



TOLERANCE IN THE NEWS

Mammy on Display

January 11, 2001 -- It started when he was a teenager. No big deal, just a curious kid picking up weird looking "stuff" at malls and flea markets. Today that stuff is a big deal — over 4,000 items drawing lots of interest from academia, media and people across the nation.

The [Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia](#), founded at Ferris State University by sociology professor David Pilgrim, is a unique facility featuring both common and one-of-a-kind pieces of racist memorabilia.

"One of the first things we try to convey to visitors is we found most of this stuff in pretty obvious locations," said Pilgrim, museum curator. "Much of it used to be sold in grocery stores and could be found in many, if not most, American homes."

Pilgrim started collecting in the late 1970s and hasn't stopped since.

"I don't remember exactly why I started buying these things, but once I started, I was so fascinated that I couldn't get enough," said Pilgrim.

"Initially, I would buy them, and destroy them. But because I came across so much of it — napkin holders, lawn jockeys, t-shirts, cigar boxes — quickly realized that was a losing proposition. I knew I had to change my strategy."

So instead of trashing it, Pilgrim began to compile it. He conducted research and authored academic essays. He wanted to understand the mindset of the people who produced and bought the "stuff."

"Quickly, I discovered the majority of white people had no idea [the picaninny](#), [the mammy](#), [the coon](#), or any of the other distinguishing statues, salt and pepper shakers or lawn jockeys they had were even offensive," Pilgrim said.

"So when they ask if I consider them racist because they own some of those things, I always tell them 'no,'" he says with a caveat. "Not necessarily."

Three years ago Pilgrim succeeded in getting university support for his collection.

"Before we got the space on campus, the stuff was taking over my home," he said. "I wanted to find a way to put it to good use. I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it."

Many of his students didn't believe Pilgrim when he talked about the depth of America's racist history.

"It's not that they disagreed with me," he said. "They flat-out thought I was lying."

For proof, Pilgrim can now just shuttle his classes down to room 324 of the Starr building on the university's Big Rapids, Michigan, campus.

"It took some time to convince administrators to provide the space for it, but I know the current president is a big supporter of ours," says Pilgrim. "Most professors are beginning to understand the academic significance of what we have."

Although the museum staff wants as many visitors as possible, tourists can't just walk in at anytime. The museum is not just a showcase for exhibits; it is also a learning laboratory. All tours are scheduled and the staff facilitates discussions before, during and after the tours.

"We know many of the exhibits are emotionally unsettling," Pilgrim said. "It wouldn't be constructive to allow people to just wander in off the street. All we would have is angry, confused people, and they would reject the educational value of the project."

"What people must realize is many of these things aren't just relics of the past," Pilgrim said. "It is still being made today."

Pilgrim points to the "plain brown rapper" and the "Doped Rastafarian" as prime examples.

Complete with dreadlocks, a marijuana cigarette and wild eyes, the "Doped Rastafarian" is now a popular image on t-shirts worn by college students across the country.

Through his classes, guest lecturing and his writings, Pilgrim stresses why he believes these symbols of Americana are so dangerous.

"These images don't just reflect racist attitudes, they shape attitudes," he said. "Sadly, the new images are still being made, and the old ones never die."