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Exhibit offers honest look at intolerance, racism

Battle Creek residents will have a rare opportunity to experience a missing piece of our American history when the traveling Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia from Ferris State University comes to the Art Center of Battle Creek from May 1-5.

Viewing the artifacts and history portrayed by this exhibit will help to debunk the many myths about black Americans and provide insights about the stereotyping and put-downs of fellow human beings. Each object in the exhibit is accompanied by a panel explaining its historical and cultural significance.

Dr. David Pilgrim, museum curator and diversity officer at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, brings the scholar's intellectual toolbox to this endeavor: curiosity, the objective pursuit of truth, the systematic collection and analysis of data, and the honest interpretation and presentation of those data.

In the 1820s, Thomas Rice, a white entertainer, caused a nationwide sensation by darkening his face with burnt cork and performing the song "Jump Jim Crow" on stage. His Jim Crow song-and-dance routine was a national and international success. Rice's "Jim Crow" became a stock character in minstrel shows that mocked and belittled African Americans.

Later, Jim Crow became a name for laws and a system of racial segregation that operated from the 1870s to the 1960s. Jim Crow laws, customs and etiquette denied blacks basic human rights. This oppression was aided by thousands of material objects that portrayed African Americans as having negative characteristics.

The mission statement of the Jim Crow Museum is, "To promote racial tolerance by helping people understand the historical and contemporary expression of intolerance." The Jim Crow Museum believes that prejudice and discrimination directed toward any group is wrong and must be opposed.

Having an awareness of how racism developed in America is critical in understanding the entire scope of how we went from slavery, to emancipation, to the Jim Crow era, to civil rights, to where we are today. It is helpful to recognize that from the beginning of our American history there was a serious contradiction. The noble idea that "All men are created equal" soon came under scrutiny. Racism, which involves a judgment that some members of the human race are superior in the social order to others, and some are inferior, provided European colonists the rationalization that those they deemed inferior fit quite naturally into the subservient roles of slaves.

The perspective of the leaders influenced everyone else's thinking. The European settlers adopted the racist views of the political and religious leaders. The schools and the laws reflected those same views which have been passed from generation to generation. For well over 300 years, Americans have been conditioned to this wrong-minded type of thinking.

Attending the Jim Crow exhibit calls for respect and sensitivity in viewing a painful part of our shared American history. Imagine how you would feel if it was a grandparent, mother or father, or you, that was the intended target of the messages, actions and attitudes presented in these exhibit pieces, decade after decade. What would these messages do to your self-esteem? Think about the amount of courage and persistence it required for African-American grandparents and parents to stand up to the magnitude of discrimination represented in the content of this exhibit, so that today's world would be a better place for their children.

You are cordially invited to expand your capacity to experience the realities of others by joining us at the Art Center of Battle Creek for this important exhibit.

Barbara Shambach and Margaret Lincoln are members of the Jim Crow Exhibit planning committee.

Exhibit details:

- **WHAT:** "Hateful Things" exhibit from Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University.
- **WHEN:** Sunday-Thursday, May 1-5.
- **WHERE:** Art Center of Battle Creek, 265 E. Emmett St.
- **HOURS:** 2-5 p.m. Sunday, May 1; 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday, May 2; 8 a.m.-8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, May 3-5.