

Article published Jan 13, 2006

Mixed reactions greet exhibition - Collection of racist memorabilia visits as city looks to leave reputation behind

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DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Howell's Amber Grubinski knows one place she won't be this weekend - at the Howell Opera House.

That's where a traveling exhibit from Ferris State University titled "Hateful Things - Objects from the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University" will open to the public on Sunday.

"I just think it's stupid; I don't think there's any pros," she said. "The way that it makes the people feel ... it's got to be horrible."

Danny Arens, manager of the Blue Willow Tea Room in Howell, disagrees.

"I'm quite excited about it," he said.

"I think it's important to acknowledge the history of our country," said Arens, who plans on visiting the exhibit. "Without acknowledging it, we can't learn from it, even if it's lamentable."

The 39-piece traveling exhibition of racist memorabilia will be open from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday; Saturday, Jan. 21; and Sunday, Jan. 22, at the main floor of the Howell Opera House, 123 W. Grand River Ave. The exhibit will also be open from 3-8 p.m. weekdays next week.

The reaction throughout the city has been mixed, as some people see the free exhibit as a chance to learn from previous mistakes, while others view it as another jab at Howell and the county's reputation.

Howell's reputation took a huge hit in the late 1980s and early 1990s when former KKK Grand Dragon Robert E. Miles moved to Cohoctah Township and would hold cross-burning rallies. Miles died in 1992.

A few years later, the KKK held a rally on the steps of the historical Livingston County Courthouse in downtown Howell. The diversity council was founded in 1988 as a response to cross-burning incidents that took place in the county.

Last year, national media featured a Howell auction house that was selling Ku Klux Klan memorabilia. Community officials say only media from Detroit, Lansing and Howell have inquired about the upcoming exhibit.

Still, Howell Area Chamber of Commerce President Pat Convery said she's glad to see such a high-profile educational opportunity come to the city.

The exhibit will also show, she said, that Howell is trying to overcome its "undeserved reputation."

"I think understanding our differences and the history of racial stereotyping is important to move forward in diversity issues for this community," Convery said.

Business owners are also supportive of the exhibit, which opens to the public on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

"Hopefully, this brings positive-minded people downtown so they see what a nice town Howell is and they come back again," said Copper Pickle manager Roy Fox, whose establishment is next door to the Opera House.

Some residents think the exhibit is a good idea but they just don't want to see it in Howell.

"This county has a bad rap for it," Howell resident Lori Mazzocco said. "Any other county, it's good because it's history. I think it's all a part of life and people need to get over it."