

## THE K.K.K. IN ARLINGTON IN THE 1920S

By

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Ku Klux Klan Klaven No. 6, of Ballston, Virginia was active during the 1920s. On several occasions its activity was reported by local papers. In 1922, the *Washington Tribune*<sup>1</sup> printed a threatening letter received by a "prominent school teacher." The text read:

Some night when you are peacefully dreaming in your downey [sic] couch of the charming BABOONS you have been instructing, and sniffing in the delightful odor exuding from their bodies, you will be rudely awakened by GHOSTS standing on either side of your couch and after you have been gagged, you will be borne to a tree nearby, tied, stripped and given thirty lashes on your ETHIOPIAN back, and left to be found by some passer-by.

WE are for law and order just so long as you aforesaid ETHIOPIANS behave, but when you thrust yourselves on your superiors, the white people, your doom is sealed.

You had better consult with your advisers, the W & Va. Railroad officials, and say to them that you will not be their cats-paw.

A word to the wise is sufficient.

[Signed] K.K.K.<sup>2</sup>

The teacher forwarded the letter to the secretary of the Fairfax County branch of the NAACP, which in turn provided a copy to the *Tribune*.

Klaven No. 6 probably also participated in national Klan activities. Presumably, some of the members were among the 30,000 marchers in the August 8, 1925 Ku Klux Klan parade. The day after the parade, an initiation ceremony was held at the Arlington horse show grounds, and a cross was burned.<sup>3</sup> It would be hard to believe that Klaven No. 6 had nothing to do with the event.

On April 16, 1926, Ballston Klan No. 6 raised a flag at the Lyon Park Elementary School. More than 100 members, headed by a band, marched into a Parent Teachers Association reception. The grand kleagle made an address, and presented a flag to the chairman. After the chairman responded, the Klan had a flag raising ceremony, and marched away.<sup>4</sup>

On September 19, 1927, about 500 Klan members—men, women and children—attended a Klan wedding at an Arlington home near Garrison

Road. Most of them had put on full regalia in response to the summons to gather. When they set out, they did not know the purpose of the gathering.<sup>5</sup>

The wedding of Miss Laura Gordon to Washington, DC attorney H.G. Harmon was performed by a justice of the peace from Potomac, MD. During the ceremony, the bride and groom stood before "an electrically illuminated flaming cross".<sup>6</sup> They were dressed in full regalia, although their masks were rolled up. Three children, dressed in white caps and gowns, were the attendants. The ceremony was led by the grand kleagle of the Ballston Post. The Ballston Post was also represented by a company of cavaliers, and by the post band. Congratulations were offered to the couple by the grand titan of the realm of Virginia. He also conveyed the grand dragon's regrets for not being present. When the grand titan addressed the crowd, he advised the members to "stand by the cause no matter what happens, as 'it is right, just and good.'"<sup>7</sup>

In Arlington in the 1920s, the Klan was even listed in the telephone book. A surviving copy of the 1927-28 *Polk's Washington Suburban Directory* listed the Ku Klux Klan as an organization in Ballston. Ku Klux Klan-Virginia Klaven No. 6 met Thursday nights at Junior Order Hall. W.O. Boxley was named as the secretary.<sup>8</sup>

The shadow of Klan activity affected the outcome of an Arlington county election. *The Washington Tribune* said that the 1927 elections in Arlington turned on the Negro votes.<sup>9</sup> The *Tribune* observed that the Negroes supported the Democratic ticket, and in each case the Democratic candidate was elected over his opponent. The paper also said that "The Negro voters resented the intermeddling in Arlington county politics by Crandall Mackey, and his raising of the Ku Klux Klan as a bugaboo to scare Negroes into supporting his candidates."<sup>10</sup>

On one occasion, upcoming Klaven No. 6 activities received news coverage in the local press. The May 5, 1928, evening *Star* announced that the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan would deliver an address on May 6th.<sup>11</sup> The speech would be given at the kloreo of sorrow, the memorial service for Klan members who had died. The announcement added that the ceremonies would be held as part of a three day celebration of "the founding of the order in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1886 and the revival of the present Klan in 1915."<sup>12</sup> The location of the ceremony was given as "the field." Apparently, the location of the field was known to *Star* readers.

Klaven No. 6 activities can be better understood in light of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan national headquarters. During part of the 1920s, the national headquarters was located in Washington, DC. The headquarters

moved to 1325 Massachusetts Avenue on June 16th, 1925. Fifty employees were transferred from Atlanta, Georgia, to serve as executive staff. The national secretary's office, the robe and regalia plants, and some of the printing operations remained in Atlanta. These branches of the Klan operations employed about 150 people.<sup>13</sup>

The *Fellowship Forum* and the *Klan Courier* were two Klan publications printed at 219 G Street, NW, for national distribution. An example of the *Fellowship Forum* editorial outlook was reprinted in the June 26, 1925 *Washington Tribune*.<sup>14</sup> The editorial from the May 2nd *Fellowship Forum* stated that it was impossible for the Negro race to produce a man with the intelligence of a white man. The editorial said in part "(the) man is simply a fool who will contend that at this time, a negroid strain can produce intellectual giants equal to those of the white race. Scientific investigation has clearly demonstrated that such a thing is impossible."<sup>15</sup> *Tribune* readers probably did not agree.

The August 8th Klan parade was the biggest event of the summer of 1925. It was heralded in the press in June, when the *Washington Star* announced "District Grants Klan Permit to Parade 200,000 Men in City."<sup>16</sup> The District Commissioners approved the parade permit with the stipulation that the marchers would not wear masks. They specified a route running from the Peace Monument on the Capital Grounds, proceeding east on Pennsylvania Avenue to 15th Street, and then concluding at the Ellipse. The NAACP and the Protestant Knights were among the organizations writing letters of protest. Many individuals sent telegrams to Clarence S. Darrow, William Jennings Bryan, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Cardinal James F. O'Connell.<sup>17</sup> There is a compilation in the *Washingtoniana* collection of quotations from newspapers all over the country, offering their comments on the Klan parade. A *Baltimore Sun* editorial said, "Washington languishes, a fit place for hookworms and sleeping sickness. Into that depressing solemnity comes the Ku Klux Klan to kick up a few didoes. Deprive it of its fiery cross? Gosh, no!" The *Syracuse Herald* said: "Ku-Kluxism is least harmful and menacing when the sun shines on it. Only in the dark can it make trouble. For that reason, we say, let them parade."<sup>18</sup>

Anticipation of the parade increased over the summer. The July 11th *Washington Tribune* reported that Col. C.O. Sherrill, the officer in charge of D.C. Buildings and Grounds, had given the Klan permission to hold night ceremonies at the Sylvan Theater, but gave an order against burning a cross on the Washington Monument grounds.<sup>19</sup> Tensions rose that summer when an anti-Klan speaker was arrested on July 22.<sup>20</sup> The *Tribune* later expressed concern that the parade would bring "lawless

people into town, who were accustomed to disregarding the rights of Negroes.”<sup>21</sup> They also feared that when the parade actually got underway the Klan might ignore their promises to parade without masks, and that a small incident could develop into a full scale riot.<sup>22</sup>

When the parade actually happened, 20,000 unmasked klansmen participated.<sup>23</sup> *Outlook* magazine correspondent Dixon Merritt reported that the parade had proceeded in an orderly fashion. It was the only parade he had seen at that point that started on time. It also was the only parade he had seen where there were no gaps or hitches in the lines, and that did not choke at the turn from the width of Pennsylvania Ave. to the narrower 15th Street.<sup>24</sup> The *Washington Post* described it as “one of the greatest demonstrations the city had ever known.”<sup>25</sup> The day’s activities ended with a service at the Washington Monument. The *Tribune* headline read: “Praying for rain, the klansmen were drenched.”<sup>26</sup> The irony did not seem to be lost on the *Tribune* editor.

In 1926, the Klan held a “Klanvocation” to elect officers for the national K.K.K. The sessions were held in the Washington auditorium over a period of three days. A parade on Monday was scheduled to open the gathering; the Klan hoped it would be as successful as the 1925 parade.<sup>27</sup> However, when the parade took place, it had half the marchers of the 1925 parade, and drew much less attention. The *Washington Tribune* commented “Klan Parade Proves Dull and Tiresome.”<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the 1920s, the legal climate in which the Klan had operated began to change. In November 1928, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a New York case which required the Ku Klux Klan to provide sworn copies of their rosters to the secretary of state.<sup>29</sup> In upholding the Walker law, the court said that the difference in character between the K.K.K. and other secret societies justified the difference in treatment.<sup>30</sup> Legislation was introduced in Congress that December which made it a felony for “any two or more persons to conspire together or go in disguise upon the public highway or the premises of another with the intent to prevent or intimidate any citizen in the free exercise of his rights as a citizen.” Offenders would be subject to “a fine not to exceed \$5,000 and imprisonment not to exceed 10 years.” A bill containing these provisions was passed in 1948, and became Title 18, Sections 241 and 242 of the U.S. Code.<sup>31</sup>

In 1929, the *Washington Tribune* reported that the Klan headquarters moved from Washington, DC, back to Atlanta. The editors commented “The Klan is on the wane and its move proves its struggle to maintain even a toe holt [sic]. This moving of the headquarters back South speaks eloquently for the changing sentiment toward the bigotry of the Klan.”<sup>32</sup>

The changes in legal climate and in public attitude would certainly have affected Klaven No. 6, of Ballston, Virginia, as it entered the 1930s.

### Notes and References

Janet Wamsley is a librarian for The International Brotherhood of Teamsters. She researched and wrote many of the labels for the Hume School Museum exhibit titled "*After the Great War: Reflections of Arlington in the 1920s*". She would like to express her appreciation to Sara Collins and the staff of the Virginiana Room of the Arlington County Public Library for their many suggestions. She would also like to thank Matthew B. Gilmore and the staff of the Washingtoniana Room of the Martin Luther King Public Library for their guidance and assistance.

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<sup>1</sup>The *Washington Tribune* was published in Washington, DC between 1921 and 1946. Its intended audience was the Negro, or what at that time was called the colored, community. It did boast, however, that it had the finest sports page in the East.

<sup>2</sup>*Washington Tribune*, May 6, 1922.

<sup>3</sup>*Washington Tribune*, August 15, 1925.

<sup>4</sup>*Washington Star*, April 16, 1926.

<sup>5</sup>*Washington Star*, September 19, 1927.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Polk's Washington Suburban Directory of Maryland and Virginia Towns Adjacent to the District of Columbia 1927-28* (R.L. Polk & Company, 1927), p. 530.

<sup>9</sup>*Washington Tribune*, November 11, 1927.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>"Evans Clair Speaker", *Washington Star*, May 5, 1928, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Washington Star*, June 17, 1925.

<sup>14</sup>*Washington Tribune*, June 6, 1925.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Washington Star*, June 17, 1925.

<sup>17</sup>*Washington Tribune*, July 4, 1925.

<sup>18</sup>"The Klan Walks in Washington", August 22, 1925, Washingtoniana files.

<sup>19</sup>*Washington Tribune*, July 11, 1925.

<sup>20</sup>*Washington Tribune*, July 25, 1925.

<sup>21</sup>*Washington Tribune*, August 1, 1925.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Washington Tribune*, August 15, 1925.

<sup>24</sup>Dixon Merritt, "The Klan on Parade: Editorial correspondence from Washington." *Outlook*, Vol. 140, August 19, 1925, pp. 553-554.

<sup>25</sup>*Washington Post*, November 29, 1982. When the Klan conceived a parade for Washington, DC in 1982, the *Post* printed a summary of their coverage of the 1925 Ku Klux Klan parade. The *Post* also said the parade had remained a legend.

<sup>26</sup>*Washington Tribune*, August 15, 1925.

<sup>27</sup>*Washington Star*, September 10, 1926.

<sup>28</sup>*Washington Tribune*, September 17, 1926.

<sup>29</sup>*New York v. Zimmerman*, 278 U.S. 184, 1928.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>31</sup>Title 18, U.S. Code, Sections 241 and 242. The language was based on a 1909 law, which had been based on law covering the Klan in its original founding.

<sup>32</sup>*Washington Tribune*, July 19, 1929.