TRAVEL

In Alaska sits museum built of hammers

By Richard Nilsen
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

HAINES, Alaska – This is a tiny town of wooden buildings on the Lynn Canal, about 13 miles south of Skagway on the state's southeast panhandle. There is not much there, and only a few cruise ships pull into its harbor.

Unlike most of its neighbor towns, however, Haines is connected by road to Canada and the Lower 48. It is a ferry terminal for those who want to drive to Alaska and ferry to Juneau.

It is also the home of the Hammer Museum.

No art here, no Armand Hammer Museum of Art, just some 1,500 to 2,000 hammers

RICHARD NILSEN/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Hammers of all manner — ancient to arcane — are at the Hammer Museum in Haines, Alaska.

hung on walls and collected in vitrines, all in a little house on Main Street, the one with the 20-foot-tall hammer in front.

The proprietor is Dave Pahl, a small, wiry man with strag-

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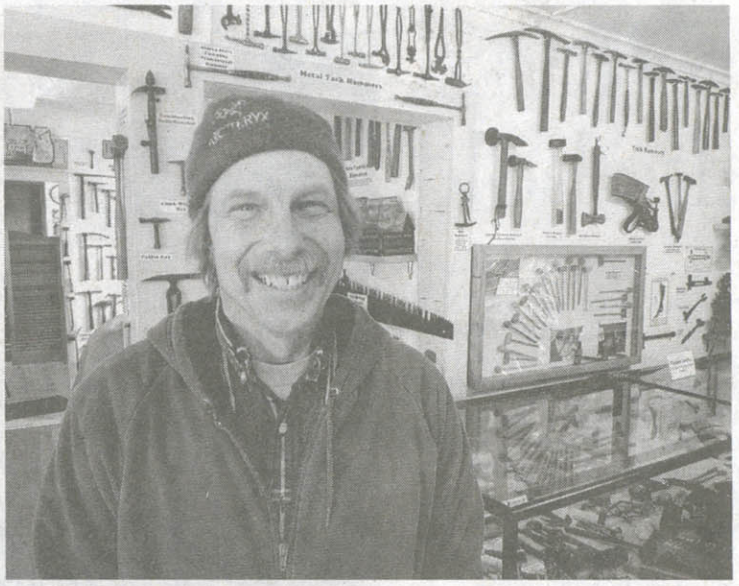
Museum gets a grip on hammers



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Hammer man Dave Pahl opened his museum in Haines in 2001.

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gly hair and a toboggan, jeans and a T-shirt who talks a mile a minute explaining all the tools he's collected.

"Began when I was homesteading and having to do most of my own work, and I needed a lot of hand tools. No electricity, you know. And after some time, I realized I had several hundred hammers, and after that, it just didn't stop."

There are claw hammers, double-claw hammers, ball-peen hammers, tack hammers, medical hammers, sugar hammers, railroad-spike hammers, coal hammers, cigar hammers (used to close cigar boxes with those tiny tacks), hammers with heads like goats, hammers shaped like three-legged pigs.

("There's the story of the three-legged pig. I never knew about it before, but several visitors to the museum have told it. She's tired of hearing it" — Pahl points to his young assistant — "but it seems the three-legged pig is a famous joke. There was this family that had a pig, and it was real good to them. It saved their lives in a fire and later pulled the young son from the water when he was drowning. Someone asked, 'Why's the pig only got three legs?' and they said, 'When you have a pig this good, you don't want to eat him all at once.' ")

There was a small pile of hammers that Pahl didn't know what they were, and asks visitors if they have any info. But it is hard to stump him. He knows more about arcane hammers than anyone ought. He has been asked by the Smithsonian Institution to help identify tools in their collection.

He knows their uses, the patents for them, the peculiarities of their manufacture and the odd names they have. The hammer for retooling a rock drill is called a zex.

"Use that next time you play Scrabble," he said.

There were cocktail hammers, used in the 1930s in posh nightclubs to tap on cocktail glasses as a form of applause, with photos of William Powell and Myrna Loy from "Manhattan Melodrama." In that film, you can see such hammers being used.

There were toffee hammers, macadamizing hammers, dulcimer hammers, slate hammers (one looked like a fox), Chinese war hammers. One was an ancient Egyptian stoneworking hammer used for the creation of the pyramids — or at least that's what was claimed. It was a large, round stone.

There was the "woman's friend," a hammer on one end of a device to lift the plates on a wood stove. One was a hammer that came free in a box of soap flakes.

There was a jackknife with a tiny hammer at one end. There was an ice hatchet and an ice hammer, used to make crushed ice. Meat tenderizers, textile-design hammers, one you dipped in ink and hit a pig with it to identify it. Almost every trade that ever was had a hammer for some purpose, and this museum had an example.

"I guess I have another 4,500 hammers in storage that I can't even show here," he said.

One hammer on display has a screw thread on the back side.

"You would take this and whack it into a wood post or a tree, and then twist it to lodge the screw thread in the wood. Then you used the hammer to tie your horse's reins up. Seems to me you could've just tied your reins to the tree," Pahl said.

Wooden hammers to crack lobster claws. Hammers from Africa, with tribal designs. Gavels from fraternal organizations. A gorgeous little shiny gold-color hammer from China used to crack the ceramic shell when you roast a chicken in a clay jacket.

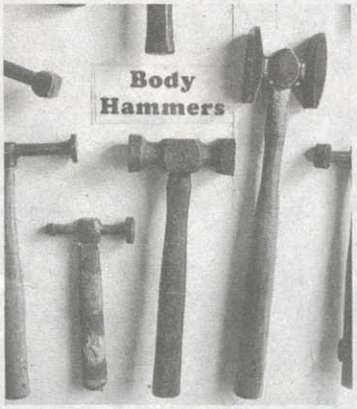
I asked Pahl if he'd ever heard of the "other" Hammer Museum. Sore topic.

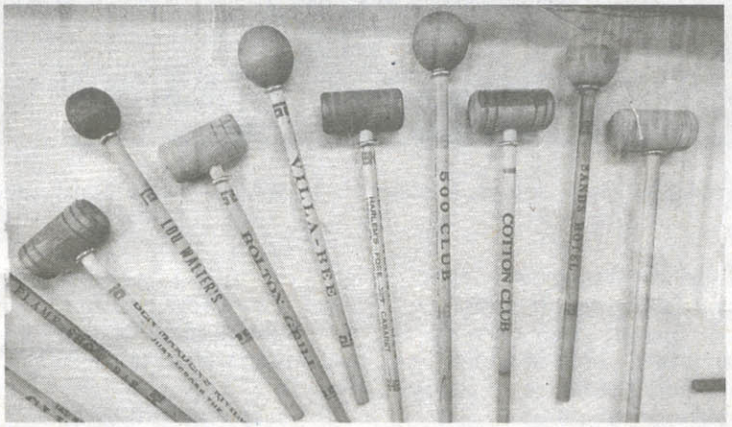
Turns out the museum formerly known as the Armand Hammer Museum of Art, of Los Angeles, has streamlined its name to the Hammer Museum and their lawyers informed Pahl that they were suing him for trademark infringement.

"They have big lawyers and I don't," he said, with some bitterness.

"I got my face on the *Wall Street Journal* last year, when they wrote a story about the lawsuit."

So, perhaps by the time you get to Haines, it will be the Museum of Hammers instead.





Among the 1,500 or so hammers in the museum are these glass-rim tappers (above), used to create refined "applause" in Depression-era nightclubs, and hammers (top) for body work.

Hammer Museum

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.
Where: 108 Main St., Haines, Alaska.
Admission: $3, free for age 12 and younger.
Details: 907-766-2374, hammermuseum.org.

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Tiny Haines was boomtown

By Richard Nilsen
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Haines is a town of about 1,800 people on the Alaskan panhandle peninsula between the Lynn Canal and Chilkoot Inlet. Cruise ships moor in the harbor several times a week, but there are few major tourist attractions. It is one of the more pristine cruise stops — fewer souvenir shops and none of the dockside jewelry stores you find at more popular cruise stops, such as Ketchikan or Skagway.

It is 13 miles south of Skagway by boat, although it is several hundred miles by road: You have to drive back through British Columbia and back down the Klondike Highway to get there. And it is about 45 miles north of state capital Juneau, although you can get there only by boat or plane. Juneau is not connected to the rest of the continent by road.

Haines was named for a missionary who brought a church there in 1884, and the town ballooned to 30,000 people during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898-99. In 1903, Fort Seward was built by the Army just south of town. It is now a tourist destination and was named a National Historic Landmark in 1972.

Haines is home to two museums: the Hammer Museum that displays a collection of 1,500 hammers of all kinds, and the Sheldon Museum, a two-story history and culture museum.

The Sheldon is in a clean modern building, all natural wood and lots of glass. Upstairs, it is all Tlingit Indian artifacts, with lots of vitrines and drawers under them, with most everything from baskets to moccasins. Downstairs, it is all about the area's industry and the former Fort Seward.

The town's other attraction is the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, a state park with the world's largest concentration of bald eagles. There is a viewpoint about 9 miles north of town by road.

Find out more

For information about lodging, activities and more, contact the Haines Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-458-3579 or haines.ak.us.