

MAKING SENSE OF THE OREGON KLAN IN THE 1920S



BY DAVID A. HOROWITZ

Oregonians are usually surprised to learn that the Ku Klux Klan was a widespread political phenomenon in this state during the 1920s. Membership in the secret order, confined to white, native-born Protestant men, peaked at about 20,000 in the middle of that troubled decade. The secret order helped elect a governor, pushed its candidates into local offices in cities such as Astoria, Tillamook, Medford and Eugene, and dominated the Multnomah County delegation to the State Legislature in 1923. Once in power Klan political clout played a major role in passing a law which prohibited Japanese and Chinese immigrants from owning land. Another Klan inspired measure prevented school teachers from wearing religious garb or habits in the classroom.

Although the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was uncomfortable with the influx of racial and ethnic minorities to the nation's cities, it did not generally carry on the violent vigilantism of its 19th century predecessors. The Klan focused its harshest rhetoric on the Roman Catholic Church. This strategy worked particularly well in Oregon, where only 8% of the population was Catholic in 1920. Klan leaders claimed that they merely opposed the "institutional" power of the Church, not its religious practices or the personalities of its followers. Yet the distinctions were not always clear. In Eugene Klan efforts led to the dismissal of three women school teachers who were Catholic. In Astoria a Catholic attorney attending a law enforcement meeting at a Methodist church criticized the Klan for being divisive. The circulation manager of the evening newspaper rose to describe himself as a member of the church hosting the forum. "You know this church is anti-Catholic," he blurted. "I won't allow you to speak

as you have been talking." The attorney ended his speech.

Anti-Catholic feeling in the state, encouraged by both the KKK and the Federation of Patriotic Societies, took on specific political coloring in the early 1920s. Walter M. Pierce won the governorship in 1922 partly because Republican incumbent Ben Olcott denounced the Klan and was thereby smeared as a secret Catholic. The garb bill erased the possibility that a Catholic nun or priest would ever serve as a public school teacher. Bills to eliminate Columbus Day as a state holiday, to end assignment of chaplains to state institutions, and to tax sectarian hospitals and colleges all passed the Oregon House of Representatives but failed in the State.

The most dramatic anti-Catholic political activity of the 1920s was the Oregon Compulsory Public School Initiative. The Klan-supported school bill required children between the ages of 8 and 16 instead of private or parochial academies. The successful 1922 measure reflected the desires of Protestant organizations such as the Scottish Rite Masons to use the public schools to teach national values of patriotism and morality to counter the new threat of European communism. But it also showed how weak and vulnerable Klansmen and other Protestants felt in a period of great change in American life.

At the heart of the campaign against parochial schools was the fear that Catholic authority stemmed from outside the nation's borders. World War 1 had just raised doubts concerning the loyalty of America's large ethnic working class. It was not surprising, then, that official Klan policy held that "the greatest danger facing the American Republic today is the gradual replacement of our religious, social and political foundations by those of alien origin." Oregon Klansmen charged that Catholics held allegiance to "a foreign power." In contrast, Protestant supremacists described the "helpless impotence" of the anti-Catholic denominations. Nativists of the 1920s claimed that the Church hoped to sap the strength of American culture by destroying the public schools. They told Protestant followers that the Church would substitute its own propaganda through night schools established for the nation's immigrants. Both the KKK and the Oregon compulsory public school bill were supposed to be answers to the imagined impotence of the Protestant sects.

It is hard to believe that large numbers of Oregonians were so frightened by the state's small Catholic population. Yet anti-Catholic pamphlets abounded and figured strongly in the election campaign of 1922. Most repeated threadbare accusations, although new twists occasionally surfaced. For example, George Estes of Troutdale put out a 1923 tract entitled "The Roman Catholic Kingdom & the Ku Klux Klan." In it he claimed that the Church was similar to a corporation in structure because "the prince of the Church may die but the corporation soul lives forever." Estes wrote that the Catholic Church was a "monarch of the old world" which was acquiring more and more land in the United States and had 700,000 "trained soldiers" in the Knights of Columbus.

Fear of papal conspiracy, an ancient phobia, prompted a LaGrande Klan official to warn that members of the Knights of Columbus carried 32-caliber automatic pistols when they went out at night. In the same spirit Klan activists stirred a furor at the University of Oregon when a Catholic sponsored student club bought a fraternity house on campus during the spring of 1922. "The wildest rumors are afloat," the Dean of Education wrote to an out of state colleague. "A large number of faculty members are supposed to be Jesuits in disguise."

Although the KKK repeatedly exaggerated the institutional power of the Church, it also worried about the supposed ability of Asians, Jews and Catholics to band together in mutually protective economic syndicates. Nativists claimed that the Church terrorized Protestants through the boycott and that the Klan had to remain secret because Protestants were vulnerable to reprisals from anti-Klan elements. Economic and social loyalty to Nordic-American "ethnicity" was described as Klan-nishness. It meant that Klansmen would emulate the ethnic networks of immigrants by sticking together and supporting each other, particularly in business. "TWK" signs outside a shop indicated that the proprietor subscribed to the trade-with-Klansmen credo of the secret order. Portland Klansmen organized a Klan Community Kitty to replace the Community Chest with a clearing house which served exclusively Protestant charities. A "100% Directory" provided consumers with a listing of businesses run by native-born, white Protestants sympathetic to Klan principles.

Economic competition between Catholics and Protestants was particularly intense in the railroad town of LaGrande, where Catholics figured heavily in both management and labor within the Union Pacific Railroad. Klan officials frequently complained that lodge members were not practicing klannishness because they continued to patronize businesses run by immigrants or Catholics. A Pendleton visitor advised his LaGrande brothers to watch their step "or the chief of police might ask you why you didn't eat your meals in an American restaurant." A Klan restaurateur in LaGrande was criticized for employing a Catholic cook, while a Klan tailor was held to account for having his finished clothes delivered by a Catholic boy. Klan officials objected strenuously to the employment of a Catholic at the local bank, but were not sure what to do about it.

It is clear from these examples that Oregon Klansmen of the 1920s saw themselves as acting on the defensive. "We are ashamed of nothing," a LaGrande spokesman explained. "Neither have we anything to hide. We are proud of the fact that we have nerve enough to express in word and action our true convictions." Klansmen claimed that their masks were simply symbols of the order and that the robes were a token of equality reminiscent of white robed saints. The burning cross, frequently placed in public places such as Portland's Mount Tabor, was to these followers of the secret order a symbol of sacrifice and service, a ritual of purification and rededication to purpose.

There was a certain dilemma that the Oregon KKK of the 1920s presents. Klansmen seemed to be defending religious loyalties, national patriotism and traditional morality from the threat of a newly emerging mass culture. Not realizing that the nation's ethnic minorities were as traditional and morally conscious as its white, native-born Protestants, Klansmen equated immigrants and Catholics with the consumerism and secular values brought by the new corporations and mass communications media. Acting to protect themselves against the rampages of impersonal institutions and modernism itself, Klansmen struck out in a state of anger and confusion at people who had even less power than themselves. It was the weakness and vulnerability of Oregon Klansmen, not their attempt to protect privilege, which prompted their bitter and rhetorically violent approach to Catholics, Jews, Asians and other "outsiders". Ironically, Klansmen themselves felt like "strangers in their own land". The 1920s Klan provides an example of modern people wrestling with the complex dilemmas of social change. At the heart of their anguish was an increasing sense of powerlessness before impersonal events and circumstances. Their rigid nativism probably distracted Klansmen from serious confrontation with the problems before them. Sadly, Klan response to the remote nature of centralized institutions and power was a misdirected one. Yet the Klan was indirectly speaking to some of the most perplexing questions of modern existence.

David Horowitz is a professor of cultural history at Portland State University and a professional jazz pianist. He is the author of several books, the most recent *Beyond Left & Right: The Insurgent Challenge to the Established Order in 20th Century America* published by University of Illinois Press earlier this year. (See Jan/Feb '95 NCTE)

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