

# Collection exposes stereotypes

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A new exhibit at the Plymouth Historical Museum displays what curators term black memorabilia — racist figures manufactured in England, Germany and the United States from the late 1800s through the 1960s.

While some may see the museum's intent as promoting an understanding of prejudice, others may view the exhibit as stirring the same racist passions that originally prompted white people to make, sell and collect the objects.

One of the items is a tin bank that looks like a black person with tongue and eyes that make grimaces when a coin is plunked into it. Another metal toy depicts a black man on a cotton bale. There's a money bank that looks like a derogatory image of a black child, and porcelain Aunt Jemima. A bottle opener is made to

look like a mouth with exaggerated black lips and a deep red throat.

"What we're going to do with a lot of this is use it with regard to stereotypes," Donna Keough, exhibit director, said this month. "We see it as a perfect way to teach about stereotypes.

"Our intent with the education program with these particular items is to teach children how negative stereotypes hurt people, but additionally these images would not be tolerated in our society today," said Keough, who is white. The most recent piece is from the 1960s.

The artifacts were collected by Ken and Jan Dersey of Plymouth. "In our 30 years of collecting, we sort of assembled a lot of toys and things related to black Americana," said Jan Dersey. "When Donna mentioned doing this exhibit, I went through our

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collection” and picked the most interesting examples, Dersey said.

“These objects that were so racist fell out of favor,” Dersey said. When the couple first started collecting, most buyers were white, like the Derseys. Now, many buyers are black. “When it first started, they were still too close to the pain,” Jan Dersey said. Prices sometimes are high — \$2,500 to \$3,000 for the man on the cotton bale.

I was pondering how the 63 black people who make up 1% of Plymouth’s population might regard this exhibit when Free Press photographer Regina Boone, who is black, came over to shoot photos of the so-called black Americana.

“Why did you start collecting?” Boone asked Jan Dersey.

“We didn’t go out to collect black Americana,” replied Dersey. “We set out to collect still and mechanical toys. But I think this would be good for people to see this area of collecting. It shows you the true history — some of the ugly stuff and how we’ve progressed.”

“Or how we haven’t progressed,” said Boone.

Boone, who is from Virginia, told me that she collects racist figures for one reason: to keep them out of the hands of racist whites.

At Ferris State University in Big Rapids, they don’t mince words. None of these “black memorabilia” or “black Americana” euphemisms. Their specialty collection is called the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia.

I called Ferris State and spoke to John Thorp, a cultural anthropologist who is head of the university’s social sciences department and director of the Jim Crow Museum. Thorp,



REGINA H. BOONE/Detroit Free Press

The Plymouth Historical Museum is showcasing so-called black Americana collected by a Plymouth couple. The artifacts depict black people in stereotypes, such as the caricatured figure of Aunt Jemima.

who is white, doesn’t call them black memorabilia. He calls them “hateful things.”

“This material continues to be produced,” he said. “Some of it is reproductions of old stuff in new form — postcards, banners, mailing labels. There are people who will create it for you now on a T-shirt, a mouse pad, on a lunch box, a clock face. The old stuff is being reproduced and there are brand-new things coming up on a regular basis.”

An example of a new racist product is a game called Ghettopoly, said Thorp. It’s similar to the traditional Monopoly board game, but “playas” get

bonus cards for getting a neighborhood addicted to crack.

“I don’t have any problem with someone taking this memorabilia and putting it on display — you could call it racist memorabilia — but what’s really important is the supporting interpretation around it ... and that you explain it honestly and truthfully and you tell the whole story,” said Thorp.

There’s a small exhibit of racist material at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, said Raymond Tate, the museum’s director of marketing and public relations.

Like Thorp, Tate said it’s important that such exhibits recognize that racist images are still being manufactured and sold. Tate is black. “Five years ago, I saw Aunt Jemima salt and pepper shakers for sale in a store in New Orleans,” Tate said.

“There are black people who are collecting it,” said Thorp. “One of the motivations is to get it off the market, but the ease with which this stuff proliferates, that is hardly about to happen.”

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