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Article published on September 01, 2006

Hopkinton Fair

Memorabilia raises concerns  
Racially-themed items no longer sold at fair

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September 01, 2006

A Texas man selling collectibles at the Hopkinton Fair removed several yesterday that depicted black people in belittling poses after he learned that someone had complained. The offending items included caricatures of black people eating watermelon and, in one case, dangling from a fishing hook as "gator bait."

Pete Rosseau, owner of Recollections in Whitney, Texas, said he was surprised to hear that someone had questioned his wares, which include originals and reproductions. He said he's sold them at the Hopkinton, Deerfield and Sandwich fairs and at Massachusetts antique shows for the last few years.

"This is part of history," Rosseau said of the items before packing them away. "They are not meant to offend anyone."

Rosseau began selling his cast-iron collectibles, which mostly include non-controversial items like flying pigs, banks and lighthouses, yesterday morning, when the fair opened. A Monitor reporter visited Rosseau's table after someone called the newspaper to complain that the black memorabilia was offensive.

When a Monitor reporter called fair officials to see if they had also received complaints, they said no but visited Rosseau's booth immediately. Shortly thereafter, Greg Fillmore, the fair's vice president, called



ANNMARIE TIMMINS / Monitor staff  
Pete Rosseau, a Texas collectibles dealer, offered to take down some of his items that depicted blacks in controversial situations. Rosseau had a display table at the Hopkinton Fairgrounds.

the Monitor to say Rosseau had volunteered to remove the offending memorabilia after hearing about the complaint from fair officials. He will still be selling his other items, which make up the bulk of his collection.

"We were not out to offend anybody," Fillmore said. "Nor was the vendor."

Fillmore said that while fair officials issue permits to vendors, they do not investigate what each vendor is selling. Nor do they forbid items if they are not illegal, Fillmore said. He said it was Rosseau's decision to pack up the memorabilia, which also included a sign for a segregated bathroom and an advertisement for Dilly Brand Laxative that depicted an overweight black woman on a toilet.

Rosseau said he's been selling cast iron collectibles for about 15 years, and in that time he had one black woman complain. Often, Rosseau said, African-Americans buy his memorabilia. He said he picks up his pieces at other shows and from individual sellers. Depending on the age of the item, he was asking between \$20 and \$125 for his pieces yesterday.

Rosseau didn't have much time to sell his black memorabilia before he offered to pack it away. But there is a big market for those items. There were nearly 200 similar cast iron pieces for sale on eBay yesterday, including African-American boys eating watermelon and black Sambo bottle openers. Also for sale was an "authenticated" neck tag from a North Carolina slave for \$2,000.

Rosseau said he's found buyers wherever he's set up his table. Just like the original Popeye riding a bike, the cast iron bank of a big-eyed black man in a top hat is a piece of history, he said. He believes the same is true of the signs directing blacks to one bathroom and whites to another. "This happened," he said. "We can't change history."

One of the bigger collectors of black memorabilia is David Pilgrim, a black man who is also the curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Michigan. He has a print of a black baby sucking on a well of ink titled "N----- Milk" and Ku Klux Klan robes. He's got a game of "party stunts," one of which directs the player to "go through the motions of a colored boy eating watermelon." Pilgrim passed on a puzzle called "Chopped Up N-----s" because he couldn't justify the \$3,000 price tag.

In an online article, Pilgrim admits he's obsessed with racist objects but says it's for a reason. "I am a garbage collector, racist garbage," he writes. "I collect this garbage because I believe, and know to be true, that items of intolerance can be used to teach tolerance."

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