

THE SECOND COMING OF THE KKK

The Ku Klux Klan
of the 1920s and the
American Political Tradition

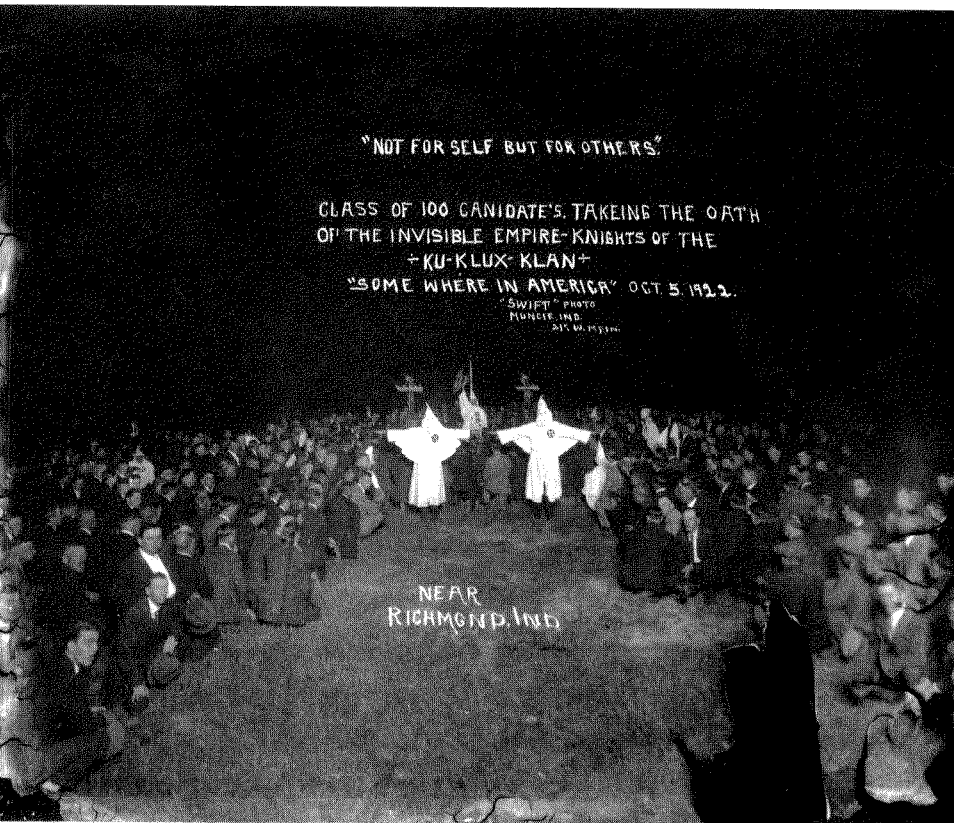
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Chapter 4

RECRUITMENT, RITUAL, AND PROFIT



KKK initiation ceremony near Richmond, Indiana, 1922.
(Ball State University Archives & Special Collections)

IN MANY RESPECTS THE KLAN MIGHT APPEAR ANTI-modernist, as in its romance about “old-time religion” and its campaign to “restore” “true Americanism.” Yet in its organizing, it was not only modern but innovative. What made the Ku Klux Klan so wildly successful in the early 1920s was an aggressive, state-of-the-art sales approach to recruitment. One study labeled the Klan “a hybrid of a social club and a multi-level marketing firm.”¹ Far from rejecting commercialization and the technology it brought, such as radio, the Klan’s system was entirely up-to-date, even pioneering, in its methods of selling. From its start, the second Klan used what might be called the social media of its time. These methods—a professional PR firm, financial incentives to recruit, advertisements in the mass media, and high-tech spectacular pageants—produced phenomenal growth for several years. This was distinctly not a project of uneducated rubes.

Enlarging the Klan was the number one priority because Simmons, Clarke, and Tyler saw it as a business—not a social movement. Simmons literally owned the Klan, and when he was deposed, his successors had to buy it from him. This is not to say that they didn’t believe in the cause; as with all Klan leaders, it would be difficult to disentangle principle from profit motives, in part because they considered their

profits honorably earned. They were champions of the business ethic, another respect in which the Klan was entirely mainstream.

Clarke and Tyler, following Simmons's original conception of his project, first sought to grow the new Klan by bringing in southern elites who could pay substantial dues, and they sent invitations to many upscale southern citizens. They apparently envisaged it as a private elite club with expensive entry fees. In one of many contradictory statements, they praised the first Klan in openly racial terms—"its valiant services in behalf of white supremacy insure it a place in the heart of every true American"—implying that the new club would be dedicated to the same cause. But they also described it as a "standard fraternal order." They promised that the new Klan would enlarge "the scope of its work" but also offered reassurance that it would retain "all of the protective features of the old Klan" and referred, ominously, to the "fourteen million people of the colored race" who were "organizing." Exploiting the anti-radical hysteria of the years after World War I, they also trumpeted the threat by "the Anarchist and Bolshevik forces . . . encroaching daily upon the basic principles of Americanism."²

Before long, receiving a tepid response, Clarke and Tyler realized the limits of this southern recruiting strategy and decided to take their project national. They divided the country into nine domains, each headed by a Grand Dragon (sometimes called a Grand Goblin); under these were head recruiters in each state or groups of states, called King Kleagles; and under each of them were local salesmen, or Kleagles.³ (The Klan tried to make every possible label start with a *K*, typically followed by an *L*. A glossary of the most common Klan titles appears in appendix I.) In essence they were setting up a decentralized system of franchises, in which local recruiters sent much of their revenue to the men above them and kept some themselves.

Kleagles, or recruiters, worked on commission: new members would pay an initiation fee, labeled a Klecktoken, of \$10 (worth \$122 in

2016). Of this, the individual salesman would keep \$4; the remaining \$6 would be forwarded up through higher officers, each one keeping a percentage, to the Atlanta head office. Veterans of the nineteenth-century Klan—obviously declining in numbers—were exempt from paying the Klecktoken. But all members paid dues, ranging from 8-1/3 to 15 cents a month, and Kleagles and higher officers took commissions from these as well. The Atlanta team also instituted a ladder that members could climb, the rungs called "degrees" as in Masonic groups: you started out at K-Uno, then could advance to K-Duo, K-Trio, and K-Quad; each degree required another initial payment and higher dues. Members joined chapters, known as Klaverns, and each chapter had to pay an Imperial Tax to the national headquarters and a Realm Tax to the region, the amount based on the intake of monthly dues.

With such financial incentives, it is not surprising that within a year, Clarke and Tyler had 1,100 active Kleagles in the field. And each new member could in theory become a Kleagle himself, thereby keeping 40 percent of the Klecktokens. Through amalgamating financial, patriotic, and racist interests, the Klan spread like a prairie fire.

Recruitment was everywhere the priority: in fact, in these first years, it seemed that the only thing the Klan did was recruit more Klansmen. National leaders instructed each local Klan group to "solve the problem of mobilization [which] means the procurement of qualified aliens."⁴ An "alien," in Klanspeak, was anyone outside the organization; nonmembers were thus equated with foreigners. Members of the Klan were by contrast "citizens," and membership constituted "citizenship."

This was a pyramid scheme. Before long members began to bump against the ceiling imbedded in all pyramid schemes—that eventually the most recent joiners could not recover their expenditures, let alone earn. Resentment grew as a result, but it did not reflect opposition to the system. For rank-and-file Kleagles, as for the Klan's leaders, there was no conflict between the Klan's mission and their profits; on the

contrary, the monetary incentive may have increased their commitment to Klan principles.

The Klan also profited from sales of goods. Clarke established and owned a company that manufactured Klan costumes for \$4 each, later only \$2 each, and sold them for \$6.50.⁵ Not coincidentally, the costumes were designed so that wives could not hand-sew them. The headgear and Klan insignia had to be just so, which made the members want the real, manufactured object. Klan leaders ran many side businesses as well—notably a recording company and a realty enterprise that bought lots in bulk and sold them singly. Klan-friendly merchants began marketing all sorts of other Klan-marked trinkets and memorabilia. A “Kluxer’s Knifty Knife,” a “real 100% knife for 100%% Americans,” could be bought for \$1.25. A member could buy a brooch for his wife: a “zircon-studded Fiery Cross.” A larger cross that a man could wear on the watch chain he displayed across his chest cost \$2.90. For only \$5 you could get, allegedly, a 14-karat gold-filled ring with a 10-karat solid gold Klan emblem on a fiery red stone. Also for sale were phonograph records and player-piano rolls with Klan songs. (See figure 19.) Advertisements for this merchandise appeared in newspapers across the country and in flyers at large Klonvocations.⁶ The Klan’s for-profit life insurance plan claimed \$3 million worth of policies in 1924—a dubious figure. It claimed to provide burial insurance as well, but this service never actually materialized.⁷

Accepting these numbers as approximately accurate, joining the Klan cost \$23.30 for the first year (worth \$318 in 2016)—a \$10 initiation fee, \$6.50 for the costume, annual dues of about \$5, and a yearly \$1.80 tax to the national headquarters. In addition members were dunned for insurance, contributions to political candidates, gifts to churches, and special projects, such as an \$80,000 auditorium with four thousand seats in Fort Worth. According to one recent estimate, the Klan took in at least \$25 million (\$342 million in 2016 dollars) annually.⁸ This is likely an exaggeration, since as much as one-third

of the members were in arrears, never paid, or soon quit paying dues.⁹ Still, even allowing for exaggeration, Klan profiteers did very well by soaking their members.

In 1922 Hiram Evans abolished the commission arrangement, although not all local Klans complied. Another road to profit remained, however—becoming a Klokard, lecturer, or Kleagle, recruiter. These positions brought in wages or fees per lecture or per recruit, often \$25 a lecture (\$342 in 2016). Accomplished speakers such as ministers could do well for themselves and their congregations, and many nonministers could draw big groups with sensationalist rhetoric.

Even enthusiasts began to notice that bringing in new members seemed to be the only Klan activity.¹⁰ One reason was high turnover. A study of the Indiana Klan showed that few other than leaders stayed for long. In one town, of 1,067 listed as Klavern members, 61.5 percent had been suspended at least once for not paying dues.¹¹ Whether because of the relatively high costs, disillusionment with the profiteering, or the fact that the rituals lost their thrill, many rank-and-file members left. Moreover, since many joined due to social and economic pressure, or because they sought to be part of an in-group, they may have lacked a steadfast commitment to Klan principles. One Indiana man later recalled his thinking at the time: “Maybe you’d better belong to it, if you weren’t a Catholic or a Jew or a black man. Maybe you’d best get in there. It got pretty prestigious just in that respect.”¹²

Klansmen organized sports teams wherever their communities were large enough. Teams were integrated into school and college competitions, as for example when the Patchogue, Long Island, New York high school basketball team celebrated its victory over the Ku Klux Klan basketball team from East Moriches. That sport, however, was rare among Klansfolk; baseball dominated. It was the American game and, of course, the white, Protestant, rural game, one that required access to large open spaces. Baseball represented the small-town, homogeneous society that the Klan idealized. Teams involved Klanspeople in competitions with “aliens,” which stimulated publicity, which in turn drew in new Klan members.

Klansmen played baseball in three contexts. In large gatherings, Klansmen and boys mostly played against each other, nonmembers joining in occasionally. They played propaganda games against “aliens,” and these were purposely designed to attract audiences and publicity; for instance, the Youngstown Klan team challenged the Knights of Columbus, and the Klan played Wichita’s “crack colored team,” the Monrovia (the Klan lost). Finally, in areas of Klan strength, it operated sandlot teams that played in recognized leagues, sometimes semipro teams. Indiana, a Klan stronghold, fielded a dozen such teams. These leagues might play in stadiums, and the newspaper coverage might list all team members—no secrecy here. In Los Angeles the Klan team played a three-game charity series against a B’nai B’rith team, and in 1927 in Washington, DC, the Klan played against the Hebrew All-Stars (whose team included Abe Povich, brother of sports journalist Shirley Povich). Newspaper coverage typically treated the Klan teams like all others, with no particular attention to Klan politics.¹⁶

Thus baseball functioned to normalize the Klan, so that it could appear as a benign club, akin to the Elks or, again, a labor union. More,

the KKK's love of baseball became another route to community clout—even audacity. A Cincinnati minister, writing in 1924 “at the request of Imperial Officials” of the KKK to August Hermann, commissioner of what would become Major League Baseball, asked him to designate July 20, when the Cincinnati Reds would play the New York Giants, as Klan Day. To support the request, minister Orval W. Baylor pointed out that the KKK had a hundred thousand members in the Cincinnati area.¹⁷

Normalization within communities sometimes resulted from stealth. Recruiters frequently invited men into a new fraternal group, without naming it. In Windsor, Vermont, for example, at a public meeting, the speaker first spoke in favor of “100% Americanism” and traditional morality, but then asked all who were not white Protestants to leave and only afterward began to condemn Negroes, Jews, and Catholics. The Klan began its Madison, Wisconsin, career in that way: in 1921 the Kleagle advertised in Madison's main newspaper, “Wanted: Fraternal Organizers, men of ability between the ages of 25 and 40. Must be 100% Americans. Masons Preferred.” By 1922 the Madison Klan was calling itself “the Loyal Businessmen's Society.” On the University of Wisconsin campus it established a fraternity called Kappa Beta Lambda, its initials standing for “Klansmen Be Loyal”; its members hoped to “make the university a center for the Promotion of Christianity, Americanism, and Klansmanship.”¹⁸ But stealth was only a veneer, or was soon dropped, because recruiters soon established an official campus Ku Klux Klan society. This was a supra-fraternity, allegedly including only the “most accomplished” members of the other fraternities. The 1921 Badger yearbook featured a group portrait of twenty-nine members of the Ku Klux Klan “Honorary Junior Society.”¹⁹

Hollywood, of course, was a doubly important target for a major boycott, as it was both Jewish and immoral. The Klan had long denounced “filthy fiction” that “submerged” young people “in a sea of sensuality and sewage.”⁵² But the movies were more seductive by orders of magnitude. Naturally the Klan opposed showing films on Sunday, but as movies grew more popular, it took on the whole film industry. Using conspiracy allegations, as usual, the Klan alleged that Hollywood’s Jews operated a deliberate plot to destroy American morals. Klanspeople understood that the movies both reflected and legitimated erotic license—to indulge in petting, parking in cars, wearing suggestive clothing. Members were instructed to boycott not only Charlie Chaplin’s films but scores of other silent movies, including the 1923 *Bella Donna* (in which a white woman falls in love with an Egyptian—“a disgrace to the white race”), the 1924 *Manhandled* with Gloria Swanson, and Samuel Goldwyn’s 1925 *A Thief in Paradise*. The 1930s Klan, though a small remnant of its predecessor, sued Warner Bros. over Humphrey Bogart’s 1937 *Black Legion*, demanding \$100,000 in damages and an additional \$500 for every time the film showed. (Its plot: a hardworking machinist loses a promotion to a Polish-born worker and is seduced into joining the secretive Black Legion, which intimidates foreigners through violence. And one of its screenwriters was Jewish.) It lost the case but gained publicity.⁵³

Perhaps needless to say, these film boycotts got little traction, so the Klan developed its own film production company, Cavalier Moving Picture Company. Under Charles Lewis Fowler, who had headed the Klan’s failed Lanier University, it produced two films: *The Toll of Justice* and *The Traitor Within*. Both offered defensive plots, positioning the Klan as the innocent target of evildoers who falsely blamed its members for their own crimes (in line with its consistent rhetorical assumption of a victim position). *The Toll* appropriated the plot of a

popular 1919 Mary Pickford film, *Heart o’ the Hills*, in which the star herself donned Klan robes and became a night rider who outed the real villain; but in the Klan film this gender-bending was corrected and a male night rider became the hero. Klan films only infrequently gained showings in movie theaters and were more often shown in public school auditoriums, churches, and large Klan meetings, free to the public.⁵⁴ After being fired by Hiram Evans, Edward Clarke launched in 1924 a more ambitious film company that, he hoped, would contest the big studios for market share; it failed, but only after he allegedly embezzled \$200,000 from it.⁵⁵ Neither of these businesses lasted; filmmaking was extremely costly, requiring significant investments in production, and could not do without paying customers. Besides, Klan films could not even begin to compete with Hollywood’s—in part because what the Klan considered immoral was a major part of Hollywood’s attraction.

The Klan was equally unsuccessful in its attacks on jazz, blues, and other “immoral” music. The story of the Gennett recording company illustrates. Founded in Indiana in 1917, Gennett was one of the first studios to put out both black and white music, in what was then a segregated production and distribution system. While Okeh Records dominated in producing black music in the East, Gennett ruled in the West. It produced recordings of some of the greatest jazz stars of the era, including the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Hoagy Carmichael, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Bix Beiderbecke. But Gennett also had a cash business, making recordings to order. The Klan was its customer. Ignoring the fact that the owners were Italian Catholics, Hiram Evans used Gennett to record inspirational speeches, and Klan groups recorded hymns and patriotic songs at Gennett studios. Contrariwise, the engineer who worked with recordings of Louis Armstrong was a Klansman.⁵⁶ (In the 1950s and 1960s, a revived Klan, then more confined to the South, condemned rock ‘n’ roll and black music, again to no avail.)