
THE REVISED KU KLUX KLAN IN EAST TENNESSEE

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The Ku Klux Klan, born at Pulaski, Giles County, Tennessee, in 1865, became a widespread southern organization and one of the best-known organizations in the history of the United States. It had a short existence in the nineteenth century, but was reborn in the twentieth century when it experienced a longer history, with periodic reappearances after 1930.

The Klan was reborn atop Stone Mountain, Georgia, on Thanksgiving evening, 1915. The American flag fluttered in a cool breeze while a crude flickering cross illuminated a Bible open to the twelfth chapter of Romans. The small group pledged allegiance to the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Shortly thereafter, a preliminary charter was granted to the Klan by the state of Georgia (Jackson 4).

The leader of the group was William Joseph Simmons, an unsuccessful Methodist minister. Born at Harpersville, Alabama, he made a profound impact upon his native state, the South, and the nation. Simmons, a dreamer, projected a fraternal organization patterned after the romantic image of the original Ku Klux Klan. It was not until the 1920s, however, that the movement grew significantly. Conceived at a time when civic clubs of all types thrived and flourished, its secrecy and elaborate ritual appealed to many who felt lost in the masses; its colorful pageantry attracted numerous members and sympathizers. It was dedicated to what members believed to be one hundred per cent Americanism, white supremacy, and Protestantism (Snell 206).

By 1920 the Klan had enrolled 5,000 members, most of whom were in Georgia. Nationwide publicity for the Klan came in the fall of 1921 when Rowland Thomas and the *New York World* began a three-week expose of the organization with particular emphasis upon its more violent aspects. The series estimated that the organization had a membership of 500,000 in 45 states. That same year the United States House of Representatives began an investigation into the alleged financial abuses of the Klan, but congressmen found no evidence of misuse of funds (Jackson 12).

As a result of the newspaper stories and the congressional investigation, the fledgling organization "received a great deal of gratuitous and much needed advertising," which proved a boon to "recruiting." The Klan became a "familiar conversational topic," and the Atlanta headquarters "was deluged with applications," many of them on facsimile blanks printed in the *World* or sister publications. By 1922 more than 200 klaverns were chartered and membership soared from 100,000 to almost a million (Jackson 12).

The Klan in Tennessee was concentrated in the western and eastern divisions of the state, being introduced into Knoxville in the spring of 1921 when Kleagle Henry P. Fry recruited members there, in Johnson City, Bristol, and other upper East Tennessee cities. The Knoxville Klavern, chartered as Knoxville Klan No. 14, reached a

membership of 500 by fall. Knoxville has the unusual distinction of being one of the few communities for which membership records are available. Kenneth T. Jackson treated it as one of the city Klans (59-65).

This paper, however, focuses on the activities of the Klan in lower East Tennessee, principally in Chattanooga. Chattanooga was a city on the move. Business boomed during the war period, and a new International Harvester plant was constructed. The city's population doubled and approached 100,000 by the end of the 1920s. A local physician headed the Klan, and some of the leading citizens were members. However, the real strength of the Klan was concentrated among the working classes, who labored in the factories, foundries, and mills of East Chattanooga. The Chattanooga Klan was the fourth chapter organized in Tennessee. Its Committee on Moral Reform gave local law-enforcement officials a list of suspected bootleggers and focused much attention on morals. In the mind of Klansmen, however, the real enemies were the alien, the Jew, the Pope, and the Negro (Chalmers 152).

In January 1921, a strong rumor was circulating in Chattanooga that an organizer for the Klan was present in the city. An article in the Chattanooga *Times* was headlined "Ku Klux Klan Coming Here?" Observers expected that a group would be established in Chattanooga and surrounding towns. Klaverns were later begun at Cleveland (No. 12), Charleston, Benton, and other East Tennessee communities. The reporter concluded that the "wheels of the clan, which have been inoperative for fifty years, are now whirring vigorously" (Chattanooga *Times*, February 7, 1921, hereinafter referred to as *Times*).

An organizational meeting was planned for February 24 at the Odd Fellows Hall on West Seventh Street. Mayor Alex W. Chambliss was invited, but he declined to attend. A second organizational meeting was held on March 2 in the courthouse auditorium, which was reserved by S.A. Givens, "one of the chief Klan organizers from Atlanta." Admission was by invitation card only, and newsmen were not invited. However, Mayor Chambliss received another personal invitation by Mr. Givens, but again declined the offer (*Times*, February 26, March 2, 1921).

Reporters were briefed by Mr. Givens and P.E. Pafford, but they were not admitted to the meeting. Approximately 150 people attended the gathering; many of these came out of curiosity. However, most of those attending were from the ranks of labor. Business and professional men were noticeably absent (*Times*, March 3, 1921). The local group was designated as Chattanooga Klan No. 4, and organizers indicated that the Klan was in Chattanooga to stay (Jackson 12).

At this point Simmons had reached his organizational limits; therefore, Edward Young Clarke and Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler formed the Southern Publicity Association to promote the Klan. The pair broadened the program to include prejudices of "uncritical minds against the Catholic, the Jew, the Negro, the Oriental, and the recent immigrant." A 1920 agreement made Clarke imperial Keagle, and he would receive two dollars and fifty cents for each recruit. The Imperial Wizard was undoubtedly troubled by the personal antics of these associates, but he was "unable or unwilling to refuse them support." When well-known northern Klansmen called for their resignations, the northern Klansmen were banished. When the Chattanooga Klan passed a "treasonable resolution" against the pair, Chattanooga's charter was revoked. Tensions subsided after Mrs. Tyler resigned because of failing health, but they intensified again when Clarke admitted that he had been arrested many times (Jackson 9, 13).

In August 1921, 150 Knights marched in a "mirth-provoking" parade in Rossville, Georgia, just south of Chattanooga. The group was "led by a diminutive Knight mounted on a raw-boned little horse and armed with a squeaky trumpet." He was followed by a tall individual with a fiery cross, the American flag, and a "slow-moving procession of white-clad masked Knights." It might have been an impressive sight except that watchers laughed

when they noticed that most of the participants were "run down at the heels," indicating that many in the parade were out of work and were not local businessmen (*Times*, August 14, 1921).

Local observers reported that the Klan did not wish to be made into a political issue although they were actively trying to influence public elections and fill offices. It was reported that Horace Humphreys, and T.S. Hunter, Republican candidates for sheriff, were members of the "Invisible Empire." Humphreys was elected sheriff by a 2,151 vote margin over his opponent (*Times*, June 4, 1922).

In the 1923 municipal primaries the Klan took an active part in the campaign in which religious orthodoxy and anti-Catholicism were major issues. The incumbent city commission was composed of two Roman Catholics, a Jew, and an "undependable Presbyterian," who as head of the Department of Education permitted several Catholic teachers to be hired. A correspondent for the Baltimore *Herald* watched the approaching election with interest. He wrote that the Klan was in "its third or political phase" in East Tennessee and that the coming election would indicate whether it would gain a new lease on life or lapse into obscurity. The leaders of the hooded organization were making a desperate effort to stave off defeat but stood a chance to elect some of their members (*Times*, April 4, 1923). Local observers noted that the Invisible Empire had reached its perihelion "and [now] was traveling rapidly to its inevitable dissolution" (*Times*, April 5, 1923).

Each side pulled out all stops in the campaign that was characterized by two clearly delineated sides, the People's Ticket and the Klan's Ticket. It was rumored that if J.W. Abel were elected, the Klan would run the schools of the city. The Klan, however, was the author of its own defeat. The Klansmen antagonized the people so much that the voters united in opposition to the secret organization. Women voters waged a fight against the Klan. Mrs. Joe Cliff was selected to head up the workers who arranged the meeting on behalf of the present commissioners. J.B.F. Lowry said that "certain preachers in Chattanooga [were] desecrating the pulpit." The *Times* editorial entitled "Renouncing the Klan" quoted Pittsburgh pastor Dr. R.B. Umy, who said, when sixteen masked men entered his church, "Gentlemen, when you remove your disguise you may remain; otherwise you will have to go." The editor believed that that would have been a good local slogan as well (April 5, 1923).

The meeting, scheduled for the Billy Sunday tabernacle because the Bijou theater was too small, had the theme: "Americanism vs. Intolerance." It was expected to be the "biggest and perhaps the most interesting mass meeting a Chattanooga municipal campaign" had ever witnessed. An advertisement indicated that the "truth about the Ku-Klux" would be uncovered, and "all lovers of true Americanism [were] invited to be present." The Rotary Club passed a resolution disapproving of "any organization whose membership is secret and unknown to the people of the community" (*Times*, April 4, 5, 6, 1923).

Another editorial supported the meeting. It was good that the women were "organizing to put a quietus once and for all upon this demoralizing, hate-producing and community-destroying influence." D.L. Grayson presided at the meeting which attracted 4,000 persons. When W. I. Frierson asked the audience if two local heroes, both Catholics, were 100 percent Americans, the crowd cheered. When asked to stand up against "religious intolerance," 99 per cent rose to their feet (*Times*, April 7, 1923).

Another editorial on "Intolerance" concluded, "We must banish religious prejudice and fight out political battles in the domain of toleration and moderation or we are headed for troubled waters." A full-page ad in the same issue indicated that the "eyes of the world" were on Chattanooga. "Let's advertise her as a 100% American city with a majority against the Ku-Klux" (*Times*, April 9, 1923).

It was predicted that the heaviest voter turnout ever polled was anticipated, but the response exceeded expectations. More than 12,000 voters participated and defeated the Klan slate. The community's groups -- Jews, Catholics, blacks, and liberal Protestants -- voted against the Klan candidates because they feared the "mask more than the Pope." Blacks, who constituted a third of the city's inhabitants, flocked to the polls and gave impressive results in three precincts (*Times*, April 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 1923; Chalmers, 152). According to Henry P. Fry, Chattanooga manufacturers were opposed to the Klan because they felt that the organization might drive Negro workers to the North (92).

By November 1923, observers noted that the Klan was seemingly on the decline in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. With the political backset in Chattanooga, recent political losses in Memphis, and its inability to gain support in the approaching 1924 political struggles, the Klan in Tennessee was projected to lose its fight (*New York Times*, November 16, 1923).

When the Klan was introduced in Chattanooga in 1921, it was not taken seriously and almost disappeared. By 1922 the Klan was more established and drew mostly from blue-collar workers. The hooded order felt so firmly entrenched in 1923 that members challenged the incumbent municipal leadership. The community decided to meet the challenge and defeated the Klan candidates. The Klan continued to exist in Chattanooga, but its strength was spent.

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