PART ONE

THE TERROR IS BORN

THE FOUNDING OF THE KU KLUX KLAN

The bare facts about the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and its revival half a century later are baffling to most people today. Little more than a year after it was founded, the secret society thundered across the war-torn South, sabotaging Reconstruction governments and imposing a reign of terror and violence

that lasted three or four years. And then as rapidly as it had spread, the Klan faded into the history books. After World War I, a new version of the Klan sputtered to life and within a few years brought many parts of the nation under its paralyzing grip of racism and blood shed. Then, having grown to be a major force for the second time, the Klan again receded into the background. This time it never quite disappeared, but it never again commanded such widespread support.

Today, it seems incredible that an organization so violent, so opposed to the American principles of justice and equality, could twice in the nation's history have held such power. How did the Ku Klux Klan — one of the nation's first terrorist groups — so instantly seize the South in the aftermath of the Civil War? Why did it so quickly vanish? How could it have risen so rapidly to power in the 1920s and then so rapidly have lost that power? And why is this ghost of the Civil War still haunting America today with hatred, violence and sometimes death for its enemies and its own members?

Frontier Justice

The answers do not lie on the surface of American history. They are deeper than the events of the turbulent 1960s, the parades and cross burnings and lynchings of the 1920s, beyond even the Reconstruction era and the Civil War. The story begins, really, on the frontier, where successive generations of Americans learned hard lessons about survival. Those lessons produced some of the qualities of life for which the nation is most admired — fierce individualism, enterprising inventiveness, and the freedom to be whatever a person wants and to go wherever a new road leads.

But the frontier spirit included other traits as well, and one was a stubborn insistence on the prerogative of "frontier justice" — an instant, private, very personal and often violent method of settling differences without involving lawyers or courts. As the frontier was tamed and churches, schools and courthouses replaced log trading posts, settlers substituted law and order for the older brand of private justice. But there were always those who did not accept the change. The quest for personal justice or revenge became a key motivation for many who later rode with the Ku Klux Klan, especially among those who were poor and uneducated.

Night Patrols

A more obvious explanation of the South's widespread acceptance of the Klan is found in the

institution of slavery. Freedom for slaves represented for many white Southerners a bitter defeat — a defeat not only of their armies in the field but of their economic and social way of life. It was an age-old nightmare come true, for early in Southern life whites in general and plantation owners in particular had begun to view the large number of slaves living among them as a potential threat to their property and their lives.

A series of bloody slave revolts in Virginia and other parts of the South resulted in the widespread practice of authorized night patrols composed of white men specially deputized for that purpose. White Southerners looked upon these night patrols as a civic duty, something akin to serving on a jury or in the militia. The mounted patrols, or regulators, as they were called, prowled Southern roads, enforcing the curfew for slaves, looking for runaways, and guarding rural areas against the threat of black uprisings. They were authorized by law to give a specific number of lashes to any violators they caught. The memory of these legal night riders and their whips was still fresh in the minds of both defeated Southerners and liberated blacks when the first Klansmen took to those same roads in 1866.

Aftermath of War

An even more immediate impetus for the Ku Klux Klan was the Civil War itself and the Reconstruction that followed. When robed Klansmen were at their peak of power, alarmed Northerners justifiably saw in the Klan an attempt of unrepentant Confederates to win through terrorism what they had been unable to win on the battlefield. Such a simple view did not totally explain the Klan's sway over the South, but there is little doubt that many a Confederate veteran exchanged his rebel gray for the hoods and sheets of the Invisible Empire.

Finally, and most importantly, there were the conditions Southerners were faced with immediately after the war. Their cities, plantations and farms were ruined; they were impoverished and often hungry; there was an occupation army in their midst; and Reconstruction governments threatened to usurp the traditional white ruling authority. In the first few months after the fighting

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Lynchings were a common form of vigilante justice during the 19th century.

The Unusual Origins of the Klan

The origin of the Ku Klux Klan was a carefully guarded secret for years, although there were many theories to explain its beginnings. One popular notion held that the Ku Klux Klan was originally a secret order of Chinese opium smugglers. Another claimed it was begun by Confederate prisoners during the war. The most ridiculous theory attributed the name to some ancient Jewish document referring to the Hebrews enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaohs.

A Klansman's costume from the late 19th century

In fact, the beginning of the Klan involved nothing so sinister, subversive or ancient as the theories supposed. It was the boredom of small-town life that led six young Confederate veterans to gather around a fireplace one December evening in 1865 and form a social club. The place was Pulaski, Tenn., near the Alabama border. When they reassembled a week later, the six young men were full of ideas for their new society. It would be secret, to heighten the amusement of the thing, and the titles for the various offices were to have names as preposterous-sounding as possible, partly for the fun of it and partly to avoid any military or political implications.

Thus the head of the group was called the Grand Cyclops. His assistant was the Grand Magi. There was to be a Grand Turk to greet all candidates for admission, a Grand Scribe to act as secretary, Night Hawks for messengers and a Lictor to be the guard. The members, when the six young men found some to join, would be called Ghouls. But what to name the society itself?

The founders were determined to come up with something unusual and mysterious. Being well-educated, they turned to the Greek language. After tossing around a number of ideas, Richard R. Reed suggested the word "kuklos," from which the English words "circle" and "cycle" are derived. Another member, Capt. John B. Kennedy, had an ear for alliteration and added the word ""clan." After tinkering with the sound for a while they settled on Ku Klux Klan. The selection of the name, chance though it was, had a great deal to do with the Klan's early success. Something about the sound aroused curiosity and gave the fledgling club an immediate air of mystery, as did the initials K.K.K., which were soon to take on such terrifying significance.

Soon after the founders named the Klan, they decided to do a bit of showing off, and so disguised themselves in sheets and galloped their horses through the quiet streets of tiny Pulaski. Their ride created such a stir that the men decided to adopt the sheets as the official regalia of the Ku Klux Klan, and they added to the effect by donning grotesque masks and tall pointed hats. They also performed elaborate initiation ceremonies for new members. Similar to the hazing popular in college fraternities, the ceremony consisted of blindfolding the candidate, subjecting him to a series of silly oaths and rough handling, and finally bringing him before a "royal altar" where he was to be invested with a "royal crown." The altar turned out to be a mirror and the crown two large donkey's ears. Ridiculous though it sounds today, that was the high point of the earliest activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

Had that been all there was to the Ku Klux Klan, it probably would have disappeared as quietly as it was born. But at some point in early 1866, the club added new members from nearby towns and began to have a chilling effect on local blacks. The intimidating night rides were soon the centerpiece of the hooded order: bands of white-sheeted ghouls paid late night visits to black homes, admonishing the terrified occupants to behave themselves and threatening more visits if they didn't. It didn't take long for the threats to be converted into violence against blacks who insisted on exercising their new rights and freedom. Before its six founders realized what had happened, the Ku Klux Klan had become something they may not have originally intended — something deadly serious.

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Klansmen were caught trying to lynch a carpetbagger in 1871.

ended, white Southerners had to contend with the losses of life, property and, in their eyes, honor. The time was ripe for the Ku Klux Klan to ride.

Mischief Turns Malicious

Robert E. Lee's surrender was not fully nine months past when six young ex-Confederates met in a law office in December 1865 to form a secret club that they called the Ku Klux Klan. From that beginning in the little town of Pulaski, Tennessee, their club began to grow. Historians disagree on the intention of the six founders, but it is known that word quickly spread about a new organization whose members met in secret and rode with their faces hidden, who practiced elaborate rituals and initiation ceremonies.

Much of the Klan's early reputation may have been based on almost frivolous mischief and tomfoolery. At first, a favorite Klan tactic had been for a white-sheeted Klansman wearing a ghoulish mask to ride up to a black family's home at night and demand water. When the well bucket was offered, the Klansman would gulp it down and demand more, having actually poured the water through a rubber tube that flowed into a leather bottle concealed beneath his robe. After draining several buckets, the rider would exclaim that he had not had a drink since he died on the battlefield at Shiloh. He then galloped into the night, leaving the impression that ghosts of Confederate dead were riding the countryside.

The presence of armed white men roving the countryside at night reminded many blacks of the pre-war slave patrols. The fact that Klansmen rode with their faces covered intensified blacks' suspicion and fear. In time, the mischief turned to violence. Whippings were used first, but within months there were bloody clashes between Klansmen and blacks, Northerners who had come South, or Southern unionists. From the start, however, there was also a sinister side to the Klan.

Black Codes

By the time the six Klan founders met in December 1865, the opening phase of Reconstruction was

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The Terror of the Nightrider

The scholar Gladys-Marie Fry, who writes about slave patrols in her book, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (University of Tennessee Press, 1977), believes it was no accident that the early Klansmen chose white sheets for their costumes. The following story was told to her by a black resident of Washington, D.C., who heard the story from his ex- slave ancestors:

The Klan's costumes were supernatural in appearance.

"Back in those days they had little log cabins built around in a circle, around for the slaves. And the log cabins, they dabbed between two logs, they dabbed it with some mortar. And of course when that fall out, you could look out and see. But every, most every night along about eight or nine o'clock, this overseer would get on his white horse and put a sheet over him, and put tin cans to a rope and drag it around. And they told all the slaves, 'Now if you poke your head out doors after a certain time, monster of a ghost will get you.' They peeped through and see that and never go out. They didn't have to have any guards."

Fry said such disguises meant to scare slaves were common and that the first Klansmen, knowing this, naturally chose similar uniforms, often embellishing them with fake horns and paint around the lips and eyes.

Relying heavily on the oral testimony of contemporary blacks whose parents or grandparents were slaves, Fry concludes that many slaves were superstitious, with real fears of ghosts, "haints," and the supernatural. But she said most slaves knew when white slave owners and patrollers were trying to fool them. One ex-slave told a Federal Writer's Project interviewer during the 1930s, "Ha! ha! dey jest talked 'bout ghosts till I could hardly sleep at night, but the biggest thing in ghosts is somebody 'guised up tryin' to skeer you. Ain't no sich thing as ghosts." Another former slave reported, "Dey ghost dere — we seed 'em. Dey's w'ite people wid a sheet on 'em to scare de slaves offen de plantation."

According to Fry's research, slaves may have been frightened by the slave patrols, but they were far from defenseless. A common trick of the patrollers was to dress in black except for white boots and a white hat, which did make a ghostly sight when a group of them were riding along on a dark night. On one such occasion, however, slaves stretched grapevines across the road at just the right height to strike a rider on horseback. The slave patrol came galloping along and hit the grapevines; three patrollers were killed and several others injured. There were no more mounted slave patrols for a long time afterwards in that county.

After the Civil War, when the Ku Klux Klan served the same purpose of controlling blacks as the slave patrols had, many whites (and later historians) mistook the surface behavior of blacks for their genuine feelings. For blacks, Fry says, "Appearing to believe what whites wanted them to believe was a part of wearing the mask and playing the game ... In another instance, on ex-slave who heard rumors of strange riders in his neighborhood went to his former master for information. The master told him, 'There are Ku Klux here; are you afraid they will get among you?' The black said, 'What sort of men are they?' The reply: 'They are men who rise from the dead.' According to the Congressional committee's report, this informant gave the matter considerable thought and rejected it. In his own words: 'I studied about it, but I did not believe it.' "

Fry continues, "It is significant that the early Klan made such great efforts to frighten and terrorize blacks through supernatural means. The whole rationale for psychological control based on a fear of the supernatural was that whites were sure that they knew black people. They were not only firmly convinced that black people were gullible and would literally believe anything, but they were equally sure that blacks were an extremely superstitious people who had a fantastic belief in the supernatural interwoven into their life, folklore, and religion.

"Such thinking had obvious flaws: the underestimation of black intelligence and the overvaluation of existing superstitious beliefs. Blacks were frightened, no doubt, but not of ghosts. They were terrified of living, well-armed men who were extremely capable of making black people ghosts before their time."

STEFANO BIANCHETTI/CORBIS

nearly complete. All 11 of the former rebel states had been rebuilt on astonishingly lenient terms which allowed many of the ex-Confederate leaders to return to positions of power. Southern state legislatures began enacting laws that made it clear that the aristocrats who ran them intended to yield none of their pre-war power and dominance over poor whites and especially over blacks. These laws became known as the Black Codes and in some cases amounted to a virtual re-enslavement of blacks.

In Louisiana, the Democratic convention resolved that "we hold this to be a Government of White People, made and to be perpetuated for the exclusive benefit of the White Race, and ... that the people of African descent cannot be considered as citizens of the United States." Mississippi and Florida, in particular, enacted vicious Black Codes, other Southern states (except North Carolina) passed somewhat less severe versions, and President Andrew Johnson did nothing to prevent them from being enforced.

These laws and the hostility and violence that erupted against blacks and Union supporters in the South outraged Northerners who just a few months before had celebrated victory, not only over the Confederacy but its system of slavery as well. In protest of the defiant Black Codes, Congress refused to seat the new Southern senators and representatives when it reconvened in December 1865 after a long recess. At the moment the fledgling Klan was born in Pulaski, the stage was set for a showdown between Northerners determined not to be cheated out of the fruits of their victory and die-hard Southerners who refused to give up their supremacy over blacks.

Ironically, the increasingly violent activities of the Klan throughout 1866 helped prove the argument of Radical Republicans in the North, who wanted harsher measures taken against Southern governments as part of their program to force equal treatment for blacks. Partly as a result of news reports of Klan violence in the South, the Radicals won overwhelming victories in the Congressional elections of 1866. In early 1867, they made a fresh start at Reconstruction. In March 1867, Congress overrode President Johnson's veto and passed the Reconstruction Acts, which abolished the ex-Confederate state governments and divided 10 of the 11 former rebel states into military districts. The military governors of these districts were charged with enrolling black voters and holding elections for new constitutional conventions in each of the 10 states, which led to the creation of the Radical Reconstruction Southern governments.

Despite the efforts made during Reconstruction, Southern whites re-imposed a racist regime almost immediately after the Civil War.

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Ghost Riders

In April 1867, a call went out for all known Ku Klux Klan chapters or dens to send representatives to Nashville, Tenn., for a meeting that would plan, among other things, the Klan response to the new federal Reconstruction policy.

Throughout the summer and fall, the Klan had steadily become more violent. Thousands of the white citizens of west Tennessee, northern Alabama and part of Georgia and Mississippi had by this time joined the Klan. Many now viewed the escalating violence with growing alarm — not necessarily because they had sympathy for the victims, but because the night riding was getting out of their control. Anyone could put on a sheet and a mask and ride into the night to commit assault, robbery, rape, arson or murder. The Klan was increasingly used as a cover for common crime or for personal revenge.

The Klan's Version of History

Few eras of United States history are as entangled in myth and legend as the period of 1865 to 1877, known as the Reconstruction. For the modern Klansman, this period of history is vitally important, and the retelling of the events of those days is a basic element of Klan propaganda.

The Klan version of Reconstruction goes like this: In the dark days immediately after the Civil War, Southerners were just beginning to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives when an evil and profit-minded coalition of Northern Radical Republicans, carpetbaggers and Southern scalawags threw out legitimate Southern governments at bayonet point and began installing illiterate blacks in state offices. Worse, the conspirators aroused mobs of savage blacks to attack defenseless whites while the South was helpless to do anything about it. The Radicals pulling the strings behind the scenes stole Southern state governments blind and sent them deeply into debt. After a few years of this, the Ku Klux Klan arose, drove out the carpetbaggers and Radicals and restored white Southerners to their rightful place in their own land.

The Klan was romanticized as the South's savior.

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Like all legends and myths, this particular scenario starts out with a few grains of truth, but winds up being a romanticized story, a version of history that white Southerners in the late 1800s wanted very badly to believe was true.

No events of this period illustrate the inaccuracy of the legend better than the race riots which occurred in Memphis and New Orleans in the first half of 1866. In both cases, white city police attacked groups of blacks without provocation and killed scores of men, women and children with the help of armed white mobs behind them. These were the worst incidents of white organized violence against blacks in that year, but by no means the only ones.

The next phase of the story concerns the Reconstruction governments that were installed in 1867 after Congress abolished the renegade governments formed by the ex-Confederate states immediately after the war. Some of these newly formed governments were indeed corrupt and incompetent, as white supremacists maintain. But historians who have studied these governments have found that often the greatest beneficiaries of the corruption were aristocratic white Southerners.

One historian summed up the radical governments this way: "Granting all their mistakes, the radical governments were by far the most democratic the South had ever known. They were the only governments in Southern history to extend to Negroes complete civil and political equality, and to try to protect them in the enjoyment of the rights they were granted." And when these governments were replaced by all-white conservative governments, most of these rights were stripped away from blacks and in some cases from poor whites as well.

The restoration of white government in the South was called "redemption," and although there are many historical reasons for the change, it was a development for which the Klan claimed credit, thereby placing the secret society in what it viewed as a heroic role in Southern history .

The Nashville Klan convention was called to grapple with these problems by creating a chain of command and deciding just what sort of organization the Klan would be. The meeting gave birth to the official philosophy of white supremacy as the fundamental creed of the Ku Klux Klan. Throughout the summer of 1867 the Invisible Empire changed, shedding the antics that had brought laughter during its parades and other public appearances, and instead taking on the full nature of a secret and powerful force with a sinister purpose.

Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest

All the now-familiar tactics of the Klan date from this period — the threats delivered to blacks, radicals and other enemies warning them to leave town; the night raids on individuals they singled out for rougher treatment; and the mass demonstrations of masked and robed Klansmen designed to cast their long shadow of fear over a troubled community.

By early 1868, stories about Klan activities were appearing in newspapers nationwide, and Reconstruction governors realized they faced nothing less than an insurrection by a terrorist organization. Orders went out from state capitols and Union army headquarters during the early months of 1868 to suppress the Klan.

Invisible Government

But it was too late. From middle Tennessee, the Klan quickly was established in nearby counties and then in North and South Carolina. In some counties the Klan became the de facto law, an invisible government that state officials could not control.

When Tennessee Governor William G. Brownlow attempted to plant spies within the Klan, he found the organization knew as much about his efforts as he did. One Brownlow spy who tried to join the Klan was found strung up in a tree, his feet just barely touching the ground. Later another spy was stripped and mutilated, and a third was stuffed in a barrel in Nashville and rolled down a wharf and into the Cumberland River, where he drowned.

With the tacit sympathy and support of most white citizens often behind it, the Klan worked behind a veil that was impossible for Brownlow and other Reconstruction governors to pierce. But even though a large majority of white Southerners opposed the Radical state governments, not all of them approved of the hooded order's brand of vigilante justice. During its first year, the Klan's public marches and parades were sometimes hooted and jeered at by townspeople who looked upon them as a joke. Later, when the Klan began to use guns and whips to make its point, some white newspaper editors, ministers and other civic leaders spoke out against the violence.

But in the late 1860s, white Southern voices against the Klan were in the minority. One of the Klan's greatest strengths during this period was the large number of editors, ministers, former Confederate officers and political leaders who hid behind its sheets and guided its actions. Among them, none was more widely respected in the South than the Klan's reputed leader, General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a legendary Confederate cavalry officer who settled in Tennessee and apparently joined the Klan fairly soon after it began to make a name for itself. Forrest became the Klan's first imperial wizard, and in 1867 and 1868 there is little doubt that he was its chief missionary, traveling over the South, establishing new chapters and quietly advising its new members.

The ugly side of the Ku Klux Klan, the mutilations and floggings, lynchings and shootings, began to spread across the South in 1868, and any words of caution that may have been expressed at the Nashville meeting were submerged beneath a stream of bloody deeds.

The KKK's First Death

As the violence escalated, it turned to general lawlessness, and some Klan groups even began fighting each other. In Nashville, a gang of outlaws who adopted the Klan disguise came to be known as the Black Ku Klux Klan. For several months middle

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Tennessee was plagued by a guerrilla war between the real and bogus Klans.

The Klan was also coming under increased attack by Congress and the Reconstruction state governments. The leaders of the Klan thus realized that the order's end was at hand, at least as any sort of organized force to serve their interests. It is widely believed that Forrest ordered the Klan disbanded in January 1869, but the surviving document is rather ambiguous. (Some historians think Forrest's "order" was just a trick so he could deny responsibility or knowledge of Klan atrocities.)

Whatever the actual date, it is clear that as an organized, cohesive body across the South, the Ku Klux Klan had ceased to exist by the end of 1869.

That did not end the violence, however, and as atrocities became more widespread, Radical legislatures throughout the region began to pass very restrictive laws, impose martial law in some Klan-dominated counties, and actively hunt Klan leaders. In 1871, Congress held hearings on the Klan and passed a harsh anti-Klan law modeled after a North Carolina statute. Under the new federal law, Southerners lost their jurisdiction over the crimes of assault, robbery and murder, and the president was authorized to declare martial law and suspend the writ of habeas corpus. Nightriding and the wearing of masks were expressly prohibited. Hundreds of Klansmen were arrested, but few actually went to prison.

The laws probably dampened the enthusiasm for the Ku Klux Klan, but they can hardly be credited with destroying the hooded order. By the mid 1870s, white Southerners didn't need the Klan as much as before because they had by that time retaken control of most Southern state governments. Klan terror had proven very effective at keeping black voters away from the polls. Some black officeholders were hanged and many more were brutally beaten. White Southern Democrats won elections easily and then passed laws taking away the rights blacks had won during Reconstruction.

The result was an official system of segregation which was the law of the land for more than 80 years. This system was called "separate but equal," which was half true — everything was separate, but nothing was equal.

Born Again

During the last half of the 19th century, memories of the Ku Klux Klan's brief grip on the South faded, and its bloody deeds were forgotten by many whites who were once in sympathy with its cause. On the national scene, two events served to set the stage for the Ku Klux Klan to be reborn early in the 20th century.

The first was massive immigration, bringing some 23 million people from Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Russia and a great cry of opposition from some Americans. The American Protective Association, organized in 1887, reflected the attitude of many Americans who believed that the nation was being swamped by alien people. This organization, a secret, oath-bound group, was especially strong in the Middle West, where the reborn Ku Klux Klan would later draw much of its strength.

The other major event which prepared the ground for the Klan's return was World War I, which had a wrenching, unsettling effect on the nation. On the European battlefields, white Americans again were exposed to unrestrained bloodshed while blacks served in the uniform of their country and saw open up before them a new world. Back at home, Americans learned suspicion, hatred and distrust of anything alien, a sentiment which led to the rejection of President Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations.

In the South, yet another series of events occurred which helped breathe life into the Klan several decades later. In the 1890s, an agrarian Populist movement tried to build a coalition of blacks and poor whites against the mill owners, large landholders and conservative elite of the Old South. The aristocracy responded with the old cry of white supremacy and the manipulation of black votes. As a result, the Populists were substantially turned back in every Deep South state except Georgia and North Carolina. A feeling spread across the South, shared by both the aristocracy and many poor whites, that blacks had to be frozen out of society.

The 1890s marked the beginning of efforts in the Deep South to deny political, social and economic power to blacks. Most segregation and disenfranchisement laws date from that period. It was also the beginning of a series of lynchings of blacks by white mobs. The combination of legalized racism and the constant threat of violence eventually led to a major black migration to Northern cities.

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William J. Simmons poses in his imperial wizard robe and mask.