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Jim Crow Museum Promotes Tolerance

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It all started for David Pilgrim with the "mammy" saltshaker.

It was toward the end of the Civil Rights era in the early 1970s. Pilgrim, now a 45-year-old sociology professor at Ferris State University, was about 13 when he came across the dispenser at a flea market in his native Alabama.

For years in the United States, particularly in the South, it was common to find salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars and other kitchen and household items made to resemble a "mammy" - a stereotypical image of a black heavyset, kerchief- and apron-wearing housekeeper and nurse maid.

Pilgrim doesn't remember his exact frame of mind when he impulsively bought the saltshaker. But he vividly remembers what he ended up doing with it: He smashed it to pieces.

He took much better care of the 4,000 or so other related items he acquired over the years in the name of education. All are now housed at Ferris State's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, which Pilgrim has helped put together over the past seven years.

(The term "Jim Crow" originated with a character created in blackface by a white performer named Daddy Rice in the early 1800s. It later was used as a stereotypical image of blacks and, by the late 1800s, was associated with racist and segregationist laws.)

The museum's mission is to help people understand historical and contemporary racist expressions and to serve as a resource for civil rights and human rights organizations.

"As you consider how they use these materials, it's a powerful, powerful teaching library in terms of tolerance and understanding for others," David Eisler, Ferris State's president, says.

Pilgrim gave the museum his entire collection of racist figurines, T-shirts, comic books, ashtrays, souvenirs, movie posters and other related items. As its curator, he now receives a small budget from the university to expand the collection.

"The same way we use sex to sell items today, we used to use race," Pilgrim says. "A disproportionate number of items in here are advertising pieces or had their origins in advertising."

The room's display cases are filled with startling, offensive anti-black words and images: drawings of watermelon-devouring black children and bug-eyed, ever-grinning grown-ups; black men portrayed in cartoons or photos as either thugs or lazy, inarticulate and easily frightened; women depicted as either mammies or lascivious, scantily clad Jezebels.

"Every group has been caricatured in the United States, but when you deal with Africans and their American descendants, they've been caricatured more, more often and, arguably, more viciously," Pilgrim says.

Drawings show young black children sitting at the edge of a swamp, the words "Alligator Bait" written below them. A tube of "Darkie" toothpaste featuring a black man in a top hat is displayed next to a later version of the same product renamed "Darlie," now with a white man in a top hat.

There are materials from the Ku Klux Klan, but they aren't given prominence over any other items because the museum focuses on "everyday racist items," says Pilgrim, who considers the museum to be a learning laboratory.

He says he has no problem finding new things to add to the collection at swap meets, art galleries and online auction spots such as eBay. Many of the items are still being made - and being passed off as originals - by companies and individuals.

Only about half the collection can be displayed at one time in the museum's current quarters, now housed in a room in the Starr Building. A fund-raising drive is under way to move the museum to a larger, more accessible on-campus location.

The public may visit but there are no set hours of operation because access is hindered by the location in an academic building.

Instead, visitors must make special arrangements through Pilgrim's office or the office of John Thorp, the museum's director, or be part of a university-approved academic course, workshop or seminar. A museum guide, often a sociology student, must be present to discuss the exhibits and answer the questions that inevitably arise.

"For the first time ever, many of them are having a genuine conversation about race when they're in here," says Thorp, who also heads up Ferris State's social sciences department.

Tim Chester, director of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids, says his institution has thousands of similar items - in storage. He and his staff have been grappling with how best to use theirs, and some might find its way into an exhibit on the region's ethnic culture planned for 2006.

Visitors to the two museums have very different expectations, so caution must be exercised when displaying such artifacts, Chester says.

"These objects have immense power, and you could put them out in contexts in which they would mean different things to different people," he says.

When Pilgrim and Thorp showed Eisler the museum soon after he became Ferris State's 17th president last fall, Eisler was fascinated.

"When you enter the museum, you anticipate some of the things that you're going to see because you understand what the content is," he says, "but I wasn't prepared for the overall effect of this. You're really impacted by it."

It has been about two years since the Rev. John Frye, the teaching pastor at Bella Vista Church in Rockford, toured the museum with some other members of his church's ministry staff. He hasn't forgotten the impact it had on him.

"I felt sadness, I think I felt anger and then I just felt overwhelmed," Frye says. "I did not know how much racist memorabilia there actually was out there."

By James Prichard