

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

Special Collections Finding Aids

Special Collections

6-12-2021

MSS0138. Ku Klux Klan collection finding aid

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/speccoll-findingaids>

Recommended Citation

"MSS0138. Ku Klux Klan collection finding aid" (2021). *Special Collections Finding Aids*. 19.
<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/speccoll-findingaids/19>

This Finding Aid is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections at University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Special Collections Finding Aids by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khggerty@memphis.edu.

**University of Memphis Libraries
Special Collections Department**

126 Ned R. McWherter Library
Memphis, TN 38152 - 3250
Phone: (901) 678 - 2210
E-mail: lib_sc@memphis.edu

Ku Klux Klan collection

Title: Ku Klux Klan collection
Collection No: MSS.138
Extent: 1.5 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: 1920-1974 and undated.

Abstract: The collection consists of materials which fragmentarily document the activities of Ku Klux Klan groups in Tennessee and beyond.

Processed by: Eleanor McKay and Phyllis Dotson, 1982; James E. Montague, 2002; Gerald Chaudron, 2014, 2017.

Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: Ku Klux Klan collection, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: November 2017

Administrative information

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was organized in May or early June of 1866 in a law office in Pulaski, Tennessee, by six bored Confederate veterans (the "immortal six"). The Ku Klux Klan was, in its inception, a social club for young men seeking amusement and entertainment. It adopted similar oaths and rituals popular with college fraternities of the day, including oaths of secrecy, mystical initiations, and outlandish titles for officers, costumed ceremonies, and pranks. The name "Ku Klux" was a derivation of the Greek word *kuklos*, meaning "band" or "circle." For the remainder of 1866 there is little evidence that the Klan was involved in vigilantism as new "dens" were formed for social purposes in many of the surrounding counties.

In February 1867 Tennessee enfranchised freedmen, and Republicans established local chapters of the Union League, a political arm of the party, to mobilize the new black voters. In some respects the KKK became the conservative ex-Confederates' answer to the Union League, a rallying point for white Democrats determined to drive freedmen, Republicans, and their allies from the polls. During the spring of 1867 the KKK's innocent beginnings began to give way to intimidation and violence as some of its members sought to keep freedmen in their traditional place.

The official reorganization of the Klan into a political and terrorist movement began in April 1867, when the state's Democratic Party leadership met in Nashville. An invitation sent by the Pulaski den to others in the state called for a gathering of members at the Maxwell House hotel, where Tennessee's conservative Democrats provided for greater control of an expanding KKK. A prescript established administrative protocols and emphasized the need for secrecy. Subsequently, former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was elected the first and only Grand Wizard. In 1868 a revised prescript declared the Klan the defender of the Constitution of the United States and the protector of the orphans and widows of Confederate dead. Klansmen were required to swear that they had never been members of the Union army, the Union League, or the Republican Party, and they supported re-enfranchising ex-Rebels and upholding the South's constitutional rights.

Prior to 1868, however, the KKK essentially assumed a defensive posture aimed at protecting the white community from the perceived threats represented by Union Leaguers and the state militia. Indeed, early in 1867, some white conservatives still hoped to win over black voters to the Democratic cause. When the freedmen flocked to the Republican banner during the elections of that year, however, conservative Democrats, incensed over their political losses, decided that a new strategy of intimidation and violence was needed.

The violent tactics of the KKK soon spread to parts of Middle and West Tennessee, where bushwhacking and general lawlessness were already common, and throughout much of the South in 1868. Klan activity was especially strong in Giles, Humphreys, Lincoln, Marshall, and Maury Counties in Middle Tennessee, and Dyer, Fayette, Gibson, Hardeman, and Obion in West

Tennessee. The Klan was less successful in Unionist and Republican East Tennessee, with the exception of some activity in the vicinity of Bristol, a pocket of pro-Confederate sentiment.

Irrespective of time and place, a major problem of the Klan's expansion from a leadership standpoint was a lack of control. Once the dens set aside social activity as their primary purpose and took up political terrorism and racial violence, they fed on local reaction to threats to conservative political control and white supremacy rather than to any coordinated direction on the state, or even county, level. This aspect of the KKK's character became clear when the violence did not disappear after the elections of 1868 but continued with little or no link to political activity. Klansmen attacked, whipped, and murdered black men and women whenever they found their activities offensive, no matter how innocent or trifling these putative transgressions were. Freed people who exhibited too much independence, established schools, or assumed positions of leadership were singled out for harsh treatment.

In an effort to curb the violent acts of the KKK, Governor William G. Brownlow called for an extra session of the legislature which, following the investigation of a Ku Klux Klan committee, reestablished the militia and gave him the power to declare martial law in any county necessary. Members of the Klan and other secret societies engaged in terrorism were subject to arrest by any citizen, a five-hundred-dollar fine, and imprisonment for up to five years under a so-called Ku Klux Klan Act. Brownlow, who wished to see prominent KKK leaders and ex-Confederates tried and convicted in order to make examples of them, employed a Cincinnati private detective, Seymour Barmore, to infiltrate the Klan and gather names. When Barmore's body turned up in the Duck River on February 20, 1869, with a rope around his neck and bullet hole in his head, Brownlow declared martial law on the same day in nine counties in Middle and West Tennessee. Five days later Brownlow resigned as governor to fill a seat in the U.S. Senate. Subsequently, Nathan Bedford Forrest, believing that the Klan had served its purpose, called for the members to destroy their robes.

After a hiatus of almost fifty years, the revival of the Ku Klux Klan at Stone Mountain, Georgia, in 1915 stimulated a new interest in the KKK in Tennessee, the South, and the nation. In the aftermath of World War I, the Red Scare, the Scopes trial, and rising nativism, many conservatives saw the KKK as the protector of traditional American values. Many working-class whites in Tennessee's urban areas, feeling threatened by economic competition from blacks and immigrants, joined the Klan. By 1923 over two thousand white men had enrolled in Knoxville, for example, and soon became involved in local and statewide elections. The political influence of the KKK in Tennessee helped elect Governor Austin Peay in 1923 and U.S. Senator Lawrence D. Tyson in 1924. Membership declined sharply during the Great Depression, however, and the Klan disbanded as a national organization in 1944.

During the post-World War II years various groups of individuals have organized under the Klan name and in turn have disbanded, depending upon conservative white reaction to perceived threats during the civil rights and school desegregation movements. Jerry Thompson, a journalist for the Nashville Tennessean, infiltrated the KKK and in 1980 and 1981 produced an award-winning series of newspaper articles on Klan activity. In 1997 the U.S. Klans, Knights of the Ku

Klux Klan, Inc., received incorporation from the secretary of state's office as a nonprofit organization at Camden, Tennessee.

Source: Wetherington, Mark V. Ku Klux Klan. *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=756>

Scope and contents

The collection fragmentarily documents the activities of Klan groups in Tennessee and beyond. It includes blank by-laws forms for local chapters, sample pieces of letterhead, membership forms, an oath of allegiance, and flyers, as well as four items of correspondence. The two 1923 letters concern businessmen exploiting their mutual Klan connections; a 1967 letter advertising a Klan-sponsored Christmas card; and a copy of a 1968 letter from a Mississippi klan leader condemning the killing of Kathy Ainsworth by Meridian police. There are also publications by and about the Klan and several pieces of clothing worn by Klan members.

Subject terms

Bowers, Samuel Holloway, 1924-2006.
Ku Klux Klan (1915-)
Women of the Ku Klux Klan.

Inventory

Box 1

Folder

- 1 By-laws of Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, circa 1920? Blank form for chapter use.
- 2 Correspondence:
 - Exalted Cyclops, Klan 3, Realm of Oklahoma, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Musokee, Okla., to President, Oklahoma Free State Fair Board, Musokee, Okla., 1923 September 10. Gives thanks for Klavern being given use of fairgrounds on August 28, 1923, to hold open air initiation.
 - R.E. Collier, Kligrapp, Klan 101, Realm of Texas, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Fort Worth, Tex., to W.A. Riggs, Aransas Pass, Tex., 1923 June 22. Responding to inquiry about produce commission merchants, recommends two possibilities.
 - United Klans of America, Inc., Tuscaloosa, Ala., to Memphis State University Special Collections, 1967 November 2. Flyer and sample of Christmas card "Keep Christ in Christmas".

- Sam H. Bowers, Jr., Laurel, Miss., to Tom E. Tucker, Meridian Police Department, Meridian, Miss., 1968 July 1 (copy). Bowers, Imperial Wizard of Mississippi's White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, condemns the killing of Kathy Ainsworth by police the previous night.
- 3 Flyers for United Klans of America meetings, 1966, 1967. Meetings in Memphis and Tipton County addressed by Robert M. Shelton, Raymond R. Anderson and Doyle Ellington (7).
- 4 Letterheads, undated. Office of the Grand Dragon, Realm of California, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Inc.; Imperial Palace, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Department of propagation.
- 5 Membership forms, Klode card, oath of allegiance, undated.
- Publications:
- 6 Newsletter: "Klan News", Memphis Chapters, United Klans of America, Inc., 1966. 5 issues.
- 7 Magazine: *The Courier*, Atlanta, Ga., vol.11, no. 2, 1935 January.
- 8 Pamphlet: "Americans Take Heed!", Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1922.
- 9 Magazine: Bentley, Max, "The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana and in Texas", *McClure's Magazine*, vol.57, No. 1, 1924 May, pp.11-33.
- 10 Other publications and flyers distributed by the White Rescue Service, Memphis, circa 1966.
- 11 Women of the Ku Klux Klan forms, letterhead, undated.
- 12 Church announcement card: Grace Methodist Church, Tenth and Lindsay, unknown city, undated (1920s?). Includes meeting on "Is the Ku Klux Klan a Good Thing".
- 13 Postcard: B/w photograph of mounted klansmen produced in Oklahoma. Addressed to E.E. Zavasky, Iowa, 1922.
- 14 Newsletter: "Town Crier-U.S.A.", Southern Anti-Communism Crusade, Memphis, 1966. (1 issue)
- OS 1** Movie advertisements: "Legion of Terror", Columbia Pictures, 1936. (2)
- Artifacts:
- 15 Circular metal pendant: "KKK member in good standing".
- OS Box 1** White cotton gown with attached hood, with blue delta symbol sewn on front. Red cloak and sash worn by a klanswoman.
- Box 2**
- Publications:
- 1 *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Atlanta, Ga., Vol. 1, No. 42, 43, 44, 47-50, 52; Vol. 2, No. 2, 4, 5, 8, 11, 13, 1924.
- OS 1** *The Fiery Cross*, Atlanta, Ga., Vol. 3, No. 3, 1941 July; Vol. 4, No. 5, 1942 July/August.
- The Fiery Cross*, Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1966 (5 issues); Vol. 3, No. 1, 1968 January; Vol. 8, No. 4-12, 1973; 1974 January/February/March.
- 2 "The White Man's Civilization" by Mary Hannah Gordon, undated. Copy of manuscript by General George W. Gordon's (1836-1911) wife claiming he was the first Grand Wizard of the Invisible Empire. Original in Memphis Pink Palace museum.