

Locksmith Robert Lang demonstrates how he can easily open a safe.

- WALTER TYCHNOWICZ, Sun

Safecracker

opens up

He can pick your lock and pick your pocket

Robert Lang doesn't fret if he's locked out of the house or vehicle. He doesn't work up a lather if he's forgotten a combination. Being able to pick the smallest lock or even "manipulate" open huge bank vaults earns Lang fame and modest fortune. He won the world safecracking competition a few years ago in Dallas - the first and only time he entered. It took a mere 18 minutes for him to crack open a double-combination banker's safe, besting 50 international competitors. Besides picking locks, Lang, 72, can also pick your pocket. Oh, it's all on the level. Perfectly legit. The pickpocket angle comes from his performances as an escape artist and magician. The safe cracking comes from his day job. As a master locksmith perfecting his craft for 56 years, his nimble talents - his large hands sport digits the size and colour of bratwurst are eagerly sought by law enforcement, banking institutions and folks in distress. Oh, the stories that spill from his lips! Tales of naked people locked out of the home at night, folks trapped in bathrooms and even stories of how he survived a nitroglycerine explosion or two. "Our best stories we can't talk about," laughed Lang, proprietor of Lang Locksmiths and Custom Safes, a six: employee shop located at 7310 50 St. There are a few, however, he can discuss. Take the late night he was called to a hotel to free a bride who accidentally locked herself in the bathroom on her wedding night. While the frantic groom paced and puffed cigarettes, Lang finally freed the blushing bride who emerged sans trousseau. Other tales involve embarrassed men brandishing large balls and chains, the result of a stag-party prank gone awry, locked to their ankles. "One guy walked in last year with one. He was a *little* ticked off."

Banks are also quick to call when vaults won't open because of missing combinations or time-clock problems. "But generally our work is more attempting to put in place locks and devices to keep the bad guys out - or slow them down - giving people the protection they really need. "Calls come in all day long. It may be a jammed lock or locks to be re-keyed, stripped locks to be repaired, a key stuck in a lock, new keys cut for a business, upgrading a building's locks after a break-in, or someone's lost their key to a safety deposit box." Local casinos use Lang's company to look after their locks. Armoured cars are another source of work, "probably a job a day. Occasionally you'll hear where the back door of an armoured car has opened and bags of money have fallen out. It's quite possible because the locks get so much use, so much abuse, that if we don't keep them in good shape then the locks fail and the doors fly open." Safes are about 50% of his business. "It's our specialty. Selling, servicing, repairing, opening up - assisting people who can't get into their safes." Over the years, he invented his own method foras he calls it - "manipulating" safes. He uses a stethoscope and listens intently as he slowly turns the tumblers. "I really wasn't taught but was told the technique from a safeman. I practised and practised and practised and found out various things on my own." The last resort is to drill open a safe, which of course damages it. Thus, he's taught his special manipulating method to safe technicians in the

U.S. as well as Canada. Ever worry about being kidnapped? "Oh, every once in awhile the thought crosses my mind." Added Lang's head safe technician, Roger Penner: "It's happened with locksmiths and bank managers. That's why the time-lock was invented, so Jesse James couldn't go and wake the bank manager in the middle of the night and force him to the bank to open the vault." Lang's company does "a job or two a week" with the police which includes picking up safes damaged by burglars, offering expert opinion "or we may get a call where they need us to open a door to check and see what's inside in case of a missing person." Born and bred in Edmonton, this year marks his 56th in the business. But he has no plans to retire. As a teenager Lang apprenticed under Joel Lipsett at Joel's Mechanical Shop. When Lipsett died in 1952, Lang bought the business. At that time chiefly cycle and sporting goods shops did lock and key work in Edmonton. It was sort of a jack of all trades for the mechanically minded, an image that's taken a long time to shed. Joe's Locksmiths Ltd. was sold in 1965 to Chubb, Mosler, & Taylor Safes Ltd. but Lang remained as service manager until 1970. "I guess I'd been on my own too long, I really found it difficult to work for a big company." He went up to Grande Prairie and opened Lang Locksmiths Ltd. Three years later he opened Lang Locksmiths Ltd. in Edmonton. Since he began, Lang has witnessed a lot of technological changes. But don't think because the industry is turning high-tech with touch pad locks, magnetic-card lock keys in modern hotel and business doors that locksmithing is an endangered species. "They still feature locks, don't they?" reminded Lang. "Someone has to install and maintain the locks." But change can be good. "Back in the '50s, we'd encounter safes where the bad guys tried to blow them using nitroglycerine. They didn't always get the safe open. Nitroglycerine was left behind. We'd neutralize it using chemicals. Sometimes there'd be a bottle of nitro left sitting on the safe." So what would you do? Take the nitro out to a field and chuck rocks at it until it exploded? "No, the RCMP take it off to a field and set a charge." Twice, however, Lang unknowingly worked on a safe when nitro residue remained. "I was taking a part off, hit one part with a hammer it exploded and I was blown across the room." Another time a damaged safe sat for weeks in his shop before it exploded. "It's a fascinating industry," said Lang. "Every phone call we get, every customer that comes in, has a different problem. It's one challenge after another. A lot of people think of a locksmith as just sitting cutting keys and refitting locks but that's only a very small segment." **M**any locksmiths apprenticed under Lang. Like Gordon Parr, for example. Several decades ago, Parr was watching "a James Bond-type movie" where an electronic device was used to open a safe. "It didn't really exist but (Parr) thought it was a good idea. So he sat down and made model after model until he got it." Today the automatic safe dialling machine is available to those in the industry. Ever forget your keys? "Only once, after driving my wife to the hospital to deliver our first-born."

He's also an escape artist

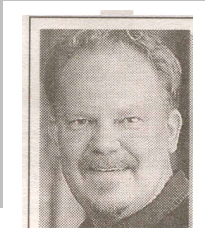
Talent is key when it comes to Robert Lang. The 72-Year-old, who grew up in Edmonton during the Dirty '30s, managed to parlay a modest ninth grade education into a rich and accomplished life. A former ski instructor, he has taught administration at NAIT, performed as a magician, hosted radio and television shows and even sang the national anthem at Edmonton Eskimo games a half-dozen times. Check it out:

- As an escape artist, Lang performed feats of derring-do in Canada and the U.S. during the '50s. Like escaping from a straitjacket while suspended upside down by a crane or submerged in water inside a barrel. In fact, one U.S. newspaper account referred to him as "one of the world's best-know escapists."
- Instructor and host of the *Learn to ski* show on CBC

- Master of Ceremonies and producer of *Search for Talent* on CFRN radio, Host of the *On Stage* variety show on CBC during 1980.

A Rotarian, he still performs as a magician and speaker at service clubs across Canada. "I had an interest in magic, and then I found escape work. I thought it was entertainment and a wonderful way to promote my shop," recalled Lang. And he's accomplished a few things through his day job as well, including being instrumental in setting up the Alberta Locksmiths Association in 1976, renamed the Professional Locksmiths Association of Alberta in 1991. Indeed, Lang is affectionately called "the grandfather of locksmithing" in Alberta by others in the industry.

- FLOREN



Erik Floren