

### News and Views: "Coon Cards": Racist Postcards Have Become Collectors' Items

It seems that when white people look at the face of a black person they tend to feel one of two emotions: laughter or fear. Laughter and ridicule prevailed in the post-Civil War period and the first half of the twentieth century. And these emotions became embedded in the media artifacts of the time. In the early part of the twentieth century the desire to make insulting fun of black people was expressed by the so-called "coon card" craze. These cards, which were typically sent home to friends and relatives by people on vacation or were collected and placed in albums to show to visiting friends, depicted blacks stereotypically with exaggerated and animal-like features. They were illustrated as having thick lips, kinky hair, flat noses, big ears, and big feet. Negroes were portrayed as lazy, stupid, oversexed, superstitious, lying, and thieving. Other cards showed blacks invariably loving fried chicken, watermelons, and possum. The golden era of racist postcards lasted into the 1950s until pressure from the NAACP persuaded five-and-ten-cent stores that they should no longer carry them on their racks.

Today the cards have become novelties and are in strong demand by both white and black collectors. Just as collecting videos of the racist Amos `n' Andy television show(\*) has become fashionable with many African Americans today, "coon cards" and other racist memorabilia are now objects of intense curiosity.

Wayne Mellinger, a white professor at Ventura College who is currently producing a book on "coon cards," once saw a black man at a flea market pay \$100 for a vendor's entire collection of racist postcards. The black man then ripped them up on the spot so no one would ever see them again. Many other blacks believe that the racist memorabilia serve as powerful reminders of America's past.

— David Pilgrim, a professor of sociology at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan, has spent more than two decades collecting artifacts depicting the racist nature of American culture. Dr. Pilgrim is donating much of his collection to establish the **Jim Crow Museum** at Ferris State.

One card in Professor Pilgrim's collection is entitled "Skinning a Coon." Rather than taking the hide off a raccoon as the caption might imply, this play on words shows a man pickpocketing or "skinning" a black woman with stereotypically exaggerated features.

Another card in Professor Pilgrim's collection is titled "Who Said Watermelon?" This card shows a black child about to enjoy watermelon, the fruit that is typically identified with black people. This postcard included the following poem:

"George Washington Watermelon Columbus Brown

I'm black as any little coon in town.

In eating melon, I can pig to shame.

Because watermelon is my middle name."

Another postcard shows a group of naked African-American babies on a beach. The card is labeled "Alligator Bait." Presumably this racist card was sent to friends back home by tourists visiting Florida. Another card shows a black youth in the jaws of an alligator with the caption, "Free Lunch in the Jungle."

(\*)See "Brudder Bones: The New Acceptability of Ridiculing Black People." JBHE, Number 17. Autumn 1997, p. 91.

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