THE KU KLUX KLAN AND COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE IN HORRY COUNTY, 1922–1925

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When most people hear the name Ku Klux Klan they think of the Reconstruction Klan or the Klan of the post-World War II period—organizations which were Southern-based and primarily concerned with maintaining white supremacy. The largest and most powerful of the Klan movements, however, was the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s.

Established by "Colonel" William Joseph Simmons in Atlanta in 1915 as a fraternal order for native-born white Protestants, the second Klan attracted only a few thousand members in Georgia and Alabama until 1920, when Simmons hired Elizabeth Clarke and Edward Tyler, two professional promoters. Through their efforts, and some fortuitous newspaper publicity, the secret order achieved an estimated national membership of five million by 1924 and dominated the political life of several states. Not just racist, the Klan during that period was also nativist, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and moral authoritarian.[1]

There has been a common impression among historians that the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was not very strong in South Carolina. Ernest Lander, the author of a general history of the state, wrote that "the Klan's influence was probably never that great" and that the Legislature's failure to pass an anti-mask bill stemmed more from "lack of interest" than from fear or support. David Chalmers, who wrote a history of the Klan, believed that South Carolina society was "too orderly to need another order superimposed on it."[2]

In Horry County, however, several incidents occurred which suggest the presence of a strong Klan. From November 1922 to June 1925 anonymous groups, often wearing hoods and robes, attacked at least five persons and threatened over twenty others. Although no Klansman was ever arrested, the motives for the incidents and the testimony of a former Klansman indicate that the Klan committed a majority of the crimes. Whether the Klan was responsible or not, the

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[1]The best works on the Klan are: Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington, Ky., 1965); David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism; the First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965); Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York, 1967).

[2]Ernest M. Lander, *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1890* (Chapel Hill, 1960), p. 68; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism,* p. 99.

incidents merit attention as examples of collective violence, a subject which historians have begun to examine as a way of discovering the impulses that have motivated ordinary people.[3] This study should further the understanding of influences which molded life in rural America in the 1920s.

Located on the coastal plain in the northeastern corner of the state, Horry County had a terrain marked by dense swampland. During its early years the county depended on turpentine and naval stores, instead of cotton, for its economic development. As a result its black population was small, and most farming was at the subsistence level. After 1880 several changes took place. The arrival of the first railroad in 1887 ended years of relative isolation and led to a rapid population increase. From 1880 to 1930 the county's population grew from 15,574 to 39,376, while the population of Conway, the county seat, rose from 575 to 3,011. From 1900 to 1930 the county's black population increased from 6,322 to 9,611. During the same period farmers switched from subsistence to commercial farming. From 1880 to 1930 the number of farms grew from 1,637 to 5,283, and the percentage of improved farmland increased from 7.4 to 33.2. By the 1920s tobacco and lumber products had become important sources of income.[4]

There were at least three Klan chapters in Horry County: one in Conway, a second between Conway and Loris, and a third in Little River. The size of the membership and its class composition are not known; but the chapter between Conway and Loris included two ministers, a constable, and two rural policemen. Members paid ten dollars to join and received hoods and robes as part of their membership. There were few meetings apart from the raids which the Klan carried out on its fellow citizens.[5]

[3]For Example, see: Richard Maxwell Brown, *The South Carolina Regulators* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing; Anti-abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970); Hugh Davis Graham, *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York, 1969); William F. Holmes, "Moonshining and Collective Violence: Georgia, 1889-1895," *Journal of American History* 67 (December 1980): 589-611.

[4]Julian J. Petty, *Twentieth century changes in South Carolina Population* (Columbia, 1962), p.46; Paul Quattlebaum, "History of Conway and Horry County," *South Carolina Magazine* 8 (1944-45): 10-11; James S. Rogers III, "The History of Horry County, South Carolina, 1850-1876" (Master's Thesis, Univ. of S.C., 1972), pp.1-3; Oscar Steanson, *Farming Possibilities in Horry County, South Carolina* (Clemson, 1939), 6-7; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Fifteenth Census of the U.S., 1930* (1933; reprint ed., New York, 1976), p.49.

[5]Interview with a former Klansman in Horry County, Feb. 19, 1982; *Horry Herald* (Conway), Jan. 18, 1923.

Although the Klan's formal program in the 1920s stressed its opposition to Catholics, blacks and Jews, Klansmen in some areas of the south and southwest found a more pressing concern: the regulation of community morals. Believing that Klan actions were more important than words, Charles Alexander examined over two hundred episodes of Klan violence in Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma and found that the victims were usually native whites who had violated the community's moral code: prostitutes, bootleggers, wife-beaters, and adulterers. From this evidence he concluded that "moral reform" was the most important impetus for the Klan in the southwest. No similar study has been done of the southeast, but at least one local study has confirmed his findings.[6]

In Horry County seventeen of the twenty-five victims were native whites suspected of immoral behavior. The first victim, for instance, was Mace Horn, a prosperous white farmer in Floyds Township who frequently paid the bail for convicted bootleggers.[7] On Sunday evening, November 12, 1922, Horn was sitting in his girl friend's parlor when three masked men burst into the room with guns drawn and ordered him to come with them. Outside they blindfolded and handcuffed him and shoved him into a waiting car which quickly sped away. Horn later recalled that the car must have traveled for twelve or fifteen miles and that from time to time it would stop at crossroads where his assailants instructed others to "come on." Finally the cars stopped, and Horn could tell from the noise that a sizeable number of people were present. After guards had been posted, some of the men gave Horn a severe beating, and when he refused to tell them about a recent shooting incident in which his brother and another man had been involved or give them any information about a particular whiskey still, one of the men took out a sharp razor and made three cuts in Horn's ears. Then they placed him back in the car and drove to a spot near Nichols where they left him to catch a ride into town.[8]

A few days after the Mace Horn incident the *Horry Herald* reported that five other men had been warned by the Klan. Sixty men in white robes took Bright Shelley to a graveyard near his home and promised that he would soon be in his grave if he didn't stop drinking,

[6]Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest,* pp.19, 59; Roger K. Hux, "The Ku Klux Klan in Macon, 1919-1925," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 62 (Summer 1978): 155-68.

[7]Horn owned over 500 acres of land. Horry County Record of Deeds, 1915-1926, Conway; interview with Klansman

[8]*Coastal Chronicle* (Andrews), Nov. 30, 1922; *Horry Herald,* Nov. 23, 1922; *The Nation* 116 (Jan. 24, 1923): 82.

driving recklessly, swearing, and abusing his wife. Similar groups visited John Rogers and J.D. Anderson, both in connection with illegal liquor traffic. They warned Rogers, a constable at Finklea's Crossroads, to do a better job of enforcing prohibition and ordered Anderson to stop grinding so much meal at his mill. J.C. Grainger and E.B. Sarvis both received threatening notes: both were warned to change their ways of life, and Sarvis was told to start attending Sunday school.[9] Of the five victims, three had land holdings of over one hundred acres.[10]

Ten months later a certain rural policeman, who was also a Klansman, arranged to have John Rogers ambushed again on a country road near his home.[11] A band of seventy-five men abducted him from his car, tied him to a tree, and administered a severe beating with a buggy trace. Then they shaved off his hair and beard and cut the hair of Cret Huggins, a woman tenant on Rogers' land. No reason was given for the attack on the woman, but the fact that she was taken out with Rogers indicates that the two may have been suspected of having an affair.[12]

Not all of the incidents, however, involved immoral conduct. On December 9, 1922, Daniel Duncan, a farmer with over five hundred acres in the Green Sea—Floyds area, received a note ordering him either to remove a fence which was blocking a road to the home of a neighbor or leave the community. The note, signed "K.K.K.," warned that if he failed to comply, "we will get you."[13]

Farmers in South Carolina, and throughout the South, had been quarreling over the fencing of land for many years. The traditional practice had been to fence only crops so that livestock could graze freely over wide territories. Those who wanted to plant their land more intensively resented this policy, though, because it encouraged livestock farmers to buy larger herds than their own lands could accommodate. In 1877 the Legislature gave localities the right to enforce laws requiring the fencing of livestock, but less densely populated areas continued to employ open range methods. In 1921 the

[9]*Horry Herald,* Nov. 30, 1922; *The Nation* 116 (Jan. 24, 1923): 82.

[10]Horry County Record of Deeds, County Court House, Conway.

[11]Interview with Klansman.

[12]*Horry Herald,* Sept. 20, 27, 1923.

[13]Horry County Record of Deeds; *Coastal Chronicle,* Oct. 4, 1923; *Horry Herald,* March 29, 1923; *The Columbia State,* Sept. 27, 1923.

Legislature passed a new law making livestock fencing mandatory throughout the state, thereby requiring the building of new fences.[14]

When Duncan chose to disregard the note the writers backed up their warning. In mid-January, 1923, Duncan answered a knock at his door and was greeted with gunfire from outside the house. Then, on January 27, a group of eight men fired over twenty shotgun blasts at him as he rode past Grassy Bay Church in his buggy. Some of the shots struck the horse and buggy, but Duncan escaped injury by flattening himself on the floorboard.

The Duncan episode, coming on the heels of other alleged Klan incidents, brought forth an outcry of indignation from influential citizens in Horry County and forced local law enforcement authorities to seek state help. Governor Thomas McLeod sent Constable W.W. Rogers to aid in the investigation, and Rogers was able to trace the shotgun shells fired at Duncan to guns owned by eight men: Monroe Hill, Albert Pridgen, M.C. Blackwell, Memory Pridgen, Stog Grainger, Lloyd Jolly, John W. Hill, and Maybury Hill. Five of the eight had land in the same area as Duncan, but none had over fifty acres; one of the men, Albert Pridgen, was a Baptist minister. When confronted with the evidence, Memory Pridgen, Stog Grainger, and Lloyd Jolly confessed to the crime and implicated the others. The subsequent investigation and trial revealed that John W. Hill, the ringleader, had sought help from the Ku Klux Klan and after failing in this, had formed "a little Klan of his own." All eight defendants were found guilty of rioting, and six of the eight were fined fifty to two hundred dollars and given suspended jail sentences of six months.[15]

The Duncan case was reminiscent of an earlier form of collective violence known as whitecapping. Whitecaps attacked people for a variety of reasons in several parts of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1889-1890 period Chicano whitecaps known as "las Gorras Blancas" protested the intrusion of Anglo-American settlers into their communal land grant in New Mexico territory by cutting fences and destroying property.

[14]David Duncan Wallace, *The History of South Carolina,* 4 vols. (New York, 1934-35), vol. 3, p.328; J. Crawford King, "The Closing of the Southern Range: an Exploratory Study," *The Journal of Southern History* 48 (1982): 53-70.

[15]Horry County Record of Deeds; *Coastal Chronicle,* Oct. 4, 1923; *Dillon Herald,* Feb. 8, April 5, 1923; *Horry Herald,* Feb. 8, 22, March 29, Sept. 27, Oct. 4, 1923; *New York Times,* Nov. 19, 1923; *The State,* Sept. 27, 1923; Horry County General Sessions Court Index, 1923, Department of Archives and History, Columbia. The court records for the Duncan case are not available.

Like this earlier episode, the Horry case involved the free access to land.[16]

Two other incidents in Horry County also resembled whitecapping. Three weeks after the attack on Daniel Duncan, Sam Holden, a tenant on the Singleton Bay Farm in Socastee, received a note from the "K.K.K" giving him twenty days to leave Horry County. The sheriff's investigation into possible motives for the letter revealed that Holden had argued with some neighbors who had hunted illegally on his land.[17] Then, on October 5, 1924, ten hooded men took George Powers, the town marshal of Loris, into the country and warned him to stop his strict enforcement of prohibition, particularly the confiscation of ginger.[18] The Powers case was similar to certain whitecapping episodes in Georgia and Alabama in which night riders attacked revenue agents and informers who hampered their moonshining operations.[19] One of the initial reports on the Daniel Duncan case indicated that another reason for his attack may have been his willingness to tell police where certain stills were located.[20]

In the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan counted blacks and Jews among its sworn enemies, but Klansmen attacked few members of either group. In Horry County, however, both groups received threats during the Klan's reign of terror. On May 19, 1924, a group of masked men wearing robes paid a visit to Max Goldstein, the proprietor of a new dry goods and clothing store in Conway. Calling him out at three o'clock in the morning, the men pointed guns at Goldstein and informed him that Conway was a "white man's country." In a letter to the *Horry Herald* afterward Goldstein attributed the visit to the courteous service he gave to blacks in his store, but his own ethnic background probably played a part.[21]

Later in the year an official of the Conway Lumber Company wrote a letter to the Governor complaining about an anonymous note which had been sent to some of his black laborers who had been working a section of the county commonly referred to as the "dead line territory." It had been a long-standing tradition in this part of the county, somewhere between Conway and Aynor, that no blacks were allowed in, either to live or work. Several years before, during the

[16]Robert W. Larson, "The White Caps of New Mexico: A Study of Ethnic Militancy in the Southwest," *Pacific Historical Review* 44 (1975): 171-85.

[17]*Horry Herald,* Feb. 15, March 1, April 5, 1923.

[18]Ibid., Oct. 16, Nov. 6, 1924.

[19]Holmes, "Moonshining and Collective Violence"; William F. Holmes, "Moonshiners and Whitecaps in Alabama, 1893," *The Alabama Review* 34 (1981): 31-49.

[20]*Horry Herald,* Feb. 22, 1923.

[21]*Ibid.*, May 22, 1924.

administration of Governor Martin Ansel, some residents had tried to enlarge the territory by attacking some of the black work camps which the company had stationed nearby. At that time the Governor and local law enforcement authorities had cooperated successfully in restoring order. Now, in the midst of the Ku Klux excitement, some workers received another warning:

Galivants Ferry, S. C.

To you colored folks we have got to carry out our line of business and you all no where you are and we have got a dose for you and if these dont move your bowels i think the next will

the white band
[drawing of a bullet][22]

The Ku Klux Klan of Horry County did not confine its activity to attacks or threats against its fellow citizens; as in other places, the Klan also contributed to charitable causes. Groups of hooded marchers visited the Loris and Mt. Olive Baptist Churches to make small donations, and Conway Klan No. 67 presented $150.00 worth of school books to the Burroughs High School Library. Although two teachers and several students signed a petition asking that the books be kept, the board of trustees voted to return the gift because each book had the Klan insignia stamped inside the front cover.[23]

There was also talk of Klan involvement in politics. As early as 1922 the Klan had started a nationwide campaign to elect candidates friendly to its programs, an effort which had been highly successful in many places. In Horry County rumor had it that there were Klan and anti-Klan tickets in the municipal election of 1924. Although the Conway Klan chapter sent a letter to the newspaper denying that it sponsored a particular slate of candidates, M.R. Smith, a candidate for re-election to the city council, reported that such a list did exist and that his name had incorrectly appeared on it.[24]

The county was obviously divided over the Klan issue. People on both sides wrote to the newpaper to express their views. One anonymous writer who identified herself as a mother called on other mothers to "pray for them (the Klan) and help them take the bitter cup from our boys and the examples that are being set before them." In contrast, M.G. Anderson, a member of the school board, complained about the

[22]H.W. Ambrose to Gov. Thomas G. McLeod, Sept. 9, 1924, Thomas McLeod Papers, Department of Archives and History.

[23]Interview with Klansman; *Horry Herald* March 22, Oct. 25, 1923, Feb. 14, March 20, April 3, 1924; *The Searchlight* (Atlanta) Jan. 12, 1924.

[24]*Horry Herald,* Nov. 20, Dec. 18, 1924

pressure the Klan had placed on him to accept the gift books. The newspaper coverage of the incidents reflected this ambivalence. The paper gave them full coverage and even denounced them on one occasion, but it also expressed its approval when Klan intervention in one case resulted in the reunion of an unfaithful husband and his family.[25] The best evidence of the community's support, however, was the fact that no Klansman was ever arrested.

To outsiders the incidents of collective violence in Horry County appeared to be nothing more than a series of unrelated neighborhood feuds. This conclusion, however, deprives us of a better understanding of the motives of the common people by assuming that they simply act in a fit of passion at every provocation.

In order to make sense of what happened in Horry County it might be instructive to look at what E.P. Thompson found about eighteenth century English food riots. Thompson was not willing to accept the commonly held belief that the rioters acted simply in response to hunger and rising bread prices. Instead, after taking a closer look at the violence, Thompson concluded that the participants sought to defend widely supported community rights or values which were being threatened by social change. In the case of the English riots those responsible acted to preserve traditional patterns of marketing, milling, and selling bread; in Horry County the perpetrators of violence and intimidation acted to preserve traditional Protestant morality, free access to land, the practice of home brewing, and the custom of racial exclusion.[26]

As the population increased and industries developed in Horry County in the early twentieth century, several changes occurred. The influx of new people provided greater opportunities for "sin" and also brought pressure to farm more intensively. Industrialization, in the form of the lumber industry, brought blacks into sections of the county where few had ever been. Like earlier agents of collective violence, the whitecaps, the Ku Klux Klan and its imitators in Horry County sought to preserve community values and customs in the face of these changes.[27]

Like the whitecaps the Klan failed in its efforts to withstand social change. As word spread about Klan violence and internal

[25]Ibid., Feb. 22, March 1, 1923, March 20, June 5, 1924.

[26]E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (Feb. 1971): 76-136.

[27]Richard Maxwell Brown, "Historical Patterns of Violence in America," in Graham, *Violence in America,* p. 70; William F. Holmes, "Whitecapping in Georgia: Carroll and Houston Counties, 1893," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (1980): 401.

corruption the more respectable elements in the secret order dropped out and the movement died. In Horry County the violence stopped when Klansmen realized that some of their leaders had some of the same weaknesses as the people they were trying to reform. One leader, for instance, abandoned his wife and family, but returned when his mother was near death. When he arrived at the train station, a group of one hundred Klansmen in full regalia awaited him. They clubbed him with pistols, then took him into the country and again beat him.[28] Incidents such as this weakened the Klan movement in Horry County to the point that it vanished from public view. A new Klan appeared in the 1950s, but race, not morals, was its main concern.[29]

[28]Interview with Klansman.
[29]*New York Times,* Aug. 29, Sept. 1, Nov. 10, 1950.