

# To keep history from repeating

## Museum displays artifacts that were designed to demean

**By Jan Biles**  
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Martin Luther King Jr. once described racism as "the boil on the body politic" that needed to be lanced to let the pus out.

A museum in Big Rapids, Mich., hopes to poke holes in that boil by displaying historical and contemporary items that promote racial caricatures and racial discrimination.

"We are using examples of intolerance to teach tolerance," said Dr. John Thorp, a cultural anthropologist at the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. "We have a room full of items meant to defame and demean black people. Some are funny, some are ugly, some are deadly."

The Jim Crow Museum, on the campus of Ferris State University, was founded by Dr. David Pilgrim, a professor of sociology who donated a 4,000-piece collection of racist artifacts to start the museum. About 1,500 people visit the museum each year.

Pilgrim grew up in Alabama and attended segregated schools, according to the museum's Web site. When he was a boy, he saw a small "mammy" figure for sale. He bought the doll and then destroyed it in front of the man who sold it to him.

For years, Pilgrim continued to purchase and dispose of racially insulting items. He eventually realized the objects were historically significant and began collecting them.

Most of the artifacts in the museum are household items -- sheet music, ashtrays, children's books, notepads, fishing lures, salt and pepper shakers, postcards, dolls and matchbooks. Each item portrays black Americans in a stereotypical, degrading fashion. For example, a framed picture of three babies sitting in marsh grass on a sand bar carries the caption, "Alligator Bait."

Thorp said the museum explores how the items function to influence and maintain the white power structure in American society.

Surprisingly, he said, racist items have become popular collectibles in the past few years. Most in demand are "happy slave images" or contemporary gangsta, rap or prostitute depictions.

"There are new stereotypes being produced, and there's new ways of using the old stereotypes," he said. "This isn't a thing of the past. People are constantly creating these images, and we found there's a market for this kind of thing."

Thorp said some faculty at Ferris State University had reservations about opening a Jim Crow museum on the campus, possibly because its purpose would be misunderstood and reflect badly on the school.

"Once the museum was in place and they could experience it, those reservations went away," he said. "The images force a person to take a stand for or against the equality of all human beings."

Still, the museum can't help but be controversial.

"We have had e-mails from people who attack the museum because they don't understand it," he said.

Thorp said white supremacy groups like the Aryan Nation and the Ku Klux Klan dismiss the museum, "but they don't mind that the images are out there, and they use the images to support their cause."

"At the beginning of the 19th century, these images were consciously promoted to defend slavery," he said in a statement on the museum's Web site. "During the later part of the 19th and into the 20th centuries, they served to justify the ongoing oppression of African Americans.

"Their continuing reproduction underscores the bigotry and prejudice that must be overcome if we are going to become a truly multicultural democracy."

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## **DOCUMENTING DISCRIMINATION**

The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., hopes to promote racial tolerance by helping people understand historical and contemporary expressions of intolerance.

For more information about the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, call (231) 591-5873; e-mail [thorpj@ferris.edu](mailto:thorpj@ferris.edu); or go to the Web site, [www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/](http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/).



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