HISTORY, SOCIAL JUSTICE

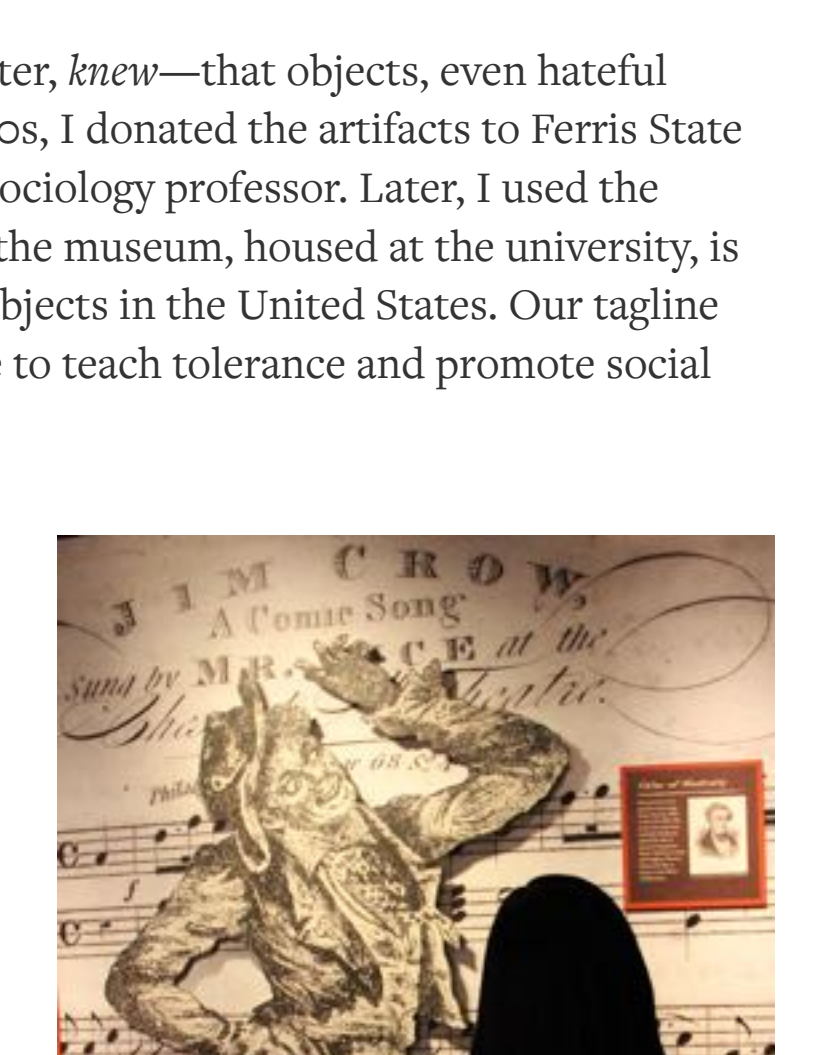
At the Jim Crow Museum, We Use Racist Objects to Engage Hearts and Heads in Social Justice

October 28, 2020 | David Pilgrim | Comments

Editor's note: This article examines the power of racist objects from America's Jim Crow period to teach social justice. For some people, certain images in the article may be disturbing. Yet, the presentation of these images is important. Many Black people lived in cultural contexts where they could not avoid the explicit and implicit imagery of white privilege. Tragically, many still do. As the author suggests, the achievement of social justice will require us to move beyond “happy history” to honest history.

At a time when many Americans are destroying racist objects, I am taking a different approach. I have spent more than four decades collecting Ku Klux Klan robes, segregation signs, and thousands of everyday objects that portray African Americans as dutiful servants, childlike buffoons, exotic savages, hypersexual deviants, and most disturbingly, menacing predators who must be punished.

I collected these items because I believed—then later, *knew*—that objects, even hateful ones, can be used as teaching tools. In the mid-1990s, I donated the artifacts to Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan, where I was a sociology professor. Later, I used the collection to create the Jim Crow Museum. Today the museum, housed at the university, is the largest collection of publicly accessible racist objects in the United States. Our tagline doubles as our vision: “using objects of intolerance to teach tolerance and promote social justice.” The museum is my life's work.



We know what we know, in part, because of what we have experienced. I was born in Harlem but raised in Mobile, Alabama, and Prichard, a city four miles north of there. It was the late-1950s and both were Jim Crow towns. The neighborhoods were rigidly segregated. The schools were either all-white or all-Black. The churches were as segregated as the schools. Black people could not visit the local libraries. Whites owned all the big money and most of the good jobs. There were Black preachers, teachers, and owners of small shops—on the Black side of town—but most Black people had low-status jobs with poverty wages. “Whites Only” signs hung in the windows of downtown stores. The businesses that did accept Black customers did so under the terms of Jim Crow—a Black person, for example, could not try on clothes in a retail shop. The police departments, all white, had reputations for beating Black people. It is not hyperbolic to say that skin color was the primary determinant of one's place in those cities as late as the mid-1960s.

My ancestors from the past four generations include people from Africa, Venezuela, Spain, the Barbados, and people indigenous to this country. I was a multiracial kid growing up in the deepest blackest South at a time when Jim Crow, though dying, was still alive. So, from my beginning, I thought about race a lot. When I was twelve or thirteen, I bought my first racist object, probably a mammy saltshaker, at a hybrid carnival/flea market in Mobile. I do not remember much about that day, but I do know that I threw the figurine to the ground. It broke. It was not a philosophical act. I simply did not like it. That was the last racist object that I purchased to break.

I attended Jarvis Christian College, a Black Disciples of Christ school in rural Texas. The school was poor, but my education was top-drawer. Benton Adams made us polished public speakers. Roy Uyechi tried to make historians of us. John H. Morgan, a theologian and sociologist, demanded that we thought in ways that were nuanced and defensible. We learned our share of what is called General Education, but, equally important, we were taught about the daily heroism of the maids, butlers, and sharecroppers who risked their jobs, and sometimes their lives, to protest Jim Crow segregation. O. C. Nix, who taught political science and history, used the Socratic method to test our understanding, arguments, and patience—but he did something else: he showed us the power of objects as teaching tools.

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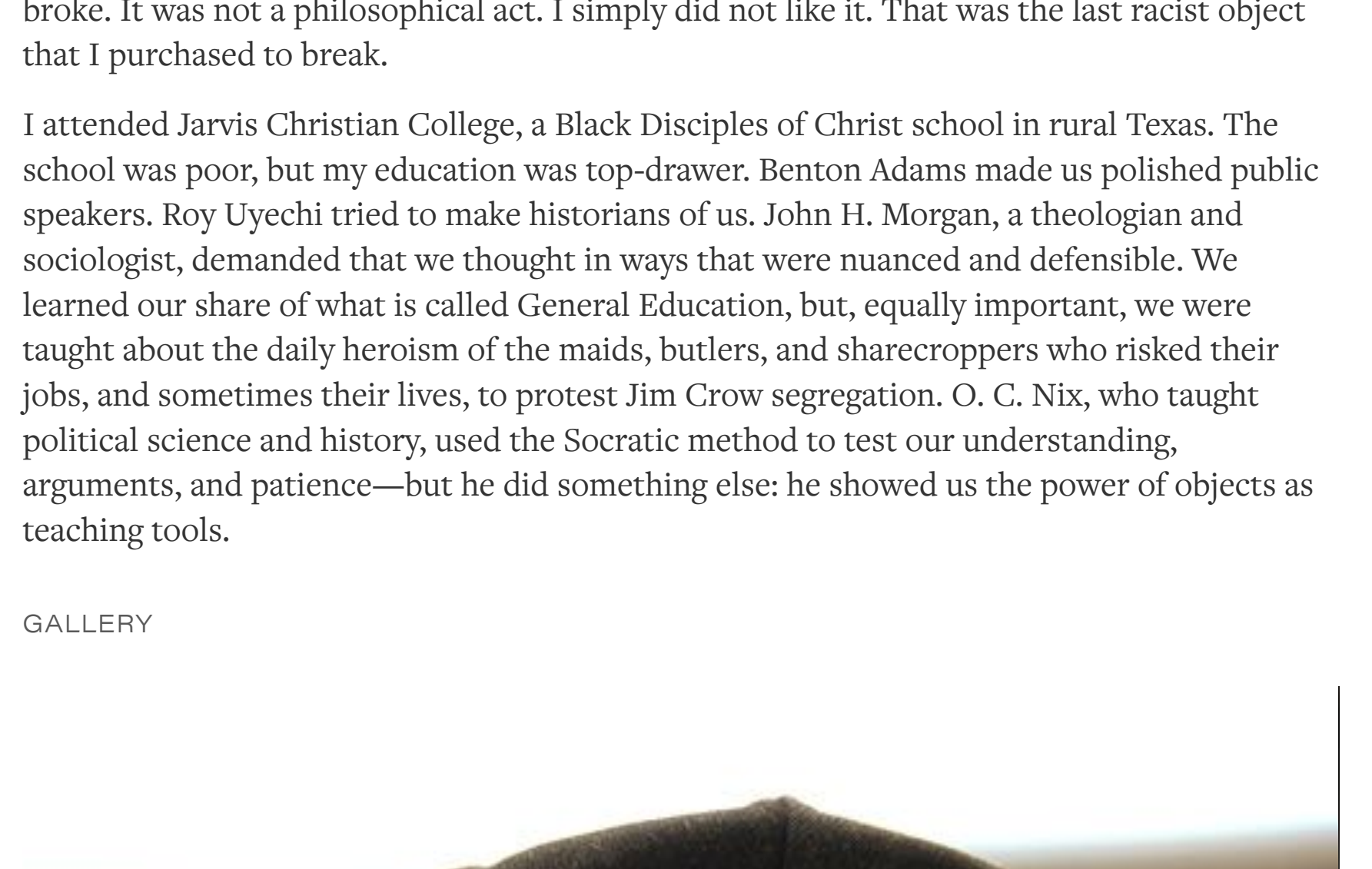

One day he brought a chauffeur's hat to class. He set it down, then asked about its relationship to the Jim Crow period. The obvious answer was that Black people who lived during Jim Crow were restricted by a race-segregated job economy; chauffeuring was one of the few jobs open to them. But that was not the answer Nix wanted. That answer was too obvious. He talked to us about the small Black middle class that existed in the 1940s in rural Texas. They wanted the material things that white people wanted: good-quality clothes, a nice house, expensive furniture, and maybe a shiny brand-new car. But they needed to be careful. A Black person, even a professional, who drove a new car violated the Jim Crow social script. The hat, an inanimate object, spoke for and protected them. *I am a chauffeur; this car does not belong to me. People like me do not desire or deserve new cars. I am not uppity. I am not a threat to you. I know my place. You do not need to hurt me. Please let me go on my way.*

I remember that story so vividly. No object holds any meaning other than what we assign to it, but this was a powerful meaning to assign to an object that, on the surface, had little to do with racism. It was during my time as a student at Jarvis Christian College when I first had the idea of building a large collection of racist objects. If Nix could use the cap to teach a compelling lesson about Black life under Jim Crow, I reasoned, it should be easy for me to use the objects in my collection as teaching tools.

Long before I became acquainted with what pedagogical specialists call object-based learning, I had used racist objects as tools to facilitate learning in the sociology classes that I taught. Using my version of Visual Thinking Strategies, I introduced objects—typically everyday items that caricatured Black people—and then asked questions. *What is it that you see? What else do you see?* This was not simply an icebreaker to get students to do something that many of us resist (talking about race); it was an early step on the road to viewing the objects and what they represent in deeper, more layered ways. *Have you always seen it that way? Have your experiences shaped what you see? How do others see this object?* I began this work when I was a professor, it continues decades later in the museum when I work with visitors.

Even if I live to be a hundred, I will always be fascinated by the variance that exists between two people viewing the same object.

GALLERY

We recreated a kitchen in the museum. It has a sink, towel racks, storage areas, and shelves. We display hundreds of objects in that kitchen: boxes of Gold Dust Washing Powder, Aunt Dinah Molasses jars (we need to empty those), Fun-to-Wash boxes, and cans of Luzianne Coffee and Chicory. There are dozens of signs: Topsy Chocolate Honey Drink, Aunt Sally's Cake Flour, Famous Black Nancy Coal, Smoky Jim's Sweet Potatoes, and much more. It would not be a kitchen without representations of Aunt Jemima. We display Aunt Jemima dolls, cookbooks, ceramic figures, and, of course, the boxes on which she appeared for more than a century.

Some visitors look at Aunt Jemima pancake boxes and are reminded of good times spent with their families. They wistfully remember the past. But there are others, like me, who look at those same boxes and see the vestiges of enslavement and segregation. If there is genius in the museum, it is that we created a space where people who see the world in very different ways are safe to share their beliefs. It sounds trite (and a little dangerous these days) to say that we still believe in dialogue.

The past is what happened; history is a narrative of what happened. The Jim Crow Museum uses objects to help us understand the past, even when what we find contradicts historical accounts, even when examining what happened is painful. Americans like happy history—narratives that make us look smart, brave, and exceptional. We want a history that has been cherry-picked, one that ignores our mistreatment of the weak and disfavored—a history that can be celebrated at picnics, parades, and in smug conversations. This approach to history is neither honest nor mature. A lynching tree was recreated in the center of the museum. It is a reminder that more than 4,000 black people were lynched in this country during the Jim Crow period.

Most well-read people know that blackface minstrelsy was a popular American theatrical form as late as the early twentieth century. The museum displays black-faced figurines, makeup for minstrel performers, minstrel joke books and scripts, and sheet music with titles like “All Coons Look Alike to Me” and “Coon, Coon, Coon.” Blackface minstrelsy was founded on the comic enactment of racial stereotypes.

GALLERY

Few people know that while white (and Black) performers blackened their faces, whitened their lips, and acted like buffoons to entertain audiences, other whites blackened their skin and committed heinous crimes. In 1923, a white high school student in Kansas City blackened his face and committed a robbery. He was not alone in his ruse. There were dozens of cases in the early 1900s where white criminals, their faces darkened with greasepaint or burnt cork, robbed, raped, and murdered—their true identities not discovered until (and unless) they were captured.

There are many stories told in the Jim Crow Museum, but none are as chilling as the accounts of white people using the skin of Black people as human leather. In 1912, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* told the story of “a physician's wife who is having a dead negro's skin tanned for a Christmas gift for her husband. A part of the negro's hide is to be made into a razor strop.” Our research found newspaper stories, from the period of Reconstruction to the mid-1920s, where the skin of Black people was sewn into purses, shoes, belts, and other products. This ghoulish practice is, of course, disgusting to contemporary Americans; however, there was a time—not so long ago—when the debasement of Black Americans was so nearly complete that one could read about the skin of a Black person being tanned in the same newspaper that reported the previous day's baseball box scores.

Studying the past (and the histories which narrate it) should not be driven by desires to make us feel good or bad—but, simply, to help us understand what happened. An objective examination of this country's past reveals much to admire—and actions that no sober-thinking, fair-minded person should praise. A common visitor response in the museum is deep sadness. That seems reasonable. The majority of the 8,000-plus objects on display are racially caricatured everyday objects and segregation memorabilia. But some objects document the efforts of African American artists to deconstruct racist imagery.

We have a copy of Jon Lockard's 1967 painting, *No More*. It shows a Black woman on an Aunt Jemima box. But this is not your father's mammy. Her bandanna bears the colors of the Pan-African flag: red, black, and green. Her face is stern, eyebrows raised, her fist bursting through the box. It is a not-so-subtle refutation of the smiling “mammies” whose greatest fulfillment came from serving her white “family.” Lockard's painting and the Aunt Jemima iconography it attempts to deconstruct serve as fruitful tools for discussion. In 2020, Quaker Oats removed the image of Aunt Jemima from its packaging. The decision-makers at their company likely had conversations similar to the ones that have occurred in the Jim Crow Museum for decades. I applaud their decision.

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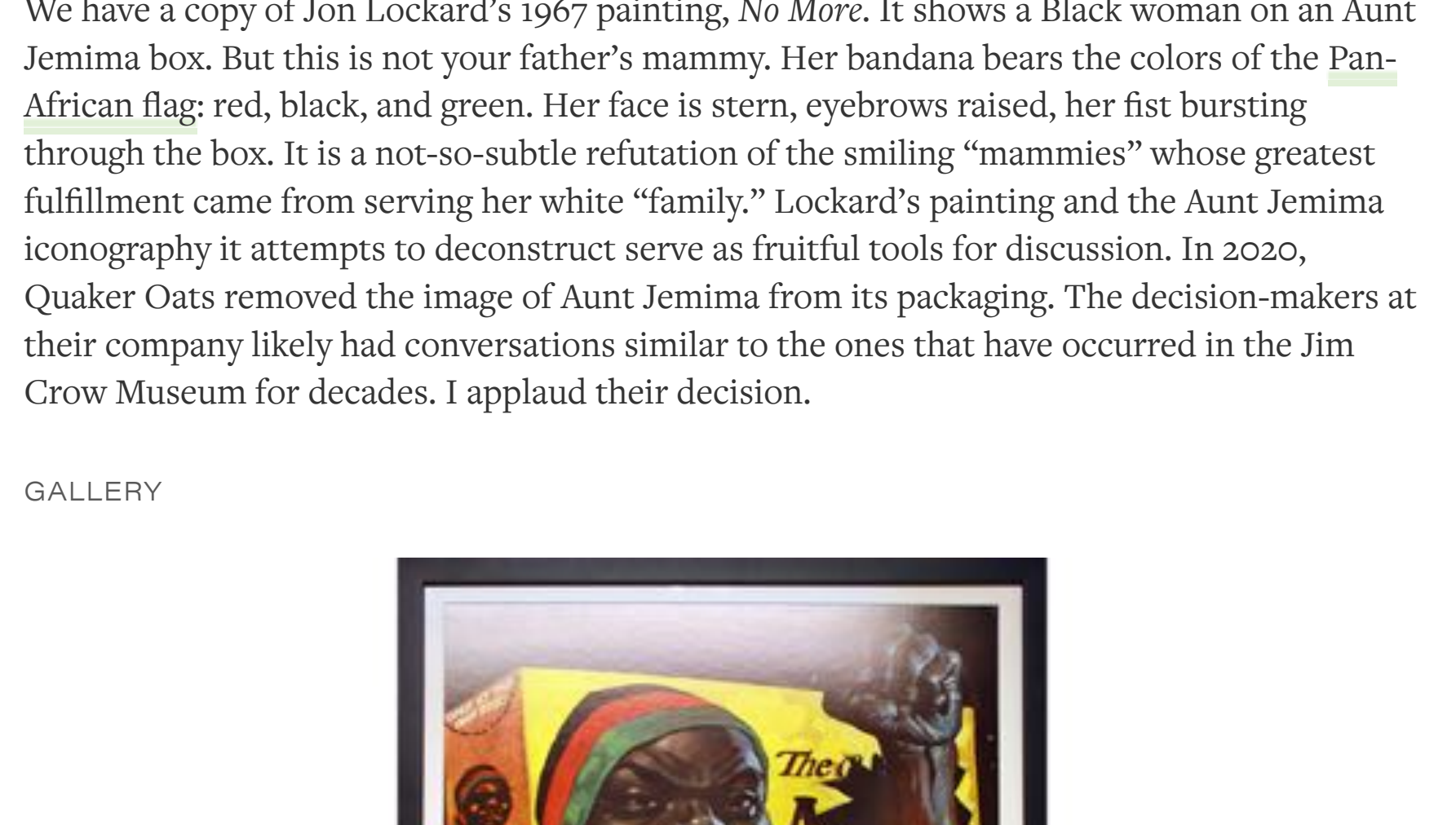

Artists like Lockhard used their art to push back against Jim Crow—the system and the symbols that supported it—so it makes sense that their work should be displayed in the Jim Crow Museum. But these are not the only objects which serve as starting points for discussing the efforts of individuals and groups who worked to undermine the racial hierarchy. In one exhibit, you will find a blanket from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first labor organization led by African Americans chartered by the American Federation of Labor. The organization's first two presidents, A. Philip Randolph and C. L. Dellums, became leaders in the civil rights movement.

One of my favorite pieces is a 1972 poster advertising the presidential candidacy of Shirley Chisholm. It bears a slogan, “Unbought and Unbossed”—also the name of her biography. We exhibit several trading cards for Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Most visitors are surprised to learn that the famed pugilist—infamous in his time for beating white boxers and dating white women—also patented an early version of the wrench in 1922.

The Jim Crow Museum also houses several portraits of African Americans who came to Michigan's Ferris Institute (an early incarnation of Ferris State University) from Virginia's Hampton Institute, which is today Hampton University. From 1910 to the mid-1920s, more than a dozen of these students came north to find opportunities to take college preparatory courses—and to escape the daily indignities of Jim Crow. They distinguished themselves in their chosen professions, and, equally important, they became civil rights leaders.

One of those students was Belford V. Lawson, the lead attorney in *New Negro Alliance v. Sanitary Grocery Co.*, a landmark Supreme Court case in 1938 that safeguarded the right to picket. He was the first African American to win a case before the nation's highest court. One of Lawson's contemporaries, Percival L. Prattis, was a pioneering journalist and influential newspaper executive. In 1947, he became the first African American news correspondent admitted to the U.S. House and Senate press galleries.

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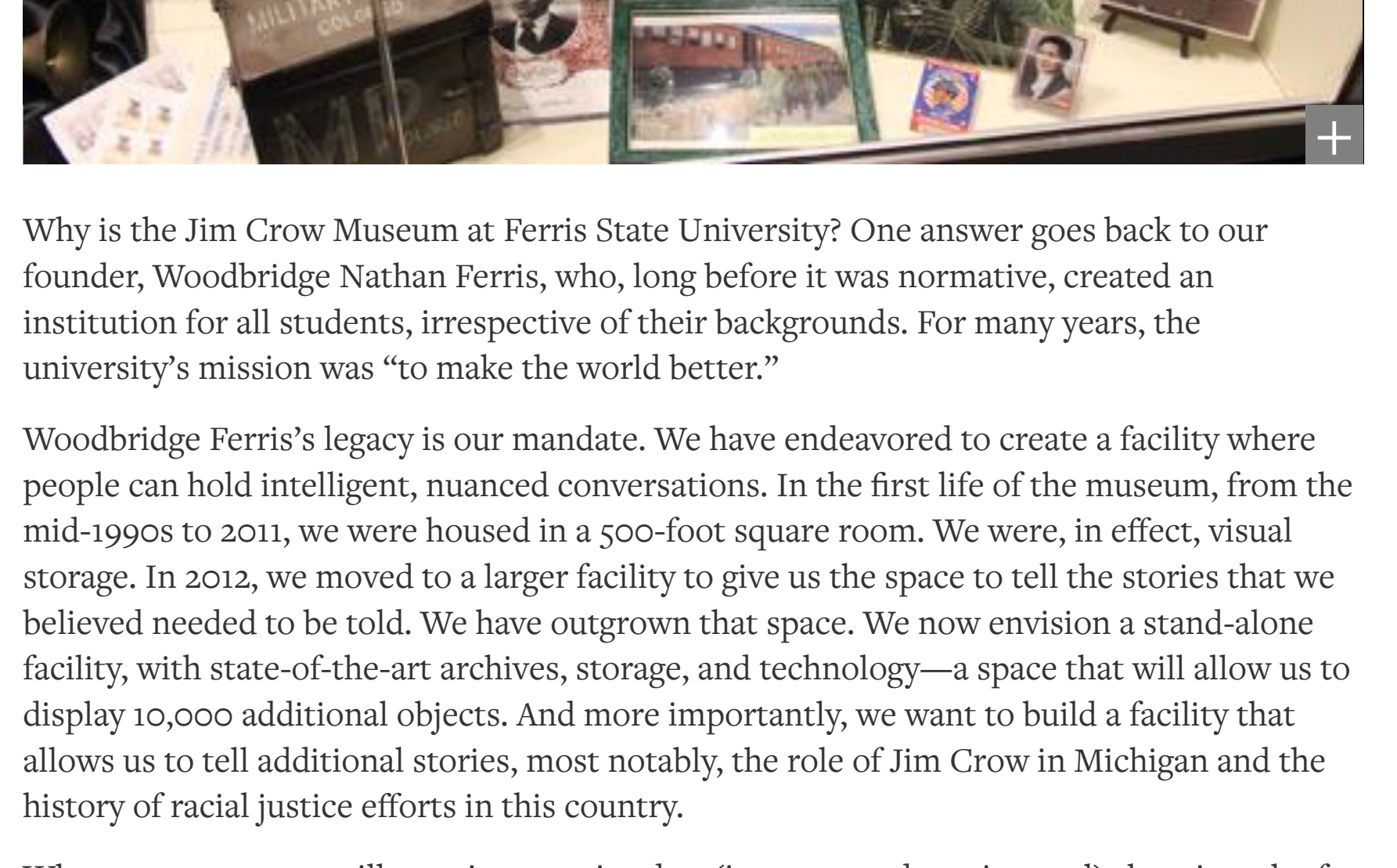

Why is the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University? One answer goes back to our founder, Woodbridge Nathan Ferris, who, long before it was normative, created an institution for all students, irrespective of their backgrounds. For many years, the university's mission was “to make the world better.”

Woodbridge Ferris's legacy is our mandate. We have endeavored to create a facility where people can hold intelligent, nuanced conversations. In the first life of the museum, from the mid-1990s to 2011, we were housed in a 500-foot square room. We were, in effect, visual storage. In 2012, we moved to a larger facility to give us the space to tell the stories that we believed needed to be told. We have outgrown that space. We now envision a stand-alone facility, with state-of-the-art archives, storage, and technology—a space that will allow us to display 10,000 additional objects. And more importantly, we want to build a facility that allows us to tell additional stories, most notably, the role of Jim Crow in Michigan and the history of racial justice efforts in this country.

Wherever we are, we will remain committed to (it may sound sentimental) the triumph of dialogue. When hearts and heads meet through honest, courageous dialogue, especially about difficult, even painful, topics, the possibility for lasting change emerges. Like a skillful teacher, the Jim Crow Museum uses objects in its lesson plan to stir passionate feelings and incite deep thinking in visitors. Accordingly, this provocative museum employs the time-honored pedagogical principle often used in kindergarten classrooms: show-and-tell.

As Zora Neale Hurston, the famed twentieth-century African American anthropologist and educator, understood well, “show-and-tell” is more than fun and games. Show-and-tell can be a pathway to serious and significant personal edification and communal transformation. She once wrote, “Tell me, and then again, show me, so I can know.”

Year after year at the Jim Crow Museum, we tell people, and then we show them aspects of our problematic past so that we may know better ways to create a more positive present and a more hopeful future.

David Pilgrim is the founder of the Jim Crow Museum and the vice president of diversity, inclusion, and strategic initiatives at Ferris State University. His book Watermelons, Nooses, and Straight Razors: Stories from the Jim Crow Museum, *was published by PM Press in 2018.*

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