

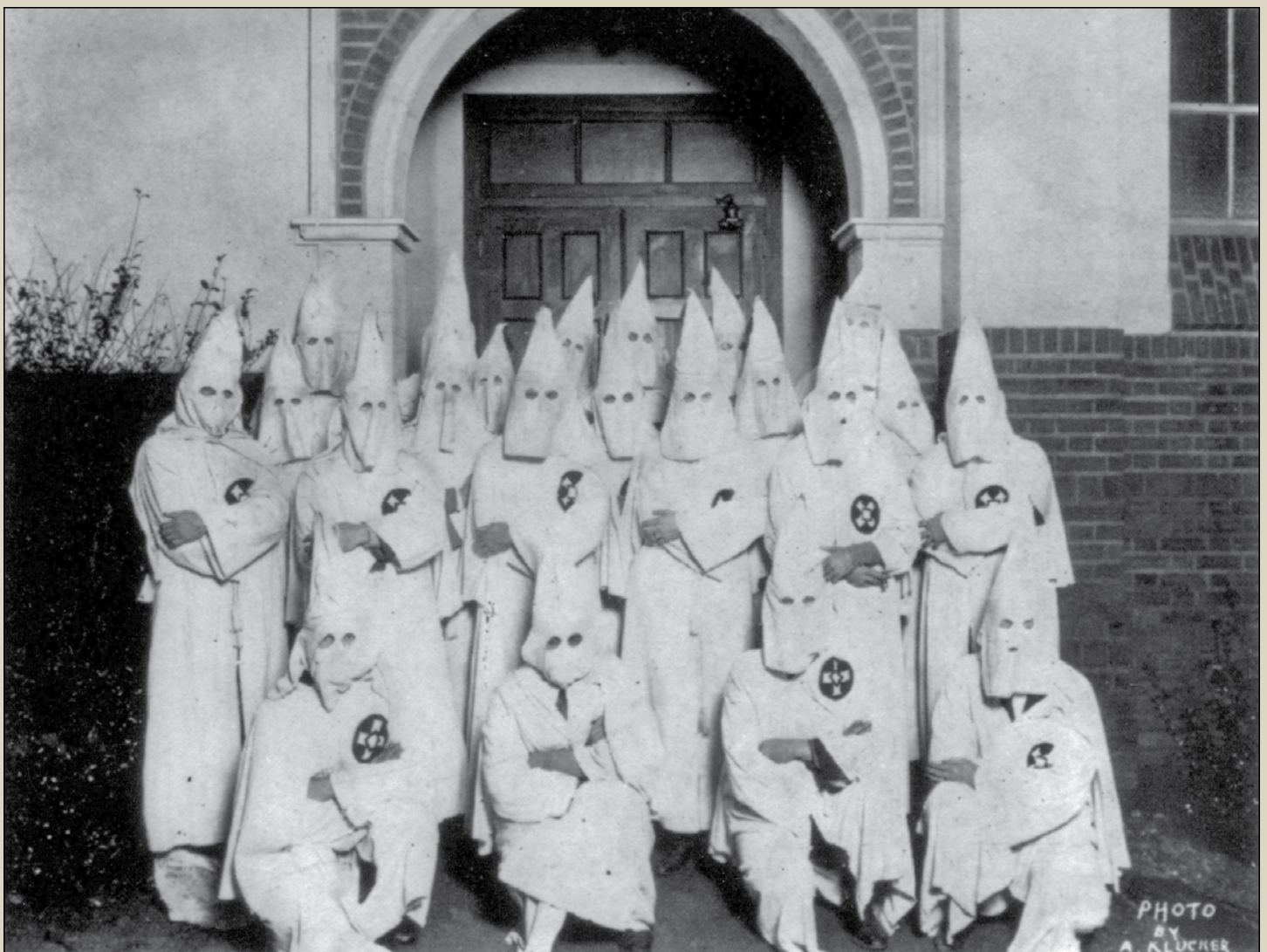
Guardians Against Change: The Ku Klux Klan in Houston and Harris County, 1920-1925

By Casey Greene

The following essay is an excerpt from an article of the same name that appeared in the Houston Review Vol. X, No. 1, 1988. It is reprinted with the author's permission.

On the evening of November 27, 1920, some two hundred mysterious figures threaded their way behind a torch bearer through the downtown streets of Houston. A hush fell over thousands of onlookers as the hooded figures silently "passed like specters from another world."¹ The second Ku Klux Klan had arrived.

Several days earlier, the *Houston Post* had announced the Klansmen's appearance. Colonel William Joseph Simmons, the second Klan's founder, spoke about its goals and objectives at



This picture appeared in the student organizations section of the 1922 Rice Institute yearbook, the Campanile. Klan activity in Houston was apparently a controversial issue among students, as the humor section of the same yearbook included a supposed student letter to "Col. Billie's Great Religious(?) Weekly" spoofing Mayfield's frequent tirades on the immoral dancing of modern youth. Colonel Mayfield's Weekly purchased space in the advertising section at the back of the yearbook, however.

The author searched the Rice Student Association minutes for 1921-1922, without finding any mention of the Klan's presence at Rice Institute. However, the student newspaper, the Thresher, Vol. VII, November 25, 1921, mentions the emergence of a new campus organization, the "Koo Klucks."

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

the First Christian Church. His address, “The Ku Klux Klan, Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” was phrased in the rhetoric of “pure Americanism” and white supremacy. He praised the order for its role as the nation’s greatest benefactor and claimed that racial mixing would lead inevitably to the destruction of the white race.²

Simmons founded the second Klan on Stone Mountain outside Atlanta, Georgia, in 1915. As late as 1920, it was still a chiefly Southern fraternal organization, although it would soon grow to more than two million members and encompass the Southwest, the Midwest, and the West Coast. Primarily responsible for this expansion was Edward Young Clarke, appointed in June 1920 as king klegle, or chief recruiter, in charge of the Klan’s Department of Propagation. Under his direction, the secret order spread from Georgia into Alabama and Florida, and then into Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Its first Texas klavern (chapter) was organized in Houston in September 1920 as Sam Houston Klan No. 1.³

PHILOSOPHIES OF THE SECOND KLAN

Although the second Klan adopted the name, the costume, the symbolism, and the languages of the first Ku Klux Klan (in operation from 1866 to about 1871), it was in fact a new and separate organization, with motivations and agendas specific to the social conditions and turmoil of the 1920s. . . .

The new Klansmen eagerly embraced a philosophy of fundamentalism, resistance to change, moral certitude, and Americanism. They adopted the little red schoolhouse as a symbol of their cherished values and resisted foreign influences, primarily Roman Catholicism.⁴

The most ardent public spokesman for the Klan in Houston was Billie Mayfield, publisher of *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* from 1921 until he sold it to Charles K. Diggs of San Antonio in September 1924. . . . *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* endorsed “one hundred percent Americanism” and the restoration of morality. After 1922 it put more emphasis on news but continued its strident propaganda against Catholics, Jews, racial mixing, and lax morals. Mayfield claimed that in 1923 his newspaper sold a million copies per week, although this was certainly an optimistic estimate.⁵ In its focus on values and resistance to change, *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* mirrored the concerns of Klansmen nationally as well as those of Houston and Harris County. . . .

UNREST IN HOUSTON AND HARRIS COUNTY

Despite the Klan’s fierce bigotry toward a number of groups, however, the key motives underscoring the order’s existence in Houston and Harris County appear to have been moralism and resistance to change. The secret order emerged and thrived during a period of unparalleled growth. Rising unemployment, crime, and a perceived weakening of community morals all contributed to tension. The Klan offered a stable reference group to many alarmed by the march of events. Although only a minority of its members were involved in the group’s acts of violence against transgressors of “acceptable morality,” many more of these self-styled guardians against change undoubtedly applauded swift retribution against those who offended traditional community sensibilities. The Klansmen saw their role as an important moral contribution to their city; only they were willing to act in order to give Houston “the kind of cleaning it needs.”⁶ . . .

HOUSTONIANS JOIN THE KLAN

Sam Houston Klan No. 1 made its first public appearance in the Confederate veterans’ parade of October 9, 1920. Its members entered a huge white float which followed banners announcing, “We were here yesterday, 1866”; “We are here today, 1920”; and “We will be here forever.” Klansmen marched in line, wearing hoods and robes, on horses and on foot.⁷ The Houston klavern grew rapidly. Mass initiations added impact to the Klan’s presence. In December 1921, five thousand Klansmen gathered in a twenty-acre field near Bellaire, around a giant cross of red electric lights. One witness reported that “the whole field, as far as the eye could reach in the glare of calcium lights and bonfires, was filled with hooded and shrouded figures, il-limitable and uncountable.” Hooded figures stood guard every ten feet. (Later, Mayor Holcombe reportedly investigated charges that Houston police officers were among those serving as guards for the ceremony.) Supposedly, 2,051 initiates took their oath that night. *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* praised the ceremony as the greatest spectacle that had ever taken place in the South. *Houston Post* reporters were invited to watch, although this courtesy was not extended to the *Houston Chronicle*, an anti-Klan newspaper.⁸

The Klan continued to grow and to maintain public visibility, despite increasing controversy over its existence and purpose. In September 1923, more than thirteen thousand people reportedly watched the initiation of 348 new Klansmen on the Gulf Coast Speedway. *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly* blamed an arsonist for a grandstand that caught fire several minutes after the onlookers left.⁹ In November 1923, Klansmen entered a float in the Armistice Day parade which carried a little red schoolhouse, complete with the slogan, “One flag, one law, one school, the nation’s hope.” So incensed at their presence were other parade members, including the Knights of Columbus, the American Legion, and various Jewish organizations, that they withdrew from the occasion.¹⁰ But still the Klan grew. Billie Mayfield claimed in early 1924 that new initiates were being added at the rate of fifty to sixty per week, although his figures are obviously suspect. In February, he reported that twenty thousand people watched as 750 men became Klansmen. An airplane lighted on its underside to resemble a “fiery red cross” flew over the ceremony, which followed a barbecue and a parade of four hundred Klansmen in full regalia.¹¹

Generalizations about the size of the Klan in Houston and Harris County are difficult to make, since no official records are known to exist. Kenneth T. Jackson estimates the total size of the Klan in Houston at eight thousand between 1915 and 1944.¹² The *Houston*



The Houston Chronicle addressed an open letter to alleged Klan members and Harris County citizens, calling for an end to violence. Harris County Sheriff, Thomas A. Binford, was named among other notables.

Photo courtesy of Bob Bailey Studios
Photographic Archive, Dolph Briscoe
Center for American History,
The University of Texas at Austin.

Chronicle gave a figure of four thousand in January 1923, which seems likely. However, the *Chronicle* placed the strength of nearby Goose Creek Klan No. 4 at one thousand, whereas the isolated acts of violence there would suggest that no more than a hundred persons were involved.¹³ Any estimate of size in both instances is compounded by the problem of fluid membership. Men came and went, and many, like Mayor Holcombe, went to one meeting and never returned.¹⁴

The nature of the Klan's membership in Houston and Harris County is also difficult to judge, since no membership lists are available. Some of Houston's leading citizens were said to be Klansmen at one point. Calling for an end to Klan-attributed violence, the *Houston Chronicle* addressed an open letter to "twenty representative citizens who joined the order in its early days" and were supposedly still members in January 1923. The letter named the following persons: Ross S. Sterling, Chester Bryan (county court judge), Wiley C. Munn (president of a department store), Boyd T. Collier (insurance), Joe Green, William I. Shotwell (realtor), Court Norton (businessman), Dixie Smith, Murray R. Jones (district court judge), Elbert Roberts (attorney), H. C. McCall, Gordon Murphy (former Houston police chief), W. A. Cathey (attorney), John E. Green (pastor of Denver Methodist Church), Henry D. Morse (businessman), Albert Townsend (country clerk), Thomas A. Binford (county sheriff), James H. B. House (city water department commissioner), W. R. Britton (city, street and bridge commissioner), and Lewis A. Hartwig (businessman).¹⁵

THE VIOLENCE BEGINS

Soon after their initial organization, Klansmen began a terror campaign against Houston citizens. During February and March 1921, they mailed hundreds of threatening letters bearing the signature of the Ku Klux Klan. The first violent act came on February 5, 1921, with the abduction of B. I. Hobbs, a lawyer. He was known for the large number of divorce suits he filed on behalf of both black and white clients. A party of Klansmen led by George B. Kimbro, Jr., cut his hair off, coated his legs with tar and feathers, warned him to leave town, and left him in the middle of San Jacinto Street. At the time this crime occurred, the Klan posted signs throughout Houston on telegraph poles and trees, which warned against racial mixing.¹⁶

H. C. McCall, Exalted Cyclops of Sam Houston Klan No. 1, organized the abduction of A. V. Hopkins in March 1921. Hopkins had allegedly insulted high school girls. Three young men kidnapped him from his workplace and drove him to a location one mile south of Rice Institute where they beat him severely. Hopkins caught a streetcar back into town, called a physician, and left town the next day. The incident drew the attention of Judge Cornelius W. Robinson, who authorized an investigation by the Harris County Grand Jury. He warned that "either the courts of this country, as now organized under the laws and the Constitution, must fall at the hands of the mob, or the mob must be subdued and held in check by the laws of the country."¹⁷

McCall, Kimbro, and others next claimed a car salesman, William J. McGee, whom the police had charged with several counts of indecent exposure. He had reportedly been annoying young girls near a neighborhood park for eight or ten months before he was arrested and charged. Late in the evening of April 26, 1921, several men abducted McGee. His assailants reported-

ly castrated him and gave him twenty-four hours to leave town. When he appeared in court the next day, McGee wore a bandage over one eye. He pleaded guilty and received the maximum fine in each case. He told reporters that he needed only six hours to leave Houston, and that he had stayed only for his court appearance.¹⁸ Billie Mayfield commented on the McGee assault in an article entitled "The Ku Klux Klan is Here to Perform a Mission No Other Agency Can Reach," which claimed that Klansmen gave the needed remedy when the mothers of the young girls involved in the incidents had been unwilling to speak up. Mayfield spoke approvingly of the Klan's watchful and protective eye:

. . . the best men in each community [would ask] . . . a delinquent brother to live the part of a man, to show him that the community in which he lives will not tolerate the libertine and the rake . . . that the community in which the Ku Klux Klan exists . . . is no place for the white man who consorts with negroes; is no place for prostitutes, bootleggers, and sure-thing gamblers.¹⁹

This emphasis on guarding community morals is one that surfaced time and again with Klansmen in Houston and Harris County.

A black dentist, J. Lafayette Cockrell, fell victim to a group of unmasked men on May 1, 1921. Several weeks earlier, he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor involving relations with a white woman and had paid the maximum fine. Cockrell was abducted at gunpoint from his car, taken to a deserted shack near Pearland, anesthetized, and castrated. Several hours later, an anonymous caller directed an ambulance to the location, and he was taken to St. Joseph's Infirmary. Incensed over the continuing violence, Mayor Holcombe demanded that it be stopped. Rumors of an uprising in the black community fortunately proved false, although, soon after the abduction several leading blacks left Houston.²⁰

THE KLAN'S PUBLIC IMAGE

The city's elite did not look kindly on the growing threat. Judge Robinson praised the first Ku Klux Klan of 1865-1871 for saving the South but argued that the second Klan was unnecessary. He believed that the law as it stood sufficed to assure law and order and the supremacy of the white man, and that the laws of the country should be respected. "If we want tar and feathers for punishment, it is the duty of the people to write it into the laws," he said. On at least two occasions he barred Klansmen from selection to serve on Harris County grand juries.²¹ Calling on Klansmen to disband, lumber magnate John Henry Kirby wrote the *Houston Chronicle* that the second Klan violated constitutional guarantees of due process and trial by jury.²² Oilman Joseph S. Cullinan turned down a request from the Student Loan Fund of Rice Institute in 1922 because of "substantial" numbers of students there who were Klan supporters. Both he and Kirby later helped to organize an American Anti-Klan Association.²³ Another opponent, Marcellus Foster, publisher of the *Houston Chronicle*, editorialized:

Why the mask, if only law and order are desired?
Why anonymity, if the common good is sought?
Does decency need a disguise?²⁴

Hoping to raise their public standing, Harris County Klansmen frequently gave charitable contributions. . . .


THE DECLINE OF THE KLAN

By 1924, anti-Klan organizations and court investigations of Klan activities were widespread in Texas. In conjunction with the improved economy and the resultant increase in community stability, these actions contributed to the second Klan's decline in Texas. In 1924 the Klan-sponsored candidate for governor was strongly defeated, a signal of the Klan's decline in the political arena as well. Locally, the 1924 school board race provided evidence of the Klan's lack of political clout. Although the Klan endorsed the four candidates (A. C. Finn, L. A. Godbold, Mrs. O. M. Longnecker, and F. M. Lucore) sponsored by the Women's Protestant League, only A. C. Finn won. The *Chronicle* labeled the defeat the end of efforts of secret organizations "to dominate the political affairs of the city."²⁵ The new exalted cyclops, Sam T. McClure, announced on September 6, 1924, that Sam Houston Klan No. 1 was washing its hands of politics and would focus instead on being a secret order. Klan Hall changed hands at the end of the year when the city purchased it for \$187,000. The Klan was allowed to keep its offices in the building for six months.²⁶ . . .

Litigation between Sam Houston Klan No. 1 and its former grand goblin, George B. Kimbro, Jr., also focused public attention on the secret order. The klavern had tried unsuccessfully in 1923 to force Kimbro to release financial records he had kept while grand goblin. In March 1925, the Klan filed suit to recover \$25,000, which Kimbro allegedly had failed to turn over as grand goblin. Kimbro filed a countersuit against the Klan for \$50,000 for money he alleged the Klan owed him and \$500,000 for defamation of character. The court ruled that testimony about the Klan's activities was admissible. It threw out Kimbro's countersuit. Six days later, the court awarded the Klan \$17,500 from Kimbro.

In a real sense, the Ku Klux Klan in Houston and Harris County itself fell victim to change. By the spring of 1922, Houston had reason for optimism. Unemployment had improved and crime had dropped, so Houstonians felt less pressure to join such an organization. The Klan's donations stirred controversy, and violence against the local citizenry tarnished its reputation and brought condemnation from the local media and business and government leaders. The Goose Creek investigations further highlighted its record of violence. Outrageous acts, such as recruiting police officers, encountered the resistance of a mayor determined to prevent the extension of the secret order's tentacles.

The Klan's inability to assert itself in the 1922 mayoral and 1924 school board races showed that its focus was too narrow to attract broad support. Klansmen simply could not impose their will on an increasingly resistant and distrustful community. The litigation between the Klan and Kimbro revealed a badly split organization and brought more unfavorable publicity. In the *Houston Post-Dispatch*, for example, the trial was a front-page item for twenty days between March 3 and 31, 1925.

The Ku Klux Klan failed because of its contradictions. No group, including the Klan, which tried to conceal its members under robes and met secretly at night in fields, could hope to survive and grow in the public eye. Controversy and violence divided the organization while its leaders sought to broaden its following. Guardians against change, the group flourished briefly so long as rapid change seemed threatening to many Houstonians. Yet, as that instability lessened and the guardians themselves were perceived as a greater threat than those they guarded against, the Ku Klux Klan in Houston and Harris County became just one more narrow issue group whose time had come and gone. 

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This 1983 Klan Rally was based on anti gay sentiments. Several hundred Houston police kept the crowd from interacting with the march. The KKK had their own guard dressed in camouflage and carrying shields.



With American, Texas, and Rebel flags flying, this group of KKK used the police as a buffer while they taunted the crowds of onlookers with words of hate in 1983.

Photos courtesy of Story Sloane, III, Story Sloane Gallery, Houston, Texas.