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UVSC hosts racism exhibit

By [Laura Hancock](#)

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OREM — In the 1980s, 20 years before the makeover craze of today, Aunt Jemima slimmed down and tossed out the head bandana she wore, which to many signified servitude.



David Pilgrim of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University discusses racially charged objects in his lecture Friday at UVSC.

Keith Johnson, Deseret Morning News

It was about time, with Jim Crow laws abolished for decades. Aunt Jemima had sported the look since 1893, when her image was first used to sell pancake mix and maple syrup, according to a display in the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Michigan.

Thirty-nine pieces from the Jim Crow Museum collection are being displayed at Utah Valley State College this month, and the museum's curator and primary donor, David Pilgrim, spoke Friday at UVSC's kickoff of its Martin Luther King Jr. Day commemorations. Events are planned at the college through Wednesday.

people to discuss issues regarding race, Pilgrim said.

The museum's 5,000-piece collection forces

Whites avoid discussing race because they do not want to seem racist, and ethnic minorities avoid the topic because they don't want to seem angry, said Pilgrim, also a sociology professor at Ferris State.

When people enter the museum, they "clam up because they're afraid to talk," Pilgrim said. "And I say to them, 'When you see that image, what do you see?'"

Blacks are portrayed as monkeys in old postcards, board games, illustrated children's books and signs exhibited at the museum.

In other pieces, their features are exaggerated to make them look like "wide-eyed, big-lipped buffoons," Pilgrim said, such as in the signs for Coon Chicken Inn, a Southern fried chicken restaurant formerly in Seattle, Portland, Ore., and at 2950 S. Highland Drive in Salt Lake City.

A huge, grinning caricature of a black man was on the front of the restaurant. Patrons had to walk through his mouth to get inside, where blacks worked but were not always welcomed as customers.

The museum is mostly dedicated to portrayals of blacks during the years of the Jim Crow laws that socially separated whites from people of color, such as the notorious prohibition of blacks drinking water from fountains designated for whites.

However, Pilgrim has begun to take interest in the portrayals of other ethnic minorities, poor whites and gays.

And many of the portrayals of yesteryear are really not that distant, Pilgrim said.

For instance, the museum features minstrel makeup that white performers, usually men, would apply to their faces to appear black. The makeup, made from burnt cork, was popular from 1840-1950.

Minstrels performed songs and skits that sentimentalized slave life and their love for their "ol' massuh," the museum exhibit states.

While minstrel shows are long gone, they have a modern-day, less-subtle-but-still racist incarnation: the "pimp and ho" parties that white college-aged students attend, wearing "black" clothing and Afro wigs.

"I don't want to live in a country where people can't make racist objects," Pilgrim said. "I want to live in a country where people are intelligent enough and compassionate enough not to buy them."

Pilgrim acknowledged the advances Americans have come in erasing prejudice — such as the corporate decision to slim down Aunt Jemima — but said more gains can be made.

Aunt Jemima recalls the classic "Mammy" image of the black, obese, maternal figure with a wide grin that supposedly showed love for the white families she served. Mammy figures had been portrayed in other household product advertisements in the 1800s. "Gone With the Wind" featured a Mammy.

Today, Aunt Jemima "continues to invoke memories of slavery and segregation," according to the wall display at UVSC.

The pieces from the Jim Crow Museum will be on display at UVSC through Jan. 27 in the library's fourth-floor gallery.

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