

INTRODUCTION

The Fourth of July in 1924 was quite a day for Little Rock. The Ku Klux Klan of the Realm of Arkansas planned a full program of festivities, culminating in a procession billed as the greatest robed parade in the state's history. Special trains brought Klansmen and Klanswomen from all parts of Arkansas and seven neighboring states, and the railroad companies provided a special reduced Klan rate. Accompanied by a band playing "Dixie," Little Rock Klansmen met out-of-town arrivals at the city's railroad stations. They placed printed signs in the windows of their vehicles that read "Klansmen, Hop In" and shuttled the guests to the Little Rock Klan Tabernacle at 17th and Main Streets, where they registered for the day's events. With standing room only in the auditorium, which seated four thousand, speakers held forth, while vendors sold cold drinks, sandwiches, and Klan items in the vestibule. In the afternoon a boxing exhibition entertained the guests, including one bout "of the midget class." Exhibition baseball games provided further diversion.

By 6:30 p.m. city police began clearing the streets for the parade. Starting off from the grounds of North Little Rock High School, the parade processed east to Main Street, crossed the river on the Main Street Bridge, continued south to a forty-acre field at 26th and Main. Banners welcomed the KKK from storefront windows along the route of the parade. Ironically, two stores in downtown Little Rock with the most elaborate displays were the Cohn and Blass department stores, both owned by Jews. An electric fiery cross on a motorized truck led the way and illuminated the procession as darkness approached. At the ceremonial grounds, under the glare of spotlights, a band played, and at 8:30 p.m. a new class of Klansmen was initiated, with the public looking on. James Comer, the Grand Dragon of the Arkansas Klan, spoke. Afterward, he introduced the national head of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, Robbie Gill, and the national commander of the Junior Klan, Paul Pooch. The evening concluded with a massive fireworks display.¹

The parade probably marked the high point of the Ku Klux Klan in

Arkansas and nationwide. At its zenith, the Realm of Arkansas claimed more than 150 chartered Klans and tens of thousands of members. Klansmen were community leaders, politicians, prosperous farmers, businessmen, and professional people. Little Rock served as the national headquarters of the women's auxiliary, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, with two Arkansans, Lula Markwell and then Robbie Gill, serving in succession as Imperial Commander of the women's order. The Klan provided an organized way for men and women to promote what they saw as traditional, patriotic, and moral values. But these Klan groups were also asserting the supremacy of white, Protestant, native-born "One Hundred Percent Americans" over other groups labeled as inauthentic Americans: people of color, immigrants, Jews, and Roman Catholics. This conversation about "America for Americans" was not new to the 1920s. And of course the discussion still continues today.

Little Rock's July Fourth Klavalkade, as Klansmen called it, demonstrates several important features of the 1920s Klan. As thousands of robed Klansfolk marched down Main Street and assembled for the final program, they did not bother to wear hoods to hide their identities. Members of the public lined the streets, even thronged the river bridge, to cheer the procession. Unlike the Reconstruction Klan of the 1860s or the modern Klan of the Civil Rights era, the 1920s organization was far from a secret society. It touted its value system, wide membership, and influence in a very public way. The modern perception of the Klan as a sinister legion of male troublemakers belies the benign, family-friendly atmosphere of many 1920s Klan events. Men, women, and children participated. Boys aged twelve to seventeen in the Junior Klan walked ahead of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, followed by Klansmen riding robed horses and marching on foot.

The event showed the close collaboration between the Klan and civil authorities. North Little Rock and Little Rock policemen prepared the streets for the parade. A platoon of mounted police rode near the beginning of the procession. Just a few weeks before, the Klan had held a pre-primary vote throughout Arkansas to select a slate of Klan candidates for state offices in the upcoming Democratic primary. At the conclusion of the gathering, Lee Cazort, the Klan-anointed candidate for governor, gave a rousing campaign speech from the spotlighted stage. Yet this bold-faced attempt to control the Democratic Party and state offices spelled an overreach, which was the beginning of the end of the Invisible Empire in the state. Arkansas's Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s was like a bubble that deflated about as quickly as it arose.

An examination of Arkansas can tell us much about the Ku Klux Klan at this moment of its greatest national prominence. The Invisible Empire was

at its heart a local, grassroots movement. Individual Klans often joined with chapters in neighboring communities for large-scale rallies called special Klonklaves. Occasionally Klansmen from all parts of the state came together, such as in the Fourth of July extravaganza described above. The Klan both reflected and created community. And the state—in Klan terminology the “Realm”—was a meaningful unit, a larger community under the leadership of a Grand Dragon. While other more populous states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois claimed larger numbers of members, the Klan was probably as influential, locally and statewide, in Arkansas as anywhere in the country. The Klan truly reached all parts of the state, with a presence in cities, small towns, and rural areas. Here, as in neighboring Oklahoma and Texas, the Klan acquired an energy not seen elsewhere, which unabashedly led the KKK into political activity. Several Arkansas Klan leaders played large roles within the national organization. The state’s Grand Dragon, Comer, was in the inner circle with Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans, which partially explains why in 1923 Little Rock became the national headquarters of the newly established Women of the Ku Klux Klan and its Tri-K Klub for teenage girls. Another Klan auxiliary, the American Crusaders, was established in Little Rock in 1924 to mobilize non-native-born white Protestants. With all this, Little Rock could claim to be the Klan’s second capitol to Atlanta, where the main headquarters resided in a mansion on Peachtree Street, just north of downtown.

Other state studies of the Klan—in Indiana, Michigan, Colorado, Utah, and elsewhere—have presented a picture somewhat at odds with the Arkansas story. They have tried to correct popular images, formed largely during the Civil Rights era and afterward, which portrayed the Klan as a violent, hate-filled fringe group. These scholarly works instead generally portrayed the 1920s Klan primarily as a respectable, civic-minded organization.² Even most of the newer scholarship that is national in scope has reinforced the theme of the second Klan as a benign mainstream movement.³ I will argue that the Ku Klux Klan arose quickly to become a powerful organization in Arkansas, providing a popular social club and community-minded organization for white native-born Protestants. But it also offered Klansmen and women a coherent ideology, with moral, religious, and tribal components, that made sense of their 1920s world. Yet in Arkansas, extra-legal violence always lurked just below the surface.

This study, for the most part, affirms and extends the only other larger-scale historical work on the Arkansas Klan of the 1920s, written by Charles C. Alexander in the early 1960s. In his book, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, Alexander examined the Invisible Empire in Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. He also excerpted the Arkansas material into three

articles published in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, which have provided for more than fifty years the standard understanding of the 1920s Klan in Arkansas.⁴ Alexander argues that the most powerful element of the Klan was not its nativist prejudice toward an “other,” but its attempt to preserve crumbling Victorian standards of morality and order. The violent streak he noted in the Klan of the Southwest primarily was directed toward moral offenders who were themselves white and Protestant. Alexander’s argument resulted from his source base. To construct his account of the Klan in Arkansas, he relied almost exclusively on two state newspapers, the *Arkansas Gazette* and Fort Smith’s *Southwest American*. It is no surprise that Alexander’s picture of the Klan resulted from events that were covered in these newspapers. He did not analyze Klan newspapers or publications in which Klansmen and women continually and rhetorically assaulted Catholics, Jews, and other outsiders. I suggest that Alexander’s dichotomy of strict morality versus nativist prejudice was not an either/or proposition. Klansmen in Arkansas also imagined their opposition to Catholics, Jews, African Americans, labor agitators, and intellectuals to be grounded in morality. Their use of vigilante violence may have targeted the cases where the chances of success were the greatest.

While my examination of Arkansas tweaks the conclusions of Alexander, it more broadly agrees with the arguments of Nancy McLean. In her seminal work of 1994, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*, McLean portrayed the Klan agenda as a set of ideological propositions that logically progressed into violent actions toward targeted groups. While McLean’s interpretive lens was national in scope, her research centered on Georgia. Her portrayal of ideologically motivated violence by the Georgia Klan paralleled Alexander’s picture of Klan brutality predicated on puritanical moral values in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Studies of the KKK in Alabama and Florida also described a pattern of violence. This examination of Arkansas thus supports a generalization that Klan violence was more frequent and more tolerated by local authorities in the South than in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Violence appears more to be a particularly southern motif for the 1920s Ku Klux Klan.⁵

In some ways the Klan was a creation of the moment. Like all populist movements, it struck a nerve of a large segment of the population in a way that whipped people up into a lather and then channeled that energy into an organizational system. The Klan transformed a set of emotions into an ideology and provided activities that gave people a sense of belonging. But the public can be fickle; organizations and fashions come and go. Today it seems hard to understand the appeal of the 1920s Klan, with a group of full-grown men dress-

ing up in costumes and inventing a whole vocabulary of words that start with the letter “K.” The emotions and ideas of the Klan, however, had staying power. The Third or Modern Klan, which arose in response to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, has few organizational connections with the 1920s Klan other than the use of the same symbols and robes. Yet this Third Klan and the growth of other white nationalist groups show that racism, exclusionary nationalism, and even the use of violence still have their appeal. But the 1920s Klan’s more mainstream concept of “One Hundred Percent Americanism” became the foundation for the modern conservative movement in American politics. This perspective has remained stable long after the Klan’s demise and shares much with the “Make America Great Again” movement that brought Donald Trump to a sweeping victory in Arkansas in 2016, and the presidency.