

The mystery of the Pajaro Valley KKK

Local historian Sandy Lydon has been tracing the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Santa Cruz County during the 1920s. Lydon begins this second of two reports by recalling a visit with a Sacramento collector who offered him KKK artifacts, which gave him some insight into the Pajaro Valley KKK.

I WAS VERY skeptical when I met with the Sacramento collector. After all, how could I be certain that the Ku Klux Klan artifacts he had were genuine? And, in light of the fact that I had heard very little about Klan activity in the Pajaro Valley in the 1920s, how was he so certain that the materials were from Watsonville and not some nameless mid-western town?

After exchanging pleasantries he set what looked like a large cardboard pizza box on my desk. The first item he pulled out was a small, white book titled "Kloran: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan." As I opened the booklet, I entered the secret world of the KKK of the 1920s.

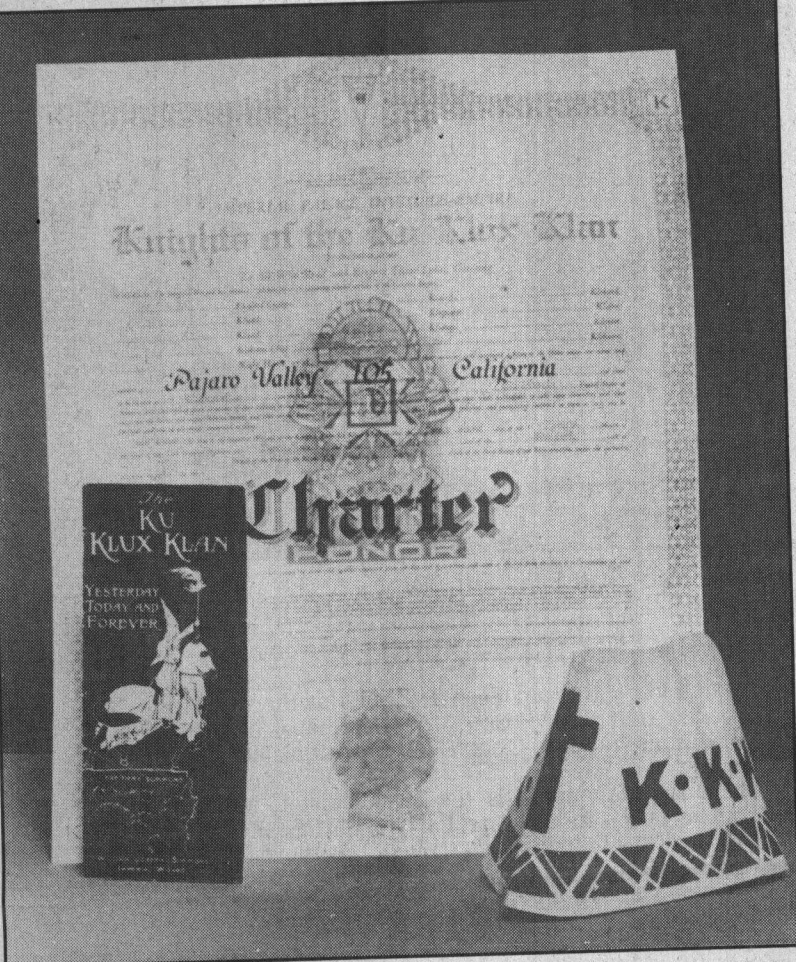
IN 1915, William J. Simmons was struck by a speeding automobile and laid up in the hospital for three months. While staring at the hospital ceiling he invented the nomenclature and rigmarole for the KKK. He became obsessed with the letters "KL" and everywhere he could, he started words and phrases with those letters.

He was not above borrowing ideas from other culture and religions, so the official book of ritual (a "sacred book") for his new Klan became the Kloran, an obvious play on the Islamic Koran. A Klan meeting became a Klonklave (conclave), the local unit was a Klavern (based on the word cavern), a Klan parade was a Klavalkade, and the Vice President of the Klan was a Klaliff (based on bailiff.) (This "K" thing reached its peak when the KKK held a huge statewide convention in Kokomo, Ind., because the town had not one but two Ks in its name.) Stenciled in red at the top of this copy of the Kloran is the word Klaliff, so this book belonged to the vice president of a Klavern.

The Kloran begins with an exhortation by Simmons to keep the rituals secret, and then what follows is an amazing description of the opening ceremony of a Klavern Klonklave and the ritual for initiating ("naturalizing") a new Klan member. A dispassionate reading of the Kloran suggests a secret club that might have been invented by third graders in a back yard fort. When Cabrillo sociologist Jack Stevens read through the rituals he remarked that it reminded him very much of the rituals of his college fraternity. Well, if nothing else, Simmons was a fraternalist, and in 1915, the Klan was founded as just another lodge.

Another of Simmons' visions, as he lay in his hospital bed, was the symbol of the fiery cross, a major part of KKK rituals both indoors and out. The original Reconstruction Klan never used a flaming cross as a symbol, but, after reading about the Scottish clans using them in Sir Walter Scott's "The Lady of the Lake," Simmons added what became, next to the hoods, the most powerful symbol of the 1920s Klan.

Indoors the Klan used electric lights, while outdoors they often used tree trunks or telephone poles wrapped with kerosene-soaked rags. Part of the ritual required that the cross be lit only after the singing of the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers." Then, once the cross was afire, the assembled Klansmen extended their left arms and sang "The Old Rugged Cross." (The first time I saw a photograph of a '20s cross burning I thought



Artifacts from the Pajaro Valley Klavern No. 105.

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

the negative had been reversed. The echoes of 1930s Germany are eerie.)

THE COLLECTOR then pulled two hoods from the box. The first was the classic formal hood with red tassel, a small red cross stitched on the wearer's right and the letters CAL (for the California Klan) on the left. There is a stiff, treated muslin liner that keeps the hood erect.

The second hood has neither the cross nor the embroidery, and the front panel was cut away so that the wearer would be exposed. When states and local jurisdictions began to legislate against the Klan in the mid-1920s, their most powerful tool was to pass anti-mask laws, thus stripping away the element of secrecy from the KKK. When the KKK staged a massive march in Washington, D.C. in 1925, they were permitted to do so only after agreeing to leave their faces exposed. This second hood probably was the "public" hood.

Then, he brought out a heavy, old-fashioned embosser, the kind of thing you would see in a notary's office. He suggested that I put a piece of paper under it and press down and read the imprinted words — and there it was — around the outside are the words, "Pajaro Valley Knights of the Ku Klux Klan," and inside, around the Klan seal, "No. 105," the number of the Klavern. Whoever owned and wore the hood was the second highest ranking member of the Pajaro Valley Klan and the keeper of its seal.

Finally, from a cardboard tube, the collector pulled a tightly wound piece of parchment. I unrolled and spread the paper on my

desk, and there was the charter of the Pajaro Valley Klavern Number 105. A gold seal is at the bottom, and on the right is the signature of Hiram W. Evans, the Klan's Second Imperial Wizard. (Evans, a Texas dentist, had forced Simmons out of the Klan's top position in a 1922 power struggle.) Above the Klan seal in the center of the charter is the date Dec. 22, 1926. Above the date are the names of the 13 Pajaro Valley men who were the founding members. The materials are genuine. The Klaliff had packed away the seal, the hoods, the charter in a box, probably never expecting them to see the light of day again.

How did this Sacramento man come to have them? He had heard through the collector network that an estate sale was going to be held in a small, Sierra foothill town. At that sale he purchased several trunks and found this Klan material in them. Knowing that the material might be more valuable to people living in the area from whence it came, he left word of his find out through the network, and you know the rest.

THE PUZZLE in all this for me is trying to understand the reasons for the KKK organizing so late in the Pajaro Valley.

The national Klan had been rocked by a series of lurid scandals, particularly the conviction of the head of the Indian Klan for murder in 1925. National membership was on the decline in 1926. Immigration of southern and eastern Europeans had been curbed in the immigration quota law of 1924, so that issue of the Klan agenda was coming under control. The number of African Americans in the Pajaro Valley in 1926 was extremely small, but the Chinese, Japanese and Filipino population was larger. Possibly the Pajaro Valley Klan was organized against them.

A careful reading of the Watsonville newspaper for the months before and after December 1926, produced only one clue. On Dec. 31, a small ad appears at the bottom of page five, consisting of a simple black square, the letters KKK and the phrase "Watch This Space." Then, on Jan. 3, 1927, the square reappears with letters KKK and the phrase "Irish People

Watch This Space." And then nothing.

One of the requirements of being a Klan member in the 1920s was birth in the United States, so whether the phrase "Irish People Watch This Space" is an exhortation for Irish Americans to consider membership or a warning to Irish immigrants is not clear. The real intent, purpose and activities of the Pajaro Valley Klavern 105 are still a mystery.

What is not a mystery is the breadth, depth, power and influence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

Riding on the wave of fear that white Anglo-Saxon America was going to hell in a hand basket and being inundated by Catholics, Jews and the hordes from southern and eastern Europe, the Klan tapped into that rich artery of nativism and racism that runs just beneath the surface of America's skin. The Klan came to every corner of America because its ideals of white supremacy were the ideals of a majority of the American people at that time. The Klan came to Santa Cruz County because Santa Cruz County was part of America.

It does not trouble me that the Klan existed in Santa Cruz and Watsonville in the 1920s. Nor even surprise me. With its powerful franchising mechanisms and its ability to appeal to the basest fears of the American people, the Klan was really just a mirror for what America was all about at that time. What does trouble me is that the organization is experiencing a resurgence in the 1990s, probing once again for that artery.

Klan demonstrations on the Martin Luther King holiday last Monday confirm that there are some Americans who still support the Klan's tenants and tactics. White supremacy is still the fundamental building block of the KKK, but the Klan has also added gays to its list of targeted peoples.

In 1915, while lying in his Atlanta hospital bed, W.J. Simmons coined the Klan's motto — "Yesterday, Today and Forever." The birth of the Klan and the attendant rigmarole seem ludicrous when viewed from 1993. But, so far, Simmons has been right. The Klan is still alive in America.

THE NAMES: I have thought long and hard about the issue of the 13 names on the Klan charter. Should I list them here or not? Some of my friends in the newspaper business argued that I should. If we can publish the names of living persons charged with crimes, what possible harm could it do to publish the names of men (mostly now deceased) who joined an organization in the 1920s?

Historians and others were not so sure. They suggested that to make the names public could bring considerable pain to residents of the Pajaro Valley who probably don't even know that their grandfather belonged to the Klan way back then. For the moment I have decided to side with the latter. The original charter is locked away in a safe deposit box, and the copy I am using is a color photocopy with the names removed. I would appreciate hearing from any of you if you have advice for me on this issue.

Sandy Lydon is a member of the history faculty at Cabrillo College.

In part one of this story on Jan. 10, there was reference to a 1924 Klan meeting at Twin Lakes Baptist Church. The reference was incorrect. The meeting was held at the Tabernacle owned by the North American Baptist Assembly. The present-day Twin Lakes Baptist Church was incorporated in 1946 and is a member of the Conservative Baptist Association, not the North American Baptist Assembly.