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SEAN KIRST

David Pilgrim, a college professor, teaches in Michigan. He can't make it to Baldwinsville today for the 12th annual TW Conroy New Year's Eve Antiques Auction Extravaganza. Still, Pilgrim wishes he could get in on the bidding. There's a box of puzzles up for sale that he'd like to buy, puzzles that would fit nicely in Pilgrim's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia.

If they don't go in a museum, Pilgrim said, he'd just as soon see them destroyed.

The puzzles were sold in the 1870s by McLoughlin Bros. of New York City, a premier maker of board games. They depict blacks as grotesque minstrel caricatures. Pilgrim, an African American raised in the segregated South, uses similar artifacts to educate visitors at his museum, based at Ferris State University.

Yet it is the title on the box that makes these items so explosive. The puzzles were sold under the title "Chopped Up Niggers," a name Pilgrim recommends using once in the newspaper, simply to explain the hurt.

"I consider myself a garbage collector, buying items that belong either in a museum or in an incinerator," Pilgrim said. He has "contradictory" feelings, he said, when those products go to auction: He is glad to live in a nation of free speech and ideas, but he hates to see racist artifacts bought and sold for the wrong reasons.

His museum offers cultural reminders of Jim Crow, an era when black Americans lacked the same basic human rights as whites. For many visitors, Pilgrim said, Jim Crow is not easy to confront. Slavery ended more than 100 years ago, which provides a comfort zone of historical separation. But millions of

living Americans were silent beneficiaries or victims of Jim Crow, which boiled down to a violent apartheid.

In all Pilgrim's years of buying museum displays, he's only seen one other example of the "Chopped Up" box of puzzles. That rare nature gives it a notorious renown. When the New-York

Historical Society did a museum display on old board games, for instance, it used the McLoughlin Bros. box as a symbol of racist attitudes.

"It was the most heinous of the lot," said Travis Stewart, a society spokesman.

Tim Conroy, president of the Baldwinsville auction house, included the name of the puzzles in a published listing of goods that will be sold today. "You get a strange feeling" from using the name, Conroy said. But he said the puzzle is only part of a larger collection of old games being sold by a Central New York family that had the games in its attic.

While Conroy said he is sensitive to the offensive nature of the name, he said an auction house must accept historical reality.

"That's a pretty rare game," Conroy said. "It's the best of the worst from a horrible time in American history, a time we shouldn't forget."

McLoughlin Bros. games, he said, are coveted by collectors because of their high quality and lithographic beauty. The box of puzzles is just as likely to be purchased by an African-American buyer, Conroy said, a point on which Pilgrim agrees.

The buyers of racist artifacts in America, Pilgrim said, usually break down into specific categories. There are "liberator collectors," often black, who buy such items to remove them from the market. There are black buyers who collect racist antiques as a way of making sure a brutal past is not forgotten, in the same fashion that Holocaust victims might try to preserve artifacts of concentration camps.

There are buyers described by Pilgrim as "amoral," who simply want to make a profit by investing in rare collectibles. There are "nostalgia" buyers, who see racist items as a reminder of a "happier," less complicated time. And there are unapologetic racists, Pilgrim said, who seek their own shaky affirmation in the past.

Conroy said an auction house would walk a difficult line if it began refusing every item that caused cultural offense. He said many famous African Americans, such as Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby, are collectors of what he calls "Black Americana," which includes everything from examples of Jim Crow to period works of art by respected black artists.

"We do what we feel is morally correct," Conroy said. "We wouldn't sell anything that was seen by a majority of people as morally offensive. We go on a case-to-case basis."

It is easy to say that people shouldn't sell these items, Conroy said. The bottom line, he said, is that the family selling the games is not wealthy. The "Chopped Up" puzzle is so rare that it will sell for thousands of dollars, Conroy said, "probably twice what the other games will sell for, combined."

He compares the situation to complaints he once received about auctioning some Nazi military items, brought home by an American soldier in World War II. The man died, and his cash-strapped widow sold the artifacts. Conroy contends that no one had the right to tell her - or the family selling the puzzle - to walk away from a much-needed financial return.

As for Pilgrim, he purchased his first racist collectibles as a young man. He bought some salt and pepper shakers made in the image of two slaves, then smashed them to bits in front of the seller.

He was brought to tears by some dehumanizing Jim Crow images, especially images that degraded black children. He'd often get into furious arguments with the people selling them.

Then he'd walk away and the items would get sold anyway.

Eventually Pilgrim set aside his fury and decided that education made a lot more sense. He began buying racist items to put in his museum. He dreams of a day when owners of such volatile antiques would donate or destroy them, instead of putting them up for sale.

Until then, Pilgrim said, "I'll bid and hold my nose." Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. His columns appear Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Call him at 470-6015 or e-mail him at citynews@syracuse.com

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