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THE KU KLUX KLAN IN THE SUNSHINE STATE:  
THE 1920's

by DAVID CHALMERS

THE GUIDING MAXIM in Florida politics has long been said to be "Every Man For Himself" and the same principle of anarchic localism seems to have prevailed in Klan affairs. The story of the Florida Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's was not one of a large statewide organization but rather that of a myriad of growing, active individual Klaverns.

The sandy soil of the sunshine state was already well prepared for the sowing of the Klan seed. In the second decade of the twentieth century virulent anti-Catholicism was preached with ever increasing success in Florida's Bible Belt. Georgia's Tom Watson touched it off with his widely circulated *Jeffersonian Magazine*. The Sturkie resolution passed by the State Democratic Party Executive Committee in 1916, condemning religious prejudice and secret societies became Exhibit A in the minds of those who conjured up visions of a conspiracy to Romanize Florida. The great apostle of Florida nativism was Sidney J. Catts. A native of Alabama, the spawning ground of Klan wizards, he first came to De Funiak Springs, Florida, as a Baptist minister, a calling which he left to become the state agent for a fraternal life insurance company. Thus far he had followed the path of his fellow Alabamian, Colonel William J. Simmons, who had disinterred the Ku Klux Klan in the twentieth century, but where the latter went into klandom, Sidney Catts turned to politics-though with substantially the same message. And so, in 1916, while Colonel Simmons was struggling to get his fraternal order going, Sidney Catts was on his way to the governor's mansion, touring the rural back country in his black Model T, as he sounded warnings against the encroachments of Satan. Governor Catts' widely proclaimed message of support for the American flag, prohibition, and the little red school house against the menace of the convent, paro-

chial school, Rome, and Africa had already popularized the doctrines which the Klan was to preach in Florida.<sup>1</sup>

The Klan entered the Sunshine State through the gateway city of Jacksonville, where during a parade on December 21, 1922, all the street lights in the business district suddenly went dark so that the marchers could make a mysterious disappearance. The Invisible Empire rapidly spread throughout the state. Its pattern was one of violence from the very start. Although the evidence does not point to Klan responsibility or participation in the election day race riot in Ocoee in 1920, or in the clash at Rosewood, in Levy County, two years later in which eight people were killed and the Negro community was burned out,<sup>2</sup> the Invisible Empire was very active elsewhere in the State. The West Indian rector of a church in the Negro section of Miami was flogged and tarred and feathered for "preaching Negro equality" and was warned to leave town under pain of death.<sup>3</sup> In another community, the Klan reportedly threatened to lynch a local judge for enforcing the traffic laws, and Colonel Simmons suspended the Pensacola Klavern for unauthorized violence when it threatened a Greek restaurateur.<sup>4</sup> Initially, however, such episodes were sporadic as the Klan concentrated on politics and expansion.

As elsewhere in the South, the Klan sought to keep Negroes from the polls, and in Jacksonville and Orlando open parades and covert warnings of violence were used.<sup>5</sup> By 1922, the Klan had emerged as a direct participant in politics. In the June primaries of that year, the Klan made a virtual clean sweep in Volusia County, carrying Daytona, Ormond, and DeLand for its ticket, which included candidates for judicial, municipal, and legislative office. Internal dissension, however, made it a short lived victory. When the mayor of DeLand refused to heed the wishes of the local Klan leader, the Klan summoned him to a meeting in the woods at which he was tried for mutiny. Despite threats, the

1. J. E. Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, 2 vols. (New York, 1952), II, chapter 18.

2. *Tampa Tribune*, November 2, 1920; Walter White, "Election by Terror in Florida," *New Republic*, XXV (1921), 195-197; American Civil Liberty Union files for 1922, New York Public Library.

3. *New York Times*, July 18, 1921; "The Reign of the Tar-bucket," *Literary Digest*, LXX (August 27, 1921), 12-13.

4. *Nation*, CXIII (1921), 285-286.

5. *New York Times*, December 22, 1920.

mayor and his friends withdrew from the Klan and many of the better citizens also started dropping out.<sup>6</sup>

Local setbacks, however, did little to stem the growth of the Klan elsewhere in Florida. The largest Klavern was Stonewall Jackson No. 1 of Jacksonville, followed by John B. Gordon, No. 24 of Miami, and Olustee No. 20 of St. Petersburg. Chapters proliferated throughout the state, mixing names of national and southern heroes, such as the Andrew Jackson Klan of Hastings and the Albert Sidney Johnson Klan of West Palm Beach, with descriptive bits of Floridiana, like the Klan of the Keys at Key West, the Fort Gaines Klan of Ocala, and the Klan of the Palms at Ft. Myers. The Jacksonville and Levy County fairs had special Klan days. Flags and bibles were presented at high school dedications at Largo and Clermont. Klansmen met to gobble down fried fish and barbecue at Hastings and Williston, and they held memorial services for departed members at Dunnellon and West Palm Beach. Klansmen made presentations at church services in St. Petersburg and Tampa and gave a large contribution to the YMCA building fund in the former community. Stonewall Jackson No. 1 joined other Jacksonville civic groups to protect city beaches from commercial exploitation, while St. Petersburg's Olustee Klan used the beach at Pass-a-Grille for cross-light initiations. The Lakeland Klan boasted that it was the first to have its own lodge building, while in Lake Worth, where the women of powerful George B. Baker Klan No. 70 operated a free day nursery, their male consorts claimed that they were planning an edifice which would be two stories high.

In November, 1923, Orlando's Cherokee No. 9 played host to a state-wide Klanvocation to mark the inauguration of Florida as a self-governing realm in the Invisible Empire.<sup>7</sup> Klansmen continued to meet, initiate, feast, and march throughout the state. In Miami, the Knights of Columbus withdrew from the Fruit and Flower Parade when the Klan entered a float in the civic and fraternal division. Symbolizing the Klan's fight against ignorance and superstition, the float showed a dragon, labeled "The Enemies

6. *New York Times*, June 18, 1922; *Daytona Morning Journal*, June 4, 1922, January 16, 1923; Department of Justice files, Washington, D. C.

7. *Washington National Kourier* (Southern edition), November, 1924-May, 1925; *Atlanta Fiery Cross*, March 13, 1925.

of American Ideals," about to attack a youth in front of a red school house. Between the monster and his intended prey stood three Klansmen with drawn swords. At the rear of the float there was a paper-mache mountain, inside of which there was an altar and fiery cross, protected by two more Klansmen. Four mounted Klansmen were stationed at each corner of the float, which was encircled with a forty-eight starred banner bearing the names of the states of the union. It may not have been the most beautiful float but it was certainly the busiest, and it took first prize.<sup>8</sup>

The Klan was similarly busy all over the state. In Ocala, Klansmen warned about slot machines, and the John B. Gordon Klan No. 24 of Miami denounced horse and dog racing and all other forms of gambling.<sup>9</sup> Speaking at the Levy County fair in 1924, the Grand Dragon deplored the poor quality of education in the state.<sup>10</sup> In Florence Villa, the Klan threatened a newly-built Negro school as well as Dr. Mary S. Jewett, a white woman who had contributed to it. A Klan newspaper claimed that a unit of the Invisible Empire was operating on the campus of Stetson University under the name of the Fiery Cross Club. At Gainesville the Alachua County Klan No. 46 was disturbed by the presence of a Roman Catholic priest who was purportedly using the dramatic society he directed as an instrument to change the faith of his innocent Protestant students. The Klan agitated against him and his campus privileges were withdrawn.<sup>11</sup>

Antagonists and the *New York World* claimed that important members of Florida's delegation to the 1924 Democratic National Convention were Klansmen, a charge which chairman E. D. Lambright indignantly denied.<sup>12</sup> The following spring the Klan boasted that individual DeLand Klansmen were helping the authorities uphold prohibition, despite "harrassment by corrupt politicians, rum rings, and a few unscrupulous Romans,"<sup>13</sup> and the

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8. Washington *National Courier*, January 1, 1924.

9. *Ibid.*, February 16, 1925.

10. *Ibid.*, November 28, 1924, December 5, 1924.

11. Chicago *Dawn*, 1925; Washington *National Courier*, February 9, 1925; Alachua Klan No. 64, "Floridians Take Your Stand," P. K. Yonge Library, University of Florida, Gainesville.

12. *New York World*, June 24, 1924; *Tampa Tribune*, June 25, 1924.

13. Atlanta *Fiery Cross*, March 13, 1925; Chicago *Dawn*, March, 1923.

Klan rallied behind a bill to provide for bible reading in the schools.<sup>14</sup>

The ever-alert Klan in Florida found much to keep it occupied. When the word came that Mrs. Kip Rhinelander, the widely publicized colored wife of a New York society playboy, was on her way to Florida, after successfully opposing his annulment attempt, the Klan hurried to the battlements. The Fort Pierce and West Palm Beach Klans quickly organized committees which checked local hotels and kept unfulfilled vigil at the railroad stations.<sup>15</sup>

During the spring of 1923, three Kissimmee men, including the night station man for the railroad and a local doctor, were whipped, tarred and feathered. A fourth man was caught spying on a Klan meeting and was also beaten.<sup>16</sup> Later that year there was a series of floggings in Tampa.<sup>17</sup> The mayor and a number of citizens of the small town of Coleman in nearby Sumter County wrote to the *World* that not less than a dozen of their neighbors had been taken out and lashed for criticizing or opposing the Invisible Empire.<sup>18</sup> At Sanford an elderly man was flogged for reportedly trying to sell his insecticide spray for celery by denouncing other products as poisonous.<sup>19</sup> When a disabled Miami veteran, whom his wife wanted chased out of town, was flogged instead, the Klan disclaimed responsibility, but there was little question about the assailants of a Miami real estate man who was similarly beaten.<sup>20</sup>

In January, 1923, a Klan parade wound around the courthouse square in Gainesville and then marched off through the Negro section of the city. A week later a white employee of the Ogletree Motor Company was abducted from the company garage late at night by Klansmen who held back Gainesville's night policeman with drawn guns. The victim was taken out into the woods and severely beaten. This was the result, the press reported, of

14. Washington *National Courier*, April 24, 1925.

15. *New York Times*, December 14 and 15, 1925.

16. *Tampa Times*, February 19, 1923; Ltr., February 24, 1923, ACLU files, reel no. 23, New York Public Library.

17. *Tampa Tribune*, November 2, 3, and 5, 1923.

18. *New York World*, June 25, 1924.

19. *New York Times*, April 15, 1925.

20. *New York Times*, November 11, 1924; *Tampa Tribune*, September 15, 1928.

his neglecting his wife and children "to chase after another woman." Gainesville Mayor George S. Waldo and Police Chief A. R. Perry argued that this was a private affair and in the final analysis the Klansmen had performed an act of "kindness to the man and his family and a blessing to the city of Gainesville."

Not everyone agreed, however, and Major William R. Thomas, local hotel owner and former mayor of the city, wrote to the *Gainesville Sun* demanding the resignation of the two officials. In March the editor of the *Sun*, Robert W. Davis, announced his opposition to the hooded order, even though he said, "many good men," probably including some of his personal friends, belonged to the Klan. Most members joined, the editor opined, because of religious fanaticism, political ambition, the hope for excitement and adventure, or through a desire to preserve order. In so doing, he concluded, they had chosen a very dangerous path.<sup>21</sup>

A major outbreak of reported Klan violence took place in Putnam County. In September of 1926, Governor John W. Martin called the sheriff and the mayor of Palatka to Tallahassee to discuss investigative findings which revealed at least sixty-three floggings had taken place in the county in a year. According to local gossip, one victim had been a "Greek" who was accused of "going out with white women." We was a big man, and he managed to hurt several of his attackers before he was finally subdued, but the other victims had not given as good an account of themselves. Sometimes as many as five people including several women, had been taken out on a Saturday night and lashed. Two of the victims died.

Klan sympathizers claimed that the violence was directed at bootleggers and bawdy house operators. The Tampa *Tribune* commented that the first few victims were probably undesirables, but that if everyone in that category had been punished it would have included five percent of the victims and one hundred percent of the floggers. Other floggings were taking place, the paper reported, from Volusia and Polk counties in the northern and central parts of the state to Monroe in South Florida. Governor Martin spoke out forcefully. Such a situation in which "mobs

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21. Charles H. Hildreth, "A History of Gainesville, Florida" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1954), 227-229; *Gainesville Sun*, January 18, 19, 20, 1923, March 18, 1923.

formed at night to terrorize the community and citizens had to carry concealed weapons," could not continue. He characterized it as a "disgrace to Florida" and threatened to remove the Putnam County sheriff and proclaim martial law if violence continued.<sup>22</sup>

However, Klan violence, when it was publicized, seemed to create little stir elsewhere in Florida. Despite occasional opposition from such diverse sources as Governor Martin, the *Tampa Tribune*, the *Gainesville Sun*, the minister of Tampa's Palm Avenue Baptist Church, the politicians of Daytona and DeLand, and the American Legion post of DeLand,<sup>23</sup> there was no apparent revulsion of feeling, newspaper or political attack, or turning away from the Klan on the part of many of its members. When the Klan opposed Alfred E. Smith's candidacy for the presidency in 1928, some loyal Democrats were reprimanded by the Klan, and in Miami the former sheriff and others resigned from the Invisible Empire.<sup>24</sup> Fiery dries and anti-Catholics, such as the influential Southern Methodist Bishop James Cannon, Jr. and the Reverend John Roach Straton, came to Florida to oppose Smith. Although the Klan campaigned for Herbert Hoover and his victory resulted from the kind of a campaign that the Klan liked, the hooded order does not seem to have been an important factor in his success.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the situation in other states, the Ku Klux Klan continued active in Florida as the 1920's came to an end. Whether it was because no ambitious state leader emerged to lead the Florida Klan into an unseemly drive for political power, or because the state was politically too disorganized or too receptive to deny it, the Florida Klan held on to its members and looked forward to the 30's.

22. *Tampa Tribune*, September 14, 1926; Ku Klux Klan file, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

23. *Gainesville Sun*, January 18, 22, 1923.

24. *Miami Daily News*, November 3, 1928.

25. Dovell, *loc. cit.*; H. J. Doherty, Jr., "Florida and the Presidential Election of 1928," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVI (1927), 174-186; William G. Carleton, "The Popish Plot of 1928," *Forum*, CXII (September, 1949), 141-147.