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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### KLAN AND COMMONWEALTH: THE KU KLUX KLAN AND POLITICS IN KENTUCKY 1921-1928

The Ku Klux Klan was a major force in American political and social life throughout the better part of the nineteen-twenties. This study examines the Klan, its growth, role, and demise with respect to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. It is largely the story of the Klan's failure to develop successfully as it was inhibited by local political factors throughout the Commonwealth.

KEYWORDS: Klan, Ku Klux Klan, Kentucky, Kentucky History, KKK

KLAN AND COMMONWEALTH:  
THE KU KLUX KLAN  
AND  
POLITICS IN KENTUCKY  
1921-1928  
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THESIS

Robert Kirschenbaum

The Graduate School  
University of Kentucky

2005

KLAN AND COMMONWEALTH:  
THE KU KLUX KLAN  
AND  
POLITICS IN KENTUCKY  
1921-1928

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2005

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Historiography

There is perhaps no name in American history that triggers such strong reactions as that of the Ku Klux Klan. There have been other similar movements; however, none have been so long lived, or displayed such a phoenixlike ability to rise from their ashes as the Invisible Empire. Other groups, from the Known-Nothings of the mid-nineteenth century to the much later White Citizens Councils a century later have, in spite of their initial popularity been short lived affairs. Other reactionary groups, such as the American Legion, which began as a semi-fascist veteran's organization, have ultimately moderated themselves, their methods, and their rhetoric. Fading from the limelight of publicity that such early extremism brought, these groups have grown into unassuming, community service organizations, and in the process faded into near obscurity. While other groups have developed, exploited, and expressed the same resurgent themes in their ideology, each new era has seen the flowering of new and different reactionary-populist groups. The Klan, uniquely, remains aloof from such changes. The Invisible Empire has been able to evoke a fear and dread, or alternatively pride and admiration, in successive generations that is lacking in other reactionary groups. The idea of the American Legion as a viable Neo-Fascist organization is laughable today, in sharp and clear contrast to the notion of a resurgent Klan which remains all too palpable. The



White Citizen's councils will never rise again and flourish as they once did, but the specter of hooded Klansmen remains a powerful force within the American psyche.

The first and third Klans were founded to overcome Federal intervention in the South.<sup>1</sup> These Klan engaged in many and varied acts of terror but embraced a decentralized structure which made any central planning impossible. Rather they reflected an intensely local structure that drew upon the massive frustration among Southerners against Federal efforts to promote equality. Relying upon whippings, beatings, lynching, and other forms of violence these Klans attacked whites sympathetic to Reconstruction policies and above all else Blacks.

Yet while the first and third Klans were spontaneous outbursts of these White Protestant Nationalist sentiments the second version of the Klan, lasting from approximately 1915 to 1930, was a far different creature. Deliberate design was at work in the second incarnation of the Invisible Empire. While the first and final Klans had been outbursts of a nationalism every bit as Southern and regional as it was White and Protestant, the second Klan bore a distinctively American variety of nationalism. This Klan's foes were far more vague social trends and tendencies. While earlier and later Klans fought against unpopular legislative programs the second Klan targeted not the government, but the groups in the nation who displayed values and qualities different from what Klansmen saw as '100% American.'

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<sup>1</sup> David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: the history of the Ku Klux Klan 3rd ed.* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1981), 8-21.

Catholics, Jews, Blacks, and immigrants were favorite targets of the Klan, but others, such as whites who failed to live within the boundaries of conservative morality were often victims as well. In short this Klan's targets were unique yet, at like other Klans, this organization remained nationalist, white, protestant, and militant.

The second Klan was the creation of Joseph Simmons, a former Methodist minister, veteran of the Spanish-American War and fraternal organizer. Simmons's life up until the founding of the Klan had not been particularly successful; His unit in the war with Spain was never sent overseas, and he had never held a permanent place with the Methodist church, remaining instead an itinerant preacher. Finally Simmons found his greatest success as a fraternal organizer recruiting men into various organizations, such as the Free Masons and Oddfellows. In 1915 he saw the potential in the imagery of the Klan, and furthermore he knew first-hand the potential of the vigilante justice the Klan stood for. <sup>2</sup>

Simmons had lived in Atlanta during one of its stormiest periods and had been witness to the outrage over the death of Mary Phagan, a 13-year-old girl working in a pencil factory in the city. Her murder in 1913, and the subsequent trial of her Jewish employer, Leo Frank, attracted nationwide publicity. In the wake of these events a group including Simmons, formed the so called "Knights of Mary Phagan." Following the commutation of Frank's sentence by the governor, some of the 'knights' broke into Frank's jail cell and lynched him.<sup>3</sup> Seeing

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<sup>2</sup> Chalmers, 21-28.

<sup>3</sup> Robert and Nancy Frey, *The Silent and the Damned: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching*

the potential in this body and, perhaps reading in Tom Watson's *Jeffersonian* magazine “another Ku Klux Klan.... [ought] to be organized to restore home rule.”<sup>4</sup> Simmons acted to organize a body that would reflect both the imagery and many of the ideas of the first Klan.

Other influences impacted the growth of the Klan. First among these was the massive popularity of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, and the novel on which it was based, *The Clansman*, which served to spread the myth of the Klan as defender of law, order, and whiteness in the aftermath of the Civil War far beyond the South. The Klan was presented not as the enemy of equality but as the ally of justice and law. Adding to this popularity was the Klan's embrace of nationalism during the period of hyper-patriotism stimulated by US entry into the First World War. A phenomenon which was intensely intertwined with the Espionage Act, the Red Scare, and other events of the late nineteen-teens, an association noted by historian David Chalmers among others.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, even though it was an expression of the same phenomenon that both preceded and followed it, the Klan of the 1920s retains a unique place within US history. This Klan displayed a hierarchical, organized structure, and one that allowed for a nationwide organization and a centrally generated ideology. Beginning

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of Leo Frank (Lanham: Madison Books, 1988), 84.

<sup>4</sup> “Thomas Watson's Jeffersonian” Sept. 2, 1915 quoted in C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 446.

<sup>5</sup> Chalmers, 28-38.

with John Moffatt Mecklin's work in 1925 numerous historians, sociologists, political theorists, and others have made the Klan the focus of intense study.<sup>6</sup>

Historians of the Klan can largely be divided into two schools of thought. The traditionalist view came first and was heavily influenced by Mecklin's view of the Klan, which was itself developed from contemporary images. The early understanding viewed the Klan as primarily a violent and rural phenomenon. Later came a more moderate revisionary view, grew in response to shortcomings within the traditional understanding.

Early scholarship tended to view not only the Klan, but also the Klansmen themselves in disparaging terms embracing adjectives for the Klansmen such as “rustic,” “narrow minded” and “gullible.”<sup>7</sup> While necessarily condemning the Klan, and understandably so, this view was unfortunate in that it needlessly and unnecessarily stereotyped the members of an organization that was very much within the ideological mainstream of its day. Integral to the early view of traditionalists was a supposed divide between urbanites and residents of small towns. Advocates of the early view held that the Klan represented a broader movement that embraced the last remnants of 19<sup>th</sup> century morality and culture, and in the process brought excitement to an otherwise mundane provincial existence.

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<sup>6</sup> John Moffatt Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1924), 95-125.

<sup>7</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 219-221.

The first scholars to examine the Klan, such as Mecklin, and Frank Tannenbaum emphasized its being centered on small town life, with a regional focus that lay heavily in the Southern states of the old Confederacy. Writing in the 1920s they acknowledged the Klan as having some nationwide following, yet this earliest of Klan scholarship still retained an incorrect assumption that the Klan was primarily a peculiar aspect of Southern regionalism.<sup>8</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Robert and Helen Lynds' work would explore the role of the Klan in the Midwest. The Lynds' work added several new facets to the debate, acknowledging for the first time the Klan's extreme popularity in the Midwest and West, as well introducing the idea of 'status anxiety' as a cause for the popularity of the Klan.<sup>9</sup>

Through the 1950s and early 60s historians of the Klan continued to develop these same themes. Prominent historians such as John Higham argued that the Klan was a "litmus test" of the previous century's Anglo-Saxon values. Higham saw the Klan as part of a wider trend in American history of conflict between rural-nativist townsmen, and cosmopolitan urban-immigrant groups.<sup>10</sup>

Later, historian Richard Hofstadter suggested that the culture clash which the Klan represented was exacerbated by the relative prosperity of the 1920s. His book *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* argued that the Klan reflected a final effort of some Anglo-Saxons

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<sup>8</sup> John Moffatt Mecklin, 95-125 . Frank Tannenbaum, *The Darker Phases of the South* (New York: Negro University Press, 1924), 3-38.

<sup>9</sup> Helen and Robert Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1929), 481-484.

<sup>10</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 2nd ed* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 285-299.

to preserve their culture in the face of increased modernity. Hofstadter held that the increasing affluence of the Jazz Age had made possible the expression of pluralistic elements that had previously been mere subtle undercurrents in American society. He argued that the Klan arose out of white nativist disgust with this sudden manifestation of permissive plurality. These same themes were later borrowed by other authors in their analysis of the Klan's role within the era.<sup>11</sup>

In all of these earliest histories of the Klan the organization was, while necessarily condemned as divisive, also regarded in inferior terms. The prevailing attitude was that Klansmen were somehow less rational and sane than other Americans. Such views were overly simplistic toward the Klan and its members and failed to reflect any hope of rationality on the part of Klansmen.

For the next several years, the original view, as set forth by Mecklin and accepted by the majority of historians after him, went through a small but significant change. In *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* Arnold Rice suggested that the Klan went beyond simply mobilizing native white Protestant militancy. He argued that the Klan was in some cases a decisive force in local and national politics. Thus for the first time historians presented a group that might be more than a mere fraternal order predisposed toward vigilante justice and nativism. Rice did not seek to overthrow the then predominant view of the Klan as an organized vigilante militia made

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (Knopf: New York, 1955), 288-301. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 209. John Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy: 1921-1933* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960), 95.

up of marginal whites. Instead he argued that Klansmen might base their voting patterns on their conservative inclinations and realized that block voting might trigger an upset in the political balance of power. He noted that some politicians actively pandered to the Klan's agenda. While such an assertion might seem obvious today it was, at the time, a considerable breakthrough. However Rice's work continued to dehumanize the Klansmen themselves, and view them as deviant at best.<sup>12</sup>

David Chalmers, among the most influential historians of his era, examined the Klan in his work *Hooded Americanism*. Chalmers not only dealt with the Klan in the 1920s, but in the 1860-70s and 1950s as well, treating it as a consistent national phenomenon developing and growing over time. Chalmers argued that the Klan had not only been consistent between its 1920s organization and its development in the Reconstruction era, but also was pursuing many of the same policies in the context of the 1950s and 60s as well. His work was by far the most extensive on the Klan to that point. Chalmers claimed that at its core the Klan was always concerned with status anxiety. His work was also noteworthy for several other reasons, including its well developed examination of the role of the hyper-nationalism of the Red Scare and post-World War One era in the development of the Klan.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Moats Miller was among the most vehement of traditionalists, and argued that the Klan was a violent reactionary

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Washington: Haskell House, 1962), 30-38.

<sup>13</sup> Chalmers, 1-21, 343-373.

fringe. Miller felt that any attempt at revisionist history simply ignored the information available on the Klan's brutality. In response to early challenges to the traditional view he believed that the obvious conclusion was that the Klan had been an organization thriving on terror and intimidation.<sup>14</sup>

While each of these authors made unique contributions to our understanding of the Klan there were certain fundamental flaws in their views. While the Klan's anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and racist and nativist sentiments are undoubtedly offensive, the marginalization of those who espoused such attitudes had been an inaccurate assessment in most of the original scholarship on the second Klan. Additionally, the view that the Klan existed primarily as a violent and vigilante fringe focusing its attacks on minorities and immigrants ignored the fact that the Klan was strongest in those states where those groups made up a minute fraction of the population. Furthermore the early works on the Klan dealt with the organization and its members as a homogeneous group and failed to acknowledge the distinctions within the Klan on the basis of location, class, and social background. Likewise this view largely failed to consider or analyze the Klan's regional variations. Other difficulties were also apparent in this scholarship; an obvious question, and one often left unanswered was; If the Klan was a reactionary fringe movement, why did a bipartisan Congress move to limit immigration for the first time during this same era, thereby granting a central demand of the Klan?

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Moats Miler, "The Ku Klux Klan" in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920s* ed. John Braeman, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 215-255.



Clearly the Klan was not so peripheral to American culture as traditionalists held.

In the early 1960s new authors began to challenge this view, recognizing that the Klansmen were largely “average, seemingly harmless citizens.”<sup>15</sup> New historians such as Charles Alexander argued that the Klan's primary goal was merely the maintenance of a “moral status quo.” Alexander's examination of the Klan showed that the Invisible Empire ignored blacks, Jews, and Catholics in the Old Southwest and instead directed its considerable ire at whites who stepped outside traditional social norms. Alexander recognized that 'traditional values' as opposed to status anxiety were the primary Klan motivation. Thus he wrote that the focus of Klansmen was not the minorities within their midst, but instead a drive for in-group uniformity among white Protestants.<sup>16</sup>

Next came Kenneth Jackson's *Ku Klux Klan in the City*, which argued that the Klan was at least as strong within the urban environment as it was in the small towns and villages that the traditional school had seen as the Klan's only strongholds. Jackson showed the Klan's membership was over twenty thousand in several cities throughout the US. Jackson went on to argue that these urban Klans were able to dominate the organization within their states. While Jackson accepted that the Klan's overall membership might be larger in the countryside than in the major cities, he proposed that,

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<sup>15</sup> Leonard Moore, “Historical Interpretations of the 1920s Klan” in *The Invisible Empire in the West* ed. Shawn Lay, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 23.

since the Klan's organizational headquarters in all states were located in cities, the city chapters maintained a crucial edge in determining the policies of the Klan. Jackson also placed the urban Klan within the context of a changing urban labor market. Jackson argued that urban Klansmen favored the organization not only out of ideological sympathy, but also out of purely economic self-interest stemming from new competition from fear of immigrant laborers and black laborers arriving as part of the Great Migration. Also critical to his thesis, and a foreshadowing of later events, was the Klan's control of urban neighborhoods. Thus Jackson seemed to turn the Klan's place in history on its head, and in this he was typical of the revisionists. Where earlier scholars had seen the Klan as a purely rural, ideologically moribund body, and a group on the fringe, Jackson and the other revisionists showed that the Klansmen could be urban, motivated by concrete goals, and above all more mainstream in their ideology than most early historians had been willing to admit.<sup>17</sup>

Other authors took the revisionary view further. Kenneth Wald produced an excellent if dry statistical analysis of the Klan's role in elections for city and national office in Memphis, Tennessee. Most importantly for the revisionists, Wald's work showed that Klan voters were not significantly different from other voters in Memphis. He also suggested that the Klan varied "greatly [depending] upon the local context."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press 1967), 235-49.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Wald, "The Visible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan as an Electoral Movement" in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11 (Autumn 1980), 217-234.

Yet perhaps most significant for the revisionists was the work of scholars, such as William Jenkins, whose specific local studies bore out local variances and patterns of Klan activity. Jenkins demonstrated that Klansmen in Youngstown, Ohio were primarily concerned with issues of morality.<sup>19</sup> He later expanded this theme into a full length book, *Steel Valley Klan*, which went beyond Youngstown to include information on the entire northeastern Ohio steel producing region. While holding to most of the arguments of the revisionists, Jenkins suggested that the Klan might in some instances go beyond the 'working class conservatism' which Jackson had suggested.<sup>20</sup>

The Klan of Indiana became the focus of several revisionary works, due both to its massive enrollment and the unique fact that its membership rolls were relatively well preserved. The first of these was William Lutholtz's *Grand Dragon*. Lutholtz, a journalist, wrote what is primarily a biography of Indiana Klan leader D.C. Stephenson. However it also contained significant new information on Stephenson's trial and conviction for the murder of Madge Oberholtzer, the original transcripts of which had disappeared from state records.<sup>21</sup>

Coinciding with the publication of Lutholtz's work was a far more scholarly study by Leonard Moore. Moore demonstrated that between one third and one quarter of eligible Indiana men joined the Invisible Empire in the early 1920s, showing once again that the Klan

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<sup>19</sup> William Jenkins, "The Ku Klux Klan in Youngstown, Ohio: Moral Reform In the Twenties" in *The Historian* (1978), vol: 41 issue 1, 76.

<sup>20</sup> William Jenkins, *Steel Valley Klan: The Ku Klux Klan in Ohio's Mahoning Valley* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990), 79.

<sup>21</sup> William Lutholtz, *Grand Dragon: DC Stephenson and the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Prude University Press, 1991), 1-24.

represented popular sentiments. His work developed the theme of White Protestant Nationalism as a central part of the Klan's appeal. Moore also revealed the role of the Klan in overturning local and state political systems and realigning leadership in both parties. Like the other revisionists Moore showed that the emphasis of the Klan was not on violence but rather primarily on the issues of morality and related legislation, social control, and philanthropy. Moore also emphasized that the values of the Klan were not far removed from those of most Americans in the era, and showed that the Klan had popularity that went far beyond rural fundamentalists. Urban Evangelicals and other Protestants freely participated in the Klan and supported its efforts to clear communities of liquor, prostitution, and corruption. The Klan, however, proved incapable of attaining these goals when it did hold power. As Moore points out, the Klan was unable to inaugurate real change once it held power. This ineffectiveness combined with the sensational murder trial of DC Stephenson in 1925 lead to the elimination of the Klan as viable force in Indiana, and indeed in the nation as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

Shawn Lay's work on El Paso in *The Invisible Empire in the West* further developed the revisionist image of the 1920s Klan. Lay argues that the Klan in El Paso very often ignored Hispanic minorities, who in the southwest often made up local majorities, and instead focused on the morality of white elites. Indeed this focus was in spite of ties

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<sup>22</sup> Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 184-192. Moore's study had appeared as a dissertation 6 years earlier, but was not published until 1991.

between the local business elite and lower class Hispanics which might have lead the Klansmen to set their sights on Hispanics instead of whites. The Klan demanded that local political leadership enforce prohibition, reduce graft and corruption, stop illegal smuggling of alcohol, and cease vote-buying. Lay's work was methodologically significant as well in that it did not base a revisionist interpretation on new sources such as the membership rolls available to Moore and others. Lay relied almost solely on the newspaper articles and Klan literature, which had been the mainstay of traditional interpretations of the Klan.<sup>23</sup>

Lay also produced an examination of the Klan in upstate New York that developed similar themes to his earlier work on the Klan in the West. In Buffalo the Klan fought against the administration of Catholic mayor Frank Schwab but in the end accomplished very little. In general the work reiterated the revisionist view of the Klansmen as rational men, not the mere brutes of traditionalist interpretations.<sup>24</sup>

The hallmarks of the revisionists were a view of the Klan that saw it as more than a fringe group, the recognition of local circumstances as dictating the Klan's policy and activity, the rejection of the Klan as solely or even primarily a vigilante group, and recognition of the Klan as a valid indicator of mainstream attitudes and outlooks.

Yet some works can be difficult to categorize. Indeed one of the

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<sup>23</sup> Shawn Lay, *The Invisible Empire in the West : Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 67-92.

<sup>24</sup> Shawn Lay, *Hooded Knights on the Niagara, : The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, New York* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 85-115.

earliest of the histories of the Klan, *The Ku Klux Klan in Pennsylvania: A Study in Nativism* written in 1936, foreshadowed much of the revisionists' argument. Emerson Loucks's work relied heavily on the Klansmen themselves, many of whom consented to be interviewed. However, Loucks's work painted the Klansmen as more victims than victimizers, especially noting violence and economic discrimination against Klansmen at the hands of Catholics. While Loucks's view does agree with what later revisionists suggested overall, it remained an anomaly in Klan literature for several decades.<sup>25</sup>

Historian Ellis Hawley combined elements of the revisionists' arguments within a largely traditionalist framework. He argued that the Klan was more akin to the contemporary fascist movements of Europe than to more familiar American center-right populism. Yet Hawley agreed that the Klan clearly displayed regional variations, and accepted that the Klan could be quite different based on local prejudices and sentiments, essential elements of the revisionist view.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, in the historiography of the second Klan some works stand out, not only for their contributions, but also in their uniqueness. Nancy MacLean's *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* is one such case. MacLean is the primary dissenter among modern historians disputing the established view. She examines the case of the Klan in Athens, Georgia, a small city built around the University of Georgia. She concludes the Klan

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<sup>25</sup> Emerson Loucks, *The Ku Klux Klan in Pennsylvania: A Study in Nativism* (Harrisonburg, Pennsylvania: Telegraph Press, 1936), 19-47.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and their institutions. 1917-1933 2nd ed.* (New York: Waveland Press 1979), 128-129.

was largely a middle-class based group in Athens, but also examines why it was not more strongly opposed in one of the progressive bastions of the state. MacLean examines the Klan's development paying special attention to the issues and interactions of race, class and most importantly, gender. Her work is the first to apply feminist techniques to the study of the second Klan. Indeed MacLean is among the first to suggest that the rising agency of women in the twenties was a primary issue for the Klansmen. Additionally she sees issues of class as more important to Klansmen than issues 'traditional morals.' In doing so she set herself apart from the revisionists who viewed the Klan's focus on nativism and religion as more important than class differences.<sup>27</sup>

Another work of significance is Kathleen Blee's *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender of the 1920s*. Blee looks at the role of gender in the Klan, and examines the role of women in the day to day activities of the Klan, and its feminine auxiliary, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. Blee notes that far from being peripheral to the organization, women were often at the forefront of its activities. Nor were these women a small clique within the Invisible Empire, for Blee points out that over 500,000 women joined the Women of the KKK, and in some places, they numbered as much as a third of the eligible female population. Perhaps most significant was Blee's evidence of a great overlap between the Klan membership and membership in other progressive women's groups. Blee shows that the women of the Klan

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 14.

often were also members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the League of Women Voters, and other groups which would not ordinarily be associated with the reactionary attitudes of the Klan.<sup>28</sup>

Also significant are those works that have touched upon the specific context of Kentucky and its Klan. A large part of Kentucky falls within the region of Appalachia and as such has a story all its own. Most historians of Appalachia have held to the traditionalist image of the Klan as a terrorist organization over the revisionist view that it was a populist movement.

Joseph Trotter's *Coal, Class, and Color* deals with the Klan specifically within the context of West Virginia. Trotter notes the Klan's existence there as a social control measure for white elites, serving as a means of oppression against blacks. Trotter suggests that the Klan was active in West Virginia during the period of about 1920-25, but, although present, was never the massive social phenomenon that it was in states such as Indiana or Ohio.<sup>29</sup>

Ronald Lewis's *Black Coal Miners in America* argues that the Klan was used to stir racial animosity and thereby indirectly discourage unionism. Although there was certainly the potential for the Klan to be used by mine owners and management as a tool for this purpose Lewis does not suggest this to have been the case.

Rather, where the Klan is mentioned it is dealt with more as an

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<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 2, 29, 40, 101-122.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color : Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 48, 71-73 212, 214.



opportunistic organization that played upon the racial views of miners to create new members within the Invisible Empire. Given the United Mine Workers of America's policy of excluding Klansmen from membership any Klan successes in mining regions became defeats for unionists. The Klan, however, remains tangential to Lewis's overall work. Thus while it is described within the context of Ohio's mining regions, where the Klan was a major force, Lewis never examines the Invisible Empire's activities in other Appalachian regions such as eastern Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>30</sup>

Other works deal with Kentucky as a whole. James Bolin's *Bossism and Reform in a Southern City: Lexington, Kentucky, 1880-1940* and Pem Davidson Buck's *Worked to the Bone* examine life within urban and rural Kentucky respectively. Both Buck and Bolin showed how, by judicious use of jobs, money, personal interaction, and outright fraud, local bosses could maintain their electoral majorities and political power. Yet nowhere does Bolin mention the Klan as a force in urban politics throughout the era.<sup>31</sup> Buck does deal with the Klan but her analysis is largely a rehash of existing literature. Rather her interest, as a sociologist, is in applying the traditionalist view of the Klan to the organization in Kentucky. She views the Klan as part of a wider effort to defuse class solidarity among the poor of Kentucky.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ronald Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America : Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington : University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 243-273.

<sup>31</sup> James Duane Bolin, *Bossism and Reform in A Southern City* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000),75-95.

<sup>32</sup> Pem Buck Davidson, *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power and Privilege in Kentucky* (New York: Monthly Review Press,2002),142-153.

Joseph Klotter's *Portrait of Paradox: Kentucky 1900-1950*, is primarily a political history of the Commonwealth, but also includes some attention to social and economic developments. Like Davidson Klotter argues politics within the Commonwealth were extremely oligarchic and machine driven, at both the state and local levels. Additional overlap between Buck and Klotter lies in their shared belief that Kentucky's elites often took a leading role in extralegal and quasi-legal violence, in an effort to maintain status, prestige and their leadership role.<sup>33</sup> Indeed this sort of violent elite role played an important part in the Klan's development in Kentucky.

Perhaps the best use of the traditionalist view is to understand how the Klan's contemporaries viewed the organization. With clear roots in the scholarship of the 1920s the traditionalist view of the extremist, violent Klan, is best suited to understanding what many of those who interacted with the Klan expected of the Invisible Empire. While Klansmen may have viewed themselves as expressing moderate views of how society ought to function, those outside the organization seem to have thought them quite violent.

While the revisionists are most likely correct in their assumption that the Klan was not always so violent or outside the mainstream as first believed, this does not disprove the notion of a contemporary view of the violent Klan. Rather the revision reflected that the Klan was popular and intensely local, one thing in California and another in Maryland. Still, in an era when mere union organizers were seen by

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<sup>33</sup> James Klotter, *Kentucky: Portrait in Paradox: 1900-1950* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 1-73.

many as closet communists, and when many took seriously warnings that the Knights of Columbus were plotting a violent overthrow of government, expecting violence from the Klan does not seem so unreasonable. Fears of massive violence outside the established socio-political system were commonplace and were easily leveled in an era when even the most seemingly outrageous charges were believed by millions. Clearly the Klan, which so emphasized its links to the original Klan of Reconstruction, could be viewed by both friends and enemies as a primarily violent vigilante organization.

Rather in spite of how the Klansmen saw themselves, those outside the Klan believed it to be a real, violent organizing force. At a time when rumors of violent groups ready to suddenly seize government power abounded, the Klan appeared to many as just another such organization. Indeed the Klan after the change of leadership in 1922, when the more political Hiram Evens replaced Klan founder Simmons as head of the organization, displayed an overt interest in politics.

The Klan did influence politics, both local and state-wide in neighboring Indiana and to a lesser extent in Ohio and West Virginia. With the Klan as a great force in those states, it served as a powerful warning to established political parties, bosses, and machines in Kentucky. The Klan entirely reshaped the structure of political parties and political life in all of Indiana, and portions of Tennessee, Ohio, and West Virginia and could potentially do the same elsewhere. Clearly the Klan represented a clear and present threat to established

politics, a fact which politicians in the Commonwealth would have been well aware.

As will be seen the relatively weak Kentucky Klan was opposed by officials throughout the state. How and why they were able to suppress the Klan are important issues. Few states were as successful in stopping Klan activity as Kentucky, and the methods used here show much about both the Klan and Kentucky. Furthermore, while historians since Chalmers have shown the role of the First World War and Red Scare on promoting the Klan's growth, none have yet suggested that local variations in the development of these phenomenon impacted the Klan's growth in a specific place. This also is an important issue which must be dealt with in order to more fully understand both the Klan and the Commonwealth.

## Chapter 2: Vigilantes and Politicians

In order to fully understand the factors impacting the growth of the Commonwealth's Klan it is necessary to understand the overall status of Kentucky at this time. Clearly factors unique to Kentucky played a role in the development of the Klan as a body there.

Kentucky is a relatively rural state and had only three major urban areas. Louisville was by far the largest city in the Commonwealth and contained 286,369 of the states 2,416,630 residents. Lexington is a far smaller city and in 1920 its population was a relatively minor 54,664. Cincinnati's influence on the society of north-central Kentucky was significant but cannot be measured precisely as the census of 1920 did not make efforts to define or analyze the metro area as more recent censuses have done. Beyond these urban islands Kentucky is dominated by farmland. The land is divided into small counties and contains innumerable small towns, often the county seats of their respective counties.<sup>1</sup>

Kentucky, like the whole of the United States, was undergoing a rapid transformation during the first decades of the twentieth century. Following America's entry into World War I these urges came to be directed not only against the German enemy in Europe but also against more local forces that were seen as unAmerican in the eyes of many.

Precisely who and what was deemed unAmerican could vary considerably

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Forstall, *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990* (Washington: Population Division US Bureau of the Census, 1997), 1.

depending on whose hands the decision was in, but pacifists, socialists, opponents of the war, and German-Americans (both naturalized citizens and resident aliens), were generally targeted. In addition, various groups could be added and, while the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan might disagree over exactly how 'unAmerican' Catholics and bootleggers were, they certainly both saw fit to expand the list of wartime enemies to include the newly formed American Communist Party and other groups deemed antithetical to the 'American way of life.'<sup>2</sup>

Instrumental to an understanding of the development of the Klan during this era is a basic understanding of the nature of Kentucky's politics. With over 120 counties, Kentucky at this time was second overall in the nation in terms of counties per square mile and third in total number of counties. Furthermore, Kentucky's counties dominated the government of the state in the twentieth century, with most political power being intensely local in character and exerted by means of political machines.<sup>3</sup>

Following American entry into the First World War, the United States government passed the Espionage Act, which greatly limited civil liberties and produced a political climate where a wide range of activities were deemed 'unAmerican.' The narrow definition of 'American' that the Espionage Act produced is critical to understanding the philosophic

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<sup>2</sup> William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion 1919-1941* (Boston: New England University Press, 1989), 1-28. Chalmers, 2, 49, 109-11.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Ireland, *Little Kingdoms: The Counties of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977) vii 143 145-146, 148-150. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, 10-11.

ground in which the revived Ku Klux Klan would flourish. This ideological climate played a critical role in the Klan's growth. Furthermore the act, along with the ensuing Sedition Act, left a clear trail of records and court cases <sup>4</sup>

Beyond mere acceptance of suspension of civil liberties by civic authorities in the name of the 'war effort' and 'national security,' many in Kentucky went a step further to enact vigilante justice in the name of patriotism. These activities went beyond simple violence against German-Americans, vigilante actions often took the form of attacks on pacifists and others who bore left of center views which were too extreme for local sensibilities. Yet particularly significant, and particularly unique to Kentucky, these activities included local political officials in a direct leadership role at the heads of violent mobs undertaking actions against dissidents.<sup>5</sup>

While vigilante violence and official prosecutions both appeared elsewhere in the era of the Red Scare, they were nowhere tied so closely together as in Kentucky. Many officials within the Commonwealth of Kentucky not only embraced vigilante methods but actively sought to control this activity by taking on a leadership role within vigilante groups. This unique role is indicative of a broader effort by many of Kentucky's elites to control and dominate such extra-legal efforts. Elites in neighboring states left no evidence of having made such concerted

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<sup>4</sup> Chalmers, 28-43.

<sup>5</sup> John Higham, 194-234. Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: McGraw-Hill, 1955) 190-91.

efforts to dominate the leadership of informal groups during this period. Rather, in other states elites seem to have worked within the existing legal system to suppress radicalism, ignoring for the most part the vigilante activities that reflected populist forms of reactionary politics. Elites generally ignored the activities of mobs and other groups outside the law, if their targets could be loosely classified as radicals. This is not to suggest that either vigilanteism or 'lawful' suppression of the left were not common throughout the US; rather, it is to suggest that elites elsewhere preferred to work within existing legal structures, and ignored vigilante efforts at radical suppression. In contrast, Kentucky's elites seemed equally and consistently likely to lead both legal proceedings and the mob as a means of repression.<sup>6</sup>

A particularly well documented account of these activities occurred in the Covington area of Kentucky in the spring and summer of 1918. There, an organization grew and developed which sought out 'enemies of the United States' among the area's German-Americans, socialists, IWW members, and Catholics. Other victims included those

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<sup>6</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 4, volumes 32, 36, 38; reel 6 volumes 53-55; reel 7 volume 57; reel 8 volumes 60, 63-68; reel 8, volume 70; reel 9 volume 90; reel 10 volume 91; reel 11 volume 92; reel 19 volumes 136-140; reel 24 volume 171; reel 25 volumes 178, 179, 182, 183; reel 26 volumes 185, 186 While pursuing the restoration of Civil Liberties, the early ACLU (also alternatively know as the National Civil Liberties Bureau (NCLB) before 1920) engaged in a wide variety of cases dealing with the various aspects of civil liberties dealing with the Red Scare, Espionage Act, Sedition Act, labor unions, and the more informal measures taken against leftists, and radicals. These cases make up the overwhelming majority of cases during this era. None of Kentucky's neighbors displayed a single instance of mob's lead by appointed officials, elected officials, and/or men noted for wealth and/or political power.

Pem Davidson Buck, 105. This work examines a variety of issues dealing with class relationships in Kentucky. Buck notes that elites lead parties of lower-class anti-union 'night riders' at least as far back as 1905, which may indicate that the pattern of vigilante groups leading lower class elements against progressive forces in Kentucky was nothing new.



who had failed to contribute significantly and visibly to the war effort. What makes this group, so noteworthy are not its targets but the fact that it was led by those who, in most other contexts, would have been content to use police and the courts to achieve such ends.

This group, the self-styled Citizen's Patriotic League, was responsible for many outburst of populist violence. One particular such attack occurred on the night of March 18, 1918, in the city of Covington, Kentucky. There a local pacifist, socialist, and church pastor, John Bigelow, was taken from his home and removed by a mob to a wooded area outside the city. There he was horsewhipped, beaten, and advised to leave the city and its environs at once. Perhaps more importantly, Bigelow was doused in flammable oil, and this may be an indication that some members of the group intended to burn him alive, a feature of many lynchings. Fortunately for Bigelow he was never set alight, and the use of oil may have been only meant as a further warning. While Bigelow did not die he was severely injured and bed-ridden for several months.<sup>7</sup>

This activity, so similar to the Night Riding of the Klan, was not an isolated incident. On the night of June 5, 1918, the Citizen's Patriotic League demanded loyalty oaths from several German-Americans. Over the course of the night a large band of approximately 200 individuals carried in over 40 automobiles traveled the length and breadth of Kenton County, denouncing 'unAmerican' activity and demanding loyalty oaths

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<sup>7</sup>*ACLU archives*, reel 7 volume 60. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 19, 1918 page 8.

from over a half dozen individuals, including a Roman Catholic priest. The group also entered two German-American owned taverns and demanded similar oaths from the proprietors. In each case the victim was called out from his home or business by the crowd and made to state his loyalty to the United States government. Additionally, victims were required to make a quite sizable contribution of \$100 toward the Red Cross. In the words of Harvey Myers, a Commonwealth attorney from the community and a member of the Citizen's Patriotic League present that night, "Kenton County must be loyal and all pro-Germans must go."<sup>8</sup>

On the night of June 24, 1918, the Citizen's Patriotic League once again went forth into the night to make the world unsafe for all things deemed unAmerican. The League demanded support for the war from Paul Flynn, a 55-year-old farmer who resided south of Covington. Flynn was accosted for failing to give sufficiently to war drives and for failing to buy war bonds. Flynn was whipped repeatedly by the League's members until he agreed to buy \$25 in US war bonds.<sup>9</sup>

In all these cases Stephen L. Blakely, attorney for the Commonwealth of Kentucky, was present and actively involved in these outbursts of mob violence. That the Commonwealth's attorney was present is especially important in showing a tendency on the part of

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<sup>8</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 6, 1918 in archives *ACLU archives*, reel 7 volume 60.

<sup>9</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 25, 1918 in archives *ACLU archives*, reel 7 volume 60.

Kentucky officials to not only ignore such outbursts of popular violence, but to incite and lead them as well.<sup>10</sup>

Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, produced an extensive correspondence with government officials on the matter of the mob violence in the Covington area, especially the activity of Blakely. The words of Governor R.C. Stanley at the time are telling: “the governor has no right to indict or to impeach and, under the law and Constitution of the State, until the civil authorities call upon the Governor for assistance or until matters reach such a state as to justify placing the particular community under martial law and the militia, there is nothing the Governor can do in the premises.” As Governor Stanley well knew, and as Baldwin found out, officials at the local level were effectively insulated from officials at the Commonwealth level. Kentucky's local politics were fundamentally in the hands of local officials, who were only answerable to Commonwealth officials in the most extreme circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

In response to such an official attitude, ACLU supporter and colleague of Baldwin, Edward F. Alexander, turned to other local officials and wrote directly to the Ohio State District Attorney's Office in Columbus, feeling that since the case involved the Cincinnati area, the State District Attorney of Ohio might feel compelled to become involved.

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<sup>10</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 5 volume 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Not surprisingly, Ohio authorities were unwilling to interfere in an affair that did not obviously involve their state.<sup>12</sup>

Alexander also wrote to district attorneys in several northern Kentucky counties on this matter. The Boone County District Attorney maintained that “nothing had happened in his district.” The Kenton County District Attorney did not respond to Alexander, in spite of the fact that Bigelow's whipping was believed to have taken place within Kenton County. Alexander also sought aid from the local Federal District Attorney Thomas D. Slattery, who refused stating “unless evidence is presented that Bigelow's abductors impersonated federal officers, [then the] department cannot act.”<sup>13</sup>

Alexander ultimately abandoned any hope of prosecuting Blakely, writing:

I may say with all frankness, that we have no confidence in the local authorities of Kenton and Campbell Counties. I believe that we have excellent grounds for this feeling. As to the Kentucky Federal authorities, I believe they are more or less indifferent with an unapparent tendency to maintain that no Federal question is presented. I do not think we should get very far if we had to depend on Kentucky Federal officials... to sum up we do not think that we can get very far in this matter of an investigation.<sup>14</sup>

In no way was Blakely ever prosecuted or censured for his activities by the state of Kentucky, nor was he indicted or otherwise

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

censured by federal officials. Most significantly, Blakely continued to hold sway over the area both as a leader of mob activities and as a district attorney. Given free reign by both state and federal officials, Blakely is typical of the Kentucky local elites who held both their official position and served informally as leaders of vigilante groups.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this case as a barometer of the general attitude of Kentuckians is a simple economic one. In spite of a \$500 reward for information on Mr. Bigelow's attackers, no information was ever volunteered. Kentuckians were either too afraid of his attackers or too much in sympathy with them to provide information on Bigelow's attorneys.<sup>15</sup>

The attitude of Kentucky's citizens toward these activities is revealed in the editorial pages of the area's newspapers. Few wrote to condemn Blakely, but many were convinced Bigelow got what he deserved.

A typical example is this letter to the editor:

Frequently the law moves altogether too slowly to satisfy; but that is no reason why one should take the law into one's hands. And Under the cloak of so called free speech many decidedly misguided individuals have substituted license for freedom. Believe what you please have been the warning of the government, but keep your mouth shut. The trouble is that many cannot or will not keep their mouths shut. That has been the trouble with Preacher Bigelow. He spoke too often both in defiance of Uncle Sam's warning....

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Wake up Uncle Sam before the nation finds itself wrapped in strangulating coils. Socialism is growing bolder socialism with monstrous ideas and no less monstrous teachings. Bigelow frankly admits the horsewhipping has changed him -- for a time at least --From an unresisting pacifists to a prepared pacifist. Evidently the horsewhipping, censurable as it was, has accomplished something Non-resistance is mighty good in theory – when applied ... it is different. <sup>16</sup>

While on the one hand preferring that such outbursts not take place, the author of this letter sympathizes with the vigilantes more than the victim. Rather than advocating the free expression of minority opinions, the speaker would rather have the government support such vigilanteism. Within this populist view, the victim, Pastor Bigelow is by no means innocent; instead, his opinions are deeply in error and require punishment. Vigilantes, then, are merely doing the right thing, albeit in the wrong way.

The case of Kentucky Socialist Frank Lavanier provides a further example of the ways in which Kentucky officials allowed vigilante justice to be carried out in the Commonwealth. Lavanier was a member of the Socialist party and was repeatedly harassed by individuals from the District Attorney's office. Like Bigelow before him, in 1919 Lavanier was accosted and threatened for his 'dissident' political views. As the original affidavit sworn out by Lavanier states, he was threatened publicly by Blakely and a mob with the words "if any of you S\_\_\_\_ of B\_\_\_\_s of you

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<sup>16</sup> *Cincinnati Enquirer* [date illegible] clippings in *ACLU archives*, reel 5 volume 36.

Socialists and Bolshevists dare to hold a meeting in Covington we will shoot the H\_\_\_\_ out of ever d\_\_\_\_\_ one of you [edited in original].” Blakely also demanded that Lavanier not only abate his political activities in the area but also move out of the city.<sup>17</sup>

Lavanier was a local pariah who was unpopular with Kentuckians in the region and persecution of him served as a rallying cry for those sympathetic to vigilante justice. Like others elsewhere in the state, he was the target of mob violence which included the involvement of local government officials. Again, by directing local feelings against the perceived threat of radicalism, members of the local political leadership were able to take charge of mob violence and direct these populist energies away from reform and a more reasoned local politics and, instead, direct them toward the paper tiger of domestic radicalism.<sup>18</sup>

Similar are the cases of James Beeler and Edward Greoshel two Louisville Socialists, who were placed in a similar situation in June through August of 1918. Each of these men was harassed in Louisville by mobs led by members of the district attorney's office. Also, both Beeler and Greoshel were prosecuted for political activities opposing to the war. Again these cases, while offering less in the way of documentary evidence, do show that the Commonwealth's politicians were willing to lead mob activities within the state. Both men seemed unable to acquire redress through the police but in each case the men were also the

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<sup>17</sup>*ACLU archives*, reel 12 volume 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

victims of official government prosecution that coincided with the mob attacks.<sup>19</sup>

Other instances of officials and mobs conspiring against individuals with nonconforming views took place throughout the state, and victims included a pacifist in the north eastern Kentucky town of Staffordsburg,<sup>20</sup> a labor organizer in Jefferson County,<sup>21</sup> several brewers in the northern Kentucky area,<sup>22</sup> and farmers in northern and eastern Kentucky.<sup>23</sup> In these and no doubt other instances, the elected officials of the state used mob violence in ways that served to reinforce existing political elites at the expense of those with unpopular political views.

In all of these instances, officials used mob violence against minority opinions in order to reinforce their local authority. In all cases documented, wherever mob members were identified they included locally appointed or elected officials. Only in cases where the mob victims themselves were able to identify the perpetrators were any mob members identified, and all official attempts to prosecute individual members failed. In all of these cases there is a clear indication of willingness on the part of officials to participate in local outbursts of mob violence.

These activities are material to the Klan's development in Kentucky. The Klan's usual claim that the ideological and legal climate of

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<sup>19</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 2 volume 12

<sup>20</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 2 volume 12. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 13, 1918 page 4. *Cincinnati Times-Star*, May 20, 1918 page 8.

<sup>21</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 2 volume 12.

<sup>22</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 2 volume 12. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 13, 1918 page 4.

<sup>23</sup> *ACLU archives*, reel 2 volume 12



the time allowed 'unAmerican' ideas to flourish in 'typical' American communities bore little resemblance to the reality in Kentucky. Clearly communities in Kentucky developed a methodology for destroying and rooting out those seen as radical, or atypical in their thinking. Kentucky officials exploited this by at the very least turning a blind eye, and often taking a leading role in such events in order to reinforce their existing leadership positions within communities. Clearly the Klan could make no claim that current politicians were deaf to the threat of radicalism and 'unAmerican activities' at the local level within the context of Kentucky. Furthermore any such claims made by Klansmen would serve to challenge established leadership. Thus the Klan could not effectively demand a role in driving out subversives without undermining the role of local elites. This was quite simply something local elites were unwilling to accept.

Kentucky was a remarkably friendly state for incumbent politicians during the 1920s. Kentucky stands in particularly stark contrast compared to neighbors. There the Klan influenced politics deeply and dethroned established politicians, in contrast Kentucky's politics show no clear indication of such influence.

Indeed, of the entire Kentucky congressional delegation, not one individual failed to win re-election in the years from 1920 to 1928. In 1924 William Fields left congress to occupy the governor's mansion, and was replaced by his political heir and fellow Democrat Fred Vinson. In

1926 three members of Kentucky's congressional delegation failed to run again, all both due to death or failing health, and yet again in each case the same party easily held the same seats.<sup>24</sup>

The routine reelection of politicians very much speaks to the stability of Kentucky's politics. While Kentucky's four neighboring states, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia on average rejected nearly 27% of their congressional delegations over the same time period, Kentuckians were returning 100% of theirs.

The Kentucky experience can usefully be compared with that of, Indiana where the Klan was stronger during this decade than in any other state. In 1924, the year the Klan was at the height of its power in the Hoosier state, Indianans rejected a massive 45% of their state's incumbent congressional delegation. Again, Kentucky returned its entire incumbent slate of congressmen during the same period. Clearly, if Indiana is any indication of the impact the Klan had on congressional elections, it was no factor within the Commonwealth.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in nearby West Virginia, nearly 83% of then House delegation was rejected by the people in 1924. On average West Virginia would reject over half of all incumbent congressmen in any given election throughout the 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> William Tyler Page, *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1920* page 5. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1922* page 5. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1924* page 7. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1926* page 7. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1928* page 9. *Louisville Courier-Journal* September 7, 1921 page 1.

<sup>25</sup> Moore, 151-179.

<sup>26</sup> Page, *Clerk of the House of Representatives Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1920* page 11. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1922* page 10. *Statistics of the*

While the Klan itself became an issue in neighboring states in these years, Kentucky's politicians were unique in their utter disregard for the Klan as an issue during campaigning. Not one of Kentucky's major candidates for the US House of Representatives or Senate made mention of the Invisible Empire in any public campaign speeches recorded during the era.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, such unwillingness of congressmen to go on record did not go unnoticed. Yet, Kentucky's congressmen may have aspired to be more than mere congressmen, and engaging an issue that mattered little at home might hurt their chances were they to seek higher office, for little apparent gain.<sup>28</sup>

In Presidential politics Kentucky was nearly evenly divided in both 1920 and 1924. Only in 1928 with the nomination of Al Smith, the first Roman Catholic to run on a major party ticket would Kentucky favor one candidate by a large majority. An analysis of these elections once again shows a lack of Klan influence.

In 1920 the race between Senator Warren G. Harding and Ohio governor James Cox, Kentuckians favored Cox by a razor thin majority of only 4017 votes, a difference of less than one-half of one-percent of the total votes cast within the Commonwealth.<sup>29</sup> The machine nature of

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*Congressional and Presidential Election 1924* page 12. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1926* page 12. *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1928* page 14.

<sup>27</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, April 15, 1920-October 17, 1928. Of 68 articles on campaign speeches, none include mention of the Klan.

<sup>28</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal* July 29, 1926 page 6. Dec 25, 1926 page 6. October 24, 1924 page 6. October 29, 1924 page 6. December 24 1924, page 6.

<sup>29</sup>Page, *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1920* page 11.

Kentucky politics is readily apparent in this instance, and while 71.2% of eligible voters cast ballots that election, this may be as much an indication of widespread voter fraud as of actual interest in politics.<sup>30</sup>

Four years later the state swung to the Republicans and a slim plurality gave their votes to Calvin Coolidge. While Coolidge claimed the state, it was not due to any significant successes by the Republican machine within the state. Rather it was Progressive Robert La Follette whose 38,465 votes prevented either candidate from achieving a clear majority. Indeed had the La Follette votes gone to John Davis, the Democratic candidate, the Democrat would have pulled away with a slim majority as the party had in 1920. In the end, 24,111 votes, 3.2% of all those cast, separated Coolidge and Davis.<sup>31</sup> 1924 marked the year of the Klan's greatest influence nationally. Yet while the Klan might be a force in other states, Kentucky's election results showed no major disruptions.

The Klan did play a very minor, if indirect role, in this election. Leaders of Louisville's black community endorsed Davis for President and suggested blacks abandon their traditional loyalties to the Republican Party due to its associations with the Klan.<sup>32</sup>

In 1928, however, events differed significantly, with the nomination of Al Smith of New York, a 'wet' candidate in the era of Prohibition, and the first Catholic candidate of any major party. In the wake of Smith's

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<sup>30</sup> Lowell H. Harrison, "Kentucky and Presidential Elections, 1912-1948" in *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, 26 (1952) 321-322.

<sup>31</sup> Page, *Clerk of the House of Representatives Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1924* page 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Louisville Courier Journal*, page 9, October 11, 1924. *Lexington Leader*, October 11, 1924 page 7.

nomination many Protestants who were usually Democrats abandoned their party. The effect of Smith's Catholic faith combined with his anti-Prohibition views led to his overwhelming defeat in Southern states, Kentucky being only one. For the first time in a decade Kentucky swung wildly in favor of one party, Hoover carried the Bluegrass state by a margin of 176,994 votes of the almost one million cast. As in other states, many voters simply stayed away from the polls. Anti-Catholic tendencies were already common before the Klan appeared, as they would remain after it vanished. While the Klan played upon these tendencies elsewhere this was not the case in Kentucky. The Klan possessed no more of a monopoly on anti-Catholic prejudice than of anti-Semitic or anti-black attitudes. The Klan merely reflected these prejudices, it did not create them, and there is no evidence to support a claim that the Klan was responsible for the great defeat of Smith in Kentucky.<sup>33</sup>

Nor was there evidence for Klan influence upon gubernatorial elections. In politics at a state level, the governor's mansion changed political hands numerous times throughout the 1920s, but this was identical to the state of the governorship in the 1930s and the 1940s as well. Indeed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the governorship of Kentucky changed hands every four years after 1907. Very commonly, as in 1919, the incumbent governor simply lacked the political power to

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<sup>33</sup> Page, *Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election 1924* page 10.

reacquire his party's nomination. Indeed in a state divided into 120 counties, many or most of ruled by intensely local, oligarchic, cliques, it should come as no surprise that holding an office requiring a state-wide majority was difficult at best. Congressmen, state assemblymen, and mayors could rely on their continuing contact with local politicians to ensure re-election. Governors and US Senators, dwelling primarily in Frankfort or Washington, had little time to devote to developing the myriad local contacts necessary to hold onto their offices, and instead often lost touch with their political bases in their various home regions.<sup>34</sup> While Congressmen serving in the US House may have had a more difficult task than local assemblymen and mayors, the relatively small regions they represented made it possible for them to maintain their hold on power in a political system that was intensely local.

In the 1923 Governor's race the Klan had not yet made any impression on Kentucky. The contest of 1923 was primarily an issue of personality. Yet regionalism and local interests also played a significant part, and many if not most Kentuckians voted on the basis of local political loyalties. Incumbents have historically fallen easy prey in gubernatorial elections in the Commonwealth, and thus it was not surprising when US Congressman William Fields defeated incumbent Republican Edward Morrow in the fall of 1923.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Klotter, 213-231, 284.

<sup>35</sup> Klotter, 272-275. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, November, 9 1923 Page 1. *Lexington Leader*, November, 9 1923 page 1.

Fields was among Kentucky's most ambitious governors of the twentieth century, and proposed a plan which would have eliminated the state's \$6 million debt, built new asylums and hospitals, and, most significantly, provided over \$50 million for road construction. Fields proposed a bond initiative to total \$75 million to fund these various expenses, to be paid for primarily by gas taxes, automobile registration fees, and an increase in property taxes.<sup>36</sup>

The bond became a ballot issue in the fall of 1924, and also a virtual referendum on the governorship of Fields. The plan drew the ire of both fiscal conservatives and newspapers, with the *Lexington Leader* and the *Courier-Journal* agreeing for perhaps the only time in the decade. Critics saw the plan as too ambitious, and rejected it out of hand. Only the *Lexington Herald* supported the measure and even then half heartedly. Likewise most of Kentucky's political bosses did not trust Fields, and failed to give him their support. The measure was defeated by nearly 100,000 votes and came as a serious blow to Fields's political prestige, one he never fully recovered from.<sup>37</sup>

The gubernatorial election of 1927 was a contest between Fields, who was still reeling from the defeat of the bond issue, and Republican Flem Sampson, Chief Justice of the state's highest court. Field's defeat on bond issue in 1924 was brought up as a constant reminder of his inability to achieve real success as governor. The other major issue

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<sup>36</sup> Klotter, 275-285.

<sup>37</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 19, 22-29. February 1924 *Lexington Herald*, February 9, 22, 22-28 1924, March 5, 25; November 5 1924; *Lexington Leader*, November 5 1924

became not roads, the Klan, or education, but whether pari-mutuel betting would remain legal at Kentucky racetracks. Amidst widespread voter fraud Sampson defeated Fields, by nearly 32,000 votes. Once again the governor's mansion changed hands after only four years, and once again there was indication of voter fraud, but no trace of the Klan as an issue.<sup>38</sup>

Issues mattered little in the campaigns for governor during this era, and most contests seemed determined more by personal loyalties than by any actual issues in the state. In both the 1923 and 1927 elections all candidates were dry.<sup>39</sup>

Elections for US Senator were little different in Kentucky than those for governor. Augustus Stanley was the incumbent in 1924, and ran against republican challenger Frederic Sackett. Sackett, a war hero, won based primarily on his contacts with local county party bosses. Once again, in a contest that focused on issues of personality and the ability to appeal to local oligarchs' interests, the incumbent proved unable to hold onto office.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in the 1926 US senate race incumbent Republican Richard Ernst was defeated by Democratic challenger Alben Barkley. Like Stanley, Ernst was unable to maintain his political connections in the commonwealth, and additionally was too weak in health to campaign

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<sup>38</sup> Klotter, 286-288 *Lexington Herald*, November 8-12, 1927 page 2. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, December 2, 1927. *New York Times*, October 26, 1927.

<sup>39</sup> Klotter, 27-276, 286.

<sup>40</sup> Klotter, 281-285.



effectively. Barkley's victory was the continuation of a prevalent theme in Kentucky politics at this time, that any office which required a statewide majority was easily captured, but difficult to retain.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the 1920s these same patterns reigned throughout Kentucky's politics. Local officials up to congressmen were able to hold onto local powerbases, but those seeking statewide office, from governor to senator, proved unable to hold onto the local power bases that were so crucial to keeping elected office. It was not until 1932 that an incumbent Kentucky US Senator would win re-election in this century. Little kingdoms and coalitions of kingdoms were what determined Kentucky's politics at a state level.

In urban politics Kentucky was dominated by traditional 'urban bosses. In rural areas, bosses also reigned supreme, often based in county seats. The line between these two types of bosses is oftentimes fuzzy, as evidenced by the commonly held title of 'city boss' for Frankfort's powerful Percy Haley.

In Lexington, Billy Klair ruled the city as a machine boss from 1900 until his death in 1937. Klair, the son of German immigrants and a Catholic was naturally hostile to the Klan, and in any case saw no reason to allow a potentially disruptive organization into his city. Klair's personal animosity toward the Klan, born out of his heritage and faith,

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<sup>41</sup> Klotter, 282-285. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 20-21 1926 page 2. September, 22 1926 page 2.

did much to discourage the Klan from rising in the city to any large degree.<sup>42</sup>

From 1912 until 1931 Lexington's city government was run on a city commission basis that kept power in the hands of a variety of elected officials. Thus Klair was able to sit on the state's railroad commission, serve as a legislator, and later hold no political office at all, while retaining complete control of local events. No one commission member held enough power to challenge Klair, and those who fell out of line were quickly replaced. Klair was "undisputed czar of Lexington politics" and had no reason to turn to the Klan for support.<sup>43</sup>

Similar situations prevailed in other cities, with Michael Brennan, running Louisville, and Maurice Galvin holding a similar position in Covington. Even little Frankfort had its own boss, Percy Haley. In each of these cases a local oligarch ruled the city in Tammany Hall fashion. Relying heavily on patronage and graft, these men ruled in a way not unlike the rural elites.

Only two factors separated these men from rural bosses. One was the hereditary position of rural elites, who often relied on bonds of kinship to maintain power. Kentucky's urban bosses were all 'new men,' without such ties. A secondly factor was a Catholic faith which remained a serious political liability throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in

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<sup>42</sup> Bolin, xv, 31-75.

<sup>43</sup> Bolin, xv. Klotter 193-194, 205, 226, 274, 276-277, 285-286, 294, 297, 304-306.

rural Kentucky. Other than these there was little difference between the ways urban and rural ruled. <sup>44</sup>

Ben Johnson of Bardstown is typical of the rural oligarchs who tightly controlled influence and power in the 'little kingdoms.' Johnson's father had held several hundred slaves, and Johnson sat for over 20 years in the US congress. As Johnson approached the end of his political career in the 1930s he handed over the reins of power to his son, who had been groomed for such a position for a number of years. Up until the day of his death "Boss Ben" Johnson ruled Nelson County without real opposition, handing out favors to those he liked, and destroying those who opposed him.<sup>45</sup>

Voting in most of Kentucky at this time was dominated by vote buying and fraud. Prices varied from one dollar per vote to \$7.50. In one especially close race in 1904 votes sold for the then exorbitant price of \$20 each. Nor was the dead vote neglected as a means of boosting a candidate's turn out.<sup>46</sup>

Blacks, who made up a relatively small segment of the Commonwealth's population at 11.4%, were, according to Klotter, as likely to sell votes as any other group. While occasional talk of

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<sup>44</sup>Bolin, xi-xv 20-37. Klotter, 193-194, 209, 212, 304, 224, 266, 268, 274, 277, 285, 294, 304, 306-307, 318. Ireland 142-150.

<sup>45</sup>Sarah Smith, *Historic Nelson County* (Louisville: Gateway Press, 1971) 384-388.

<sup>46</sup>Klotter, 195-201. J.A. Richards, *A History of Bath County Kentucky* (Yuma, Arizona, Southwest Press, 1961).

disenfranchisement was not unheard of, no serious efforts were made to eliminate black suffrage in Kentucky.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, Kentucky's bosses had a tight grip on power, and moved against any forces that threatened that hold on politics. Yet the Klan represented a real threat. Its ability to mobilize popular discontent could have represented a real danger to their hold on political power. It also threatened their role as vigilante leaders.

The Klan failed to arrive in Kentucky until 1923. Elites in Indiana, Ohio, and other states allowed the Klan to grow strong from 1919 to 1921 when it was under relatively the apolitical leadership of Simmons. The Klan of 1922 and on was lead by Hiram Evans who openly flaunted the Klan's political power. When the Klan arrived in Kentucky, it was obvious that it had a political agenda that was not present earlier. This proved a critical distinction between the growth of the Klan in Kentucky and elsewhere. Clearly the leaders of Kentucky's many small counties and its few cities had the power to stifle such a threat. After 1922 they would have the motivation.

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<sup>47</sup>*US Census Bureau Statistical Abstract of the United States 1920*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921) 40. Klotter 195-201.

## Chapter 3: The Klan and Politics

The Ku Klux Klan of Kentucky never grew into the major organization that was seen in states such as Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. Nor did it even grow to moderate size and influence of the Klans in neighboring Tennessee and West Virginia. For Kentucky the question is not 'why did the Klan succeed here?' but rather 'why did the Klan not succeed there when it claimed so much success in neighboring states?' The reasons for this include a variety of conditions and developments that rendered Kentucky separate and unique from its neighbors. While similar to Tennessee, Ohio, West Virginia, and Indiana, in many respects Kentucky is unique and important differences are at the heart of the Klan's relative lack of success in the Commonwealth compared with its popularity in nearby areas.

Kentuckians generally accepted fraternal organizations, even relatively new ones. The American Legion, an organization which originally had many features that paralleled those of the Klan, had little difficulty in recruiting many members there, and Kentuckians were among the most effective fund raisers in the Legion's ranks. Likewise Kentucky was home to innumerable Rotarians, Elks lodges, Masons, and Shriners.<sup>1</sup>

As has been noted by a number of historians, documentary evidence for the Klan has often times been scant. In the particular

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<sup>1</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, December 30, 1917 Page 6 section 2. Thomas D. Clark, *The Southern Country Editor* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co, 1948), 33-74

case of Kentucky the lack of evidence is made even worse by a tradition in the early part of the twentieth-century of deliberate destruction of records on the part of clerks,<sup>2</sup> likely in order prevent possible prosecutions of local political officials for illicit activity. In this examination of the Klan such sources as pamphlets, newspapers, and similar items have been used extensively. The Klan of Kentucky itself left few official records, and many of the primary sources that do exist are often so incomplete as to render them functionally useless. Nevertheless, some documentary evidence is available and is useful for presenting a view of the Klan and its activities.

While some local newspapers have been preserved, most Kentucky papers from this era have not been, and this makes the role of the *Leader* and the *Courier-Journal* particularly important. Additional periodicals from New York, and elsewhere occasionally made references to the Klan's Kentucky branch, and provide further documentary evidence to corroborate information regarding the Klan in the state.<sup>3</sup> Other documents are available as well, such as speeches, pamphlets and other materials, both in favor of and in opposition to the Invisible Empire. These too serve to shed light on the trials and tragedies of the Klan in Kentucky.

The second Ku Klux Klan, founded in Atlanta in 1915, did not spread to Kentucky until several years later. The first reference to this revived order anywhere within the Commonwealth occurs in the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Ireland, *Little Kingdoms* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1977), 145-147.

<sup>3</sup> George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana press, 1990), 328-329.

December 30, 1917, issue of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. The editorial staff wrote a scathing condemnation of the first and second Klans which focused especially on their extralegal activities. While this article acknowledged the popular understanding of the first Klan, that it was a 'necessity' in dealing with post-Civil War chaos, editors are quick to point out that Kentucky, never had a Reconstruction government, had little if any need for the methods or behaviors associated with the first Ku Klux Klan. Likewise, the editorial staff saw little need for the revived Klan.<sup>4</sup>

The *Lexington Leader*, which was noteworthy for its opposition to the *Courier-Journal* throughout the era, was tentatively pro-Klan. Thus when the Klan marched through Mount Sterling, the *Courier-Journal* reported only 100 marchers at a Klan gathering, emphasizing the small nature of the actual march. The *Leader* however placed the emphasis on the alleged 10,000 viewers of the parade, and the “good time had by all” while also, almost in passing, recording the number of marchers at 100.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed the *Leader* was often overzealous in its treatment of the Klan. In the Mount Sterling meeting there were allegedly 100 observers for each Klansmen. In a similar event in Richmond, Indiana, 6,000 Klansmen drew only 30,000 other attendees, a ratio of 5 to 1.<sup>6</sup> Thus it is unlikely that all of the *Leader's* figures are accurate, but

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<sup>4</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 8, 1925 page 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Lexington Leader*, June 11, 1924 page 8. *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 8, 1924 page 7.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Forstall, *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 2000* (Washington: Population Division US Bureau of the Census, 1997), 1. *Lexington Leader*, June 11, 1924 page 8. *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 8, 1924 page 7. Moore, 122.

they do show a clear bias which favored of the Klan.

Emphasizing different aspects of the organization and its activities, the anti-Klan *Courier-Journal* and pro-Klan *Leader* tell different stories. The *Courier-Journal's* tale is one of a failing, floundering Klan unable to hold or attract members. That of the *Leader* is a different account entirely, one focused on the excitement and crowds surrounding the Klan's gatherings. While the *Leader's* figures for Klansmen are in accord with the number given in the *Courier-Journal*, the *Leader* focuses instead on the crowds gathered at processions, and the 'orderly' and 'exciting' nature of the parades of Klansmen. Where there are no crowds or the Klan is unwanted the *Leader* emphasizes the unruly nature of counter demonstrators or their illegal activities. A typical story from the *Leader* remarks on the 5,000 attendees at the funeral of a Klansman slain in a gun battle with bootleggers. The article which concerns a man in New York is a tribute to the bravery and honesty for which the Klan supposedly stood. The *Leader* also ran a weekly feature in the Sunday edition on the nature of God by 'One Hundred Percent Americans' throughout the period, a clear use of Klan symbolism. Similarly, when describing clashes between the Catholic anti-Klan organization the Knights of the Flaming Circle and the Klan of Ohio, the Klan is portrayed as the victim of aggression. The reader is lead to believe the Klan's successes have evoked the ire of Ohio's Catholics.<sup>7</sup>

Only with the Klan's apparent inability to deal with its own

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<sup>7</sup>*Lexington Leader* May 23, 1924 page 9. June 22, 1924 page 7. August 5, 1924 page 7.



difficulties nationally in 1925 and 1926 did the Klan become less favored in the pages of the *Leader*. While some other Kentucky newspapers are persevered most have not survived. However by contrasting accounts from the *Leader* and *Courier-Journal*, a balanced look at the Klan can be achieved.

Regardless of sources, no single answer can suffice to explain the Klan's lack of success in Kentucky. Rather a range of different causes and factors were at play. The conditions prevalent throughout Kentucky at this time combined with various ill-timed and ill-conceived Klan activities to make the Klan a much smaller influence in Kentucky than in neighboring environments.

In part the Klan's lack of success can be attributed to its inability to acquire a foothold in the largest city within Kentucky. The story of the Klan in Louisville is one quite different from that of the Klan in nearby Indianapolis. While the Klan there succeeded, grew, and indeed became a bastion of power within the state, the Klan never had such success in Kentucky's largest city, in spite of Louisville being an early target of Klan recruiters.<sup>8</sup>

Klan recruitment drives followed a set pattern, usually opening with a speaking engagement at a local theater, church, or fraternal lodge. There, a speaker, invariably a 'Doctor,' 'Reverend,' or 'evangelist,' would deliver a sermon on the principles of the Klan, often tailored specifically to the local audience. These engagements might go on for several consecutive nights. After this, the Klan would accept

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, 235-307. Moore, 7, 8, 16, 25, 61-62, 81, 82, 83, 84, 86, 100, 103, 104, 107.

applications for membership. Once the Klan was sufficiently organized, and elected officers, the speaker would move into another location and repeat the process.

While in other instances the Klan used existing fraternal lodges and bodies to promote itself, these events are nearly impossible to document in Kentucky. However, had the Klan used such means in Kentucky there would likely be more accounts of the Invisible Empire within the state. In any event the utter lack of Klan documents makes it impossible to compare Klan membership to lodge membership.

The first attempt at organizing in Louisville came in the fall of 1921, amidst the furor of the campaign for mayor. Blacks, after years of neglect by Republican allies, turned away from the party they had supported since the Civil War. Progressive members of the city's black community formed an independent local party, the Lincoln Independent Party.<sup>9</sup> Such a development threatened to upset traditional voting patterns. This was especially significant in a city where blacks made up well over a quarter of the population.. Together with immigrants these two minorities made up slightly over half of the cities residents.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time Klan speaker Dr. G.S. Long requested permission from the city's Board of Public Safety to speak. In a city where the majority of adults were either blacks or immigrants the

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<sup>9</sup> George C. Wright "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" in *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Winter, 1983), 8-23.

<sup>10</sup> *Statistical Abstract of the United State 1920*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1921) 50-51.

combination of an independent black party and an alienated immigrant population did not bode well for the continued viability of Louisville's established machine boss Mickey Brennan. Thus incumbent Republican mayor George Smith, a Brennan lieutenant, ordered the city Board of Public Safety to bar Long from speaking in a move to curry favor with black, immigrant, and Catholic voters. While the Klan would loudly protest this decision, it was never overturned, and throughout the decade Klansmen and Klan meetings simply were not seen in Louisville.<sup>11</sup> This event was critical in the development of the Klan within the Commonwealth. For while the Klan in neighboring Indiana used Indianapolis as the hub of its activities, the Klan in Kentucky would be unable to organize in Louisville. This marks a critical difference between the two states and may explain differences in Klan development.<sup>12</sup>

The Klan speaker, however, had not initially chosen Louisville as the focus for his recruiting activities. Rather Dr. Long, a dentist who initially hailed from Oklahoma, had come to the region to find recruits among Indiana's many white Protestant communities along the Ohio River, a region where the Klan was already growing rapidly.<sup>13</sup> Louisville, a large city for that time, sat just across the river from the Hoosier state. Given his proximity to so many potential Klansmen, Long would have been foolish to have ignored this potential recruiting ground. A long drawn out struggle in court over the right to speak in

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<sup>11</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 16, 1921 page 8. *Middlesboro Daily News*, Sept 21, 1921 page 1.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, 7-8, 16, 25, 61-62, 81-86, 100-107.

<sup>13</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 16, 1921. *Middlesboro Daily News*, Sept 21, 1921 page 1.

the city would have meant significant legal costs and much time for recruiting lost. Since Kleagles (Klan recruiters) were paid on a per capita basis, a recruiter turned away from the potentially lucrative, but now closed city of Louisville, would most likely have turned to the closest area known to yield many recruits. He would have returned to Indiana. Louisville represented potential, but Indiana represented known profitability.

Yet Long was unwilling to abandon Louisville completely. When Long did speak, it was in the Louisville suburb of Jeffersonville, Indiana. Of the over 600,000 residents of Louisville, 200 attended, a total which includes 4 uniformed Louisville police, sent to 'observe' the meeting. The message was unmistakable; the Klan was not welcome in Louisville. The political leadership found it potentially divisive. The people, so few of whom dared to venture out, were either fearful or uninterested.<sup>14</sup>

While Mayor Smith lost re-election it was due to charges of embezzling over \$10,000 in city funds, and not any sort of backlash from barring the Klan. Incumbent mayors have traditionally fared poorly and only one Louisville mayor in the twentieth century won consecutive terms. Mickey Brennan came to terms with the new mayor and retained his power as boss in spite of the setback. Thus Louisville remained an anomaly among Southern cities for its hostility to the Klan.<sup>15</sup>

It also is unlikely that Louisville residents were inclined to cross

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<sup>14</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 18, 1921 page 4. Moore, 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Klotter, 193-194, 209, 212, 304.

the border and join the Klan in neighboring Indiana, for Jeffersonville and Clark County, home to most of Louisville's Indiana suburbs, contained fewer Klansmen than similar urban areas in northern regions of Indiana. If anything, the shadow of Louisville was stifling the Klan across the water.<sup>16</sup>

As Moore, Lutholtz, and Jackson have shown, the Klan's urban chapters were a key to its success. Moore and Jackson in particular have shown that the Indianapolis Klan's large size was a key to its popularity in the state as a whole. Minorities (blacks and immigrants) made up over half the population of Louisville, unlike Indianapolis, where native born whites made up 75% of the population.<sup>17</sup> Without a similar stronghold in Kentucky, the Klan success here was critically limited. Furthermore, Kleagles had little reason to venture into such a hostile environment when nearby Indiana offered nearly limitless possibilities. Indeed, no major Klan activity occurred again in or near Louisville until 1923.<sup>18</sup>

Court records indicate that the Klan did not attempt any membership drive anywhere within Kentucky during the rest of 1921, nor in 1922. It was a full two years after the recruitment drive in Louisville before the Klan resurfaced in the Commonwealth.<sup>19</sup>

When the Klan did resurface it did so meekly. The Klan's only activities in 1923 were failed attempts to raise chapters in Paducah,

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<sup>16</sup>Moore, 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> *Statistical Abstract of the United State 1920*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Lutholtz, 33-47. Moore, 7, 8, 16, 25, 61-62, 81-86, 100-107, 191. Jackson, 235-49.

<sup>19</sup> *Albert v. KKK Fayette County Circuit*, 9427, 11 (Fayette District Court 1925). *Albert v. KKK* 345 (US Federal Court Eastern District Kentucky, 1925).

Richmond, Mayfield, and Louisville. In each case organizers from Indiana or Ohio were prevented by officials and police from organizing local Klans.

In Richmond the Klan organizer was charged with attempting to “arouse discord, strife and ill feeling between different classes of persons.” The organizer was Ohio native C.F. Acker, who was arrested for violating Kentucky’s “Criminal Syndicalism law.” This law was originally intended to outlaw labor organizations, including the IWW, and the Socialist and Communist parties. However, in Richmond it was used to target the Klan as well.<sup>20</sup>

In Louisville Klan speaker, E.H. Lougher, was denied permission to speak by city officials. Unlike Long, Lougher ignored the ruling of the Board of Public Safety but was quickly arrested. At the scene of Lougher's planned engagement, police threatened openly to use tear gas and fire fighters assembled ready to use hoses to dispel crowds. While the Klan might protest the treatment as unfair, real efforts to promote the Klan in the city were discouraged and would not come again until 1928.<sup>21</sup>

In Paducah the Klan's organization efforts met once again with official hostility. Paducah sits along the Ohio River in far western Kentucky and like Louisville lies just south of Indiana. Just as in Louisville, the Klan attempted to organize, and was once again denied permission by the city officials to hold any meeting in the city.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *ACLU archives* reel 33 volume 242. *Paducah News Democrat*, September 19, 1923 page 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> *Paducah News Democrat*, September 22, 1923 page 1. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 22, 1923 page 3. E.H. Lougher, *The Kall of the Klan in Kentucky* (Ku Klux Klan Press, 1924), 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Paducah News Democrat*, November 2, 1923 page 2.

Mobs were another means of dealing with the Klan, and when led by elites represented a tradition in some areas. In Mayfield, Kentucky, on August 26, 1923, H. Barber, a Kleagle was ordered to leave the city by a “committee of citizens.” This committee included at least several members of county government, including the sheriff. Barber was forced out of town without being allowed to hold any meetings or other attempt to set up a local Klan. This again represented a further example of the efforts of ruling elites to undermine the Klan's appeal as a vigilante organization by taking on leadership positions with mob violence. When the Klan did arrive and attempt to organize in spite of this resistance a year later, the Kleagle were arrested on charges of speeding.<sup>23</sup>

All these events took place in August and September of 1923, and the Klan could not have timed their efforts more poorly. As the Klan was attempting to organize in the Commonwealth, it was drawing national attention for its efforts in Oklahoma. There, following outbursts of violence against Jews and blacks in Tulsa, Governor Walton declared martial law throughout the state. Headlines across the nation screamed of the imminent civil war brewing in the Sooner state. Walton even went so far as to prevent the legislature from meeting. Armed Klansmen and militia marched through the streets of Oklahoma City. While the governor was ultimately impeached for his heavy handed methods of dealing with mob violence the effect, throughout the fall was pronounced. The Klan had clearly not brought

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<sup>23</sup> *New York World*, August 27, 1923. *Lexington Leader*, August 17, 1924 page 8.

anything like the law and order it espoused to Oklahoma.<sup>24</sup>

In such an environment, with the Klan grabbing headlines nationally and bringing a state to the brink of civil war, recruitment proved difficult elsewhere. To politicians the dangers of disturbances such as the ones in Oklahoma were clear. To the dry and law abiding citizens of Kentucky, the Klan represented not law and order, but anarchy and chaos.

In 1924 the Klan made its next efforts at recruitment in the Commonwealth. While Kleagles had been rebuffed in Kentucky in 1921 and 1923 they might easily have returned to Ohio or Indiana and found a healthy following of new recruits there. Yet by 1924 the Klan had reached its pinnacle in those states, and Kleagles, in order to find fresh recruits turned to Kentucky with greater force than in either 1921 or 1923. They would continue to meet with a resistance that was every bit as vehement and insurmountable as in previous years. While the relatively pro-Klan *Lexington Leader* boasted of the Klan's 450,099 new members recruited nationally from July 1923 to August 1924, it admitted that Kentucky's share was a scant 538.<sup>25</sup>

Community leaders used a variety of methods to deal with the Klan, from simply withholding speaking permits as had been done in Louisville and Paducah earlier, to banning the wearing of masks, and some turned to even more direct and violent means.

Several cities turned to anti-mask ordinances as a means of

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<sup>24</sup> Chalmers, 49-55. *Paducah News-Democrat*, September 11, 1923 page 1. September 16, 1923 page 1. September 19, 1923 page 1. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 16 Page 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Lexington Leader*, May 16, 1924 page 10.



repelling Klan activities. Lexington led the way by passing an anti-mask ban in March of 1924.<sup>26</sup>In Danville and Owensboro, ordinances were passed banning the wearing of masks in public in the spring and summer of 1924. Pineville also did so, although whether before or after these other Kentucky towns is unknown, but certainly before 1927 when the state court of appeals upheld the legality of this law. The Commission Human Rights, in its report in 1981 freely admitted that many communities may have passed ordinances in the 1920s and later that have been largely forgotten.<sup>27</sup>

In the town of Middlesboro, Kentucky, a simpler solution was found in merely charging any robed Klansmen with “Disorderly Conduct.”<sup>28</sup> At the time of arrest, the Klansmen were made to remove their masks and other regalia, which served the dual purposes of both humiliating the Klansmen and revealing their identities.

Judges could be lenient toward those locals duped by the Klan, even if they were not so with the outside Klan organizers. In February of 1924, L.M. Ketcham, Klan organizer from Indiana, and several associates burned a cross in London, Kentucky. Ketcham was fined and served time for contempt of court for refusing to give the names of Klansmen to Circuit Judge A.T. Manning. At most, ten Klansmen were present at the burning of the cross and all except Ketcham, stated that they had joined “a klan for law enforcement... but not the Ku

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<sup>26</sup>*Harrodsburg Herald*, March 7, 1924 page 1.

<sup>27</sup>*The Ku Klux Klan Can't Hide Its Face Behind Bedsheets in these Kentucky Cities and Counties: A Compilation of Anti-Mask Ordinances in Kentucky Communities*, (Louisville : Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, 1981). 1

<sup>28</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 10, 1924 page 5. *Middlesboro Daily News*, July 10 Page 1.

Klux Klan.” Ketcham himself was arraigned 45 times by the judge, and spent 56 consecutive days in jail, each arraignment leading to a 30 hour jail sentence for contempt of court. The judge accepted the rather flimsy excuses of the London Klansmen, but Ketcham's punishment was severe. While the Klan may have continued its activities in London, there is no evidence for it having done so, and given the hostility toward Ketcham for the relatively minor act involved, it is doubtful that others would have eagerly followed his example.<sup>29</sup>

To assure the expulsion of Klan influence Judge Manning required all potential jurors to state their affiliation, or lack thereof, with the Klan. In doing so, he compromised the most central tenet of Klan membership, secrecy. Furthermore, as any active Klansmen were prevented from jury service he removed the Klan's potential, so often suggested in other areas of the country, to influence juries. In doing so very publicly the judge struck out at the influence of the Klan throughout a three county region.<sup>30</sup>

A variety of other legal means could also target Klansmen. At the Klan's attempted rally in Somerset Klansmen were surprised to learn that under city laws only law enforcement personnel were allowed to direct traffic. Several Klansmen were arrested, and the rally ended in disarray.<sup>31</sup>

Different communities might also interact to prevent the Klan

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<sup>29</sup>*Lexington Leader*, March 16, 1924 page 1. March 30 page 8.

<sup>30</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 2, 1924, page 4. *Lexington Leader*, June 2, 1924 page 7.

<sup>31</sup>*Lexington Leader*, August 21, 1924, page 12. September 9, 1924 page 12.

from developing. On June 30, 1924 the Klan cancelled its planned speaking engagement to be held in the Cheapside section of Lexington. While the *Lexington Leader* reports the cancellation was due to a schedule conflict with another speaking engagement in New York. In reality Lougher had to appear before a Louisville court the same day. While the scheduling might be coincidence it seems likely that Louisville's court dates were influenced by Lexington's politics.<sup>32</sup>

Ideologies could often mix when dealing with the Klan and in Central City, in the West Kentucky coal fields near Indiana, Mayor Lonnie Jackson attacked the Klan and forbid its meeting. In doing so Jackson spoke not only as mayor but "As president of the United Mine Workers of America, District No. 231." This event also shows the hostility of organized labor toward the Klan. The UMWA forbade members from joining the Klan, and the Klan's opposition to this and other unions would do little to endear it to workers.<sup>33</sup>

Klan recruiters nearly always came in from bordering states where they had met more success and less resistance than in Kentucky. These efforts focused on communities along Kentucky's borders, areas adjacent to already existing Klans. Few, however, got far beyond the border communities. Typical of this are events in June 1924.

In Flemingsburg, a town less than 20 miles from the Ohio border, the Klan demonstrated and later that same month it did so in Middletown, near the Indiana-Kentucky border, Klansmen met at the

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<sup>32</sup>*Lexington Leader*, June, 29, page 12. June 30, 1924 page 12.

<sup>33</sup>*New York Call*, August, 26 1923 page 9.

same time. Both communities sit only a few miles from the Tennessee-Kentucky border.<sup>34</sup>

In Newport, Kentucky, Klansmen burned a cross in front of the town's First Baptist Church, less than a mile from where US Route 27 crosses into Newport from Cincinnati. While fifty Klansmen were present, and the display was reported as 'orderly' the fact this event occurred so close to Ohio, makes it doubtful that the Klansmen involved were Kentuckians, but more likely, residents of Ohio. In May a similar incident took place in Harlan, in Eastern Kentucky near West Virginia.<sup>35</sup> A week later Klansmen were released from county jail in Denver, Kentucky, a town located near Inez and the West Virginia-Kentucky border. These Klansmen were imprisoned for disturbing the peace during a scuffle involving members of the Knights of Columbus.<sup>36</sup>

Klansmen even brought gifts at some of these cross-border events. A church in Owenton on April 26 received an undetermined amount. The Klan also paid a church debt of \$1,000 owed by a church in Augusta, Kentucky, another city on the Ohio-Kentucky border. Yet little else is known of these events, and these churches did not become later centers of Klan activity.<sup>37</sup>

The Klan eventually learned such events might be difficult after the stiff resistance they began to meet in places like London, Central City, and Maysfield. Cross burning represented a means of displaying

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<sup>34</sup>*Lexington Leader*, June 8, 1924 page 6. June 27, 1924.

<sup>35</sup>*Harlan Enterprise*, Friday May 11, 1923 page 1. *Lexington Leader* March 25, page 2.

<sup>36</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 31, 1924 page 5. *Lexington Leader*, March 31, 1924 page 1.

<sup>37</sup>*Lexington Leader*. June 17, 1924 page 12.

Klan presence without a prolonged appearance. A cross could be prepared in advance, brought to a sight and then lit as the Klan left the location. Such an attempt could give the false impression a local Klan existed when in fact it did not. In Elkton, Kentucky, along the Tennessee-Kentucky border crosses were burned in August of 1924. Yet, no Klan meetings, gatherings or other activities are recorded in Elkton before or after the event. Clearly if this was outside interference from Tennessee it was short lived, and if the Klan was local, no other activities are recorded.<sup>38</sup>

Resistance to the Klan could also employed more informal means. In Brooksville, a hamlet ten miles south of the Ohio-Kentucky border, anti-Klan forces left nails and tacks strewn on roads leading from a Klan meeting place. Numerous Klansmen's automobiles were damaged in the event, but the message, while simply sent, was clear. An almost identical incident happened in Russellville, a town on the Tennessee line, later than month. In Williamstown, twenty miles south of Indiana, the Klan was not subjected to destroyed tires, but was pelted with rotten eggs. The assailants in all these cases were never found<sup>39</sup>

Some churches also put up resistance to the Klan. Kentucky's organized religious bodies were apparently largely anti-Klan from such records as have survived. The Southern Methodist Episcopal Church's Kentucky meeting passed a measure denouncing the KKK as an organization promoting race hatred. SME Church, a mostly white

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<sup>38</sup>*Lexington Leader*, August 3, 1924 page 6.

<sup>39</sup>*Lexington Leader*, June 8 1924 page 6. June 22, 1924 page 6. June 25, 1924 page 6.

denomination, was a leading church in the Commonwealth and serves well as an example of official religious attitudes toward Kentucky. The SME Church did acknowledge and approve of racial segregation at the meeting, but yet still saw the Klan as a divisive issue harmful to its congregations. Clearly the rejection was not of racism itself but of the Klan specifically.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise the state Bar Association condemned the Klan, both for its actions outside the law and its prejudicial views. Indeed, the speaker at the Bar Association's 1923 meeting in Covington rightly saw the Klan as a modern expression of the same impulses present in the Know Nothing Party, an organization he also condemned.<sup>41</sup>

Still in spite of the Klan's failure to organize, its potential as a means to political advancement was not lost on aspiring politicians. In a machine-based system, advancement came quickly for some and not for others. Those unable to work within the system saw the Klan as a means of easy political success. Here, as in Indiana, relative outsiders sought to use the Klan to break into a tightly closed political system.

One such example was in Princeton, Kentucky. While the only documented such occurrence, it serves as an example of what happened to those who used the Klan to advance their political careers in the Commonwealth. In Caldwell County the local political elite, like elites throughout the United States, wholeheartedly ignored

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<sup>40</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 25, 1924 page 3. *Lexington Leader*, September 25, 1924 page 1 section 2.

<sup>41</sup>John F. Hager *Lawless Liberty Automatically Becomes Tyranny* Address Delivered at Annual Meeting of Kenton County Bar Association, at Covington, December 15, 1923 by of Ashland, Kentucky, University of Kentucky Archives, 7.

the prohibition laws. The Klan within the community then began a concerted effort toward eliminating such violations of these statutes. In this instance Abe Morse, city attorney, led the Klan in its efforts at establishing a new political order for the county.

Morse had run for county judge and lost against M.T. Smith the previous year.<sup>42</sup> However, Morse saw the Klan as a potential tool in his struggle for political power. Morse and other Klan members repeatedly provided alcohol to various politicians throughout the county.

Afterward the Klansmen signed sworn statements against the entrapped officials. Eight warrants were sworn out against Judge Smith, three against chief of police Charles Martin, three against Commonwealth's Attorney T.C. Bennet, one each to Sheriff Henry Towery and Deputy Sheriff Sid Cantrill, and a startling twenty-two against Deputy Circuit Clerk Garrard H. Barnes. Eventually over 109 individuals were charged before the end of the Klan's sweep of the county.<sup>43</sup>

However, the drive of Morse and Door to unseat the political elite of Princeton and Caldwell County ultimately failed. In June of 1924 the county sheriff arrested Morse, Dorr, and A.S. Ridgeway the local Kleagle. In these cases the charge was possessing alcohol, which, given that the Klan's method of entrapping local politicians with alcohol certainly seems valid. In August of 1924, A.S. Ridgeway, was "strongly encouraged" to leave the city of Princeton in order to avoid

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<sup>42</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June, 24, 1924 Page 1 section 1. *Lexington Leader*, August 8, 1924 page 8. August 17, 1924 page 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June, 4 1924 page 3. *Lexington Leader*, August 8, 1924 page 8.

charges that he had violated prohibition laws. It was Ridgeway who had allegedly purchased the alcohol. The city council of Princeton further voted to request that Dorr and Morse both resign along with Morse's assistant attorney J.E. Lisanby. Furthermore, the city council moved to outlaw new fraternal organizations within the city.<sup>44</sup> Clearly the Klan had failed in its attempts to overthrow the existing political elites of the county which continued to rule the area and had purged itself of members who opposed the status quo.

The Klan's lack of success is difficult to explain in some cases. Rallies in Frankfort and in Flemingsburg, another town on the Ohio state line, were planned in June of 1924. However, the Flemingsburg rally was limited to Klansmen from Ohio, and the Frankfort rally contained only Klan marchers in the city's homecoming parade. No specific reason can be seen why more Kentuckians did not join in these events or why Klansmen were allowed these chances to assemble. Likely many were intimidated official hostility to the Klan, expressed through informal means.<sup>45</sup>

In 1928 the unpopularity of Al Smith's campaign for president gave the Klan a sudden burst of renewed vigor and strength. In some areas the Klan managed a brief revival. However the scope of this revival in Kentucky was extremely limited in scope.

The Klan's efforts focused on one last attempt at creating a presence in Louisville. Why the Klan chose to deal with a city that had

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<sup>44</sup>*Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 16, 1924 page 3. *Lexington Leader*, August 17, 1924 page 1 section 2.

<sup>45</sup>*Lexington Leader* June 18, 1924 page 6; June 24, 1924 page 6. *Louisville Courier Journal* June 27, page 6



been so uniformly hostile is uncertain, but Louisville still represented a large urban area where many might identify with the Klan's message. The Klan attempted to rent the city of Louisville's "old armory" as a meeting place, noting that it had previously been used by Democrats for an Al Smith rally. The proposal caused considerable discord in Louisville and resulted in a debate before the Louisville City Commission. The debates at the commissioners meeting on August 17 were unremarkable, and show the usual attitude toward the Klan present throughout Kentucky. The Klan was able to attract only a few supporters, who objected to the city's refusal. The Klansmen present gave the usual protests that no harm against the city would ensue, and that the Klan was a purely harmless patriotic organization. After deliberation the city commissioners announced the unanimous decision that the Klan would in fact be refused the use of the armory. However, as the Klan rightly pointed out, previous use of such facilities had been made by members of other bodies in the city, and it was a common site of rallies and various other gatherings. Still the officials in Louisville followed the course of action seen in numerous other cases in the city and elsewhere throughout the state and barred the meetings.<sup>46</sup>

The Klan was not entirely without success in Kentucky. The largest Klan rally ever held in Kentucky was in Henderson and had over 13,000 attendees. However, this number and the location were specifically chosen to give misleading results as to the Klan's

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<sup>46</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 18, 1928 page 5. August 25, 1928 Page 1. *Lexington Leader*, August 18, 1928 page 5. August 25, 1928 page 5.

popularity. Henderson is less than 5 miles from the city of Evansville, Indiana. Given that no Klan gatherings followed in Henderson, it would appear that these '13,000' Klansmen were all, or almost all, members of the burgeoning Klan across the river in the state of Indiana. A similar event occurred simultaneously in Pikeville on the West Virginia border. Such efforts would serve to inflate the Klan's apparent strength in the Commonwealth, and perhaps, leaders of the Klan hoped, increase membership in what might be seen as a popular organization.<sup>47</sup>

Another rally in Alexandria, Kentucky on the same day drew over 10,000 Klansmen. Like the simultaneous rally in Henderson, this rally's location was chosen carefully based on its proximity to Cincinnati, a city with its own large Klan population. While the Klan in Cincinnati, or throughout Ohio, was not nearly as large or powerful as the Klan in neighboring Indiana, it was, nevertheless, a powerful force in its own right. Thus, like the rally in Henderson, the Alexandria rally was designed to draw in Klansmen from neighboring areas and artificially inflate the appearance of the Klan's success here in Kentucky.<sup>48</sup>

In January of 1924 Klan organizer E.H. Lougher was allowed to speak in Harrodsburg, one of the few instances where he spoke in the Commonwealth without being arrested. Later, on the night of

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<sup>47</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal* August 8, 1924 page 2 section 1. *Lexington Leader* August 8, 1924 page 8, August 17, 1924 page 1. Thomas Majestic "The Ku Klux Klan in the Big Sandy Valley" *Journal of Kentucky Studies* vol. 10 (1993), 75-80.

<sup>48</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 31, 1924 page 6 section 2. *Lexington Leader*, August, 8 1924 page 8. August 17, 1924 page 1.

February 25, 1924 Klansmen burned a cross in Harrodsburg. These are some of the only successful Klan events taking place in the Commonwealth which likely made exclusive use of Kentuckians as members. Others were the parades in Harrodsburg, Kentucky on June 13 1924 and June 20, 1924. Beyond the several hundred matchers present, and a short speech by a masked member no other details are available. However this would mark the Klan's only recorded instance of a successful parade deep inside the state. <sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the relative success of the Harrodsburg Klan can be attributed to the relatively weak nature of local politics there. Of the nearly 15,000 people resident in the county, only 1,412 voted in the primary of 1924, an especially uncommon occurrence in a state where the total number of votes recorded was at times twice the county's population. The most likely reason for this is that Harrodsburg and Mercer County represent a political vacuum at the time when local oligarchies were in disarray or transition, allowing the Klan a window of opportunity not available elsewhere. However, this is not certain, and no definite answer exists to explain this anomaly.<sup>50</sup>

In a few places the Klan existed but was so small or insignificant that it took on an inconsequential role. In Madisonville, the Klan appeared at a wedding on August 25, 1924.<sup>51</sup> Klansmen also appeared at a funeral in Providence, a town on the Tennessee line, but

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<sup>49</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, February 26, 1924 page 5. *Lexington Leader*, February 26, 1924 page 8. June 19 page 6. *Harrodsburg Herald*, January 4, 1924 page 1. June 20 1924 page 1. June 27, 1924 page 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Harrodsburg Harold*, August 8, 1924 page 6. Klotter 195.

<sup>51</sup> *Lexington Leader*, August 25, 1924 page 10.

numbered only about 22. Attempts to appear at a funeral in Danville were thwarted by the city's anti-mask law.<sup>52</sup>

In all these instances some common themes stand out. All of the Klan's large rallies and gatherings (large being defined as over 500 Klansmen present) took place along Kentucky's borders. The Klan's gatherings in Newport, Pikeville, and Alexandria are the only such large scale meetings in the state. Such meetings were deliberate attempts to create the appearance of a large and successful Klan where none actually existed. Furthermore, these large gatherings as well as all other smaller gatherings except those in Harrodsburg, were isolated instances. Not once, in all the mentions of Klan activity in the state does the Klan appear to have met twice in the same location publicly. This is in sharp contrast to neighboring Indiana where Klansmen met regularly and openly in locations such as Kokomo. Clearly if local officials somehow allowed Klansmen to meet, they did not repeat the mistake, an unmistakable indicator of local resistance in Kentucky that was not present elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

The Klan's downfall began in 1925, (as it was) wracked by scandals both locally and nationally. While national headlines gave great attention to the murder trial of D.C. Stephenson in Indiana for his part in the killing of Madge Oberholtzer, the local Klan was not without its legal woes. Other legal battles raged between Hiram Evans, head of the Klan in 1925, and William Simmons the previous leader and Klan founder. Elsewhere charges of graft and embezzlement

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<sup>52</sup> *Lexington Leader*, September 3, 1924. *Lexington Leader*, September, 1924 page 8.

<sup>53</sup> Moore, 77, 80, 94-95.

became common.<sup>54</sup>

In March of 1925, former Klansmen from Fayette County sued the Kentucky KKK and George Biggerstaff, Grand Dragon of the Klan in Kentucky, for mismanagement of funds. The civil case that followed revealed much about the inner workings of the Klan in the Commonwealth, its size and extent. The Klan's questionable conduct of business was displayed for all Kentuckians to see, as the case dragged on for months. Thus the court battle is significant not only for what it reveals about the nature of the Klan's activities, but also for its role in shaping public perceptions of the organization.<sup>55</sup>

The stated goal of the plaintiffs was the return of money which they had donated to the Klan for a headquarters which remained unbuilt. They hoped to have the money returned and with interest.<sup>56</sup>

The Klan, it was alleged in court documents, had raised the membership costs within the Commonwealth from the normal \$10 to \$15, and had added a 50¢ 'tax' for each month's membership. These two additional surcharges would raise the Klan's annual membership fees to \$21 for the year. These surcharges were allegedly kept by the state Klan officers and not passed on to the headquarters in Atlanta. Such additional costs certainly dispelled the likelihood of some potential Klansmen joining the Invisible Empire.<sup>57</sup>

The Klan, from the time of its founding in Atlanta, had been a

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<sup>54</sup> Chalmers, 62–74. Leuchtenburg, 210–13. Moore, 10. Lutholtz 1-8.

<sup>55</sup> *Lexington Leader*, March 1, 1925 page 1. *Lexington Courier-Journal*, March 1, 1925 page 1. *Paducah News-Democrat*, November 1, 1925 page 1.

<sup>56</sup> Fayette Circuit Court 9427, page 1-5.

<sup>57</sup> *Albert v. KKK Fayette County Circuit*, 9427, 11 (Fayette District Court 1925). 7, 13.

profit making venture. The monetary incentives to Kleagles and others are well known. Yet if the Klan charged such high rates it could clearly have produced even more significant profits for local leaders.

Further charges of corruption followed, including allegations that the Klan had used aliases in signing leases and purchasing phone lines. Other allegations were that the Klan had purchased a \$4,800 Cadillac for the Klan head in Lexington, George Biggerstaff, that Biggerstaff had taken a salary of \$60,000 a year, that he paid his officers in the Klan the relatively great sum of \$150 per month, and that the Klan of Kentucky had over billed for Klan uniforms and paraphernalia.<sup>58</sup>

The plaintiffs, refused any efforts made toward divulging the names of those taking part in the suit, or any other Klansmen. As stated in an affidavit, "Plaintiffs further state that...to be known as subscribers would be discrediting and humiliating in their business and social lives."<sup>59</sup> Clearly the Klan in Kentucky was not the path to social mobility, prestige, and political triumphs that it was elsewhere.

Also revealed in the case was that record keeping for the Klan at both the state and county level were practically nonexistent. Klan leaders admitted that no records of donations and dues had been made and implied that other records were also not kept.<sup>60</sup>

Stalling tactics on the part of Klan leadership further kept the case in the headlines for months. Klan leaders first sought to have the

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*-4, 13.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> *Albert v. KKK Fayette County Circuit*, 9427, 11 (Fayette District Court 1925). 13

case dismissed, citing a lack of evidence. When these efforts failed, the Klan then moved to have the case turned over to federal jurisdiction; arguing that the Klan was not incorporated in Kentucky, but in Georgia, and therefore the Fayette County circuit court had no jurisdiction.<sup>61</sup>

While the Klan succeeded in moving the case to Federal Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky, the delays cost the Klan heavily in terms of public relations, as it dragged on for over a year. These delaying tactics on the part of the Klan's leaders may have indicated culpability to the citizens of Kentucky. While the suit was eventually dropped, with the plaintiffs paying the defendant's legal costs, it dragged on well into June of 1926. Throughout this time those that sat on the fence of the Klan question, moved decidedly away from the Invisible Empire.<sup>62</sup>

The *Lexington Leader* abandoned its friendly treatment of the Klan in the wake of the scandal, and mention of the Klan's activities throughout the state dropped while this and other cases went on. Clearly, the Klan had received considerable attention and clearly its publicity was no longer so favorable as it had once been.<sup>63</sup>

Nor should one forget that these events occurred simultaneously with the murder trial of Stephenson. To the Kentucky residents of 1925 and 1926 the Klan, both locally and nationally, seemed far from the clean and law abiding image it promoted.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Albert v. KKK* 345 (US Federal Court Eastern District Kentucky, 1925) 71.

<sup>63</sup> *Harrodsburg Herald* Friday March 6, 1925 page 1. *Lexington Leader* June 9, 1925 page 2

As has been noted, elites were generally at the forefront of efforts to stymie the Klan's growth,<sup>64</sup> and the same holds true in Kentucky, perhaps more so than in other regions of the country. Never did Klansmen get far enough to involve themselves in Kentucky's local politics as they did in nearby states. Local elites in Kentucky retained far more power in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than elites in neighboring Indiana, and elsewhere.

There was no real violence involving the Klan in Kentucky during this period. In all of the decade from 1920 to 1929, six men were lynched in Kentucky, but robed Klansmen played no apparent role in any of these cases. Nor were there any instances of flogging or other violence involving Klansmen.<sup>65</sup>

Kentucky represents a unique case in its reactions to the Klan. This becomes all the more apparent by comparison between the Klan's development here and its growth in neighboring states, especially Indiana. While the Klan grew to phenomenal successes in the areas north of the Ohio River, it failed to develop deep roots here.

Obviously the reason for this is in large part that Kentucky's political elites chose quite deliberately to limit the Klan to a local fraternal body completely denied political power. Often even this limited role was denied the Klansmen and their organization was simply barred from meeting altogether. Clearly the mayors, judges, and others who instigated these measures knew the Klan represented

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<sup>64</sup>Moore, 12, 79, 84-85,105, 139-141, 150

<sup>65</sup> George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1990), 6



a clear threat to their power and sought to defuse that threat at its earliest appearance.

Yet why and how they were able to do this, or even how they knew what the Klan meant to their power, is significant. For politicians and others in Indiana, Ohio, and elsewhere allowed the Klan to grow only to see it topple existing political structures. Why then were Kentucky's elites able to thwart the growth of the Klan, and why did they recognize it as a threat when this was not realized early on in the Klan's development elsewhere?

The answers to these questions are a combination of factors working to render the Klan in the Commonwealth ineffective. The Klans of Indiana, Ohio, and most states where the Klan was successful grew under reign of Simmons, the Klan's founder, however the late coming Kentucky Klan only set up roots later. Early on the Klan appeared as a fraternal body, albeit one making special appeals to white and Protestant nationalism. When Hiram Evans came to power in the fall of 1922 the Klan took on an overtly political tone. The Klan elsewhere grew while it appeared to be a benign organization, only when it was widely established did it take on an overt political agenda. When the Klan attempted to set root in Kentucky its political ambitions had become clear.<sup>66</sup>

While the Klan gained an early foothold in Indianapolis, Youngstown, Charleston, and other cities, it was never able to develop a major base in any of Kentucky's urban areas, such as they were.

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<sup>66</sup>Moore, 13-19 36, 36, 93, 155.

The Klan was chased out of Louisville and never developed as a major force in that city. While the Klan did have offices in Lexington, it never became a significant factor in city politics or life. In almost all cases, successful statewide Klan movements required an urban branch to serve as hub for organizational activities.<sup>67</sup>

Mickey Brennan's decision to forbid the Klan's meetings in 1921, was a deliberate attempt to appeal to Catholic, immigrant, and black voters. While the Klan nationally had not yet taken on the overt political tones it did later, it still focused on divisive issues and in a relatively cosmopolitan city such as Louisville the Invisible Empire was offensive to many. Louisville's urban leadership did nothing unusual in keeping an unwelcome force from entering the city. Yet the implications were profound. Without an urban presence to serve as a hub for Klan activities, the rural Klans lacked focus and organization.

For the next two years, seldom did Klan recruiters come to the Commonwealth. Few Kleagles would have chosen to focus their efforts on Kentucky when Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia offered rich grounds for the recruitment of Klansmen. It must be remembered the Klan recruiters were paid on a per capita basis. Indiana especially represented an area known for great profitability, but Kentucky was a relatively hostile and unknown region.

This early failure on the part of the Klan to develop there gave Kentucky's political leaders time to recognize the Klan as a divisive issue both socially and politically. The Klan's influence was especially

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<sup>67</sup>Jackson, 8-48.

obvious in neighboring Indiana. Politicians in a machine environment, as Kentucky was in the 1920s, saw the clear threat to their power. Reactionary populism, which the Klan represented, threatened to undermine the boss based politics of Kentucky.

Personal and economic incentives were not the only means available to local elites that ensured their grip on power. Elites were not above taking on a role within vigilante organizations that ensured their continuing hold on power. While the traditionalist interpretation that the Klan was an especially violent organization is no doubt flawed, it is based on the attitudes of many at the time of the Klan's greatest successes. Clearly, the degree to which the Klan was a violent group varied by time and location, but it was certainly perceived as violent by many. In Kentucky such an organization, existing outside the traditional structure of vigilante justice in Kentucky, might have served to undermine the power of elites. This was a threat elites did not tolerate.

Clearly the Klan threatened elites. It threatened their role in extra-legal violence, a role elites had exercised for some time. More importantly, it threatened their control of the ballot box, a hold developed over time thorough nepotism, vote buying, and personal loyalties. The Klan's brand of populism represented a real challenge to political machines and the Klan represented a real form of reactionary populism.

Thus, in 1924, when the Klan began its major attempts to gain membership in Kentucky, local judges, mayors, and other political

elites came down squarely and universally in opposition. While some events unfolded relatively successfully for the Klan, the overwhelming majority of Klan activities met clear opposition from local leadership. Klansmen were denied the right to sit on juries, speak publicly, and parade. When Klansmen did attempt these activities, they were beaten, thrown in jail, or otherwise prevented from such actions.

It has been noted that those attempting to gain influence in political establishments were most likely to use Klan influence, with established politicians doing so reluctantly if at all. In Kentucky, where bosses were more entrenched than elsewhere, use of the Klan as a means of advancement met much stiffer resistance than in neighboring states.

By 1925 the Klan in Kentucky was still a relatively minor influence. While the Klan did make appearances in some communities, most notably Harrodsburg, the Klan did not grow into a noticeable force anywhere in the Commonwealth and had been stifled in most locations. The Klan was plagued nationally by scandals, of which the most notorious was the murder trial of DC Stephenson, Grand Dragon of Indiana, but it was not without scandal in Kentucky.<sup>68</sup> The small Klan in Kentucky was engaged in a civil action that after a series of delaying motions was finally dropped in June of 1926. The case, which lasted over 15 months, grabbed attention and headlines away from whatever meager successes the Klan might otherwise have possessed.

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<sup>68</sup>Moore, 189.

In spite of the plaintiff's case being dropped the negative publicity ought not to be underestimated. For over a year, the Klan attracted the attention of Kentuckians, not as an organization supporting white superiority, nor one standing for '100% American' values or ideas, but rather as a body being sued by former members for mismanagement.

Furthermore the Klan there appears to have charged over twice the usual national fees for membership. If cost was any factor in Klan membership, it was doubly significant here.

The Klan did not grown enough locally to have any chance to overcome the scandals that wracked it throughout 1925. When the Klan both nationally and locally did make a brief resurgence in 1928 in opposition to Al Smith's candidacy for president, it never approached its former power.

Thus the Klan developed later in Kentucky than in any of the state's neighbors. When the Invisible Empire finally did attempt to plant roots in Kentucky, it had already assumed a political tone, and for this reason met with severe opposition from political leaders. Further, the Klan would only had a year between its first real membership drives in Kentucky and the series of scandals that would destroy it as a national force. The Klan never was able to set down roots before it became an overt threat to politicians within the state. Political leaders within Kentucky only had to fend off the Klan's advances for a year before the organization was discredited both nationally and locally.

Had the Klan more time in which to organize, it might have eventually made inroads into the machine that was Kentucky politics. Few suspected in 1924 that the Klan would be largely a memory in ten years. Had it continued to thrive and flourish, had Klan leaders not so involved themselves in scandalous activities, it could have potentially remained a force in American politics for years to come.

In summary, the Klan failed in Kentucky. It grew primarily when presented initially as a fraternal body, appealing to White Protestant Nationalism in its early phase before 1922. When Hiram Evans became leader of the national organization in the fall of that year the Klan took on overt political ambitions and in doing so it threatened established political structures with its brand of reactionary populism. In areas where it had not developed prior to Evans leadership, the Klan was stifled by political elites who now clearly saw it as a threat to their power.

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