

Patience Frederiksen

Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,
& Museums

lam.alaska.gov

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Addison Field

Chief Curator

104 College Drive
Sitka, Alaska 99835
907-747-8981

Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM FEBRUARY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's February Artifact of the Month is block of whale's baleen (SJ-VI-A-23). The museum has little information on the piece of baleen, but it has been identified by two different scientists as most likely coming from a minke whale.¹ There is no record of when the baleen was donated to the museum, but it is listed in a 1931 inventory record and may have been a gift of one of the original founding members which included a number of amateur naturalists.

The minke whale is a member of the baleen whale family, also known as rorquals, and is the smallest of the "great whales."² Minkes have between 280 and 300 yellowish-white baleen plates, usually no more than 11 inches in length, on each side of its upper jaw. They are distinct from other rorquals because of their narrow, triangular rostrum or upper jaw, which is proportionally shorter than the upper jaws of their rorqual counterparts. According to the American Cetacean Society, the taxonomy of minke whales is currently in question, and there may be three species of minke whales: the Antarctic minke whale (relatively large and lacking a flipper stripe), the dwarf minke (smaller than Antarctic, has a flipper stripe, lives in tropical southern hemisphere waters), and the true minke whale (flipper stripe present, lives in the northern hemisphere).

Although the Sheldon Jackson Museum has not collected natural history specimens for many years, it once focused heavily on the flora and fauna of the territory of Alaska. The museum was originally called the Alaskan Society of Natural History and Ethnology and the periodical, *The Alaskan* published an advertisement for the organization's first meeting on Oct. 22nd, 1887 that read as follows:

"Museum of Natural History and Ethnology – All interested in the formation of a society for securing a Museum of Natural History in connection with the Training School are requested to meet at Dr. Jackson's office in Austin Hall, on Monday evening next, at 8 o'clock."

The constitution of the Society, unanimously approved on October 24th, 1887 stated, "1. The name of this society is the "Museum of Alaskan Natural History and Ethnology," and the Society's "purpose is to collect and preserve in connection with the Sitka Industrial Training School, specimens illustrative of the natural history and ethnology of Alaska and publications relating thereto.", etc."

The Society's interest in natural history was highlighted by the titles of the papers and articles its members read aloud in its meetings and the organization's membership being divided into committees that included: Taxidermy; Insects; Shells, Rocks and Fossils; Botany; Mineralogy; Capture of Fishes and Angling;

¹ According to Dale Rice of the National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle, WA, this is probably from a minke whale. Rice noted that is possible it is from a fin whale because the front one-half to one-third of the right baleen plates are yellowish white.

² According to the American Cetacean Society, rorquals are whales with baleen, a dorsal fin, and throat pleats.

Ornithology; Skeletons, Bones, and Horns. Titles of papers given by individual members included, but were not limited to, "Alaskan Bald Eagles"; "Trees of Alaska", "Fresh Salt Water Clams"; "Food of the Sea Urchin," and "Coal in Alaska."

The first official curator of the Society, Frederic E. Frobese, had a profound love of taxidermy and was notable for giving lengthy talks on certain animals or birds during meetings only to arrive at the next gathering with a gift for the Society – a stuffed version of whatever he had been expounding upon during the previous month's assembly. The meeting minutes reveal that he gave "stuffed" crows, sea snakes, Jake snipes, bullfinches, dipper birds, hen haws, mud gulls, flying fish, sea urchins, and more.

Although the majority of the natural history specimens given to the museum in the late 19th century were largely culled from the collection as the museum's leadership in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, wished to focus more on Alaska Native ethnographic material and artwork, there are fortunately still some samples in the museum's permanent collection today.³ Natural history specimens include blue whale bones and a blue whale skull, walrus tusks, mammoth or mastodon bones, whale teeth, mountain sheep horns, shells, and more.

The February Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until February 28th. This sample of baleen and other examples of natural history specimens in the collection may be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 10am and 4pm. The museum is closed for lunch from noon to 1pm. General admission is \$3 and free for those 18 and under or members of either the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska State Museum.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Jacqueline Hamberg

Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 747-3004

www.museums.alaska.gov

Alaskan Society of Natural History and Ethnology. Meeting: 24 October 1887

Alaskan Society of Natural History and Ethnology. Meeting: 9 April 1887

Alaskan Society of Natural History and Ethnology. Meeting: 10 January 1888

The Alaskan [Sitka] 22 Oct. 1887: n. Print.

"Minke Whale." <http://acsonline.org/fact-sheets/minke-whale/>, American Cetacean Society, 31 January 2017

³ It was not until 1985 that the Alaska State Museum acquired the Sheldon Jackson Museum and unfortunately, there were no written records by former museum curators during the early 20th century regarding what became of the natural history collection and taxidermy and mammal specimens. It is likely the specimens either became too damaged due to improper storage around the campus or that they were given to educational organizations or discarded due to the shift in focus back towards Alaska Native peoples.