Those of you who aren’t familiar with the Klan may not know it was anti-everything except white protestants. It was anti-Catholic, anti-black, anti-Jew but it was pro anybody who would come up with the money to buy the sheets.¹

These words spoken by Bernard Friend at a panel discussion about the Jewish community in Muncie, Indiana, in 1981 bring humor to a dark subject—a subject genealogists and other researchers may be tempted to shy away from. However, doing so would ignore a significant aspect of twentieth-century history, leaving a big gap in our understanding of the development of Indiana’s counties and, more important, of the Hoosier State. In 1925 nearly 21 percent of native-born white Hoosier men were members of the Ku Klux Klan, which is a staggering 165,641 men. Though membership was high in almost every Indiana county, the Klan’s highest membership was in the state’s northern and central counties.²

Important to any discussion of the Ku Klux Klan is the fact that there have been three separate Klan groups. The first was confined to the South and was characterized by Confederate veterans trying to turn back the tide of Northern Reconstruction and deny blacks their freedom. The third phase of the Klan began in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement and was similarly characterized by its violence toward African Americans. In its second phase, however, the Klan garnered its highest known membership and attracted men from the mainstream all over the United States. The Klan was especially strong in the Midwest, and scholars have estimated that there were four to five million Klan members in the 1920s nationally.³ The exact number of members is difficult to pin down since the numbers were quite fluid. Scholar Kathleen Blee indicates that because the public and private faces of the Klan were so different, member turnover was quite rapid.⁴

The Wayne County Ku Klux Klan collection at the Indiana Historical Society offers researchers an extensive view into the Klan of the 1920s. The collection encompasses mundane financial reports, bills, and receipts; state and national Klan bulletins, correspondence, and publications; and lengthy

This map illustrates the percentage of white men in each Indiana county who belonged to the Klan in 1925, near the peak of the Klan’s popularity. (From Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928 by Leonard J. Moore. Copyright ©1992 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher. www.uncpress.unc.edu)
membership lists that include names and addresses of Klan members. All of these records seem to have been kept diligently, beginning with membership lists from 1921, not long after the Klan first entered Evansville, Indiana, in fall 1920. On October 6, 1921, Wayne County’s Cambridge City Tribune gave this enigmatic statement: “It is generally reported that they will refuse to let the Ku Klux Klan into Richmond. This is surely a false report for the well-established reason that they want to hog every thing they can get over there.” Though a vague statement, the newspaper had it right: Richmond’s Klan, Whitewater Number 60, was chartered on July 4, 1923, the same date Indiana’s Klan was chartered. In fact, between 1922 and 1926, 41 percent of Richmond’s native-born white men were Klan members.5

According to a Klan bulletin from June 20, 1923, Indiana had 375,000 members and hoped to reach 400,000 by the July Fourth charter. If they were to hit that goal, the bulletin stated, it would make “Dear Old Indiana THE GREATEST STATE IN THE UNION FOR THE SUPREMACY OF CHRISTIANITY AND PATRIOTISM.” In May of that year, the pro-Klan newspaper, the Richmond Item, ran an advertisement for a public initiation taking place on May 25 in which the public could witness those taking the Klan oath and hear a discussion answering “Why the Klan?” On May 26 the Item reported that this gathering had been attended by nearly three thousand people. The initiation included fireworks and crosses lit on fire in a field.6

In October 1923 the Klan staged a huge parade and initiation, or as they put it, a “naturalization,” in Richmond. The day after the parade, which was supposed to include an “Aeroplane Swinging a Huge Fiery Cross,” the Item ran a front-page, above-the-fold story with the headline “Spectacular Array Presented By Klan in Mann[er]joth Parade,” reporting that more than thirty thousand people witnessed the spectacle, suspending city traffic. Many who attended came to Richmond in buses from Marion, Muncie, and Anderson, Indiana, as well as from Dayton, Ohio.9

The Item often ran Klan advertisements as well as coverage of Klan activities in prominent places in the newspaper. Another Richmond paper, however, was anti-Klan. The Richmond Palladium’s coverage of the same “mammoth parade” did not appear until page nine. In its short article, the Palladium made no mention of how many spectators were present overall, only an estimate that eight hundred to a thousand people were present to hear the first speaker—far below the Item’s estimated thirty thousand total attendance. Speakers at the event included ministers from the Church of Christ in Indianapolis and Plainfield Christian Church. According to the Palladium, “The parade was made up of delegations from a number of cities of eastern Indiana and western Ohio as well as a strong representation of Wayne county members.” Several groups of women and some children participated. “Automobiles in the parade were extensively decorated and ‘fiery crosses’ appeared in the parade at frequent intervals.” According to Nancy Maclean, writing about the second Klan, these “public shows of strength” were meant to “sway non-members and frighten opponents at key times.” Maclean states that the Indiana Klan’s main office would warn uncooperative public officials to “‘beware the invisible eye’ and to allow their demonstrations.”10

According to Leonard J. Moore in Citizen Klansmen, the 1920s Klan in Indiana represented a true cross section of the population and was not “disproportionately urban or rural.” Members were not “significantly more or less likely than other members of society to be from the working class, middle class, or professional ranks.” Additionally, Klansmen were Protestants, and “their religious affiliations mirrored the whole of white Protestant society, including those who did not belong to any church.”11

Although Klan members of the 1920s still wore white robes and hoods, violence was not the Klan’s primary means of instilling fear in the hearts of its self-proclaimed enemies. The official stance, as explained in an undated message to “all Exalted Cyclops” (the heads of individual klaverns or Klan groups) was that “violence is not and will not be countenanced by the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan—that there is nowhere in our Oath, Ritual or Constitution and Laws one word to the effect that this organization is anything but a law abiding organization, whose members are sworn to uphold the law and assist the duly constituted authorities.”12

Nevertheless, the Klan retained white supremacist beliefs. Its main focus in the 1920s was promoting its brand of Americanism. Marketing itself as a Christian and patriotic organization, one that any dutiful American citizen should join, the Klan subtly revealed its vehement anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Jewish stances. Instead of violence, the Klan used a mixture of intimidation and persuasion to silence perceived enemies and to bring members into the fold, as in the above example of the Richmond parade.13

If marketing was one main strategy, the 1920s Klan also operated as a highly effective pyramid scheme “fueled by an army of highly incentivised sales agents.” The initial fee to join the Klan was $10.00, an amount roughly equal to $139.00 in today’s money. In addition to this fee, members also had to pay $6.50 for a robe and $1.00 per year for a “realm tax.”
Nearly all of the fees were distributed “to either the handful of top leaders” or recruiters. Therefore, although the Klan presented itself to potential members and the public as a social club—despite its official slogan as the “Invisible Empire”—it actually worked as a “multi-level marketing firm.” Scholars such as Blee believe that the widespread popularity of the Klan in the 1920s was due to this sophisticated marketing plan in conjunction with the period’s decline in agricultural prices, social changes, new technological advances, immigration into and migration around the country, urbanization, and postwar nationalism.

Klan records that have survived in Indiana hold a surprising amount of information about rank-and-file members, and they also demonstrate the organization’s monetary focus. The collection for Wayne County contains long membership lists that include full names, addresses, and dates that may indicate when the member applied for membership or when he was initiated. There are also lists of names in quarterly reports that reveal members who were reinstated as well as those who were suspended for non-payment of annual dues. These records show just how regulated the Klan was in terms of organizational hierarchy, chapter meetings, and chapter reporting. For example, there were official forms for quarterly reports and meeting minutes that were sent to state and national headquarters. Proof of the Klan’s fiscal focus appears in a January 1925 letter the Whitewater Klan in Richmond received from W. Lee Smith, chief of staff for the Realm of Indiana, indicating that the Richmond Klavern was overdue on its quarterly reports and funds. Smith stated that the Richmond Klan’s negligence was causing “additional expense and use of unnecessary time.” Along with this allusion to corporate efficiency was the use of intimidation in the closing: “Our national headquarters are communicating with us every day about your report demanding that either these reports be received on time and organizations otherwise function as they should and do things the Klan way or drastic action will be taken.”

The Klan also marketed itself as a defender of morality and family. In its 1916 constitution, the Klan’s purpose is laid out in chivalric terms. Calling itself “a common brotherhood,” the constitution states that the Klan was formed to cultivate and promote “real patriotism” and to “practice an honorable clanishness toward each other; to exemplify a practical benevolence; to shield the sanctity of the home and the chastity of womanhood; to maintain white supremacy; to teach and faithfully incultate a high spiritual philosophy through an exalted ritualism, and by a practical devotedness to conserve, protect and maintain the distinctive institution, rights and privileges, principles and ideals of a pure Americanism.”

An example of the Klan working to defend morality and family can be seen in correspondence from 1927. On October 4, a Glenwood, Rush County, Indiana, woman called on the Richmond Klan to step in regarding her runaway husband. According to her letter, her husband was living with another woman. She wrote that she had two small children and was unable to work due to illness. A week earlier she had written to the Indianapolis Klan but had not heard anything back. Six days later the Richmond Klan responded, telling her to talk to the prosecuting attorney in her county to file charges against her husband for non-support. “This will enable us to have something to work on,” they said. In conclusion they wrote, “We can not touch him under the circumstances to do this we would have to actually have proof of this matter.” It is unclear
whether the wayward husband was a Klan member. It may be
more likely that the woman saw a Klan advertisement promis-
ing to return straying husbands as Klansmen would enhance
their reputations in their klaverns by finding errant husbands
and holding them publicly accountable.20

Deadbeat husbands and fathers were not the only targets
of the Klan’s morality policing. Women who neglected their
children or were deemed “fallen women” were also held accountable. Men and women were both subject to stern Klan
warnings and sometimes even violence, just as both men and
women of the Klan were the enforcers of what they deemed
to be the correct moral path. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan,
of which there were an estimated half million, formed as an
auxiliary to the Klan around 1923. WKKK documents and col-
lections are even rarer than those of their male counterparts.
In researching the WKKK for her book *Women of the Klan*,
Blee located WKKK members in three ways: historical documents
in which women publicly revealed their membership or were
identified by anti-Klan organizations or listed in Klan docu-
ments; second, newspaper obituaries that indicated whether
women were given the WKKK funeral rituals; and third, inter-
views with former Klanswomen, WKKK contemporaries, and
victims of the WKKK.21

While the documents of the Ku Klux Klan shrouded the
organization’s bigoted beliefs in terms of family and morality,
the women’s documents were much more blunt. For example,
the pamphlet *Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* states,
“This is a White Women’s organization, Exalting the Cauca-
sian Race and teaching the doctrine of White Supremacy.” It
continues, “We would not rob the colored population of their
rights, but we demand that they respect the rights of the
White Race in whose country they are permitted to reside.”
Immigrants, the WKKK believed, were in the United States “to
serve the interests of the land from which they came, regard-
less of the interests of this land in which they make their
homes and seek their fortunes.” Like the KKK, the women’s
group was also anti-Catholic and anti-Jew; membership in
the WKKK was “restricted to those who accept the tenets of
true Christianity, which is essentially Protestant.” Blee finds
that the WKKK was a major player in the advancement of Klan
ideals and that it was “responsible for some of its most vicious,
destructive results,” for instance, by spreading rumors and
slander through “poison squads.”22

Just as the WKKK pamphlet informs members of the
group’s philosophies, the Wayne County KKK collection con-
tains bulletins and letters from the state and national offices
that were to be read to Klan chapters at their meetings. These
documents make it easy to glean how the group worked to
spread its concepts of morality and white supremacy in com-
unities. In one undated and unsigned note each organization
is told to complete fifteen tasks. One instruction points to
how the Klan planned to monitor the community in which
its members lived: “Procure the name, address and voca-
tion of every individual of voting age, in each county, town-

This hood was likely worn by a member of the Richmond Klan,
Whitewater Number 60. (Indiana Historical Society)
ship, and precinct, falling within the following classifications.” The classifications were extensive and included immigrants; “I.W.Ws., Bolshevists, Reds, or Agitators”; bootleggers; those who owned or worked in brothels; Jews; Blacks; and Roman Catholics. Klan chapters were effectively instructed to spy on meetings of these groups and to write reports: “Wherever such evidence is secured, make a written report to the state office, covering the nature and location, hour of meeting and what transpired.” Each Klan was also instructed to establish “a program in which one outstanding thing for the community will be accomplished,” such as “aiding the public schools, Ministerial Associations, or any benevolent organization, or any civic body.”

Another way the Klan attempted to spread its message in the community was by reaching out to public schools. A June 1927 letter to all the exalted cyclops in Indiana asked for the names and addresses of each school teacher who taught ninth through twelfth grades. The national organization planned to send each teacher a free copy of the Klan magazine, the Kourier. “The July issue of this magazine,” Grand Dragon W. Lee Smith wrote, “will be purely an Al Smith [Catholic governor of New York and 1928 Democratic presidential candidate] issue and its contents will be a clear, definite statement of facts relative to the issues of the day, Romanism [Catholicism] versus Americanism. These facts contained in this issue can be used as reference for years to come upon this controversy.”

The directive regarding New York’s Catholic governor evinces an unprecedented quest for political power in the 1920s Klan, a quest that separates it from both the Reconstruction-era and Civil Rights-era Klans. In 1924 only one anti-Klan candidate was elected to Congress from Indiana, whereas the others were allies of the Klan or bent their positions to satisfy the Klan. The Wayne County primary election returns published in the May 7, 1924, edition of the Richmond Palladium show the election was a landslide victory for Klan-backed candidates. An example is the gubernatorial primary in which Ed Jackson ran with widespread Klan support. Jackson won on the Republican ticket and went on to win in the November general election, as well. In Wayne County, Jackson received 3,372 votes—more than half of all the votes for governor in the primary, which consisted of fourteen candidates (six Republicans and eight Democrats). His closest Republican competitor, Indianapolis mayor Samuel Lewis Shank, only received 1,706 votes. D. C. Stephenson, infamous Grand Dragon of Indiana and political boss, saw Jackson “as a candidate [the Klan] could control.” For his part, Jackson saw the Klan “as an immensely popular, bipartisan group that had repackaged a message of morality, Americanism, Protestantism,
toward our organizations” so the state Klan organization could “work to the end of getting men on the state pay roll who are our friends.” In a letter dated February 21, 1929—five years after the Klan had reached its maximum political power and four years after Klan membership in Wayne County and Indiana as a whole began to rapidly decline—J. A. Colescott, Indiana’s “Imperial Representative,” asked the Richmond Klavern about Denver C. Harlan, Richmond’s representative in the Indiana legislature. He asked four questions about Harlan: what his religious affiliation was, whether he had ever been a Klan member, what his attitude toward the KKK was, and whether he had any fraternal affiliations. Handwritten next to whether Harlan was ever a Klansman and his attitude toward the Klan was the word “hostile.” The letter concludes with this statement, “Please let us have this information at the earliest possible date as it is necessary that we have this to carry out our program.”

A few small hints in the collection show that Wayne County’s Klansmen were at least paying attention to the political situation. The “Great Titan, Province #2, Realm of Indiana,” R[obert] F. McNay, wrote a letter in 1925 asking all Indiana chapters to “check up all the men who hold state positions who reside in your county and as to their attitude toward our organizations” so the state Klan organization could “work to the end of getting men on the state pay roll who are our friends.” In a letter dated February 21, 1929—five years after the Klan had reached its maximum political power and four years after Klan membership in Wayne County and Indiana as a whole began to rapidly decline—J. A. Colescott, Indiana’s “Imperial Representative,” asked the Richmond Klavern about Denver C. Harlan, Richmond’s representative in the Indiana legislature. He asked four questions about Harlan: what his religious affiliation was, whether he had ever been a Klan member, what his attitude toward the KKK was, and whether he had any fraternal affiliations. Handwritten next to whether Harlan was ever a Klansman and his attitude toward the Klan was the word “hostile.” The letter concludes with this statement, “Please let us have this information at the earliest possible date as it is necessary that we have this to carry out our program.”

The Ku Klux Klan grew so rapidly in the United States, especially in Indiana, that there was likely no way to sustain membership levels and growth. But its decline was, if anything,
more rapid than its rise. The Klan’s political success in the 1924 primary and general elections had seemed to promise an organization well placed to take over the state for a long time. However, after D. C. Stephenson, former Grand Dragon, was convicted of murdering Madge Oberholzer in November 1925, his political allies deserted him, as did many Klansmen across the state. From the very beginning Klan membership had been fluid, but after Stephenson’s conviction, there was more ebb than flow in membership numbers. In Wayne County alone, membership dropped 65 percent in the year following the conviction. The fourth quarterly report, dated January 1, 1926, showed the Whitewater Klan had 345 members in good standing. By April that number dropped to 213, and by the fourth quarter reports for 1927, only 45 members were in good standing.31

The Klan limped along for the remainder of the 1920s and into the 1930s. It attempted to convince its members that enemies of the Klan were trying to discredit the organization with talk of Stephenson. An undated letter from Grand Dragon Smith, likely from 1927 since it mentions the fourth anniversary of the WKKK, contains a reference to Stephenson post-conviction: “Newspapers have had much to say regarding Stephenson’s alleged exposures. We have heard so much of this affair in the past that certainly Indiana Klansmen are well advised regarding the situation. All this publicity is brought about for no other purpose than to hold in public disrepute the existence of the Klan and Klan activity.”32 During the 1930s the Klan’s focus turned to Communism. In a 1932 bulletin, Grand Dragon J. A. Colescott wrote, “The Klan once saved this nation from the terrors of the black race and the Klan must RIDE again in this year of 1932 to save our government from the terrors of communism.”33 This new focus did not seem to gain much traction or bring in new members. The Wayne County collection only contains material dated through 1933. Whether the county’s klavern lasted beyond this date cannot be determined from its papers.

In addition to the Wayne County Klan collection, the Indiana Historical Society Library has collections from Crown Point in Lake County and Odon in Daviess County. The Crown Point collection shows a very active Klan chapter in the extreme northwestern portion of the state with more detailed minutes for each meeting than those of the Wayne County Klan. There is some evidence that a klavern in Lake County took its rhetoric to the next level and used intimidation and fear tactics against immigrants, who were a major part of the population in the area. In the Lake County Times from November 3, 1924, a small report on the front page titled “Burn Fiery Cross on South Side” notes, “Foreigners residing in the neighborhood of Madison street and the J. H. Belt Highline are said to have received a scare Saturday night when a fiery cross was burned. It was also near the Gary Armory where Col. Roscoe Conklin Simons, colored orator, addressed a large republican audience.”34 Although the Klan is not specifically mentioned, it seems likely it was responsible, given the burning cross’s status as one of the Klan’s most iconic symbols. Further, the tone of the newspaper’s report may show widespread acceptance of the Klan as there is no condemnation in the report to suggest discomfort with the threatening incident.

The Odon Klan collection, much smaller than either the Wayne County or Crown Point collections, seems to be
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of individuals and families, names appearing in any of the IHS Klan collections have not been included in this article unless they also appear in published material such as books and newspapers.

Ku Klux Klan collections allow us to look deeper than names on membership lists and dues cards. When Klan missives, instructions, bulletins, and correspondence are viewed as propaganda—highly effective marketing material—they reveal how an organization can prey on and intensify a society’s fears and prejudices. Realizing lessons such as this from our ancestors’ lives—our history—may help us make informed decisions about our future.

This is the first known Klan funeral in Daviess County in southern Indiana. The funeral was held for a murdered miner, who was a Klansman, in April 1923. (General Picture Collection, P 0411, Indiana Historical Society)

Emotions still run high whenever the Ku Klux Klan is mentioned. When historic Klan membership cards were found in Noblesville in 1995, the town was shocked. Those records, now housed in the Hamilton County Museum, are only open to historians. If a genealogist wants to know if a relative’s name is included in the membership cards, the museum staff will do the search. The community’s reaction to its Klan records has sparked several articles, including a study by Allen Safianow that grapples with the difficulty of "getting right with the Klan" in the twenty-first century. The Noblesville example shows us that although it may not be easy or palatable to learn about an ancestor’s involvement in one of the world’s most infamous hate groups, the Klan remains a part of our collective history. To shy away from it or ignore it would be a disservice to ourselves and to future generations.

Public libraries, archives, and county historical societies throughout Indiana may house Klan items. The Indiana State Library holds Klan materials, and the Indiana Historical Society holds collections not mentioned here. The IHS’s Klan collections are open to researchers. However, to protect the privacy comprised of rough drafts of membership lists and meeting minutes. An interesting detail in the Odon collection is the inclusion of a 1923 Klan newspaper from Marionville, Missouri, that reports on the murder of a Daviess County Klan member at a miners’ union meeting the previous April. The victim and the killer were both members of the union, but while the victim was a Klansman, the killer was a Catholic. The Washington Herald newspaper in Daviess County reports that the slain Klansman received the first known Klan funeral service in the county. It was attended by three to five thousand people.

This is the first known Klan funeral in Daviess County in southern Indiana. The funeral was held for a murdered miner, who was a Klansman, in April 1923. (General Picture Collection, P 0411, Indiana Historical Society)
Notes


5. Collection Guide, Ku Klux Klan, Wayne County, Indiana, Records, 1916–1933 (Bulk 1922–1927), M 0407, Indiana Historical Society. This collection is extensive and contains seven document cases, one oversized folder, twelve bound volumes, six microfilm reels, and one artifact box. Most records are specifically for Richmond’s Whitewater Klan, though there are minutes from 1924 to 1925 for Fountain City, Klan no. 3, as well. Hereafter items appearing in this collection will be cited as box #, folder #, KKK Wayne County, IHS.

6. Moore, Citizen Klansmen, 13; Cambridge City (IN) Tribune, October 6, 1921; Whitewater Number 60 Charter date, box 1, folder 5, KKK Wayne County, IHS.

7. Klan bulletin, June 20, 1923, box 1, folder 1, KKK Wayne County, IHS.


9. Richmond (IN) Item, May 26, 1923, and October 6, 1923.


12. Unsigned, undated message to all “Exalted Cyclops,” box 1, folder 5, KKK Wayne County, IHS.


16. Moore, Citizen Klansmen, xii.

17. Membership lists, box 3, folders 1 and 2, and Quarterly reports, box 3, folder 3, KKK Wayne County, IHS.

18. W. Lee Smith, letter, dated January 28, 1925, box 1, folder 1, KKK Wayne County, IHS.

19. Ku Klux Klan Constitution of 1916, box 1, folder 11, KKK Wayne County, IHS.

*This cross burning took place at the Indiana State Fairgrounds after the May 6, 1924, primary in which Klan-backed candidates won by a landslide. After this ceremony, which attracted an estimated 25,000 men, women, and children, approximately 7,000 robed Klansmen and Klanswomen marched from the fairgrounds to downtown through African American neighborhoods, including along Indiana Avenue. (Alton Hornsby Jr., ed., Black America (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 1:260; W. H. Bass Photo Co. Collection, P 0130, Indiana Historical Society)*
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