

Going on the offensive

In the toniest of Minneapolis neighborhoods, Jim Crow lives on -- in the form of Alan and Diane Sims Page's indelible collection of black Americana.

By [Bill Ward](#), Star Tribune

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This couldn't be Kenwood, that bastion of stately gentility, could it? This living room strewn with Ku Klux Klan "dolls" made by Dallas schoolchildren, slave chains and branding prods, a handheld fan for the Pickaninny Restaurant and a "Coon-Jigger" toy from Alabama? Could these symbols of vile racism possibly have a place in polite society? You'd better believe it, Alan and Diane Sims Page insist, if only as a reminder of how impolitely American society has treated people of color over the centuries. "It is our history. It is who we are," said Alan Page, a former Minnesota Vikings star and a justice on the State Supreme Court. "It's an important reminder for me that life isn't always fair, that not only have things not always been equal, they're still not, and that we need to make sure we don't go back to those ways."

The Pages are hardly the only collectors of provocative black Americana. Actress Whoopi Goldberg spent thousands of dollars on black memorabilia at Minneapolis' now-defunct Cobblestone Antiques in the 1980s.

Racist collectibles are highly sought, according to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich. There are about 50,000 collectors of "black memorabilia" -- an umbrella term that includes any object related to the African-American experience. Since the 1970s, there has been an upsurge in interest in black collectibles, especially blatantly racist objects. The high demand has led to an escalation in prices.

Black lawn jockeys, for example, cost less than \$30 in the 1970s, but now sell for at least \$500 each. In fact, because of avid collectors such as Goldberg and the Pages, very few Jim Crow items hit the market these days. "It's all gone," said Diane.

That makes the Pages' collection as priceless as it is provocative. Is there any item that is so racist that they wouldn't purchase or display it?

"Absolutely not," said Diane. "That would be the point, the reason to buy it. Because it is offensive, it was offensive, and we should not forget." "We've tried to hide it," added Alan.

"When it was happening, we tried to pretend like it wasn't happening. And now that it's changed, we're trying to pretend it never happened."

Diane provided the impetus for amassing the Pages' collection of black Americana -- which extends well beyond icons of intolerance to include paintings by Burr Singer, Harlem Renaissance artifacts and other memorabilia.

"It all started when a friend of mine came over to the house, which was very contemporary. I think we had a couple of Andy Warhols on the wall," Diane said. "And she looked around and she said 'You have four children. Where is your African-American history for your children?' And I said, 'Where does it exist? I don't even know where to find it.' So that was kind of a wakeup call to me, and I started looking for it."

Added Alan: "One thing led to the next. It's been mostly Diane's doing. I've just been a fellow traveler, the beneficiary."

It's not just from the South

The Pages are collectors by nature. Alan Page's memorabilia from his Hall of Fame football career -- his close friends call it "the Shrine" -- is in the basement. For years, he has sought out miniature antique replicas of Smith Miller trucks. A 1906 Buick, beautifully restored by Diane's father, Irving Sims, sits in their garage. They also have handfuls of items from sundry cultures.

"We have a few pieces that are just African," Diane said, "but I don't have the expertise to know what's tourist stuff and what's authentic. I'm Norwegian, so we have some Norwegian stuff. And I'm 10 percent Native American and Alan has Native American blood on both sides of his family, so we have some of that, too."

Still, there's little question that the hunt for black Americana stoked a particularly strong fire within both of them. The collection started with a book by African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and branched out to include the more controversial material, the Pages said.

They found the KKK dolls at the Minnesota State Fair -- "under the counter," Alan noted. They discovered the works of Singer, a Jewish woman who, Diane said, "spent the entire 1930s painting African-Americans because she said that nobody was painting them realistically. Everything else was stereotypical, caricatures."

One of their favorite Singer oil paintings is called "Only on Thursday." It's of the public swimming pool in Pasadena, Calif.," Diane said. "They cleaned the pool Friday

mornings, so blacks could only swim on Thursday, just before they cleaned it. And that's in California. It wasn't until 1944 that they finally integrated the pool."

And the more they shopped, at antique fairs and in stores wherever they traveled, the more bigotry-laden material the Pages found:

- A toy called "Alligator Bait," with a black child clenched in a gator's jaws; a "Public Sale of Negroes" notice from 1833 proffering "two likely young Negro wenches ... of genteel appearance ... and well worthy of the notice of a gentleman of fortune;" funeral fans labeled "strictly white patronage."
- A promotional coin from a New York City real-estate agency reading "white race only"; "The Baby's ABC Book," in which "B is for Ball" and "N is for ... " what now actually is most commonly referred to as "the N-word"; a postcard from 1914 with arrows pointing at two black men and a handwritten note: "Sambo is scared."

Hanging over the door leading to the Pages' garage is a large white fluorescent sign, originally posted in the Birmingham, Ala., bus station, with big bold black letters proclaiming "COLORED." Every morning Alan Page dresses -- suit and bow tie on weekdays, jogging togs on weekends -- and walks beneath that sign and out into a world that, he solemnly states, "still has a long, long way to go."

Sign of the times, then and now

Many of the Pages' items are not overtly racist, but reflect the segregation of the times, including a Jackie Robinson doll and posters for the Georgia State Colored Fair in 1914. The most evocative, at least for the Pages, is a plain-looking, handmade sign on canvas. A New Hampshire family made it to wave at a train that was carrying Abraham Lincoln's casket on a tour through the Northeast in 1865. On one side is inscribed "Uncle Abe, we will not forget you!" and on the other "Our country, shall be one country!" It just breaks your heart," Diane said. "We saw this in Chicago, and the dealer was going to take it to a show in New York. Alan was literally choked up when he saw it, and when he left the room, I told the man 'put it on lay-buy. I have to have it for his office.' But he's always liked having it here in the house, so it never made it to his office.

"What's great about this is, we're still not one country today. So that's our favorite piece."

Added Alan, softly: "That has all the hope ... [long pause] it's a reflection of the past and the hope of the future."

There's little if any room to augment the collection. By happenstance, that couldn't happen anyway.

"We don't go to antique stores much anymore. There's nothing there," said Alan.

Diane agreed, to a point. "You can't find anything, and not just African-American memorabilia, everything you collect. EBay has changed the world, and people are hanging onto things longer. If we started today to try to put together this collection, we could never do it. If you were lucky enough to find a piece today, you couldn't afford it. Everything is so expensive."

On the other hand, she added, "There's this beautiful old lawn jockey I've had my eye on. ... "

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