D.D. Smalley was excessive to the bone. Even his name was excessive, notes Smalley aficionado Helen Fosdick: The initials stand for David David. A draftsman and mapmaker for the Southern Pacific Railroad, he threw himself into hobbies. He made robots, which performed for his guests. He built large telescopes, for which he ground his own lenses. When he entered a painting show at the City Auditorium, he won first, second, and third place. He carved ships-in-a-bottle, airplanes, scenes of rural life, and complete balsa-wood train sets. He even hosted a radio show on which he performed as a one-man band and offered a prize to any caller who requested a tune he couldn’t play.

In 1941, at his wife’s suggestion, he converted his attic to the Hyde Park Miniature Museum, where neighborhood kids could admire his eccentric treasures. There were corset staves, dinosaur turds, fleas dressed in tiny costumes, and approximately 250,000 stamps that he’d soaked off envelopes and tied into neat bundles. There was a petrified beehive, an acorn from the White House lawn, and things that Smalley proclaimed to be “Porcupine Eggs.” Kids could make the giant model train set whistle, or they could read any issue of Popular Mechanics or Life ever published. Visitors were asked to sign a guest book, and if they put a penny in the donation box, a mechanical monkey would tip its hat.

Smalley died in 1958. In 1994, Helen Fosdick and Smalley’s grandson, Frank Davis, carefully stored the museum’s contents in a barn in San Marcos. Someday, they hoped, the museum could be revived.

This fall, students from the Rice Building Workshop designed and built an exhibition unit for the museum — one that could both travel the country and recreate the strange charm of Smalley’s attic. “The purpose of the Rice Building Workshop is to get architecture students involved in hands-on projects with real-world clients,” says Danny Samuels, the workshop’s director. “These clients and this project were fun. The students had a grand time.”

On March 19, the exhibition debuts at Brazos Projects, the exhibition space next to Brazos Bookstore. For a year, viewers will be able to appreciate Smalley’s dinosaur hip bones, his genuine Hawaiian grass skirt, and a ring that once belonged to 8’6" Jack Earle. — Lisa Gray