

The Ku Klux Klan and My Grandmother's House in Vernonia *continued from front page*

electricity, its work buildings cement, its equipment the best. It pounded out the timber -- 350,000 board feet for each of two eight hour shifts. By 1924, there were 1,500 souls in the town and then, by 1928, 2,500. A company town of sixty or so structures grew up on what people called O and A hill. Management lived in a row of craftsman homes while smaller worker bungalows tumbled down the hill toward the town and along the east side of the mill pond.

Oregon American and its owner, Central Coal and Coke, brought several of their southern workers to Vernonia with them, and many were minorities. The 1930 census had 96 Filipinos living in Vernonia, 55 African Americans, 51 Japanese, 5 Hindus and one Eskimo. Those who worked at the mill and lived in Vernonia were well below the O and A Hill, segregated by race in shacks and in a hastily put up boarding house. The census worker called the area "Down River Road" to distinguish it from O and A Hill "Up River Road." It was located across Rock Creek, close by the high school ball field.

Those minorities that didn't live on Down River Road were scattered in a few locations in the town, in logging camps outside of town, or in a big boarding house for Japanese rail workers on St. Helens Road. Some worked for the railroad, some owned laundries, some cooked, one was a musician in the dance hall and another was the proprietor of a pool hall, but the biggest employer was the mill.

Not all lived on platted streets. Gessaro Kuge and his wife Takae ran a boarding house located by the census taker as 'by the river across the tracks.' Mr. Kuge was a timber sorter at the mill as were most of the eight boarders. They had five children, four boys and one girl, the eldest 16 and the youngest one month. Takae described her vocation as 'cook.' Oregon American paid its minority workers the same as the whites. About 500 people worked at the mill site at its peak and another 200 at its logging camps in the forest.

In 1928, the town contained nine churches, two theaters, seven hotels, three schools, two auto repair shops, four pool rooms, five bars and taverns, four doctors, three dentists, two whore-

houses and a dance hall.

At the same time that O and A was transforming this community, the revival of the Ku Klux Klan was transforming Oregon and some of its strongest outposts were communities at the edge of the great Douglas fir forests, like Vernonia, Tillamook and St. Helens.

From its founding in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee by confederate veterans, the Klan has had several incarnations, the first characterized by its resistance to reconstruction and the growing political power of Blacks in the South. Increasingly, it became a terrorist organization and extremely violent. By the time federal troops put down the rebellion, the terror had been successful and reconstruction overturned along with the rights of former slaves. Another incarnation was the civil rights era in the 1960s when the Klan became even more secretive and violent, though its efforts were less successful.

Governor Olcott tried to rally the anti-Klan community in the state: "The time has come to determine whether our state government shall maintain its orderly way, controlled by the voice of all the people, or whether it shall be turned over to some secret clique or clan, to be made the tool of invisible forces, working in the dark toward aims unknown to others than themselves."

The Klan's appearance in 1920s America was different, rising from what would have been called 'the new media' of its day. The release of D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* portrayed a Klan struggling against a hostile world order that favored immigrants, Catholics and Blacks over whites and Protestants, endangering their women and flooding the country with people who didn't speak English. The Klan in the early twenties was organized much like we would organize it today -- targeting specific groups, tailoring messages to time and place and offering substantial financial rewards for success.

Klan membership soared nationally to somewhere around 2-3 million members, with about 35,000 in Oregon.

The focus on membership was on existing organizations like the Masons and Elks as well as Protestant churches and evangelicals. Many min-

isters became deeply involved in the new Klan. The message behind the new face of the Klan also emphasized social activities and business agendas like referrals and mutual marketing. According to Professor Thomas Pegram, who wrote recently of the rise and fall of the Klan in the 1920s:

"Within the restricted spheres of religious, racial and often gender exclusivity, the Klan provided meaningful community and sociability for its members."

The New York Times, in its review of Professor Pegram's book, *One Hundred Percent American*, described the twenties version of the Klan as "sort of Rotary, for white supremacists."

Part of this sense of belonging in Oregon came from early political success. The Klan messaging in Oregon was working. Few African Americans then lived in Oregon and the state was more than 90% Protestant, leading to a focus on anti-Catholicism along with vigilantism against bootleggers and speakeasies, public drunkenness and marital infidelity.

The Klan helped put together and backed a ballot measure in 1922 that required all children within the state to attend public schools, shutting down the parochial schools of the Catholic Church. Governor Benjamin J. Olcott, a Republican, was vigorously anti-Klan and against the Klan's Compulsory Education Act.

Some vigilante episodes in Medford led the Governor to attack the Klan in the middle of a vicious primary fight against a Klan-backed candidate. Olcott could feel his government slipping away in the face of 58 Klaverns across the state. Some, like Tillamook, LaGrande, St. Helens, and Medford were clearly in the thrall of the Klan; their public officials and law enforcement were Klan members or Klan supporters. The *Medford Mail Tribune* fought the Klan, but in Tillamook the paper supported the Klan.

Two weeks before the 1922 primary, Olcott tried to rally the anti-Klan community in the state:

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or clan, to be made the tool of invisible forces, working in the dark toward aims unknown to others than themselves. The true spirit of Americanism resents bigotry, abhors secret machinations and terrorism and demands that those who speak for or in her cause, speak openly, their faces to the sun."

Olcott barely survived his primary election but went down in the general after the Klan threw its support to the democrat, Walter M. Pierce, who hailed from another strong KKK community, La Grande. The Compulsory Education Act was approved by the voters and Klansman Kaspar K. Kubli, (No I'm not making this up) was elected Speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives. The legislature soon passed the Alien Property Act, designed to deny

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