



Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report

North Carolina resurgence of
the Ku Klux Klan

Chapter 3



North Carolina in the 1960s: Klan Country

On the heels of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision and escalating civil rights activity, the challenge to Jim Crow-style segregation in the South gained a new immediacy in the mid-1950s. Not coincidentally, Ku Klux Klan activity during this period reached levels not seen since the 1920s, when the KKK boasted over four million members nationwide and held a march in Washington including some 40,000 hooded Klansmen and women. While overall Klan membership in the 1950s and 1960s was measured in the tens of thousands rather than millions, previously splintered and ineffective organizations began to come together, bolstered by a renewed ability to recruit citizens across the South. The largest and most influential of these groups was the United Klans of America (UKA), based in Tuscaloosa, Ala., and headed by Robert Shelton, a former tire salesman. Shelton's UKA had grown to include hundreds of active chapters (within the Klan, they were referred to as "units" or "klaverns") throughout the Deep South, though as of 1963 the organization had failed to make any inroads in North Carolina. Late that year, however, Shelton traveled to the Tar Heel state to meet with eight enthusiastic and ambitious would-be Klan leaders, and concluded the meeting by mandating that former awning salesman J. Robert Jones "organize North Carolina" for the UKA.¹

Jones was not new to the Klan world – he had been a member of the old US Klans, which had all but disappeared after being embarrassingly routed by a group of Lumbee Indians during a rally in 1958² – and he took his task seriously. Over the next few winter months, he began organizing weekly rallies in cow pastures and open fields across the state, and as the weather improved, these rallies were held more frequently, sometimes seven nights a week. They quickly became large-scale affairs, with several self-styled preachers and political theorists speaking in support of traditional Southern values, Jim Crow and states' rights.

Mostly, though, they spoke against looming changes in the political and racial landscape, which the Klan saw as rooted in hypocritical liberal Washington politics, the encroaching Civil Rights Movement, and a sweeping Communist conspiracy. Klan officers and local members wore satin robes and hoods to the rallies, though their numbers were generally dwarfed by supportive and curious local onlookers in work or casual clothes. Besides the featured speakers, spectators could enjoy music blaring through makeshift loudspeakers (generally in a traditional country music style and often featuring baldly racist titles like "Move Them Niggers North," "Wop Wop, Bam Bam – Who Likes a Nigger" and "They're Looking for a Handout"), buy Klan paraphernalia at a concession stand, and even pay a ten dollar initiation fee – along with another \$15 for robes – to join the local klavern. The climax of each nightly rally was, of course, the burning of a wooden cross covered in gasoline-doused burlap. The burning was a well-orchestrated ritual; robed Klansmen would ceremoniously encircle the fiery cross, which could be anywhere from 30 to 60 feet high.³

By 1965, tens of thousands of North Carolinians had attended these rallies (crowd estimates by the State Highway Patrol ranged between 150 and 3,000 at each event, depending upon the location and time of year), with smaller numbers participating in the UKA's periodic "street walks" (daytime marches by robed Klansmen and helmeted members of the UKA "security guard") or implicated in more controversial attempts to intimidate black residents or white liberals with cross burnings, beatings and shotgun fire.

Despite the fact that Klan rallies were the largest political gatherings of any kind in the state at this time, local media tended to give UKA events only minimal coverage. The Klan was sometimes despised by those in power, viewed as a constituency that would circumvent official channels to achieve their ends, often in unpredictable and undesirable ways. But they were also tolerated by some of those same elites, as an element willing to work by any means necessary to preserve the Jim Crow-style political, economic and social status quo. The result was a benign consensus among public officials and other local elites that the KKK would simply go away when it had outlived its usefulness, as it had in earlier eras. Like many other states, the Klan had been active in North Carolina during Reconstruction, and again in the 1920s, when Klan members numbered in the millions nationally.⁴ In the early 1950s, there had been a flare-up of violent and strongly moralistic Klan activity in the southeastern part of the state, though that largely ended with a rash of arrests – and convictions – for Klan-sanctioned kidnapping, assault and conspiracy.

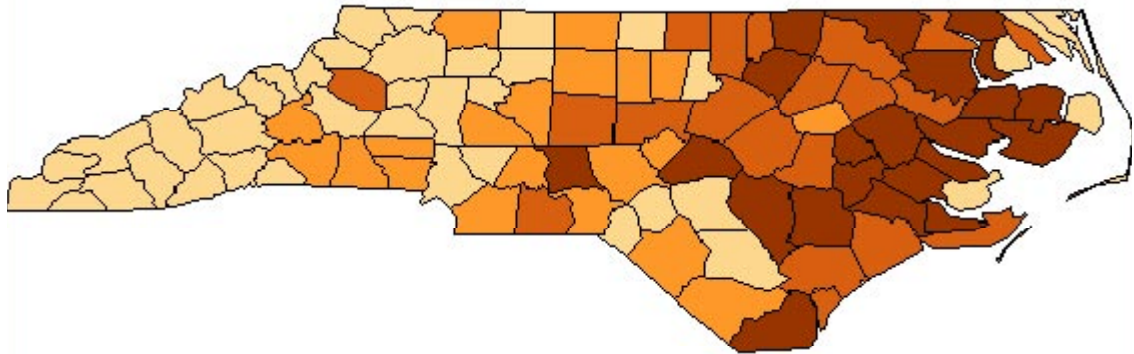
But it was to most everyone's surprise that the hearings of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) on the Ku Klux Klan concluded that, by late 1965—in the space of two short years—North Carolina was far and away the most active Klan state in the nation. Indeed, the state claimed over 12,000 dues-paying UKA members at that time – well more than both Alabama and Mississippi combined – and several times that number contributed financial or ideological support (see Figure 1 for the distribution of Klan activity across North Carolina counties).⁵ In 1965, only one klavern was active in Guilford County, though the following year a second unit formed in Greensboro. Known as the “Greensboro Gun Club,” the unit had 54 dues-paying members in 1966, according to an informant working for North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation.⁶

The fallout of this revelation of North Carolina as a Klan stronghold was considerable: the banner headline in the *Raleigh News and Observer* proclaimed that “Tar Heels Reject State's Label of No. 1 for Klan” and Governor Dan Moore set up an “anti-Klan” committee to coordinate the actions of a variety of state policing and investigative agencies.⁷ At the federal level, the HUAC hearings continued for a month. Over 200 Klan adherents eventually testified, and five UKA leaders – including Robert Shelton and J. Robert Jones – were sentenced to prison terms for their refusal to turn over records. By this time, the FBI was also actively disrupting Klan activities through their counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) against “White Hate Groups” that, among other things, recruited hundreds of informants to infiltrate local klaverns.⁸

At first, these attempts at repression didn't seem to bear fruit. A 1966 event at Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium featuring the Klansmen convicted during the HUAC hearings drew such a large crowd that a separate sound system was set up outside the building for the benefit of the hundreds of supporters who weren't able to fit into the packed hall.⁹

By the following year, however, informants across the state were able to exploit emerging tensions over finances and leadership, a situation that only worsened when Jones spent close to a year in prison for his contempt of Congress offense. A series of competing organizations emerged, including one headed by Greensboro resident, former UKA “Imperial Kludd” and acknowledged FBI informant George Dorsett. Alongside significant overall attrition among the rank-and-file, this proliferation of Klan groups meant that more groups were battling over the KKK's dwindling membership and financial resources. In 1972, Jones publicly broke from Shelton and resigned from the UKA, though by this point, internal squabbles and quickly-receding hopes for the resuscitation of the Jim Crow South ensured that the Klan retained little of its previous strength or appeal.¹⁰

Figure 1: Distribution of North Carolina UKA Units¹¹



Legend:

Non-shaded (tan) counties – zero klaverns

Orange-yellow shading – one klavern

Light brown shading – 2-5 klaverns

Dark brown shading – 6 or more klaverns

Resurgence: A Growing Pattern of Klan and Communist Confrontations

In the early 1970s Klan membership had dropped following the wane of desegregation protests, but by the middle of the decade, David Duke's campaign to move white supremacist ideology into the mainstream ("from the cow pasture to hotel meeting rooms") had reinvigorated Klan activity nationwide.¹² In 1978, Duke held a Klan rally in Louisiana that attracted almost 3,000 people, the largest since its anti-integration heyday in the 1960s. Of this rise and fall, Professor Jeffrey Woods told the GTRC in the first public hearing:

The Ku Klux Klan ... was just becoming active again in the late 1970's. The Klan had hit a low point in 1974. One FBI estimate that year put the number of Klansmen nationally at just 1500 ... North Carolina had boasted the largest and richest realm in the Klan empire. But the membership dropped off rapidly as internal struggles for power threw the organization in disarray. The FBI's Counterintelligence Program, meanwhile – the same counterintelligence program that worked on communists – picked the organization apart from the bottom up using the same techniques. There was a campaign of infiltration and disinformation that devastated the Klan until 1971 when the program formally ended. On top of that, the Klan was simply unpopular. A Gallup Poll in 1970 revealed that some 76% of Americans strongly disapproved of the Klan– it was a rating at the time worse than the Vietcong. By 1975, however, the KKK had begun to rebuild.

There are a couple of examples of how they did this. The first is with people like David Duke who reversed the national membership decline by giving the Klan a more palatable public image. Then there were other leaders such as Bill Wilkinson, returned the old rank and file with a public stance of unbridled violence. Wilkinson's followers in the independent Klans were particularly focused on confrontation with black activists, anti-war protestors, and communists. Klan membership shot back up. Growing the Klan on such a confrontational

*doctrine inevitably led to violence.*¹³

The increase in Klan rallies in the mid- to late-1970s had not gone unnoticed by civil rights and anti-fascist activists. In early 1979, confrontations were flaring in the South between the Klan and their outspoken opponents, among them two ideologically opposed Communist groups, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO)¹⁴.

In the North Carolina Piedmont in February 1979, David Duke's Knights of the KKK obtained a permit for a Klan display at the Forsyth County Public library in Winston-Salem. The exhibit was protested by local NAACP, RCP and the Jewish Defense League, and a scuffle erupted between members of Joe Grady's Federated Knights of the KKK (FKKKK), the American Nazi Party and the RCP. No arrests were made but, directed by library staff, police closed the exhibit.¹⁵

In March of 1979, FKKKK received a permit for the Benton Convention Center in Winston-Salem to show the silent film "Birth of Nation." The film, used as a recruitment film for the Klan, portrays newly freed Blacks as drunks and sexual predators and glorifies the murderous Klan as the chivalrous saviors of white honor and tradition imperiled by Reconstruction. Local protest of the film at the convention center resulted in heavy police presence, which Grady later complained to the FBI reduced attendance.¹⁶

The Birth of a Nation

D. W. Griffith's epic film, *The Birth of a Nation*, has been at the center of controversy since its original release in 1915. *The Birth of a Nation* revolutionized filmmaking with technical and creative innovations, which sometimes obscure the film's systematic and extreme racism: the central argument of the film assumes that black people are barbaric and sub-human. Somewhat insidiously, Griffith blended together actual historical fact with racist fictions. For instance, painstaking detail went into reenacting some of the battles scenes from the Civil War, or from Lincoln's assassination, two events that actually happened, while simultaneously the film represents African-Americans as buffoonish clowns, drunks, cloying pets, or savage rapists.

The story that Griffith tells, building on a novel and play by Thomas Dixon (*The Clansman*) and including material from Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People*, seeks to explain the events leading up to and resulting from the Civil War. The idea of birthing, of creating family, runs throughout the film as a central theme, whether that birthing refers to the national family of the United States or a couple of fictional families from the North and the South. Indeed, Griffith argues strongly against miscegenation, doing everything in his power as a filmmaker to set up the black male as a potential rapist—potential since neither of the two would-be rapists in the film succeed. Both potential rapists find themselves confronted with violence from the terrorist group, the Ku Klux Klan; in fact, the film glorifies lynching.

That the film appeared at a time of extensive lynching throughout parts of the U.S. was one reason why the newly-founded N.A.A.C.P. mobilized itself to protest the film. In some places, they were able to prevent the film from being shown at all, while in other places, they only managed to have certain scenes removed. The right to show the film has been challenged in court over one hundred times since its release. One scene that was cut in 1915 was an epilogue, titled "Lincoln's Solution," where African-Americans are shown being rounded up into boats and shipped back to Africa. In the 1920s, as the Ku Klux Klan grew in size—aided by post-World War I xenophobia about immigrants and communists—the film was used as a recruiting tool by the Klan, and it has continued to be used for that purpose, as was planned in China Grove, North Carolina, in July 1979.

Elsewhere in the South, on May 26, 1979, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) marched in Decatur, Alabama, in protest of the conviction of a mentally handicapped black man, Tommy Lee Hines, who was accused of raping multiple white women.¹⁷ The march was attacked by 150 members of Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire of the KKK, who were counter-demonstrating in support of the conviction and calling for Hines' lynching. Twenty-three shots were fired from both sides during the clash, striking four people (two Klansmen and two demonstrators), none fatally. No Klansmen were charged, although a black demonstrator and prominent local civil rights leader, Curtis Robinson, was convicted of shooting a Klansman when he retaliated against a Klansman who was beating on the car containing Robinson's wife and children.¹⁸

News of Decatur spread through activist networks like wildfire. Among those present at the march were WVO members Paul and Sally Bermanzohn, Nelson Johnson, Roz Pelles and Jean Chapman.¹⁹ Signe Waller reports that there were disagreements among the activists at the Decatur march about whether to confront the Klan and police non-violently or in a "militant" fashion,²⁰ echoing longstanding rifts in the civil rights movement over the relative merits of nonviolence and armed self-defense.

Following their return from Decatur, WVO leaders discussed the resurgence of the Klan and the threats they believed the Klan posed to trade union work by preventing interracial cooperation. (See Labor Organizing in North Carolina's Textile Mills). On June 28, Johnson, the Bermanzohns and Jim Waller met at the Waller home to strategize about the anti-Klan campaign and how it might help tap into the lived experience of the workers they hoped to organize.²¹ During the course of this conversation, Signe Waller noticed a small announcement in the local Greensboro paper about the Klan holding another screening of "Birth of a Nation" in China Grove, a small segregated town situated near several textile mills in Rowan and Cabarrus Counties. Three WVO members, Sandi Smith and Ed and Clare Butler, had recently been assigned to Kannapolis to work in Cannon Mills (a Cone subsidiary) and attempt to organize workers there.²²

Paul Bermanzohn, drawing on deeply-etched memories of relatives murdered in the Holocaust, urged the group to resist actively what he saw as dangerous fascist threat:²³

I grew up with memories of Nazi stories from my mother. I was an anti- Nazi by the time I was 3. There was no choice. You have to oppose them or they will destroy everyone. They will not stop at the first targeted group ... You gotta stop these guys before they do too much damage. They used fear so people wouldn't oppose them. So people were afraid. We wanted to puncture their air of invincibility, so that was something that characterized our work.²⁴

They agreed that WVO members would visit China Grove and meet with residents there in hopes of helping to organize a protest.

■ Notes

¹ David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1981).

² Charles Craven, "Memories of Klan Rout Hangs Over Peaceful Robeson Field," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 20 March 1966.

³ Oliver Williams, "Rebirth of Klan Counters Moderate Action in State," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 23 August 1964.

- ⁴ David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1981); Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).
- ⁵ House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Activities of Ku Klux Klan Organizations in the United States*, 1966, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office.
- ⁶ *North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation Reports*, in Governor Dan Moore Papers, 1966, North Carolina State Archives.
- ⁷ Russell Clay, "Tar Heels Reject State's Label of No. 1 for Klan," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 24 October 1965.
- ⁸ David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: the New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- ⁹ Dick Creed, "Moderation is Noted at Rally of Klan," *Winston-Salem Journal*, 16 August 1966.
- ¹⁰ David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1981).
- ¹¹ Data and map taken from David Cunningham and Benjamin T. Phillips, "Contexts for Mobilization: Community Structure and Klan Presence in North Carolina, 1964-1966" (paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, August 2004).
- ¹² Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 368-69, 376.
- ¹³ Jeffrey Woods, Statement to the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Public Hearing, 16 July 2005.
- ¹⁴ The *Workers Viewpoint Organization* (WVO) changed their name at the national conference in October 1979 to the *Communist Workers Party* (CWP). The Southern Regional office of the group was to announce the name change officially at the Nov 3, 1979, anti-Klan rally and continued to use the name WVO until that rally. Accordingly, we refer to the group as the WVO until the Nov 3, 1979, rally and thereafter as CWP.
- ¹⁵ FBI SA Thomas Brereton, "Memo on Greenkil re: Background to China Grove," to SAC Charlotte 44A-3527 P (18 October 1982), 5, chart of names; SA Dukes, "Report of Investigation to SAC Charlotte," Winston-Salem, 21 March 1979, 1; Don Pelles, interview with the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 23 December 2005. Roland Wood interview with the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission* DATE
- ¹⁶ FBI SA Brereton, "Greenkil Report: Civil Rights," to US Attorney, Greensboro 44-81521, FD-204 (date), 6; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Subject: Paul Bermanzohn," Charlotte Field Office, CE 44-3527, Sub A, Vol 3, in University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Manuscripts Department, Collection 4630; Wade, *Fiery Cross*, 377.
- ¹⁷ The family of the accused man, Tommy Lee Hines, said that he was mentally incapable of driving the car that was used in the assaults. See Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 377.
- ¹⁸ Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 378.
- ¹⁹ Sally Avery Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors' Eyes* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 181; Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), 193; Rosalyn Pelles, interview with the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 23 December 2005.
- ²⁰ Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), 193.
- ²¹ Paul Bermanzohn, interview with the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, DATE; Nelson Johnson interview with the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, DATE; Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), 194; Nelson Johnson, Written statement to the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 26 August 2005; *Workers Viewpoint Organization*, "Southern Regional Bulletin," July 1979.
- ²² Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), 204; FBI SA Brereton, "Memo on Greenkil re: Background to China Grove," to SAC Charlotte 44A-3527 P (18 October 1982), 1.
- ²³ Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2002), 62; Paul Bermanzohn, Statement to the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Public Hearing, 15 July 2005.
- ²⁴ Paul Bermanzohn, Statement to the *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Public Hearing, 15 July 2005.