

Welcome to Kolorado, Klan Kountry

When the Invisible Empire ran the state, only one major city escaped: Colorado Springs

By Ed Quillen



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- Klan members on Ferris wheel at W.H. Forsythes merry-go-round site at 8th and Greenwood, Caon City, April 26, 1926



Hooded white robes and flaming crosses are usually associated with the worst aspects of Southern culture. But there was a time, almost 80 years ago, when the Ku Klux Klan took over the Republican Party and dominated Colorado politics.

After the general election of 1924, the governor, Clarence Morley, was a Klansman. Benjamin Stapleton, the mayor of Denver, consulted the Klan when making appointments. U.S. Senator Rice Means was elected with open Klan support. The state House of Representatives had a Klan majority. Klansmen marched and burned crosses in small towns throughout the state, from Great Plains through the mountains to the Western Slope. A city council, or the mayor's office, or the police and sheriff's departments, or the county government -- many fell under the Klan's control.

As Denver, Pueblo, Grand Junction, Canon City and scores of other towns and cities succumbed to the Klan, only one major city escaped: Colorado Springs. Then as now, El Paso County was a GOP stronghold, but the party leadership actively opposed the KKK, and the Invisible Empire never gained power at the base of Pikes Peak.

The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was a national movement that gained its greatest political success in Colorado -- perhaps because Colorado, in a perversely progressive way, was the only Klan realm with a women's auxiliary. It was national organization of white Protestants who supported "100% Americanism" and opposed lawlessness -- especially the rampant violation of Prohibition.

This incarnation of the KKK had the same regalia and public ritual as the first Klan, formed to oppose Reconstruction in the South after the Civil War. It likewise resembled the Klan that was reborn in the 1950s and 1960s to oppose school integration and voter registration in the South.

But there were significant differences. The Klan of the 1920s was something of a fad, inspired by the first Hollywood blockbuster epic: D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which was released in 1915 and was based on the racist novel *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon. In the book and the movie, night-riding Klansman defended the virtue of white Southern womanhood.

This was part of the inspiration for the national leader, Imperial Wizard William Joseph Simmons. He was an Atlanta-based traveling salesman who had learned by 1920 that Klan memberships could be a profitable product. When a Coloradan paid a \$10 initiation fee (the "klectoken"), \$8 went to the national headquarters, and there was more to be made by selling robes, regalia and the ritual book, the "Kloran."

His hired recruiters spread across the country, and in 1921, Simmons himself went to Denver to start building the Colorado Klan.

Under Simmons, the Klan was similar, in many respects, to the other secret social and fraternal lodges -- Eagles, Masons, Woodsmen of the World, Odd Fellows, etc. - that were a staple of American life then. Indeed, these lodges, along with some Protestant churches, were the Klan's chief recruiting grounds as they attracted the respectable and prosperous elements -- ministers, merchants, doctors -- in many communities.

Membership lists were secret; when Klansmen appeared in public, they wore robes and hoods. It was not a monolith; local klaverns promoted what would attract the greatest membership and political power. Thus in Grand Junction, it was essentially just another fraternal order; in Cañon City it appeared as a political reform group promoting paved streets and new schools; in Pueblo it aimed to stamp out bootlegging and police corruption.

Unlike areas of the South, where lynchings occurred regularly, there are no such recorded attacks in Colorado. In his definitive book about the Klan in Colorado in the 1920s, *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado*, author Robert Alan Goldberg cites a couple of examples of real Klan terror, all in Denver.

In 1922, a black janitor named Ward Gash got a letter from the Denver Klan that charged him with "intimate relations with white women." He was told to leave town, and "Nigger, do not look lightly upon this. Your hide is worth less to us than it is to you." He turned it over to the district attorney, and left town.

About that same time, Dr. Clarence Holmes, president of the Denver NAACP chapter, started a drive to integrate Denver's theaters. The Klan burned a cross in front of his office and sent a threatening note, but he persisted.

In the 1920s, Denver blacks attempted to integrate some neighborhoods, and several houses were bombed. But no one was injured. No one was arrested, either, so it was hard to know whether the bombings were from the Klan, or just bigotry in general.

Goldberg found only two acts of real violence from the Klan (again, in Denver). Five Klansmen kidnapped Patrick Walker (a member of the Knights of Columbus) on Oct. 27, 1923, and beat him with the butts of their revolvers. In January 1924, Ben Laska, a Jewish attorney, got a similar kidnapping and beating, this time with blackjacks.

Most of the Klan's pressure, however, was political (anti-Klan state legislators were featured in ads that called them "traitors" in Klan newspapers) and economic (boycotts drove the anti-Klan Denver Express newspaper out of business) rather than physical.

The Colorado Klan of the 1920s had its racist and anti-Semitic elements, but in Colorado its primary targets were recent Roman Catholic immigrants, especially Italians. They made and drank wine, thereby violating Prohibition and showing disrespect for law and order. They also sent their children to parochial schools, thereby demonstrating that they weren't rearing their children to be mainstream Americans who went to public schools.

Thus the immigrant Italians, whose population was growing in the 1920s, became a political issue. They could be construed as a threat to the American way of life, and the Klan's political candidates promised to confront this threat.

Once Klansmen were in public office, they could dispense favors, jobs, contracts and other patronage, thereby building a rich and enduring political machine. The Klan's platform was "100% Americanism," and the Klan gained its political power in a 100 percent American way -- by participating at the grass roots.

In the spring of 1924, Klan members packed the precinct caucuses of both the Democratic and Republican parties, then supported Klan candidates in the primary and general elections. In Colorado, the Klan captured a few Democratic nominations, but it had the most success infecting the Republicans.

Klansman Clarence Morley, a Denver judge, was elected governor, and he took orders from Dr. John Galen Locke, the Grand Dragon of the Colorado Realm. Klansman Rice Means was elected to a short term in the U.S. Senate; millionaire Laurence Phipps, widely accused of bankrolling the Klan, was re-elected to a full Senate term. Klansmen held a majority in the state House of Representatives, and controlled a substantial bloc in the state Senate.

Once in control, KKK-controlled legislators introduced numerous proposals, including firing all Catholics and Jews on the University of Colorado faculty, and outlawing the use of sacramental wine (which was still allowed under Prohibition). Mostly they wanted to abolish many boards and commissions, replacing them with new ones with different names, so they could pack them with Klansmen.

But most of those proposals were ultimately defeated. In *Hooded Empire*, Goldberg, noted: "Just two Klan-endorsed bills became state law: one requiring schools to fly the American flag and the other making ownership or operation of a still a felony."

The Klan also gained power in Pueblo, which was ready for some law and order in the 1920s. "Little Italy" sat on Goat Hill on the east side of town, and the newly arrived immigrants ignored Prohibition in favor of their traditional wine-making, which quickly evolved into bootlegging and violent struggles for control of the liquor trade.

In four years, there had been 10 murders. Two Bessemer homes were bombed in 1923. No one was ever captured or charged for the murders or bombings, and law-abiding Pueblans blamed a corrupt police force and judiciary. The Klan organizers who arrived in 1922 had a popular issue to promote: Nobody else could stop the violence and open disregard of the law, but the Klan could.

After amassing more than 1,000 members with clandestine recruiting, the Klan made a dramatic public opening. On April 29, 1923 at a Sunday evening service at the Broadway Christian Church, three hooded Klansmen walked in during a hymn, and presented \$25 to the Rev. Gus Ramage. An accompanying letter explained that "We are a Christian militant organization and are ever ready to stand behind the Protestant Church as long as it remains Protestant. We are not Anti-Catholic, Anti-Jew, Anti-Negro, or Anti-anything, but are PRO-AMERICAN."

A week later, more than 1,000 uniformed Klansmen burned a 40-foot cross on the north side of town. That summer, Pueblo hosted a convention of more than 3,200 Klansmen from southern Colorado and held big outdoor rallies; in the winter, the

klavern met at the Odd Fellows Hall at Seventh and Grand, ending the year with six burning crosses on Christmas Day.

Early in 1924, 50 Klansmen joined Sheriff Samuel Thomas -- their fellow KKK member -- on liquor raids. The action made the Klan popular in nearby Trinidad, where a judge blamed local crime on "foreigners, who by education and training believe in the use of intoxicating liquors."

In Walsenburg, where the sheriff and a deputy had been murdered by an Italian bootlegger, 350 Klansmen marched in January 19, 1924, demanding justice and carrying banners that said "America for Americans" and "We're for Restricted Immigration."

People were frustrated by the wave of violent crime and the failure of the justice system to address it. They feared for their safety, and the Klan offered an answer -- one that was not opposed by the local newspapers, which ignored the Klan.

But the Pueblo klavern did not take direct action to see Prohibition enforced with a vigilante crusade to terrorize and eliminate the home wineries, speakeasies, roadhouses and stills. Instead, the Pueblo klavern, like the Denver klavern, turned to politics in 1924, with the goal of taking over the state government.

Klan organizers arrived in Colorado Springs in 1921, prepared to follow the usual course: operate clandestinely, secure the support of community leaders, sell memberships, then make a dramatic public appearance.

It didn't work in the Springs. Within a month, the police department had the Klan under surveillance, so that its membership list could not stay secret. Many police chiefs became Klan members, but Colorado Springs Police Chief Hugh Harper was one of the few Colorado peace officers to fight the Klan from the moment it arrived. He saw it as a "temptation to the hot-heads and the firebrands. I believe that there is a good prospect that the new Ku Klux Klan may take men into its roster who act first and think afterward. That can only mean a calamity in any community, sooner or later."

He scoffed at the Klan's claim to support law and order: "Thieves and crooks join the Klan to secure the protection of Klan police officers."

One leader of Klan opposition was C.C. Hamlin, publisher of the city's two leading newspapers, The Gazette and the Evening Telegraph. He flayed the Klan on the front pages and the editorial pages. "Its code is such that few save the most viciously biased would openly subscribe to it. The protection of anonymity, the refuge of moral cowardice, alone brings members to it."

To remove that protection, Hamlin had reporters infiltrate the local klavern; he published a list of leaders, and threatened to print the name of every member.

While Protestant ministers openly supported the Klan in other towns, many preachers condemned it from the pulpit in Colorado Springs.

Like any other American city in the 1920s, Colorado Springs had some bootlegging and related vice. But it never reached the level of Pueblo's lawlessness, and there was no public alarm that the police were failing to do their jobs.

The Springs Klan did attract as many as 2,000 members, and it did once burn a cross atop Pikes Peak -- but thanks to strong opposition from the community's leaders, it was never a real power in El Paso County.

Newspaperman Hamlin was a Republican national committeeman -- and he told his readers that being loyal to the principles of the Republican Party meant voting for Calvin Coolidge for president in 1924, but against Klansmen Morley and Means for governor and senator.

Up the river from Pueblo, the Klan gained power in Fremont County, and made a brief appearance in the Salida area, where about 200 members marched in parades and burned hillside crosses. They threatened Italian immigrants, but the immigrants threatened right back by organizing their own fraternal order, the Sons of Italy. The Klan burned crosses on some Catholic lawns, "but the homeowner usually drove them off with a shotgun," in the recorded recollection the late Joe Stewart, who served as county coroner for many years.

On the state level, Democrats and holdover Republicans in the state Senate, led by Sen. Billy Adams of Alamosa, managed to prevent the Klan's legislative agenda (such as repealing Colorado's civil rights laws) from passing, and the political climate turned against the Klan. Meanwhile, scandals and ineptitude plagued the Morley administration and the Colorado realm -- Morley and Locke both ended up in jail.

In some parts of Colorado, like Cañon City, Klan resentments lingered into the 1950s and 1960s. Jim Little, publisher of the Wet Mountain Tribune in Westcliffe, grew up in Colorado Springs and Cañon City in the 1960s. "There were stores in Cañon that my father told me that I could never go into," he recalls, "because they were owned by Klan families and my dad hated the Klan."

But by then, the Klan of the 1920s, with its base in the respectable Protestant element, had faded away like most fads. A new Klan had formed, one that was not "pro-American" but avowedly racist and anti-Semitic. But this one, too, was opposed from the onset by the people of Colorado Springs, who rallied, just as their forebears, to make a clear public statement that the Klan was not welcome at the foot of Pikes Peak.

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