

At Ferris State, mammy inspires a museum

BY JAMES PRICHARD
ASSOCIATED PRESS

April 12, 2004

BIG RAPIDS -- It all started for David Pilgrim with the mammy salt shaker.

Now a 45-year-old sociology professor at Ferris State University, Pilgrim was about 13 years old when he came across the dispenser at a flea market in Alabama.

For years in the United States, particularly in the South, it was common to find salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars and other household items made to resemble a mammy, a stereotype of a black, heavysset, kerchief- and apron-wearing housekeeper and nanny.

Pilgrim, who is black, doesn't remember his exact frame of mind when he impulsively bought the salt shaker. But he vividly remembers what he did with it: He smashed it to pieces.

He took much better care of 4,000 or so other related items he acquired over the years in the name of education.

All are now housed at Ferris State's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, which Pilgrim helped put together during the past seven years. Jim Crow is a post-Civil War term of discrimination against and segregation of blacks.

The museum's mission is to help people understand historical and contemporary racist expressions and to serve as a resource for civil rights and human rights organizations.

"As you consider how they use these materials, it's a powerful, powerful teaching library in terms of tolerance and understanding for others," said David Eisler, Ferris State's president.

Pilgrim gave the museum his entire collection of racist figurines, T-shirts, comic books, ash trays, souvenirs, movie posters and other related items. As its curator, he now receives a small budget from the university to expand the collection.

"The same way we use sex to sell items today, we used to use race," Pilgrim said.

TO VISIT

The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia is at Ferris State University in Big Rapids. Visitors may tour the museum only by appointment. To arrange a guided group tour, call 231-591-5873. Admission to the museum, which is inside the Starr Building on the university's main campus, is free.

By the Associated Press

The room's display cases are filled with startling, anti-black words and images. Epithets are everywhere, as are drawings of watermelon-devouring black children and bug-eyed, ever-grinning grown-ups.

"Every group has been caricatured in the United States, but when you deal with Africans and their American descendants, they've been caricatured more, more often and, arguably, more viciously," Pilgrim says.

Cartoons and photos portray black men as either thugs or lazy, inarticulate and easily frightened. Women are depicted as either mammies or lascivious, scantily clad Jezebels.

Only about half the collection can be displayed at one time in the museum's single room. A fund-raising drive is under way to move the museum to a larger, more accessible campus location.

The public may visit but there are no set hours of operation because access is hindered by the location in the Starr Building, an academic facility.

Instead, visitors must make special arrangements through Pilgrim's office or the office of John Thorp, the museum's director, or be part of a university-approved academic course, workshop or seminar. A museum guide, often a sociology student, must be present to discuss the exhibits and answer the questions that inevitably arise.

"For the first time ever, many of them are having a genuine conversation about race when they're in here," said Thorp, who also heads Ferris State's social sciences department.

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