

The Ku Klux Klan and Vigilantism

Essential question: What factors led to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee?

The Ku Klux Klan was formed in Pulaski, Tennessee between December 1865 and May 1866. Its founding members were six well educated former members of the Confederate army. They claimed that they originally intended the organization to be nothing more than a social club modeled on a popular fraternity. However, the organization quickly became something much more sinister: a paramilitary group that used violence and intimidation tactics on anyone who opposed their vision of a country ruled by white men.¹

The name Ku Klux was derived from the Greek word Kuklos meaning “circle” and “klan” was added for alliterative value. Following the fraternity tradition, the men developed secret signals and codes for passing messages. They created coded titles like Grand Cyclops (president) and NightHawks (messengers) and rituals including hazing of new members. The original six then donned some sheets with holes cut out for the eyes and began riding around the countryside crashing parties and playing practical jokes. As others became aware of the group, membership grew and new clubs or dens were created in surrounding counties.²

According to John Lester, one of the original Klansmen, the men only gradually realized that they could use their costumes and anonymity to frighten Blacks. However, some historians find this story doubtful. They believe that the group had intimidation of Black citizens as its main purpose from the beginning. The 1866 Civil Rights Act had

¹ Susan Campbell Bartoletti. *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.: The Birth of An American Terrorist Group*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2010). 13-16.

² Ibid., 25-26.

declared Blacks to have the same rights as whites. This likely horrified the former Confederates who had prospered under a legal system that denied equal rights to Blacks. On May 1, 1866 a confrontation between discharged USCT troops and policemen in Memphis was followed by two days of racial violence. Congress sent a special committee to Memphis to investigate the events. The Congressional Committee determined that

“the outbreak of the disturbance resulting from collision between some men and discharged colored soldiers was seized upon as a pretext for an organized and bloody massacre of the colored people of Memphis, regardless of age, sex, or condition, inspired by the teachings of the press, and led on by sworn officers of the law composing the city government and others.”³

Three days of violence left forty-six Blacks and two whites dead, five Black women raped and 75 people injured. Ninety-one homes, four churches and eight schools belonging to Black people were burned. The massacre also known as the Memphis Race Riots of May 1866 may have been the real motivation for founding the organization. ⁴

The Ku Klux Klan began patrolling roads and whipping Blacks who travelled at night. They also began collecting information about white Republicans and Blacks who were politically active. As former Confederates, the men could not vote in Tennessee elections, but they could harass and intimidate anyone who dared to vote for policies they opposed. In 1867, Klan members from all around the state met in Nashville. They revised and refined their rules, wrote a constitution called the Prescript and devised an

³ U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. *Memphis Riots and Massacres*. 39th Congr., 1st sess. 1866, Rep. 101. 5,

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llss&fileName=1200/1274/llss1274.db&recNum=10>

⁴ Bartoletti, *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.*, 21-23.

organizational system for spreading new dens throughout the south. The “Invisible Empire,” as they now called themselves, selected Nathan Bedford Forrest as their new Grand Wizard or leader.⁵

Forrest had made his fortune in the Memphis slave trade before the Civil War. During the war, Forrest was known as the “Wizard of the Saddle.” It is likely that the title “Grand Wizard” was derived from this nickname. Forrest was in command at Fort Pillow in 1864 when Unionists and Black Federal Troops were slaughtered, though he was never formally charged for the massacre.⁶ Forrest’s name drew even more former Confederates to the organization. While the organization claimed to be selective, many poor white men claimed to have been forced to join. They were threatened with fines and beatings if they did not participate.⁷

This “social club” quickly became an instrument of terror throughout the South. Blacks who defied social norms by looking white men in the eye, speaking to white women or doing anything that demonstrated pride were considered “uppity” and subject to abuse from the Klan. Blacks who enjoyed economic success were especially vulnerable to the vigilante justice handed out by the Klan. George Taylor had amassed 60 acres and 2 mules before the Klan broke into his home in the middle of the night. They dragged him outside where they whipped him until his backbone was visible through his wounds. Taylor and his family were forced to abandon their farm and possessions, a loss of about 500 dollars.⁸

In Tennessee, Klansmen increasingly targeted Radical Republicans as well as politically active Blacks. On August 12, 1868 a group of six masked men approached

⁵ Ibid., 41-46.

⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸ Ibid., 81.

Lewis Powell's home in Hickman County. Powell was a member of the Black Union League. Powell hid in the woods as the men advanced. The men asked Powell's wife for food. When she told them that her family was poor and had none to spare, the men opened fire, killing her. They rode off as Powell ran back to find his wife dead. Governor Brownlow ordered the State Guard to catch the klansmen, but they did not succeed.⁹

Frustrated with the State Guard's lack of success, Brownlow hired a private detective named Seymour Barmore to infiltrate the Klan. Barmore managed to get admitted to a den, but was later heard bragging about breaking up the Klan. A message was relayed to Klansmen in Maury County who boarded the train Barmore was on and kidnapped him. Barmore's body was recovered six weeks later. The Klan had sent a message: anyone who crossed them would die.¹⁰

As the organization grew, its ties with the Democratic Party grew as well. In Tennessee, Conservative Republicans and former Confederate Democrats were able to reclaim control of the legislature. When a new state constitution was put to a vote in 1870, Klansmen made sure that both Black and white voters voted for it or were too scared to vote at all. The ratification of the 1870 Constitution and the election of John C. Brown, a former Confederate general and Klansmen, meant that the Ku Klux Klan would continue to terrorize the state for many years to come.¹¹

⁹ Hardy, "Fare well to all Radicals"

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee

Using the text, answer the questions below.

1. When was the Ku Klux Klan formed? _____

2. Where was the Ku Klux Klan formed? _____

3. Who formed the Ku Klux Klan? _____

4. What type of organization did the men base the Klan on? _____

5. Why do you think the klansmen wore robes and hoods? _____

6. According to the klansmen, why was the organization formed? _____

7. What law declared Blacks to have the same rights as whites? _____

8. Why do historians think the organization was formed? _____

9. What actions did the Ku Klux Klan take towards Blacks? (2 examples) _____

10. What actions did the Ku Klux Klan take towards Republicans? _____
