

Tempo

The stock and carriage trade of the gadget store supreme

*Your business deserves devotion that is loyal
I love you just like a fellow loves his goil
So always remember
Hammacher Schlemmer
I love you.*

—part of a song sung
by Fred Allen in a
1929 Broadway musical

By Charles Leroux

FOR GADGET freaks like you, me, the Duke of Windsor and a secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, one old curiosity shop always has been a mecca. The place [on East 57th Street in New York] and the catalogue [issued eight times a year to



giving need for a Hovercraft lawnmower, an Electric Ice Cream Scoop and a table tennis training machine.

That mecca is coming to Michigan Avenue. In time for Father's Day shopping, traditionally the store's second busiest season, surpassed only by Christmas, Hammacher Schlemmer will open its first store outside of New York, at 620 N. Michigan Ave., where O'Connell's Restaurant was.

"We hadn't really planned to expand quite so rapidly," Richard Tinberg, Hammacher Schlemmer's president, said, "but an opportunity to get space on Michigan Avenue doesn't come along every day."

Tinberg's Chicago office is on West Superior Street in a converted candy factory, out of which the Hammacher Schlemmer catalogue operation is run. On the table next to his desk sat a portable Dry Ice maker. ["The only portable model that can produce a one-pound block of minus 110 degree F. Dry Ice in just 60 seconds," the catalogue says.] Leaning against Tinberg's wall was a polo mallet. ["Would you believe that the best polo mallets in the world are made in Lombard, Ill.?" he asked.]

THE ONLY OR THE best. That is what Hammacher Schlemmer long has been known for, the theme to which the company has rededicated itself since the 1980 purchase of the company from Gulf & Western Industries by Chicago businessman J. Roderick MacArthur, son of the late insurance billionaire John D. MacArthur. There is now the Hammacher Schlemmer Institute, an independent, not-for-profit test facility separating the best from the rest, skimming the crème de la crème of devices, the most intriguing and, often, most costly playthings for the child that hides within the typically middle-aged, well-educated, product-knowledgeable, affluent [HS knows that



Tribune photo by Anne Cusack

Hammacher Schlemmer president Richard Tinberg with Gaggia Electric Distiller, from the company's spring catalogue.

by the ZIP codes of mail orders and by the limos that deliver shoppers to the Manhattan store] customers [who, HS also knows, do not like things that need to be assembled].

The original Hammacher was Alfred, who, in 1859, invested money in a hardware business founded in the 1840s by William Tollner. Hammacher was made a partner, and the firm was then called Tollner and Hammacher. The original Schlemmer was William, who arrived in New York as a 12-year-old immigrant boy with only the clothes on his

back and a slip of paper in his pocket with the name of his uncle written on it, William Tollner. Schlemmer worked at the store for years, was made a partner after the Civil War and, over time, bought his uncle's shares in the business.

After Tollner died, the company became Hammacher, Schlemmer—a perfect name for a hardware store, sounding like hardware ["A three-pound hammacher, please, and a box of No. 10 schlemmers"]. The store became to hardware what Gucci later would be to leatherwear.

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cause.
That's why it is always so interestin
cross people who see themselves as "called
Robert E. Norton is one of those people. No

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Chief salesman wore frock coats then," Tinberg said [women did not work as salespersons until one Miss Palmer in 1935], "and the nuts and bolts and screws were displayed in glass and mahogany cases on velvet, like jewelry."

ONE CUSTOMER back then, Col. Edward Green, bought wire netting for the collection of rare birds he kept in his suite at the Waldorf-Astoria. Another customer was the czarist government of Russia, which, in 1916, ordered one of

The nuts and bolts history of a carriage trade haven

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nearly every small metal object in the 1,000-page catalogue, perhaps out of curiosity over things Western or perhaps with the intention of practicing the sincerest form of flattery.

The nuts and bolts were sent by sea, of course, and arrived, rumor has it, not in time to be copied but in time to be used as shrapnel against the Bolsheviks in the revolution of 1917. Successful Bolshevik revolutionaries later ordered all sorts of Hammacher Schlemmer hardware, had the items shipped in chests with photographs tacked to the lids, photographs showing the use of each tool or part, clearly not just curiosity.

In 1926, William F. Schlemmer, son of the original, opened the store on 57th Street, which would become the main Hammacher Schlemmer outlet. Shortly thereafter he relegated the tool and hardware business to the basement while filling the main floor with luxury goods, artifacts of a lifestyle that always had fascinated him [he would later aid in the development of several products for the store: shrimp dishes, telephone stands, cocktail sets, caviar servers].

WHEN CUSTOMERS would tell Schlemmer that they still had the tools they had bought from his father 40 years earlier, he would always remark, "That's why there's no money in hardware."

The coming of the carriage trade to Hammacher Schlemmer opened the gates on a flood of anecdotes, many, no doubt, true, about the well-known and the well-to-do and what they bought there.

The Maharaja of Kashmir bought two 12-by-6-foot tasseled canopies called Porta-Shades. Katharine Hepburn ordered an especially long-legged table. The Duke of Windsor enjoyed buying flashlights, every kind of flashlight in the place. A Communist Party secretary from Yugoslavia was a passionate Hammacher Schlemmer shopper. ["There was a gadget freak," Tinberg said.]

J. Edgar Hoover bought a cheese set, some chutney, a gong. Alexander Calder was a regular customer for piano wire [for the mobiles]. Dwight D. Eisenhower bought a Nothing Box for \$25 [a box with lights that flashed randomly for about a year, after which the box died; the Beatles bought them by the hundreds]. Patricia Nixon had HS redo the White House and Blair House closets with electric-powered, rotating clothes racks. [A Hammacher Schlemmer dictum at the time was: "If it's not electric, make it electric; if it is electric, get rid of the cord!"] The dictum remains in effect, though electric has in many cases been replaced by words like computer-operated, solar-powered or

laser.]

King Hassan II of Morocco bought \$28,000 worth of stuff—a \$1,895 hot dog vendor's cart, a \$995 half-size Model T Ford, a \$695 automatic crepemaker—and then had his finance minister attempt to get a little off the price. Hammacher Schlemmer declined, as they always have, to discount.

FAVORED CUSTOMERS can get *anything* [except a discount] through Hammacher Schlemmer whether the store sells the item. A South American businessman ordered an elevator installed in the side of a mountain. The Duchess of Windsor had the store send her what Tinberg called "small, common things; hairnets, items like that." A Haitian politician ordered a tombstone. An Italian countess has HS send her rat poison on a regular basis. The store answered a gentleman cus-

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tomers' request for a "medium-size bronze fig leaf," the purpose of which was to make modest a garden statue the man had recently bought.

The parade of products that has brought the rich and famous to Hammacher Schlemmer marches on today. Tinberg recently returned from a shopping trip to Europe. In Germany he found a coffee roaster that attains the proper 700 degrees. In England there was a beach towel with a built-in inflatable pillow. In Italy he was shown an excellently designed mayonnaise maker.

In addition to shopping the world, the store develops some products on its own. One recent one is a CO₂-powered device that instantly chills white wine [it, of course, could chill red wine, but Hammacher Schlemmer customers wouldn't do that].

A third way the store gets products is that inventors come to call. In 1938 Fred Waring, of the musical group Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians, came in with the

Vitamaster [renamed by Hammacher Schlemmer the "Waring-Go-Round"], a chopper driven by electricity that reduced vegetables to a health-giving juice. Most of us now have one and call it a blender.

OTHER INVENTORS have missed the mark. Years ago, one proposed a foam-rubber mallet "to strike back at cars that encroach on a pedestrians' rights." Another, an Austrian, recently offered a swimming pool a mere 10 feet long. A device in the pool created a current that the swimmer was to stroke against thus keeping him swimming in place.

"We didn't think that would work very well," Tinberg said of the mini-pool, "but the products we carry, more than 2,000 of them, we don't think of as frivolous. They are intriguing products that perform specialized tasks."

Some more specialized than others. The Remote-Control Car Starter does just that and is advertised as a comfortable way of pre-warming or pre-air-conditioning a car, though it was developed originally for the Department of Justice's witness protection program and, HS speculates, may be being bought by some people who are in debt to the wrong people.

A hot seller, the Electronic Wine Guide, is a pocket calculatorlike device that is programmed with data on vintages of French, Italian, German, and California wines. Is the '67 red Bordeaux ready to drink? Find out in an instant.

The Electric Ice Cream Scoop is a device that "enables you to serve perfectly formed scoops of hard-frozen ice cream or sherbet quickly and easily without strenuous digging. . . . Its nonstick Teflon® bowl preheats to 248 degrees F. . . ."

"OFTEN," TINBERG said, "products that seem silly are, in fact, ahead of their time." He pointed to a long list of Hammacher Schlemmer firsts:

The steam iron in 1937, the Waring blender, the toaster [one in every home now, a tough sell in the '30s], the portable radio [a 30-pounder originally], the Amana Radarange [the first microwave oven, 80 sold in 6 weeks at \$500 each], Mr. Coffee [his birth announced by Hammacher Schlemmer in the early 1970s after other stores rejected him], the videocassette recorder [a larger, heavier, more expensive version in 1967 than you see now], the portable computer in 1974.

Perhaps the items of today will seem, in the future, like primitive versions of the, by then, commonplace. "Look," someone will exclaim, looking at an old 1984 Hammacher Schlemmer catalogue, "Electric Ice Cream Scoops had cords then!"