

Offensive, informative collection destined for Slavery Museum

By EDWARD LEBOW
Daily Press

March 26 2005

SUFFOLK, Va. -- The coppery metal medallion on the coffee table in Therbia Parker's south Suffolk house is about the size of a cookie, but it holds a much larger story.

"It's a slave tag," said Parker, hefting it in his hand a few times to feel its weight. "Some of them had just numbers stamped on them, but this one actually has the name Moses."

The table also held clocks, magazine ads, bottle openers, figurines and salt-and-pepper shakers that portrayed blacks as big-lipped, wide-eyed caricatures. Across the room, leaning against a chair back, was a white and black sign with arrows pointing the way to "white" and "colored" restrooms.

"These are all things most people, white and black, would want to buy and destroy," Parker said.

But he and his wife, Marva, have spent the past 30 years amassing what some local historians consider one of the region's largest and most valuable private collections of objects and images that reflect the nation's long and troubled racial course. Its 3,000 or so pieces span from slavery to segregation to now.

The Parkers, who say the collection is worth about \$500,000, plan to give it to the United States National Slavery Museum, slated to open in Fredericksburg in 2007. A portion of it is now on display at Riddick's Folly, a history museum in Suffolk.

Therbia Parker, a 56-year-old Vietnam War veteran who works as a siding contractor, uses the objects as visual aids to talk to students, congregations and others about the history of racial injustice and stereotyping.

The objects connect people to the past in a way that stories alone sometimes can't, said William Alexander, a Norfolk State University history professor who helped organize a recent 200-piece exhibition of the Parkers' collection at NSU.

Though they didn't intend it, the Parkers helped pioneer an area of American collecting that has become profitable and popular.

As many as 50,000 people and institutions may collect artifacts of America's racial history, say dealers and museum curators.

"This has definitely become an area for investment," said Philip J. Merrill, whose Baltimore firm Nanny Jack & Company specializes in selling and advising collectors and institutions about African-Americana. "But it's what I like to call an under-discovered one."

Sales prices have risen considerably in recent years, said Merrill, who advises collectors of African-Americana on the popular TV show "Antiques Roadshow."

Thirty years ago, Parker could pick up salt-and-pepper shakers featuring stereotyped images of mammies for \$3 or less. Now they could go for \$125.

The shift was due partly to changing outlooks about race, said David Pilgrim, a sociology professor who founded the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University in Michigan.

"In the late 1960s and early 1970s many people began getting rid of racist objects because they were just embarrassed by these things," he said. "But in the 1980s a number of price guides came out that said these objects were worth a lot of money."

The most extreme pieces often fetch high prices, he said.

Postcards showing lynchings--sometimes found at eBay and other online auction sites--can each cost several thousand dollars or more.

The growing popularity and market for such things disturbs Pilgrim.

"I can't imagine selling this stuff," he said "I can't profit off of racism."

Others see the growing market as an inevitable part of America's coming to terms.

There's more to the history of black Americans than racism, said Merrill, who has been buying old family Bibles and letters that tap the wider range of black experience.

Parker's collection also goes beyond the tragic. Antique portraits of unknown blacks and images and documents of known Civil Rights luminaries line his walls. Yet most of the collection exposes racial hatred and stereotypes.

"Most people don't know what many of these objects represent," said Parker, pointing out a tin labeled "Nigger Head Tobacco" and a jar of "Nigger Head Oysters." "These things are part of a history that's not taught."

He picked out a doggie bag and takeout box from a restaurant franchise known as the "Coon Chicken Inn."

"Just what would make somebody on a Sunday afternoon want to take their family to the Coon Chicken Inn?" he said. "The thing about this kind of stereotyping is it wasn't exclusive to the South."

The Coon Chicken Inn operated in Seattle, Portland, Ore., and Salt Lake City until the early 1950s.

"Aunt Jemima was made in Ohio," said Parker. "Nigger Head Tobacco came out of Milwaukee. And all of your sheet music with racist lyrics came from Tin Pan Alley in New York."

For Parker, collecting has been a way to overcome his own fears about racism.

"It's been a growing process," he said. "Some of these things really offended me when I started out. They had power over me because they were demeaning. I actually saw myself as a reflection of them. But knowledge is power. Now I see this all as history."

He began collecting shortly after he got out of the Army in 1971.

"My wife and I didn't have any money," he recalled. "I'd always been interested in history, so I started going to antique shops. They were free."

He bought haphazardly at first. Then he concentrated on cereal boxes, cookie and tobacco tins, clocks and banks.

"Some things I just wasn't ready to buy," he said. "They were just too offensive to me and I couldn't imagine what I'd do with them."

He passed up a number of segregation-era "white" and "colored" signs before finally buying some.

"But as time went on," he said, "I began to ask myself, 'If you're going to tell the story, then tell it, the whole story.'"

To find some of the more offensive artifacts, he learned to ask antique dealers whether they had anything tucked away in their back rooms.

A dealer in North Carolina suggested Parker give him a buzz before he came down for the next visit.

"I think I might have something you'd like," he told him, "but I don't keep it here at the shop."

When Parker got there, the man took him in a back room, unzipped a suitcase and pulled out a Ku Klux Klan robe. Parker declined the offer at first, but he couldn't stop thinking about it.

He ended up buying it and a few other Klan items for about \$450, then hid them from his wife for several months.

When he finally spread them out to look at them, he said, he noticed blood stains on one.

"Even now," he said, "I wonder if that's an African-American's blood on that robe?"

The Daily Press is published in Newport News.

Copyright 2005, [Daily Press](#)