

Probably the largest one man collection in the United States, Jamison's Museum fills a half dozen buildings with over 100,000 fascinating items. The old flag at the right has only 38 stars.

Rollo Jamison's Museum

A Journey Into Yesterday

by George Vukelich

In this day of the bulldozers and multi-lane highways, it is somewhat of a shock to encounter a man like Rollo Jamison of Beetown. And it is a rare pleasure, to boot. At 65 years of age, the bright-eyed bachelor doesn't exactly want to hold off the twentieth century, he just wants to make sure that the bulldozers don't get all of the nineteenth. Thus, he has spent 50 years preserving the nineteenth century and he has the determination of a man set to go another 50.

Jamison is chief cook, bottle washer, and curator of Jamison's Museum, a chockfull complex of some half-dozen buildings in Beetown, halfway between Lancaster and Cassville in southwest Wisconsin's Grant County.

Modestly enough, Jamison won't hazard a guess as to how many items his museum contains.

"I couldn't tell you," he says, shaking his head. "I haven't counted them. I have all my buildings around here full. Plumb full. I try to collect items that go back to the earliest beginnings of Grant County and then I sort of come up to modern times. But, let's see. I've got a complete old blacksmith shop, a complete old woodworking shop, a log cabin built about 125 years ago, a schoolhouse I moved in here from near Bloomington. Then of course the building where I live, the one with the stairs from the old dance hall."

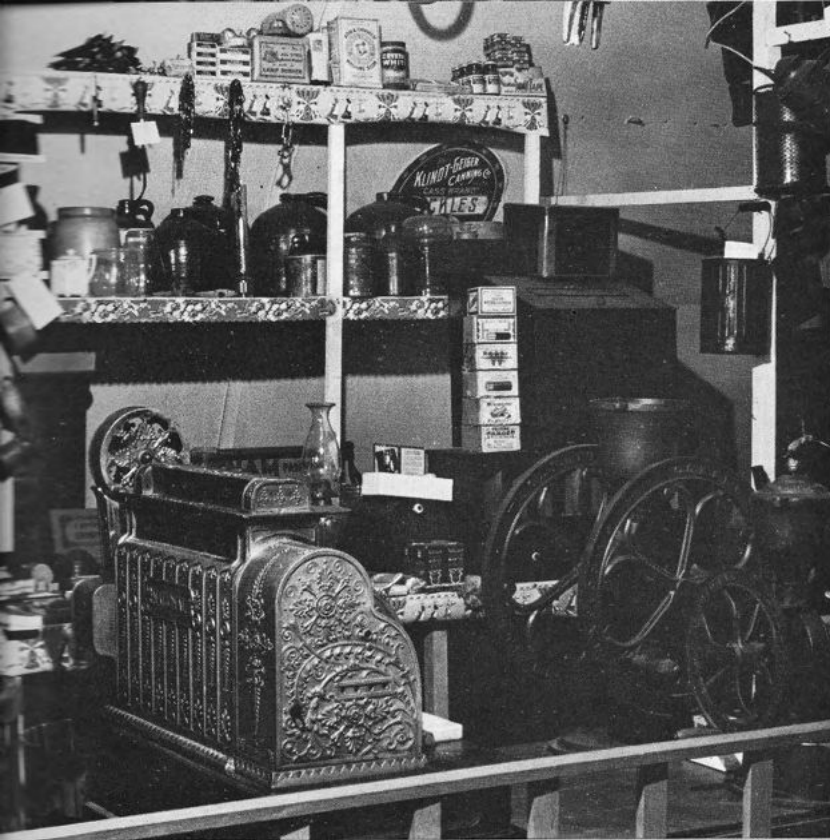
You get the idea. One informed Beetown source estimated that Rollo had about 100,000 items in the museum. An inventory would stagger the mind and boggle the imagination: cracker barrels, sugar scales, coffee scoops, kerosene lamps, Gramophones, wax cylinders, a fleet of horse-drawn vehicles — including a surrey with the fringe on top — a handsome carriage (called a Clarence, and once driven by a mayor of Detroit), a medicine wagon, a kerosene wagon, and thousands of items that not even my mother-in-law remembers. I asked Rollo if he started by saving string.

"Well," he grinned, "when I was on the farm, my dad used to be plowing with a walking plow and I used to follow him. I got to picking up arrowheads and ox shoes and I got interested in collecting that way, I guess. After that I got to picking up old rocks in the creek and things like that. Of course, I had an awful time as a kid: I'd bring this stuff home and my mother would throw it out. But I saved as much as I could."

He pointed to the framed arrowhead collection mounted over the doorway.

"That started it all," he said. "I had an idea I should save a little history."

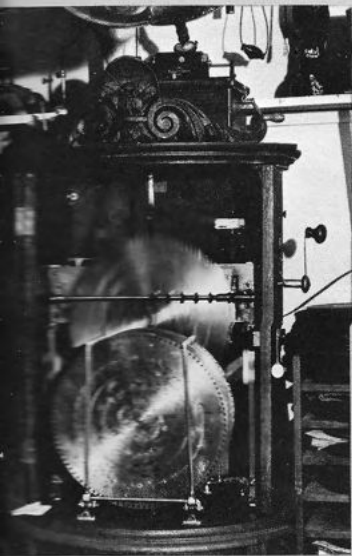
It seems quite possible that if he had had the chance, Rollo Jamison might have gone on to become a professional historian.



A corner in Jamison's old general store section. For every item Rollo Jamison can tell a story.

Left — A Regina Music Box of the 1880's can do automatically anything a modern juke box can — select, change or play the same record again.

Right — An Eagle Cash Register from Civil War days does everything except total the day's receipts.



Watches from the past. The watch on the left is wound with a key and a tiny chain with links like a bicycle.



"I didn't get much of an education," he laments. "My dad went away and left us in 1912 to run a donkey engine in the British Columbia lumber camps. I worked out and my mother worked out and the rest of the children went off to school. I didn't get to school any more after that."

The other children, two boys and a girl, never shared Rollo's passion for collecting things.

"I'm the only black sheep," he admits. "Oh, they visit, but when they walk through the museum, I can see that they're not interested."

He showed me an old stove sitting with others.

"That stove there," he said: "we kids huddled around that stove the night our mother told us our father wasn't coming home." As an afterthought he added, "I saved it."

Rollo has saved a lot of people's stoves, not to mention primitive washing machines, homemade sausage grinders, muskets, butter churns — the list would fill every single page in this magazine.

"I don't go out and scour the country," he says, "or beg anybody out of anything. If I hear of something that should be in the museum, why I go out and sometimes the people say, 'Oh, gosh, I'd like to have you have it but it belongs to my grandparents or some good friend and so I better keep it.' I say, 'Well, if it's a keepsake, I don't want it, but if you're going to let some antique collector take it away from here then I would like to have it.' Rather than have somebody haul it away from here, I'd like to keep the history here."

History is important to Jamison. He sees his role as primarily that of an historian.

"Every item I have here," he says, "I get the history with each item as the people tell me. I think that's the way history should be collected."

History is about all Beetown has these days. Like thousands of American boom towns, it reached its zenith over a century ago and then the boom passed and Beetown has never been the same since. Lead — the grey gold — was the town's claim to fame, and naturally Jamison learned the story firsthand from old-timers who are no longer around.

"Well," he says, "the way it was told me, four fellows were taking mail by horseback from Galena to Prairie du Chien. As they came over the hill about a mile and a half below town, they saw that a big tree had been blown down by a storm and under the roots of this tree was a nugget of lead, which turned out to weigh 425 pounds. One of the limbs had broken off the tree and there was honey coming out of it. It was a bee tree. Well, that started the lead mining here — that was 1827 — and that was the start of Beetown too."

The town reached a population peak of some 2200 people during the lead-mining heyday. After the Civil War, lead "got cheap," the boom petered out, and so did Beetown. Now fewer than 200 people live there.

It's not easy to make a living in a place like Beetown. Jamison knows from firsthand experience.

"I ran a garage, a little repair shop, for 20 years here. I had a real good business but it was always one fellow paying me and the next fellow charging his bill

and all the money was on the books. Naturally I was collecting history all the time and the main thing was I needed to get all the things under one roof. So I needed a business that wasn't all on the books. So I'd drive around the area studying places of business, like a bird studying a place to build a nest. And it seemed to me the only business that was strictly cash was the tavern business so I went into the tavern business in 1940 and stayed with it for 11 years. There was fair money in it and I saved up enough to do what I've done with the museum. But I just never did like a tavern. I don't drink myself. Never have."

He doesn't smoke either but he's not moral about it. The money he saves by not drinking and not smoking goes into buying additional items for his beloved collection. He freely admits that he can't compete with the city antique collectors when it comes to price, but he appeals to the owner's sense of history and usually Jamison winds up with the item at a price that he can afford.

"Carriage out there," he says, "fellow wanted \$500 for it. Well, I said he could probably get it from some antique collector but that carriage was bought and used in this area. It was part of Grant County's history and it would be nice if it could stay here in the museum. Fellow let me have it for \$25. Lots of folks have a feeling for history if you only ask them."

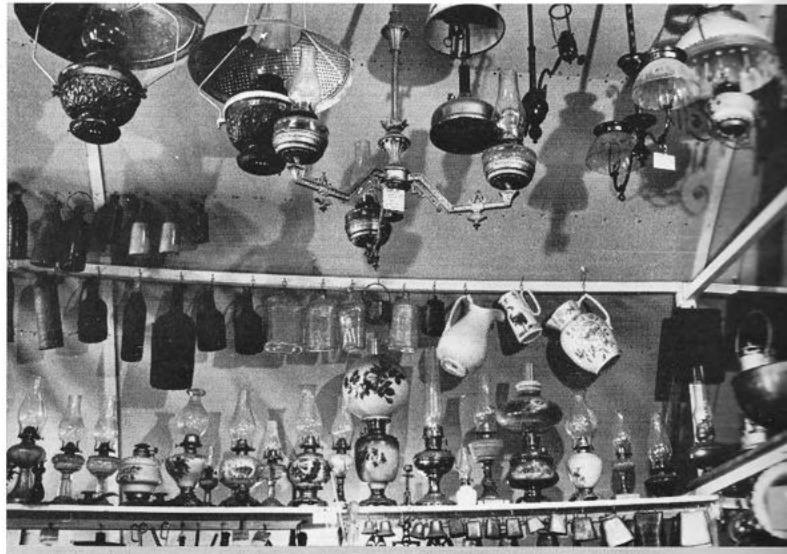
Naturally, having experienced the perils of credit transactions, Jamison, as a customer, is strictly a cash-and-carry man. Just as naturally, this philosophy finds him living close to the belt. Money, it seems, is always a problem, whether you're buying a brand-new electric coffeepot or a coffeepot that has already seen a hundred years of service.

Jamison charges adults sixty cents to go through his museum, and last year some sixteen hundred went through. Kids go through for a dime a head, although if the youngster is without funds, Jamison waives the fee and the youngster is conducted around like a cash customer. Three years ago the Grant County Board stepped in to sweeten the pot a little. The Board had been voting the State Museum at Cassville \$500 annually to admit area school children free. When Jamison said that kind of support might help keep his museum from going under, the Board voted him a \$500 grant too. It's as he says: Lots of people have a feeling for history if you only ask them.

Obviously, the museum is not a get-rich-quick scheme for Rollo Jamison.

"It's not a get-rich-slow scheme either," he laughs. "Beetown is off the beaten trail, but the people that do come to the Museum are awful nice people. I live. I enjoy meeting all the people. Shucks, I have people here from England and New Zealand, Australia, and Switzerland. I'm pretty proud when I see them register that way. Then there are people from the different states. And of course there are always the kids."

Jamison especially enjoys the kids who visit. They follow the Pied Piper into the Past and stand wide-eyed as he "tells" the history of each item and they get a chance to touch things and work things and watch things work. Things that were made before they were



Jamison has examples of every known way our forefathers made light from a wick in tallow to elaborate gas chandeliers and the earliest incandescent lamps.

born. Before their parents were born. Before their grandparents were born. Jamison's idea of a museum is that everything shouldn't be under glass and remote. Things should be touched and cranked and worked.

"Lots of people would say," he observes, "that you'd have an awful time in a place like this with kids here, but I don't. I just tell them not to misuse anything because I'm the one who has to repair the thing and I can't replace it and the kids never sass. They're awful good."

Jamison also observes that the little kids invariably prefer the doll collection, the boys like the gun and musket collection, and the older kids seem to be interested in a little bit of everything.

"The younger ones seem to just like the thing itself, a doll or a musket. But the older ones like to get the story of the thing too. I guess that's what history is all about."

He gives youngsters pieces of lead, "black jack," quartz and "fool's gold" when they leave. "They like to carry something away to remind them of the visit,"

Early typewriters — Remingtons, Smiths, Densmors and a Blickensderfer with interchangeable faces like the modern IBM.



he smiles. "So I let them take a little bit of our history with them. You'd think it was gold coins, the way they clutch them."

Some of the older customers would also like to carry something away. Jamison is besieged by antique collectors willing to purchase anything, from his Edison Kinetoscope, an early movie projector, to his pioneer "juke box" which plays up to twenty tunes on large perforated metal disks. He rejects all offers with a firm "no" and has never sold an item to anyone, any time, for any price.

"We're not collecting antiques," he says. "We're collecting history. Some people don't understand that. They think money will buy anything and it's kind of a shock when they come to find out it can't.

"Course, a lot of them keep coming back," he smiles. "I keep charging them sixty cents apiece."

Jamison has friends at both the Milwaukee Museum and the Wisconsin State Historical Society. (Not to mention the Pride Seed Corn Company of Glen Haven, which borrowed his collection of antique corn cutters, corn planters, corn driers and testers for a Farm Progress Day in Beaver Dam and stole the show from the new equipment displays.)

"I know the boys up at the Historical Society," he says. "I like them, but if this collection here went to the state, well, it would get pigeonholed and stored and now and then a piece would get on display. They don't have any more room than I do and I want this collection to stay together. In Grant County." He stopped and motioned toward the jampacked museum. "It's hard for me to put into words, but I feel that it should all stay here. Things can have roots, too, like people."

It was the Milwaukee Museum that confirmed Jamison's discovery of what he regards as the museum's most unique item.

It started with some local people looking at his arrowhead collection. They suggested that if he really wanted to find arrowheads, he should get down Potosi way (where they fished), and so he did.

"I went down to Potosi and went digging here and there and — not knowing where to dig — I picked up some broken arrowheads and some burnt rock and then I went down next to the river and I started digging in the moist sand and something green began to turn up. I remembered people telling me that copper did that and I had read some about the Hopewell Indians from Michigan having copper and so I called Roy Grindl at Platteville (then President of the Grant County Historical Society) and told him about what I had. Roy called the Milwaukee Museum and they came down and posted the grounds and made a study of it." The Milwaukee Museum team found that the copper was tempered and, in view of the fact that the Hopewell Indians did not know the tempering process, suggested that the copper had been brought here from Asia down through Alaska, five thousand years ago.

"It's not as exciting as a flintlock for most folks," he says. "But it's probably the most valuable or unique thing I ever found. Tempered copper. Hard as steel. Right here in Grant County. And nobody knows yet

how they tempered it. It's a lost secret. A lost art."

A man like Rollo Jamison doesn't come down the pike every day. You get the feeling that with a little support, he would restore Beetown right down to the last chinked log cabin, and hand-wrought wagon wheel. He's the first to admit that Beetown is a dying proposition and yet he, for one, won't let it — or anything connected with it — go without a fight.

Take the post office, for example.

"Well, they were going to close the post office a few years ago and the postmistress felt awful bad because we were going to lose the postoffice. I said, let's get a petition up. And she said it won't do any good, the inspector had talked to her and they would close our post office. Everybody said the same thing. Even my cousin, Paul Jamison, at the store." Jamison stopped and looked at me sideways. "I said anybody can be licked if he keeps his hands in his pockets. Let's get 'em out an' get a petition up."

"I jumped in my car," he continued, "and went up and talked to Melvin Bunn and Harold Craney up to Bloomington. I said I'd like to show people in Beetown that we could save a post office. I said, they've all given up and I think it can be saved. They said, 'You sure you can do it?' I said, well, I'd like to try if you aren't going to charge me too much. I got to do it all myself. Well, they said, if you've got nerve enough to do it, we won't charge you anything. They fixed me two petitions — one for town and one for the rural — and I took them around to be signed. Everybody I talked to, they said, well, it won't do any good, but we'll do it for your sake. After everybody signed it, I sent one to the Postmaster General — it was Mr. Summerfield under President Eisenhower."

Jamison, who obviously should never be underestimated, also dug up a letter written in 1848 by the Cassville postal official authorizing postal service to Beetown. Jamison had two photostatic copies made of that beautiful scripted authorization — "the copies cost me sixty cents" — and mailed them off to the Postmaster General in the company of the petitions.

Naturally, Mr. Summerfield wrote back thanking the people of Beetown for calling this matter to the attention of the federal government. He also notified them that he was countermanding the Postal Inspector's order and that the Beetown Post Office would remain in business.

"That's what happens to a town sometimes," Jamison said. "People just give up. I'm not the kind to give up. I figure I came into this country without anything and I'm going to leave the same way. I ain't gonna take anything with me either. If I've done some good here, why I figure this collection should do her."

Driving back into the twentieth century later, on the highway to Lancaster, I met a red Monza speeding past me like a bat — all I glimpsed were two blurred twentieth century faces. I slowed down and kept my eyes on the spreading valleys, watching for redtailed hawks or quail or anything. I even watched for barns, because it came to me like a revelation that I had never really seen a barn before.

