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EVEN IF IT'S INNOCENT, IT'S AN INSULT

What's in a Name? In Sambo's, a Real Flap

BY WILLIAM RASPBERRY

If Alan King and Gene Kelly opened a restaurant, they wouldn't call it Kike's Kitchen. If Daniel Inouye and Henry Gonzales went into the fast-food business, they wouldn't call it Dago's Diner. If Bruce Nigel, Germaine Greer and Jimmy Stewart started a franchise, they wouldn't call it Nigger Jim's.

So you wonder if Sam Battistone is putting you on when he tells you that he doesn't understand the flap over Sambo's, the name of the restaurant chain he heads. It is headquartered in Santa Barbara.

As he explains, in all innocence, the "Sam" is from his father's name and the "Bo" constitutes the first two letters of his partner's last name, F. Newell Bohnett.

It certainly was never intended as a racial disparagement, he says, and he cannot understand why some residents of Reston, Va., are upset that the company intends to open a Sambo's in their town.

Martha Pennino, a member of the board of supervisors of Fairfax County (where Reston is located), has delivered a strong protest over the proposal. Sterling Tucker, chairman of the Washington, D.C., City Council, has written company officials asking them to "find a new name for your Washington-area restaurant outlets." (Current plans are for some 60 outlets between Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Va.)

The biracial Reston Community Assn. has launched a full-fledged campaign against the proposed Sambo's. But company officials insist they don't know what the flap is about. They don't intend to change the name, they say.

"There's no ground for changing it," Battis-

tone said. "We've operated these family restaurants for 20 years on a 24-hour basis, and it's been Sambo's the whole 20 years. The name has been accepted across the country."

Bruce Anticounti, vice president and general counsel, says pretty much the same thing. "We are aware of what appears to be the sentiment of a small portion of the people (of Reston)," he said. "Our position is that we have 850 restaurants throughout the country—845 of them under the name Sambo's—and the problems you can count on one hand."

He attributes the Reston difficulty to a handful of oversensitive people. While he says

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that officials are still "trying to assess" the situation, there is "at the present time no intention of changing the name."

Spokesmen for the Reston group say they are encouraged by the fact that some local communities have been successful, after sustained protest, in getting the company to switch from Sambo's to Jolly Tiger, a trademark that the company also owns. Plans to open in New Bedford, Mass., were abandoned altogether earlier this year after some residents there protested.

There is nothing particularly illogical about the company's position. After all, officials point out, they are not accused of racial discrimination, unfair hiring or anything of that sort. The whole controversy is over the name and the concomitant implications of racial insensitivity.

Some not directly involved in the controversy have pointed out that "The Story of Little Black Sambo," a children's story written 77 years ago by an Englishwoman, was not about blacks or Africans at all but about an East Indian lad. In any case, they say, the protagonist was a clever boy who defeated a group of tigers by turning them all to butter.

These factual points, however, miss entirely the emotional effect that Little Black Sambo has on blacks. For one thing, Sambo was used as a derogatory term for blacks long before Helen Bannerman's book. No black who was referred to as "Sambo" ever thought he was being complimented for his cleverness. (Mark Twain's "Nigger Jim" was a positive character, too, but you'd better choose another name if you wish to compliment a black friend.)

Furthermore, those of us who remember the book from our childhood recall the caricatures that illustrated it: not dark-skinned Indians but black, thick-lipped, red-mouthed, flashily dressed and greedy people hardly distinguishable from racist caricatures of American Negroes.

For those and a variety of other reasons, the name Sambo is taken by black Americans across the country as an insult. It's hard to imagine that Sam Battistone doesn't know that.

Nor is it surprising that the company has had few formal complaints, although it currently operates in some 45 states. I'm not likely to write you a letter of protest if I assume that you know you're insulting me and that you simply don't give a damn.