The New Klan is mostly remembered as a hyper-reactionary movement, distinct for its opposition to Judaism, Catholicism, Bolshevism, and multiple “dangerous ideologies” of the conservative Twenties. But the Klan had its progressive side as well, attracting labor unions, socialists, and leftist radicals who hated the expansion of corporations and unregulated capitalist greed just as much as they hated the immigrant workers whom mining companies exploited in the rush toward profits. This complexity is most obvious in Kansas, which despite its present reputation as a conservative bastion had been a leader in the prewar progressive movement. The abrupt transition of Kansas during that period calls into doubt the dichotomy of Left and Right that frames most political dialogue.

William Allen White once remarked that when anything happens, it happens in Kansas first. The Emporia Gazette editor conveyed a view both personal and provincial, having devoted a decades-long career to linking his native state—with its rural, regional values—to the larger spirit of national reform that characterized the early twentieth-century United States. Admittedly biased, his observation remains relevant a century later. Kansas remains for many the iconic heartland, a barometer of social and political change, an attitude evidenced by Thomas Frank’s 2004 book, What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America. Borrowing its title from White’s famous essay, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” Frank’s work juxtaposes the progressivism of White’s day with the state’s contemporary battles over school funding, evolution, abortion, firearms, and other hot-button topics of the culture wars.
The abrupt shift, some would argue, occurred in the reactionary climate of the post–World War I period that drove reformers into retreat. As goes Kansas, so goes the nation, White would say, and others have as well, seeing in the early 1920s an abandonment of reformist ideals.1

Yet the assertion that a turn occurred, either in Kansas or elsewhere, rests on some questionable premises. From 1919 to 1924, a handful of southeastern counties, part of a regional industrial complex of coal, lead, and zinc-mining districts and railroad towns, produced unprecedented levels of leftist activism. Simultaneously, the same area spawned a rise of that organization most symbolic of right-wing reaction, one that became the bane of White’s life, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). For scholars accustomed to thinking of progressivism and conservatism as opposing binary forces, the reality of both springing from the same earth—literally, when discussing coal mines—can be bewildering. Such is the consequence when political values are divorced from the particulars of place and studied in abstract vacuums. Alternatively, a thorough examination of the local roots that gave rise to both reform and reaction reveals enough commonalities to question whether they should be regarded as separate movements at all. The New Klan’s reception and growth in the union halls of southeast Kansas not only suggests greater continuity between one state’s past and present than previously believed, but also exposes as outdated the very dichotomy of left and right that frames most political dialogue.

In its early twentieth-century context, “progressive” broadly refers to the diverse aggregate of reformers who challenged hegemonic control of government by urban bosses and plutocrats. Some scholars reject the term for its sweeping vagueness, pointing to many regional and ideological variations. For the Midwest and western states, progressivism’s origins can be traced partly to the earlier Populist Party, even though White’s own 1896 “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” essay—reprinted nationally by Republicans—in fact constituted a conservative attack on rural radicalism. Yet Kansas Republicans quickly learned to employ and co-opt the Populists’ strategies and rhetoric. Few progressives began as farmers; most were college-educated, middle-class Protestants, heirs to the moral reformers who championed prohibition. As of 1910, the one-fourth of voters who lived in Kansas’s seven most industrialized counties predominantly supported candidates representing working-class interests, that is Democrats and socialists. By contrast, voters elsewhere backed moderate Republicans promising moderate alternatives. These included White and the future governor Henry Allen, both of whom joined Theodore Roosevelt in his split from the Grand Old Party (GOP) in 1912. Politicians like these made possible Kansas’s long list of impressive reforms: abolition of capital punishment, extension of full female suffrage, employer liability laws, worker’s compensation, required registration of lobbyists, and improved

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measures for regulation of public health such as sex education and purification of municipal water. Still, the state’s liberal reputation has been exaggerated. The anarchist Emma Goldman, after a visit in 1911, declared that Kansans lived on past glory and had grown smug and complacent, lacking interest in new ideas. A decade later, many Americans agreed. Roosevelt’s departure from the Bull Moose Party in 1916 prompted reconciliation between reformers and the mainstream GOP. Soon, moderates began re-entering the folds of a party for which worker protections and public safety now took low priority.2

Kansas remained overwhelmingly agricultural in its reform era, with more than three-quarters of its population residing on farms or towns with fewer than two thousand people. But this statistic belies a certain economic diversity that lay in the state’s sub-regions. Kansas’s earliest known coal mining began around 1850 through a stripping process used by neighboring Missourians. Explorers eventually discovered nine seams that extended from Fort Scott south into Crawford and Cherokee counties. By 1898 fifty-three mines operated in Crawford, 30 of those within five miles of the town of Pittsburg. An early study shows high levels of extraction: almost 3 million tons in Crawford in 1910, nearly 5 million in 1915; Cherokee County producing 1.4 million and 1.7 million respectively in those years. Employment levels were also high; the number of miners residing in Pittsburg alone grew from 1,447 in 1890 to 7,458 by 1910 and peaked at 9,094 in 1915.3 Cherokee County trailed its northern neighbor in coal but did boast a place in the lead and zinc bonanza of the Tri-State Mining District, so named for its proximity to Missouri and Oklahoma. The sinking of a new shaft there in 1915 quickly resulted in more than 160 mines and mills. Towns like Galena and Baxter Springs grew overnight into makeshift, transient communities as electric trolleys imported workers daily from Joplin. The cost of the Tri-State District’s success could be found on European battlefields. Lead of course was the chief mineral for rifle and machine gun bullets, while zinc was used in copper alloys to manufacture millions of brass shell casings. With artillery accounting for most military deaths in the Great War’s early stage, zinc rose in price from $40 to $135 a ton. Overall, the Great War

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helped boost Kansas to its place as producer of one-third of the United States’s coal from the 1880s to 1917 and one-tenth of its lead and zinc until 1945.4

Mining companies that initially recruited skilled miners from the British Isles replaced them with unskilled labor once cutting machines came available. While some African Americans migrated to southeast Kansas and by 1900 comprised 12.4 percent of its coal producing force, mostly the coal towns became international mosaics. The community of Frontenac in 1915 included Germans, Russians, Irish, English-Welsh, Scandinavians, Scots, French, Italians, Canadians, and Mexicans. On a Saturday night in 1934, an English teacher recorded thirty-eight different languages on Pittsburg’s streets. Governor Walter Stubbs, a Quaker who tried in vain to enforce prohibition in Crawford County, once proclaimed “I might as well be governor of the Balkans.” Though employed as a pejorative, the name stuck and by the war years, the coal camps became collectively known as “the Little Balkans”—dozens of towns in eastern Crawford and northern Cherokee counties, with churches, schools, union halls, and company-owned “shotgun houses” located near the open shafts. Immigrant families clustered together and consciously resisted assimilation by refusing to learn English, perhaps in protest of their terrible work environments. The state Commission of Labor and Industry recorded fifty-four fatalities in 1916 alone, twenty of those killed in one explosion, the rest by falling rock and mine collapses. The victims’ surnames indicate their range of origins: Waksininski, Salvaggi, Lipovic, and Stefancic, but also Wilson, Kelly, McGee, and Jameson.5

Both Crawford and Cherokee counties saw increased criminality, supposedly imported by immigrant, mostly Catholic, workers. The Sicilian camp of Chicopee, with a population of four hundred, had an active chapter of the Black Hand (a predecessor of the mafia) and dozens of unsolved murders. An Oklahoma newspaper described tri-state towns as “overrun with the worst gang of cut throats, murderers and all-round criminals that ever disgraced a civilized country.” These gangs corrupted public officials and controlled networks of prostitution, alcohol, cocaine, and heroin. In the years preceding Klan presence in the Little Balkans and environs, complaints about poor law enforcement dominated local dialogue, especially after 1914 when the crisis in


6 DeGruson, “The European Influence and Experience,” 1–3, 8–10; Johnson, Tar Creek, 212–4; and Exposer (Tar River, OK), 16 March 1918. For the “overrun” see Exposer (Tar River, OK), 7 September 1918.
Europe’s “Big Balkans” precipitated conflagration—a point not lost on Protestant farm families whose lands lay adjacent to the developing mines.

The radical side of Kansas reform found its voice in socialism, which at one point controlled most county and city offices in coal-producing areas. The town of Girard became an intellectual Mecca for the movement, especially after Julius Augustus Wayland relocated there with his weekly newspaper *Appeal to Reason*. By 1913, the *Appeal* employed more than 130 Girard residents to serve a subscribing audience of 750,000, making it the second-largest socialist publishing house in the country. Figures like Mother Jones and Eugene Debs—who carried the region in his 1912 presidential campaign and even briefly served the *Appeal* as associate editor—frequently visited and lectured. After Wayland’s suicide, the *Appeal* passed through several owners until its acquisition by Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius. A son of Jewish immigrants from Philadelphia, Emanuel began his journalist career with socialist papers like New York’s *Call* and Milwaukee’s *Leader*. Moving to Kansas, he married Anna Marcet Haldeman, a niece of the reformer Jane Addams. The couple’s purchase of the *Appeal* coincided with a downturn in popularity; though the paper had rejected the Socialist Party’s official antiwar platform, affiliation with Bolshevism tarnished its reputation. Emanuel and Marcet seized the moment to broaden the paper’s intellectual scope. Renaming it the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly*, they launched a companion *Appeal Pocket Series* that included the enormously successful *Little Blue Books*. Less than twenty square inches in size, each book disseminated free-thinking philosophies on topics like sex education and Darwinism. Emanuel and Marcet’s circle of friends included literary lights who contributed to the Little Blue Books: Clarence Darrow, Jack London, Carl Sandburg, and Upton Sinclair, whose original serial version of *The Jungle* had been published by Wayland’s press.7

Kansas socialists played only a minor role in the legislative triumphs that characterized the reform era, but their greater contribution lay in the spotlight cast on the poverty and abuses of coal country. May Wood-Simons, for example, documented the ghastly number of miners killed by rock slides and suffering respiratory problems from breathing coal dust. Stores and physicians in the camps acted as mere appendages of the companies. Shared exploitation brought class unity—“in this locality to be a union miner is to be a Socialist,” she wrote—but proletarianization stopped at the edge of the camps. Wood-Simons noted with literary flourish the contrast between conservative farmers and unassimilated miners:

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Beside the wheat field throbs the engine of a mining shaft and the shacks of French and Italian miners, ... workmen, just out of the mine, stretch in the shade of the green leaves at the edge of some mammoth cornfield waiting for an electric car. They speak in the soft accents of the Latin races, in the gutterals [sic] of the Teuton or relate with breezy western abandon incidents at Telluride and Cripple Creek.

Dark-eyed Italian lads dangle their bare feet from the wagon of some farmer of New England descent or generously teach their Yankee school teacher how to read the Italian language.

It is this combination of the rural and the industrial, of the farm worker and the closely unionized miner, of old American agriculturalists and recent immigrants that creates the unusual condition in the region around Girard, Kansas.

Socialist intellectuals seemed to understand the unique nature of Kansas mining and its accompanying radical politics as industrialized aberrations in the midst of an agrarian state, and therefore asserted an inclusive class identity—ameliorative of race, nationality, even gender—as a counter to rural conservatism.

Kansas socialists did have their exclusionary side. Father Joseph Pompeney, a Pittsburg Catholic priest, incurred their wrath by publicly describing socialism as atheistic. A local polemic published in 1913 by Jesse O. Judd attacked Pompeney’s activism as a subterfuge for the Catholics’ “real agenda” of undermining public schools and subordinating workers. Titled Why I am Not a Roman Catholic, Judd’s tract condemned Pompeney and all priests as “the greatest scab-herders and exploiters of labor on this continent.” Judd—elected Crawford County treasurer a year earlier—claimed that in its loyalty to global capitalism the Catholic Church supported authoritarian regimes in Cuba and Mexico by using superstition to keep workers ignorant and compliant. Anticipating a key propaganda weapon in the Klan’s postwar arsenal, Judd directed special scorn at the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternity that supposedly swore allegiance to the pope over any “heretical king, prince or state” and waged “relentless war against all heretics, Protestants and Masons” to the point of ripping open “the stomachs and wombs of the women, and crush[ing] their infants’ heads against walls, in order to annihilate their execrable race.” A congressional investigation revealed this “bogus oath” as fake but that not deter local socialists and later Klansmen from publishing it.

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8 Wood-Simons, “Mining Coal and Maiming Men,” Coming Nation (Girard, KS), 11 November 1911.

Despite a facade of proletarian unity, socialists, like moderate progressives, never spoke with one voice, adapting or rejecting Marxist ideology to win allies or, as they did against Pompeney, demonizing enemies to survive in the fractious realm of state and local politics. While hatred of corporate greed drew upwards of twenty thousand votes for socialist gubernatorial candidates in 1916, the war made such successes short-lived. Extractive workers suffered many setbacks by 1920 in the form of declining prices, displacement by mechanization, and most significantly, lowered support for radical causes. Labor organizers and people of German descent endured discrimination and even violence as the war gave seeming license to mobs willing to take extralegal action against suspected un-Americans. *Appeal to Reason* and another weekly, the *Worker’s Chronicle* (a pro-Klan paper after 1923), had their anti-war and anti-draft issues barred from postal delivery, while the state charter board rejected the *Appeal’s* incorporation request in 1917. Organized labor responded to these changes not with solidarity but with internecine conflict. John L. Lewis, the president of United Mine Workers (UMW), represented a faction that challenged the AFL (American Federation of Labor) model of unions as shops of skilled craftsmen in favor of class-based industrial unions. Samuel Gompers responded by painting Lewis and his fellows as communists, in turn prompting Lewis’s purging of radicals within the UMW—and hence his immersion in the affairs of the Little Balkans. Leadership there centered on Alexander Howat, a child of Scottish immigrants whose presidency of UMW District 14 earned him the sobriquet the “czar of the Kansas coalfields.” Howat’s firsthand knowledge of coal mining, combined with a flamboyant style and the support of socialist intellectuals, made him a dashing figure in labor circles through the war. By 1919, Howat, angered at Lewis’s perceived accommodation with operators, became a key player in a midwest faction advocating district autonomy and more confrontational tactics.10

The nationwide coal strike placed agrarian Kansas politically at the heart of rapid change. Reacting to the winter 1919–20 fuel shortage, Governor Allen seized control of the district’s mines and issued a call for ten thousand volunteers to work them. Allen also shepherded through the legislature a series of anti-syndicalism laws criminalizing strikes and bringing labor relations under the jurisdiction of the Industrial Court Act. Replacing the Public Utilities Commission, the Act created a governor-appointed board of three judges to arbitrate disputes and issue binding rules for workers and employers, prohibiting strikes but sanctioning collective bargaining, with the

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court in theory serving as a neutral third party. Both labor and capital expressed contempt for “Allen’s Court,” as it was known. John S. Dean, the attorney representing the Kansas Employers Association (and later a legal spokesperson for the Klan), opposed the bill on grounds that it granted government excessive power of regulation. But the greatest outcry emanated from the spectrum’s other extreme, from Howat and his supporters in District 14 who named it “the Kansas slave act.” In September 1921, Howat’s order of a work stoppage led to his conviction and imprisonment for violating the Court’s strike injunction. In protest, more than eight thousand miners laid down their tools and by winter brought Kansas coal production to a standstill.\(^{11}\)

Since no official did more to rid the state of both striking miners and the Klan, Governor Allen’s views merit attention. His rhetorical defense of the Industrial Court placed his action in the continuum of Kansas reform, no different from other types of government regulation. Labor-employer conflicts in crucial industries like fuel represented the collision of competing economic interests at the expense of a neutral public one, which Allen felt government must intervene to protect. Noting parallel examples in England and Russia, many reformers accepted Allen’s justification of the court as an impartial mediator between the opposing forces of plutocracy and communism, though Allen more frequently raised the specter of the latter. In a chapter of his book *Party of the Third Part* titled “Invisible Governments,” he accused union leaders like Howat of imposing a servitude “more drastic than that which any government ever imposed upon any subjects.” The Republican governor even drew support from Democratic, unionized counties where workers understood the state government to be an effective weapon against corporate power: “The average worker, when he has an opportunity to follow wise leadership, is not a Bolshevist.” Allen would later employ the same “invisible government” language against the Klan, which he probably understood in terms similar to and perhaps even identical with unions: anarchic, secret, violent societies, agitating against public order.\(^{12}\)

Allen correctly surmised that frequent strikes and the debate over his proposed Industrial Court divided coal country along multiple fractures. One miner with thirty years of experience wrote to declare “We are fast becoming slaves to Alexander Howat and his gang” and “Your industrial bill won’t hurt no honest coal miner.” During the 1919 strike when state authorities seized control of operations, about 170 truck drivers, carpenters, and general laborers—distinctive for their lack of mining experience and


negligible representation of immigrants—volunteered for coal duty. Farmers also comprised an important part of this anti-strike group. Although White eventually defected from Allen by supporting unions, the editor acknowledged “a silly terror of Bolshevism in the hearts of the American people,” especially “farm boys” who thought it their patriotic duty to step into jobs abandoned by striking workers. Brawls erupted in the coal camps and even on children’s playgrounds between pro- and anti-Howat factions.

After the UMW’s withdrawal of support for the strike, the burden of feeding workers’ families fell on wives and mothers. On December 11, 1921, hundreds of women from District 14 met in Franklin to affirm opposition to Allen’s “industrial slavery law” and demonstrate solidarity with male relatives. Labeled by newspapers “the March of the Amazons,” the crowd—three thousand strong by one estimate—stormed local mines, obstructed traffic, destroyed companies’ equipment, assaulted scab workers with red pepper, and apparently tossed the Crawford County sheriff into a pond. As violence escalated over the next four days, Allen dispatched four companies of national guardsmen with a machine gun. The troops’ presence succeeded in curtailing the female marchers but not the strike. State officials closed pool halls and dancing establishments and even burst into private homes on the pretense of seeking illegal alcohol but with the real purpose of intimidating supposed radicals. By January 1922, more than fifty leaders of the Amazon March had been arrested, earning them public praise from eighty-four-year-old activist Mother Jones, who visited the coal region that month.\footnote{W. L. Wells to Governor Henry Allen, 8 January 1920, www.kansasmemory.org/item/213498; “Men Unassigned,” 4 December 1919, www.kansasmemory.org/item/212584; and William Allen White, The Autobiography of William Allen White (New York, 1946), “silly terror of Bolshevism” on 611. For an overview of the women’s march see Goosen, “Like a Brilliant Thread” and Schofield, “The Women’s March.”}

But Howat, whose incarceration prompted the strike, had had enough. On January 13, he ordered the miners to go back to work; many had already done so. Howat’s supporters could take heart in some judicial and political victories. Democrat Jonathan Davis won the 1922 gubernatorial election—with overwhelming Klan support—by campaigning in opposition to Allen’s Industrial Court, which by 1925 had been ruled by the U.S. Supreme Court to be an unconstitutional violation of private rights to contract.\footnote{Miner, Kansas, 246–51 and Lee, Farmers vs. Wage Earners, 165–75.} But for many, the strike called into question the consequences of immigration, class conflict, and radical reform that Kansas’s coal country seemed to embody. Little wonder that the Klan’s message of Protestant redemption found a receptive audience, even among those who had previously counted the strikers as allies.

The origins of the New Klan are well-known, from its 1915 founding in Atlanta toward its growth over the next decade to four million male and female members. After 1920, two talented publicists, Edward Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, injected new life into the then-stagnant organization. Creating an elaborate hierarchical structure, they led the Klan toward enormous expansion in midwestern states like Indiana where
Grand Dragon David Stephenson—a former socialist and coal dealer—grew powerful enough to defy the national KKK by attempting to turn the state branch independent. By the mid-1920s, a series of scandals opened Clarke and Tyler to charges of immorality and hypocrisy, allowing Hiram Wesley Evans to solidify control. A Texas dentist, Evans pushed the Klan ideologically toward anti-Catholicism and nativism and channeled the violent tendencies of some of its followers toward respectable political action. As Evans's Klan grew more visible nationally, it actually declined in the Deep South where it began, evolving into a federation of local and state political machines run by charismatic individuals.15

Contemporary accounts described the typical member of the Klan as an ignorant rural type, fearful of losing privilege or—as later scholars put it—experiencing “status anxiety.” Revisionist case studies have rejected this stereotype, pointing out that the Klan's success transcended an assumed rural-urban dichotomy and attracted recruits in communities undergoing prosperity as well as decline. Indeed, the KKK served different needs in different places by addressing mainstream fears about local “others.” The Salt Lake City chapter consisted of non-Mormon businessmen hoping to overthrow Mormon hegemony; a branch in Orange County, California railed against boosters for encouraging Mexican immigration. The historian Shawn Lay's appraisal is significant: in the organization’s early stages, recruiters, in chameleon-like fashion, tailored their sales pitches to fit varying contexts, and they succeeded in answering so many social and political concerns that terms like “populist” and “reformer” are not inaccurate descriptors.16

Understanding the Klan’s appeal in coal country requires first an acknowledgement of the unifying appeal that its moral absolutism brought to mainstream Protestants. Preachers often welcomed into Sunday services robed Klansmen who marched down center aisle, handed over packets of cash, and legitimized their roles as militant Christians equally prone to charity and strength.17 Anti-Catholicism had been a political factor since Kansas’s inception, one that socialists had not hesitated to exploit. In the Little Balkans, antipathy toward Catholicism merged easily with antipathy toward immigration and other “isms”: as one spokesperson put it, “The Klan


would have you go into the little Italys, of this country, peopled by 2,000,000 Italians, carrying on governments of their own, . . . The Klan would then invite you to go into the little Russias, and the little kingdoms of many other races . . . and study Socialism, Bolshevism, Nihilism and Sovietism in actual practice, before you ask the Klan to disband.”

In bemoaning the loss of Protestant hegemony, the Klan also mourned the loss of its secular corollary, the Protestant work ethic—the principle that each individual succeeds or fails on his or her own initiative. Farmers, skilled craftsmen, and small business owners looked with scorn upon recipients of unearned wealth, be they privileged idlers living on inherited income, or wage laborers demanding more than they deserved by threatening collective action. In blaming Catholicism and the refuse of Europe for fomenting class conflict, the Klan offered a platform to middle-of-the-road independent producers who felt trapped between plutocracy and communism, industrial elites and unions, so-called Jew bankers and Bolsheviks.

Success in the Little Balkans rested also in the social and ideological home the KKK provided for those angered by the cold-heartedness of industry and the apparent crime and anarchy imported by recent immigrants—two phenomena they did not necessarily perceive as separate. This perspective may explain why the Klan gained some recruits among strikers and even socialists themselves by posing as labor’s friend. Studies of European movements show many similarities: Nazism, Fascism, and Klanism all emerged from the Great War during a time of vicious capital-labor disputes, and all used vigilantism and intimidation to assert a nationalistic form of reactionary populism. Through the mid-1920s, the Klan expressed appreciation for socialists-turned-dictators, especially Mexico’s Elias Calles and Italy’s Benito Mussolini, both of whom defied Catholic authorities and provided state-based alternatives to corporate capitalism and Russian communism. Unlike its European counterparts, however, the Klan was less successful in obtaining long-term support from established elites and mostly rejected class-based discourses, instead expressing hostility in racist, xenophobic language.

An inverse relationship developed between Klanism and working-class movements. Nationally, union membership declined in the 1920s from 12 to 8 percent of the total U.S. labor force while Socialist Party membership dropped from 110,000 in 1919 to 12,000 in 1923. Both the UMW and socialists condemned the Klan and promised expulsion for anyone who joined. Victor Berger, whose city of Milwaukee saw thousands of socialists join the KKK, declared the group “venomous, cowardly, and

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despicable" and expressed regret for socialism’s previous role in providing anti-Catholic foundations. Such appeals made little difference, especially in coal country. In West Virginia—like southeast Kansas the destination of eastern European immigrants—UMW miners joined the secret order over their leaders’ objections. A study of Williamson County, Illinois contends that coal miners and UMW officials comprised at least one-third of local Klan membership. Despite the KKK’s anti-union stance, miners there joined not as unionists but as cultural conservatives. Indeed, neither “left-wing radicals” nor “right-wing Klansmen” were ideological monoliths. If scholars grapple with the contradiction of workers carrying the fiery cross out of loyalty to a particular set of values one moment, and go on strike side-by-side with Catholics and immigrants to enforce a different set of values the next, workers themselves apparently did not.21

From his Kansas home, White perceived Klanism to be harmful for distracting reformers’ attention toward racist agendas and splitting them internally:

If I had a million dollars, I would devote some part of it to proving or disproving a theory that I have; namely, that the big business interests of Wall Street, “Nordic, Protestant, Gentile” might have put up some money to the Klan in Georgia, financing their high-powered salesman [sic] to make trouble for the Jewish international bankers and also to smash the labor movement by diverting and dividing it. Certainly nothing has hit labor such a smash in my memory . . . .22

In White’s native state, Klanism followed a regional pattern shared by neighboring areas. In metropolitan Kansas City, 120 miles north of the Little Balkans, the KKK drew support from craftsmen and small business owners concerned about organized crime. Southeast Kansas shared a closer cultural connection with its southern neighbors, however. By 1922, KKK organizers moved into the Ozark Mountains and profited from the anger many rural people felt about recent railroad strikes. The number of


actual Kansans who joined is difficult to know given the KKK’s secretive nature; one study estimates one hundred thousand members, whereas others place it much lower. As early as summer 1921, Klansmen in Texas and Oklahoma planned a northward membership drive. Only a month after the “Amazon March” and Howat’s release from prison, 250 Klansmen marched behind a flaming cross in Caney, on the Oklahoma border. By the end of 1922, the KKK’s national headquarters claimed that nine klaverns (chapters) had been organized statewide, seven of which lay in southeast Kansas and another in Wichita, Governor Allen’s hometown. Newspapers found it to be significant that “the order of the white cloak selected the most important oil and mineral towns” for recruitment. In mid-July 1922, after more than seventy percent of the state’s shop craftsmen joined a national railroad strike, Klan organizers announced they would hold their first parade in Arkansas City, a leading railroad center. A state attorney general’s investigation revealed that kleagles (Klan recruiters) endorsed the strikers’ goals and their hatred of Allen’s Industrial Court. The KKK did appeal to race prejudice, denouncing black workers who comprised the bulk of companies’ scab labor. Mostly, however, local Klan literature downplayed white supremacy in its emphasis on labor issues. One advertisement listed as its three priorities a closer relationship between capital and labor, preventing unwarranted strikes by foreign agitators, and limiting immigration.23

The convergence of so many events in 1922—strikes, armed force in the Little Balkans, the legal battle over the Industrial Court Act, Klan insurgency—undoubtedly produced some sleepless nights for Governor Allen. His instructions to Arkansas City authorities not to allow a KKK demonstration, even threatening to send troops, motivated the local Exalted Cyclops to cancel both the planned parade and cross burning. Yet this crackdown only stiffened resistance. Two weeks later, Allen received a warning, signed “KKK,” advising him to change his interpretation of the Industrial Court law. In October, Klansmen kidnapped the Catholic mayor of Liberty and horse-whipped him for obstructing a planned meeting. Arkansas City remained a trouble spot: Klansmen there sent threatening letters to several people, including the school superintendent who was ordered to hire an all-Protestant staff. They also stopped cars to search for and confiscate liquor. Allen likely fanned political fires by appointing James McDermott—one of his judges on the unpopular Industrial Court—to investigate these crimes. Given his fear of what he called “invisible governments,” Allen probably drew no distinction between leftist radicals and conservative nativists. Indeed, as the turmoil caused by each seemed to coalesce, unions and klaverns became

different faces of the same enemy, to be fought in like manner. By end of year, his administration began proceedings to expel the KKK as a Georgia-based corporation operating in Kansas without legal sanction.24

The Klan spread rapidly, even into the state capitol. In May 1923, a crowd of thousands gathered near Topeka to watch a plane carrying the fiery cross circle the city, while a pro-Klan demonstration in the Supreme Court room—where Allen’s ouster suit proceeded apace—led to the expulsion of more than two hundred spectators. Opposition to Catholic parochial schools was its mainstay; western Kansas recruiters launched a series of ex-nun lectures, supposed exposes by women who had escaped imprisonment in convents and lived to regale prospective members with lewd presentations like “The Priest’s Happy Hunting Ground.” By 1925, some pro-Klan papers had softened their rhetoric and admitted the bigotry of earlier ideas. Later interviews with members of the Girard Klan—home to more than four thousand members—revealed memories of stern warnings to wife abusers and deadbeat fathers as well as fond

24 Arkansas City Daily Traveler, 5 July 1922; Arkansas City Daily Traveler, 6 July 1922; Arkansas City Daily Traveler, 21 July 1922; Wichita Beacon, 10 October 1922; Jones, “The Ku Klux Klan in Eastern Kansas,” 11–2; and Chalmers, Hooded Americanism, 143–8.
memories of the KKK providing free food, clothing, and candy to children during coal strikes. One anonymous source claimed her father was allowed to join even though he was an Austrian Catholic and former bootlegger. Whether the work of overeager recruiters trying to enhance their commissions or a lack of sincere commitment to official ideology, the Klan’s principle of selective membership was not always enforced.25

Until its decline at mid-decade, the Klan proved quite capable of adapting to local changing conditions, which was appropriate, considering that politically it succeeded or failed at local levels. Publishers of Pittsburg’s pro-labor Worker’s Chronicle—which, like Appeal to Reason, was one of two papers censored for sedition during the war—placed the firm into voluntary bankruptcy and then reopened in September 1923 as the Mulberry Independent. By 1924, Pittsburg and Mulberry boasted the largest Klan chapters respectively in the region. E. H. Given, a pastor at United Brethren Church, used his position as editor to build Klan support for his congressional campaign, especially seeking the endorsement of the wealthy landowner Jonathan Miller. On his property north of Mulberry, Miller hosted a cross-burning and flag-waving ceremony for visitors from neighboring chapters, an event that drew through his pasture gates more than 1,800 automobiles and cast a fiery glow visible for miles. Such activities accelerated as fall elections approached, with the Klan sponsoring candidates for various Crawford County offices. An anti-Klan faction called the Loyal Constitutionalists emerged in August 1923 and despite comparatively small numbers, its control of the Mulberry News provided a voice of opposition to the growing KKK machine, as well as competition for Given’s Independent.26

The transition of the Worker’s Chronicle to the Mulberry Independent illustrates the larger transition taken by many reformers toward nativism. From its founding in 1908 through its last issue on August 31, 1923, the Chronicle stood firm as an advocate for working-class ideals, offering a tribute to workers for upcoming Labor Day and declaring “Democracy in government goes hand in hand with democracy in industry.” After changing its name and moving its printing plant to the “progressive little city” of Mulberry, publishers acknowledged that it would no longer be a labor newspaper exclusively. Hence, the new Independent presented editorials titled “Why Martin Luther Left the Catholic Church” alongside “When Labor Comes Home.” Besides arguing that labor must share decision-making power with industry, both articles contended Klan members must be as vigilant in fighting trusts, corporations, and other selfish interests as in promoting patriotic values and championing assimilation through public schools. Editor Given pivoted quickly toward the national Klan’s agenda. In the
premiere issue on September 14, he delivered an expose highlighting the KKK’s positive achievements, its opposition to “wet politicians” and “Popery,” its insistence on improved law enforcement, and the false acts of violence attributed by its enemies. Given paid special attention to the Oklahoma governor Jack Walton’s use of martial law against supposed Klan violence in Tulsa, and he counseled Kansans to be alert for similar oppressive measures from Henry Allen.27

The *Independent* never truly shed its progressive origin, especially not in 1924 when Klan politicians sought votes in coal country. Trying to rally miners against Republican candidates, the paper reminded its two hundred weekly subscribers about “the Fool Court” created by Allen and his cronies, “the most dangerous set of parlor radicals the state ever saw assembled at one time. It [the Industrial Court] was one of the most damnably mischievous laws ever enacted to persecute an industrial district such as this,” a legal tool used by the GOP “to lick the working man with.” Overshadowing state and local politics were the imminent union elections in mining districts. Klan spokespersons hailed Howat and other men jailed by Allen as martyrs who killed the Industrial Court. Lewis’s leadership of UMW, they claimed, constituted “a damnable disgrace” as tyrannical as that of any robber baron. Probably because of Crawford County’s high proportion of immigrants, *Independent* editorials seldom employed the same racist, xenophobic rhetoric that Klan propaganda did elsewhere. In fact, considering that it was mouthpiece for one of the largest klaverns in the nation, the paper’s pro-KKK views seemed almost incidental. Even articles on “Popery” appeared less frequently than discussions about the pros and cons of specific candidates. Within the political discourse of left-right, the *Mulberry Independent* appears a strange creature, publishing a laudatory obituary for Senator Robert LaFollette and a diatribe against Darwinian evolution in the same issue.28

As a Jewish and socialist editor of *Appeal to Reason*, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius held greater incentive than most to denounce the KKK, and so he did at first. On October 1, 1921, a piece titled “The Ku Klux Klan Will Be Exposed” promised within three weeks the launch of a ten-article series showing the inner workings and violence that characterized the secret society and pledged “to destroy this deadliest of all the foes of law and order.” From his base in Girard, Haldeman-Julius requested public assistance by inviting subscribers to submit with their renewal fees a list of known KKK members: “You will be surprised to find out who in your midst belong to the masked robbers.” The paper included a blank form to be snipped and returned under the title “I Want to Help Unmask the Ku Klux Klan!” with room below for names and addresses. But the series never materialized. Instead, the *Appeal’s* October 22 issue

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27 *Workers Chronicle*, 31 August 1923; *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 14 September 1923; *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 21 September 1923; and *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 12 October 1923.

28 For “parlor radicals” see *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 29 August 1924; *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 19 September 1924; For “damnable disgrace” see *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 10 October 1924; *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 15 January 1925; and *Mulberry Independent* (KS), 3 July 1925.
carried a front-page article hypothesizing that “big business” financed the Klan to encourage the lower classes’ prejudice and break their unity. Through the following year, Haldeman-Julius mounted a half-hearted campaign, never following through with naming names and merely printing national studies about the KKK with no local context. One can only speculate about his reasons, though it is possible—once confronted with their popularity and the consequences for sales if he challenged them—he came to perceive the Klan less as an ideological opponent than a competitor for the same reading audience. In December 1922, he responded to recent letters accusing him of “selling out” to the Klan and Catholic Church by accepting advertising money from both. Haldeman-Julius defended the practice on grounds of free speech but pointed out that while he did sell advertisement space to the KKK, he remained hostile to them: “I fail to see the logic of the cry that only a Protestant can be an American.” His reply reveals growing cynicism about proletarian-based movements, arguing that the Klan relied on churches to preach hatred and in the process imbued society with “coarse, common material . . . Democracy is a failure, because it says the dull clods of the mass are the equals of the cultured, which is a rank falsehood. The mass is a sullen, vicious beast, church-led and church-poisoned.”

For idealists like Haldeman-Julius, the Klan’s rapid, overwhelming rise inspired a tactical shift away from organizing the masses into a class-based movement toward one of gradually educating them to recognize their true interests—what later activists would call “consciousness-raising.” In January 1923, in a tone filled with envy and weary resignation, he wrote “One cannot help admiring the brilliant salesmanship of the Klan.” By then, readership of Weekly and the Little Blue Books had begun to decline, a sign of the shrinking popularity of socialist dogma and the rise of nativist sentiment:

I told how old readers of the Appeal, good old boosters for the Socialist party, are now functioning in the Ku Klux Klan, particularly in the South. I am being told that this cannot be true. There must be a mistake . . . . Here [referring to a recent letter] is . . . a subscriber who has spent years in the “cause” and now she is working in another “cause”–to save us from the Pope and keep “niggers and Catholics” from holding office. Of course, such stuff should not be taken seriously, but it does show that what I said about Socialists having transferred their energies to the Klan is true, even though it does sound incredible.

29 Klinkon, “A Historical Study of the Ku Klux Klan,” 14–9, 48–53; Appeal to Reason (Girard, KS), 1 October 1921; Appeal to Reason (Girard, KS), 22 October 1921; and Haldeman-Julius Weekly (Girard, KS), 9 December 1922.

30 Haldeman-Julius Weekly (Girard, KS), 6 January 1923.
Through the decade, Haldeman-Julius published sporadic articles critical of the KKK but never recommended direct engagement, instead advocating long-term enlightenment and elevation—and about even that he remained pessimistic. In “The Sweep of Bigotry,” he said America must rise to England’s standards of cultural superiority: “It may take a long time, but we too must develop a reading, thinking, truth-seeking tolerant element large enough to be of genuine influence.” Nor did he and his contributors ever depart from socialism’s anti-Catholic strain: “The Ku Kluxers are not altogether wrong in their contention that the aim of the Papists is to place the government into the hands of their clergy... There is a steady crop of boobs on this planet who must have some sort of supernatural religion, and a goodly portion of these will be born or will become Catholic.” Religion, Marx’s opiate, was the driving engine both of Klan hatred and of that hatred’s primary target. Neither merited much sympathy from Girard’s reformers and intellectuals.31

The Klan’s power continued to escalate, albeit temporarily. Despite Allen’s departure from office in early 1923, the ouster suit he initiated continued through the courts for two more years. Kansas klaverns, of which KKK attorneys ultimately claimed more than thirty, never operated under official charters but under pseudonyms like “Sunflower Clubs” or—tellingly—“industrial associations.” One such club in Shawnee County sponsored a Topeka parade of more than 1,200 robed Klansmen defying a state attorney general’s ruling that masks could not be worn in public. By 1925, Crawford County’s Chapter Number 22 supposedly boasted the largest membership in Klan history, with frequent rallies and barbecues. The fiery cross burned almost nightly at Pittsburg’s baseball field. Defenders claimed that Klan vigilance produced a 75 percent reduction of illicit liquor trade and achieved near unanimous victories for nominations in county elections.32

Two specific developments account for the KKK’s decline after 1924. The better known of these is White’s crusade against them following election of a Klan-backed mayor in his hometown of Emporia, as well as their influence on both gubernatorial candidates—incumbent Democrat Jonathan Davis and Republican Ben Paulen. Despite the pro-labor and anti-Allen rhetoric of two years earlier when the Klan had supported Davis, the group’s discomfort with the Democratic Party increased as its size grew. Catholics, after all, voted Democratic. When the Klan endorsed Paulen and thereby infiltrated White’s beloved Republican Party, the editor launched a successful petition allowing him to campaign as an independent gubernatorial candidate. For several weeks, he toured the state condemning the Klan as cowards, declaring

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“No man gets behind a mask to do a good thing.” His speeches and writings bemoan the Klan’s dominance of state government, their purging from office of every “man who does not eat meat on Fridays,” and their use of violence. Journalist that he was, White’s goal was less about winning the election than ridiculing the Klan, and in this he partly succeeded. Paulen’s win by 323,403 votes against Davis’s 182,861 and White’s 149,811 show a roughly even split between pro- and anti-KKK forces, but show more of a victory for the moderate wing of the GOP. In particular, the re-election of the state attorney general Charles Griffith, who had been aggressively prosecuting the Georgia charter case, revealed some of the Klan’s growing weakness.33

The other development came not from KKK enemies but from allies. As part of an ongoing struggle to establish their legal status in Kansas, Klan leaders in April commissioned the Topeka attorney John S. Dean to represent them. Dean had been counsel for the Kansas Employers’ Association, renamed by 1924 Associated Industries, described by unions as the most powerful lobbying force in the legislature opposed to minimum wage laws and other reforms implemented before the war. In a career noted for representing railroads, packing houses, and other anti-union corporations, Dean had been on the side of conservative opposition to Allen’s court, successfully arguing unfair government infringement on employers’ rights. Under a headline titled “Ranks of Labor May Be Broken by Ku Klux Klan,” the Wichita Beacon called Dean’s commission “a peculiar complication.” Many suspected the commission as part of a “divide and conquer” tactic to shove the Klan’s working-class members into choosing racial and religious exclusion over devotion to labor solidarity. Both White and Haldeman-Julius had voiced this same suspicion before and would do so again. During his fall campaign, White employed language akin to that of his friend Allen:

In Kansas the two invisible governments, the two masked conspiracies, the Ku Klux Klan and the Associated Industries, with one attorney, John S. Dean are united. The Associated Industries will use the Klan and laugh at it. Most Klansmen are working men... [The Klan is helping] John Dean and the Associated Industries beat the Child Labor amendment. Come, fellow Kansans, let us tear off the masks from these Klansmen, and their masters, the self-seeking corporations.

Despite possible machinations to co-opt the hooded order as a tool of unrestrained capitalism, Dean and his employers failed, at least in the short term. The Kansas Supreme Court in 1925 ruled the KKK an out-of-state company conducting business without an approved charter. After the defeat of a proposed “Klan bill” that would have granted an exception, followed by the U.S. Supreme Court’s refusal to hear an

appeal in 1927, Kansas became the first—and only—state to legally expel the Ku Klux Klan.34

Being expelled, of course, did not prevent them from operating in some extralegal manner, but the damage was done. Having begun in opposition to moneyed interests, this recent swing toward control by conservative Republicans and anti-union lobbyists

showed how far the Klan had evolved in its short existence. Labor advocates, such as those at the Mulberry Independent who had initially welcomed the KKK, no friends certainly to White, shared the editor’s dismay at Klan members supporting the same party that had imposed on the Little Balkans the Industrial Court and “brought soldiers and the enforced working of workmen under rifles and machine guns.” GOP victory brought an opportunity for musing to the Independent: “I never could understand why the Ku Klux Klan (which is distinctly a commoners organization) wanted to play with that crowd [Republicans]. I am afraid most of them will rue the alignment. I have never seen oil and water mix yet . . . . The SYSTEM is the same everywhere; it is just as keen and grasping in Kansas, as it is in Wall Street, only not so big, and we put the friends to the SYSTEM in power this year, so it will win more privilege and plunder! When will the people learn wisdom?” Their sentiments were quite similar to those held by journalists in Girard: workers apparently had been hoodwinked, their reformist impulses against predatory capitalism defused, first by the Klan’s absorption of socialism, and then by the Republican Party’s absorption of the Klan.

The burning cross in Kansas was extinguished almost as quickly as it began, mirroring larger trends. National limits on immigration assuaged nativists’ deepest fears, while scandals, internal bickering, and the tendency by leaders to expect unquestioned loyalty sapped much of the initial enthusiasm that the KKK generated. Many who otherwise shared the organization’s worldview regarded the wearing of masks as undemocratic and hypocritical. A local study concludes that by 1930 the KKK had vanished in the state. After its disbandment in 1925, the Wichita chapter turned over its remaining funds to a local hospital. Twenty years later, rumors about a cross burning and possible resurgence led reporters to interview Charles McBrayer, a former Grand Dragon. A respectable local farmer and school board member, he claimed no knowledge of a new chapter being organized but “If I were a young man I probably would be a member.” McBrayer attributed the demise to a “lunatic fringe” that alienated the more intelligent. However, of their basic principles, he explained, “There is nothing wrong about the Klan. It has been lied about so much that I finally decided to quit.”

Taking Kansas as a bellwether, the postwar radicalization of labor, manifested in ways that scanned the political spectrum, carries contemporary lessons for analysts who ponder the ideological origins of populist-nativism. At least in its incarnation in the coal fields, nativism emerged not as the first stage of a conservative period but as the concluding stage of a progressive one. The New Klan presented itself in the language of populist change, offering working-class miners an alternative discourse to that of strikes and radicalism. Despite its anti-union rhetoric, it is more accurate to say the


36 For the decline of the national Klan see Alexander, Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest, 242–56; Jones, “The Ku Klux Klan in Eastern Kansas,” 39–41; and Wichita Beacon, 31 December 1945.
Klan competed with leftist movements for the same constituency rather than opposed them outright. Socialism and other reforms had their day in southeastern Kansas. But their ability to transcend differences by unifying workers under the banner of economic justice had limits. Despite inevitable empathies born of mutual toil and the shared dangers of dust and collapsing mines, native-born white Protestants could not completely envision the dark-skinned, the Catholic, the foreigner, who worked alongside them as permanent friends and allies. However, this short-sightedness is no reason to essentialize or dismiss as ignorant bigots men who for three or four years at most bought KKK memberships. Rather, the fact that workers so quickly transferred their loyalties from unions to klaverns before abandoning both suggests that the ideological roots of movements openly associated with left and right were never planted very deep. The historian Robert Paxton’s description applies well here: “Fascists despise thought and reason, abandon intellectual positions casually, and cast aside many intellectual fellow-travelers.” Certainly reformers and labor activists, who initially believed the Klan could advance the fortunes of working families, agreed.37

In another sense, however, the New Klan in Kansas failed as an organization because it succeeded so thoroughly as a movement. It promised an end to disruptive strikes and foreign agitation, the preservation of Protestant hegemony, and a more sedate labor force at peace with capital. With those goals accomplished, what further need for meetings and annual membership dues? During a time of intense class polarization, the Klan enjoyed a brief but influential role in defusing those tensions and their accompanying radical politics, thereby pulling Kansans away from the reform practices that previously defined them. William Allen White offered an epitaph: “The great guns of the Western Front smashed so much more than the little French towns and the flesh and blood of the soldiers. . . . We should not be angry if the child minds about us show a strange perversity and a wicked bigotry which is bound to pass as humanity readjusts itself. . . . What a sordid decade is passing! It will be known in America fifty years hence as the time of terrible reaction.”38 Despite his prescient insight, White need not have looked so far away for explanation. The horror of European trenches certainly reverberated through Kansas’s small towns and wheat fields, but the end of a reform era sprang from holes in the earth closer to home than he wanted to believe.


38 White, Autobiography, 632.