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Exhibition sheds light on racism

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David Pilgrim knows some people will be uncomfortable with his exhibit coming to Howell.

But he says the traveling exhibit titled "Hateful Things — Objects from the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University" aims to spark a dialogue about race relations among visitors.

"Much of the criticism we have is muted once they see the exhibit," said Pilgrim, the curator of the museum. "When they come, they see this is a very serious critique of racism."

More than 39 pieces of racist memorabilia from the museum will be open to the public starting today — which also happens to be the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday — at the Howell Opera House. Many of the pieces are shocking; many are thought-provoking.

Pilgrim, who started collecting the memorabilia when he was a teenager, said one of the items he is most disturbed by is a reproduction of a print featuring black children above the phrase "Alligator Bait."

"The idea as black children being used for bait ... is very unsettling," he noted.

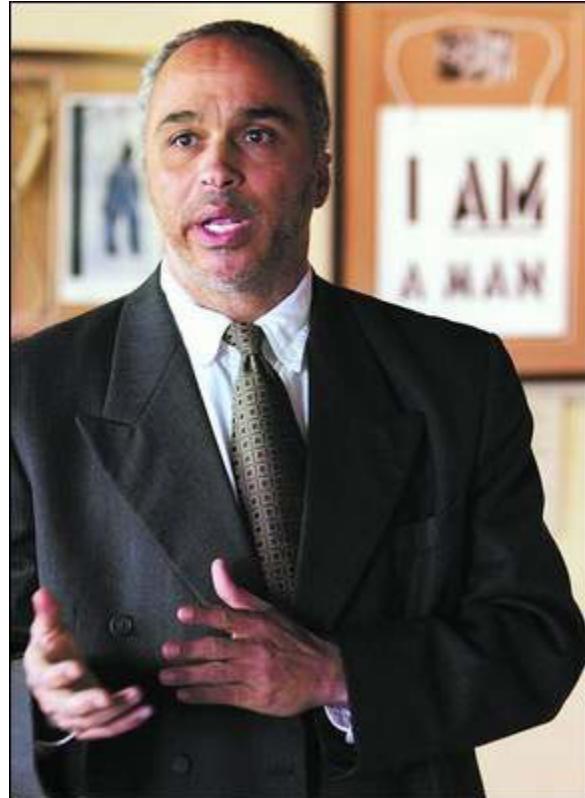
The exhibit also features a story titled "The Ten Little N———." The story was created in 1869, although the one on display is from the 1890s. The piece was popular through the 1960s.

Each line in the story describes how a black child dies. One talks about how a child chopped himself in half after chopping up sticks.

While many of the objects are from decades ago, there are some modern items in the exhibit, too. A Ghettopoly board game, which parodies Monopoly, features "Ghetto Stash" cards instead of "Chance" cards.

"The 5,000 items we have in the Jim Crow Museum, I could buy tomorrow," Pilgrim said. "Every item in the museum is still being made."

Pilgrim said he gets many of his items from eBay.com or auction houses.



In 2005, community leaders and members of Livingston 2001 purchased a \$700 Ku Klux Klan women's cape to donate to the Jim Crow Museum from an auction featuring KKK items held in Howell.

Last year's first KKK memorabilia auction, held at the end of January, received national media attention. Most of the media at Saturday's event came from Mid-Michigan and the east side of the state.

The auction wasn't the community's first brush with the KKK.

Former KKK Grand Dragon Robert E. Miles lived in Cohoctah Township in the 1980s and early 90s and, a few years later, the KKK held a rally on the steps of the historical Livingston County Courthouse in downtown Howell.

The Livingston 2001 Diversity Council was founded in 1988 as a response to cross-burning incidents that took place in the county.

Council Vice President Lee Reeves was at Saturday's media preview and said she hopes the event will leave its mark on visitors.

"They think it's a lot of Klan memorabilia," Reeves said, "but it's none of that here. It's really the images and how they've imprinted themselves on this country."

One of the images in the exhibit was from Howell's past. A playbill from around 1905 or 1906 mentions a farce at the Howell Opera House that uses a derogatory term toward blacks.

Officials with the Livingston Arts Council and the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council said the show was typical in many communities at the time, and they might give the playbill to the museum.