About this issue...

In 2000, President Bill Clinton announced the completion of the Human Genome Project. He noted that “In genetic terms all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99.9 percent the same. The most important fact of life on this earth is our common humanity.”

Those who have experienced the horrors of war have long known that, in a foxhole, everybody is the same color—red. A fraction of a millimeter below the surface of our exterior, we are all the same.

When we think of race in America, we often assume its permanence and underlying reality. While the Human Genome Project undercut this assumption, the history of race has shown the complexity of the issue.

In her recent book, “The History of White People,” Nell Irvin Painter, professor of history at Princeton University, examines the fluidity of the concept of race. In particular, as Painter relates, the idea of white people as a race has fluctuated.

In the mid-19th century, such prominent American intellectuals as Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that only Anglo-Saxons were white; other Europeans and their descendants were not.

In the mid-20th century, such prominent American intellectuals as Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that only Anglo-Saxons were white; other Europeans and their descendants were not.

The description of race is, as distinct from race, only comes into broad usage in the mid-20th century.

This special issue of Museography explores various facets of race and ethnicity in Southwest Michigan. The stories illustrate how origin, skin color, and religion have been used to justify the removal, exclusion, or restriction of those who were perceived as different.

They show that, while genetics may prove that race is a scientifically meaningless concept, the perception of race as a social force is very real.

Stories like the removal of the Anishnabek peoples, the segregated Jewish resorts on Lake Michigan, and the activities of the 1920s-era Ku Klux Klan reveal the unwillingness of some Americans to live and associate with those deemed different and, from their perspective, undesirable.

But for each of these stories, individual Americans have demonstrated their ability to succeed despite the barriers of prejudice. Sam Dunlap, Art Washington, and Irene Vazquez accomplished much in the face of racial and ethnic discrimination. And the story of the early 19th-century abolitionists illustrates that there were some who, however imperfectly, sought to eliminate the worst consequences of racism.

In Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “South Pacific,” the song “You’ve Got to Be Taught” poonders a romance between an American Army lieutenant and an island woman that is doomed because of the poison and blindness of intolerance. Those fresh out of the womb come with a pure heart and an open mind. They have to be taught to be full of hatred and prejudice, the lyrics—very controversial for their time—proclaimed.

We hope this special issue will contribute to the underlying purpose of “RACE: Are We So Different?”, which is to stimulate a conversation within our community. What stories can you share that will help us recognize our common humanity?

Maybe some people can be “untaught.”

---Dennis Bertch
Associate Vice President for Academic Services, KVCC

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An unprecedented look at race and racism in the United States

National Presenting Sponsor

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Kalamazoo’s school-desegregation case made history

Victor Rauch was a Kalamazoo Gazette reporter and editor from 1966 to 1999. Assigned as the beat reporter for the Kalamazoo Public Schools from 1968 through 1974, Rauch covered the desegregation case from start to finish, and beyond. These are his recollections of what became a major local, state and national milestone. The award-winning reporter is now an adjunct instructor of journalism at his alma mater, Michigan State University.

Enrollments in today’s Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) are practically and culturally diverse. Black, white, Hispanic and students from other backgrounds gather in every school building to prepare for life in a multicultural world.

It wasn’t always that way. Before 1971, the city’s 3,000 black students were concentrated in just a few school buildings, while its 12,000 white students were predominant in the rest.

The year of desegregation is forever etched in the memories of those who lived through it.

The seeds of change were being sown in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement had been focused initially on the segregated South, but anger and frustration spread to the North after advocates for voting rights for black residents were beaten and killed in confrontations in Mississippi and Alabama in 1964 and 1965.

Sympathy marches and racial confrontations welled up in the North, including major riots in Watts in 1965, and Newark and Detroit in 1967. A report by the Kerner Commission in early 1968 blamed black discontent on “white racism.”

After the April 1968 assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, emotions soared nationwide.

In some places, major violence erupted, but in Kalamazoo black and white community leaders began calling for renewed efforts to put an end to imposed separation of the races.

One of the often-heard voices for peaceful protest, reason and morality to achieve equality in housing, public services and education in the 1960s and 1970s was that of Duane L. Roberts, a postal porter and carrier and president of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Roberts regularly attended meetings of the Kalamazoo City Commission and the Board of Education. He also led a weekly discussion of issues on a local radio station. While he never married and had no children, he served as a voice of the black community and a conscience to the community at large.

Roberts, whose ancestors were Kalamazoo County’s first black settlers in the early 19th century, was a product of KPS, a member of its small but growing black enrollment, and an occasional settler in the early 19th century, was a product of KPS, a member of its small but growing black enrollment, and an occasional settler in the upper- and lower-elementary buildings.

Like many cities in the North, Kalamazoo had experienced a black population influx from the South in the 1940s and 1950s.

Newcomers tended to move into identifiable black neighborhoods. Property deeds in some white neighborhoods still bore the words of restrictive covenants barring black ownership and occupancy.

By 1968, after Roberts and others convinced the school board and administration to look into desegregation, a study revealed that about 90 percent of Kalamazoo’s black students were concentrated in just five of the city’s 29 elementary schools and three of its secondary schools.

In the South, where public schools had been intentionally segregated into all-white and all-black, there was the notion that “separate but equal” was fair to all students. In the North, segregation was believed to have occurred randomly.

In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that officially sanctioned segregation is illegal. That landmark case, “Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas,” drew attention to inferior educational opportunities inherent in segregated schools. It spawned court orders to end segregation in other school districts. In most cases, the remedy involved busing of students.

Based on its 1968 findings, the KPS administration and board began looking at ways to achieve racial balance among the schools. The first step was a model-schools program that gave some students and teachers a chance to experience desegregation voluntarily on a small scale in the 1969-71 school years.

By the spring of 1971, based on the success of that program, plans were drawn up to begin phasing in a systemwide, racial-balance plan at the elementary level that fall.

Details of the plan and new attendance maps were published in The Kalamazoo Gazette. Public hearings and neighborhood meetings were held to explain how boundaries were drawn, which schools would be closed, and which would become upper- and lower-elementary buildings.

Opposition was strong. Overflow crowds forced the board to reschedule sessions to accommodate everyone. And everyone, especially those who opposed “forced busing,” seemed to have their say, not only at the meetings but in record-setting numbers of letters to the editor on the opinion pages of The Gazette, which added extra pages to publish them all.

Then, in a bold move, the school board voted 4-3 on May 7, 1971, to implement the entire plan, first grade through 12th, in September 1971. Further sessions were held to fine-tune the new attendance patterns and keep time spent on buses at a minimum.

Invariably, arguments would erupt at school-board meetings as opponents of “forced busing” called for delaying the plan or switching to a voluntary plan.

The terms of two school trustees on the prevailing side were to expire in June. The election rhetoric was heated. Two anti-busing candidates were elected. On July 6, 1971, the newly constituted board voted 5-2 to suspend the May 7 plan and replace it with a voluntary “open enrollment” plan.

Roberts and the NAACP then joined with students and parents as plaintiffs seeking a federal court order claiming that the rezoning was a violation of the 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal rights under the U.S. Constitution.

U.S. District Court Chief Judge Noel P. Fox Jr. issued a temporary restraining order Aug. 12, 1971, halting implementation of the voluntary plan. After hearings Aug. 19 and 20, the judge issued a preliminary injunction Aug. 25 ordering immediate implementation of the May 7 plan.

The July 6 board, the court determined, had taken action that essentially segregated students by race.

Along with appeals rejected by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, the case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and the plan for assigning students adopted by the board in May went into effect in the fall of 1971. With a few minor hitches, the busing of students went smoothly, with parents on both sides of the issue helping to assure the safety and well-being of all the children.

Judge Fox’s injunction was made permanent after a full trial in 1973 in U.S. District Court in Kalamazoo. The U.S. Supreme Court in 1975 refused to review the judge’s findings. The May 7 plan has been reversed and refined from time to time over the last four decades to maintain racial balance among the schools.

Roberts, who remained humble despite his role in the landmark case of Michelle Oliver vs. the Kalamazoo Board of Education, beamed with pride when his alma mater—Western Michigan University, Class of 1960—awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1980.

After retiring, Roberts was elected in 1989 to a seat on the KPS Board of Education. He died in October of that year. A portrait of Roberts in the School Administration Building silently speaks volumes about what he did for the community he loved.

Duane Roberts, shown here in 1960, was a regular at meetings of the Kalamazoo City Commission. He was also a fixture at school-board meetings as desegregation simmered in the late 1960s. Photograph courtesy of The Kalamazoo Gazette.

In 1989, a Wood Lake School group meets with Duane Roberts at the statue of Martin Luther King Jr. on Kalamazoo’s North Side. Photograph courtesy of The Kalamazoo Gazette.
When Sydney Martin agreed to an interview in 2007, she became a participant in the Kalamazoo Valley Museum’s project to record the stories and experiences of members of ethnic groups living through the Civil Rights Era in Southwest Michigan.

The project soon adapted to be more in keeping with oral tradition—going as far back in time as the participants’ memories took them. In Martin’s case, her memories are part of a shared experience that speaks to a strong oral tradition among First Nations people—the Anishnabek, or People of the Three Fires.

Martin is Potowatomi, Wolf Clan, and her memories and experiences are rich with ties to this part of the land in Southwest Michigan, and with cultural memory and the revival of traditions and knowledge.

Martin was raised by a woman who was not her biological mother, but in all other respects was worthy of the title. Gladys Whitepigeon Sands became a single mother, without benefit of adoption or any public assistance. She supported herself and Martin by making and selling black-ash baskets. To this day, her baskets are prized possessions by any who are lucky enough to own them.

Frequently going door to door, she peddled baskets to local farm families, from Kalamazoo to Holland. They were sturdy market baskets; they were egg, sewing and bread baskets. They were so good—beautiful and robust—that her turnover was low; farmers didn’t need to keep replacing them. Soon she began selling in town, going to meeting halls and other places where city dwellers might buy her baskets for their beauty alone.

Family stories recall a time when Native Americans living in this area were essentially in hiding, a remnant of the enforced removal of Potowatomi from this area by the U.S. government. Their roots were here, yet they weren’t supposed to be here. However, many individuals and families remained, and over generations held on to their histories and cultural practices.

In her interview, Martin describes growing up in the Hopkins area in Allegan County, among Native American children who were raised by relatives, as she was, without formal adoption: “...They (many Indian children) never knew they were adopted, I mean raised by these elderly people... They did all this, it was common. It’s not just unique to this community. Wherever we went, there were Indian people raising other people’s Indian kids and not telling anybody because they didn’t want them going out with [being adopted by] the white families around that would take them away...”

Growing up, Martin was a member of a traveling church choir that was part of an Indian mission in the Martin area. However, her Native American traditions and rituals stayed with her.

Martin, now a herbalist who practices Native American spiritual rituals, notes that she is pleased that young people are seeking to learn the traditions and values of their elders.

All over Michigan, there are gatherings of Anishnabek to rekindle and enrich identity through many traditional practices, including religious and social gatherings, revival of native languages and always a focus on family, broadly interpreted.

Speaking of the strong bonds of community, Martin believes that all Native American history “...along the Kalamazoo River is very great. I can’t prove all of this because it’s handed down from generation to generation, orally. If push came to shove, I wouldn’t want to prove it anyway, because that isn’t how we are. We know what we say is true and we know what we’ve been told by our elders is true.”

These days, they gather more frequently all around the state to absorb the teachings of elder and grand chief Baa wa bii gun, who is among the few with broad knowledge and cultural memory of their shared past.

Oral histories keep Anishnabek traditions, ways alive
Vasquez told the Museum in an interview. “Unfortunately, the racism just reared a different dimension of its ugly head.”

“Jene Vasquez went from picking cherries in Oceana County as part of a migrant family to a Ph. D. in comparative religion at Duke University,” she said. “But, just as today’s baseball players of African ancestry owe their opportunity to Jackie Robinson’s courage, so does Vasquez know that the ethnic and cultural discrimination her father faced was the foundation on which she was able to succeed.

Vasquez’s parents came from Texas in the late 1940s as migrant workers, settling initially in Zaneda and then Holland as one of the area’s first Hispanic families.

Her father, a World War II paratrooper, eventually left the fields and a fruit-packing canner to work at the General Motors plant in Grand Rapids for 33 years until his retirement. Meanwhile, her mother and five siblings spent summers working the farms of West Michigan—not only for money but also to build family bonds and teach the ethics of hard work.

As a Mexican American, the senior Vasquez encountered what many Japanese Americans and blacks faced when they were mustered out of military service in the wake of World War II.

“You’d think they would have earned the respect from the communities they were returning to for their service in the war,” Vasquez told the Museum in an interview. “Unfortunately, the racism just reared a different dimension of its ugly head.”

Even though he had earned a high school diploma in his former home state, he had received additional education and training in the Army, and had even qualified for a scholarship from what was then Michigan State College, social barriers blocked his path.

“My parents were determined to find a better life,” Vasquez recalls, “and became the first on both sides of our family to come to Michigan where the migrant stream was the first stop.”

As her father decided to follow the American way and—as that “way” prescribed—pick himself up by his bootstraps for the good of his family, there were lessons to be learned in the fields and a fruit-packing canner to work at the General Motors plant in Grand Rapids for 33 years until his retirement.

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South Haven’s Jewish Resorts

Kalamazoo’s Jewish heritage dates back at least to the arrival of Mannes Israel in 1844. Its German-Jewish community, which Israel promoted, was well integrated into the local civic and business environment with men such as Sam Folz, a clothing retailer, elected mayor in 1903. The city’s first synagogue, Temple B’Nai Israel, was built on South Street in 1875.

Still, the history of Southwest Michigan also reflected social prejudices against Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. South Haven’s Jewish resorts reflect this anti-Semitism. Resorts such as Fidelman’s and Mendelson’s Atlantic Hotel grew not only for locals but also for Chicago residents who took ferries from Chicago and elsewhere looking for fun and relaxation on the shores of Lake Michigan.

In the earliest days, the society encouraged Jews to farm, but it quickly became apparent that the farms could attract vacationers. The peak years for the Jewish resorts were the middle decades of the 20th century. The 1950s brought new vacation opportunities around the nation. Many resorts, not only Jewish ones, lost their appeal. Because of increased access to air and automotive travel as well as improved highways, Americans were able to explore sites andır attractions in the resorts’ lounges. Guests sometimes brought their own beverages to share with others. Of course, kosher cooking was a major attraction at the resorts. Jewish vacationers not only could enjoy kosher foods, but traditional foods prepared the way their mothers and grandmothers had prepared them.

It’s not surprising that four generations of some families made South Haven their annual summer destination. The established resorts, however, didn’t accept Jews who were looking for extended stays. This was the market to which the Jewish resorts, located north of the Black River, would cater.

The resorts offered activities that were typical for vacationers in those days. People could lounge around a pool or go to the beach. Such sports as tennis, badminton, and shuffleboard were popular. Beauty pageants and talent shows provided night-time entertainment, as did dances. Sheila Fidelman, owner of one resort, taught dance steps to its guests in the morning so that they could take to the floor with confidence in the evening.

Jewish orchestras from Chicago and elsewhere provided entertainment in the resorts’ lounges. Guests sometimes brought their own beverages to share with others. Of course, kosher cooking was a major attraction at the resorts. Jewish vacationers not only could enjoy kosher foods, but traditional foods prepared the way their mothers and grandmothers had prepared them.

It’s not surprising that four generations of some families made South Haven their annual summer destination. Most of the resorts were family-owned, and children and grandchildren would pitch in during the vacation season to make certain that the daily work was done. Some children camped in tents during the summer so that their rooms were available as guest rooms in time. In time, the next generation would take over the operation when their parents retired.

The peak years for the Jewish resorts were the middle decades of the 20th century. The 1960s brought new vacation opportunities for Americans. A decline in the overt discrimination of earlier years allowed Jewish Americans to enter amusement parks and other attractions.

Because of increased access to air and automotive travel as well as improved highways, Americans were able to explore sites around the nation. Many resorts, not only Jewish ones, lost their appeal.

As the younger generation of the resort families went to college and pursued other careers, the Jewish resorts along Lake Michigan closed. Their legacy persists, testimony to the prejudices and entrepreneurial spirit of an earlier era.

The Removal of the Anishnabek: Our Trail of Tears

On Oct. 10, 1840, some 750 Anishnabek, also known as the Potawatomi, began walking south on Burdick Street on the first leg of their journey to new homes west of the Mississippi River.

For several weeks they had been gathering north of where the Amtrak railroad station now stands. As chilly autumn air settled in and, with their belongings packed, they began the long march from their native lands.

For centuries, as with other native peoples, they had tried to maintain their traditional culture and lifestyle on the lands that had been their home for generations.

The Potawatomi had sided first with the French against the English, then with the English against the rapidly expanding number of American settlers. When the War of 1812 ended, British Canada eliminated its clandestine support of the Potawatomi once and for all.

The Potawatomi were forced to accept a series of treaties yielding their land in Michigan to the federal government on terms that were hardly fair and equitable.

An 1821 treaty required them to give up most of their land in southern Michigan and to live on reservations such as the Matchebenashewish Reserve that covered most of what is now Kalamazoo. A later treaty in 1827 consolidated those reservations into one larger region, Nottawaseepi, in southern Kalamazoo and northern St. Joseph counties.

In the 1833 Treaty of Chicago eliminat-ed all Potawatomi land in Southwest Michigan and required the natives to move to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River.

The deadline for removal was eventually extended until 1840. The Potawatomi had generally maintained good relations with the American settlers pouring into the area beginning in the late 1820s.

Early settler accounts recalled that the natives had shared information on the location of land, water, and hunting grounds. They had assisted in raising houses and barns. And the settlers benefitted from trade in fish, maple sugar, and other goods.

The American hunger for land was insatiable, however. The national government had adopted a policy that called for the removal of all eastern Indians to the West. In the spring of 1840, U.S. Army troops under the command of Gen. Hugh Brady were dispatched to southwestern Michigan to round up the Potawatomi.

Some of the Indians came in voluntarily. Others had to be forcibly herded by the troops. Of an estimated 7,000 Potawatomi then living in Michigan, about one-third were eventually resettled in Kansas and later Oklahoma.

Not all went west, however. Another third moved east to British-ruled Ontario. The remainder either moved further north, away from the main areas of settlement, while a smaller number managed to stay in the area by converting to Christianity and living at various missions.

The Anishnabek are still with us. Despite efforts at removal, they are our neighbors, reminding us that we are relative newcomers to a land that was home to Native Americans for centuries.
On March 20, 1907, The Kalamazoo Gazette published a review of a play that had been staged at the Academy of Music the previous evening.

The newspaper's reviewer praised the quality of the performance and commented on the loud, mixed reaction of the audience. Young African-American males in the balcony hissed and jeered, while white patrons cheered.

The production was based on Thomas Dixon's "The Clansman," a novel that was the basis of D. W. Griffith's classic 1915 film, "Birth of a Nation."

The book and movie are credited with reviving the Ku Klux Klan in the years after World War I. As the Klan became a national issue in the years following the end of "The War to End All Wars," The Kalamazoo Gazette provided accounts of Klan violence as well as criticism of its secretive ways.

In October 1921, the newspaper published a column by the Rev. J. Twyson Jones, pastor of Kalamazoo's First Congregational Church denouncing the Klan as cowardly and unpatriotic. According to the Rev. Jones, "there is no room for such a society in democratic America."

In a Jan. 15, 1922, review of social clubs in the city, a Gazette writer says that Kalamazoo boasted almost all fraternal and civic groups "except the Ku Klux Klan which will probably never be formed here."

This prediction did not come true. Kalamazoo Klavern 126 of the Klan was established in the mid-1920s, but neither the play nor the film led to any immediate effort to create such an organization.

One of the earliest reports of a Klan meeting in Kalamazoo appears in the Gazette of Oct. 16, 1923. A group of citizens was denied a permit by the Michigan State Armory Board to use the local facility for a rally. Undaunted, several hundred residents stood in the rain for more than an hour listening to a KKK recruiter.

There is no reference to exactly when a local chapter of the Klan was formally organized, but interest in the organization remained strong.

In February 1924, an overflow crowd, including hundreds who were turned away, filled the Armory for an hour-long talk from C.M. Jones, a Klan representative.

Later that year, Klan members filled the Armory for an anti-Klan speech by Aldrich Blake of Oklahoma. Although they walked out en masse during Blake’s talk, they had effectively prevented their opponents from attending.

A statewide gathering of the Klan, called a Klanvocation, was held in Kalamazoo on Saturday, Oct. 25, 1924, drawing thousands of Klansmen and Klanswomen.

A large parade moved from Crane Park down Park Street, through the downtown, and then out of town along Portage Street. The activity concluded with a cross-burning near Woods Lake.

During the campaign for the Kalamazoo City Commission elections in November 1925, the Citizens Committee, composed of wealthy businessmen, endorsed a slate of candidates who explicitly rejected the Klan.

The endorsement apparently stemmed from reports that a rival slate included candidates favored by the Klan. Of the seven commissioners elected, four were believed to be KKK members or sympathizers, including the newly elected mayor, George K. Taylor.

This may have been the Klan's high point in Kalamazoo although it continued to publish a newsletter from its Portage Street offices for several more years.

It would be comforting to know if the hundreds of residents who rushed to a cross-burning on Kalamazoo's East Side on Oct. 16, 1937, were intent on extinguishing the last embers of hatred and prejudice.
The taint of racism was not unusual in college athletics. Yet Sam Dunlap and the Western State Normal School managed to overcome discrimination in the early years of the 20th century. A star football player from Benton Harbor, Dunlap was denied the opportunity to play for the University of Michigan when the school learned he was African American. Dwight Waldo, Western’s first president, unhesitatingly welcomed Dunlap to campus in the fall of 1915. It only took Dunlap’s third game to establish his reputation. Running for three touchdowns while throwing another, he earned the nickname “The Black Ghost” in leading Western to a 79-0 rout of Alma College. In his second season, he scored 19 touchdowns in a six-game season including seven in a game against Ohio Northern. The Hilltoppers, as Western’s team was then known, lost only once, a last-second defeat to a Notre Dame team led by George “The Gipper” Gipp. Legendary Irish Coach Knute Rockne called Dunlap one of the finest athletes he had ever seen. During his four years at Western, Dunlap lettered in football as well as track and field. He was the starting second baseman on the baseball team. A year of military service during World War I interrupted his collegiate career but he returned in 1919 to lead Western to a 4-and-1 record. Racism plagued Dunlap during and after his playing career. In 1915, Culver Military Academy refused to play a scheduled game with Western if Dunlap participated. He sat out the game even though President Waldo promised to support him if he chose to play. Football coach Bill Spaulding dismissed one player from the team who refused to play with Dunlap. In addition, the team had to make separate travel arrangements for him when traveling to away games. After graduation, Dunlap accepted a position as football coach at the West Virginia Collegiate Institute, an all-black school. He soon left, uncomfortable with the racial climate in the state. For the next several decades, Dunlap lived in New York City, where he worked for the Consolidated Edison Power Co., and then in Los Angeles. He returned to Southwest Michigan in 1951 with his wife, Lenora, and took a job as a custodian at Western Michigan. Dunlap remains one of the greatest athletes to ever play at Western. His record of 19 touchdowns in a six-game season (1916) is a Bronco record that has been tied but never broken. On the athletic field nearly a century ago, Dunlap overcame the challenges of racism and became an enduring legend. Just like Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson in baseball, Dunlap was ahead of his time and never had the chance to compete in professional football as thousands of African Americans have since the 1950s. 

Wing Young Huie is an award-winning photographer who has received international attention for his many projects that document the changing cultural landscape of his home state Minnesota. This 50-piece retrospective of his up-to-the-minute, societal mirrors of our changing cultural landscape spans a 30-year career. Visit the Kalamazoo Valley Museum’s first-floor gallery to view more of the photographs of Wing Young Huie during the stay of the exhibition “RACE: Are We So Different?”