



ONE FLAG,
ONE SCHOOL,
ONE LANGUAGE



MINNESOTA'S KU KLUX KLAN IN THE 1920s

Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle and Nancy M. Vaillancourt



The Ku Klux Klan, organized by Confederate veterans in 1866 and virtually destroyed by the Civil Rights Act of 1871, was reborn with a new structure and a broader, more formal agenda in 1915. The new Klan, too, began in the South but, popularized by the inflammatory film *Birth of a Nation*, soon spread north and west. It identified the values of the white Protestant past as the only true American way of life, which, it proclaimed, needed protection. Changes associated with industrialization and accelerated by World War I, such as the increase of large-scale business, rapid urban growth, and the influx of millions of European immigrants—including many Catholics and Jews—frightened citizens struggling to adapt to postwar culture. Throughout the 1920s, the Klan’s invocations of God, flag, and country—“one-hundred percent Americanism”—spurred growing national membership estimated at 25 to 30 percent of the Protestant population.¹

While this incarnation of the Klan had violent fringes, its major weapon in the North was social intimidation. Through awesome spectacles, economic boycotts, rumors, and political actions against Jews, Catholics, immigrants, and people of color, the Klan sought to uphold its definition of American values. By the 1920s the KKK was flourishing in the Midwest, which provided more than one-third of its membership. According to historian Richard K. Tucker, midwesterners flocking to its flaming crosses were not rabid would-be lynchers but, rather, ordinary men and women caught up in a rush of nationalism, nativism, and the perceived need for self-preservation. These ordinary people included thousands of Minnesotans, distributed across the state.²

In 1917 the state legislature had created the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety to maintain law and order on the home front and ensure that citizens con-

tributed to the war effort. Letters to the commission, in which Minnesota residents reported on their German neighbors for not being good Americans, document nativism on the rise. Tolerance for “outsiders” deteriorated further after the armistice in 1918, when the war’s labor boom came to a sudden end. The 750,000-some blacks that had been encouraged to come north to work were now regarded as “loathsome competition by Northern whites,” in the words of historian Wyn C. Wade.³

Throughout the 1920s the KKK grew in Minnesota, recruiting thousands to its gospel of white Protestant supremacy.

In Duluth, veterans returned to find U.S. Steel, the city’s largest employer, importing blacks to work at the Morgan Park steel mill and quell strike threats by white workers. The black population of Duluth was not large, but distrust of blacks boiled over into a horrendous event on June 15, 1920, when circus workers Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie were murdered by a white mob. The furious crowd wrongly believed the black men had raped a white girl. Ten thousand are believed to have attended the lynchings.⁴

What happened in Minnesota after this horrific event? Although the state legislature passed the nation’s

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FACING: Robed Klan members circling the American flag in a nighttime ritual, September 1923

first anti-lynching law in 1921, Minnesota, like the country, was in the grip of a postwar depression that fueled the insecurities that attracted some people to the Klan. Throughout the 1920s the KKK grew in Minnesota, recruiting thousands to its gospel of white Protestant supremacy, mixing in local politics, and trying to inject religion into the public schools. Referring to a checklist of values (see sidebar), the *Call of the North*, a Klan newspaper published weekly in St. Paul, enjoined readers: “If you believe in these fundamental principles of real Americanism you believe in the creed of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Ally yourself today with the nation’s most powerful organization for God, flag and home.”⁵ Minnesotans across the state responded to this call.

Klan activity in Minnesota appears to have begun in 1921. Just one year after the lynchings, recruiting reached north from the Atlanta headquarters to Duluth, where a Minneapolis man with an assistant from Chicago organized a Klan chapter. The *Duluth Herald* stated in August 1921:

The great majority of the individuals in the Klan are men of good intentions, although narrow and without much vision. They fail to grasp the essentials of American history. They do not know that one of the big things our ancestors fought for was the doing away with autocratic power, exercised by irresponsible tribunals, lawless or even, in old days, lawful. When these persons see this, the Ku Klux Klan will be reformed from within. . . . It would be shocking if a majority of the persons in the Klan were bad citizens. They are not. In fact, they fairly represent public opinion in the places where they flourish.

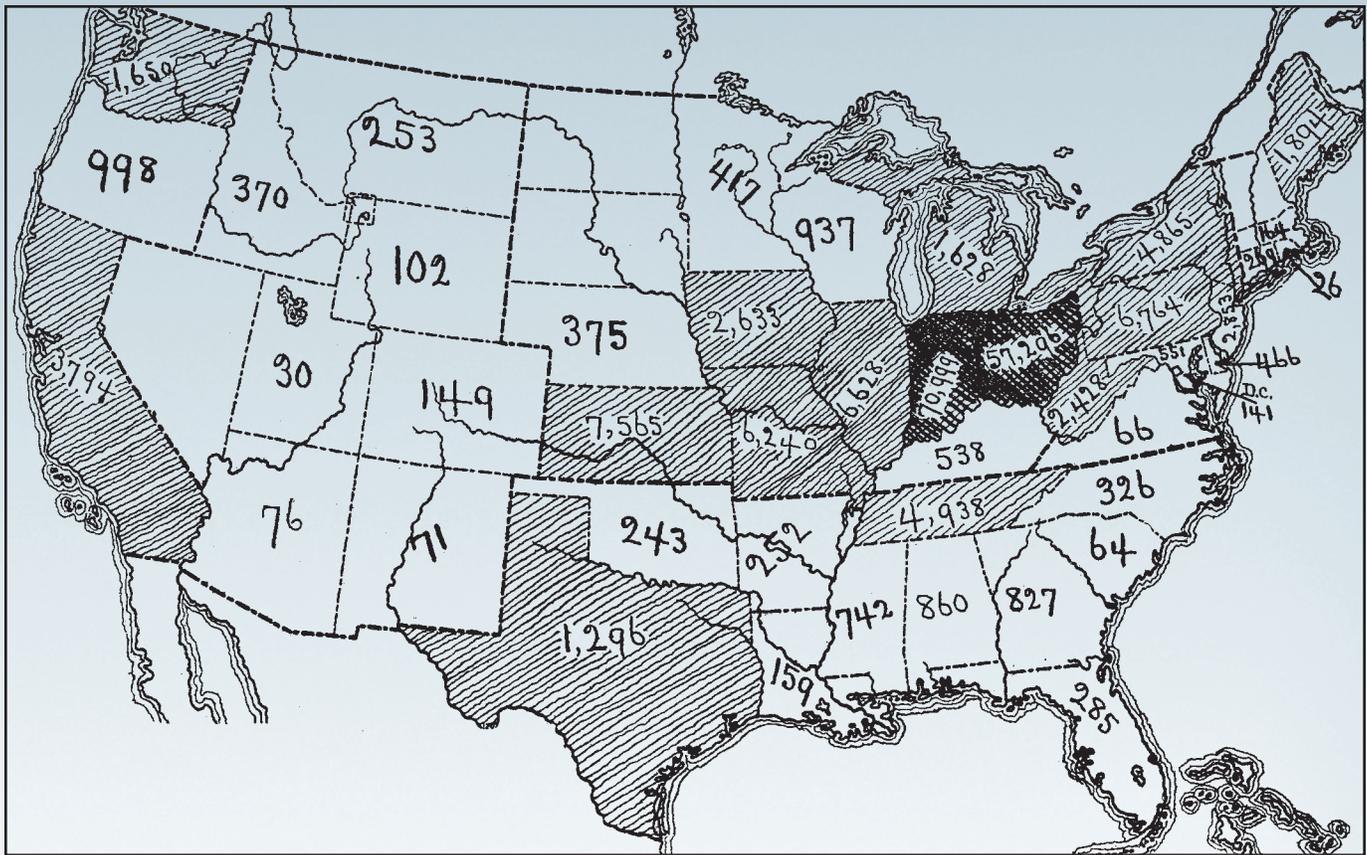
One year later, the Klan claimed that the Duluth-area chapter had 1,500 members.⁶

Ku Klux Klan representatives also arrived in Minneapolis in 1921, and in August, North Star Klan No. 2 began holding meetings at Olivet Methodist Church on East Twenty-Sixth Street and at Foss Memorial Church at the corner of Fremont and Eighteenth Avenue North. While chapters in Minneapolis and St. Paul probably attracted the most members, people from Cass Lake and Walker in the north to Austin, Albert Lea, and Owatonna in the south began flocking to KKK rallies, meetings, and picnics. By 1923, the year that the Klan failed in its very public attempt to ruin the reelection of Minneapolis mayor George Leach, the University of Minnesota paper,

the *Minnesota Daily*, reported its belief that some students were Klan members. Two years later, The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Minnesota filed articles of incorporation in St. Paul, establishing a nonprofit corporation “purely patriotic, secret, social and benevolent and its purpose shall be benevolent and eleemosynary and without profit or gain,” as the incorporation certificate proclaimed.⁷

AM I A REAL AMERICAN? THE TEST IS SIMPLE. DO YOU . . .

- ... Believe in God and in the tenets of the Christian religion and that a godless nation cannot long prosper.
- ... Believe that a church that is not founded on the principles of morality and justice is a mockery to God and man.
- ... Believe that a church that does not have the welfare of the common people at heart is unworthy.
- ... Believe in the eternal separation of church and state.
- ... Hold no allegiance to any foreign government, emperor, king, pope or any other foreign, political or religious power.
- ... Hold your allegiance to the Stars and Stripes next to your allegiance to God alone.
- ... Believe in just laws and liberty.
- ... Believe that our free public school is the cornerstone of good government and that those who are seeking to destroy it are enemies of our republic and are unworthy of citizenship.
- ... Believe in the upholding of the constitution of these United States.
- ... Believe in freedom of speech.
- ... Believe in a free press uncontrolled by political parties or by religious sects.
- ... Believe in law and order.
- ... Believe in the protection of our pure womanhood.
- ... Believe that laws should be enacted to prevent the causes of mob violence.
- ... Believe in a closer relationship of capital and labor.
- ... Believe in the prevention of unwarranted strikes by foreign labor agitators.
- ... Believe in the limitation of foreign immigration.
- ... Believe your rights in this country are superior to those of foreigners.



Map showing the increase of members in Klan chapters organized between March and July 1923, noting the biggest gains in the Midwest (and no reports from the Dakotas and Nevada); *The Protestant*, July 1924.

To grow, the Klan had to be visible, and so its picnics and rallies were advertised and open to all. Public speakers—sometimes hired, sometimes volunteer—openly proclaimed the Klan gospel at these events. Sympathetic clergy preached it from pulpits. The opening of a Klan recruiting drive typically included a public rally and a parade. Kleagles (recruiters) offered Protestant ministers free membership and subscriptions to Klan periodicals and sent membership invitations to patriotic societies and fraternal orders. People who loved their family and could be generous to their neighbors and friends were the backbone of the 1920s Klan. As historian Kathleen M. Blee found, “The true story of the 1920s Klan movement and the political lesson of Klan history is the ease with which racism and intolerance appealed to ordinary people in ordinary places.”⁸

Historian David Chalmers has observed that in Minnesota the Klan drew heavily from fraternal orders, including Masons and Shriners. In St. Paul, the weekly *Midway News* closely monitored the Klan and its members, taking particular note of American Legion activities. From 1924 to 1927, the paper published a Klan directory in each issue, listing members’ names, addresses, and jobs. Editor James H. Burns noted in

one entry, for example, “Stafford King, Klansman No. 1233. State Adjutant of the American Legion: THINK OF IT!”⁹

Newspaper accounts describe Ku Klux Klan recruitment drives, initiation ceremonies, and social activities throughout the state. Chapters vied with one another to host the most creative event. An outsider could mistake a Klan gathering for a political rally, county fair, or Fourth of July festival. For example, the August 24, 1923, *Call of the North* encouraged all Klan members to attend a district rally and the first Klan parade in Minnesota, to be held in Albert Lea on August 31: “Of course, it will be a real frolic and a humdinger.” Soon thereafter, the paper invited: “Klansmen, pack your robes and meet at Austin, Minnesota” for an open-air gathering and public naturalization ceremony at the fairgrounds. (“Naturalization” meant the recruit was accepted from an “alien”—racially integrated—world into “citizenship in an empire” that believed in the purity of the white race.) On September 15,

approximately 20,000 onlookers witnessed the initiation of 400 new members in a field outside of Austin.¹⁰

In 1924 Minnesota chapters of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan began to be organized. The *Minnesota Fiery Cross*, successor newspaper to the *Call of the North*, reported that national headquarters had sent an official to direct organization work. “We are at liberty to state that the Queen Kleagle for the Realm of Minnesota is a

The Klan’s power was devastating precisely because it was so well integrated into family life.

minister’s wife. She brings with her to assist in the great work ahead, her talented and charming daughter.” Klanswomen, Klan teens, and Klan babies strengthened the group’s claim that it was a family-oriented organization that promoted sociability. The Women of the Klan drew on community ties, church suppers, and kin reunions to circulate the KKK message of racial and religious hatred. The Klan’s power was devastating precisely because it was so well integrated into family life.¹¹

By the mid-1920s, the Klan was reaching the apex of its power. In 1924 it was influential enough that a motion to denounce it by name failed at the Democratic National Convention, further splitting that already divided political party. In August of that year, Minnesota’s first statewide konklave, or Klan convention, was held at the Rice County fairgrounds in Faribault. According to a Klan report, 2,000 men and 500 women in full regalia took possession of the town, staging a street demonstration as part of the gathering. (The *Midway News* countered that fewer than half that many had attended.) Overhead flew an airplane with “K.K.K.” emblazoned in fiery letters under the wings. It was estimated that more than 69 Minnesota cities and towns were represented. All afternoon, automobiles poured into Faribault with their hooded occupants. Speeches that day referred to “the Jewish problem,” “the Yellow Peril,” and “Americanism in the Public Schools.” Following the addresses, more than 400 men and women were initiated.¹²

After this beginning, Owatonna hosted the next three konklaves, which provide a good look at how the Klan operated during the 1920s. As Steele County seat and one of the largest towns in southeastern Minnesota, Owatonna was served by three railroads. It was

the commercial center for a large area, with manufacturing, retail, and financial institutions, hotels, and many costly houses. Declining crop prices and land values were causing economic hardship among farmers, businessmen, and laborers, however, making them susceptible to Klan propaganda about “Jewish bankers” and “foreign interests.” At the same time, the apparent success of Owatonna’s Catholic population might have drawn some citizens to Klan doctrine. By 1922 one of the town’s two substantial Catholic parishes had outgrown its building and purchased land for a planned expansion. A Klan coin dated 1922, originally owned by an Owatonna resident, proclaims anti-Catholic doctrine

I would rather be a Klansman in a robe of snowy white
Than a Catholic priest in a robe as black as night.
For a Klansman is an American,
And America is his home.
But the priest owes his allegiance
To a dago pope in Rome.¹³

The first published mention of Klan activity in Steele County appeared in Owatonna’s *Daily People’s Press* for May 6, 1923: “K.K.K.—Usual time and place.” Within weeks of that notice, Klan recruiter “Twilight” Orn, dispatched from Minneapolis, addressed more than 200 people in Owatonna’s Central Park. Orn, who edited the Klan’s *Call of the North*, claimed to have been a public school superintendent. In reality, he was Peter J. Sletterdahl, a former schoolteacher from Hutchinson, Minnesota. The following month he spoke to a group in Blooming Prairie. An Owatonna newspaper reported that he “demanded the restriction of immigration to those fit to be citizens and the abolition of parochial school teaching subjects of a primary nature.”¹⁴

The Klan also showed its presence in Medford, Bixby, Hope, and Ellendale with cross burnings as well as horn-blowing parades when meetings concluded. Flag-bearing members also paid visits to Steele County social organizations. For example, 12 Klansmen made a dramatic appearance at a fundraising event hosted by the Medford Community Study Club in October 1924, presenting a \$20 gold piece for a local citizen who had medical expenses.¹⁵

In July 1925 it was announced that the state’s second konklave would be held in Owatonna on Labor Day. In a four-to-one vote at a special session, the Steele County Board of Commissioners gave the Klan permission to use the fairgrounds for its gathering. In his presentation to



*Banner of the Women's Ku Klux Klan,
gold satin with metallic fringe*

the commissioners, Milton H. Frye, a minister and traveling salesman as well as the Klan's local representative, told the county board that "more than half of the voters in the county were KKK members." He then asked the Steele County Agricultural Society for permission to use the fair grandstand, the women's or dairy building, and the horse barn. Since the county commissioners had already approved the use of the grounds, the Agricultural Society unanimously granted the request. Frye promised to give the admission charge of 25 cents per person to the society to help pay the outstanding balance on the grandstand.¹⁶

On the day of the konklave, automobile caravans arrived in Owatonna. According to newspaper accounts and photographs, practically every county in southern Minnesota was represented, and chapters attended from the central and northern parts of the state, as well. Vehicles

were decorated with crosses and banners. Many displayed the letters KIGY, standing for "Klansman I Greet You," an abbreviation meaningful to group members but "mystical" to the *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*. Admission to the fairgrounds was limited to members of the Klan. Frye reported that approximately 500 people joined that day to gain entrance. Afternoon activities featured sports, music, and speeches. Advertised events for men included a 100-yard dash and a fat man's race for those over 225 pounds. The ladies of the Trinity English Lutheran Church served dinner at the local armory, while other attendees enjoyed picnic suppers at the fairgrounds.¹⁷

As the time for the parade approached, local residents lined the streets from the fairgrounds to the downtown area. The *Journal-Chronicle* reported Frye's prediction: "The konklave will probably provide the biggest gathering of Klansmen ever held in the state." Thirty hooded men, their faces exposed (a 1923 state law prohibited wearing masks to conceal identity), marched ahead of the parade to control traffic.¹⁸

A robed Klansman, riding a white-robed horse and carrying an American flag, led the parade and was greeted with applause. Behind him followed a mounted color guard. All 25 horses were robed; only their eyes, ears, and mouths showed. Klavaliors, the Klan's marching unit, clothed in white robes with red and green caps, marched ten abreast, forming a special honor guard for Harry E. Kettering, the Grand Dragon of Minnesota. Kettering had come from West Virginia to direct the Minnesota Klan; his signature is among those on the incorporation papers. Dressed in a green robe and hood, he rode in a car with state and national Klan officials.¹⁹

Marching units came from Martin County, Red Wing, Wabasha, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, Virginia, and other unidentified towns. A group of Klansmen, led by a robed and hooded six-year-old boy, preceded a float depicting a schoolhouse with children at play in the yard. The sign on the float read, "One flag, One school, One language." The parade ended with two floats bearing crosses lighted with red electric bulbs. Marching north on Cedar Street, the procession circled Central Park and then returned to the fairgrounds by way of Elm Avenue. In Owatonna, as historian Tucker later observed in general, "There was little or no public controversy over letting the Klan parade. The time when Klan parades would be met by outraged counter-demonstrators was still far away."²⁰

The procession ended at the filled grandstand, where Klan leaders spoke and 250 robed men and women presented Klan symbols and terminology in a ceremonial “demonstration.” A glee club of 50 and Klan orchestras from Red Wing, Faribault, and Albert Lea were among the planned entertainment. Adding to the festivities, local spokesman Frye officiated at a triple wedding (an area couple plus two brothers from Wisconsin marrying twin sisters from Minnesota). Across the nation, weddings effectively united the Klan to respectable concepts of family and religion. Spectacular outdoor ceremonies could feature robed Klan members arrayed before a burning cross, forming the backdrop for the exchange of vows.²¹

Next, Grand Dragon Kettering addressed the group, as did speakers from West Virginia, Texas, and several other locations. The evening climaxed with a fire-

Klansmen posing by their decorated autos, Steele County Fairgrounds, September 7, 1925

works display enjoyed by many residents outside the fairgrounds. The pyrotechnics featured large burning crosses, Klan symbols, and the flaming letters KIGY. Deposits to the Steele County Agricultural Society account from the KKK for the use of the grandstand totaled \$590.50, suggesting that, at 25 cents admission per person, attendance was close to 2,400. Frye had anticipated that the parade would include 10,000 Klansmen and Klanswomen; the *Daily People's Press* reported, however, that 1,055 marched.²²

Alliances with Protestant ministers, particularly evangelicals who believed that principles of Christian faith should guide political, social, and cultural life, were an important part of Klan strategy. Such ministers denounced evolution and wanted the Protestant bible restored to American schools. They hewed to *The Fundamentals*, originally published in a 12-volume set,





Parade unit at the 1925 konklave proclaiming success at one of the Klan's chief objectives

affirming essential Christian doctrine and opposing the modernism and liberal theology that blossomed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. According to historian Wade, the Klan endorsed the belief that “a ‘return’ to principles our progenitors had supposedly held” would be the “panacea for postwar America’s growing pains.”²³ When a kleagle arrived to recruit new members, he would point to the KKK as the greatest Protestant organization on earth. Joining was promoted as a patriotic gesture, as the Klan proclaimed its tenets of “one-hundred percent Americanism” to be both moral and Christian.

Within three weeks of the 1925 konklave, the Owatonna Board of Education received three petitions that challenged the separation of church and state. Two of them, asking the board to allow bible reading and the Lord’s Prayer in the public schools, came from the Steele County Child Welfare Board and from a coalition of four Protestant ministers from Owatonna, representing Trinity English Lutheran Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church (this minister was also commander of Owatonna’s American Legion post), the Associated Church, and Our Savior’s

Lutheran Church. The ministers also lodged a third petition requesting that the schools “set aside one night a week, preferably on Wednesday, when school activities will not be held and the school co-operate more closely with the churches in co-ordinating public school education with religious education,” the *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle* reported. The board of education tabled all three, as the state attorney general had previously ruled that praying and reading scriptures in school was “violative” of the state constitution unless decided otherwise by the courts. A test case might be made, the board pointed out.²⁴

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The matter was revived in January 1926 when a committee of local ministers and the members of the Steele County Child Welfare board presented a joint petition, this time signed by several hundred voters. The Board of Education responded that its individual members did not oppose the reading of the bible in public schools but repeated the attorney general’s ruling. As a compromise, the board stated that it would not object if individual teachers or principals were to read bible selections in the schools.²⁵

By August 1925 the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County, Number 11, had obtained use of 20 acres of wooded land east of downtown Owatonna, which it would formally purchase, through a holding company, in 1927. The land, at the corner of East Rice Lake Street and Willow Avenue where Vine Street ended, became known as Klan Park. A farmhouse built in 1874 still stood there; to accommodate larger crowds, a meetinghouse, or klavern, was constructed. This property was the site of the 1926 state konklave on Sunday, August 8. Unlike the previous year, this gathering was open to anyone willing to pay the admission charge. The afternoon program consisted of music and an address

from the Imperial Representative for Minnesota, who spoke on “The Condition of the Klan in Minnesota and the United States.”²⁶

The torchlight parade that night began going west on Vine Street to the downtown area, around Central Park, and back on East Main Street. Led by the Ellendale concert band, this parade was not as long as the previous year’s. Nevertheless, a large crowd, estimated at 20,000, again lined the streets to watch. A fire-alarm box along the parade route was activated, and the Owatonna fire department responded to the false alarm. The fire truck then joined in, bringing up the rear of the parade. That evening’s naturalization ceremony saw the initiation of 200 new Klansmen.²⁷

Klan Park continued to be owned by the Holding Company of the Steele County KKK long after the massive rallies ceased.

The third and last annual konklave held in Owatonna was scheduled for Labor Day, September 5, 1927. Again, M. H. Frye, the Klan’s local spokesman, heralded the event, expecting 10,000 visitors. Plans for activities followed the pattern of the previous years, with the addition of a baseball game at Klan Park between Owatonna’s Southern Minnesota League club and an unnamed opponent. The Southern Minnesota Klan band of St. James was to be among the entertainment. Frye announced that many large delegations were expected from the far reaches of the state (including 400 members from Aitkin County); all together, they would “put on a spectacular drill.”²⁸

The program began as scheduled with performances by a male quartet, the Albert Lea Vagabonds, the O.K. Orchestra of Owatonna, and the St.

Paul Klan drum corps. Visitors from Minneapolis and St. Paul gave speeches. As the sports program was finishing and the picnic suppers were being prepared, a torrential downpour began. Participants raced to their cars and then left when there was no relief from the rain. The parade and evening activities were cancelled.²⁹

The end of the Owatonna konklaves coincided with a general loss of Klan power. Its strength in the Midwest markedly declined after 1926, when Indiana Grand Dragon David C. Stephenson, a major leader, was convicted of second-degree murder for abducting, sexually assaulting, and mutilating a woman, then holding her captive for days and failing to call for help when she swallowed poison. In prison serving a life sentence, Stephenson produced a “black book” with evidence of corruption that led to the indictment of the governor of Indiana and the mayor of Indianapolis, both Klan supporters. This scandal was broadly publicized. In St. Paul, the *Midway News* reported that Stephenson’s illicit sexual activity would “fill an evil book, yet he had many ministers preaching his cause and working for him, men deluded by his doctrine.”³⁰

There would be other scandals as well as attempts to revive the organization and its political power, but these

Attend Steele County's Free Fair August 29 — Sept. 1

THIRD ANNUAL

Konklave and Demonstration

KU KLUX KLAN

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ALL DAY The Biggest and Best of All	KLAN PARK	ALL NIGHT Public Invited
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Something Doing All the Time

Races, Sports and Stunts, Prizes Given Bands, Singing, Reading and Speaking
 Addresses Afternoon and Evening

Grand Parade on City Streets at 7:00 P.M.

Line of Parade From Grounds on Vine, to Grove, to Main, to Cedar, to Rose, to the Fifth Ward School

This Will be a Parade of Marchers, Floats, Decorated Cars, Led by Bands and Drum Corps

One Admission for All Day and Night

Steele County K. K. K.

Advertisement, Owatonna Journal-Chronicle, August 26, 1927



Plat map from the 1937 Standard Atlas of Steele County showing the land owned by the KKK Holding Company

efforts would fall short of the successes of the early 1920s. For example, in July 1930, only 500 Klansmen from all over Minnesota gathered at a daylong picnic in St. Paul to install a new Grand Dragon for the tri-state realm of Minnesota and North and South Dakota.³¹

In Owatonna, Klan Park continued to be owned by the Holding Company of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County long after the massive rallies ceased. Not until 1945 did three trustees sell the property to a family with no Klan connections. The 20-acre tract, with its original farmhouse, presently remains divided between farmland and woods. The klavern is no longer standing.³²

In 1946 Samuel L. Scheiner, director of the Minnesota Jewish Council (established in the 1930s to monitor anti-Semitic activities), learned that several states had initiated or completed proceedings to revoke the charters of state-incorporated Ku Klan Klux chapters. Through national correspondence, Scheiner gathered information on successful efforts in New York State and California. He was advised that an authorized corporation that did not comply with requirements of “reports, franchise, tax, etc.” could be dissolved.³³

Undoubtedly as a result, Minnesota Governor Edward J.

Thye soon received a request from the American Jewish Congress, a national organization, asking that “Klan activities in this state be searched out and investigated. . . . to revoke any charters or licenses.” Thye replied, “I am glad to be able to say that an inspection of the official records of the state has failed to reveal any license or charter granted by the State of Minnesota to the Ku Klux Klan. I do not believe that such an organization is functioning anywhere in this state.”³⁴ That response must have relieved and satisfied Scheiner, for although memos, clippings, and letters attest that his organization continued to monitor Klan activities nationwide through 1966, no further mention of Minnesota appears in the files.

Despite Governor Thye’s assurances, The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Minnesota and the Holding Company of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County—and perhaps other Klan corporations—remained on the books until 1997, when Secretary of State Joan Grove dissolved them, as authorized by Minnesota statute. Similar to the policies Scheiner had investigated, Minnesota’s was not specifically aimed at the Klan. Rather, it was a housecleaning measure that required all incorporated nonprofits to register with the secretary of state’s office by December 1990. There were provisions for regaining “good standing” after this deadline passed; failing that, all unregistered nonprofits were dissolved by December 31, 1997.³⁵

The Ku Klux Klan found a home in 1920s Minnesota and flourished for a time. Like their compatriots nationwide, Minnesota members, in their efforts to elevate white Protestant nationalism to the status of official doctrine, failed to recognize that the cultures they denigrated also produced loyal citizens with moral and ethical values. The Ku Klux Klan continues to exist today, but not with the national influence it had in the 1920s.

Peter Sletterdahl, *aka* Twilight Orn, the Minnesotan who had served as Imperial Representative for the Dakotas as well as a national Klan organizer, lecturer, and editor, stripped away the group's mystique when

he wrote in 1926, "I turned against the Klan when I finally saw the Invisible Empire as a sinister political machine which capitalizes Protestantism and prostitutes patriotism in order to win the battles of politics." Orn concluded, "The Klan is religious fanaticism and racial prejudice seeking political power for the benefit of a few arch-manipulators."³⁶ Examining the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s reveals how bigotry can insinuate itself into harmless everyday activities—parades, church suppers, weddings, and picnics; how prejudice can seek a political foothold; and why people may embrace movements based on hatred and fear. □

Notes

Please contact the authors at dorseyhatle@usfamily.net with any information about the Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota.

1. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1982), 3–11; Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 111.
2. Jackson, *KKK in the City*, 90; Richard K. Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross: The Rise and the Fall of the Ku Klux Klan* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), 3.
3. Estimates of Minnesota membership vary widely from the Klan's own grandiose claims of 100,000 to more sober estimates of 30,000; Cathleen B. Taylor, "Midnight on the Knoll: Ku Klux Klan Activity on the University of Minnesota Campus," typescript, 16, copy in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).
3. Carl H. Chrislock, *Watchdog of Loyalty: The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety during World War I* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), ix, 89–90; Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, Main Files, sedition folder, Minnesota State Archives, MHS; Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 151.
4. Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000).
5. *Session Laws of Minnesota, 1921*, 612; *Call of the North*, Nov. 14, 1923, p. 4.
6. Marie Kochaver, "Early Ku Klux Klan in the North Country," 1, 5, typescript, 1981, copy in MHS; *Duluth Herald*, Aug. 4, 1921, p. 10.
7. Kochaver, "Early Ku Klux Klan," 14, 19; Taylor, "Midnight on the Knoll," 14–15; Minnesota Secretary of State, Corporation Division, Incorporation Certificate Record, vol. H, p. 480, State Archives, MHS.

8. Tucker, *Dragon and Cross*, 67; Jackson, *KKK in the City*, 10; Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7.

9. David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 149; *Midway News*, Sept. 12, 1925, p. 1, Oct. 3, 1925, p. 5 (quote). King, who served as state auditor from 1931 to 1969 (*Legislative Manual of Minnesota, 2007–08*, 84), illustrates the point that mainstream citizens joined the second Klan. In 1948, while contending unsuccessfully for the Republican gubernatorial nomination, he was exposed as an ex-Klan member. He eventually denied the charge but did admit to attending one meeting—"not as a member"; see *Minneapolis Spokesman* clipping, Sept. 10, 1948, in Subject Files, Ku Klux Klan, Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota (JCRC) Records, MHS.

10. *Call of the North*, Aug. 24, p. 1, Aug. 31, p. 1, Sept. 7, p. 4, Sept. 21, p. 1—all 1923; Margaret Patterson and Robert Russell, *Behind the Lines: Case Studies in Investigative Reporting* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 303; Taylor, "Midnight on the Knoll," 14. For examples of Klan activities in Fairmont, Virginia, Hibbing, Brainerd, and Red Wing, respectively, see *Minnesota Fiery Cross*, May 30, p. 1, Mar. 7, p. 4, Apr. 4, p. 1, Apr. 11, p. 1—all 1924; Frederick L. Johnson, *Uncertain Lives: African Americans and Their First 150 Years in the Red Wing, Minnesota, Area* (Red Wing: Goodhue Co. Historical Society Press, 2006), 96–98.

11. *Minnesota Fiery Cross*, Feb. 29, 1924, p. 1; Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 3.

12. Jackson, *KKK in the City*, 248; *Midway News*, Aug. 23, 1924, p. 1, 7.

13. Larry Millett, *The Curve of the Arch* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press,

1985), 138; Edgar B. Wesley, *Owatonna: The Social Development of a Minnesota Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938), 92–95; *The Wanderer*, May 25, 1939, p. 6; coin loaned to Steele County Historical Society by Otto M. Nelson, Owatonna.

14. *Daily People's Press*, June 26, 1923, p. 2, 6; *Midway News*, Aug. 23, 1924, p. 1; *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, July 13, 1923, p. 11. Evidence points to two Klan chapters active in the area: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County, No. 11, and the women's Golden Seal Klan of Owatonna, No. 12. See Minnesota Secretary of State, Corporate Division, Incorporation Certificate Record, social file 892, Secretary of State's Office, St. Paul, and Golden Seal banner, Steele Co. Historical Society, Owatonna.

15. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*: Ellendale, Oct. 3, 1924, p. 9, Dec. 11, 1925, p. 9, Jan. 6, 1926, p. 8; Bixby, Dec. 12, 1924, p. 3; Hope, Sept. 26, 1924, p. 8; Medford, Oct. 31, 1924, p. 3, Aug. 14, 1925, p. 7. See also John Gross, *Medford: Hamlet of the Straight River 1853–2003* (Medford: Medford Area Historical Society League, 2003), 109.

16. Minutes, special meeting of Steele Co. Board of Commissioners, July 20, 1925, Steele Co. Recorder's Office, Owatonna; *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, July 24, 1925, p. 1, Aug. 7, 1925, p. 1. Frye, born in Wisconsin, was a minister in the UB [United Brethren?] Church. Married with three children, he had lived in Todd and Faribault counties before arriving in Owatonna; U.S., manuscript census, 1910, Population, Grey Eagle, Todd Co., enumeration district 176, sheet 3B, and 1920, Kiester, Faribault Co., enumeration district 81, sheet 1B. The 1928–29 city directory lists him in Owatonna, living with widow Elvira Frye and his son. No directories were published during the depression years, and Frye was no longer in the area by 1940.

17. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1925, p. 1; Ouradnik Studio, "Steele County Demonstration, Owatonna," photo album, MHS.

18. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 4, 1925, p. 1; *Session Laws of Minnesota, 1923*, 183. State representative Myrtle Cain (Minneapolis), active in the League of Catholic Women and the National Women's Trade Union League, authored the anti-masking bill in January 1923. An Oregon Klan official then threatened at a public hearing that, if the bill passed, he would work to get all Minnesota parochial schools abolished. The bill passed unanimously the next day; Taylor, "Midnight on the Knoll," 19-20.

19. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1925, p. 1; *Daily People's Press*, Sept. 9, 1925, p. 6. On Kettering, see *Midway News*, July 12, 1924, p. 1.

20. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1925, p. 1; *Daily People's Press*, Sept. 9, 1925, p. 6; "Steele Co. Demonstration" photos; Tucker, *Dragon and Cross*, 68.

21. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 4, 1925, p. 1 (announcing plans), Sept. 11, 1925, p. 1, 4; Steele Co. marriage records, vol. L, Steele Co. Recorder's Office. For another example, see *Freeborn County Standard*, Feb. 12, 1925, p. 1; for weddings elsewhere see, for example, William D. Jenkins, *Steel Valley Klan: The Ku Klux Klan in Ohio's Mahoning Valley* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 61.

22. *Daily People's Press*, Sept. 9, 1925, p. 6, also reporting that the Klan raised approximately \$2,000 to be used later to purchase property; Steele Co. Fair receipt book, 1922-1934, Steele Co. Historical Society.

23. Wade, *Fiery Cross*, 169.

24. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 25, 1925, p. 1, Oct. 9, 1925, p. 1.

25. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Jan. 15, 1926, p. 1.

26. Deed Record Book No. 85, p. 90, May 12, 1927, Steele Co. Recorder's Office; authors' interviews with Sue Wacek, whose father bought the property in 1945, Nov. 13, 2006, Feb. 24, 2007, notes in author Vailancourt's possession; *Daily People's Press*, Aug. 10, 1926, p. 6; *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Aug. 13, 1926, p. 1. The Holding Company of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County was incorporated February 1, 1927, to "manage and control" the land; Secretary of State, Incorporation Certificate Record, social file 892. Earlier, the *Daily People's Press*, Sept. 9, 1925, p. 6, and the *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, July 26, 1926, p. 1, had erroneously stated that the Klan owned the land.

27. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Aug. 13, 1926, p. 1.

28. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Aug. 19, 1927, p. 1; Sept. 2, 1927, p. 1.

29. *Owatonna Journal-Chronicle*, Sept. 9, 1927, p. 1.

30. *Midway News*, Nov. 6, 1926, p. 1.

31. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 151.

32. Deed Record Book No. 110, p. 496-97, Nov. 30, 1945, Steele Co. Recorder's office; Wacek interviews. Wacek's father showed her the klavern foundation in the 1950s.

33. Samuel L. Scheiner to Dorothy M. Nathan (American Jewish Committee), May 24, 1946; Leon L. Lewis to Scheiner, June 6, 1946 (quote); Arnold Forster (Eastern Regional Office of Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai Brith), to C.R.C. and A.D.L. Regional Offices, Aug. 1, 1946, Klan subject files, JCRC Records. Scheiner's organization was later renamed the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota.

34. Edward J. Thye to Rabbi Irving Miller, Oct. 15, 1946 (also quoting Miller's letter), copy, Klan files, JCRC Records.

35. Minnesota Statute 317A.821; Certificates of Involuntary Dissolution, Dec. 31, 1997, Secretary of State's office. It is possible that other Klan corporations were dissolved or still exist. These two were identified by "Ku Klux Klan" in their titles; groups incorporated under less obvious names would have escaped notice.

36. P. J. "Twilight" Orn, *The Nightshirt in Politics: Americanism Abused* (Minneapolis: Ajax Publishing Co., 1926), title page, foreword, 27.

The images on p. 360, 363, and 366-68 are in MHS collections; the coins are courtesy Otto M. Nelson, Owatonna; the pennant and plat map are courtesy the Steele County Historical Society, Owatonna.

Klan coins, about half-dollar sized. "Non Silba Sed Anthon," a conglomeration of Latin and Gothic words, translates as "Not for one's self, but for others"; "SYMWAO/MIAFA" stands for "Spend Your Money With Americans Only" and either "Made in America for Americans" or "My Interests are for Americans."





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