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Fishin' Paradise
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Chronicle Color Photo

KING

By John Furneaux
Photos by Paul R. Seals

Curiosity allegedly killed the cat, but as far as one Houstonian is concerned, it didn't have any such harmful effect on him—for it provided the impetus for what now probably is the largest privately owned museum in the Southwest, the Hyde Park Miniature Museum at 1406 Welch.

Tearing things apart to see what "makes them work" comes as second nature—or perhaps rates higher than that—to Dave Smalley, curator, who in his 57-year span has collected everything from cannonballs to Indian relics, hats and shoes of the "Gay Nineties," to materials made of twentieth century plastics.

An authority on many subjects, he is a glaring contradiction to the adage about a "jack of all trades and master of none." His renown as a collector is surpassed only by his status as a master hobbyist, for he probably has had more hobbies than any 10 men.

Smalley's ability as an oil painter is a natural one, for his mother, Mrs. Laura Roosa, used to be an art teacher here. After doing a few canvasses, he decided to enter them in a show at the old City Auditorium. To his surprise, his paintings won first, second and third prizes.

Astronomy was not neglected among his hobbies. He made several telescopes, grinding the lenses through weeks of painstaking effort. One of his largest telescopes, with a 12-inch lens diameter, was given to the Hermann Park Museum of Natural History.

A devotee of early-day radio, Mr. Smalley was a licensed "ham" operator and constructed his own set. This was forgotten when he became interested in wood carving, and later in high-frequency electrical experimentation. He built a robot man which was controlled by a central switchboard to do his bidding, while sparks emanated from its lifelike frame.

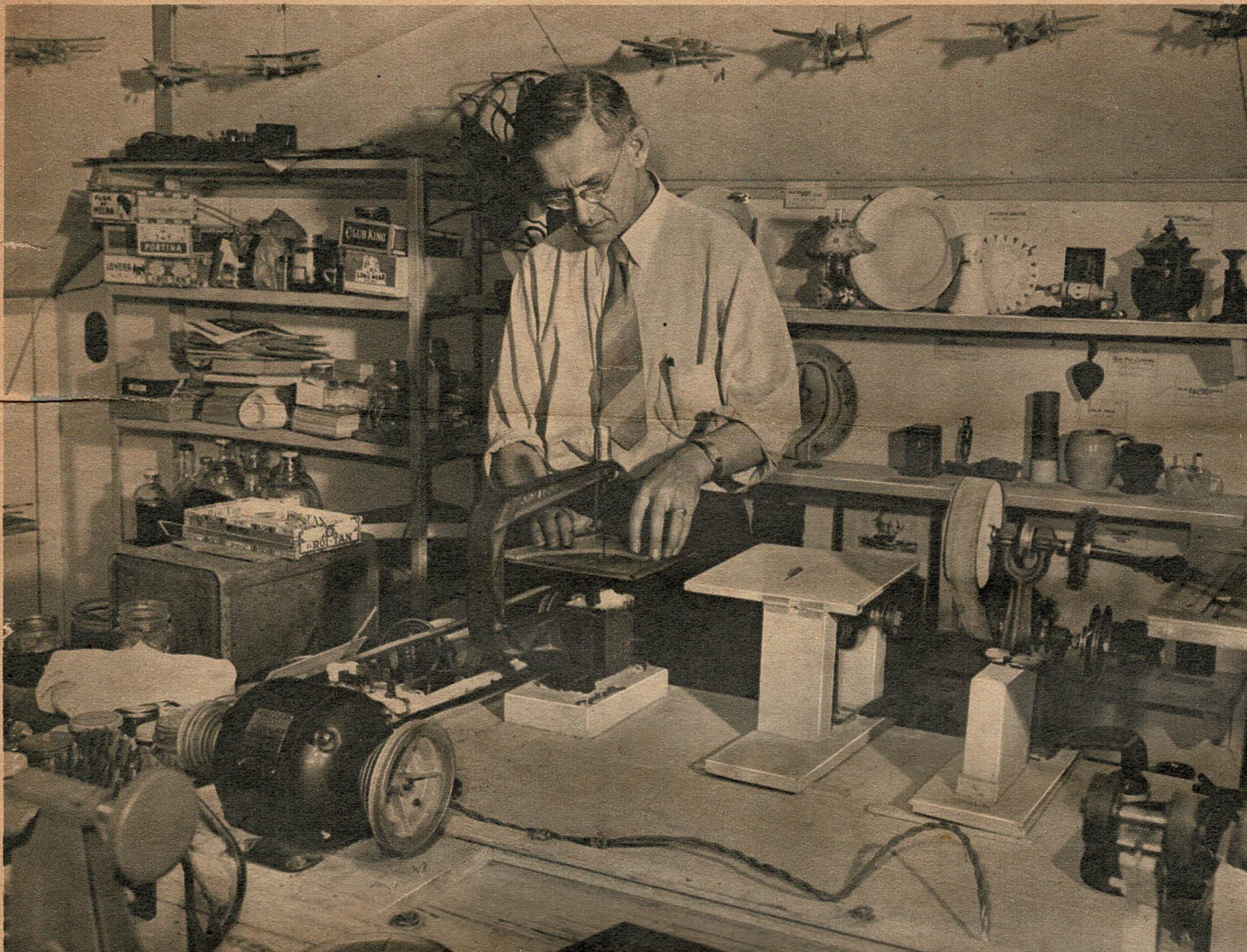
When the Milam Street bridge was being built, workmen unearthed a large number of cannonballs, dating from Civil War days. Mr. Smalley obtained some for his museum.

During an illness at the Southern Pacific Hospital, with a plaster cast around his body for nearly a year, he built what he calls "My old Kentucky home"—a farm scene complete with animals and barns, constructed from old matches and toothpicks and glued piece by piece on the inside of a 16-ounce bottle. Another interest during his confinement was that of making beaded bags, most of which he gave away.

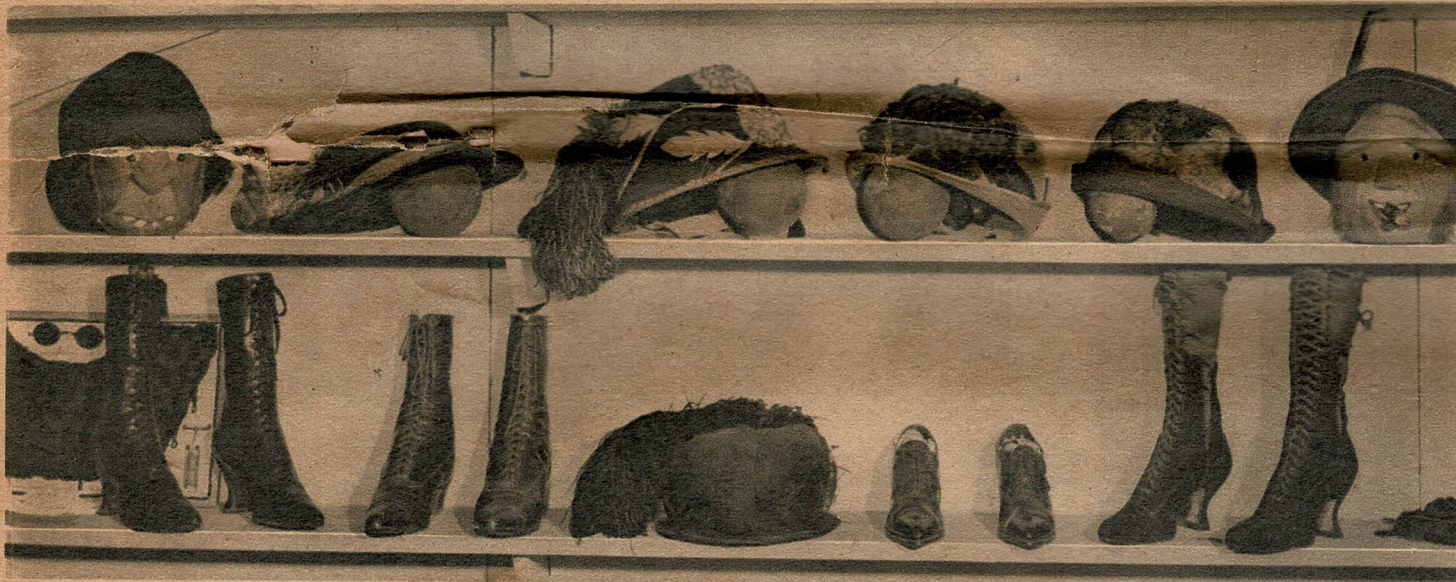
The influence of his 29-year association with railroading at Southern Pacific is evidenced by a model railroad layout, which occupies a prominent spot in his museum.

The first train model he built was the "John Stevens" locomotive of 1812, said to have been the first steam engine to run on American rails. Its locomotion

Stone art of the American Indians, at left, has been collected by Mr. Smalley over a period of years. Teeth of the giant mammal, also shown on lower shelf at right, are said to be over 1,000,000 years old.



Modern-day plastics are the material from which Dave Smalley is starting another "project." Although he talks of his hundreds of other hobbies in an affectionate tone, his current activities deal almost entirely in working with this comparatively new material.

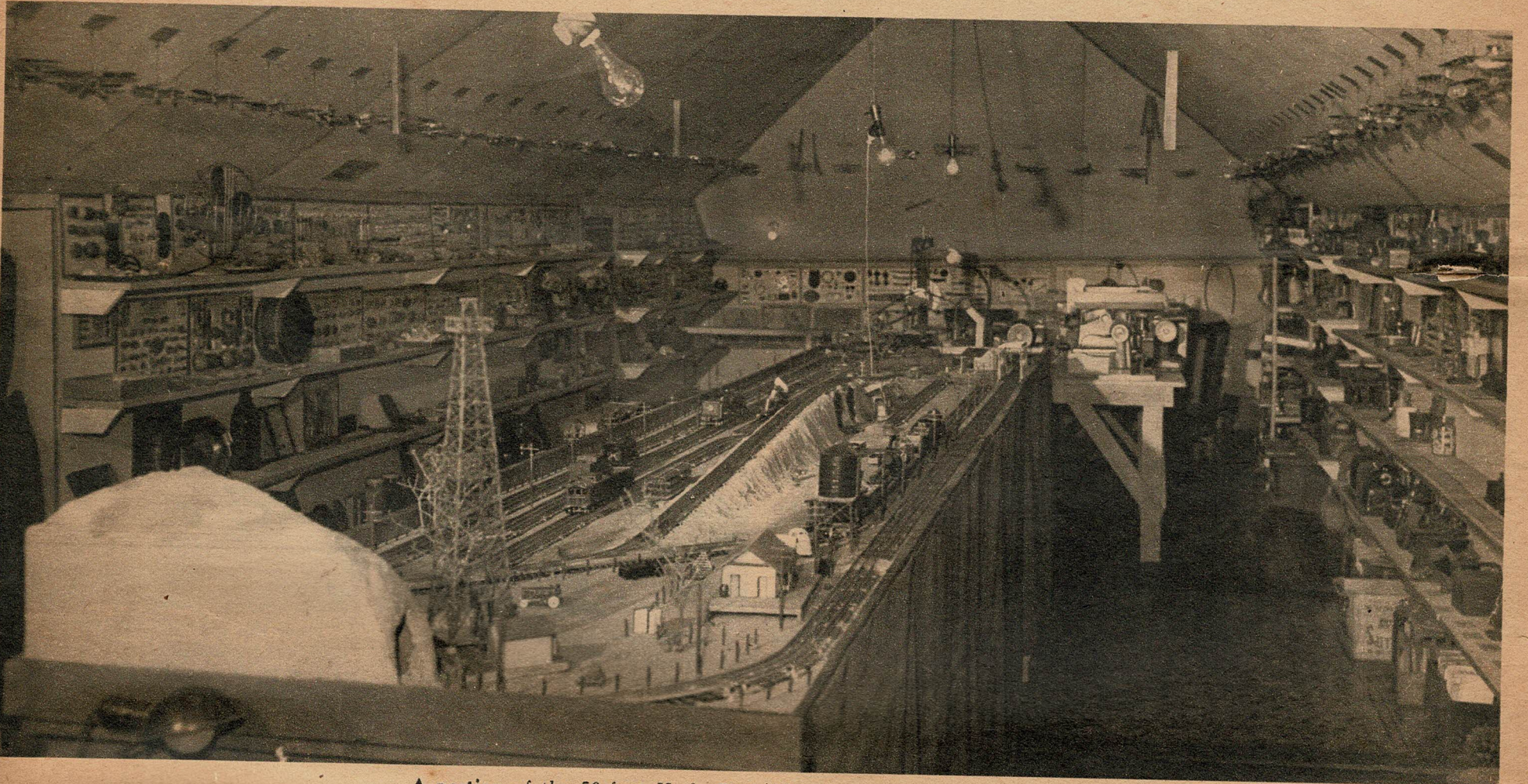


Shades of the Gay Nineties! These hats and shoes, which caused many a flutter down Houston's fashion avenues, were given to Mr. Smalley for his museum by old-time Houstonians. Props for the hats are Civil War cannonballs unearthed during construction of the Milam Street bridge.



of Hobbyists

Collections and Handiwork of Houston's
Dave Smalley Fill a Museum at His Home



A portion of the 50-foot Hyde Park Miniature Museum features a model railroad layout constructed in its entirety by Mr. Smalley, a railroader himself for the past 29 years.

was provided by engagement of a large cogwheel on the engine with the clogged rails on which it ran.

The Spanish galleons of Columbus' day, on exhibit at the museum, required much time to construct, he says, but he is unable to say how long for "I lose track of time when I am working on a project."

Collectors would have a field day if Smalley displayed a "For Sale" sign. He has an outstanding stamp collection, some interesting old coffee grinders and two music boxes, one of the 1885 period, complete with many "rolls" of music.

Perhaps the largest collection he has is that of Indian relics, followed closely in size by an exhibit of model airplanes which include replicas of the first planes built by the Wright brothers. His most recent plane is a scale model of a six-motor Russian transport used during the latter part of World War II.

Women are reluctant to leave one corner of the museum, for in that spot are on exhibit numerous hats of the Gay Nineties period. One of these deep-crowned, plume-bedecked models, of which he is particularly proud, adorned the head of a very prominent Houston lady during many a Sunday afternoon promenade, Mr. Smalley says. Of another era also are women's shoes with high tops and extremely pointed toes.

Most of his collection of books, fossilized bones, bits of meteors and old stereopticon slides has been shelved by the hobby man now, for his current interest is working with plastics.

He may change his mind tomorrow, however, for—according to his wife—"When his curiosity is satisfied, he has got to have something else to try."

Smalley, at right, plays a mournful tune on an 1885 music box he has in his collection. Muzzle-loading and ball and cap guns of bygone days adorn the walls.

