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Images to Remember

Memorabilia fosters discussions about race

By David Olson

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Shirley Walthall proudly collects objects that dehumanized her and other black Americans.

There's the wooden watermelon topped by two smiling, pig-tailed black girls. There's a sign for "Black Nancy Coal" that features a white man in blackface and a rag wrapped over his head. And there are several representations of mammies, the once-ubiquitous symbols of black female servitude.

Walthall, 63, of Everett knows all too well how those objects degraded blacks and reinforced white people's stereotypes. But it's impossible to understand black American history without understanding how pervasive such humiliating items were, she said.

"I don't think we should ever forget it," Walthall said. "It's a part of our past, and if we forget where we came from, we'll lose a part of our history that's extremely important for us to remember."

Walthall is one of thousands of black Americans who collect racist memorabilia. Her two dozen pieces hang from her kitchen wall and sit on a dining-room display case next to dolls, ceramic figurines and other objects that present a far more positive image of blacks.

A cookie jar with a smiling mammy face looks galling on a shelf above commemorative plates of black jazz musicians. But to ignore or hide these images would be to gloss over the pain of the past, she said.

David Pilgrim agrees. He is curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich. "Jim Crow" was the name given to the system of discrimination against blacks from the 1870s to the 1960s.

The museum houses more than 5,000 racist objects in a cramped former classroom at the university.

Pilgrim views the memorabilia as a way to teach about racism, past and present. The museum is open by appointment only, and visitors must first watch a documentary that places the objects in a political, social and cultural context, "so they're not just looking at objects," Pilgrim said.

Most visitors view the material with what Pilgrim calls a "thoughtful sadness." Afterward, they sit down in a group to talk about what they've seen. Unlike in most interracial discussions about race, participants don't mince words, he said.

"These images are so powerful that they force us to talk about race and racism," Pilgrim said. "People resist having open, honest discussions about race: whites for fear of being called racist if they say the wrong thing, and blacks for fear of being called angry if they say the wrong thing.

"This is a place where they can deal with their feelings, where they can get it all out."

Several thousand people have visited the museum since it opened in 1995, and the museum's 3-year-old Web site has received 250,000 hits, he said.

Walthall sees the objects as more than just a reminder of the past.

"People still believe in the stereotypes: that blacks are lazy, that blacks don't keep up their property, that we're dumb," she said.

One of the pieces is a ceramic figure of a black boy with huge lips and feet.

"I think it's a put-down," Walthall said. "It looks ridiculous."

"And the more ridiculous you can make African Americans look, the more it perpetuates prejudice," said her husband, Bennie.

Bennie and Shirley Walthall lived through Jim Crow discrimination growing up in rural East Texas. But many younger blacks know of that era primarily through books. The objects, Shirley Walthall said, can be more powerful than words.

The mammy dolls reveal how whites not only saw themselves as superior to blacks, but how they perceived blacks as accepting and even reveling in their servitude, Shirley Walthall said.

A classic mammy that Walthall bought at the Everett Public Market antique mall 10 years ago for about \$10 features a wooden face with a big grin and huge lips. A cloth red and white rag is attached to the top of her head, and "Everett Washington" is carved on the top. It's unclear when the piece was made.

Walthall said the object is a reminder of the pervasiveness of bigotry. After all, Everett was the site of huge Ku Klux Klan marches in the 1920s, and until the 1960s, racial covenants made many neighborhoods off-limits to blacks.

"It's important that people know there have been stereotypical attitudes in Everett as well, that it's not just the South," Walthall said.

Walthall bought most of the two dozen pieces of offensive memorabilia from antique shops in the Northwest and in Texas. Many are original, but at least one is a reproduction.

Several of them were gifts. A late white friend gave her two mammy dolls several years ago. The woman realized as an adult that the mammy image had racist overtones, Walthall said. But as a child, she loved them.

"She said her grandmother made them for her," Walthall recalled. "She said, 'I'd really like you to have them if they don't offend you.'"

At the time, even most blacks weren't bothered by many of the representations that are now viewed as racist, Bennie Walthall said. They were images so ingrained in American culture that they became just a part of everyday life.

"You'd go into the store and buy Aunt Jemima cornmeal and you wouldn't think twice about it being offensive," Bennie Walthall said. "As people became more aware of themselves and proud of themselves, these things started to take on notes of offensiveness."

Even today, though, the objects must be put in their historical context, Shirley Walthall warned.

When Walthall was a teacher and principal at Hawthorne, Lowell and Silver Firs schools in Everett, she would regularly take groups of first-graders into her home to view her collection of black dolls, African handicrafts, prints of Jacob Lawrence paintings and other objects of cultural pride.

But she didn't show them the racist memorabilia. They were too young to be able to put the objects into the proper context, and she feared that showing them could perpetuate negative stereotypes rather than undermine them.

For those who are old enough to understand, the objects reveal not only the hatred that blacks have historically confronted in the United States, but the dignity that Jim Crow-era blacks maintained even in the face of constant humiliation, said Barbara Drake, 64.

Drake is a friend of Shirley Walthall who displays her own collection of more than a dozen mammy and pickaninny dolls in her Everett home. When she looks at them, she remembers the sacrifices of her forebears. By doing so, Drake transmutes symbols of degradation into affirmations of progress.

"People suffered so much for us to get to where we are today," she said. "We've come so far from the rag on the head. These people were important, and we shouldn't forget what they did for us."

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Learn more

To find out more about racist memorabilia, go to the Web site for the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at www.ferris.edu/jimcrow.

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