Red Smith paused to answer a question about a convection heater, then continued through his hardware store to the big room beyond, which houses treasures gathered over more than a century.

The room itself is more than 100 years old. It was the site of the original H.J. Smith's Sons General Merchants, established in Covington in 1876 by Smith's grandfather. The store has since moved next door, and the original site now is home to various items Smith and his father and grandfather collected.

"That pirogue's one of my prides," Smith said, pointing to a huge cypress dugout that dominates the room. The boat was 20 feet long originally, with a 4-1/2-foot beam. "As an LSU researcher who came to see it said this tree was growing close to the time of Christ."

"The ingenuity of those old people was amazing. They'd split the tree like a watermelon, then bore two holes they chopped it out, they went back and so they'd know how deep it was. After they made the casket they'd put the body in and seal it up and tighten all those bolts so no air could get in so there'd be no decomposition."

"Relatives might come from as far away as New York City, and they might not get here for three or four weeks. But they could see the deceased through the glass face plate," Smith said.

A typed sign hanging near the casket proclaims it as an actual model used in New Orleans. "The corpses were preserved, and even the flowers remained intact -- some known to have been encased over 180 years," according to the sign, which also says: "We are now accepting deposits for orders. Please order in advance. Can we take your measurements?"

When Smith's grandfather established the store back in 1876 it was similar to a commissary where farmers would come to buy feed, seed, household products, clothes and shoes. The purchases would be applied against an anticipated crop -- usually cotton -- and would be paid for when the crop came in, Smith said.

The store was built on North Columbia Street because "it was almost a straight shot from Monticello (Miss.) to Covington. It was as straight as they could get to bring their produce down as close as they could get to New Orleans."

"They'd bring a schooner -- pulled by dray animals -- up the Bayou Falaya River, load it up and send it to New Orleans. The Bayou Falaya flows into the Tchefuncte River about three miles south of town, then into Lake Pontchartrain," Smith said.

Ed Smith stands behind a whale vertebrae on the counter in H.J. Smith's Sons General Merchants museum. Photos by Bill Feig.

The building on North Columbia Street in Covington houses the hardware store on the left and the museum on the right.
"The old man (Smith's grandfather) stored produce in his warehouse until the price was at its upper limit, then he'd sell," Smith said with a chuckle. "My grandfather had two sons, and eventually they came into the business. In 1947 I came back home and got into the business with my dad, J. Lewis Smith."

These days four of Smith's five sons and his wife and his daughter are in business with him. The fifth son "is in the drug business," Smith said with a laugh, referring to the pharmacy up the street at which the young man works.

"I tell you, I feel so blessed. I didn't want nothing to do with Covington when I was their age. I went to LSU and got a mechanical engineering degree, but I found I missed this little town, missed the hunting and fishing.

"Since my attitude had been wanting to get away, I told them if they wanted to leave I wouldn't stand in their way, but if they wanted they could be partners in the business," Smith said. "One thing I'm going to tell you, we're not going to have any feuding or fussing or fighting. My dad and his brother would get in some hellacious arguments. It used to upset me."

Jack Smith said he's worked in the family store since he was 14, "if not earlier," and he never thought about doing anything else. "Nobody's got a real job description. If you start that it'll make one person more important than another. Our personalities all work well together. Usually in a partnership, one feels like he's working harder than the other, but not with us."

Red Smith's wife Rita started working in the store in 1957, and she enjoys working with her husband and their children. "I love having them all so close. I don't like staying at home because no one's home anymore," she said.

"They know what they have to do. Plenty of times I go to them because they're more familiar with the stock," she said.

Below, a 1935 newspaper headlines the death of Huey P. Long. At right, among the many items in Smith's museum are old pieces of office equipment and firefighter's hats that date back to 1910.

The pirogue and the casket may be his pride and joy, but Smith is rather fond of the many treasures housed in the family museum. The cast-iron cane mill was used to grind sugar cane, and the juice from the cane went into the big, cast-iron syrup kettle.

"See that little box right there?" Smith asked, pointing to a black metal box sitting on the wooden floor. "It's a safe, a safe that was built by a blacksmith. To me it's really work of art. He put this plate over the secret keyhole. See, there's the keyhole," he said as he slid the plate and revealed the hidden opening. "I don't know whether it was a stagecoach safe or strongbox or what, but it shows the ingenuity of these people who didn't have nothing."

Wooden shelves line much of the museum's wall space. Leather football helmets — from Lyon High, which became Covington High — are displayed on one shelf, and 1910 firemen's hats from the Jefferson Fire Department in Covington are on another. The fireman's hats belonged to Smith's father. "Back then they had to do it all. They ran the businesses, fought the fires, and were the town's politicians," he said.

The shelves also are filled with bottles and jars made of green, blue, amber, brown and clear glass, metal cooking utensils, hurricane lamps, wooden duck decoys, old shoes, cigar boxes, old baking pans and more.
The cast-iron lady’s casket from the Girod Street Cemetery in New Orleans

rakes, picks, axes, pitchforks and saws.
The wooden washing machine, which dates back to the early 1900s, “is an interesting device,” according to Smith. “They had the thing made so it would work either with or without electricity. The agitator would float up, so when the water got too high the clothes couldn’t get on top of it and get wrapped up.”

And then there’s the round refrigerator, complete with a rotating tray inside. “With all our ingenuity today, we don’t have anything like this,” Smith said as he reached inside and gave the tray a spin. “But you can’t put a round refrigerator in a corner.”

Glass jars and bottles are among the collectibles

He also has a cast-iron cotton scale, a cast-iron hot water heater, an old gasoline pump, and a whole vertebrae that he got from someone who was giving away things that his father had accumulated. “He asked if I wanted it and I said I don’t turn anything down.”

Smith's petrified rat is a favorite among Smith's younger visitors

Smith pointed out the rat on the table, and the fellow moseyed over to take a look. “That’s gross,” was the verdict. “Sometimes I feel kind of antiquated keeping up with all this stuff,” Smith said. “But collecting grows on you. It’s an addiction, kind of like drugs or whiskey, but a lot better for you,” he said with a smile and a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

powder cans and old metal fans.

Other items — metal locks and keys, a wooden ukulele, a jeweler’s vise, a hand-powered drill press, button hooks, collar buttons, petticoats, a corn husk mop, wagon wheel spokes, a wheelwright’s measuring wheel, a Quackenbush pellet rifle and a Springfield cavalry carbine — are displayed in glass cases, and there’s a corner for early American tools, such as the wooden corn sheller that dates back to 1900, the cast-iron horse-drawn seed planter, the wooden wheelbarrow, the wooden seed drill, the butter churn, wagon wheels, cane strippers, shovels,