

July 5, 2006

A Gift Shop in Harlem Finds Customers for the Memorabilia of Racist America

By [ANTHONY RAMIREZ](#)

The day Glenda Taylor placed the white hood and white robe of the [Ku Klux Klan](#) in the window of her Harlem shop was one to remember.

At the foot of the Klan gown was an 1868 issue of Harper's Weekly depicting a dead black man, with the caption "One Vote Less." Passers-by of all races stopped, stunned, in front of her memorabilia shop, Aunt Meriam's, on West 125th Street, Ms. Taylor said.

One black woman dispatched her 10-year-old daughter into the shop to confront Ms. Taylor, 50, who is black. The girl, Ms. Taylor recalled, said something like, "How could you?"

Ms. Taylor and her mother, Mary Taylor, sell all manner of black memorabilia, including advertisements for the Cotton Club and playbills for a Broadway musical starring Sammy Davis Jr.

But the Taylors and dealers like them also sell collectibles from the Jim Crow era — cookie jars, coin banks, matchbook covers, fruit-box labels, ashtrays, postcards, sheet music, just to name a few items — that portray blacks in grotesquely racist ways. Little boys eat watermelon. Men steal chickens. Women happily scrub and clean.

While selling such items in the heart of America's most famous black neighborhood might seem offensive, dealers say that blacks rather than whites tend to be the ones collecting the most repellent objects.

"Why do some Jews collect Holocaust material?" asked Wyatt Houston Day of the Swann Galleries in Manhattan, who organizes an annual auction of African-Americana. "Any people who endure a Holocaust tend to collect, out of a lest-we-forget impulse. It is very much akin to what happened to blacks, and the objects are just as vile."

With the civil rights movement, many whites became ashamed to keep their own racially caricatured bric-a-brac, or that of their parents and grandparents. The rise of the Internet caused prices to fall as attics and cupboards emptied and glutted the market on eBay and Yahoo auction sites. An especially prized type of cookie jar is the McCoy mammy jar which once sold for as much as \$600; it now sells for as little as \$50.

"The main reason that black people collect" objectionable objects, Glenda Taylor said, is "that they love that item and hate that item at the same time."

She added, "It's like the 'n' word. African-Americans are very good at turning a painful thing into something else."

For David Pilgrim, a sociology professor at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., however, the issue is starker. "This is the ugly intersection of money and race," he said.

Mr. Pilgrim, who is black, runs a temporary museum, with 5,000 racist objects. Stores, he argued, are not the proper surroundings for a thoughtful discussion of what he calls "contemptible collectibles."

He is trying to raise money to establish a permanent Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia (www.ferris.edu/jimcrow). "To me," said Mr. Pilgrim, whose own collection makes up nearly half of the temporary museum's inventory, "this stuff is garbage. It belongs either in a museum or a garbage can."

Most historians date the Jim Crow era from 1877, when the federal occupation of the South ended, to 1965, when the Civil Rights Act guaranteeing basic rights for black Americans was passed. Jim Crow was an 1820's musical routine performed by white men in blackface, and the term

became a synonym for discrimination and segregation. Jim Crow laws passed by Southern legislatures were a way for whites to roll back black gains after the Civil War.

But Mr. Day of the Swann Galleries said that derogatory objects were made in every state, including New York. "It is very much blacks through white eyes, not a region's eyes," he said.

Mary Taylor, 68, remembers growing up with mammy dolls and other racially stereotyped objects in Hallandale, Fla., near Fort Lauderdale. "We resented this stuff," said Ms. Taylor, a former administrator at Medgar Evers College. "It depicted us as ugly."

She added that blacks now looked at it differently. "We look at ourselves differently. A lot of black people don't have that inferiority complex anymore."

The Taylors scour garage sales, lawn sales, auctions, flea markets and estate sales in upstate New York, Pennsylvania and Florida for items. "The smaller the town, the better," because they tend to have more of the smaller auctions and estate sales, where prices are still low, the elder Ms. Taylor said.

Glenda Taylor, a former administrator for nonprofit education groups, said she got the 1920's Klan robe from "a white collector who got it from an estate sale from someone's attic," she said. The Taylors later sold the hood and robe for \$1,500 to a collector in Washington State.

The younger Ms. Taylor likens her shop, named after a favorite aunt, to a time machine. Older black customers, prompted by the memorabilia, like to reminisce, she said.

A black man in his 60's, looking at a "For Colored Only" reproduction in the shop, remembered the time when as a college student he had lunch in a Louisiana coffee shop. As he left, the white owner broke every dish he had used.

The next day, the black man, a drum major at nearby Grambling State University, brought the entire football team $\frac{1}{2}$ all blacks $\frac{1}{2}$ for lunch. They watched in satisfaction as the shaken white owner broke dozens of his dishes.

"If any type of shop like this should be, it should be here in Harlem," the elder Ms. Taylor said. "There should be a black museum. I would prefer that, if we had the money."