

James P. Hicks became a knowledgeable collector of African American history and **Black memorabilia** quite by accident. In 1990 an impromptu trip to an antique shop ignited his passion to collect anything documenting or depicting Black Americana. Hicks, a locksmith at the University of Iowa went on the road searching shops, auctions and flea markets throughout the Midwest. He studied the market of collectibles and Black history. Today he has amassed a superb array of over 1100 memorabilia items depicting Negro stereotyping and rare historical items documenting African American's political, cultural and historical experience.

Hicks states, "At first I was offended by the caricatures which showed Blacks in a negative, stereotypic light." Among Hicks' advertising pieces is a tin whiskey sign from 1898 depicting a Negro family with whiskey, chickens and watermelons. The advertisements with distorted images of Negroes and their lives stand in sharp contrast to the experience told in slave narratives, Negro newspapers and two centuries of literature in Hicks book collection.

Hicks urges people to detach from the offensive first impact of the items to see their historical context. "We have to tell the whole story, to learn what our American history books failed to report and to recognize the blatant, yet subtle use of stereotypes in toys, advertising and entertainment.

Hicks is one of a growing number of collectors of Black Americana. Over the last 15 years there has been a shift in

The James Hicks Collection

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In this photo: --Mr. Hicks giving a tour of the exhibit.

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This exhibit is divided into 10 sections



1. Introduction



2. The Burden of Slavery, 1619-1861



3. The Civil War, 1861-1865



4. The Price of Freedom: Reconstruction, 1865-1877

consciousness favoring the collecting of the Black memorabilia. Some people collect with the express purpose of removing these images from the landscape. Others, like Hicks, feel that understanding the history of the African American is important to understanding race relations today. The slave was treated miserably, inhumanly. Post slavery generations were suppressed in other ways.

Hicks says, "Racism was indoctrinated into our culture. Through this exhibit, others can learn more of Black history and come to appreciate the progress and achievements of African Americans. Perhaps, we can look at our own misperceptions."

"Collecting is my passion," says Hicks. "The discovery and the hunt has become my sport. I subscribe to three antique newsletters and my network of fellow collectors and auctioneers alert me to pieces on the market. Most of the items held by dealers and collectors today are too expensive for me to afford now that Black collecting has become "hot". I search out estate sales and auctions where occasionally rare or unique pieces will surface from boxes in the attic. If I'm lucky, I can get pieces at a price I can afford. A woman who heard me speak at the Johnson County Heritage Museum sold me one of my most valued pieces, a broadside to announce a rally in Jefferson County, Iowa to oppose Negro suffrage. She wanted it to be a part of my collection.

My hope for my collection is that it can be exhibited widely to a broad audience. The exhibit raises our awareness of the determination, fortitude and heart of African Americans who have come from slavery to their roles of leadership and



5. Say Hello To Jim Crow, 1878-1897



6. Up From Slavery: The Self Help Period 1898-1919



7. The Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1946



8. The Civil Rights Era, 1947-1968



9. The Black Power Movement, 1968-1980



10. The Turn of the Century, 1981-2004

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contribution to American industry and invention today. The exhibit is a celebration of triumph of the spirit, and only in this sharing and experiencing of history can it be recognized and appreciated.

Perhaps someone seeing this collection will catch the fever and begin to collect where I have left off (approximately 1980s), so that future generations can continue to document the African American experience along side mainstream American history.

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[Read more](#) about Mr. Hicks' collection

