



THE SECOND COMING OF THE KKK

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

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the career of Daisy Douglas Barr undoes today's assumptions even more, because she was a Quaker. In the late twentieth century Quakers became associated with liberal theology, anti-racism, and other progressive attitudes. But a century ago the Friends church included plenty of racists and conservatives and was moving rapidly toward evangelicalism. Barr was by no means the only Quaker in the Klan; in the town of Richmond, Indiana, for example, some 7 percent of Klansmen were Quaker.¹⁵

A native Hoosier, Daisy Douglas Brushwiller was born in 1875 into a devout Quaker family. She was a prodigy: she was only four, she later said, when she first felt inspired to testify to her spiritual commitment, and at eight and again at twelve she felt "the personal call from God" to preach and spread the word. At sixteen—her autobiographical narrative placed these experiences, conveniently, every four years—she reportedly preached her first public sermon, after which she was "saved" at a United Brethren service conducted by a woman evangelist. ("Girl evangelists" were in vogue at the time.) At eighteen she married schoolteacher Thomas Barr, who joined the Klan at her urging and began leading tent revivals around the state. In 1910 she became pastor of the Muncie, Indiana, Quaker meeting. (Female ministers were uncommon in mainstream white Protestantism but by no means entirely absent.) Soon she too was preaching at revivals, caus-

ing many of her listeners to be "saved" and at least one sick man to be cured. She was prolific on paper as well as out loud, writing a great deal of poetry like this:

*I am clothed with wisdom's mantle . . .
I am strong beyond my years;
My hand typifies strength,
And although untrained in cunning
Its movements mark the quaking
Of the enemies of my country.
My eye, though covered, is all-seeing;*
It penetrates the dark recesses of law violation,
Treason, political corruption and injustice,
Causing these cowardly culprits to bare their unholy faces . . .
My feet are swift to carry the strength of my hand
And the penetrations of my all-seeing eye.
My nature is serious, righteous and just,
And tempered with the love of Christ.
My purpose is noble, far-reaching and age-lasting . . .
I am the Spirit of Righteousness.
They call me the Ku Klux Klan.
I am more than the uncouth robe and hood
With which I am clothed.
YEA, I AM THE SOUL OF AMERICA.¹⁶*

Daisy Barr thus fused religiosity and Klannishness with extraordinary confidence and without a touch of feminine meekness.

Like many other clubwomen of the time, Barr was a joiner, never limiting herself to a single affiliation. A woman of formidable energy, she also threw herself into an array of reform causes: president of the

* This is a reference to the "all-seeing eye" used by Masons as symbol of truth and power.

Indiana Humane Society, active in the campaign for Prohibition, creator of the Muncie YWCA (the Y's were then fierce temperance and revivalist organizations), and founder of a "refuge," the Friendly Inn, for former prostitutes. (Like many such reformers, she was baffled that the "fallen women" were not interested in being "rescued" by evangelicals.) When the Barrs moved to Indianapolis in 1917, Daisy became president of Indiana War Mothers. Soon after the woman suffrage amendment passed, she became the vice chair of the Republican State Committee, the first woman to hold such a position; the male co-chair joined the Klan, quite possibly, considering her charisma, at her urging. Meanwhile, her husband became Indiana's deputy state bank commissioner. This was a power couple.

Barr soon became Imperial Empress of a women's Klan affiliate, Queens of the Golden Mask. She wielded considerable bargaining power with Klansmen, a power enlarged when she established the "poison squad," a statewide women's network (of which more below). The squad practiced black psywar, spreading rumors, allegedly from Catholics or Jews, designed to make the alleged sources appear immoral and thus to build support for Klan political candidates. By 1923 she was head of the Indiana WKKK and a traveling speaker for the Klan itself. A whirlwind of energy, in July of that year she led a naturalization ceremony with two hundred women and claimed that one thousand would-be members were present but lacked the proper regalia required for admission. Three months later she led Indiana's most spectacular Klan parade yet. So influential was the Indiana WKKK under her leadership that she almost succeeded in moving its national headquarters to Indianapolis.

As WKKK spokeswoman, Barr frequently broadcast feminist messages. Her reform work had long been oriented toward women, and she campaigned to have a woman added to the Indianapolis police force—a typical Progressive Era cause, motivated by the belief that women were less corrupt and harder on moral offenses than men. She

once publicly reprimanded a police officer for uncouth remarks. Her speeches honored woman suffrage and urged women to make active use of their new political citizenship. Her temperance arguments featured stories of drunken male brutality, as befitted a member of the WCTU. She hurled vitriol against gamblers, adulterers, and men who patronized prostitutes and despoiled young girls. She called on women to support female candidates, to step up and exert power in their churches.

Her affiliations arose, no doubt, from firm principle, but they were also lucrative. She contracted with the Klan to be chief WKKK recruiter for Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, and Minnesota. The agreement guaranteed her a dollar for each woman initiated and four dollars for each recruit within Indiana. Moreover, she became the conduit for purchases of robes, from which she likely received a percentage of sales.¹⁷ (No wonder she refused to “naturalize” women who lacked the regalia.) But like Tyler, Barr was apparently not satisfied with these profits, and Klan leaders complained that she did not deliver the required sums to national headquarters. Numerous male Klan leaders did the same; the flow of money, combined with lack of accountability, presented irresistible temptations to corruption.

Barr and White were also women's rights advocates, as was Tyler, implicitly, through her achievements. Their activism requires a more capacious understanding of feminism. Their combination of feminism and bigotry may be disturbing to today's feminists, but it is important to feminism's history. There is nothing about a generic commitment to sex equality that inevitably includes commitment to equalities across racial, ethnic, religious, or class lines. In fact, espousing sex equality and enacting female leadership have often been easier for conservative women, because their whole ideological package does not threaten those who benefit from other inequalities. (Leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Sarah Palin may serve as illustrations.)

In one small but much-cited indication of WKKK feminism, in 1926 the Silver Lake, New Jersey, Klavern invited Margaret Sanger to speak about birth control. A former Socialist Party member and feminist, and a nurse who had seen firsthand the economic and health costs of large families, she was the most prominent national leader in the campaign to legalize contraception. Sanger's background, anathema to Klan values, included cosmopolitanism, avant-garde arts, radical

politics, even free love. Conservatives vilified her. Moreover, she had defied laws against obscenity—birth control was still legally obscene at the time—served some time in jail, and fled to Europe to escape further prosecutions. But by the mid-1920s she had brought the birth control movement into alliance with eugenics. She announced that her Birth Control League “was ready to unite with the eugenics movement whenever the eugenists were able to present a definite program of standards for parenthood on a eugenic basis,” according to the *New York Times*.⁶⁴ Sanger was by no means a bigot. She accepted some eugenical categories, such as “feeble-minded,” but never the Klan's racial and religious hierarchy. (She herself was of Catholic descent, although her father was a freethinker.) She did, however, see eugenists as allies in her campaign for reproduction control, and in that connection her interests coincided with those of the Klan. Sanger agreed to speak to the Klanswomen, although with considerable unease because she disliked the Klan's racism. They received her enthusiastically, and she reported receiving a dozen further speaking invitations from the WKKK.⁶⁵

The fact that Sanger crossed paths with the WKKK says little about her politics; her policy was to speak to any group that would have her. Inviting her says rather more about the New Jersey Klanswomen. Because open endorsement of birth control was still a radical act at the time, and Sanger herself was controversial, inviting her suggests that these Klanswomen may have been interested in reproduction control. Notably, the WKKK never joined in the “race suicide” rhetoric that denounced upscale white women who limited births. The invitation also suggests Klanswomen's autonomy from the male leadership. Although we cannot assume that this New Jersey Klavern, located near Philadelphia, typified the WKKK, nevertheless birth control was then often in the news, and it seems likely that the power to control when and how often to be pregnant would have stirred many Klanswomen's interest.