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Progressive Values in the Women's Ku Klux Klan

Abstract

Few scholars come across original documents or declarations of the Women's Ku Klux Klan. In fact, most Americans are unaware that during the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's, women were not only active participants but also created their own branch of the Invisible Empire. The evidence we do have of the Women's Klan reveals that the organization and the Klan itself had similar aims, but the women's branch grew to encompass a wider variety of values and beliefs. For a more thorough understanding of the Women's Klan one needs to examine the historical backdrop of the 1920's and, in particular, the Progressive movement. Both the efforts to create the WKKK and the beliefs espoused by its members reflect the Progressive movement's pattern of intervention into society to ameliorate its problems and uphold Victorian moral values.

Progressive Values in the Women's Ku Klux Klan*Jackie Hill*

I, the undersigned, a true and loyal citizen of the United States of America, being a white woman of sound mind and a believer in the tenets of the Christian religion and the principles of "pure Americanism," do most respectfully apply for affiliation in the Ladies of the Invisible Empire.¹

Few scholars come across original documents or declarations of the Women's Ku Klux Klan. In fact, most Americans are unaware that during the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's, women were not only active participants but also created their own branch of the Invisible Empire. The evidence we do have of the Women's Klan reveals that the organization and the Klan itself had similar aims, but the women's branch grew to encompass a wider variety of values and beliefs. For a more thorough understanding of the Women's Klan one needs to examine the historical backdrop of the 1920's and, in particular, the Progressive movement. Both the efforts to create the WKKK and the beliefs espoused by its members reflect the Progressive movement's pattern of intervention into society to ameliorate its problems and uphold Victorian moral values.

Progressivism of the early twentieth century encompassed a wide range of interests, reforms, and ideas; however, all of the organizations and individuals within the movement felt the need to intervene in a "corrupted" industrial society to uphold certain cultural values. Most of these reformers, although called "progressive," glorified conservative Victorian ideals. The purity of women was one of the values that Progressive leaders sought to protect. Jane Addams' settlement house reforms and D.W.

¹ "Women Klan Members Reveal Family Life," *New York Times*, October 1, 1922, <http://www.proquest.com>.

Griffith's creations in the film industry, for example, based their innovations on the idea that women are moral guardians. The Ku Klux Klan, egged on by one of Griffith's productions, "Birth of a Nation," was reborn amid these Progressive-era reforms. The Invisible Empire redefined its values, expanding the need to safeguard the purity of white women to saving the values of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant race in general.

The second Ku Klux Klan ostensibly endorsed the same values as its post-Civil War predecessor, but changes in modern society instigated its new attacks against almost any non-whites and non-Protestants. As Griffith's film illustrates, the first KKK arose during the Reconstruction period as an attempt by Southern ex-Confederates to defend white supremacy against interference by both Northerners and newly freed black slaves. Kathleen Blee, a WKKK scholar, points out that "the rituals and organized terrorism of the first KKK were based on symbols of violent white masculinity and vulnerable white femininity."²² The Klan terrorized African Americans, claiming that they threatened the purity of poor white Southern females. Many years later, high rates of immigration, rapid urbanization, and the migration of blacks to the North instigated a rebirth of the Klan. The wave of Progressivism that swept the political, economic and social arenas of the early 20th century also hit the Klan. For the KKK, intervention in society was necessary to defend "100-percent Americans" against what it saw as alien influences. This second Klan also based its values on the notion of vulnerable femininity, but many of the KKK's attacks in the 1920's were against Catholics, Jews, and immigrants as well as African Americans.

² Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12.

The second Klan also diverged from its precursor by addressing female voices that had begun to reverberate with much more strength. Efforts to create a women's division of the Klan began under the ruling of Grand Dragon William J. Simmons. As early as 1915, Simmons began preaching against "alien" influences. Simmons did not stray from the pattern of exploiting womanhood to justify terrorism and racism; he simply converted it into a symbol of all white Protestant values that had become threatened during the Progressive Era.³³ Simmons quickly rose to power and as Grand Dragon he hired Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Clarke to be publicists. Tyler's power within the KKK grew to such a degree that members began to fear a "breach in the all-male domain" of the Klan.⁴⁴ Simmons responded to these tensions by appointing Tyler to oversee plans for a women's organization. Internal problems within the Klan erupted shortly thereafter, however, and a new Grand Dragon, Hiram Evans, emerged to take Simmons' place. Evans and Simmons battled for months and advocated their competing women's divisions, Simmons' "Kamelia" and Evans' "Women of the Ku Klux Klan." On the surface the two programs were basically the same, and Elizabeth Tyler's personal beliefs and purpose statements echoed in the doctrines of both. In the end Evans' organization prevailed, but it eventually found support from former "Kamelia" members as well.

The struggle to create a Women's Klan was an example of Progressive intervention into an existing organization to improve it in light of modern circumstances. The Klan, which from the beginning had promised to protect vulnerable white females from corruption, needed to be reinterpreted in light of women's suffrage. In a sense, the

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

ability to vote elevated women to an equal status with men and empowered them to demand more than a minimal role in the new Klan. The KKK, a fraternal society that championed male supremacy, was opposed to transferring most of their power to the females within their organization. A solution that they could tolerate was to establish a separate entity which would hardly interfere with the men's agenda but would nominally allow the women equal rights. Elizabeth Tyler explained early on that "the women's organization will be on par with that of the men. We plan that all women who join us shall have equal rights with that of the men."⁵⁵ However, she also mentioned that "the women's division...will not be in any sense a dependent auxiliary of the Ku Klux Klan. It will be a separate organization...bound to the parent organization."⁶ This proposed female Klan would therefore not conflict with the interests of the original but would still owe its allegiance to and fully support the KKK. This plan was Progressive because it sought to alter and improve the existing organization to accommodate the new roles of women.

Like Progressive women who had used their image as moral guardians to attain suffrage, female Klan members fought for their own division by appealing to the values the Klan represented. As active members in their own organization, women argued, they could both represent and promote the chastity and purity of women. In an interview with the *New York Times* on September 13, 1921, Elizabeth Tyler proclaimed that "women ought to join us and when they know the real purposes of this organization they will want to become members... The Klan stands for the things women hold most dear."⁷⁷ Women

⁵ "Says Women Here Flock To Join Klan," *New York Times*, September 13, 1921, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

declared that as the embodiment of integrity and righteousness, they would utilize a division of the Klan to salvage moral values that had been corrupted by modern society and alien influences. One early organization created as a predecessor to the WKKK, the “Tri K Club,” boasted that with a female Klan “many of the moral uplift problems of the present could be solved.”⁸ One of its purposes was to “bring the young women of today who will become the mothers of tomorrow into a sense of responsibility of their duties.”⁹ The efforts of these female Klan members to win support for their own, separate organization were as progressive as those of the suffragists and other social organizations at the time.

Many of the beliefs and doctrines of the Women’s Ku Klux Klan resembled those of the “revived” KKK. The Klan under Simmons emphasized white supremacy and believed America to be “a white man’s country, so ordained by the will of God, and that the reins of the government should and must rest in the hands of its white citizens.”¹⁰ In response to swarms of immigration from Europe in the early 20th century, the Klan expanded its definition of “white” to exclude “every colored race in the world, so far as the United States is concerned.”¹¹ The Second Klan was also vehemently anti-Catholic and anti-Jew. According to Klan members, the KKK opposed these groups because they failed to advocate a separation of church and state. Tyler, interviewing as a representative for Simmons in 1921, explained further that members of the Klan “must owe no allegiance to any foreign Government or power, and the Catholic and Jew, under these

⁸ “Klansmen Honor American Mothers,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1925, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Woman Organizer Defends Ku Klux,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1921, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹¹ Ibid.

conditions, automatically bar themselves.”¹² The Klan of the 1920’s promoted “100-percent Americanism” but limited the term to Protestant Anglo-Saxons.

The female division of the Klan also sanctioned racism and was intolerant of any religion other than Protestantism. Some of the objectives outlined in the literature for the WKKK were “to advocate more stringent immigration laws...to oppose intermarriage between members of white, black, yellow, and brown races” and to ensure that in America “no room will be left for un-American ideals, religious or political.”¹³ Women of the Klan plainly reacted the same way as the male members to new waves of immigration and new patterns of racial intermarriage. Also, entry into the WKKK was just as strict and carefully monitored as was initiation into the Klan. In order to join the Ladies of the Invisible Empire of Baltimore, for example, women had to answer a series of questions that mirror many of those that men were asked. A 1922 issue of the *New York Times* spelled out several of these inquiries:

What is your religious faith? Catholic, Jew, Protestant, or Mohammedan?
 What are your political affiliations?
 Do you owe any allegiance to any foreign nation, Government, institution, people or Ruler?
 Do you esteem the United States of America, its flag and Constitution above any other nation, flag and Government, and will you ever be loyal in supporting the same? ¹⁴

Emphasis on Protestantism, brutal race bigotry, fear of alien influences, and “100-percent Americanism” were the main requirements for female Klan membership. The WKKK took most of this doctrine from its paternal organization.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Join ‘Invisible Empire,’” *New York Times*, January 7, 1923, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹⁴ “Women Klan Members.”

The WKKK, however, did have its own motives and promoted separate ideals which underscore the Progressive component of the institution. In particular, women of the Klan wanted to use their power to educate women as well as improve life at home, within the church and in society. Cash-collectors for Simmons' proposed "Kamelia" stated that their objective was to "educate women in the science of government and history of the United States and to contribute funds to orphanages and similar deserving institutions."¹⁵ These propositions seem more similar to those of reformers like Jane Addams or anti-child labor organizations than the Ku Klux Klan. Similarly, the aims of a Shreveport chapter were "to assist all Protestant women in the study of practical politics...to scrutinize with impartiality the platforms of political parties and the declared principles of all fraternal and civic organizations."¹⁶ Clearly the women endorsing a WKKK understood that such an organization would offer opportunities beyond its notoriety for racism and violence. Although the WKKK was openly racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic, its goals of improving society and educating women were Progressive aims.

In addition, women continued the Progressive trend of endorsing moral guardianship and motherhood after they were granted permission to establish their own division. The use of the term "motherhood" appears in several of the WKKK's doctrines and literature. Major Kleagle Leah Bell stated that "we must get back to the teachings of our mothers, and if we had lived up to those teachings there would be no need for the Ku Klux Klan or any other organization in America today."¹⁷ The image of motherhood, which was seen as sacred by Klansmen since its formation, was a Victorian image that

¹⁵ "Thrift, Kamelia, Thrift," *New York Times*, October 2, 1923, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹⁶ "Join 'Invisible Empire.'"

¹⁷ "Klansmen Honor."

Progressives also sanctioned. The WKKK simply manipulated it to fit within the Ku Klux Klan's purpose statements. Klanswomen also expressed a concern with "the happiness of the home and the welfare of the state" and sought to bring about recognition of the Bible as the one sure foundation of true Americanism."¹⁸ Progressives similarly associated motherhood with the home and expanded the image of the "home" to represent domestic America. The essence of motherhood that Klansmen had used to underscore male supremacy became in the Progressive era a tool that women could also employ for their own objectives.

One final bit of evidence that highlights the Progressive aspect of the WKKK is the parallel decline of the Progressive era and the female Klan. Early into the 1920's, new immigration laws which barred many Europeans from entering the United States had begun to take effect. Klansmen and Klanswomen saw the threat of "alien" influences decline. "By 1928," Blee asserts, "membership [in the Klan] declined to several hundred thousand."¹⁹ Also, many of the voices of Progressive reform, including those of Klan members, were silenced as the country suffered the unemployment and poverty of the Great Depression. More importantly, the intolerance and racism of the KKK and WKKK became much more apparent near the end of the 1920's. In a 1927 *New York Times* article, one female Kleagle, Mary King, resigned, declaring that "although we entered the Klan with the highest of ideals, working for the betterment of the nation, the actual working out of the ideals has not been so good."²⁰ The next era of the Klan remained mostly in the South and in the hands of men who spoke out against New Deal programs,

¹⁸ "Join 'Invisible Empire.'"

¹⁹ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 175.

²⁰ "Many Klanswomen Quit," *New York Times*, March 13, 1921, <http://www.proquest.com>.

Communist organizers, and Southern blacks.²¹ The Progressive tide had risen and fallen, ending the heyday of the Women's Ku Klux Klan.

Although the WKKK plays a marginal role in both history and literature, it remains a shining example of Progressivism and the concerns of early 20th century Americans. Without the precedent of moral reform set by Progressives, a female Klan never could have existed. The Ku Klux Klan, like many organizations that experienced drastic change during the time, responded to female voices and their demand for a more active role. To achieve this goal, the women flaunted their stereotype as moral guardians of the home—both a Progressive strategy and an appeal to the ideals of the Ku Klux Klan. Once in power, the women fought for education and social reform like many Progressive reformers but with the ugly shadow of racism and intolerance. The Women's Ku Klux Klan, like the Progressive movement, failed to accomplish all of its goals and faded from the horizon with the arrival of Depression and war. Both, however, uncover from the depths of the early 20th century the values and beliefs of many prominent Americans that would shape history for decades to come.

²¹ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 176.