The Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s: A Concentration on the Black Hills

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The Ku Klux Klan dates back to the period of hostility and complex confusion that appeared as a result of the Civil War. The Deep South was everywhere a scene of desolation. Physically the South had been ruined. Its few factories had been destroyed, its railroads torn apart, its cities gutted by fire. The land between Washington and Richmond was described as a desert. The most pathetic victims of the war, as always, were the people; many of whom had been reduced to begging for food and shelter. It was in this environment that a number of secret societies began to appear; variously known as the Pale Faces, the White Brotherhood, the Knights of the White Camillia, and—most famous of all—the Ku Klux Klan. ¹

This most notorious secret society had been formed at Pulaski, Tennessee, in December 1865 when six young men decided to form a club to alleviate their problem of idleness and to find amusement. They could have chosen almost any name for their group, but ended up using the Greek name for circle "kuklos."² They began to meet in secret places, to put on disguises, and to engage in much horseplay, which was a satisfying escape from the problems of the day.

The members soon discovered that their appearance had an unexpected effect upon the local Negroes and capitalized on it. They looked quite grotesque in their costumes and hideous masks. They rode through the countryside mounted on horseback claiming to be the dead soldiers from Shiloh who had recently risen from hell to return to keep the Negroes in their rightful place. The time was “rotten ripe,” it seemed to most whites, for the development of the Klan as a means to control the newly freed Negroes and their northern friends.

In April 1867 a collection of former Confederate soldiers, officers, and politicians met in Nashville, Tennessee, to form their movement and to provide a specific direction. Former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was chosen as the first Grand Imperial Wizard. At first their principle weapons were persuasion and fear, but inevitably varying degrees of violence were enlisted. The Klan throughout this period remained very much in the hands of local leadership with only nominal control held by Forrest and other national leaders. The rapid rise to power and the growing use of terror and violence led to an increasingly amoral attitude among many members.

By 1869 the Klan was both externally very successful and internally in a great deal of trouble. The quality of the members began to decline as the better citizens became disillusioned and dropped out to be replaced by the more lawless elements. It was impossible to retain control of an organization that was largely composed of autonomous units dedicated to the use of force. By January 1869, Imperial Wizard Forrest ordered the dissolution of the order. His explanation was that the Klan had become perverted in some localities and that public opinion was becoming unfavorable to masked orders. There was adequate evidence to support this position.

In a number of states important strides had already been made toward the restoration of white rule and most responsible leaders were willing to end the Klan activities. However, the Federal Force Act, martial law, mass arrest, and the growing


disapproval of responsible citizens were necessary to bring the Klan to an end, with only a few exceptions, by 1872. As General Forrest testified later, the Klan had been, in the eyes of most Southerners, basically a law and order organization. It had been formed and perpetuated to guarantee the South a way of life that was rapidly disappearing. The Klan’s former leadership asserted that it was a law and order movement because it was directed at the restoration of the proper order.5

Through the late 1870s and the 1880s, remnants of the Klan remained in the Deep South as a fraternal order. Then in the 1890s the growing fear of the alien and the supposed threat of the foreign born began to be felt. Many believed that the basic fault of all their domestic problems, from the industrial wage-price structure to political instability and anarchy, was the ever growing numbers of foreign born citizens. The aliens, for instance, were recruited as “scabs” to keep wages low and were taking over much of the western land. The undesirable aliens were at the root of many anarchistic activities such as inciting rebellion and bombings. In 1901 President William McKinley was killed by a self-professed anarchist who spoke with a foreign accent.

This growing fear of the foreign born caused a revival of nativism. Nativism has been defined by John Higham as “an intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign or un-American connections.”6 The nativistic movement became largely an antialien, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic movement. The membership was recruited from the white, native-born, small town oriented, Anglo-Saxon Protestant who claimed to be protecting the traditional American values.

At this crucial junction a media had to be found that would carry nativism across the United States as a national movement. The tradition of the Ku Klux Klan as the savior of the oppressed people and preserver of the past during the dark days of reconstruction was one of the treasured folk memories of

5. Ibid., p. 21.

many Southerners. Now Northerners were beginning to react to the problem of the immigrants and it was not unnatural that they too turned to the Ku Klux Klan as an instrument to guarantee the safety of the nation from alienism.

It was in this atmosphere of dissension and disillusionment that Thomas Dixon Jr. grew into manhood. Dixon, who had succeeded in many endeavors, had not been able to feel his own fulfillment until, to reach even greater audiences, he turned to literature. He drew on his own Carolinian experiences and told how the Carolinas had twice been saved from black degradation. His books *The Leopard’s Spots* in 1902 and a sequel *The Clansman, An Historic Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* in 1905 were hailed as literary successes and caused a considerable sensation. Many believed that *The Clansman* was too good to be hidden in the pages of a book and the plot was adopted to the stage. Again the story was very well received and it was proposed that it should be made into a movie. Dixon did not have the movie expertise or the money to finance the project, but David W. Griffith, a talented young director who had been looking for the right medium, found *The Clansman* much to his liking.

Working often without a detailed script, Griffith developed a three-hour saga that captured the imagination of the nation. With the music by Wagner, such stars as Mae Marsh and Lillian Gish, and battle scenes copied from the popular prints of Matthew Brady; Griffith created an early masterpiece. It began with the earliest period of Negro bondage in the United States, ran through the problems of succession, and then displayed the brilliant Civil War battle scenes. The story portrayed destitute Southern families during Sherman’s march through the South. Against this setting was the tender story of young lovers struggling to survive in the now prostrate South. After the war was over and the soldiers returned home, they found that northern reconstruction had already begun and the Negro was the instrument of the carpetbagger. Into this emotion-charged scene galloped the hooded Klansmen to rescue the fair damsel and the floundering South from complete degradation.

The picture was an unprecedented success, a national

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sensation. The title was changed by Griffith after an early showing to *The Birth of a Nation*. It appeared in Grand Forks, North Dakota in December 1915 and ran for a week to packed houses. 8 It ran in the Black Hills area in early 1916 and was billed as “D.W. Griffith’s Masterpiece, It is a Story of Romance. It is a Story of Adventure. It is Full of Human Interest and Emotion. Go to ‘The Birth of a Nation.’” 9 The movie grossed almost eighteen million dollars from its nationwide showing and set the stage for a revitalized version of the old Klan. There was criticism of the portrayal of the Klan as a savior of the people, but when it was highly praised by Chief Justice Edward White, a former Klansman, its future success was guaranteed. 10

It was in this electrically charged climate that the Klan was reborn in 1915, though not by Thomas Dixon or D.W. Griffith, but by an ex-Methodist circuit rider and revivalist lecturer, “Colonel” William J. Simmons of Atlanta. The Simmons revival depended upon the wide popularity of the movie. On Thanksgiving Eve 1915, shortly before the Atlanta showing of *The Birth of a Nation*, Simmons gathered on Stone Mountain with some old Klan members and nearly forty other men to form the new Invisible Empire. When the movie played in Atlanta, the billboard announced the organization of “The World’s Greatest Secret, Social, Patriotic, Fraternal, Beneficial Order.” 11 The revival of the long-defunct Ku Klux Klan had been launched.

For a time it was only a fraternal order that stressed Protestant, 100 percent Americanism, and the supremacy of the white race. As World War I began, the Klan worked to root out shirkers, idlers, alien enemies, and any other who might threaten the war effort. The Klan emerged from the war with several thousand new members, an ever growing treasury, and a new purpose—that of being a self-appointed white Protestant conscience. But Simmons was not inherently a fighter, his talent lay in devising fraternal ideas and rituals. Gutzon Borglum,
sculptor of mountains, student of men, and once high in the inner circle of the Klan, assessed Simmons as a dreamer who tended to surround himself with weak men.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1919, the Klan again received a shot in the arm when two public relations promoters saw the money making potential of a nationally organized Klan. They were Edward Young Clarke and Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler and, together with Simmons, they formed the Southern Publicity Association. Clarke and Tyler agreed that a profit of 80 percent should be realized to consider the movement a success and then launched their money making venture.

When the recruitment program was begun in 1920, the press reacted to the national Ku Klux Klan by giving the movement all the publicity it could possibly use. The organization had been intended to be primarily southern, but now with the expanded potential a broadened program had to be devised. This program developed into an aggressive defense of 100 percent Americanism. Nativism was the goal with an attack on all things that were suggestively alien in nature. The Klan actively opposed Negroes, Jews, Roman Catholics, Orientals, and aliens. The Klan also recruited its efforts to fight dope, bootlegging, rustling, graft, violation of the Sabbath, commercialized sex, adultery, questionable business ethics, or any other scandalous behavior that did not adhere to the ideals of 100 percent Americanism as judged by the Klan vigilantes.

By 1921, the Klan numbered at least one hundred thousand and was still growing.\textsuperscript{13} Its phenomenal growth can be directly attributed to the inventive nature of the many Kleagles or recruiters who were receiving at least four dollars of the original ten dollar klectoken or initiation fee required. The King Kleagle or state realm leader got one dollar. The Grand Goblin who was the regional domain head got fifty cents; two dollars and fifty cents went back to the Imperial Kleagles, Clarke and Mrs. Tyler in Atlanta; and two dollars went to the Imperial Wizard Simmons.\textsuperscript{14} If a higher klectoken or initiation fee could be garnered then the initial recruiter could count on an even

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 33.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 34.
A certificate of membership in the Knights Kamellia.

greater profit. Besides the initiation fee and regular dues, members bought the regalia from the Atlanta office and received all publications through the Atlanta headquarters.

Clarke first sent out a small corps of professional recruiters, but soon patriotic amateur recruiters, hungering for profits, were scouring the country for every white native-born Protestant they could entice. It was claimed that every state in the Union had its own chapter and several were supposedly formed overseas under the International Order of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The Knights were initially quite successful in the Dakotas, Colorado, Minnesota, Nebraska, and other surrounding areas. Exactly how many were actively involved and the exact identity of its membership is difficult to say. Because it was a secret organization and one that performed either extralegal or illegal acts, most of the official records were eventually destroyed. There are no known archives or official files, so the
actual history of the Great Plains Ku Klux Klan must come from the most contradictory and always suspect historical source, the personal interview.

The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan seem to have first made their appearance in South Dakota by July 1921. The principle Klan salesmen appear to have been from the Indiana Klavern and began to gain support in the southeastern corner of the state around Canton and Beresford. By 1925 the Klan blanketed the entire state with Klaverns in virtually every major town. The Black Hills area was entered as early as 1922 and the Klan found a ready following among many who felt that Roman Catholicism was truly a national threat. The initiation fee charged locally seems to have been about fifteen dollars, so some recruiter must have been making a little extra pocket money.

Most local Klansmen apparently subscribed to the fundamentals that appeared on a Klan propaganda sheet in 1923. Under the title “Knights of the Ku Klux Klan—What the Organization is — What it Stands For” is a statement that in part relates:

Klansmen are: Pro-American, Pro-Gentile, Pro-White and Pro-testant. The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan is an organization of Native-Born Americans, White Gentile, Protestant Citizens formed to oppose by all legal means, every lawless element in our country:

Klansmen claim the right as American, Protestant citizens to band themselves together to perpetuate the ideals handed down to them by their American, Protestant forefathers who drafted the constitution of our Country.

Investigate and find out for yourselves the type of individuals and the character of the organization opposing the Ku Klux Klan.

You will find every bootlegger, blindpigger, dive and resort keeper, every dope seller, every crook and criminal in the United States individually and collectively opposed to the Ku Klux Klan, and lined up with these opponents of the Ku Klux Klan will be found every anarchist, every I.W.W., every “Red” radical, every


enemy of the public schools, every servant of a foreign Pope and every alien enemy of our country.

Remember, the statement continues, Klansmen are not red, radicals, arson fiends, thugs and murderers. They are loyal American citizens, your own neighbors, the friends you meet and are glad to greet every day. Klansmen eat at your table, regularly transact business with you and attend church with you. Klansmen are honored men in the communities in which they reside.\(^{17}\)

Locally, the Klan gained its greatest support by spouting 100 percent Americanism and by promoting the prohibitionist cause. Many Black Hills Klansmen apparently believed that vigilantees were needed to uphold law and order and to promote their brand of Americanism. Around 1924 for example, one suspected bootlegger in Redfield, South Dakota, received KKK attention. Blacky Smith, a coal hauler by profession, was bootlegging on the side and was supposed to have a rather loose deal going at home where his wife was the principle attraction, or so the Klan believed. The Klan contacted Blacky and suggested that he either leave town or the bull whip and tar and feather medicine would be applied. Blacky and his wife left quickly for some unknown destination.\(^{18}\)

On another occasion, a lady of ill repute from Rapid City was invited to leave the Gate City. She laughed at and mocked the supposedly righteous leaders of the Pennington County Klan. She was then whisked off the street one September evening and taken to Farmingdale where she was stripped and bathed in tar and feathers. Needless to say, she also hurriedly left the Rapid City area on the next train.\(^{19}\)

The reasons for the Klan entrance into the Black Hills area seem to be as varied as the membership of the Klan. The vigilantes opposition to bootlegging, prostitution, and many

\(^{17}\) Voice of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, vol. 1, no. 1 (a publicity sheet issued by the Grand Forks Ku Klux Klan, 21 Feb. 1923.) Ku Klux Klan File, Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, Dakota Room, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks. This discourse had a large circulation through the North and South Dakota Provinces and their individual Klans.


\(^{19}\) Kenneth Stewart to Charles Rambow, 18 Nov. 1971.
other vices has already been mentioned. Also, it is said to have been rumored that Negro troops would be transferred to Fort Meade, the cavalry post just east of Sturgis, in 1922, 1923, or 1924. The racial climate in the Sturgis area had not normally been volatile and race relations were fairly harmonious. Several Negro families had lived in the area in the past without creating strong feelings of prejudice. There were still several individual Negroes who were members of the community, but the fear of large numbers of colored troops with an authoritative bearing moving to Fort Meade apparently frightened many. However, the rumored Negro troops never came.

The most obvious reason, of course, for KKK activity was Klan opposition to Roman Catholicism and a fear of Catholic

20. Nettie Rambow, daughter of the late Judge Hugh W. Caton who was a member of the Sturgis Klan, Rapid City, interview on 25 Sept. 1971.
involvement in politics. Several local former Klansmen suggested that opposition to Catholicism was their sole reason for Klan membership. The Klans opposed Al Smith in 1924 and again in 1928. In 1928 the Klan slogan was swat Smith and put Heflin (senator from Alabama) in the White House.21 Some also feared that Jimmy Walker, controversial mayor of New York, would be entering the Democratic primaries.22

In Sturgis and Lead the fear of Catholic control was particularly strong. Lead had an active and aggressive parochial school in operation, while Sturgis had the parochial school through the twelfth grade and also an academy retreat for the training of nuns. The many crosses that were fired along with three substantial dynamite blasts for attention in Sturgis were across town and in a direct visual line with the Saint Martin’s Academy. The crosses, which measured from twelve to twenty-five feet tall, were wrapped in oil soaked gunny sacks and were placed on both Sly and Glover Hills. They were fired quite regularly, occasionally with a responding circle, the symbol of the Catholics, being fired on the opposite hill.23 Three K’s were dug well above the Glover Hill crosses and were set ablaze at the same time as the crosses for greater visual effect. These forms of intimidation were not totally ignored by the Catholics and on more than one occasion, some sort of retaliation was threatened.

Marcus, a small community just east of Sturgis, was a hot spot of Klan activity throughout the 1922 to 1928 period. On one occasion, while a dance was in progress, attended by many Catholics and it was said a few bootleggers, a cross was fired on a little hill just southeast of Marcus directly above the dance hall. A cry went up from the Catholics, “they’re burning our cross, they’re burning our cross,” and many staunch Catholics rushed to put the fires out. Several ruined their best clothes from the carbon of the burning oil and gunny sacks around the crosses. Not many days later, a circle was wrapped in gunny


sacks and fired against the black of the sky upon the same spot that the crosses had been burned, in obvious retaliation for the Klan activity.  

The usual tactic of Klan entrance into a community was to have professional organizers individually contact the local Protestant ministry to find out what was worrying a community and offer the Klan as a solution. In several other areas the Klan succeeded in gaining the support of these ministers and in recruiting their talents against the local Catholic, Jewish, or foreign elements. This religious antagonism tended to generate an atmosphere of distrust and intolerance that might tear a community apart. Fortunately, the local Ministerial Association had already made their peace with the Catholics in Sturgis. Father Columban Bregenzer, the popular and respected rector of Saint Martin’s Academy since 1903, worked closely with the Presbyterian minister, C.D. Erskine, and several others of prominence in the community, some who were active Klansmen, to keep the lid on the religious tension and to keep a bad situation from getting worse. On more than one occasion the Klan was known to have paraded in full regalia up to Reverend Erskine’s pulpit to present a purse of persuasion, thirty or forty dollars, to the congregation. This sort of internal give and take left the religious elements shaken and suspicious. The Catholics, for instance, were said to be organizing and arming to protect themselves. Fortunately, it never came to a showdown and only a memory now lingers.

No doubt the Klan also attracted some followers because of that aura of excitement and adventure. It must have given one a feeling of power to think he was fighting to uphold justice and doing it in a dramatic way. One of the impressive cross burnings occurred during the winter of 1926 in southwest Spearfish and several old residents still remember seeing the Klan figures scurrying among the pine trees against the backdrop of an expanse of snow. All this was magnified by three dynamite


blasts and three giant blazing crosses illuminating the scene.\textsuperscript{27}

A group of young college students showed their potential strength at Spearfish Normal School in 1925. A local fraternity of the KKK had been formed earlier and by 1925 had gained a substantial membership. Dr. Woodburn, an ordained minister and then president of the normal school, held chapel at ten o’clock every morning. At one of these sessions he delivered a provocative sermon against the Ku Klux Klan. A number of young men of the fraternity took exception to his comments, went out one night to Dr. Woodburn’s garage, borrowed gasoline from his own car, and set a flaming cross in his front yard. Only the fast thinking on the part of neighbors kept his house from burning. Dr. Woodburn delivered no more anti-Klan speeches, at least not in public.\textsuperscript{28}

According to several old-timers the area Klondklaves sponsored by the KKK were also filled with excitement and a feeling of adventure. One well-attended gathering was held at Sturgis on 23 August 1924. The affair was liberally advertised with large arrows and K.I.G.Y. (Klansmen I Greet You) signs painted on every bridge and signpost from the Minnesota border to Sturgis,\textsuperscript{29} where a crowd of Klansmen and women variously estimated at from four thousand to eight thousand\textsuperscript{30} met to culminate the year’s activities. According to the handbills and advertisement in the 21 August 1924 issue of the \textit{Sturgis Record}, the Klondklave was, “Open to everyone. Come and bring your wife and kiddies with you. National and state speakers. Speaking afternoon and evening. Feed stands on the grounds. Be there and hear the principles of this great Order explained.”\textsuperscript{31} Three crosses estimated at from twenty-five to thirty feet tall were fired after the crash of three dynamite blasts. Directly above, trenches in the shape of three giant K’s,

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Sturgis Weekly Record}, 28 Aug. 1924.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 21 Aug. 1924.
A Ku Klux Klan parade in Rapid City during the 1920s.

Klan members participating in a night parade at one of the Klonklaves.
which had been filled with sawdust and oil, were lighted to burn all night and smolder half the next day. In this carnival atmosphere, which was illuminated all night by the headlights from a huge circle of hundreds of autos, the speakers harangued the crowd, estimated at between twenty-five thousand and thirty thousand, all afternoon and well into the night. Many of the thousands of participants were not Klansmen, but curiosity seekers who also enjoyed the excitement of the night parades, the giant bonfires, and the exhilaration of the crowd.

Another large Klonklave was held in Belle Fourche on 4 July 1925 at which a lengthy parade celebrated the success of the Black Hills area Klan. The event was attended by almost five thousand Klansmen and women representing at least forty-three states. The crowd was estimated at almost forty thousand and with the Sturgis Klonklave was considered the high point of Klan glory in South Dakota.

The western South Dakota Klan flourished, according to some observers of the day, because of the numerous socials it sponsored. In the Sturgis area several large buildings were utilized in the Bear Butte valley for the domestic socials, and large picnic gatherings were also popular. The Ladies Auxiliary formed sewing circles and hosted charity activities. The Klan, like most fraternal groups of the day, specialized in activities for the social and economic betterment of Anglo-Saxon citizens of the area.

An example of the charity of the Klan can be found in the following newspaper clipping from Custer, South Dakota, dated 4 July 1925.

A sympathizing friend who went to the McKinney home immediately after his death was discovered, came to this office and told us that within a hour after Mr. McKinney's death a representative of the Ladies Klan called on Mrs. McKinney and presented her with a purse of $25 and told her to bring the children to town and have them properly clothed and they would pay the bill.

35. Rapid City Daily Journal, 6 July 1925.
Such social functions were publicized by the Klan to provide proof that they were satisfying their civic obligations. A favorable press was more assured by the social aspects and could detract from the less desirable activities of the Klan.

Fortunately, the incidence of violence in the Klan of western South Dakota was not great. There were numerous warnings issued for various suspected or proven offences, but not many of the threats of bull whippings, tar and feather baths, or beatings were actually carried out. One reason the Klan here seldom resorted to violence was the success of the more level-headed members in keeping the lawless elements under control. Perhaps another reason was the knowledge that there may be retaliations that could precipitate full scale battles. A well-attended community dance was in progress in Sturgis in 1925 while up on the hill directly to the northeast above Sturgis, the Klan was preparing to fire several large crosses. Suddenly, a clattering broke out from two Browning automatic machine guns that had been mounted on the adjoining hill by several resentful cavalrymen from Fort Meade. The “unarmed” Klansmen leaped for cover and returned fire with hand guns.36 Apparently, the cavalrymen only wanted to throw a scare into the Klansmen because they shortly ended the engagement and fell back from the hill. They were all captured by a large body of townsfolk who were attracted to the scene by the noise of the rapid fire machine guns. It was learned later that some of the cavalrymen wanted to bring a piece of light artillery, but had reconsidered. The men involved in the firing upon the Klansmen were either cashiered from the military or were quickly and quietly transferred to more peaceful pastures.37

This incident apparently caused many of the Klansmen to wonder if it was all worth their while. The Klan had had some exciting moments and had, they believed, performed a significant service for the area. Many of the members did not feel, at that time, that they were doing anything wrong by participating in KKK activities. The vast majority were strong Anglo-Saxon, Masonic Christians who were opposed to immigrants, minori-

37. Vernon Officer, resident of Sturgis, interview on 27 Nov. 1971.
ties, and Catholics, whom they felt were threatening the traditional American puritanism that they had been raised to cherish. They believed that they had been able, in part at least, to redeem the noble ideals of hard work, good character, and self-esteem that were being denied and destroyed by those who were un-American or ruled by a foreign power.

In 1927 the national Klan began to fall on dark days. Internally it was a wreck. Hiriam Evans of Texas was now in full revolt against Joseph Simmons, the Atlanta Imperial Wizard, and many splinter Klans began to form for no other reason than the prospect of making money. The Imperial Kleagles, Clarke and Tyler, were under state indictment for disorderly conduct and adultery. They were also charged by the rival Klans with appropriating substantial sums from the national treasury for their own private use. The general public was being daily "entertained" by stories of Klan violence, beatings and lynchings, directed against an ever growing number of critics who saw the Klan as a lawless threat to themselves, their families, and their dreams of what Americans should be.

At this crucial moment, the downward plunge of the Klan was accelerated by the activities of the "Old Man" of the Indiana Klan. David G. Stephenson, Grand Dragon of the Realm of Indiana, had been one of the most dynamic leaders in the North, but ended up as a principle horror story of American Klandom. Stephenson was accused, tried, and found guilty in federal court of kidnapping and sexually assaulting a young woman employee and then being an accomplice to her untimely death. At the age of thirty-six the "Old Man" of the Indiana Klan was sentenced to life in the Michigan City Penitentiary. This disclosure cost the national Klan thousands of members.

Locally, the Klan's demise was accelerated by several conditions. The Klan, which had run its course in the Black Hills area in about five years, from 1922 to 1927, seemed to have run out of relevant or significant issues by 1927. There was still, of course, the election of 1928 that would kindle a dying ember, but this was not enough to revitalize the North and South Dakota Klans. The extinction of the local Klans can also


39. Ibid., p. 172.
be attributed to the fact that the KKK just plain scared many people. Enough threats were issued and enough emotion aroused that many were fearful that continued Klan activity could lead to disastrous consequences. Anti-Klan opposition was growing, the Catholics were organizing for a possible showdown, and any little slip could have erupted into a regrettable situation. There was probably also an economic relationship. The Klan was hurting business. Many people who were not sold on the purpose of the Klan remained disassociated by staying away from the businesses that had Klan support or hired Klan employees. It is also probable that the general economic recession, which was already keenly felt in this area and would result in the national economic collapse in 1929, had diverted local attention from the supposed threat of the Catholic, Jewish, and alien minorities. As Klan strength declined, the North and South Dakota organizations were merged with the Minnesota Klavern. 40 The Tri-State Realm was perpetuated for a time after 1927 by the inevitable die-hards, but by the middle 1930s the north central Klan was dead.

Today there is little evidence in the Black Hills area of the existence of the local Klaverns except for a few crosses carved on several local hillsides and the memories of many old-timers of the area. 41 The chances of such an organization gaining any strength in the locality in the future seem very remote. The history of the Klan is not a proud one and the recent activities such as bus bombings and new threats of violence in the South and in the East have not enhanced the image of the Klan. Locally, the general feeling is a sigh of relief that the outbreak of violence that may have occurred in the 1920s did not happen and that today we are well rid of those chauvinistic vigilantes of the Invisible Empire, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.


41. Today there is an obvious reluctance by many old-timers and most former Klansmen to discuss the old Klan in extensive detail. Many are reluctant to be quoted about Klan activities of membership because they believe there are still people living here who were among the active membership or who may have had loved ones who were members. The general feeling seems to be one of mild shame by those who know of the KKK activities in the Black Hills during the 1920s and genuine surprise by those who believe the Klan was strictly a southern phenomenon.
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