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**Khalid el-Hakim holds a Nation of Islam newspaper from his collection, pieces of which have been displayed in Detroit.**

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## To never forget, activist saves vile pieces of black history

By Neal Rubin / The Detroit News

It's a word we don't put in the paper, and a word Khalid el-Hakim would just as soon wipe from everyone's vocabulary, no matter their race or level of hipness. But he can show you a mechanical bank where it's cast in iron on the back.



El-Hakim is black and active and committed, and he offers compelling reasons to preserve this sort of thing instead of

burying it in a landfill. "If you destroy it," he contends, "there's no evidence it ever existed."

So he demonstrates how you put a coin on the outstretched hand of a cartoonish black man in a top hat and flip a lever. The man's eyes go white and the coin disappears through his gigantic red lips, and isn't it fun, kids?

C'mon, you say. The bank is probably 100 years old. No one would sell that today. Except that el-Hakim can reach into another display case at his home in Highland Park and grab a yellow cardboard box with a tube of toothpaste inside.

It was sold in Southeast Asia within the past 10 years, he says. There's another black man in another top hat on the box, and above him is the brand name of the fine product within: A slur maybe half a level less startling than the one on the bank.

El-Hakim, 35, teaches middle school social studies to kids in Detroit with what educators gently call "behavioral and attendance challenges." He hopes to keep doing it next year, even if last week's mail brought a layoff notice.

That's another story, though. Today's subject is why, on a dreary afternoon two Sundays ago, el-Hakim and his friend Geoffrey Devereaux drove to Howell for the estate sale of one of the leading flaming racists in Michigan history.

Part of the reason Devereaux went is that el-Hakim's friend Proof, the well-known rapper, wouldn't. Financially, "I got your back," el-Hakim says Proof told him. When it came to sitting next to him, Proof said, "No way," and Devereaux understands the response.

There were 50-plus people at the auction house, Devereaux says, many of them clearly Klan supporters, only five of them black. "It was macabre."

As for el-Hakim's primary interest, he showed up wanting some of that natty Ku Klux Klan sportswear. But really, all your average robe and hood tells you is that whoever wore it was afraid to show his face.

His interest is black history, so by the time some self-identified Klan-sympathizing goofball spent \$6,000 on

Robert Miles' two black robes, el-Hakim had changed direction.

For a total of \$250, el-Hakim says, he bought something far more valuable: A glimpse inside the old Grand Dragon's head.

There was a black-and-white photo Miles liked enough to have framed of himself with a burning cross. Some books by black authors a librarian might catalog under "revolutionary," including "War in America" by Brother Imari. A box of Anti-Defamation League reports on potentially menacing organizations like Miles' own.

Best of all, el-Hakim now owns Miles' scrapbook -- a newspaper clipping play-by-play of Klan activities or things the Klan probably wished it had thought of, like bombing school buses in Pontiac in 1971 and tarring and feathering a pointedly tolerant high school principal in Ypsilanti the same year.

"If I could admire something about a Klan person," el-Hakim says, "he was very well-read." Knowing what Miles was reading can only help a historian understand what he was thinking.

El-Hakim calls his assembled artifacts The Bell Collection. His name was Stan Bell until he converted to Islam 11 years ago, "and my mom was not too happy with the name change, so it is in honor of my family."

These days, his mom cheerfully refers to him as Khalid, and she can tell you most everywhere pieces of the collection have been displayed, among them Wayne State, the Detroit Job Corps and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

To inquire about an exhibit, e-mail [newrisingsun99@yahoo.com](mailto:newrisingsun99@yahoo.com). Much of the material is arresting without being appalling: Mattel's first black Barbie, known simply as "Black Barbie." Or a book he found at a thrift store, inscribed to the previous owner by Rosa Parks. Or the New York Daily News edition covering the Million Man March in October 1995, an event he

attended and which spurred him to expand his small trove and find ways to bring it to the public.

Much, however, is dumbfoundingly offensive. He and artist Tyree Guyton are fiddling with plans for a motor-home-based exhibit. Its name will be deliberately jarring, just like the illustrated postcard in a rack on his mantle that shows a black man stealing a chicken. "A bird in de han," he's saying, "am worth two in the coop." "I want to open people's eyes to pay attention to this stuff," el-Hakim says. "You can't get over it until you deal with it."

There's another postcard, Depression-era, from Dover, Del., on which a pudgy, shirtless black man is chained to a post. A white man in a sport coat and straw hat stands behind him holding a whip. A crowd is gathered to watch, and most of the spectators are children.

"Some of these kids are still alive," el-Hakim says. Some of them might have even owned that cast-iron bank. He can't change that, but maybe he can help them wish they hadn't.

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