

GLIMPSSES OF EARLY COLORADO

Ku Klux Klan wielded much power in the 1920s

A moral and social revolution during the 1920s prompted a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan.

Based on a strict white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant order which prohibited the use of liquor, proclaimed racial superiority and extolled the virtues of segregation, the KKK grew to varying degrees throughout the country.

Colorado experienced a strong enough movement of the Klan to enable it to establish control of the state government, complete with a governor who was associated with the group.

In Longmont, too, the Klan was able to assert enough influence to elect a majority of the aldermen, the mayor and various other elected officials.

In 1923, the local election produced some local officials who were disposed toward the Klan but the Klan did not have enough power or prominent citizens in its membership to have much effect on the city government.

It worked, instead for two years improving its situation and, in 1925, succeeded in electing the majority of the city council from its members.

People in Longmont were becoming increasingly aware of the Klan in the county because of incidents such as the cross burning in Erie on April 29, 1924.

The Klan was protesting the local mines' practice of hiring "foreigners" instead of local residents and ignored the mine owners' protest that "the locals" wouldn't put in an honest day's work when they were hired.

In May, 1924, the Klan members on the city council made their first tentative effort to establish a Klan government. They succeeded in abolishing the office of city engineer and E.S. Bice, the engineer for eight years, was without a job. This move played an important part in later Klan politics.

In December, 1924, the local Klavern was large enough to send 50 members to Lyons to participate in the funeral of one of the Klan members and at Christmas time the tree at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Main Street was adorned with an electric cross hung by some unknown Klan member. It stayed there for two days.

The Klan did not use that name as a political party but, instead, ran under the name of the Progressive Economic Party.

Their opposition, the Citizens Party, failed to place but two aldermen on the council in the April elections in 1925 and, the Progressive Economic Party came into power.

The new council took office April 21, 1925, and immediately ousted street superintendent George W. Dean. Dean had been a city employee for 38 years.

By a four to two vote, three-man committees were selected with the Citizens Party members holding the majority in only one committee, the building



Dr. John Galen Locke headed the Colorado Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s
the Klan enjoyed a brief span of considerable power throughout the state between 1924 and 1926

committee.

Longmonters had hesitated to call the new council a Klan council until a paid advertisement appeared in the Daily Times written by a group of citizens forming a new organization.

It read:

"By reason of the organization of the KKK and the nature of its activities, a situation has developed in the city of Longmont, which, if not checked, can have but one end — the continued stirring of ill feeling among our citizens, the creation of hatred and distrust, the development of destructive factional antagonisms...

"Citizens are threatened. A campaign of persecution has been started.

"Not content with the spoils which have come to them through control of all departments of our city government, the local leaders of the so-called 'Invisible Empire' are now reaching out for control of our schools."

The editorial went on to call citizens together to form the Visible League "to include all citizens who will agree that our schools should be free from the contaminating influence of secret political propagandists."

The election of two school board members became a bitter campaign with mud-slinging from both sides. Again, the Klan was

successful but the election was closer than the council election.

On May 3, 1925, the council ousted Vern Campbell as fire chief, a move that shocked the entire community. Campbell had been on the force for 15 years and had served as chief for seven years.

Campbell was only one of several appointed officials who were replaced with Klan sympathizers.

Longmont had been faced with a need for more water for some time and previous councils had investigated the possibility of combining a storage area with a hydroelectric plant. The new city council immediately began feasibility studies on a dam above the Longmont Dam on the St. Vrain River.

The council employed an engineer who took a year to determine a location for the dam known as the Chimney Rock dam and draw up plans for the construction. The initial estimate was \$85,000, to come out of the citizens' pockets.

People in Longmont did not get too concerned at first as they knew the old dam was filling with silt and a dry summer had produced a water shortage. As time wore on and the \$85,000 was almost gone for engineer's fees, the people

provide sand and gravel. The deciding vote came on June 9, 1926.

Work proceeded against the protests of the three council members opposed to the construction of the dam. They argued that the council had failed to investigate thoroughly the problems that were arising and accepted only those reports or the parts of reports that were favorable to construction of the dam.

By this time a large majority of the people in Longmont were against proceeding with the construction, but the council ignored the wishes of the people.

A period of time passed while the engineer searched for a location where bedrock could be reached and then a diversion stream was required. It was late in the summer of 1926 before actual construction was begun.

Forms were built, cement was poured and large pipes were put in place. It was not long before construction had to be halted for the winter, much to the relief of many Longmonters.

In the spring of 1927, work was resumed but problems arose with the delivery of cement and the preparation of sand and gravel. Only little progress had been made by April when the city elections took place.

The results of the elections surprised even the most optimistic. Only the members of the Citizens Party who served as councilmen were re-elected. The rest were soundly defeated.

However, the old council didn't give up so easily. There were still a couple of meetings before the new council could take over. They proceeded to sign a contract with a construction company to complete the dam, effective immediately, and agreeing to pay the company \$125,000. The company immediately moved into the site and began work.

Upon taking office the new council stopped construction and spent two weeks considering the idea of proceeding with the dam before finally rescinding the motion on the contract.

The council still had to face the problem of breaking the contract and ended by paying the company more than \$3,500 for the work they had already done.

And that ended the project which nearly split Longmont in two and cost the city coffers \$130,000.

The end of Klan power had occurred in the state in the November elections of the previous year and Longmont slowly returned to normal in 1927, still faced with a water problem and many dollars poorer.

The Chimney Rock dam still stands as it was left in 1927, monument to the days when the Klan ran Longmont.

This story, written by Jim Gregory, was published in an April 1971 issue of the Daily Times-Call.

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