Winter 2003

Lee Forest Collection

Maureen Elgersman - Lee (ed.)

University of Southern Maine

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Public Hours
Tuesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m., 1:30-4:45 p.m.
Wednesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; 1:30-4:45 p.m.

Collection Contacts
Maureen Elgersman Lee, faculty scholar (207) 780-5239
Susie Bock, head of special collections, director of the Sampson Center, University archivist (207) 780-4269
David Andresen, archives assistant (207) 780-5492

Please note that the African American Collection of Maine is located on the second floor of the Gorham library until the renovations to the Portland library are finished.

Calendar of Events
Scandalous Eyes: African America in Illustrated Sheet Music Covers, 1895-1925
Area Gallery, Woodbury Campus Center, USM Portland campus
January 28-April 1, 2003
This exhibit features more than 70 illustrated sheet music covers belonging to local collector Sam Carner. Curated by Carolyn Eyler, USM Art Gallery; Frank Carner, English; Donna Cassidy, American and New England Studies/Art; Kathleen Winger, Philosophy/Art; J. Mark Searce, Music; Nolan Thompson, Campus Diversity and Equity; Maureen Elgersman Lee, History/African American Collection of Maine. The Lee Forest Collection is named for member Lee Forest, director of environmental services, who donated a variety of household notions, including cookie jars and salt and pepper shakers, to the African American Collection. As the late Barbara Christian related in the Marlon Riggs video, Ethnic Notions, domestic notions like jars, shakers, clocks, and ashtrays are not just notions of the home, but manifestations of some of the most gut-level feelings about race in the United States. Whether rendered in print, in film, or in visual objects, images of the mammy, sambo, coon, and picaninny are designed to be laughable and entertaining, but they are not necessarily considered inaccurate in assigning traits like thievery, laziness, ugliness, and ignorance to Black Americans.

Home Is Where I Make It: African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine
Fourth floor, Glickman Family Library, USM Portland campus
February 1- May 31, 2003
This exhibit highlights the sense of community, familial traditions, and activism of 10 African Americans from Portland, South Portland and Gorham. It is the product of a grant funded by the University of Maine System in conjunction with the Maine Humanities Council.

A PLACE IN TIME:
The Lee Forest Collection
The Lee Forest Collection is named for University of Southern Maine staff member Lee Forest, director of environmental services, who donated a variety of household notions, including cookie jars and salt and pepper shakers, to the African American Collection. As the late Barbara Christian related in the Marlon Riggs video, Ethnic Notions, domestic notions like jars, shakers, clocks, and ashtrays are not just notions of the home, but manifestations of some of the most gut-level feelings about race in the United States. Whether rendered in print, in film, or in visual objects, images of the mammy, sambo, coon, and picaninny are designed to be laughable and entertaining, but they are not necessarily considered inaccurate in assigning traits like thievery, laziness, ugliness, and ignorance to Black Americans.

What then is the value of such aspects of American material culture? Material culture is, among other things, evidence of a society’s values, aesthetics, preoccupations, and even its contradictions. Aunt Jemima (mammy) cookie jars, for example, reveal how comfortable a society, or a certain segment thereof, is with racist constructions of Black women. These same images may also act as sources of comfort—ways of seeing and organizing the world in such a way that one feels powerful, comfortable, superior, entertained, or secure—in a changing world. Other objects or illustrations that depict Black men as inherently dangerous and dishonest “coons” help one understand how public continued
African American Collection of Maine
University of Southern Maine
P.O. Box 9301
Portland, ME 04104-9301

Home Is Where I Make It: Project Findings

Data collection for the project, “Home Is Where I Make It: African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine,” has been completed. The pool of interviewees consisted of ten local African Americans, and while this represents an admittedly small sampling of people, the activities and impact of the participants far outweigh their numbers.

Some statistical information helps bring the project into focus. Forty percent of project participants were born in Maine. Of the 60 percent who were born outside of Maine, half were born in the northern states of Illinois, Ohio, and New York and the other half were born in the southern states of Texas and Mississippi. Eighty percent of the project participants had at least some degree of post-secondary education. When broken down along gender lines, 100 percent of the men had at least some post-secondary education compared to the women’s 60 percent. When it comes to military service, 8 percent of the men interviewed mentioned having served in the military, and while none of the women had military service, 40 percent of them mentioned having married a man who was in the military or affiliated with the military. These findings are engaging, but with such a small sample group, it is impossible to generalize these findings or proportions to the larger African American population of the Portland area.

Despite differences in migration and education, all of the interviewees were able to talk about distinct familial practices that they continued and had passed on to their children.

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No significant correlation, however, between ideas of Black community membership and activism. All of the ten persons interviewed for the “Home” project identified ways in which they have had an impact on the Portland area. From membership in local interest groups to leadership in larger, more recognized organizations like the Lions Club and the NAACP, all interviewees had engaged in some level of social involvement. Several participants could talk about both formal and informal ways in which they helped others. They read to shut-ins, mentored high school students, led Cub Scouts, took in motherless children, and advocated for health care improvements. Additionally, the vast majority of those interviewed mentioned either Green Memorial AME Zion Church or Williams Temple Church of God in Christ as an institution that figured in their sense of community or their activism, reinforcing the institutional significance of the Black Church even in places where Blacks represent just a fraction of the overall population.