The “Invisible Empire” Comes to Marietta

By Jann K. Adams (in collaboration with Hidden Marietta Tour Company)

It may be surprising to many in Washington County that the cloaked and hooded “Invisible Empire” made quite a presence here in the 1920s! The Ku Klux Klan was anything but “invisible.” Thousands of white robes and hoods paraded on the downtown streets and stopped at the Armory for a photograph in 1923. The local group was large enough to have a third floor office and Klavern in the Park Block at 254 Front Street in Marietta.

What brought about this rise in Klan activity in the 1920s? After the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) of the southern states had lost its strength in terms of membership and activities diminished, but did not disappear from terrorizing African-Americans. During the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s), many Americans became fearful of increased immigration from southern Europe, the rise of cities with accompanying poverty and crime, industrialization and labor unions, and increased presence of African-Americans, Catholics, Jews and foreigners. A panic swept through the masses that the good old America run by white Protestants might be a thing of the past. The fear of losing a lifestyle reignited the idea of masked crusaders coming to the aid of white Protestant America.

The stimulus for the Second Wave of the Ku Klux Klan came from an unexpected source. The silent film, “The Birth of a Nation,” directed by D. W. Griffith in 1915, ignited a rekindled interest in KKK activities nationwide. It was a patriotic romance of how the KKK saved white Southerners in the Reconstruction Era from the growing civil rights that African Americans were just beginning to enjoy. Griffith based the film on the 1905 book, The

Movie poster; Wikipedia.com
height was fired at 8:00 p.m., followed by a charge of dynamite that alerted all of Marietta of the Klan’s presence. It burned for 40 minutes. Many people witnessed the event, but did not take it seriously until the next event occurred.

The following day, the Ku Klux Klan interrupted the Methodist Church evening service where visiting evangelist, Rev. Pat Withrow was speaking. Six Klansmen appeared and four of them approached the podium, handed an envelope to the minister, and began to walk away. The minister then addressed the Klansmen and congregation that he presumed the visit had good intentions and he had had similar visits in other churches. Withrow continued by speaking on the real meaning of Americanism. The envelope had contained a cash donation with congratulations of his work.

Interestingly, in 1908, The Marietta Times had posted a magazine excerpt written by Dixon titled, “A Terror To The Negroes: the Formation of the Ku Klux Klan Brought Unruly Blacks to Their Senses.” Was there already a presence of Klan in the area or was the editor advocating Klan activity?

**KKK arrives**

The Ku Klux Klan first descended upon Marietta on February 24, 1923 with the burning of a fiery cross near Harmar Hill at the site of an old quarry. The oil soaked cross measuring 14 feet in

![Fiery Summons](image1.png)

*Fiery Summons*

*By virtue of the power vested in me as Exalted Cyclops of this Klan, I hereby summon you to attend a Klanclave of our Klan on February 22, in the Year of our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-Eight. This is the Klanclave about which our Imperial Wizard and Grand Dragon have written you. Klanman, be there.*

![Klan in front of National Guard Armory](image2.png)

*Local Klan in front of National Guard Armory; date and source unknown*
Throughout 1923, the Marietta, Williamstown, Parkersburg, and other Washington County groups of the Klan held ceremonials with speakers and the burning of fiery crosses. Hundreds of Klansmen and thousands of spectators observed a ceremonial held on July 27 in the Norwood area. The Shankland farm with borders on Newport Pike, Acme Street, and Phillips Street filled with the robed and hooded Klansmen as the ceremony began in a meadow. From a platform, a band played “The Star Spangled Banner” and visiting men and women speakers lectured to the crowd. The event concluded about midnight with the sounding of bombs and rockets.

Klan conclaves

The Marietta Klan hosted its first annual conclave on October 20, 1923 at the Washington County Fairgrounds that attracted people from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other parts of Ohio. The event took on the flavor of a county fair with refreshments and vendors selling balloons, flags, and pennants. Spectators were allowed into the fairgrounds, but only Klan members were permitted on the racetrack oval.
Robed guards secured the area. The daylong conclave included lectures on the Klan organization and principles, a band concert, and naturalization and initiation rites were held in the evening. A unique and very visible event was an airplane carrying a lit fiery cross flying over the gathering.

One of the grandest spectacles of the conclave, observed by thousands of spectators lining the streets, was the Klan parade through downtown Marietta. Seven hundred and fifty Klansmen and Klanswomen on horseback led the marchers as they walked down Second Street to Greene Street. Two bands played music and some visiting groups carried crosses. The parade route led north on Third Street to return to the fairgrounds. As it crossed Putnam Street, the fire alarm sounded causing quite a disruption of marchers as the clanging fire engines rushed to a reported fire on Sacra Via. As it turned out, it was a well-timed false alarm that was perhaps given by a person in opposition to the Klan. The day ended at the fairgrounds for ceremonies and the burning of a flaming circle on a hill overlooking the event.

In August 1925, local Klansman joined the national conclave of the Ku Klux Klan in Washington D.C. where thousands of men, women, and children watched the sea of white robes and hoods that stretched out for a mile. Klan members numbered at least 25,000 as they marched in formation in the parade route down Pennsylvania Avenue. About 100 people from Washington County traveled by train and auto for the grand event.

By 1928, the Marietta Ku Klux Klan had so many members they could not fit in the headquarters on the third floor of 254 Front Street at the same time. They had to have two meetings. Since this was a secret order that conferred degrees, their activities throughout the years were not in the daily press. But we do know, dues were collected, ceremonies held, degrees conferred, local advertisers supported Klan-Kraft, the local KKK newspaper, and the group was well connected to the national Klan. Early in that year, the Imperial Wizard,
the national commander in chief, sent a special letter from the Invisible Empire to all Klansmen to be alert for a new call of patriotism to support the fundamentals of Americanism. Apparently, the Alien World, all things outside of the Empire, proposed a new conflict opposed to Klan principles. Indeed, a Fiery Summons was sent out by the local Exalted Cyclops to attend a Klonklave in February.

The present

Today, there is no apparent local Ku Klux Klan activity. In the 1980s, KKK rallies led by outside groups met at the courthouse. The only physical remnant of the Klan of the 1920s is a rock carving in the Kris Mar woods near the Frontier Shopping Center. A rock outcropping contains an image of a hooded figure with the date 1925 carved beneath it. In 2014, KKK flyers from North Carolina’s Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan were left on porches in Marietta. Whether we have secret activity here or not, it is prudent to acknowledge that Christian denominations around the nation denounce the Ku Klux Klan and, with its history of violence, the KKK is considered to be a hate group.

Sources:


*The Marietta Daily Times*, February 26, 1923, “Ku Klux Klan Here.”


*The Truth – Without Fear or Favor* KLANKRAFT (KKK newspaper), October 11, 1923, Marietta, Ohio

*The Marietta Daily Times*, August 10, 1925, “WC Had Hundred Present at Klan Conclave.”

*The Marietta Daily Times*, October 5, 1925, “Big Crowd Attends County Klan Meeting.”


Polk City directories of Marietta, 1922, 1924-5.