

A Group Based Solely on Hate

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Sep 12, 2022) The Ku Klux Klan—or KKK as it is more commonly referred—is an organization rooted in hate and oppression. The Klan has had three different incarnations, each one as insidiously evil as the first. The roots of the original KKK are in Pulaski, Tennessee when in the spring of 1866 six young Confederate veterans formed a group with the purpose of making sure that former enslaved people were denied full participation in civic affairs within newly the newly readmitted state. They supposedly took their name from the Greek word kuklos, which means “circle,” and “Klan” was added for its alliteration. The group instituted a number of secret rituals, including the practice of wearing a mask in public.

The original organizers later claimed that they formed the group predominantly for “amusement,” a claim that does not correspond with the activities of the earliest groups. For certain as it spread outside Tennessee to the rest of the South (including Texas), it became associated with the oppression of Freedmen and resistance to Reconstruction policies. It became a membership requirement to pledge to support the continuation of the concept of white superiority, to oppose any “amalgamation of the races,” and to resist any efforts that ran counter to complete white control of government and politics.

There was no central KKK organization, or even a confederation of groups during this era. Each local “den” had a “grand Cyclops” leader, and they even existed under different names. In Texas, one of the white supremacist groups called themselves The Knights of the Rising Sun, and another the Knights of the White Camellia. Despite a lack of coordination and poor organizational elements, the KKK groups in Texas all practiced a particular form of terror. Masked groups of “Knights” killed Freedmen, intimidated African Americans to keep them from voting, and often burned the houses and crops of anyone who dared to suggest that Whites and Blacks should possess the same civil rights. It would not be until the late 1860s when the intervention of U.S. Army troops, as well as the extension of federal governmental power under the Radical

Republican Congress, finally began to stop the tide of KKK violence. Texas' Republican Governor Edmund J. Davis helped to lead a policy fight against KKK activity within the state, and by the mid-1870s the organized groups had either ceased or had moved underground, and most KKK activity—except in Deep East Texas—had ended.

While the official organization associated with the KKK concluded in the 1870s, the concept of white superiority continued within Texas and the South throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. The Populist revolt of the 1890s gave impetus for the rise of Jim Crow Laws, which in turn made the idea of visibly oppressing and suppressing people of African descent more accepted within “polite” society. Such attitudes set the stage for the second incarnation of the KKK. As Jim Crow Laws helped fuel another round of racial animosity, in Georgia a group of white supremacists chartered a new KKK in 1915, one that was patterned after the original. The new groups rise coincided with the premiere of the film *Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffiths' racist—and ahistorical—homage to Klan resistance to Reconstruction. The movie spurred an expansion of the group, and this version of the Klan spread not just through the South but became a truly national organization, and one that attracted not the fringes of society but one that cut across class and economic status lines.

The second Klan was by far the most successful, and in its earliest days enjoyed great success. The second KKK hid behind a veil of “decency,” fashioning itself into a sort of social club that tried to reclaim morality and order as the most important components of a “decent society.” The reality was quite different. Beneath its seemingly innocuous façade, the second Klan was still the same secretive, racist, and violent organization it had been in the 1860s and 1870s, one committed to insuring the primacy of the White, Anglo-Saxon, race.

Texas Klansmen had the same success as the rest of the nation in the early years; a Texan even became the national Klan leader in 1922 when the national meeting elected Dallas dentist Hiram W. Evans its “Imperial Wizard.” Texas had 100,000 admitted KKK members by the end of 1923, and even elected Earle Mayfield, an open KKK member, as its United States Senator. While members such as Evans and Mayfield may have sought to soften the KKK's image, its innate cauldron of hate still bubbled among the ranks. Klan violence, including lynchings, beatings, and “cross-burnings” began to proliferate as the Klan gained membership. Eventually, even such a staunchly Jim Crow state as Texas began to turn against the KKK, and with the election of Miriam Ferguson as governor and Dan Moody as attorney general, the Texas legislature began to pass laws designed to end the Klan's influence. The Depression and the subsequent New Deal generally ended the second KKK.

During the years after World War II, the civil rights movement (or the Second Reconstruction) began to organize and press for an end to legal segregation in the South and racial oppression throughout the nation. A push for greater racial equality once again brought out elements of white superiority, so in the 1950s Texas and the South saw the re-birth of the third KKK. Because federal laws and FBI scrutiny was now more widespread, this version of the Klan became the most secretive of the three. During the 1960s most White southerners denied the existence of the Klan, and while it remained small and politically impotent, it still operated as a clandestine barrier to the hope of integration and civil rights. The third Klan remains active, and still spreads its message of hate and white purity. Klan members attacked African Americans in Vidor, Texas in the 1980s, and white supremacists dragged James Byrd to death in Jasper in the 1990s.

While the KKK does remain active in the nation, it is encouraging that at least the shame of such an ideology has driven much of it more underground. However, we need to also make sure that we are always cognizant of that part of our past and find a way to reckon with the fact that such racist ideas do still persist, and we must ever be vigilant lest we find ourselves repeating past mistakes.

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