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

Casey Greene

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 spectres 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 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 2 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 kleeagle, 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

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¹Galveston *Daily News*, November 28, 1920; *Houston Chronicle* and *Houston Post* of same date.

²*Houston Post*, November 22, 27, 1920.

³*Houston Chronicle*, March 22, 1925.

Philosophies of the Second Klan

Although the second Klan adopted the name, the costume, the symbolism, and the language 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. Who was the ideal Klansman? One Klan newspaper summed up the requirements:

A man must be of Caucasian blood.

A man must be a Protestant.

A man must swear to uphold all laws of the United States, including the 18th Amendment [Prohibition].

A man must forget his political affiliations.

A man must believe in the Free Public School.

A man must take a most binding oath that he will always conduct himself as a man.⁴

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.⁵

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. Mayfield was a Spanish-American War veteran and an officer in World War I. He was already well experienced in moral authoritarianism. During the Galveston labor strikes of 1920, he served as provost marshal of the Texas National Guard, sent in to restore order. The Guard was under the command of General Jacob F. Wolters, who imposed military law on the city. Both Wolters and Mayfield were furious with the *Houston Press* for its published criticisms of their actions in Galveston, and Mayfield ordered three soldiers to Houston to arrest the paper's editor. The attempt failed, and in the resulting storm of public reaction Mayfield took full responsibility for ordering the arrest and General Wolters relieved him of duty. Although a military tribunal acquitted Mayfield, he was later convicted in the Fifty-fifth District Court and fined fifty dollars.⁶

⁴Walsenburg [Colorado] Klansman, June 1924, in the Alwin D. Fariior Papers (unprocessed collection), Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Fariior was a member of Walsenburg Klan No. 12. He came to Houston in 1924 as industrial Young Men's Christian Association secretary for Anderson, Clayton & Company. Although he joined Sam Houston Klan No. 1, his papers understandably contain no mention of his Klan activities.

⁵See Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930*, Urban Life in America Series (New York, 1967), 18-23, for a discussion of Klan philosophy.

⁶Galveston *Daily News*, September 2, 1920; *ibid.*, April 27, 1923. The troops finally left Galveston on October 8, 1920.

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.⁷ 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. The various rationales developed by historians to explain the Klan's national resurgence are clearly demonstrable on a local level in the pages of Mayfield's paper. Kenneth T. Jackson speaks of Klansmen's fear of change, while Richard Hofstadter believed they were primed to respond to what they perceived as "encroaching evils." Hofstadter views the Klansmen as a product of a rural crusading psychology of the twenties, in the same sense that prohibition and creationism were products of the era.⁸ Arnold S. Rice considers the 1920s as marking the arrival of modernism, entailing a loss of parental control over the young and relaxed attitudes toward morality.⁹ *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly* railed against weakened morals; Billie Mayfield objected to young women who took late night automobile rides with their boyfriends and criticized fathers who let their daughters go to liquor parties. Jackson also notes that urban Klansmen disdained Jews and Catholics for refusing to give up their native tongues and for holding allegiance to corrupt political machines.¹⁰ Mayfield made no secret of his bigoted attitudes toward both groups, intertwining his prejudices with moralism. He denounced Jewish movie producers for introducing young women to "questionable tastes" and accused Jews of serving as tools of Roman Catholicism. He viewed Roman Catholicism as a "worldwide Tammany Hall party" which sought to replace American independence with loyalty to "the Deity on the Tiber." The Klan nationally argued that Jesuits sought to replace public schools with their own parochial institutions.¹¹

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

⁷*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, March 17, 1923, in Linda Elaine Kilgore, "The Ku Klux Klan and the Press in Texas, 1920-1927" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Texas, 1964), 183.

⁸Jackson, 242; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 274, 286.

⁹Arnold S. Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Washington, 1962), 16.

¹⁰*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, March 17, 1922; *ibid.*, April 14, 1923; *ibid.*, September 22, 1923; *ibid.*, March 22, 1924; Jackson, 213.

¹¹*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, December 3, 1921; *ibid.*, May 18, 1922.

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."¹²

What were the social upheavals which encouraged the founding of Sam Houston Klan No. 1? First, Houston was undergoing a period of unprecedented expansion. The city's population jumped from 78,800 in 1910 to 138,276 in 1920. Nationally, only Akron, Detroit, and Los Angeles had grown faster. Census figures from 1910 and 1920 show that precinct #1, which included Houston, increased in population by sixty percent, from 94,984 to 152,652, in those ten years. During the same period, precinct #3, which included the community of Goose Creek (now part of Baytown), had the sharpest rise of population in this area, 140 percent.¹³ Second, postwar Houston faced the problem of rising unemployment, as did much of the rest of the nation. The armistice spelled disaster for American industry, which was still gearing up for wartime production. Millions of workers faced layoffs, and returning veterans faced a shrinking national job market. Across the United States, unemployment rose to three million people by February 1919 and above four million in 1921. During the winter of 1921-22, it finally levelled off and declined slightly from a high of 5.5 million workers.¹⁴ Starting in 1920, a stream of unemployed men made their way to Houston from other states. From December 13-20, 1920, a total of 2,394 men applied for work in the city. In April 1921, there were 1,890 applicants, of whom 864 were white, 463 black, and 563 Hispanic. Only 137 were placed. In 1919, ninety-four out of every hundred job applicants had found work in Houston, but by 1921 this ratio

¹²Charles C. Alexander, "Invisible Empire in the Southwest: The Ku Klux Klan in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, 1920-1930" (unpublished dissertation, University of Texas, 1962), 8.

¹³Houston *City Directory*, 1920-21; Houston *City Directory*, 1930-31; Houston *Chronicle*, October 11, 1920. Although the second Ku Klux Klan objected to foreigners in many cities, nativism was not a problem in Houston. According to the Galveston *Daily News*, January 16, 1922, more than 91% of the local inhabitants were native born, and only 12,012 foreign-born whites were registered in the 1920 census.

¹⁴Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration* (Minneapolis, 1969), 75, 231, 233.

dropped to only sixty-three of every hundred applicants. The outlook was brightest for domestics; clerical workers had the poorest chance of employment.¹⁵

Third, a crime wave swept the city in December 1920, and continued until the end of April 1921. Many connected it with the sudden influx of the unemployed; the Houston *Post* warned of the likelihood of "an invasion of criminal vagrants," while the Houston *Press* blamed robberies, auto thefts, and burglaries on the "jobless army" in the city.¹⁶ Even after the crime wave had subsided, the Houston Police Department was still concerned with these "undesirables." Upset with habitual loafers, Mayor Oscar Holcombe announced on November 29, 1921, that the police planned to raid street corners and lounges and file vagrancy charges against anyone who did not have a good reason for being there. Dragnets went into effect after a grace period which allowed the unemployed to register at the city employment office. The police picked up one hundred undesirables on January 14, 1922. Eighty-four blacks and four whites were taken prisoner in a sweep ending on January 23. In all, Houston police arrested 1,502 persons during the month of January 1922.¹⁷ By the spring, however, the unemployment situation had eased, until, in June, there was actually a shortage of certain kinds of labor. With the ending of this cycle of expansion, unemployment, vagrancy, and crime, the social tensions in the area eased and some of the Klan's influence began to decline.

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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁵Galveston *Daily News*, December 21, 1920; Houston *Post*, December 20, 1920; Galveston *Daily News*, April 3, 1921; *ibid.*, February 17, 1922.

¹⁶David G. McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin, 1969), 161-163; Galveston *Daily News*, December 21, 1920; Houston *Press*, January 10, 1921; *ibid.*, April 29, 1921; Houston *Post*, December 2, 1920.

¹⁷Galveston *Daily News*, November 30, 1921; *ibid.*, January 15, 25, 1922; *ibid.*, February 4, 1922.

¹⁸Galveston *Daily News*, October 9, 1920.

calcium lights and bonfires, was filled with hooded and shrouded figures, illimitable 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²²

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 1944.²³ The Houston *Chronicle* gave a figure of four thousand in January 1923 which seems likely. However, the *Chronicle* placed

¹⁹Houston *Chronicle*, December 9, 1921; Houston *Press*, same date; *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, December 10, 1921; Houston *Post*, December 11, 1921.

²⁰*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, September 22, 1923. The Galveston *Daily News* for September 17, 1923, reported 246 initiates.

²¹Galveston *Daily News*, November 13, 1923. Despite the Klan's worst fears, the little red schoolhouse was not yet in any danger of disappearing. The Houston *Post-Dispatch*, March 29, 1925, reported that of 13,018 buildings owned by public schools in Texas, 9,954 were wooden school buildings.

²²*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, February 23, 1924; Galveston *Daily News*, February 17, 1924; Houston *Chronicle*, same date. The *Daily News* alluded to this ceremony as a forthcoming event, but only Colonel Mayfield's Weekly reported that it actually occurred.

²³Jackson, 239.

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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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 (county 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).²⁶

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.²⁷

H. C. McCall, Exalted Cyclops of Sam Houston Klan No. 1, organized the

²⁴Houston *Chronicle*, January 11, 1923.

²⁵*Ibid.*, March 25, 1925.

²⁶*Ibid.*, January 14, 1923.

²⁷Houston *Press*, February 3, 7, 1921; *ibid.*, March 26, 1921; *ibid.*, April 6, 1921; Houston *Chronicle*, February 6, 1921; Houston *Post-Dispatch*, March 19, 1925. The Houston *Press*, February 12, 1921, reported that Hobbs left Houston to visit his sister in Alvin, where he was assaulted again and warned to leave.

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."²⁸

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 reportedly castrated him and gave him 24 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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 had 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,

²⁸Houston *Press*, March 17, 1921; Galveston *Daily News*, March 18, 1921. McCall was affiliated with W. L. Pearson & Company, a construction firm. In 1920, he was Republican precinct chairman of Precinct No. 9, Harris County.

²⁹Galveston *Daily News*, April 28, 1921; Houston *Post*, same date.

³⁰Colonel Mayfield's *Weekly*, December 10, 1921.

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.³¹

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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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?³⁵

Hoping to raise their public standing, Harris County Klansmen frequently gave charitable contributions. Horace Wilkins, a bank vice president, received a letter signed "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan" with \$250 enclosed. The note

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³²Houston *Post*, August 2, 1921; *ibid.*, October 22, 1921.

³³Houston *Chronicle*, August 26, 1921.

³⁴J. S. Cullinan to Frank Andrews, Chairman, Rice Institute Student Loan Fund, November 1, 1922, in the Joseph S. Cullinan Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; minutes of the first meeting of the American Anti-Klan Association, December 11, 1923, Cullinan Papers. 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."

³⁵Houston *Chronicle*, September 7, 1921.

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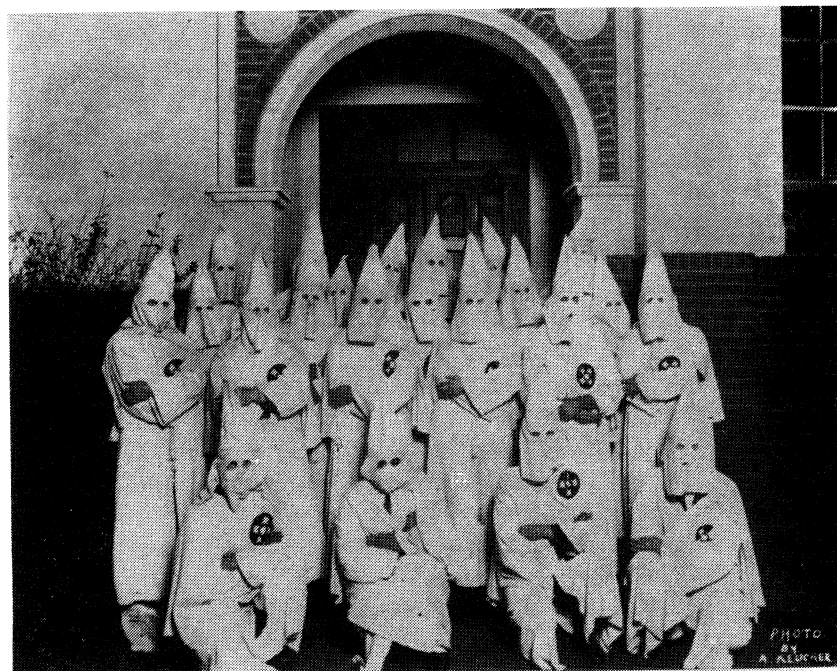
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³⁵Houston *Chronicle*, September 7, 1921.



THE KU KLUX KLAN OF RICE INSTITUTE

"The Year the Owls Were So Bad"

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.

said that the money was for a widow's lumber bill. In February 1921, Klansmen notified the local Young Women's Christian Association that they were depositing \$500 for the benefit of working girls who lost their possessions in a fire. Klansmen donated \$90 to the Bellaire Parent-Teacher Association for school building improvements and gave money for the construction of a watchman's house for the Boy Scouts. The *Houston Press* condemned the latter gift, noting that the watchman's house "should have painted on it a skull and cross-bones, a black bucket dripping with tar and a cowering human at a whipping post."³⁶ Donations to churches were also reported. During December 1922, Klansmen interrupted Sunday evening services at First Methodist Church in Pasadena to present a \$60 donation for the Women's Home Missionary Society, and three Klansmen gave \$100 to the South End Christian Church in Houston. They even took part in burial services at Goose Creek.³⁷

On two occasions, their charitable giving sparked a controversy. The first occasion, the "flag incident," involved Father J. M. Kirwin of Galveston. In an address at St. Joseph's Church in Houston on September 2, 1921, he paid tribute to Edmund L. Riesner, a Marine killed at Belleau Wood in 1918. Kirwin had noticed an American flag flown by the War Mothers at half mast at Main and McKinney in downtown Houston in memory of the fallen Houstonian. However, he refused to remove his hat in its presence since the Klan had given money for its purchase. "Any organization that goes about proclaiming its one hundred percent Americanism is like a woman who boasts of her virtue," he noted. In reply, a Presbyterian minister, Dr. William McDougall, attacked Roman Catholicism and endorsed Klansmen in a speech, "When Americanism is not Americanism."³⁸ The second such incident took place in October 1921, when Klansmen presented \$45 to Thomas Dismuke Post #52 of the American Legion for the purchase of eight bugles. The American Legion's national commander, Henry D. Lindsley, warned Legionnaires not to associate with Klansmen, but the men of Thomas Dismuke Post #52 refused to listen. They accepted the donation, and post Commander R. R. Lewis and nine of the post's twelve executive officers resigned in protest.³⁹

³⁶*Houston Post*, March 19, 1921; *Galveston Daily News*, February 20, 1921; *ibid.*, August 13, 1921; *Houston Press*, August 12, 1921; *ibid.*, October 24, 1921.

³⁷*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, December 2, 9, 1922; *ibid.*, February 17, 1923.

³⁸*Houston Chronicle*, September 2, 16, 1921.

³⁹*Houston Chronicle*, October 19, 22, 23, 1921. The post was named after a Houstonian who went down aboard the U.S.S. *Jacob Jones* in World War I. Its constitution included the provision "to foster and perpetuate one hundred percent Americanism." Constitution and By-Laws of Thomas Dismuke Post #52, American Legion, Houston, Texas, (n.d.), Farrior Papers.

Political Aspirations

The Klan soon involved itself in local politics as well, fielding its first candidate for mayor of Houston in 1922. Judge Murray B. Jones received 652 votes to win the nomination in a meeting at Klan Hall on November 25. The campaign centered on two issues, the Klan and vice. Jones charged Mayor Holcombe with being a Klansman in disguise, while Holcombe called on voters to reelect him on the basis of his record.⁴⁰ On December 19, Klan member Gordon Murphy resigned his position as Houston's Superintendent of Police. He charged Mayor Holcombe with failure to suppress vice. Murphy claimed that enforcement against bootlegging and gambling was in the hands of the vice squad and outside his jurisdiction. He threw his support to Murray B. Jones in the mayoral election. Mayor Holcombe responded by citing a letter dated June 8, 1922, in which he had advised that Murphy was to consider himself the chief of police in truth as well as in name.⁴¹

Billie Mayfield added to the controversy by accusing Holcombe of participating in a gambling party at the Binz Building on or around Christmas Day, 1921, or New Year's Day, 1922. He also blamed Holcombe for quashing a police raid on the party. Furthermore, he said, Mayor "Buncombe" had allowed drunkards to walk the streets freely and tolerated prize fights. Holcombe requested an investigation by the Houston Baptist Pastors' Conference. Eleven witnesses testified that the mayor had not been in a gambling party. Only vice inspector L. E. Ogilvie claimed to have seen him. Ogilvie's affidavit was dated December 25, 1922, the day before the conference and a year after the event itself. Billie Mayfield alleged that Holcombe had gambled at the Herman Hale Lumber Company. After spending seven hours in session at the Rice Hotel, the pastors' conference issued a resolution which completely exonerated the mayor.⁴²

Jones's supporters were livid. Attorney John M. Mathis called the investigation a whitewash and offered to pay twenty dollars to anyone who could obtain an affidavit from Holcombe denying the gambling allegation. Other

⁴⁰Galveston *Daily News*, November 27, 1922; *ibid.*, December 10, 1922. A Houstonian. Jones was judge of County Court At Law No. 1. He studied law at Princeton for a year and graduated from the University of Texas law school in 1910. After serving in World War I, he returned to Houston to resume his law practice. Holcombe, who served as Houston's mayor over eleven nonconsecutive terms, first ran for the office in 1921 on a platform calling for improved business, reorganization of city government, and improved schools.

⁴¹Houston *Chronicle*, December 19, 1922; Galveston *Daily News*, December 20, 1922. Murphy joined the Houston police department in 1909 as a patrolman. He was promoted to detective and later to chief of detectives. On February 14, 1921, Mayor A. E. Amerman appointed him police chief, and Mayor Holcombe reappointed him on June 3, 1921.

⁴²Colonel Mayfield's *Weekly*, December 9, 1922; Houston *Chronicle*, December 27, 1922; Houston *Post*, same date. The *Chronicle* article includes a transcript of the hearings.

persons claimed that they would not change their minds even "if all the Baptist ministers in the United States should exonerate Holcombe" and proffered their support to Jones since he was a "loyal Klansman."⁴³ The controversy mattered little. Holcombe was reelected mayor by a majority of 1,177 votes out of 19,925 cast. W. R. Britton, a candidate for Street and Bridge Commissioner, was the only Klan sponsored candidate who won.⁴⁴ Holcombe continued his opposition to the Klan during subsequent terms in office. According to City Attorney Sewall Myer, Holcombe held H. C. McCall responsible for outrages in Houston, and on one occasion warned McCall that he would protect Clifton F. Richardson, the editor of the *Informer*, Houston's leading black newspaper, from a Klan plot to assassinate him.⁴⁵

Vice inspector Ogilvie later testified that H. C. McCall had direct control of Gordon Murphy during 1920-21. Mayor Holcombe knew that the Klan had penetrated the Houston police department. In October 1921, he announced that he was investigating possible Klan ties among its personnel. He brought in several former officers from West Texas in 1922 to offset the secret order's growing influence. Future police officers would be required to sign and swear to a statement which listed all of their memberships. Holcombe also refused to tolerate policemen who campaigned on behalf of Murray Jones. On January 2, 1923, he dismissed five officers "for the good of the service," although he later reinstated four of them. The fifth officer, Ogilvie, was not reinstated since he resigned before the dismissal order reached the police department.⁴⁶

Violence at Goose Creek

By 1923, many citizens were tired of Klan violence, both in Houston and in the surrounding communities. In Goose Creek, a town of seven thousand in southeast Harris County, the courts began investigations into a number of occurrences. While the Klan was never firmly implicated in all of these incidents, it was always suspect in the minds of many, and Klansmen figured as key witnesses in the cases. The testimony produced a blurry, confusing, and sometimes contradictory account.

Goose Creek was in the throes of an oil boom. John Gilliard had found oil in nearby Tabbs Bay in the summer of 1916 and contracted to drill a test well on his property close to shore. The Goose Creek field produced five thousand

⁴³Galveston *Daily News*, December 29, 1922.

⁴⁴Houston *Chronicle*, December 27, 31, 1922; Galveston *Daily News*, December 29, 1922; *ibid.*, January 1, 1923; Houston *Post*, January 1, 1923.

⁴⁵*Informer*, May 28, 1921; Houston *Post-Dispatch*, March 26, 1925.

⁴⁶Houston *Chronicle*, January 3, 1923. The Houston *Press*, October 27, 1921, reported that it was common knowledge that many police officers were Klansmen. Mayor Holcombe had revoked the commissions of about a hundred officers several months earlier.

barrels of oil by the end of 1917. Humble Oil and Refining Company drilled offshore wells in Tabbs Bay in 1918 and built its refinery next to the field, completing it on San Jacinto Day, 1921. The town of Goose Creek was incorporated on January 28, 1919.⁴⁷

Boom times brought lawlessness, and the postwar recession brought unemployment. In March 1921 a crowd estimated at fifty to two hundred unemployed whites protested at the Humble Oil plant in Baytown against its hiring of Mexican workers.⁴⁸ Goose Creek Klan No. 4 was organized and "KKK" labels began to appear on the houses of residents suspected of offending the community. Three men stripped, beat with a wet rope, and tarred and feathered "Red" Kemp, a Goose Creek jitney driver, in May 1921.⁴⁹ Others were beaten and tarred and feathered during the following months.

The most celebrated case took place on January 8, 1923. Fifteen or so intruders, one of them disguised as a clown and two dressed as women, entered the home of Mrs. Audrey Harrison. The man disguised as a clown held a gun on her, her daughter, and a visitor, R. A. Armand, while the men dressed as women bound them. Their assailants then drove Armand and Mrs. Harrison to a pasture and beat them and cut off Mrs. Harrison's hair "close to the scalp."⁵⁰ Goose Creek residents refused to talk, but the Houston press gave extensive coverage to the beatings. The *Chronicle* addressed a "Letter to Twenty Citizens," including Murray B. Jones and H. C. McCall, requesting their assistance in identifying the culprits. The newspaper found the violence "shocking and disgraceful," and likened it to an outbreak of Klan-instigated violence at Mer Rouge, Louisiana, then making headlines. Its editors asked Klansmen how they intended to aid the investigation.⁵¹

Colonel Mayfield's Weekly exonerated the Klan. Billie Mayfield argued that Mrs. Harrison had filed for divorce and praised the Klan for bringing a measure of stability to Goose Creek, which before had been a hotbed of loose morals frequented by gamblers, bootleggers, and "drunken women in

⁴⁷Walter Rundell, Jr., *Early Texas Oil: A Photographic History, 1866-1936* (College Station, 1977), 119-123; Baytown *Sun*, January 31, 1985.

⁴⁸Houston *Chronicle*, March 22, 1921. According to the *Chronicle*, March 30, 1921, some of the Mexican laborers quit, making room for the rehiring of unemployed whites.

⁴⁹Houston *Chronicle*, May 2, 1921; Houston *Press*, August 10, 1921.

⁵⁰Houston *Press*, March 22, 1921; Galveston *Daily News*, June 22, 1921; Houston *Chronicle*, May 2, 1921; Houston *Press*, August 10, 1921; *ibid.*, January 13, 16, 1923. Other victims in Goose Creek included W. Stewart, a jitney driver who was assaulted on June 20, 1921, and "Shorty" Brown, assaulted on July 25, 1921. Brown was handed a card which said "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan." His assailants claimed he was a loafer who spent too much time with women.

⁵¹Houston *Chronicle*, January 14, 15, 1923. Two men were murdered at Mer Rouge in August 1922 while returning from a picnic. Both had opposed the Klan.

gorgeous clothes bought of sin." With the Klan's presence, men went back to church and traditional values were restored.⁵² The Houston *Informer* judged that the beatings had originated in racism, and warned that Goose Creek had evolved into a "mobocratic community" — only now the victims were white instead of black.⁵³

Judge Robinson, who had barred Klansmen from serving on Harris County grand juries, authorized a grand jury investigation of the Goose Creek beatings on January 15, 1923. Goose Creek Klan No. 4 issued a statement denying responsibility, and Sheriff T. A. Binford made his first arrest. "The case will be history in a few days," he commented. The suspect, however, was freed when several witnesses placed him at his father's business on the night of the attacks. R. A. Armand then identified M. P. Rogers, a Goose Creek fireman, as one of his assailants. Rogers was arrested and charged with assault with intent to murder.⁵⁴

On January 24, 1923, Judge Robinson instructed Harris County grand jury members to select a new grand jury for the next term. The continuing investigation turned up another incident. M. P. Rogers, Perkins Wright, Allen Wright, and William Ogden were indicted for conspiring to flog E. C. Slaughter, the Goose Creek postmaster, who was reportedly a Klansman. Slaughter and other Klansmen disarmed the four men before violence erupted.⁵⁵

The grand jury investigation had little success. Nearly one hundred witnesses failed to point out the assailants. Judge Robinson called on the newly assembled grand jury to focus on secret orders, including the Odd Fellows, the Masons, and the Klan, as possible suspects. Judge Murray B. Jones's district court tried the men indicted for conspiring to flog E. C. Slaughter. One witness claimed that all of the defendants, except Allen Wright, were also Klansmen. Judge Jones dismissed the charge of unlawful assembly against Wright, and his jury found the other defendants innocent the next day.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the Harris County grand jury indicted E. C. Slaughter, M. P. Rogers, William Ogden, and others on charges which ranged from perjury and possession of weapons to aggravated assault. The investigation revealed that a ring of up to fifty men committed some twenty acts of violence in Goose

⁵²*Colonel Mayfield's Weekly*, January 20, 1923; *ibid.*, June 2, 1923.

⁵³*Informer*, January 21, 1923.

⁵⁴Galveston *Daily News*, January 16, 17, 19, and 20, 1923; Houston *Post*, January 16, 17, 20, and 25, 1923.

⁵⁵Galveston *Daily News*, February 1, 6, 1923; Houston *Post*, February 1, 1923.

⁵⁶Galveston *Daily News*, February 6, 1923; Houston *Post*, February 6, 8, 9, 1923.

Creek over two years, culminating in the attacks on Armand and Mrs. Harrison.⁵⁷ In June, the grand jury held four men in contempt for refusing to answer questions. J. E. Harper, W. E. Viles, W. S. Bradley, and K. A. Cubley were taken to jail where they stayed until June 28, when Harper, Viles, and Bradley cleared themselves in court of all charges. Harper and Viles affirmed the grand jury's investigation. The testimony of the three witnesses resulted in ten more indictments on charges of assault with a prohibited weapon and aggravated assault. William Ogden and M. P. Rogers were among those indicted for assaulting Armand and Mrs. Harrison.⁵⁸

Twelve men pleaded guilty to involvement in various incidents in Goose Creek on July 24, 1923. Judge Robinson fined each of them one hundred dollars. The defendants plea bargained and renounced participation in further floggings. The investigation concluded when Murray B. Jones changed the pleas of four defendants and the district court dismissed their cases for lack of evidence.⁵⁹

The Decline of the Klan

The Goose Creek violence was never clearly linked to the Klan. However, the eight-month investigations indicated an increasing opposition on the part of many law officials and community members to Klan-type violence. 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* labelled the defeat the end of efforts of secret organizations "to dominate the political affairs of the city."⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁷Houston *Post*, May 6, 1923. This issue has the text of the Harris County grand jury's report. According to the Harris County Assistant District Attorney's office, the actual grand jury files are not available, since such records are considered secret.

⁵⁸Houston *Post*, June 21, 29, 1923; *ibid.*, July 6, 1923.

⁵⁹Galveston *Daily News*, July 25, 1923; *ibid.*, August 1, 1923.

⁶⁰Houston *Chronicle*, April 6, 8, 1924.

\$187,000. The Klan was allowed to keep its offices in the building for six months.⁶¹

Meantime, dissension had surfaced between Sam Houston Klan No. 1 and its former grand goblin, George B. Kimbro, Jr. He was cited to appear in court on November 15, 1923. Judge Charles E. Ashe denied a Klan motion in Eleventh District Court to force him to relinquish financial records he kept as grand goblin. The Klan tried again in April 1924, but Judge Ewing Boyd of Fifty-fifth District Court denied the Klan's application for appointment of an auditor.⁶² The Klan filed suit during March 1925 against Kimbro to recover \$25,000 which he allegedly failed to turn over while he was grand goblin. As kleagle, Kimbro received four dollars from every ten-dollar initiation fee. As king kleagle (chief recruiter), he took in five dollars for every member, from which he sent four dollars to the field organizer and kept one dollar. In his capacity as grand goblin beginning in March 1921, he received fifty cents for each member.⁶³

Kimbro filed a countersuit for recovery of \$50,000 he said the Klan owed him and \$500,000 for alleged defamation of character. His attorney, Erwin J. Clark, tried to show that top Klan officials approved of tar and feathering parties despite Kimbro's opposition. Kimbro testified that in August 1922 he was banished from the Klan after he disagreed with Edward Young Clarke over the violence. The Klan's attorneys, including Harry Lawther of Dallas and Paul S. Etheridge, the imperial klonsul from Atlanta, objected on the grounds that these disclosures would prejudice the jury. Kimbro also testified that he understood that the Klan would reimburse him for out-of-pocket expenses.⁶⁴ The court ruled on March 11, 1925, that testimony about the Klan's activities was admissible. However, on March 27, it threw out Kimbro's countersuit. Judge Ewing Boyd granted Klan counsel a motion for an instructed verdict that Kimbro had not proven the existence of a conspiracy to defame him. On March 31, 1925, the court awarded the Klan \$17,500 from Kimbro. Thus ended one of the longest suits in the history of Harris County.⁶⁵

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

⁶¹Houston *Post*, September 7, 1924; *ibid.*, December 18, 1924; Houston *Press*, December 18, 1924.

⁶²Galveston *Daily News*, November 11, 1923; Houston *Chronicle*, April 12, 1923.

⁶³Houston *Post Dispatch*, March 7, 10, 11, 1925.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, March 11, 1925.

⁶⁵Galveston *Daily News*, March 11, 27, 1925; Houston *Post-Dispatch*, April 1, 1925.

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.