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# Ugliness of 'everyday racism' shown in Jim Crow collection

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BIG RAPIDS -- He has spent three decades roaming flea markets, antique stores and, now, the Internet, seeking items for his collection, yet David Pilgrim says he hates the objects that have claimed so much of his time and money.

For example, this piece: a print showing nine black children, all naked and sitting in a row above the caption, "alligator bait." He has dozens of postcards showing blacks being bitten by alligators and other animals.

"It's a way of saying, 'You're not as human,'" he said.

When he was 14, Pilgrim bought his first piece, a ceramic "mammy" saltshaker, then smashed it on the ground in front of the seller. He bought more racist collectibles and destroyed them, but eventually decided the pieces, although offensive, are part of America's past and present.

Thus, Pilgrim, 45, a Rockford resident and sociology professor at Ferris State University, began building his collection of racist memorabilia. A decade ago, he donated his collection to Ferris and, in 2001, opened the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia.

Now Pilgrim, the museum's curator, is helping raise \$1.2 million to renovate a larger space at Ferris for the museum and another \$1 million endowment to operate it. John Thorp, the museum's director and head of the college's social sciences department, said he hopes the new museum opens by the fall of 2007.

Visitors will enter through a door labeled "Colored." Another door, labeled "Whites Only," will be closed. The new museum will give a history of Jim Crow, the stage name of a white vaudevillian who performed in black face, and will include sections on Jim Crow laws, the violence used to enforce them and items of popular culture that stereotype blacks. Other sections will chronicle the rise of the civil rights movement and the accomplishments of blacks.

For now, most of the collection is in storage, while about 4,000 items are arranged in display cases in a 500-square-foot room. The Jim Crow Museum is open by appointment only.

Pilgrim knows his collection offends many. Children aren't allowed in.

"There are some people, they're not ready to come in here yet," said, Pilgrim, who grew up in Alabama and attended segregated schools. "I believe there is value in this, and it's the same value medical researchers have when they look at disease in the hope of finding a cure."

Display cases are filled with the items of everyday racism: a box of Aunt Jemima pancake mix, advertisements stereotyping blacks. Some are more blatant: an ax handle signed by Lester Maddox, similar to the one the former Georgia governor used to chase blacks away from his restaurant.

Pilgrim picked up a plastic cookie jar shaped like an alligator and opened its mouth. "Mmmm, mmmm, these sure are some tasty cookies," the alligator said in an exaggerated black dialect. Pilgrim bought the talking cookie jar at a large discount store three years ago. After he demonstrated it for a couple of the chain's executives, they ordered the cookie jars removed from their stores.

A final display case contains a Ku Klux Klan hood and other Klan items. Last January, Pilgrim attended an auction of Klan memorabilia in Howell, enduring Nazi salutes and other racist taunts.

"You can imagine the tension in the room," he said. "When you do what I do, you end up in situations like that. The whole night was surreal."

The Livingston County Diversity Council paid \$750 for a Klan robe and donated it to the Jim Crow Museum.

"We don't emphasize the Klan," Pilgrim said. "Our focus always has been on everyday racism. One of the points we try to make is this stuff right here is fertile ground for the most extreme stuff."

In recent years, demand for such collectibles has increased, and so have the prices, Pilgrim said. Some collect to get the items off the market, some as investments, some to reinforce their racist views, some, like Pilgrim, for educational purposes.

"There's not a piece in here you could not purchase today," he said. "Today, you can buy reproductions made in Taiwan."

"Any item with the word 'Nigger' in it sells for more on the secondary market," he said, but added: "A lot of people, if they don't see the word 'Nigger,' they don't think there's anything wrong with it."

It bothers him that people make money on this stuff. "I hate that," Pilgrim said. "I absolutely hate that."

Recently, he has broadened his search, collecting a couple thousand pieces that demean other groups, including women, Jews, Polish Americans and Asian Americans. He still buys 10 or more items a week that portray blacks unfavorably.

"This is one of my favorite sections here," he said, then reconsidered. "I don't like any of this," he said. "I refer to myself as a garbage collector for good reason."

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