

Saving stereotypes
Controversial school tiles headed for museum
by Sandra Svoboda
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As Royal Oak prepares for the demolition of several elementary schools, district officials and local historians are preserving one ugly reminder from a racist past: Painted fireplace tiles depicting the Little Black Sambo story, complete with the bulging eyes, very dark skin and exaggerated red lips featured in Jim Crow-era depictions of African-Americans.

"Society has changed, and we understand that we don't want to support this stereotype in the future," says Superintendent Thomas Moline. "It was instituted in a time and era when there was no second thought to producing that type of work. There's been some desire to try and preserve it."

First installed in a kindergarten room at Longfellow Elementary School in the 1920s, the hand-painted tiles will go to the Royal Oak Historical Society this summer when Longfellow is razed, Moline says. "Only an historical exhibit could show it in the proper framework," he says. The fireplace also contains pictures of animals including a little bunny and a turtle.

The Little Black Sambo tale, often cherished as a children's story about a boy who gives tigers his fancy clothing to avoid being eaten, is an unintentional product of one of the worst eras in American race relations, says David Pilgrim, the curator of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University, where the collection includes thousands of pieces of racist memorabilia.

Helen Bannerman, an Englishwoman married to an officer in the British Army stationed in India, wrote the story for her daughters in 1889. It made its way to England where it was published as a book and eventually came to the United States. Although the Sambo story's original setting was India, the dark-skinned characters with stereotypical African names made the book part of the prevailing 20th century racist sentiment, Pilgrim says.

The Sambo character and story perpetuated one of the most enduring and damaging stereotypes of African American males as simple-minded, docile creatures who were dependent on the slave owner or white man.

Pilgrim, also the chief diversity officer at the Big Rapids university, viewed photographs of the Longfellow tiles. One pair of tiles depicts a man in tattered clothing smoking a pipe and carrying a pot. Another set shows a boy under a palm tree with a monkey.

But it's the scene set in a kitchen with an overweight woman cooking, a man in a rocking chair and a child holding an umbrella that is most historically significant by Pilgrim's

standards. The caricatures represent three of the most prevalent and disturbing black stereotypes.

"This is the classic Little Black Sambo," Pilgrim says of the scene. "You have the Mammy, then you have what later became the coon or the Sambo and you have the picaninny, the little boy."

The tiles were made by the Flint Faience & Tile Company, a subsidiary of AC Spark Plugs that produced the glossy, painted tiles from 1921 to 1933, says Jane McIntosh, the registrar at the Sloan Museum in Flint. She knows of no other Sambo tiles.

With the publication of the book *Flint Faience Tile A to Z* three years ago, the tiles have increased in value, McIntosh says. "They're just starting to be really appreciated for their quality. If people started collecting them five years ago, they were probably picking them up for pennies," she says. She declined to put a price on the Royal Oak collection.

Tom Wurdock, past president of the Royal Oak Historical Society, says the group hasn't decided exactly how to display the Sambo tiles. The society is negotiating for a new space; if it moves there, a permanent exhibit could explain the historical context of the tiles.

"It is part of our history. Just like any community, you have the good and the bad and the history you can learn from. I think we'd be remiss if we just disregarded it and didn't do anything with it and didn't learn anything," Wurdock says.

Meanwhile, Pilgrim would like to add the Royal Oak tiles to his museum, where an expansion will include a room dedicated to the Little Black Sambo phenomenon.

"I'm glad that it's going to some museum. I'm disappointed that it's not going to us," Pilgrim says. "If they put it in a basement, it's a damn shame. If you tell that story and look at the role the images played sort of validating a set of ideas about Africans and their American descendants, you can see it's not just an image."

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