

Steele County Historical Society

"Preserving and interpreting the history of Steele County and making it accessible to all."

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The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota in the 1920s

Submitted by Nancy Vaillancourt

The Winter issue of Minnesota History Magazine, printed by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, will feature an article entitled One Flag, One School, One Language: The Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s by Minneapolis history teacher, Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle and Steele County Historical Society board member, Nancy M. Vaillancourt. The following article relates Klan activity more specifically to Steele County.

The Ku Klux Klan began in the South following the Civil War, but ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1871. After the popularity of the movie, Birth of a Nation, in 1915 a new Klan was organized beginning in the South. However, the new Klan wanted to spread throughout the United States. Their stated goal was to have representation in every county of every state. To bring their message to the rest of the country, the Klan presented a white, Protestant view of society while persecuting those who were another race or religion.

In rural areas of Minnesota, such as Steele County, there were few blacks to be concerned with and those of Jewish ethnicity were few and far between. Instead the Klan in Minnesota was focused on protecting society from the foreign influences of immigrants and Catholicism. Some of the anti-immigrant feelings began many years earlier, but were increased by the anti-German feelings of World War I. Soldiers returning from World War I became voices of isolationism and patriotic nationalism. Foreign influences were questioned and regarded with suspicion. When the Klan preached its message of 100% Americanism, membership grew. The Call of the North, a St. Paul Klan newspaper, urged readers, "Ally yourself today with the nation's most powerful organization for God, flag and home."

While the largest membership was concentrated in the Twin Cities, Klan units flourished around the state. Membership was encouraged at rallies and picnics where Klan speakers, usually from other towns, preached the Klan principles. Often Klan recruitment was accomplished through invitations to Protestant congregations, Masonic groups, and patriotic organizations. Historian Kathleen M. Blee stated, "The true story of the 1920s Klan movement and the political lesson of Klan history is the ease with which racism and intolerance appealed to ordinary people in ordinary places."

Minnesota's first statewide Konklave, or Klan convention, was held in 1924 at the Rice County fairgrounds in Faribault. The grand event featured a street demonstration, and an airplane with the insignia K.K.K. buzzed over the fairgrounds.

Although Minnesota's first Konklave was held in Faribault, Steele County holds the distinction of hosting the following three statewide Klan gatherings. Klan activity had begun in Steele County in 1923 with public meetings held in Central Park in Owatonna and at a park in Blooming Prairie. The Klan was active throughout the county with meetings held in Medford, Hope, and Ellendale. Often the participants would leave their meetings, blowing their horns in parade style. Cross burnings were held in many areas of the county, often close to Catholic churches or the homes of Catholic families.

No organized violence was attributed to the Klan in this area. Actually, the Klan would present themselves at public meetings, including church services, where they would present gifts of \$20 to \$50 for the churches or those in need.

When it was announced in July 1925 that Owatonna would be hosting the state Konklave on Labor Day, the Steele County Board of Commissioners in a 4 to 1 vote at a special session gave the Klan permission to use the fairgrounds for its gathering. The Steele County Agricultural Society was then approached for permission to use the fair grandstand, and other buildings on the fairgrounds. The fair board approved this request.

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KKK continued...

According to newspaper accounts of the konklave, practically every county in southern Minnesota was represented, as well as units from St. Paul, Hibbing, and Duluth. The day-long event featured sports in the afternoon including a 100-yard dash and a fat man's race for those topping 225 pounds. Dinner was served by the ladies of the Trinity English Lutheran Church at the armory downtown, while other attendees shared homemade picnic suppers at the fairgrounds.

Although attendance at the fairgrounds was limited to Klan members, the evening parade on Cedar Avenue to Central Park was open to the public. The parade was led by a robed Klansman, riding a white-robed horse and carrying an American flag. Behind him followed a mounted color guard. Although the Klan members had to have their faces uncovered due to a 1923 state law, the 25 horses in the color guard wore white robes with their faces covered. The parade was documented through photographs taken by Ouradnik Photography; a photo album of those photos is in the Minnesota Historical Society collection.

Floats from units outside of Steele County featured schoolhouses with signs such as "Public schools for All," a reference to the Klan's opposition to Catholic schools. Another float carried a woman clutching a wooden cross, surrounded by four Klan members, swords raised toward the cross, as the participants sang "Rock of Ages."

The parade returned to the fairgrounds where lectures were delivered on patriotic issues. Local spokesman Frye, a United Brethren minister, officiated at a triple wedding. Those married were two brothers from Wisconsin who married twin sisters from Red Wing, Minnesota. The third couple were residents of Owatonna. The konklave ended with a fireworks display that featured burning crosses and the letters KIGY, representing the term *Knight, I Greet You*.

In our Steele County Historical Society archives, the fair board receipt book indicates that the KKK paid \$590.75 for the use of the fairgrounds. At the stated admission price of 25 cents per person, that would suggest that attendance at the konklave was close to 2,400. In many instances, the klan inflated the number of attendees. In this case, spokesman Frye had expected 10,000 Klan members; the newspapers estimated attendance between 1,000 and 2,500.

By August 1925 the Holding Company of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County obtained use of 20 acres of wooded land in Owatonna, which it would formally purchase in 1927.⁴⁶ The land bordered by Rice Lake Street, Willow Avenue, and Rose Street was locally known as Klan Park. A simple building was constructed as a klavern. The 1926 state konklave was held at this site. The formula was the same – sports, music (led by the Ellendale concert band), and an evening parade.

The third and last Konklave held in Owatonna was scheduled for Labor Day, September 5, 1927. That year a baseball game was held on a field at Klan Park between Owatonna's Southern Minnesota League club and an unnamed opponent. The Southern Minnesota Klan Band from St. James performed as did other musical groups: a male quartet from Albert Lea, the O.K. Orchestra of Owatonna, and the St. Paul Klan drum corps. As the parade began to form, a torrential downpour began and the parade and evening events were canceled.

The 1927 Konklave was the Klan's final public event in Steele County. Nationally the Klan had lost support due to scandals involving the national leaders, particularly in Indiana. Although the konklaves were no longer held, the klan continued their ownership of the land. It was not until December 1945 that three trustees of the Klan sold the property to the Nass family.

The Holding Company of the Ku Klux Klan of Steele County continued to exist as an incorporated nonprofit organization until 1997, when Secretary of State Joan Growe dissolved it, along with other nonprofits that were no longer active.

As stated in the Minnesota History magazine, "Examining the Ku Klux Klan in Owatonna during the 1920s reveals how bigotry can insinuate itself into harmless everyday activities—parades, church suppers, weddings, and picnics; how prejudice can seek a political foothold; and why people may embrace movements based on hatred and fear." By learning about the Klan's brief period of activity in Steele County, citizens can be informed and vigilant that such an episode will not repeat itself.



Pictured to the right: Entire families could be involved in the Klan movement. This banner for the Women's Ku Klux Klan in Owatonna was used in the women's ceremonial activities.

Pictured at left: A KKK coin owned by Otto Nelson. The term non silba anthor is a Latin phrase used by the Klan meaning "not for one's self, but for others"



Our sincere thanks to Nancy and Elizabeth for sharing their article with us, and congratulations for being published in the MHS History Magazine!