku Cannery* machines originally from the Kodiak Island area; to the new multimillion dollar building, the *Haines Borough Public Library*. Last, and certainly most unique and specialized, was the quaint little house across the street from the Sheldon Museum shyly announcing *The Hammer Museum*. At first I'll admit it gave me a chuckle, but I was drawn into the building by my curiosity, pondering, *what could this museum hold that would draw people into its doors time and time again? And who would create a museum of hammers and why?* Upon entering the museum I was inundated with an exhibition of hammers covering a significant period of American history and by a parrot greeting me with a *Hello!*

Since his childhood fascination with hammers and the strong influence of his grandfather's *Bill Poster Hammer*, Dave Pahl, Director and Founder of *The Hammer Museum* has been collecting hammers for 30 years. It became a family affair in 1994 when Pahl and his wife, Assistant Curator Carol, took the family on a trip down south. Concerned about travelling on the highways, they chose the less threatening back roads, increasing their hammer collection by 200. It didn't stop there but carried on in '98, when they worked all winter restoring a '73 motor home abandoned in the woods in Haines. They headed down again for another collecting spree while home schooling their two boys, Woody and Turner. Now, there are now 1200 hammers in the collection. So how did the physical museum come to be? That's the real story, one of timing and serendipity.



Interior view of the Hammer Museum. Photo courtesy Stacey Becklund.

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Cruise ships began infiltrating the waters of Haines. In 2001, longshoreman Pahl was tying up ships often enough to have to come into town and take up another project in between ship arrivals and departures. Thus began *The Hammer Museum* as more than a collection without a home. They purchased the house on Main Street and began digging underneath the house to lay a new foundation when Pahl discovered his most prized and historical object: the 19th Century *Tlingit Slave Killer/Warrior's Pick*.

Historically, the rock hammer is the first tool. And the hammer covers both aspects of tools that of shaping and assembling. Hammers can be made from stone, metal, wood, leather and even thousands of layers of paper as with a certain mallet type which needs to be softer than the object struck. Hammers can be used for driving, cobbling, snow knocking, tacking and even stirring your cocktails like at the *Cotton Club* in the 20's. It is a study of Americana, the labor industry and ingenuity when discussing hammers. The Pahl

passionately research the patents and history of the pieces they collect. The objects tell their stories through the worn handles and heads. One can hardly imagine what it would be like striking 22,000 blows to make one 10" metal working file and producing up to five in a day. When describing the different tasks of the hammer it often sounds like an exercise in gymnastics.

To tour *The Hammer Museum* is truly a unique experience. Would I go for another visit? Most certainly, I would want to see how it has evolved and sustained itself. In this day and age we tend to move much faster than needed and forget to observe the subtle nuances of detail that a hammer may have to share. ♦



The Hammer Museum, exterior view. Photo courtesy Stacey Becklund.