

Hateful Things: Museum exhibit conveys a powerful message

By Lee Roberts (June 29, 2006)

MILWAUKEE - The exhibit itself does not take up a lot of space. The message that the one-room show at America's Black Holocaust Museum conveys, however, is a large and very powerful one.

Called "Hateful Things," this traveling show from the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids, Mich., gives visitors an idea of the scope of prejudice and discrimination that existed in this country's pre-civil rights era, as well as the remnants that have surfaced since and are still evident today. The 39 items of material culture, which span from the late 19th century to the present, include stereotypical and demeaning images of Africans and their American descendants in the form of advertisements and everyday items including ash trays, kitchen gadgets, toys and games.

Millions of anti-black items were produced during the Jim Crow period (mid-1870s to mid-1960s), according to information from the Museum of Racist Memorabilia, and these items served to justify prejudice and discrimination against African-Americans by integrating racism into daily life.

"All racial and ethnic groups have been caricatured but none as often, or in as many ways, as Africans and their American descendants," the exhibit's written materials tell visitors.

Those caricatures range from the well-known mammy images such as Aunt Jemima to portrayals of black men as lazy coons or violent brutes, and black women as promiscuous Jezebels and whores - many of which depict blacks as physically grotesque and/or culturally deficient. Even black babies are targeted, with messages such as one that portrays them as alligator bait.

Not so long ago While such images from the past are disturbing enough, what may be even more surprising is the number of racist items that have been produced in recent years, and are still being produced. The exhibit includes a Halloween mask produced in 1996, for instance, based on an image called "Plain Brown Rapper." This caricature, which is also popular on T-shirts, according to the Jim Crow Museum, portrays black men as sex-crazed, violence-prone musicians or dope-dealing thugs.

Also displayed is a game called "Ghettopoly," which was produced in 2002. A racist spoof of the real-estate/business game "Monopoly," this version features properties such as a "Pawn Shop," a "Crack House," and "Martin Luther King Blvd.," instead of "Park Place" and "Boardwalk. And, in place of the "Community Chest" cards, there are "Hustle" cards.

Even more disturbing is the "Running Nigger Target," a two-dimensional metal image of a running black male that was used for target practice, complete with bullet strikes. It was on the market until 2001, according to the museum.

Making people aware that racist objects are still being created today was one of the main objectives in choosing the items for this traveling exhibit from his museum's collection of 5,000 pieces, said David Pilgrim, director and curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia.

"Our mission is to use objects of intolerance to raise issues of tolerance and intolerance," he said.

So far, the "Hateful Things" exhibit has done so, the director said.

"It has sparked some really good, open, constructive dialogue. I usually visit the places the exhibit goes and when I'm there, I like to step back and listen to the conversations. It is especially great to hear young people discussing racism."

The full tour The "Hateful Things" exhibit is a good fit for America's Black Holocaust Museum, which exists to educate the public of injustices suffered by people of African heritage, and to provide visitors with an opportunity to rethink their assumptions about race and racism.

The traveling show's stop in Milwaukee seems especially appropriate at this time, when the Black Holocaust Museum is honoring the memory of its founder, James Cameron, who died on June 11, just days after the exhibit opened.

Cameron, who was America's only living survivor of a lynching, dedicated his life to promoting civil rights, racial peace, unity and equality. It was his own experiences as a 16-year-old who was falsely accused of participating in the murder of a white man in Marion, Ind., that led him to open the museum in Milwaukee in 1988.

As a result of his arrest, Cameron witnessed a mob of 15,000 people beat and lynch his two friends. Cameron, who also was severely beaten and nearly lynched, miraculously survived the ordeal. He was sentenced to four years in the state prison for accessory before the fact of manslaughter.

Cameron received a pardon from the State of Indiana in 1993, and last year, at age 91, he traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend a session at which the U.S. Senate issued a formal apology for failing to outlaw lynchings when it had the chance. Cameron's friends were two of more than 4,700 Americans (most of them black) who were lynched between 1890 and 1960.

When planning a trip to see "Hateful Things," be sure to leave enough time to go through the rest of the exhibits at the Black Holocaust Museum. You can't miss the recreation of a slave ship, which visitors must walk through to get to the other exhibits. There are also displays that tell the stories of Slavery in America, the Ku Klux Klan, Lynchings, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fair Housing and Modern Day Injustices.

It is also well worth your time to sit and watch the moving film that tells James Cameron's story - one that reaches far beyond his own horrifying experiences back in 1930 to the wider view of racial injustices throughout our country's history.

America's Black Holocaust Museum welcomes visitors of all races and backgrounds, and encourages community understanding of the nation's history of racism, prejudice, social change and cross-cultural understanding.