"I am a sick man," the Imperial Wizard told congressmen investigating the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in 1921. "I have suffered an attack of tonsillitis combined with laryngitis, which developed into bronchitis, which threatened pneumonia... At any time, under the strain of talking, I am liable to have a coughing spell that may result in a vomiting spell."

Imperial Wizard William Joseph Simmons wasn’t trying to weasel out of appearing before the House committee that October day. The Klan poohbah was so eager to talk he’d sent the panel telegrams demanding to testify. Despite his threat to blow lunch, the hammy Simmons gabbed for hours with nary a cough or retch. The next day he blabbed some more. On his third day as a witness, he swaddled his throat in a thick purple scarf and kept on talking.

Simmons painted the Klan as a peaceful, Christian group, its robes “as innocent as the breath of an angel.” He claimed to be a lifelong “friend of the Negro.” Sure, he’d written the “Ku Klux Kreed,” a vow to “forever maintain white supremacy,” but that was just “race pride.” And he denounced New York World stories on Klan violence as “unfounded rumors” published in a paper “owned or controlled by a Jew.”

In closing, Simmons stood to paraphrase Jesus Christ: “I cannot better express myself than by saying to you who are persecutors of the Klan, ‘Father, forgive you for you know not what you do.’” Then he fainted, possibly on purpose, into his chair. His theatrics played well in rural America. Within months, several hundred thousand Americans had joined the Klan. “Best advertising we ever got,” Simmons crowed. “Congress made us.”

The Wizard was a big man, 6’2”, with bright
red hair and a line of mesmerizing palaver. Born on an Alabama farm in 1880, he served in the Spanish-American War, then became a Methodist preacher, proselytizing around rural Alabama until 1912, when the church fired him for incompetence. He sold garter belts and though he’d never married, lectured on “Women, Weddings and Wives.”

He carried cards from a dozen fraternal outfits—Masons, International Order of Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Knights Templar—whose badges festooned his vest. He loved his lodges’ goofy rituals and mystical mumbo-jumbo. The Woodmen of the World hired him as a publicist. He did so well they made him “Colonel” William Simmons.

A colonelcy was nice, but Simmons longed for his own show. In 1915, he decided to resurrect the Ku Klux Klan, the Reconstruction-era terrorist group. Federal prosecutors had stamped out the Klan decades earlier, but Simmons thought he could revive it. He scripted quasi-religious initiation rituals, confecting alliterative titles—Kladd, Klaliff, Klekster, Klorder—and crafting a constitution: “The Tribunal of Justice shall consist of a Grand Council of Yahoos, and a Grand Council of Centaurs...” Naturally, he gave himself the top job—Imperial Wizard.

In October 1915, Simmons applied to charter his Klan in Georgia. Thanksgiving night, he led 15 men up Stone Mountain, outside Atlanta, to perform an ancient ritual Simmons had adopted and which would become infamous. They erected a wooden cross and set it ablaze.

The movie The Birth of a Nation—a Lost Cause fever dream portraying Klansmen as saviors of white women under siege by lust-crazed black men—was about to open in Atlanta. In local papers Simmons placed ads alongside those for Birth blaring, “Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the World’s Greatest Secret, Social, Paternal Beneficiary Order.” The night the movie opened, Simmons led a mounted squad of armed Klansmen in white sheets, galloping past the theater and firing their rifles into the sky.

Simmons’s stunts attracted several thousand members. In 1920, he hired public relations geniuses Edward Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, and within a year, Klan ranks swelled to nearly 100,000. Simmons touted the Klan as a “high class” organization, ballyhooing the many ministers, Masons and businessmen in its ranks. But when Klansmen beat, whipped, castrated, or killed people they despised—blacks, Jews, Catholics, immigrants, and union organizers—Simmons denied that their actions had any connection to his “patriotic, benevolent association.”

Simmons and his cronies at the Atlanta office knew that many members at least condoned violence by secret cadres within the Klan who concealed their crimes lest word reach the cops.

However, Klan leaders cared far less about whipping blacks, Catholics, and Jews than they did about amassing money and political power. Driven by greed, David Stephenson, charismatic Grand Dragon of the Indiana chapter—the nation’s biggest—even toyed with recruiting Catholics, until he realized anti-Catholicism was a big draw in fundamentalist churches where the Klan recruited.

Simmons loved being Imperial Wizard, particularly now that revenue from initiation fees, dues, and sales of Klan robes was pouring into his “Imperial Palace” in Atlanta. The Klan bought him a house and paid him $1,000 a month—today, $172,000 a year—plus a $25,000 bonus. The Klan endorsed Prohibition, but Simmons frequently celebrated his good fortune with dollops of bourbon.

In September 1921, the World exposed Klan crimes. Publicity from the ensuing congressional hearings boosted membership to nearly a million. Rising revenues attracted men, chief among them Hiram Wesley Evans, eager to depose the frequently soused Simmons. A Dallas dentist, Evans became national secretary, or “Imperial Kligrapp.”

At the 1922 “Klonvocation,” Evans convinced delegates to elect him Imperial Wizard and shunt Simmons to the role of Emperor. Simmons went along until it dawned on him that the Emperor was a figurehead and Evans had the reins—and the key to the strongbox.

Irate, Simmons denounced his successor at Klan gatherings. He sued Evans, who countered, alleging libel. After a Klan employee killed Simmons’s lawyer, William Coburn, in 1923, the Emperor surrendered. He settled for a $145,000 payout in return for severing ties to the “invisible empire” he’d created. “Murder was too much for me,” he explained. “I didn’t want to fight men who could kill that way.”

Without Simmons, Klan membership briefly exceeded 3,000,000. In 1925, Indiana authorities convicted Stephenson, chief of that state’s 350,000 Klansmen, of kidnapping, raping, and murdering a young woman. His lurid trial laid bare the extent of Klan bribery of politicians in Indiana and elsewhere. Millions of members quit. By 1930, the Klan was down to 50,000 diehards.

Simmons took his severance to Florida, where he founded The Knights of the Flaming Sword, appointing himself Supreme Monarch. The scheme flopped and Simmons drifted back to Alabama where, historian Wyn Craig Wade wrote, “the forgotten and frequently tipsy Wizard haunted the lobbies of second-rate hotels until his death in 1945.”

**Racist Requiem**

Ex-Kleagle William Coburn was shot dead by fellow Klansman Philip Fox in 1923.