

Hammer Home

Dave Pahl has so many hammers he started a museum. Who knew the simplest of human tools had so many designs and uses?

BY MATT ROSS

In the cartoon world, a character who's hit his thumb with a hammer is often portrayed with eyes bulging out of the sockets. What would the picture be if he were bombarded by more than 1000 hammers at once?

The hammers at Dave Pahl's place — we're back in real life here — may not physically assail his visitors, but they do pack a strong visual punch that leaves newcomers with wide eyes and slack jaws.

Dave and his wife Carol are the proprietors of some 1200 specimens, all neatly displayed at the aptly named Hammer Museum. The quirky establishment has become a must-see for summer tourists to picturesque Haines, Alaska, not far south of the Yukon's southwestern border.

The Pahls greet visitors with a Cheshire-cat grin and an infectious enthusiasm that, coupled with the mere sight of all those hammers on the wall, makes the \$3 admission fee already worth the money.

This is the third summer the Pahls have operated the museum, although when he moved to the United States' last frontier 30 years ago, Dave had no intention of creating a tourist attraction. "I was out to be a pioneer and live off the land," he recalls. To do that, he began to collect hand tools, including hammers.

Suffering from cabin fever during the long Alaskan winter, he began to fit handles onto loose hammerheads. Then, about a decade ago, he decided to take a road trip through the Lower 48 states to build on his collection. The Pahls hit flea markets, antique shops, garage sales and wherever else they thought these tools might have been lying around, discarded, unused and forgotten.

There was one small detail they'd overlooked in their zeal: Canada Customs. There was no way around it. To get home to Alaska, they had to go through Canada. "When we got to the Canadian border and they started to search the van, they didn't get very far before they realized we had nothing but hammers," says Carol, imitating the expressions of disbelief on the customs officials' faces that she now sees on a regular basis. "They let us through."

Many of the hammers found on that trip are now displayed in the purpose-built, single-storey structure. You might never have believed there could be so many designs for an instrument with such a basic shape. The museum's four rooms showcase hammers used to make horseshoes, shape cobblestones, secure railway ties, bind books and repair musical instruments, among many other purposes. Five mannequins — donated by the Smithsonian Institution, no less — are situated throughout to demonstrate how hammers are used.

While not quite claiming expertise status, Dave is fluent about many of the pieces thanks to his extensive research.

"This is cabin fever," he says as he picks up a 10-centimetre-thick binder filled with papers containing hammer patent documents.

All the hammers have a story. Take the 1887 carpet stretcher and tack hammer for instance. "One of the selling points was that one-handed people could use them because there were a lot of amputees after the (American) Civil War," Dave explains.

Many of the tools were made more than a century ago and a few are more than a thousand years old, including a hammer sent by an Irish museum

that's been dated to 200 A.D. However, the piece the couple holds near and dear is the tool Dave uncovered when he was digging the foundation for the building.

The flat piece looked more significant than just a stone when he spotted it protruding from the earth. Later it was determined the hammer was of the type used by the local Tlingit first nation an estimated 800 years ago.

"Everybody in town laughed at my husband for opening a hammer museum but to find this under the ground was special," Carol says.

As the Pahls have a venue to show their collection, Carol stands firm on one house rule: "He still isn't allowed to have more than 100 out at a time at home." **H**

Matt Ross is a freelance writer from Lloydminster, Alberta, who spent last summer travelling around the North.



Mannequins demonstrate the hammers' uses.