

The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota ¹

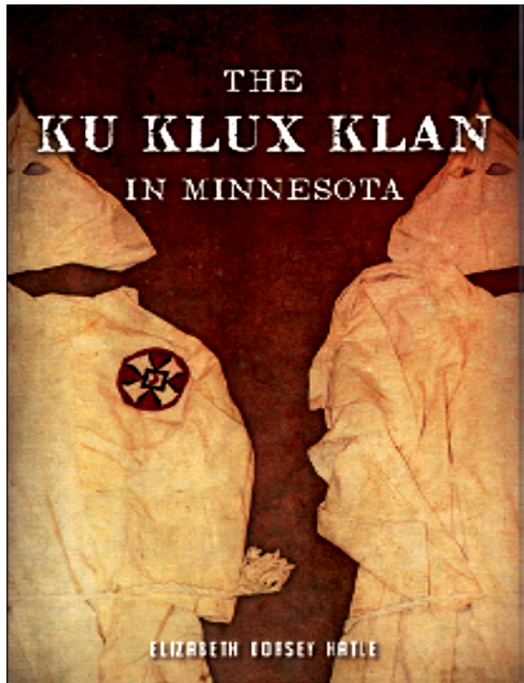
By

Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle

• ∞ •

A Book Review and Essay
by Thomas L. Olson

This past January, 2018, on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, residents of three Minnesota Iron Range communities were leafleted by a recruitment flyer from The Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The broadsides touted white supremacy, complained that



white people are denied the right to celebrate their culture, and for good measure described Martin Luther King Jr. as a “Communist pervert.” Predictably, community officials and leaders denounced the fliers. Soon thereafter the Southern Poverty Law Center noted that recent Klan recruitment efforts have been directed at heavily white communities. The three targeted Iron Range communities, Virginia, Buhl, and Embarrass are all located in 92% white St. Louis County.²

Piddling activity by a small North Carolina group associating itself with the Ku Klux Klan is of passing importance. That any group

¹ Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle, *The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota*, 187 pages, published by The History Press, Charleston, South Carolina (2013).

² John Reinan, “KKK Peddles hate Message on Iron Range,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 19, 2018.

believes Minnesota is fertile ground for white supremacy activism is not. Rural Minnesota, counties outside the Metropolitan core, by wide margins voted in 2016 for a presidential candidate whose message was clearly racist, nativist and given to hyperbolic ultra patriotism.³ With two additions, virulent anti-Catholicism and protecting the purity of white womanhood, those were also the major themes of Minnesota's earlier experience with the Ku Klux Klan which, in the 1920's, enjoyed improbable success throughout the state.⁴

This similarity of social and cultural attitudes, now separated by nearly a century invites us to re-examine Minnesotans' enduring beliefs and revisit the 1920's KKK in Minnesota. Although there are limited accounts, we are fortunate to have the recent work of Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle whose book, *The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota* was published in 2013 and a long article by Hatle and Nancy H. Vaillancourt, "One Flag, One School, One Language: Minnesota's Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's" published in *Minnesota History* (vol. 61, Winter 2009-10). Both works rely heavily upon primary sources drawn from the Minnesota Historical Society and from county historical societies where the Klan enjoyed a significant presence. These include personal papers; legal and court records; Klan and other organizational papers including newsletters and magazines; local newspapers, and a number of personal interviews with the descents of Klan members. Together, this material provides us with a great deal of information about Minnesota's 1920's Klan.

³ See <https://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/minnesota/> for Minnesota results by county. Ironically, St. Louis County, targeted by the KKK, voted for Clinton as did the other northeast counties. But the remainder of rural Minnesota is a sea of red. Pipestone County, as just one and not an unusual example, voted 70-24% in favor of Donald Trump. And Steele County, a hotbed of KKK activity in the 1920's, voted 59-33% for Mr. Trump.

⁴ This is not surprising. During the New Deal era Catholics voted strongly Democratic. Over the abortion issue, however, Catholics abandoned the Democrats in droves. It would not due for Republicans presently to target Catholics when their "base" has so many of them. Similarly, for any party to stick it's neck out in defense of heterosexual moral purity would invite more charges of hypocrisy when so many office holders and candidates of both parties are tainted publicly.

The first, post-Civil War Klan⁵ in the American South, a loose, secret, and ritualistic organization intended to intimidate blacks and bring down reconstruction, was destroyed by organizational weakness, an inability to control its more sadistic and murderous members, and by Federal action in the 1870's. It was reborn in Atlanta in 1915 and greatly influenced by D.W. Griffith's 12 reel silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and its predecessor novel, *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon Jr., both of which glorified the reconstruction-era Klan. In the South the new Klan existed primarily to intimate, harass, and even lynch African-Americans in order to keep them "in their place" and uphold "Jim Crow" segregation. A new ritual, cross-burning, was added to enhance intimidation and project Protestant symbolism.

After The Great War (WWI), this reinvented Klan, better organized and using paid recruiters, costume sales, dues and fees, spread out of the South and especially into the Midwest and West. There, intimidation persisted but violence was seldom used and its appeal broadened to include virulent anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-radicalism and pro-prohibition stances as well as promotion of unquestioning and uncritical American patriotism and loyalty. By the mid-1920's the revived Klan claimed 4-5 million members nationally although those estimates are disputed. As is well-known, Indiana became a center of KKK cultural and political influence. Less known is that the Klan enjoyed considerable growth elsewhere, including in Minnesota.

Minnesota, of course, had miniscule black and Jewish populations in 1920. So while racial hatred and resentments dominated KKK grievances in the South, Minnesota Klansmen demonized others: Catholics, un-Americanized foreigners, new immigrants generally, political radicals, unionists generally but especially of the I.W.W. ilk, and anyone else non-white and non-protestant. The Minnesota Klan, however, presented its message

⁵ The origin of the name Ku Klux Klan is said to be the Greek word *Kuklos* or circle.

positively. It invited citizens to ask themselves eighteen questions to determine if they were “real” Americans. Did they, for example, believe in Christianity; that Americans should hold no allegiance to popes, kings, or emperors; that public schools were the cornerstone of good government; law and order; the constitution; protection of “pure” womanhood; a “closer relationship of capital and labor (an anti-union stance); prevention of strikes by foreign labor agitators; limitation of foreign immigration, and finally, believe that “your rights in this country are superior to those of foreigners.” African Americans were not mentioned even though Klan membership was open only to whites. Indeed, it was open only to native-born whites. Those who were not native-born but wished to join were not, however, rejected. They were simply required to participate in a ceremony of “naturalization” for which there was an additional fee.⁶

In Hatle’s telling, the Minnesota Klan can be traced primarily to the anti-German sentiment which arose as a result of America’s entry into WWI, the American propaganda campaign against the “Huns,” Minnesota’s Committee on Public Safety, the Sedition Act of 1917, and opposition to radical unionism and to the Non-Partisan League and later the Farmer-Labor party. Its rise was also attributable to Protestant fears of Catholicism—especially that Catholic schools inculcated anti-American papist loyalty—and to protestant defense of prohibition. Catholicism and prohibition were neatly entwined issues since many, probably most, Minnesota Catholics were of German or Irish descent⁷ and many consumed beer and spirits.

Author Hatle is surely correct in her attributing a significant part of the Klan’s appeal to the patriotic fervor occasioned by United States entry into World War I. She might, however, have paid greater attention to the rise and success of the Nonpartisan League.

⁶ The Klan was ostensibly, like many other organizations of its time, for men only. But like other organizations there was a woman’s auxiliary for like-minded females. On “naturalization” see Hatle, pp. 29-30.

⁷ Irish being the other.

Founded in 1915 in North Dakota by Arthur Townley, the league was an agrarian protest that demanded and in a short while got a state-run bank, warehouses, a state-owned railroad, employer-funded workmen's compensation, a progressive state income tax, and a home-financing association. Its rise in the Midwest was meteoric.

Let's be clear. The Nonpartisan league was not socialist and far from Bolshevik. It was rather in the tradition of the Populist party of the 1890's. It simply wanted to level the playing field of capitalism. That was enough to threaten those in power—business and civic leaders—those who profited from the *status quo* and , who found it convenient to claim that agrarian radicals were in fact Bolsheviks, socialists, and anarchists out to destroy the proper order and America itself. When the Nonpartisan leaguers found common cause with pro-German immigrants over the issue of whether America should enter the war and the benefits that such entry would bring to American industrialists, it was too much for the existing order. The Minnesota Commission on Public Safety was the result.

How influential the Minnesota Klan was is a matter of conjecture. Hatle cites numbers suggesting that Klan gatherings throughout the state, complete with cross burnings, often drew more than a thousand people. Even considering that accurate crowd estimates can be difficult and that the Klan undoubtedly exaggerated its numbers, Hatle offers sufficient statewide examples to demonstrate that large turnouts were common and that Klansmen often traveled considerable distance to attend these gatherings. To Minnesotans today such numbers, considering Minnesota's far smaller population then, may seem vastly overblown. But in my own Minnesota research focused on Red Wing, I was initially surprised at how many people, in a town of 9,000, in the wintertime, on a week night, attended a basketball game or silent movies (two theaters) — nearly 1000. And those were “gate receipt” events, not crowd estimates. What's more, on any of those evenings many others were out of their homes for church or social or organizational affairs.

What is important to consider is that life in Minnesota in an age before significant commercial radio and before television entirely, centered on events outside the home no matter what the weather.

Despite impressive turnouts of members, prospective members, and the simply curious for Klan parades, mass meetings, initiations, speechifying, and cross burning, we are left with the question of how influential and/or intimidating the Minnesota Klan proved to be. To be sure, there were a few notable connections between Republican politicians and the Klan. The connection recurs throughout Hatle's book and especially identifies long-time State Auditor Stafford King as a Klan member as well as a leader of the American Legion. Republican U.S. Senator Thomas Schall is also said to have courted the Klan but is not identified as a member. But evidence that either of them endorsed intimidation or hued strongly to a Klan line or "agenda" is lacking. It may be that these politicians and others simply sought to network within any group where they might find voters. King and Schall were consummate politicians who would kiss as many babies or lean in whatever direction the wind blew to win votes.

In the 1920's it was not hard to find, within the ranks of both conservatives and progressives, views favoring prohibition, immigration restriction, opposition to unions, anti-radicalism, and hyper patriotism. And those views were likely reinforced through overlapping memberships extending well outside the party. The first half of the twentieth century were years of rapid growth for fraternal associations. Although some of the organizations—Rotary, Lions, and Kiwanis existed explicitly for service and networking (the Lions forbade discussion of politics or religion) that wasn't true for many. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, for example, was open only to whites until 1976 and after 1919 required that no member could be a member of or sympathetic to the I.W.W. or the Communist Party. The International Order of Odd Fellows remained all white until 1971. The Moose Lodge was open to white men only and

required that its members speak and write English. And the Masons, although requiring only a belief in God, was and is a secret organization. As was the Klan.

Perhaps most important was the rapid growth of the American Legion whose founding convention was held in Minneapolis in 1919. Although the American Legion was ostensibly non-political and stressed that it was about looking out for the interests of veterans, it widely and openly promoted an agenda of unquestioning loyalty, 100% American patriotism, anti-labor and anti-radicalism, military preparedness, and anti-progressivism generally. What is more, although the Legion was not closed to African-Americans members, black veterans were restricted to black-only clubs. That was as true in Minnesota as elsewhere.⁸ So, throughout Minnesota's towns and cities white men--business owners, white collar workers, veterans, and some farmers as well were members of organizations and, as we'll explore below, churches that even if they deplored the style and demeanor and intimidating marches and cross-burnings of the Klan, held to similar views. Although Elizabeth Hatle tells us there was overlap in membership, indeed that the Klan's Imperial Wizard, William Simmons, belonged to fifteen fraternal organizations, she doesn't explore those fraternal linkages. Indeed, in work that is sometimes rambling, and unnecessarily anecdotal and digressive, there is little analysis to help us understand the Klan's success.

In placing the Minnesota Klan's origins in the anti-German sentiments that arose during World War I and in Minnesota's Commission on Public Safety, Hatle is correct to say that dissent on who was responsible for The Great War and whether the United States should have entered on the side of the British and French empires came very quickly to be viewed not as dissent but outright disloyalty. And it was but a nimble step to equate that dissent with German-Americans, Catholic German-Americans in particular, or

⁸ To learn more about Americanism, loyalty, and patriotism, I recommend a book that's as relevant today as when it was written. It's University of Wisconsin historian Merle S. Curti's *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1946).

anyone who was not native born or who spoke English poorly. Those views were easily combined with a demand for national “unity,” and a willingness to compel it against immigrants generally and particularly to those who held “foreign” radical political and unionist ideas. Rolling stones not only don’t gather moss -- they can gain momentum. To broaden this argument somewhat, Hatle might have noted that this particular sequence of events began nationwide not upon American entry into the Great War but with the preparedness campaign that preceded it. There were sensational books, magazine and newspaper articles, movies and above all gigantic parades flying hundreds of flags all urging that America prepare for war. Above all, preparedness was not only a matter of national defense against the horrors of invasion (however remote that possibility) but was linked to an absolute demand for unity and patriotism. And, where the Spanish twenty years before had been seen as weak, the Germans were far more powerful and became a perfect foil to demonize and arouse nativist loyalty and unity. What’s more, Woodrow Wilson’s policy of maintaining U.S. neutrality was attacked by Theodore Roosevelt and others as weak and vacillating. Thus, amid the patriotic outpouring, pacifists and those who tried to link warmongering to war profiteering were given little credence. All of this was taken as a lesson by Wilson once war came and he became as oppressive of dissent (as was his Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer) as his earlier opponents. The lesson Wilson learned, moreover, was not lost upon future presidents. Nuance and patriotism have no time for one another.

It is important also to say that policies and attitudes of the progressive wings of both parties, Republicans and Democrats, in addition to pursuing such worthwhile reforms as restrictions on child labor, promotion of the eight-hour day, and woman suffrage, also had many proponents who at the same time favored government controls on individual liberties including prohibition and eugenics which were intended to “improve” American families. In foreign policy, all three “progressive” Presidents—Theodore Roosevelt,

Taft, and Wilson were carriers of the American “big stick” and “dollar diplomacy” especially when it came to muscling Latin Americans. What’s more, all three were enthusiastic champions of American corporatism though from different perspectives. As a result, their enmity for anything left of conservative craft unionism was pronounced.⁹

It is not surprising that the onslaught of wartime hysteria, encouraged and promoted by America’s business and political leaders and the American Legion, survived the war and became something of a groundswell when the Red Menace of Bolshevik Russia was added to an existing litany of fears and insecurity.

Importantly, the roots of racism, nativism, xenophobia, and anti-Catholicism go back much further than the build-up to American participation in the Great War. Attitudes toward all things Catholic, after percolating for a century, easily hopped the Atlantic and are to be found in numerous writings of the British American colonists as early as the 1630’s. With modest numbers of Catholic immigrants, expressions of such views subsided for a time in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Then, with the emigration of Irish Catholics following the 1845 Potato Famine and of German Catholics following the uprisings of 1848,¹⁰ anti-immigration and anti-Catholic sentiments found expression in the American or, pejoratively, the Know-Nothing Party. Although the party disappeared by 1860, for a time, as the Whig Party collapsed and the Republican Party was just rising, the Know-Nothings were a significant political force. The party tended to have strength in cities where the new immigrants competed with the native-born for jobs. For comparison, it is probably true that overall the new Ku Klux Klan in the 1920’s also found its greatest strength in cities although the Minnesota experience suggests that

⁹ Today, now 50 years since they were published, these books do more to explain the progressive era than studies before or since. Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916*, (NY: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State: 1900-1918* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1968); and Robert W. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1967).

¹⁰ Between 1850 and 1855 U.S. immigration increased five times over the previous decade.

its membership was broadly dispersed. It is also important to note that the Know-Nothings, although clearly anti-Catholic and nativist, also generally favored industrial regulation, prohibition, and improving the status of women and working people. Those were views also held in the early 20th century by progressives. In the North the party tended to be anti-slavery and when the party withered, most of its northern members gravitated to the Republicans.

Having been placed on a back burner but never without a pilot light, anti-Catholicism in particular resurfaced in the American Protective Association which was strongest in the Midwest, semi-secret, and drew upon Masonic ritual. Its 1894 statement of principles demanded first “loyalty to true Americanism,” but did not disqualify foreign born Protestant Irish, Scandinavians, or Britons. And indeed, many members were not native-born. So although the APA is often thought of as nativist that is at best a half-truth. But while it claimed tolerance for all religions, it simultaneously held that allegiance to any ecclesiastical power claiming equal or greater sovereignty with the United States was “irreconcilable with American citizenship.” As a result, the APA believed that such persons, i.e., Catholics, should not hold political office or be allowed to teach in the public schools. Importantly, the APA rejected the importation of “pauper” labor in order to protect American workers. And finally, some in the APA advanced the argument that the lowest class of immigrants, again Roman Catholics, were responsible for a high percentage of crimes committed and thus their entry should be restricted.¹¹

Other possible origins for the Minnesota Klan also deserve mention. Although there were few black persons in Minnesota and the Minnesota Klan did not specifically target blacks, Hatle does tell us about the lynching of black circus workers charged with rape in

¹¹ In addition to encyclopedia entries and a few articles, there are few monographs. Donald L. Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964. No articles have been published in Minnesota History about the APA.

Duluth—an incident that occurred prior to the rise of the Minnesota Klan. Although the episode is telling, persons who would participate in a lynching clearly possessed an exaggerated fear of and animosity toward African-Americans. And although it is true that Minnesota was among the earliest northern states to extend suffrage to blacks (males, 1868) the notion of race equality simply did not exist broadly in Minnesota in the first decades of the 20th century. An example is found in the boxing match between black Jack Johnson and James Jeffries (The Great White Hope) in 1910 in which Johnson pummeled Jeffries. Boxing was a far more popular spectator sport then than now. And the introduction of motion pictures meant that fight films became very popular. When the Johnson-Jeffries film was shown it provoked white rage around the country and in some instances rioting (by whites). Although no riots occurred in Minnesota, some local officials tried to ban the film and there was widespread feeling, including among local officials, that the display of a black man pounding a white was shocking and contemptible. Together with the fact that Minnesota members of fraternal organizations and the American Legion took for granted either segregation or exclusion of blacks, it's fair to say that although the Klan may not have singled out blacks for intimidation, an attitude of white racial superiority was widespread and assumed.

Nor does Hatle address the cultural upheaval that struck the United States in the wake of World War I. The phrase we all know is the “Roaring Twenties,” a catch-all for flappers, the Charleston, speak-easies and bathtub gin that doesn't help us explain the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. At its core was the status of women. Before World War I and Prohibition, women, proper women, did not enter saloons. Saloons were for men. Prohibition changed that—illegal speakeasies welcomed men and women. And in many places, including Minnesota, illegal drinking was sometimes, and sometimes frequently, winked at by law enforcement as was illegal gambling. For some, even those who may not have been committed “drys,” it was a matter of law and order—the law is the law. For others, those

who had supported the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League and believed that prohibition would "improve" American family life, the tepid enforcement of the Volstead Act was anathema.

There was other change. Before the 1920's women did not smoke cigarettes—certainly not in public. Suddenly they did and cigarette advertising spoke to that fact although sometimes obliquely as in the advertisement of one tobacco company which depicted a young woman who says, provocatively, "blow some, my way." That women could become hooked on cigarettes, a product which they had not formerly known they needed, can be attributed to Edward Bernays and his colleagues whose new "science" of advertising and public relations convinced women that smoking was linked to emancipation. In France, moreover, many American doughboys had casual sexual encounters with European women. As a result, there was an upturn in sexually transmitted diseases. As important, returning American soldiers brought with them a desire for European sexual practices, especially fellatio and cunnilingus, which their American partners also came to enjoy. And, on top of it all, and of great significance, by virtue of ratification of the 19th Amendment, women could, beginning in 1920, vote.

Although it may be apocryphal, the British band at the surrender at Yorktown in 1781 is said to have played a ballad, "The World Turn'd Upside Down." In part, its lyrics are:

Listen to me and you shall hear, news hath not been
this thousand year:

Since Herod, Caesar, and many more, you never heard
the like before.

Holy-dayes are despis'd, new fashions are devis'd.
Old Christmas is kickt out of Town.

Yet let's be content, and the times lament, you see the
world turn'd upside down.

In Minnesota, in the 1920's, a good many people, white Briton and Nordic Protestants especially, must surely have believed that despite the conservative politics of the time that the world had indeed been turned upside down. For good measure let's add that many Minnesotans had come to America, whether their ancestors, for the native-born, or more recently, from countries—Scandinavia, Britain, and even Germany, that were racially white northern European. And for the most part that was the culture they found in Minnesota. The idea that this comfortableness could be upended by immigrants owing allegiance to a Pope, or by Negroes migrating north to take their jobs, or by atheist, bomb-lobbing labor radicals who took their cue from the Bolsheviks, was more than many could stomach. To them, the Klan offered hope that America could be made right (great) again.

Finally, it must be said that “meat and potato issues” matter greatly in American politics. That Ms. Hatle fails to take into account the severe recession that hit America in the wake of World War I is thus surprising and a major flaw in her work. The recession's cause, of course, was the rapid retreat from a robust war-based economy. In the process, many American veterans, after loyally serving their country, found it difficult to land a job. On top of this, and crucial to our understanding of post-war nativism, was the belief that what jobs existed were being handed to recent low wage (Catholic) immigrants. That that travesty was not being played out in such Minnesota Klan strongholds as Steele County, for example, is of little matter. That it was perceived, true or not, to be happening nationally, was enough to give locals a cause for veteran and racial solidarity.¹²

Let's also be clear that the 1920's Klan in Minnesota seems never to have been a potent political force nor did it succeed in large scale intimidation of Catholics, new immigrants, or African-

¹² To be added to this is an agricultural recession which did hit Midwest export markets as European agriculture recovered rapidly following the war. This recession continued through the 1920's and was a cause and forerunner of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Americans. In part that may have been because although the 1920's Klan was far better organized than its post Civil War predecessor, it remained politically inept. Its efforts to sway a few local elections weren't successful and its primary focus was on oration, parades, and picnic gatherings. In addition, and importantly, it may have failed in its primary goal of intimidation and fear in Minnesota because in 1923, a legislator, Myrtle Cain (who was Catholic and a unionist), introduced an anti-masking bill that prohibited concealing one's identity in public. Although the Klan threatened reprisals on any legislator who voted for the bill, it passed unanimously.¹³ And that may well have limited any political or intimidation effects the Klan sought and caused sympathizers to shy from joining for fear of public exposure and denigration. So, although the Klan may have represented the social and cultural views of many Minnesotans, as a political force within the state it was marginal at best.

As it did nationally, the Minnesota Klan declined rapidly in the later quarter of the 1920's. The reasons for its decline are usually attributed, as Hatle does, to the criminal trial of Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson in Indiana in 1925, a growing belief that the Klan's leaders were enriching themselves, Klan violence in the South which was more than northern members could stomach, and a general bailing out by politicians who had endorsed or flirted with the organization. These may be true but insufficient explanations. Indeed, one explanation for the decline of the Klan in northern states especially may be due to the national acceptance of its principal notions regarding Catholics, immigration, nativism, and the fear of cheap labor. Its goals, after all, were national aims. One particular piece of legislation is on point. In 1924 Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) which established draconian quotas limiting immigration from Jewish, Catholic and poorer eastern and southern Europe and prohibited Asian immigration altogether. It was intended, according

¹³ Session Laws of Minnesota, 1923.

to sponsor Senator David Reed (R, Pa.), to keep" American stock up to the highest standard – that is, the people who were born here." The legislation passed handily with support from Samuel Gompers and American craft labor. There may be then, many reasons for the rise and then decline of the Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota and nationwide. But whatever the exaggerated or actual numbers of members or influence, the important point is that a large number, perhaps even a majority of Americans agreed with the Klan's positions on immigration, Catholicism, race, nativism, Americanism, and patriotism. They simply nodded a passive assent. Indeed, what a Minnesota thing to do.

So, here we are. Nearly a hundred years later. Although Minnesota voted narrowly for Democrat Hillary Clinton that was due to the state's principal cities. Geographically, the state voted overwhelmingly for a candidate who unashamedly professed anti-immigrant, racist, and ultra-nationalist positions. In rural Minnesota vote totals of 60-40 in favor of Donald Trump were common. Some were closer to 70-30. These are overwhelming statements.

Why? The answer, it seems to me, can only be that cultural and social issues continue to matter—a lot. Just as in the 1920's, presence of the Klan or no, sizeable numbers of people care deeply about social, cultural, and religious issues. Matters of immigration, now from Latin America rather than Eastern Europe, religion, now Islam rather than Catholicism, abortion and GLBT rights rather than STD's are all very much with us. Marijuana, which we were told was a drug as dangerous and addictive as heroin is now touted as not dangerous at all. In fact, it may be good for us. What's more, the Democratic party has taken on these and other issues of "identity" as their primary planks at the same time they have ignored economic and class issues—poverty, income disparity, housing, labor rights, and universal health care to the extent that they have lost the support of many of those whom they claim to champion.

What's worse, they have allowed cultural issues to define entirely "the left" in American politics.¹⁴

Finally, there's the "fear factor." Americans, Minnesotans included, have been led to believe, above all, that as the greatest nation, the "indispensable" nation, we are set upon by "evil doers" intent on spoiling our goodness by attacking directly or by undermining our "democracy." We are pure. They, the "other" threaten our goodness. That's been an American trait going back a long way. All of that was refined nicely during WWI. Once begun, however, it was harder to dial down once the war ended. Thus, in part, the 1920's Klan.

Are the 1920's with us? Of course. Can we escape? Unlikely.

• ∞ •

Reviewer

Thomas L. Olson was born and grew up in Red Wing, Minnesota. He earned a bachelor's degree from Wisconsin State University at River Falls and a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Minnesota. He taught at Mankato State University and the University of Minnesota and then enjoyed a career in university administration and in philanthropic development for educational, arts, and health care organizations. He is retired and lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He can be reached at tolson4377@comcast.net.

He is the author of "Blockbusters: Minnesota's Movie Men Slug it out with Studio Moguls, 1938-1948," one of the most frequently downloaded articles on the Minnesota Legal History Project website.

¹⁴ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (N.Y., Henry Holt & Co., 2004).

His book, *Sheldon's Gift: Music, Movies and Melodrama in the Desirable City* (North Star Press of St. Cloud, 2009) recounts the stormy history of show business in Red Wing, especially its iconic Sheldon Theater. More than local history, the book addresses the unique predicaments of entertainment enterprises, highbrow and low, in small cities. The book also has a good deal of courtroom drama in relating the story of movie-related lawsuits in the 1930's and again in the 1950's that challenged municipal theater ownership.



Posted MLHP: July 29, 2018