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KU KLUX KLAN: THE INVISIBLE EMPIRE IN BOULDER COUNTY

In a room in Denver's swank Brown Palace Hotel late in 1921, a movement was born that cast a dark shadow on the history and reputation of Colorado and its citizens: the Ku Klux Klan. Colorado's Klan dominated state politics from 1921 to 1925, then, once exposed for what it was, quickly faded into the background.

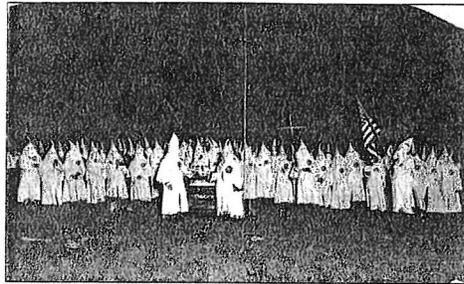
At the movement's apex, Klansmen were elected or appointed to the offices of Governor, Secretary of State, United States Senate, Denver Mayor, manager of safety, city attorney, chief of police, and many of the city's police force and fire fighters. Klan locals, called Klaverns, sprang up all over the state including Boulder County.



Colorado Klan Grand Dragon, Dr. John Galen Locke here in Minuteman attire. Governor Clarence Morley was said to have always been on the phone with "his master," Locke.

—Scan 10039385 courtesy Colorado Historical Society

The mastermind behind such a demented force in Colorado history was Dr. John Galen Locke. He coordinated the birth of this twisted organization and then nurtured its growth throughout Colorado,



"In one of nature's amphitheatres, in a canyon near Boulder . . . a class of one-hundred-fifty candidates were naturalized under the blaze of the fiery (sic) cross . . ."

—Scan 10039383 courtesy Colorado Historical Society

primarily along the Front Range. It was during the general election of 1922 that admitted Klan members took control of Colorado's Republican Party, despite resistance from members of its reasonable wing. District Judge and Klan member Clarence Morley won the Republican gubernatorial nomination and the election, and, upon taking the oath of office, began taking orders directly from Colorado Grand Dragon, John Galen Locke.

The Colorado Klan followed a systemized plan of "Kluxing," or recruiting and organizing, throughout the state. Recruiters, called "Kleagles," set off across the state to prey upon citizens who felt disenfranchised or threatened in the post World War I world. Klan appeal was directed at Americans' reaction to reforms of the Progressive Movement and other "acids of modernity."

Although the Klan is associated with anti-African American acts, in Colorado their venom was directed primarily at Jews and Catholic immigrants, especially the Italians. The Klan felt that Catholics were responsible for three presidential assassinations and at least 90% of all

military desertions in World War I. They opposed the civil service because they saw it as a haven for "Catholic, Jews and the foreign born." Klan doctrine claimed that the Jews were the cause for the increase in the number of females who took up smoking. The Klan-dominated state legislature nearly passed a law preventing the serving of alcohol in churches, an attempt aimed directly at use of wine in Catholic services.

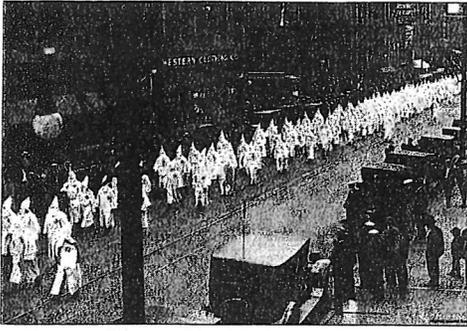
"I would rather be a Klansman
in a robe of snowy white,
Than to be a Catholic Priest
in a robe as black as night;
For a Klansman is AMERICAN
and AMERICA is home
But a priest owes his allegiance
to a Dago Pope in Rome."

—Rocky Mountain American,

April 24, 1925

Support for the Colorado Ku Klux Klan was enthusiastic in Boulder and Boulder County. On a dark night in 1922, over two hundred and fifty Klan acolytes were led to a location thought to be near Linden Avenue or Lee Hill Road and initiated into the organization by way of what one observer described as a "medieval cult service." As many as twenty-five hundred witnessed the scene, illumination provided by a burning Christian cross and automobile headlights. One of the ideals pledged by the incoming Klansman was to protect "the flower of white American woman hood." Later in 1922, the Boulder local was granted official status becoming state Klavern No. 3.

Klan neophytes paid an initiation



Klan parade down Denver's Seventeenth Street on May 31st, 1926. The intersection with Larimer is in the background. Other landmarks are the Western Clothing Company and the Columbia Hotel.

—Scan 10025793 courtesy Colorado Historical Society

fee of \$10 plus \$6.50 for a white sheet and hood. One Boulder store advertised "wizard sheets" at 98 cents each and "wizard pillow cases" at 25 cents apiece.

Also in 1922 Boulder was treated to a "Winter March" by the Klan. A procession consisting of one float and as many as 60 cars paraded down Pearl Street. Klansmen applied black tape over the numerals on their license plates in order to avoid detection. The float and street marchers carried signs and banners with slogans, such as "Join the Invisible Empire" and "Watch Us Grow."

To add insult to injury, Boulder was the home of a Ku Klux Klan newspaper called the Rocky Mountain American, published by William Francis. Not only was it filled with vitriolic prose and verse but with advertisements for Boulder businesses sympathetic to the Klan. Often the businesses gave clues as to their leanings through their names and slogans. One grocer's catch phrase was "Klean Kanned Goods." A barber declared one could obtain a "Klean Kuick Kool Shave," and another merchant advertised "Kash and Karry" transactions. Other less than subtle lures were "Klothing Karefully Kleaned" and "Klean Klassy Kars."

The Klan soon dominated affairs in Longmont as it took control of the city government and the school board. Longmont Klansmen were proud of

being the state's Klavern No. 2 and of conducting the first Klan funeral in Colorado. The deceased happened to be mayor of Lyons.

In Lafayette, the late Clancy Waneka recalled that Klansmen erected crosses on the hills east of town. He reported that the crosses were "wrapped with some kind of cloth," then ignited. He went on to say that Klan members roughed up local citizens and even broke into a church service both to recruit sympathizers and to intimidate others.

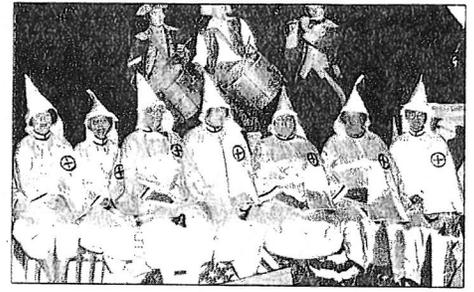
The Rocky Mountain American featured a regular column entitled, "Interesting News from Progressive Lafayette." It also editorialized about gambling in Louisville as being controlled by Italian Catholics, but noting that the Irish were involved, too.

"I will work with the Klan and for the Klan in the coming election, heart and soul. And if I'm re-elected, I will give the Klan the kind of administration it wants."
—Denver Mayor Ben Stapleton

Old timers in Superior remember their families talking of cross burnings on the hillside above the Industrial Mine. Although unconfirmed, this story shows the widespread appeal of the Kolorado Klan. Crosses were burned in Louisville and on lawns of Catholics' homes in Boulder.

In Boulder, the battle of ideals was intense. During the 1924 campaign, candidate for U.S. Senate and Klansman, Rice Means, wanted to kick off the Colorado vs. Utah football game for publicity reasons. University officials declared, "Mr. Means can kick off anywhere he wants, except Boulder."

There was also a battle of words between Mr. Francis of the Rocky Mountain American and L. C. Paddock, editor of the Boulder Daily Camera. Paddock referred to the organization as the Komic Kapers Klub. Francis refused to use Paddock's



The "Spirit of '76" Arvada Parade, August, 1925.

—Scan 10039384 courtesy Colorado Historical Society

name in his writing, citing him only as the "Pearl Street Editor."

In a short while, the Klan skyrocket began to fizzle. Grand Dragon Locke was exposed as having used the organization's treasury for his personal benefit. While the state Klan network began to crumble, Locke went on to start another reactionary group, the Minutemen.

The Rocky Mountain American wrote its own obituary, "Boulder Klavern No. 3 officially died at the stroke of midnight, Thursday, July 23, 1925." Klan puppets stayed in office until the Election of 1926 when a coalition of Democrats and anti-Klan Republicans restored a sense of normalcy to Colorado politics.

Although internal corruption and dissention snuffed the flame of hatred and intolerance, the Klan legacy lingered and occasionally sputtered back into headlines over the subsequent years. There were cross burnings on Flagstaff Mountain as late as 1939 and reappearances during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Colorado's Invisible Empire left an indelible image in the state's history.

Written by Larry Dorsey, Chair of the Superior Historical Commission and editor of the Historian.

Sources: Carnegie Library for Local History, Boulder, CO, various print materials; Steven Hart Library, Colorado Historical Society; Robert A. Goldberg, Hooded Empire: the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado; James H. Davis, Colorado Magazine Vol. 42, No. 2, 1965.