

Playacting the Past: Race Relations and the Play of White Children, 1900-1939  
Kristina DuRocher, PhD  
Kennesaw State University

Toys and material culture, while created for entertainment, also communicate messages about society. In the South after the Civil War, cultural productions contained overt messages about black and white bodies. These representations became mainstream as catalogues such as Sears, Roebuck and Company standardized mainstream American culture, and drew on this imagery in the offering of children's toys such as the "Chicken Snatcher." Introduced in 1926 as "one of the new, most novel toys of the year," it included a spring action motor which caused a "scared looking negro" to dance with "a chicken dangling in his hand and a dog hanging on the seat of his pants." The catalog description concluded that this was "A very funny toy which will delight the kiddies."<sup>1</sup>

In the North, these advertisements likely furthered a historical nostalgia, as well as functioned as a way to keep blackness safely contained. In the South, however, against the struggle to enforce segregation, these material representations reflected white southerners' idealized images of race relations. While playacting with toys helped white children across the nation to imagine themselves as racially superior, southern whites reinforced these representations by having southern white children perform historical pageants and participate in youth organizations such as the Children of the Confederacy. This paper examines how these acts of role-playing and social rituals functioned in part as space in which white adults prepared children for their future gender and racial roles as the of defenders and upholders of white supremacy.

---

<sup>1</sup> James Spero, *Collectible Toys and Games of the Twenties and Thirties from Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalogs*, (New York : Dover Publications, 1988) Image from 1926 Catalog, p 55.