

The Original Jim Crow

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Topeka Capital-Journal

Published Sunday, May 16, 2004

The phrase "Jim Crow" began as a character in a song, but by the late 1800s the words were used to describe a set of laws and customs that nullified amendments to the Constitution and oppressed blacks.

Dr. John Thorp, a cultural anthropologist at the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., said a song sung by blacks in the early 19th century poked fun at Jim Crow, a slave master, and a law that said blacks couldn't dance by shuffling their feet.

The phrase entered popular culture in the 1820s when it appeared in sheet music written by Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, a white actor and musician who did short skits between play scenes at the Park Theater in New York City.

Some accounts say Rice heard a black man singing the Jim Crow song on the street and decided to use that image as a stage character in his act.

Thomas Rice was the author of the song that gave Jim Crow laws their name.

"He saw a crippled slave doing a dance, and Rice gave the dance this name," Thorp said, explaining another account.

Rice depicted blacks as lazy, singing and dancing fools in his act. He wore blackface makeup, using burned cork to darken the skin of his face.

Thorp said Rice's stage show was a hit, and Jim Crow became a stock character in minstrel shows. When the clamor for minstrel shows began to quiet in the 1870s, the Jim Crow character made a transition into movies and radio shows.

By 1838, the term "Jim Crow" had become a racial epithet for blacks.

"By the end of the 19th century, the term was being used to describe laws and customs that oppressed blacks, particularly in the South," according to the museum's Web site.

Under Jim Crow laws, blacks could be denied the use of public transportation and public facilities and barred from juries, neighborhoods, schools and jobs.

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'ETIQUETTE' OF DISCRIMINATION

The Jim Crow system, in existence from the 1830s to the 1950s, resulted in a "racial etiquette" that was meant to oppress blacks and prevent them from gaining economic, social or political power. Some of those behaviors were:

A black man couldn't offer his hand or shake hands with a white man because it implied social equality. A black man couldn't offer a hand or any other part of his body to a white woman without the risk of being accused of rape. A black man couldn't offer to light a white woman's cigarette, because that implied intimacy.

Blacks and whites weren't to eat together. If they did, the whites were served first, and some sort of partition was moved between them and the black diners.

Blacks were introduced to whites, never whites to blacks.

Whites didn't use courtesy titles, such as Mr., Mrs. or Miss, when referring to blacks. Blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to whites and weren't allowed to call whites by their first names.

If a black person rode in a car driven by a white person, the black person sat in the back seat or the back of a truck.

White motorists had the right of way at all intersections.

SOURCE: Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia

*Come listen all you gals and boys,
I'm going to sing a little song, My
name is Jim Crow.*

*Weel about and turn about and do
jis so, Eb'ry time I weel about I
jump Jim Crow.*

*-- "Jim Crow," a song by Thomas
Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice*