

## **Keeping Jim Crow Alive: A Ferris State University museum aims to use the pain of racist and offensive material to educate and foster racial healing**

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"There is still a debate about whether Black people should use this material in any way other than to destroy it, or whether they don't belong in a museum or being resold by Black people. This is high-octane material, but the benefits are also high."

- Dr. David Pilgrim, Curator, Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia

The pop-eyed, overweight and scarf-clad mammy. The silly, shiftless Sambo. They are a few of the ugly stereotypical images of Black Americans that many U.S. citizens -- of all races -- want to forget.

But Dr. David Pilgrim won't let them. Pilgrim is curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich. It is a place where -- for many people -- history hurts. The museum houses about 5,000 items including posters depicting drawings of alligators poised to devour naked Black babies, "for Whites only" signs and restaurant signs which read "No Dogs, Niggers, or Mexicans," and graphic depictions of lynch mobs celebrating around one of their Black victims.

Across the nation a handful of other museums, including Milwaukee's Black Holocaust museum, showcase offensive or racist memorabilia. Most have material dating back to when Africans first arrived in America on slave ships.

"The difference is that we started at Jim Crow -- not at slavery -- and we never stopped collecting items," Pilgrim says. "Every piece that we have is still being made and is still being sold today."

Some of it can be found at Internet auction houses such as eBay, he says. Others can be purchased privately from individuals who have had growing collections for decades.

The Jim Crow museum has become a must-see for many educators and researchers examining the African American experience in the United States. Since it opened in 1995, more than 3,000 visitors have traveled to the Ferris campus to visit the museum and another 80,000 have accessed the museum's Web site.

Pilgrim, who also is a sociology professor at Ferris, says some Black people have cried after visiting the museum. Some Whites, after seeing the vast collection have apologized on the spot to Pilgrim, who is Black. Critics have left saying that while the artifacts are hurtful, the museum exaggerates their significance and that displaying them globally on the Internet will do nothing to foster racial healing.

Pilgrim says the goal of the museum is not to trigger tears or anger, or to jar people into deep feelings of guilt. It is to broaden the dialogue about race in America, he says.

"There is still a debate about whether Black people should use this material in any way other than to destroy it, or whether they don't belong in a museum or being resold by Black people," Pilgrim says. "This is high-octane material, but the benefits are also high."

The museum is open to anyone, but appointments for visits are required. There are no walk-in visitors, and after each visit, guests are encouraged to discuss their feelings and thoughts with other visitors.

### **PRESERVING THE PAST**

The Jim Crow period, which started when segregation rules, laws and customs surfaced after Reconstruction ended in the 1870s, existed until the mid-1960s when the struggle for civil rights in the

United States gained national attention.

In the 1830s, Thomas Rice, a White actor, helped fuel the belief among many Whites that Blacks were subhuman, lazy and stupid. Rice painted his face black with burnt cork and performed his song "Jim Crow." Soon after that, minstrel shows gained widespread international acceptance. It was commonplace to see Black people mocked as uneducated and irrational. The shows peaked in the 1850s and interest in them faded in the 1870s, just as Jim Crow laws were surfacing, Pilgrim says.

But racist depictions of Black people persisted. In films, White actors dressed in black-face, mocking Blacks, and White people portrayed Blacks on shows such as "Amos `n' Andy," often speaking in broken English and acting in nonsensical ways.

One goal of the museum is to remind visitors that these items are still being made and sold, Pilgrim says. One of the museum's more contemporary items is the bumper sticker from the 1992 Republican convention which reads: "Work: It's the White thing to do." The collection also includes the cover of the New Republic magazine on which Colin Powell is caricatured with big red lips.

#### A TOOL OR A TAUNT?

The museum has received about 100 e-mail messages and letters from White supremacy groups railing against the museum's mission, Pilgrim says. There also was resistance before the museum opened from some Blacks in Michigan who said such materials should be forgotten rather than showcased.

"I consider myself a garbage man because much of this stuff is garbage," says Pilgrim, who was born in New York and raised in Mobile, Ala. "But some of it is useful garbage."

Ralph Holcomb, an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, first visited the site two years ago and found it to be a treasure.

"I got so excited about it that I sent a note about it to all of the colleagues in the School of Social Work here," he says. "I put it on a national listserve, and since then, in class, I reference the museum often when I teach about the civil rights movement."

The museum and the Web site are "a tremendous resource for our students," Holcomb says. "They are sobered by what they see. It's a piece of history that they are blind to and allows them to enter into a racist world that, unfortunately, we still live in."

After seeing the museum's Web site, Lori Mayer, an administrative assistant at Middlebury College in Vermont, used the material to educate her own family.

"I sent David an e-mail telling him how wonderful it was that he was doing that work," she says. "Any time there's learning and teaching on these issues, it is healing. I'm part of a multicultural family and we work on these issues all the time."

#### HUMBLE HOME

Ferris State is in Big Rapids, a small rural town about four hours north of Detroit. Pilgrim says the college has made a significant investment in the project, providing free space for the relatively small museum, which is slightly larger than a college classroom. Ferris has given about \$50,000 for shelving and over the years has given about \$15,000 to purchase items.

Pilgrim, who graduated from Jarvis Christian College in Texas before earning master's and doctoral degrees from Ohio State University, says his interest in racist items formed when he was a youngster in Alabama. He often purchased offensive materials only to rip them up in front of the person who had just sold it to him.

He did that for years, but he said in high school he realized the educational value of the materials. He started collecting the items and used them as proof that racism still exists.

The most rewarding moments at the museum come when he sees how the collection educates young people. The youngest visitors have been seventh-graders. "When I tell young people that there was a time that Blacks could not go to Myrtle Beach in South Carolina, most of them will say, `You're lying,'" Pilgrim says. "But we have the actual signs to prove it. There is a certain power that comes with being able to hold the artifact in their hands."

For more information on the Jim Crow Museum, visit [www.ferris.edu/jimcrow](http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow).

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