

## Chapter Thirteen

### In Western New York? The Ku Klux Klan in Genesee County in the 1920s

*Apparently, all roads led to Batavia yesterday. Highways in every direction were lined with cars bearing the Klansmen and their invited guests to the city . . .*

*Batavia Daily News, Tuesday, September 2, 1924*

#### *Introduction*

When I was an eighteen-year-old Coast Guardsman stationed in Riviera Beach, Florida in 1975, I made a trip to the local post office to mail a letter. A flyer on the community bulletin board caught my attention, for it was unlike any flyer I had seen growing up in New Jersey. The handbill showed a fully clad Ku Klux Klansman on a horse. The horse too was fully clad in Klan regalia. The announcement above the galloping Klansman proclaimed that there was a community picnic in Riviera Beach hosted by the local Klan – and that all white, Christian men and women were invited.

That image stayed with me until I left the service and enrolled in the university as a history major. It was only then that I learned that the Ku Klux Klan is also part of northern history – including that of New Jersey. During the last few years as the County Historian in Genesee County, New York, I became increasingly aware just how pervasive the Klan was in the North – and in the history of Western New York. Genesee County proved to be no exception.

On Labor Day in 1924, at Exposition Park in Batavia, the Ku Klux Klan held a community picnic. As described in the local media,

Exposition Park and the streets in the vicinity of it yesterday, particularly in the afternoon, had the appearance of a busy day at the Genesee County Fair, for the park was the picnic place of the KU KLUX KLAN of western New York. (1)

This newspaper account informed readers that about 15,000 people attended the event. A street parade followed through downtown Batavia. While we will turn to this event and the parade later in this chapter, it suffices to say here that the

Festival at Exposition Park embodies much about the Klan's attraction for many in Genesee County during the 1920s. It even suggests something about subsequent life in the county after that decade.

The label of Ku Klux Klan conjures up images – as it had for me as an eighteen-year-old from the north, images drawn from the late nineteenth century south. For many, that imagery included African-Americans newly freed from slavery subject to lynching or other forms of domestic terrorism. However, by the 1920s that initial Klan activity had largely achieved the goal of black political and economic subjugation in what remained of the Old South. That same political and economic subjugation also existed in the north. So why do we see a Klan resurgence in both the South and in the country at large – which included Genesee County in the 1920s – a county in which the vast majority of people were white to start with?

While the Klan in Genesee County continued to stress the exclusion of African-Americans, the fact that there were so few people of color in the county demands an exploration of other reasons accounting for the Klan's attraction. A meeting that took place in Batavia at the Odd Fellows gathering in Majestic Hall offers a glimpse as to why as many as 3,500 residents of the county joined the Klan in the 1920s – while easily twice that number supported its goals. (2) At that assembly, a minister visiting from Macon, Georgia, the Reverend Samuel Fowler, spoke of his mission to spread “the gospel of the Klan.” Moreover, what did that gospel include? It included those who were “100 percent anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-black, and 100 percent Protestant, white, and American-born.” (3)

Meetings such as the one held by the Odd Fellows were not secret. They took place in the light of day with full media exposure and preliminary advertisement. These were not the Night Riders of old. There were meetings held in churches and fraternal lodges. There were recruitment drives and Klan members openly proud of their membership in the Klan. Election to Klan offices was widely reported in local newspapers as early as 1918. “At the Ku Klux Klan meeting on Saturday evening,” readers were told, “the election of officers for the coming six months took place.” (4) These officers included the “Commander-in-Chief, Dayton Wood,” along with Bert Schultz as “Sergeant-at-Arms,” “Miss Bessie Johnson (as) Treasurer,” and “Miss Charlotte Warboys (as) Secretary.” (5)

This press release reminds us of the Klan's appeal to those who thought that the modern America emerging after World War One was one stressing too much individual freedom. “Aliens,” or those who either did not belong to the Klan or were not sympathizers, constituted a threat to what the Klan referred to as “true”

Americans. Resentment fueled membership, and that resentment of those seemingly intent upon destroying what Klan members thought of as traditional America were the targets of Klan rhetorical fury. These “aliens” had too much influence in the county, as the North Bergen Klan proclaimed in a public debate:

The subject was “should the public good have preference to personal liberty?” The question was decided in favor of the affirmative. (6)

People doing damage to America were members of privileged groups who had taken control of the county – and America – from what the Klan considered “true Americans.” Not surprisingly, this came out in clearly racial and religious terms, with the two categories typically merging. Catholics and Jews remained typical targets for county Klan members. As growing numbers of Irish and Italian Catholics entered Genesee County and began an upward social ascent, so too did the anger and resentment over perceived Catholic control mount. This anger sometimes manifested itself in physical threats to the Catholic communities in such places as Batavia, as reported in the *Daily News*:

Someone with white chalk marked large K’s on the Summit Street side of St. Joseph’s church and on the curb along the pavement yesterday.

The Rev. William C. Kirby, rector of St. Anthony’s Church, on Sunday morning told his Italian parishioners that the Klan had secured permission for using Exposition Park for a picnic and the use of the streets for the parade and he urged his people to conduct themselves quietly and to avoid starting any disorder. (7)

Catholics and Jews received blamed for a variety of social ills, ranging from corruption and crime through sharp business practices to alcoholism and sexual immorality. The Klan fed upon a wide range of anxieties. This enabled them to increase membership, or at least to build public support. These diverse concerns about the direction of post-World War One Genesee County produced a Klan that was more than an identifiable group. It was instead a broad social movement.

People from many different occupations and social classes joined this movement in the 1920s. In addition, they were all fighting against different enemies. For example, there was the Reverend L .E. H. Smith, known as the “raiding pastor.” Klan members suspected that “aliens” bombed the home of this Prohibitionist. As a result, anger over bootlegging – associated with both Jews and Catholics in Klan thinking – and bootleggers suspected of trying to kill a leader in the anti-liquor movement translated into hundreds of Klan members and their sympathizers patrolling the highways to assist police in combatting the illicit traffic in liquor. (8)

The Klan’s cooperation with local law enforcement translated into police officers who were themselves Klan members. This takes us into one of the central themes of this chapter. For a time, the Ku Klux Klan became mainstream in Genesee County, just as it did nationally in the 1920s. It fed off a variety of fears. Immigration, sexual immorality, political radicalism, Darwinian notions of evolution, the perceived threats of the Pope in Rome, liberal Protestantism, world government, modern movies and art, and Judaism all constituted challenges to what was thought of as “real Americans.” There was something here for many different fears and resentments. The point in this chapter is not to condemn but rather to understand. In the process, we could reach a deeper understanding of our own day as we examine this aspect of Genesee County in the 1920s.

### *Real Americans*

Because the number of African Americans in Genesee County remained low, the Klan did not concern itself with African-Americans apart from some passing references to them in their literature and speeches. Along these lines, the Klan did not espouse a white supremacy designed to subjugate blacks. However, their version of white supremacy was fashioned to intimidate non-Protestant whites, whom they believed engaged in criminal activities amounting to a form of treason. If not fought against successfully, America could perish. “On the night of November 6, 1924,” we learn in Ruth McEvoy’s unpublished report as the City of Batavia’s historian, “while Italians were celebrating Alfred E. Smith’s reelection as Governor, three crosses were burned . . .” (9) Smith, an Irish Roman Catholic, symbolized for the Klan the twin evils of “Romanism” and foreign influence in American institutions. Openly supported by equally suspect Italian Catholics only fanned the flames of anger and resentment. Not surprisingly, we discover that “old timers say that crosses were set up before the houses of prominent Catholic citizens . . .” The degree of support for such actions within the county media

cannot be determined, though such testimonies about cross burnings on private front lawns remained largely unreported throughout the mid-1920s.

The consistent rejection of Jews and Catholics in Klan literature was not the biological rejection of African-Americans on racial grounds. Nevertheless, the desperate calls for excluding Jews and Catholics – and liberal Protestants – was part of the definition of “100% American.” The Klan’s depiction of Jewish and Catholic offenses were those of major offenses, for they added up to an erosion of the United States and “Christian civilization.” Genesee County Klan members viewed their role as sentries on patrol to guard against pernicious forces threatening the Republic. Theirs was a good and pure civic movement simply responding to emergencies emerging in the county, and the country at large, in the 1920s.

The Klan viewed itself as on a sacred mission to rescue America and its Protestant institutions from evil Jews and Catholics. Protestantism and Klan beliefs remained inextricably bound together in Genesee County in the 1920s, and anyone outside of that could not really be an American. This message emanated from the pulpits of such churches as the South Alabama Baptist Church. At its April 27, 1924 service, seven “fully robed Klansmen, wearing their caps but without masks,” approached the altar.” (10) Along with some Protestant churches, the Majestic Odd Fellows hosted a minister exiled from his pulpit in New York City because of Klan association. The Reverend Oscar E. Haywood, on April 14, 1924, addressed a crowd of three hundred in Batavia. He spoke of the usual Klan concerns regarding residents born outside of the United States, the threat of Catholicism and Judaism, and the immorality encouraged by Hollywood movies, automobiles that allowed young people unprecedented privacy, and the bootlegging of illegal liquor. By the end of Reverend Haywood’s speech, an estimated one hundred county residents made the decision to join the Klan. (11)

The “naturalization” of one hundred county residents into the Klan enabled them to recruit other potential Klansmen. The recruiters approached a candidate with an initial question – “are you 100 percent for America?” The gathering at the Majestic Odd Fellows Hall was of course not the first of this kind. Two years earlier the Odd Fellows sponsored a talk by a university official. The President of Lanier University in Atlanta, Georgia, C. S. Fowler, was brought in to spread the Klan gospel. He was a “national organizer.” (12)

However, not all Protestant churches in Genesee County endorsed the Ku Klux Klan. The First Baptist Church was one of these. Led by the Reverend George K. Warren, the congregation denounced the Klan. On the evening of November 26,

1922, Reverend Warren rejected the Klan in the strongest possible terms. He rejected “its principles and procedures.” (13) He attacked the oath of allegiance those becoming members – “naturalized” – were obligated to take. Pledging their loyalty to “the invisible empire was indefensible, Reverend Warren maintained. Instead, a true American’s sole allegiance should be “to the law of the land, to the one flag.” (14) Any Klan actions otherwise invited the destruction of the very America Klan members professed to love. Noting the many farmers in the first Baptist Church, he likened Klan activities in the county to a farmer

who set fire to a pile of grain to get rid of the infesting rats and in doing so destroyed the grain, the barn and adjacent residence. (15)

Even an opponent of the Klan such as Reverend Warren conceded that the Klan made some valid points about alcohol abuse, governmental and corporate corruption, threats to the family resulting from sexual immorality, and the undemocratic nature of the Roman Catholic Church. Nonetheless, its methods, not to mention its earlier history of murder and violence, negated any good that the Klan could do in the community. Reverend Warren reminded his audience “the federated Protestant churches” had gone on record in their opposition to the Klan, which encouraged the arousal of “racial prejudice and religious antipathies.” (16) He likened Klan attacks on Roman Catholicism to what was happening in places such as Oregon. There the Klan played an instrumental part in compelling Catholic parents to send their children to public schools to be “Americanized” when parochial schools were banned. He reminded the audience that the right of religious liberty is one central to the Constitution. In effect, opponents of the Klan were pointing out that the Klan itself was hardly American.

Nonetheless, those drawn to the Klan continued to see it as the embodiment of “100 percent Americanism.” For some, the attraction of the Klan lay in its seeming rejection of privilege, especially that exercised by economic and cultural elites. The Klan in this sense expressed another aspect of its “100 percent Americanism” – that of the small entrepreneurs against the forces of economic bigness. Klan literature continuously exalted those without as much in the way of economic power or educational attainment. This took a political turn, as politicians who were depicted as protecting the wealthy or the professional classes were viewed as aligning themselves against a democracy of mainstream

businesspersons or those who were not professionals. The irony was that some of the leaders of the Klan were themselves, locally and nationally, people with more economic resources and greater professional standing. However, this contradiction was in and of itself a strength of the Klan in the 1920s. There was something here for everyone.

This appeal to a broad cross-section of people appeared in a list of Genesee County Klan members made public in the fall of 1924. This resulted from a court order issued in Buffalo by the Supreme Court under Justice Charles Pooley. The names of county Klan members appeared in an edition of the *Rochester Evening Journal and the Post Express* on September 20, 1924. (17) The occupations listed next to each name reveals something about just how representative of county society the membership in the Klan was. Undoubtedly, each member brought his or her own resentments and anxieties to the decision to join. They also found in the Klan some aspect of Klan ideology that was appealing. Accordingly, just a small sampling reveals schoolteachers and bookkeepers from South Byron. There were mill hands and farmers from Alabama. Basom's list reveals a mail carrier and a truck technician. Butchers, sales clerks, and students make their appearance on the list from Batavia. Laborers and automobile dealers hailed from Oakland. Telephone operators and chauffeurs from Elba appear. Journalists, government workers, attorneys, and physicians round out a list resulting from a court order made public by the Buffalo police department. (18)

"Real Americans" stood in opposition to concentrations of power. For the Klan, it did not matter where that concentration of power was. Protestantism was inherently always dividing against itself – even on the question of the Klan. Decentralization was part of Protestantism, and hence, of the Klan's worldview. In contrast, there was only one "Romish" church. Those drawn to the Klan saw the Pope as desiring world domination. Jews, though divided like Protestants, conspired to achieve global domination through financial dealings and cultural control, e.g. Hollywood movies. "Real Americans" also had only one ultimate allegiance – to the United States. This differed from immigrants, Catholics, and Jews, whose loyalties lay elsewhere. These conceptions of "real Americans" spawned ideas about conspiracies serving to induce a fear driving county residents to join the Klan. In Klan speeches, literature, and festivities there was a predictable theme – that of Anglo-Saxon Protestants defending themselves, and their institutions, from people who were not really American. In an excerpt from a poem that circulated in the county, entitled *Klippings, Komments, and Kriticisms*, we see the Klan view of those lacking the courage to wage a righteous war:

Y is for yellow,  
The color of him  
Who sold out his vote  
To old Rome for some gin. (19)

Binding Anglo-Saxons together – not to mention attracting new members – required more than appeals to anxieties and resentments, however. There was also a place for fun and mystery. This too appeared in abundance in the Ku Klux Klan of Genesee County.

*Parades, Carnivals, Good Food, and Secrets*

Klan parades, carnivals, and community picnics functioned to appeal to potential recruits and to build support among those thinking of joining. They were very much in keeping with a decade featuring large gatherings also serving as entertainment. Like the Democrats and Republicans known for their lively and festive conventions, and similar to Protestant camp meetings, Klan public events fostered a group identity transcending otherwise isolated individuals.

In Genesee County, Klan events drew thousands of people. “Thousands of Persons Assembled for a Western New York Picnic,” a headline in the *Batavia Daily News* reported. (20) The writer in this article then elaborated: “Ku Klux Klansmen and their Guests Gave Exposition Park and Vicinity (the) Appearance of a County Day Fair.” (21) These festivities were very popular in the county throughout much of the 1920s. Not only were they attractive to those enjoying these festival days. They also attracted people opposed to the Klan. This served to heighten the drama of such open Klan activities. One anti-Klan activist in Batavia purposely parked his automobile directly in the path of a Klan parade. The police ordered him to move his vehicle. He did so by slowly making his way into the ranks of Klan marchers, “in an apparent effort to split the parade.” (22)

In another case, again in Batavia, a rumor emerged that a man viewing a Klan parade suddenly departed from the crowd and fired a gunshot through the door of an automobile in the parade. Disarmed and arrested, there was a subsequent controversy as to whether this event actually took place. (23) In yet another rumored event, a parade was two hours late in getting started. Many believed that New York Governor Alfred E. Smith had ordered the parade’s cancellation; a



rumor fueled by Smith's run for the Democratic Presidential nomination. This rumor proved to be unfounded. (24)

Public events such as Klan parades and Klan carnivals remind us that there were two sides to the Ku Klux Klan in Genesee County in the 1920s. On the one hand, there was the cloak of secrecy, which, as we shall see, manifested itself in rituals, language, and the very costume of the KKK. Conversely, there was the very opposite of secrecy in the parades and carnivals. Nevertheless, both worked to attract people looking to belong to an organization expressing their view on topics ranging from immigration through immorality to crime. The parades and carnivals attracted people while simultaneously fostering a sense of belonging to an organization seemingly the same as any other fraternal group in the county in the 1920s. In the process, a public event such as a carnival also provided income for the Klan in Genesee County.

The parades and carnivals featuring such attractions as good food attracted people of all ages and backgrounds. They were also reminders of what the Klan thought was being lost in modern America. Rides, music, various kinds of contests, and of course, good food, provided examples of wholesome and innocent family fun. Flowers and crosses were visible on automobile floats. At the Exposition Park KKK Fair in Batavia, vendors sold such items as Ku Klux Klan dolls. They also sold pinwheels and flags. This newspaper account reveals that

Numerous hot dog and refreshment stands were set up on the grounds and did a thriving business in spite of the fact that thousands more had brought their own lunches which they ate on the grass. The Klansmen and their guests made a real day's outing out of the affair, bringing their wives and children and other members of their families. (25)

Publicity for these events was extensive. There was press coverage of the arrival via train of Miss Dorothy Nichols, a Klan lecturer. When she arrived at the train station in Batavia, much was made of her doll, which was dressed in Ku Klux Klan robes. (26) Signs appeared in Albion and Medina, on which were white letters six feet in height announcing "K.K.K. At Batavia" with signs directing traffic to Batavia. (27)

At the carnival grounds in Batavia and elsewhere in Genesee County, mounted Klansmen maintained patrols. This added drama and excitement to Klan activities. It also attracted the curious, who paid 25 cents for admission to the carnival. This was the price for men, as women and children entered the grounds free of charge. Tourists in the county, or people passing through on business, were drawn by the crowds thronging the event, and could apply for admission to the Klan festival on the spot. (28) If accepted, the adults were invited in, along with their children. Admission rested upon the answers to such questions as

1. Are you Native-Born?
2. Are you an American Citizen?
3. Do you place America first?
4. Are you a Gentile who believes in White Supremacy? (29)

On this questionnaire the phrase, "Yours for America," was signed TI BO TIM. This mysterious acronym was a common feature of the Klan in the 1920s. The Klan had its own language. This added to the sense of belonging felt by members, who saw themselves as waging a holy war against the evils besetting the county and the nation in the 1920s. While it is not clear what this particular acronym stood for, it is not surprising that it appeared. In Genesee County and elsewhere in the United States, such acronyms as

- AYAK (are you a Klansman?)
- AKIA (a Klansman I am)
- MIAFA (my interests are for America)
- SANBOG (strangers are near, be on guard)

were all commonly used by Klan members (30). The use of mysterious language combined with other practices to present the Klan as simply another fraternal organization in the 1920s, no different from such groups as the Rotary Club or the Elks. They too had their own rituals and unique qualities. We shall turn to this shortly. However, it is crucial to point to some obvious differences between the Klan and the Rotarians or the Elks. Chief among these distinctions is the fact that in the 1920s Rotarians and Elks did not burn crosses. The Klan in Genesee County may have held community picnics and carnivals – but they also engaged in other, less wholesome acts designed to entice recruits – and also, to intimidate enemies.

Why did the Klan burn crosses? Part of the answer lies in their proximity to Klan enemies. Even if such enemies had not violated the Klan's understanding of an acceptable political, economic, or racial order the fiery cross communicated a not too subtle message – transgression could result in far worse consequences. In the spring of 1924, a cross was burned in front of the courthouse in Batavia. Dissatisfied with the lack of progress made by the police in the investigation of a murder in Linden, some county residents understood the burning as one in which the Klan desired to take over the investigation if the police proved ineffectual. (31) In LeRoy, a Klansman distributed trinkets depicting fiery crosses. Automobiles marked with crosses appeared on county roads. These automobile crosses were made of pasteboard strips colored white and red. Off-duty Batavia police officers openly placed these crosses, about a foot in height and six inches in width, on the sides of these automobiles. (32) In Indian Falls, “a huge fiery cross flickered on a hill top” accompanied by a band. (33)

Reports of burning crosses increased in frequency throughout Genesee County in the 1920s. Burning crosses appeared in East Pembroke, Pavilion, State Park, Austin Park, and in a gravel pit. (34) A burning cross also made an appearance in St. Joseph's Catholic Cemetery.

So not only were crosses placed in close proximity to a courthouse seen as embodying corruption and inefficiency, but also, in the case of St. Joseph's Cemetery, as a very public expression of the necessity of mobilizing Protestants in an effort to rid the county of Roman Catholics. The Klan was issuing a general threat to Catholics. Leave or face the consequences of remaining in Genesee County. Another message was also being sent. This one targeted those eligible to join the Klan but still hesitated joining. What could happen to white, Protestant, native-born residents daring to be outside of the Invisible Empire? What could happen to those remaining, in Klan parlance, “aliens?” Cross burnings produced nervousness and uncertainty for both Catholics and for Protestants refusing to join the Klan. Nevertheless, the threat of ostracism at best or violence at worst could not be enough to induce one to join. There had to be positive inducements. Carnivals were one, but so too was the general appeal throughout the 1920s of membership in a fraternal order – be it the Rotary Club or the Klan. Like those other associations, the Klan had to provide rewards of an emotional and financial nature for those willing to pay dues.

*Just another Club*

By 1926, approximately 10.2 million Americans belonged to a variety of benevolent orders. One can add another one-half million children to this number, who belonged to affiliated groups. (36) Therefore, it is not surprising that the Klan adopted strategies for recruitment and retention proving successful for other groups in this period. Organizations such as the Rotary Club and the Elks offered the enticement of networking for those in business or seeking employment. This was especially important in an era long before the Internet and, indeed, before many newspapers listed jobs in the classified section of their dailies.

Not surprisingly, Klan meetings were regularly announced in local media. Media reports on Klan elections and other activities abounded. They were identical to articles concerning elections in other county groups. One could replace “Ku Klux Klan” with “Odd Fellows” and have a similar announcement. The “Ku Klux Klan at North Bergen will meet at 8 o’clock on Saturday evening,” an announcement in the *Batavia Daily News* reported. (37) A notice in that same newspaper appeared five days later in which readers discovered that at “a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan on Saturday,” in North Bergen, “George J. Hottols was accepted as a member.” (38) Other meetings in North Bergen made their appearance in the *Batavia Daily News* in March, April, and May of 1918. One not familiar with the Klan could have assumed that it was simply another fraternal organization.

Like other organizations, there was a requirement to pay dues. “The Ku Klux Klan’s treasurer on Saturday evening,” one newspaper article revealed, “reported \$4.50 on hand.” (39) Business meetings teemed with descriptions of Klan activities. In North Bergen, there “will be a business meeting and election of officers of the Ku Klux Klan on Saturday evening,” the *Batavia Daily News* reported in 1918. (40) Like other organizations, not everyone was willing to pay dues indefinitely – or even at all. In 1922, some people expressing an interest in joining the Klan were precluded because of an unwillingness – or inability – to pay dues. “Applicants were taken apart into groups,” one account reads, “and some are said to have withdrawn when they learned that the initial donation of \$10 was expected and that the full four degrees will cost \$175.” (41)

Even those paying their initial dues were, in some cases, later disenchanted with Klan money management. Some members became angry after paying for robes that never arrived. Others complained of being pressured by Klan district leaders to purchase fireworks that they could not afford, echoing one man who stated that “I haven’t got ten bucks” to join in the first place. (42) When some members discovered that one Klan district leader received \$2.00 for each new

member enrolled they quit the Klan in disgust. By one point in mid-1925, some “said openly that the Klan was fleecing the members.” (43)

Like other fraternal organizations, there was concern about money management and the dues requirement. In other ways as well, the Klan in Genesee County resembled the fraternal orders of the 1920s. Here installation rituals and ceremonies replete with formalities and rules of conduct gave members a sense of belonging to an organization not open to just anyone. The essence of the Klan’s rituals was the creation of an aura of mystery. One description places new Klan members just south of the R.E. Chapin Farm in 1923:

It was said that a class of 200 was initiated at that time. The automobiles formed a circle lowering their lights into the center of the ring where initiation ceremonies took place. (44)

In a manner eerily similar to the torchlight processions of the Nazi storm troopers that arose less than a decade later in Germany, the initiation held at night gave entry into the Klan an aura of the sacred. One became a holy fighter for true America. This was something that other fraternal orders, more exclusively commercial in nature through the emphasis on networking and community service, did not offer. People with purpose joined together as Protestantism became mobilized and militarized. Klan rhetoric intensified such spectacle. An excerpt from a “Klode Card” illustrates this. Members of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Genesee County received this card throughout the 1920s:

We meet with cordial greetings  
In this our sacred cave  
To pledge anew our compact  
With hearts sincere and brave  
A band of faithful Klansmen  
Knights of the K.K.K.  
We all will stand together  
Forever and for aye.

Home, Home, Country and Home  
Klansmen we’ll live and die

## For our Country and Home. (45)

The anxieties and hatreds giving rise to basic Klan beliefs provided an emotional alternative to the more bland nature of other fraternal orders in the county in the 1920s. In addition, those feeling excluded in any number of ways in post-World War One America discovered camaraderie in the Klan. As one Klan member stated, “Jews don’t make citizens. All they are here for is money.” (46) He then added, “The Knights of Columbus won’t let you join them and the niggers won’t let you into their secret societies.” (46)

However, for the Klan to continue to grow, others angry and anxious about the direction the county was heading in the 1920s had to be attracted. Children in some measure were attracted by the Klan’s advocacy of baseball. While sporting events and carnivals drew children, there was still a concurrent need to interest more adults. In other words, the Klan in Genesee County sought women who were as angry and anxious as the men drawn to the Klan were. What role, then, did women in the county play in the Klan of Genesee County in the 1920s?

### *Women of the Klan*

At first, the presence of women in Genesee County’s Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s surprised me. Nevertheless, as I explored this aspect of the county’s Klan history I became less surprised. One of the major concerns of the Klan in the years following World War One was the moral direction America was heading. While the calendar read the 1920s, the culture of the county was still very much an embodiment of Victorian-era values. At the center of that worldview was the sanctity of the family, with women as the center of that family. The Klan in Genesee County welcomed the granting of the vote to women with the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. The Klan supported the idea of female political participation – participation by greater numbers of “100 percent” Americans.

This meant that women had the opportunity to purify a county fast heading into immorality. The opening of the first movie theater in Batavia in 1906 intensified worries about the effects of movies on the morals of young people in particular. (47) The Klan understood the film industry as one dominated by Jews. A Jewish man was a partial owner of this early theater, called “Dreamland.” (48) For the Klan, most movies were unacceptable for two reasons – they were immoral and they were Jewish. The Klan saw a conspiracy to weaken the morals

of young people and, in the process, the family. As the primary protector of family life and community morals women in the Klan saw themselves as righteous warriors for true Americanism. Now armed with the vote and a tradition of political militancy reaching back into the nineteenth century they moved headlong into Klan activism.

Therefore, it is not surprising that they played an important role in Klan activity in the county throughout the 1920s. Churchwomen were identified as Klan members for whom there was no contradiction between female church groups and Klan activity. "The Ku Klux Klan will meet in the church parlors at 8 p.m. on Saturday," a *Batavia Daily News* article told readers in 1917. (49) In North Bergen, an announcement for a "Ku Klux Klan Entertainment for the Rev. and Mrs. Smith" appeared. The committee in charge of this church luncheon included "Miss Bessie Johnson, Miss Alice Walker, and Miss Irene Merrill." (50) Numerous other announcements appeared showing churches and women of the Ku Klux Klan united in community activities between 1917 and 1924. One story in the *Batavia Daily News* in 1923 showed a gathering including women at the South Alabama Church. Entitled "Klan Services at South Alabama," hooded Klansmen were kneeling before the pulpit. Behind the pulpit was a large American flag and a "Welcome" sign. The caption to this photograph appears below:

This is a flashlight picture of the service at the South Alabama Baptist Church last Sunday evening during which seven members of the Ku Klux Klan, without masks, entered the church in the midst of the service and presented the pastor an envelope containing \$35. (51)

The caption goes on:

The white-robed figures are seen kneeling before the altar while the Rev. David Brittain, pastor, offered prayer just before the presentation was made. The service had been announced as a community service and the church was filled. A *Batavia* photographer was engaged in advance to

take the picture. (52)

Klan female activists viewed their role in the Klan as one of fulfilling a responsibility owed to their family and to society. They were conservatives seeking to uphold and restore what they viewed as traditional American values regarding morality in private and public life. Ironically, as activists they also insisted upon leadership roles within the Klan that by their nature challenged male authority. It is not surprising that as the decade unfolded they became increasingly prominent in county Klan activities. New officers emerged in the North Bergen Klan in 1918 – and half of the leaders were female. Bessie Johnson was elected Treasurer, while Charlotte Warboys became Secretary. In that same year, Lelia Langdon accepted the office of Treasurer of an auxiliary group, the Ku Klux Klan Society. (53)

The anxiety of Klan women in Genesee County in the 1920s was certainly one directed towards discernible groups. Jews in particular received blame for subverting morality through such mediums as movies. Catholics remained targets as well. For example, women remained in convents against their will. They argued that priests raped these women in the convents. “N is for nuns,” one widely-circulated flyer proclaimed, “those poor creatures confined in prison-house convents – ‘tis cert’nly unkind.” (54) Yet the fears of immorality – especially female immorality – was also directed towards young Protestant women being influenced by such new developments as movie houses and automobiles, for in both cases, couples were alone, unsupervised, and even in the dark. Apprehension produced by new inventions enabled newly enfranchised women to feel more certain about their need to play a role in Klan activism. Even if they were not seeking a Klan office, they could openly attend public Klan gatherings, as Clara Freeman from Alexander did in Batavia in the summer of 1924. Affirming her belief “in America first and White Supremacy at all times,” she appeared at the Fair Grounds in Batavia and openly expressed her support for the “Knights if the Ku Klux Klan,” who

will speak upon the most powerful secret,  
nonpolitical and thoroughly American  
organization in existence. If You Hear the  
Rumblings in the Distance, you cannot  
afford to miss this opportunity. Don’t judge  
this great law-abiding Order by hearsay.



Come and hear the truth. (55)

Like her male counterparts, Clara Freeman saw the county as evenly divided between them, and us, or between those “naturalized,” or Klan members, and “aliens,” or non-Klan people. The Klan in Genesee County assumed a veneer of normalcy serving to conceal its underlying mission, one that linked it to the earlier Klan that emerged in the South after the Civil War. For in the end, the Ku Klux Klan continued its struggle against forces deemed un-American, be they cultural, religious, political, or racial.

*Are You With Us – or Against Us?*

The Ku Klux Klan in Genesee County did not always engage in those acts normally associated with the Klan. Lynching, whippings, and other forms of terrorism were not there, despite its name, its ancestry in the original Klan, and the burning of crosses. However, the legacy of white supremacy – as defined by the Klan – continued unabated. Rather than the few African-Americans in the county, the Klan in Genesee County redirected its efforts against other targets. Roman Catholics, Jews, and immigrants remained common targets of verbal assaults and warnings, primarily through a public presence of parades, carnivals, gatherings in churches, and, of course, cross burnings.

Non-Protestants, especially Irish and Italian Catholics, remained common enemies viewed as undermining the quality of life for 100 percent Americans. These groups, along with native-born Protestants who disagreed with Klan views, were associated with political corruption and other forms of criminal behavior – especially the sale and use of illegal liquor during this era of Prohibition. The struggle against perceived enemies of America was constant and unrelenting, and it was a dominant feature of Genesee County life throughout much of the 1920s.

This battle raged largely in the open. This was not the earlier Klan operating in the darkness of night. Very public events, such as parades and carnivals, were a regular feature of the Klan. Both men and women were openly honest about their membership and commitment to the ideals of the Klan. Even those who did not join expressed their support, be it at church functions or what appeared to be harmless county fairs. As evidenced by occupations listed at enrollment, the Klan drew upon many different occupations. This was a movement presenting itself as mainstream; as something straight out of the Business District on Main Street in Batavia. Nevertheless, despite its efforts to be a radical version of the Elks, the

Odd Fellows, the Masons, or even Rotary, they remained committed to ridding the county of their version of un-American people and ideas. Theirs was the local expression of the national movement of the Klan in the 1920s. The Klan for a time in the 1920s held great emotional appeal. While the Klan today is certainly not what it was in the 1920s, one can only speculate about just how much the sentiments drawing county residents to the Klan then are still apparent in the early twenty-first century.

*Chapter Thirteen. In Western New York? The Ku Klux Klan in Genesee County in the 1920s*

- (1) The *Batavia Daily News*, 2 September 1924, p. 1.
- (2) Unpublished report of Batavia City Historian Ruth McEvoy, 1982, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 391.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) The *Batavia Daily News*, 9 October 1918, p. 7.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) "Ku Klux Klan Held Its Semi-Annual election Saturday," *Batavia Daily News*, 9 October 1918, p. 7.
- (7) Unpublished report of Batavia City Historian Ruth McEvoy, 1982, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 5.
- (8) "K.K.K. to Patrol Road for Bootleggers," *Batavia Daily News*, 25 April 1924, p. 2.
- (9) Unpublished report of Batavia City Historian Ruth McEvoy, 1982, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 392.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) "Klansmen without Their Masks Visited South Alabama Church, Presented

a Purse to Pastor," *Batavia Daily News*, 28 April 1924, n.p.

(12) "Ku Klux Klan Speaker Addressed 300 in Batavia," *Batavia Daily News*, 15 April 1924, n.p.

(13) "Batavia Ku Klux Klan Branch Starting with Fifty Members Heard Address Of Potentate," *Batavia Daily News*, 17 November 1922, n.p.

(14) "Principles of Ku Klux Klan Denounced from the Pulpit by the Rev. George K. Warren," *Batavia Daily News*, 27 November 1922, n.p.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Ibid.

(18) "Batavia Klan Officers Named," and "Genesee County Names Found on Klan List," *Rochester Evening Journal and the Post Express*, 20 September 1924, p. 1.

(19) Ibid. Also see a pamphlet entitled "Western New York and Buffalo List (of the) K.K.K.", housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.d.

(20) Portion of a poem housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.d., n.p.

(21) *Batavia Daily News*, 2 September 1924, n.p.

(22) Ibid.

(23) Ibid.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Ibid.

- (26) *Batavia Daily News*, 2 September 1924, p. 4.
- (27) *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- (28) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- (29) *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- (30) Admission Questionnaire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Genesee County, Genesee County, New York, housed in the Genesee County History Archives.
- (31) A good overview here is that of Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017), especially p. 73.
- (32) "Flaming Cross Planted Close to Courthouse," *Batavia Daily News*, 8 April 1924, n.p.
- (33) "Fiery Cross on a Hill," *Batavia Daily News*, 19 August 1924, n.p.
- (34) *Ibid.*, n.p.
- (35) Unpublished report of Batavia City Historian Ruth McEvoy, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, 1982, pp. 392-393.
- (36) *Ibid.*, p. 393.
- (37) See Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, p. 30. Also refer to Mary Ann Clawson's *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989).
- (38) 13 September 1917, p. 6.
- (39) 18 September 1917, p. 3.
- (40) "Ku Klux Klan's Finances," *Batavia Daily News*, n.d., n.p.

- (41) 7 March 1918, p. 2.
- (42) "Batavia Ku Klux Klan Branch Starting with Fifty Members Heard Address Of Potentate," *Batavia Daily News*, 17 November 1922, n.p.
- (43) This was in response to a question concerning his refusal to become a member of the Klan in 1924. See the unpublished report of co-historians Lois M. Brockway and Shirley F. Kern of Pembroke, 1981, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.p.
- (44) Ruth MCEvoy's unpublished report of 1982, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, p. 394.
- (45) "Ku Klux Klan Conducted Initiation Ceremonies," *Batavia Daily News*, 15 October 1923, n.p.
- (46) "Klode Card," housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.d.
- (47) Co-historians Brockway and Kern of Pembroke, unpublished report of 1981, housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.p.
- (48) Ruth McEvoy, *History of the City of Batavia* (Batavia, New York: Hodgins Printing Company, 1993), p. 62.
- (49) Ibid.
- (50) "Ladies' Missionary Society and the Ku Klux Klan this Week," *Batavia Daily News*, (no specific date in 1917), n.p.
- (51) Undated and unlabeled announcement housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.p.
- (52) "Klan Services at South Alabama," *Batavia Daily News*, (no specific date in 1923), n.p.
- (53) Ibid.

- (54) "North Bergen Officers," *Batavia Daily News*, (no specific date in 1918), n.p., and an announcement in the *Batavia Daily News*, 20 March 1918, p. 9.
- (55) "Klipings, Komments, and Kriticisms," portion of a poem housed in the Genesee County History Archives, n.d., n.p.
- (56) Admission oath to the Ku Klux Klan Picnic at the Batavia Fair Grounds, 1 September 1924, housed in the Genesee County History Archives.

