The Second Resurgence of the

Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s

KKK in Reconstruction Era vs. Roaring Twenties

Reconstruction Era

-KKK extended into almost every southern state by 1870
-Goal was to resist measures aimed at establishing political and economic equality for Black Americans
-Ku Klux Klan Act (1871) designated crimes committed by Klan members as federal offenses; counter offenses did not work



Roaring Twenties

-Huge resurgence of KKK in the Midwest and Northern cities in 1915
-Inspired by the film *Birth of a Nation*
-Not just racist, but also against Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and labor unions
-Disliked industrialization and blamed increased consumerism on Jewish bankers of Wall Street
-Feared Catholics were stealing their jobs and were under foreign control

The Klu Klux Klan or the KKK is a historical and current American white-supremacist hate group. Its founding in 1865 coincided with the second phase of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era when Congress mandated that to be part of the union, Southern states had to approve the 14th amendment, which granted "equal protection" to Black Americans (though many states still found ways to circumvent giving Black Americans equal rights). The KKK's goal was to resist measures, like the 14th amendment, aimed at establishing political and economic equality for Black Americans, and to restore white supremacy. By 1870, the KKK gained immense popularity and extended into almost every Southern State. Klan members, often wearing masks and dressed in white robes (as seen in the image), carried out attacks on Black institutions, as well as on Black and white leaders that were dedicated to the reconstruction policies of equality for all. It is estimated that the KKK lynched 3500 individuals in the South between 1865 and 1900. In response to Klan violence, Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act that made individuals and states punishable under federal law for hate crimes and disenfranchising people due to their race. While President Ulysses S. Grant used this act to quash a lot of Klan activity, particularly in South Carolina, these counter offenses eventually failed, as white supremacists reasserted their control over the South as Jim Crow segregation took hold.

In 1915, there was an enormous resurgence of KKK, though this time it expanded to Midwestern and Northern cities. The second resurgence was largely inspired by D.W. Griffith's 1915 racist film *Birth of a Nation*, which romanticized and sympathized with the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. White, lower-middle class

Protestant Americans in the Midwest and Northern cities became fearful that the surge in immigration was changing American culture, and so targeted much of their antipathy toward Catholics and Jewish people, who they associated with foreigners, though they also still targeted Black Americans. Klan members of this time period were resistant to the surge in big businesses and industrialization, and they blamed the economic shifts of the Roaring Twenties on Jewish bankers of Wall Street. They feared Catholics immigrants, whom they felt were stealing their jobs and driving down wages. Many were also convinced that the Catholics were under the control of a parish priest or the pope. Although not every Klansman during this time period was violent, many carried out lynchings, arson, beatings, and whippings.

Between 2.5 to 4 million KKK members in the mid-1920s

By the mid-1920s, KKK membership reached between 2.5-4 million members. They exerted tremendous political influence by helping to get governors elected in Alabama, California, Oregon, and Indiana. Additionally, approximately 75 members of congress got their seats due to KKK assistance.

Prohibition

- Created an association between immigrants (especially Catholics ones) and drinking and criminality
- 18th amendment took effect in 1920
- A way for the KKK to justify and expand its anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant mission
- KKK sold itself to the public as a type of law enforcement to stop bootlegging; began raiding Catholic immigrants' homes to "enforce Prohibition"



THE DEFENDER OF THE 18TH AMENDMENT

The 18th amendment was ratified in 1919, which prohibited the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages. Thus began the Prohibition era, which lasted until 1933 when the 21st amendment repealed the 18th amendment. During the 1920s, Prohibition advocates believed their country was now under the control of Catholic immigrants that threatened U.S. culture with their drinking habits and saloons. Prohibition, then, became an easy way for the KKK to make their anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant stance more palatable to the general public. During the Prohibition era, states disproportionately arrested immigrants, Black Americans, and the poor and working class, however, the KKK felt the police weren't doing enough to stop bootlegging, or the illegal manufacturing, sale, and distribution of alcohol. The Klan sold themselves to the public as law enforcement and so used Prohibition to justify raids on Catholic immigrants' homes. KKK members would sometimes even plant alcohol in these homes, or seize alcohol for their own drinking, thus demonstrating how these raids were actually just an excuse to commit acts of violence against Catholics, rather than enforcing Prohibition. The Women's Christian Temperance union, otherwise known as the WCTU, was a separate organization that was supportive of the Klan's enforcement of Prohibition. Women even began to join the Klan, largely because of the WCTU.

Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK)

- Formed on June 10, 1923 as an auxiliary group of the KKK; Lulu Markwell, former president of Arkansas's WCTU, was the organization's first Imperial Commander
- 500,000+ women across the nation joined; recruited through social events like pageants and picnics
- Created right in the aftermath of the women's suffrage movement



Women played a huge role in the resurgence of the KKK during the Roaring Twenties. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan was formed on June, 10 1923 and headquartered in Little Rock, Arkansas. Lulu Markwell, former president of The Women's Christian Temperance Union of Arkansas, became the the first Imperial Commander of the WKKK, thus further demonstrating the alliance between the WCTU that advocated for prohibition and the KKK. At least 500,000 women across the nation joined the WKKK, which operated like a social club by holding events like pageants and picnics to recruit new members. To qualify for membership, one had to be a native-born, white, Protestant woman. Suffrage was important to the WKKK, as they believed a woman's right to vote was essential for protecting the country and keeping it pure of immigrants, whom they felt corrupted America's political and moral fabric.

"WE BELIEVE in the mission of emancipated womanhood, freed from the shackles of old-world traditions, and standing unafraid in the full effulgence of equality and enlightenment."

"WE BELIEVE that the current of pure American blood must be kept uncontaminated by mongrel strains and protected from racial pollution."

"WE BELIEVE that the government of the United States must be kept inviolate from the control or domination of alien races and the baleful influence of inferior peoples." -From the "Creed of Klanswoman"



The WKKK in many ways embodied contradiction. Having formed soon after the women's suffrage movement, the members embraced women's voting rights and even discussed birth control. Yet, members still believed in upholding women's traditional domestic roles, and they were hateful toward immigrants, Black Americans, Jewish people, Catholics, and bootleggers that they felt contributed to the decline of American society. The WKKK, therefore, shows the dual-nature of women's voting rights. While it gave white women access to an essential right, many of them used this right to discriminate against others. The above quotations from the "Creed of the Klanswoman" reflects their contradictory ideology. The first belief is progressive, as it conveys how women should be free and have equal rights. In contrast, the latter two beliefs are discriminatory, expressing the WKKK's stance that the America should be kept "uncontaminated" by immigrants, whom they regarded as "inferior peoples." These second two beliefs also reflect a larger, general anxiety in the Roaring Twenties toward immigrants.

Decline of the KKK

- Poor leadership led to its quick decline
- Some of its leaders were arrested due to sexual impropriety and possession of illegal alcohol; David C. Stephenson was found guilty of rape, kidnapping, and second-degree murder of his aide, Madge Oberholtzer
- The Great Depression in the 1930s also shrank Klan membership
- Disbanded in 1944
- Had a third resurgence in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement

Despite the KKK having a rapid surge in membership in the 1920s, it quickly collapsed, primarily due to its poor leadership. While the organization claimed to be moral, many of the leaders engaged in unethical behavior, such as sexual assault and, ironically, illegal possession of alcohol. The organization grew unstable, as there was an infighting between leaders for control. William Simmons, a Klan founder, was ousted by Hiram W. Evans, who associated himself with one of the Klan's most powerful and renowned personalities, David C. Stephenson. Yet, this allyship proved to be destructive when Stephenson forced his aide, Madge Oberholtzer, on a Chicago bound train, where he assaulted and raped her. Weeks later she died from infection of the wounds Stephenson had inflicted on her. A jury convicted Stephenson of rape, kidnapping, and second-degree murder. This controversy, along with the The Great Depression, led to the collapse of the Klan. However, the Klan later had a third resurgence in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement. The KKK continues to be an active group today, though membership is on the decline as infighting amongst the organization continues and newer racist groups gain greater public appeal.

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