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A Small Town in Alaska Is Home to the World's First Hammer Museum

Perhaps no one knows the history of the tool better than collector Dave Pahl, who opened a shrine of his artifacts in Haines 20 years ago

Jenna Kunze

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To grab pedestrians' attention, Pahl built a 19-foot-tall hammer and erected it on the lawn in front of the museum in 2007. Jimmy Emerson, DVM via Flickr under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Imagine a hammer. Chances are the implement that comes to mind has a wooden handle—maybe rubber—leading to a metal head, with a claw in the back. You've got the picture? OK. Now forget it—because the 2,500 hammers (with another 8,000 in storage) at the Hammer Museum in Haines, Alaska, defy common knowledge.

The four-room museum traces the origin of humankind's first tool back through centuries of history, from the present-day to the industrial age to colonial times and beyond recognition. A rock hammer believed by paleontologists to have crafted the Pyramid of Menkaure in Egypt, a Roman battle-ax infantry soldiers used as a weapon, billposter hammers used to tack up advertisements, bankteller's hammers of the late 1800s used to cancel checks before the advent of the hole puncher, and small mallet drink hammers bar-

goers in New York's 1960s used to summon a refill or offer applause hang on the walls and rest in glass cases.

"There's something for everybody here at the Hammer Museum," says Dave Pahl, the museum's founder and a lifelong collector. His collection shows that every profession, somewhere along the line, utilized a specific hammer. "Everybody uses a hammer, but a lot of us don't even realize how often, or where we'd be without it."

Some 2,500 hammers are on display in the museum, with another 8,000 in storage. Jimmy Emerson, DVM via Flickr under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Pahl, originally from Ohio, came to Alaska in 1980 to become a homesteader. He and his wife settled in Haines, a small town of about 2,000 people in Southeast Alaska, where they built an off-grid cabin and raised their children in a lifestyle of self-sufficiency. His

fascination for tools motivated him to collect hammers at estate sales and, later, on eBay. “Family vacations were hammer hunting,” Pahl says with a squinting smile. Eventually, his personal collection outgrew his home.

“We have a one-room log house we live in, and I had hammers hanging all over the walls,” Pahl says. “Then this building came up for sale, and I was getting a lot of pressure from [my wife] Carol to get some of these hammers out of the house. She was getting tired of dusting.”

In 2002, Pahl opened what was then “the world’s only hammer museum” in a modest, 1,200-square-foot cottage with white siding and green trim. Over the past 20 years, Pahl says he’s hosted serious collectors from all over the world, including Lithuania, Ukraine and Australia. A Lithuanian friend has since opened his own hammer museum in Linkmenys, called *Plaktuku Ekspozicija* or “Hammer Museum,” with a slightly larger collection. “That's when we kind of shifted over to ‘the world's first,’” Pahl says with a laugh. The Frohnauer Hammer, a 17th-century hammer mill museum in Frohnau, Germany, has been welcoming visitors since 1953. Meanwhile, private collector Scotty Fulton runs the informal Fulton Hammer Museum in Maysville, Kentucky, where he displays about 21,000 hammers in a building beside his home.

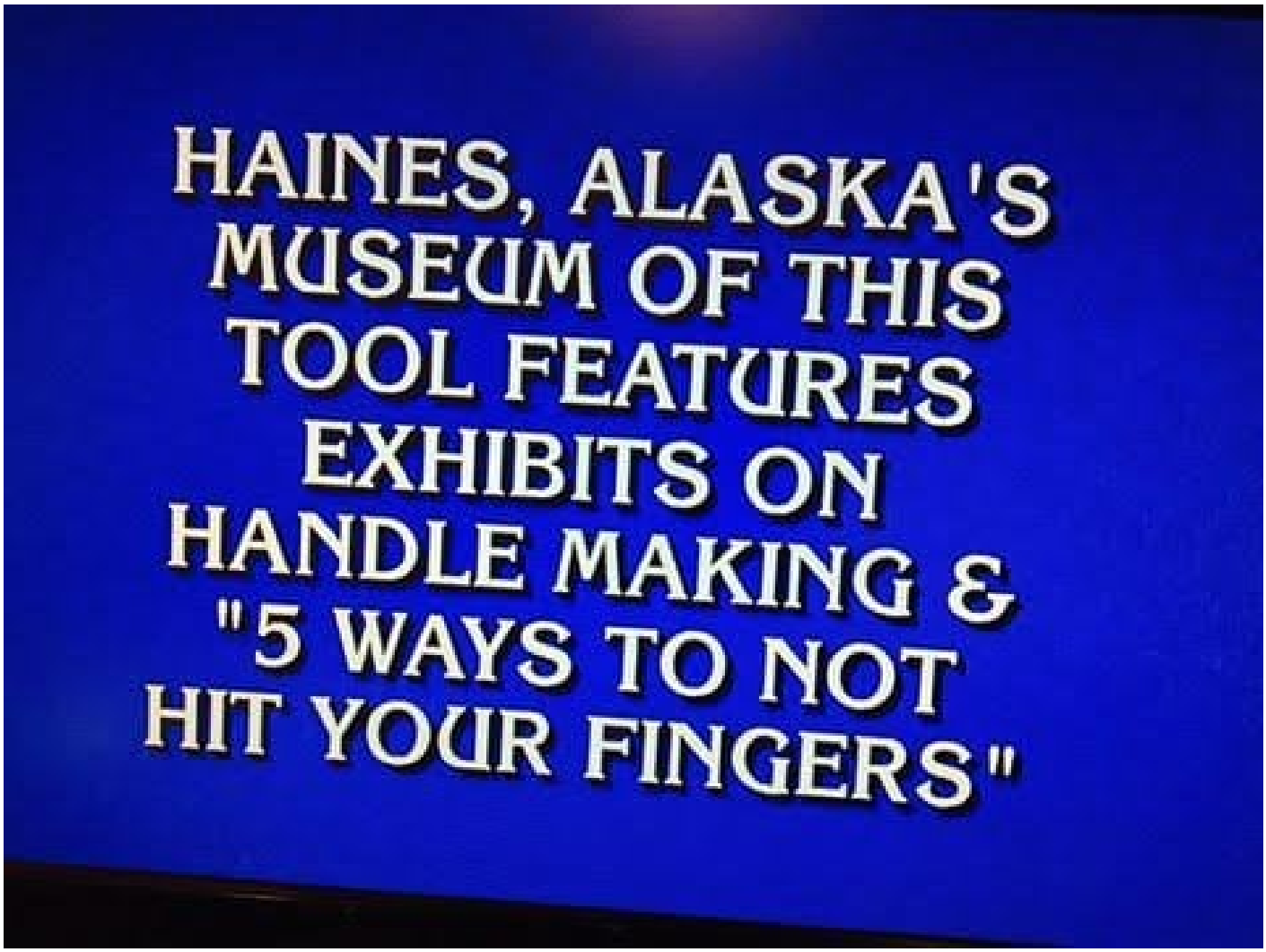
Dave Pahl is the founder of the Hammer Museum. Jenna Kunze

But what sets Pahl's collection apart is the 2,500 patent documents he has that show visitors exactly how each inventor intended their tool to be used. "He has all the information," Fulton says. "He's got an advantage there, so he can give more details about a hammer. If anybody is [an expert], Dave is. And he uses his hammers, too, living in the wild up there in Alaska."

Haines receives cruise ship traffic in summer months, which keeps the small-town museum (one of four in Haines and its neighboring Alaska Native village of Klukwan) in business. To grab pedestrians' attention, Pahl built a 19-foot-tall hammer and erected it on the lawn in front of the museum in 2007. "Our attendance at the door went up immediately that day by 25 percent," he says. "And it's never gone back since." In the winter months, he decorates the iconic sculpture with Christmas lights.

Pahl says that the museum's roughly 8,000 annual out-of-town visitors have helped to not only keep the museum afloat, but also to contribute significantly to its collection.

"Some of the finest stuff in here has been donated by our visitors," he says, including a complete assembly line from an 1880s hammer handle-making company. "They come in, and then maybe a year later, they'll go to a garage sale and they'll see something, or they'll know somebody." In 2018, the museum's collection expanded by 1,600 hammers after Jim Mau, a collector from Phoenix, Arizona, died and his family donated his collection—along with "floor-to-ceiling stacks of reference material."



Townspeople will proudly tell you that the museum was featured on the quiz show "Jeopardy!" in 2016 under the category "Offbeat Museums." Jenna Kunze

In many ways, the small museum has put Haines, Alaska, on the map. Townspeople will proudly tell you that the museum was featured on the quiz show “Jeopardy!” in 2016 under the category “Offbeat Museums.” The $200 clue: “Haines, Alaska’s museum of this tool features exhibits on handle making and ‘5 ways to not hit your fingers.’”

Pahl is recognized as one of the foremost hammer collectors in the world, and draws regular inquiries from everyone from children looking to identify hammers for a school project to professionals from the History Channel asking for expert advice on which hammers to use for reenactments. In 2004, David Shayt, a late curator in the National Museum of American History’s work and industries division, asked Pahl to help him identify certain hammers in the Smithsonian’s collections during a private visit. Pahl’s ten-year-old son was able to verify one of the tools as a hammer used to reseal a cigar box lid, the collector remembers. And just last month Pahl self-published a 200-page book, *The Improved Hammer: A Guide to the Identification, History and Evolutions of the Hammer*, that’s a synthesis of his years of research and experience, complete with scanned images of patents to illustrate each hammer. One reviewer, a collector in Oregon, called it “the new hammer bible” in an email to Pahl. Fulton says it is the best book on hammers he’s ever come across—“very informative.”

Roughly 8,000 out-of-towners visit the museum each year. Jimmy Emerson, DVM via Flickr under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Pahl's passion for hammers is contagious. In the back of the museum, he's dedicated a corner to artwork that's been inspired by the tool, including a poem he wrote about a prosthetic hammer hand in his collection. He reads it through a toothy grin: "*Handy Dan lost his hand and he was laid up for a while / But by prayer and by grace he fashioned his brace / He went back to work with a smile*…"

Pahl's hope, he says, is twofold: to preserve the history of the hammer, while also encouraging young people born into a world of automation to "become a bit more hands-on" and maintain its use.

"That's really the founding aspect of this museum," Pahl says. "My interest in 'do-it-yourself,' and I'm still a do-it-yourselfer."

He mentions that the towering hammer outside the museum is beginning to rot from the rain. “Might need to build a new one,” he says. “Maybe with yellow cedar this time.”

Luckily, Pahl has all the tools to make it happen.

ALASKA **COLLECTING** **MUSEUMS** **TRAVEL**