

From The Middle

In 1922 A Kansas Paper Gave Readers An Inside Look At The Klan. The Evil It Exposed Was Timeless.

By Max McCoy
Kansas Reflector

On the big hill west of town they met on hot summer nights beneath a wooden cross illuminated with electric bulbs. Purists might have said the cross should have been flaming, but at least there were the hoods and the white robes and the desperate oaths and the silly language rife with the letter “k.”

This wasn’t the original Ku Klux Klan, the secret society formed by a half-dozen former Confederate officers in 1865 to terrorize newly freed Black people and to fight Reconstruction. That first Klan had been dismantled by 1872 and its hooded leaders jailed.

No, this was a reimagined Klan, a movement that had been sweeping Main Street America in a wave of nostalgia and bigotry. What was happening at night on the big hill just outside Coffeyville was similar to other meetings held across the country, with Protestant religion and patriotic fervor masking the worst impulses of those beneath the hoods.

The meetings weren’t strictly social occasions.

The Klan was organizing, running candidates for office, and attempting to insinuate itself into every aspect of civic life, under the guise that it was doing good charitable and patriotic work.

One citizen who wasn’t buying it was A.J. Valentine.

Valentine was the 39-year-old editor of the Coffeyville Morning News who thought the Klan meetings were both absurd and dangerous. In October 1922, he announced that the News had an informant in the ranks of the local Klan.

It was a risky move for Valentine.

A rival editor would later note, in a 1943 local history, that what Valentine may have lacked in discretion he made up for in bravery.

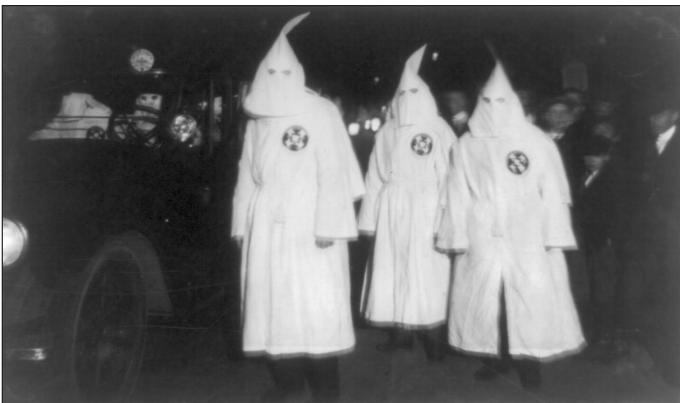
Valentine’s paper was an upstart not yet three years old, struggling against the well-established Coffeyville Journal and other publications, including by 1923 the Daily Dawn.

The summer of 1922 had burned like a torch as the resurrected Klan spread its hooded influence across Kansas, its kiegles organizing new chapters in towns big and small. It may have seemed an unusual turn for a state that had been admitted to the Union as free on the eve of the Civil War, but that had been 61 years ago, and Kansans, like just about everyone else in America, had been buffeted by change.

A world war, a pandemic, and the disorienting rush of the Jazz Age had frightened many into longing for an imagined earlier time, a fictional America where there was moral order and political stability. There was also a cancerous nostalgic yearning for a time before so many people had so many freedoms. Like the old Klan, the resurrected version targeted Black people, Jews, and Catholics.

Encouraged by the 1915 film “Birth of a Nation,” the first blockbuster, which portrayed the original Klansman as heroes and Black people and carpet-baggers as rapists and villains, Americans in the millions flocked to join the new “Invisible Empire.”

For them, the hood and robes and fiery crosses had become symbols for real Americans, an exclusive



Ku Klux Klan members gather at a parade in Virginia in 1922. (Library of Congress)

club of white Protestant men (although there was a women’s auxiliary). Most of the 1920s Klan members were described as solid middle class citizens.

Coffeyville became a stronghold of Klan activity, with the local chapter of the Invisible Empire railing against the perceived lawlessness of South Coffeyville, a town a mile to the south, across the Oklahoma line. It was Prohibition, and the Klan said bootleggers from South Coffeyville were a corrupting influence. But then, it thought jazz music and teen necking parties were wicked, too.

Valentine’s Klan reporter, whoever he was, first appeared in the Oct. 11, 1922, edition of the Morning News. The writer took the tone of a society editor reporting a black tie affair.

“One of the most delightful cow pasture parties of the season was held on the big hill west of the city,” the piece began. “It was a masquerade affair, white robe and white mask completely concealing the identity of each guest. The decorations consisted of a large cross which was lit up with electric light bulbs — the cows having been removed before the fun started.”

In a ceremony called “naturalization,” an oath was administered to new members, requiring allegiance to the Invisible Empire. The initiates were required to swear they would die before divulging Klan secrets.

“The guests did not give their names to the News’ cow pasture society reporter but the following automobile tags were noticed attached to the cars that were assembled.” A list of 10 tag numbers and the names the secretary of state had registered for each vehicle followed.

Over the next few days, additional installments in the cow pasture saga identified more vehicles and their owners. Letters began appearing in the Morning News from citizens who claimed somebody else had borrowed their cars to attend the Klan meeting. In one case, the executive of a pipeline company said he was the owner of record for a number of company vehicles, but he couldn’t control the movements of every auto.

Some of the hoods, at least, were finally off. Valentine, a relatively obscure editor astride a powder keg of bigotry and popular influence, may have had the most to lose.

He certainly was among the most audacious.

But Klan influence continued to swell in southeast Kansas, culminating in the beating of a local mayor, Theodore Schierlmann. His offense? He was Catholic, had spoken out against the Klan, and had refused to rent a local hall for a Klan function.

“Reign of Terror is On,” a Morning News headline

declared.

On Oct. 30, Gov. Henry J. Allen came to Coffeyville and during a speech at a local theater denounced the Klan. It was a secret order, he said, operating without benefit of a state charter as required of other social and fraternal organizations.

“We confront in Kansas an astonishing development of prejudice, racial and religious,” Allen said, as reported by the Associated Press. “It is seeking to establish the un-American idea that we can improve the conditions in the state by turning it over to a masked organization which arrogates to itself the right to regulate the individual.”

Allen, a Republican, said he had instructed the state attorney general to expel every Klan official from the state.

The organization, he said, “has taken the old Ku Klux Klan from its grave. It has set up the incredible philosophy that we require religious instruction from masked men whose characters and capacities are concealed by disguise.”

On Dec. 8, 1924, an explosion wrecked the publishing offices and plant of the Daily Dawn, the Klan newspaper. Nobody was hurt in the 1 a.m. blast, but damage was estimated at \$75,000 — or about \$1.4 million in today’s dollars.

“Nitroglycerine was used,” reported a Nevada, Missouri, newspaper. “Besides wrecking the newspaper plant the blast badly damaged an adjoining grocery store, a bicycle shop and a florist shop. Almost the entire roof of the Daily Dawn building was blown off and the front and rear walls were blown out. Windows for several blocks were shattered.”

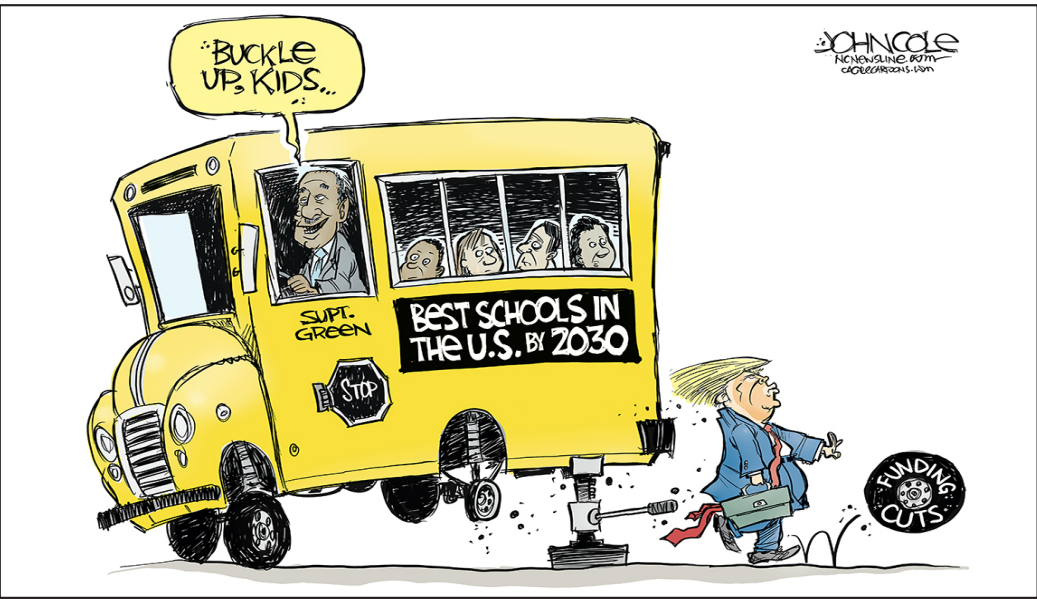
Also in 1925, the Klan was officially declared illegal in Kansas.

But the legacy of the Klan lived on, especially in places like Kansas City, where a former Klansman held office for 30 years, according to Rives. There were also at least 41 incidents of lynching of Black people across the state to 1927, and perhaps more.

In 1928, Valentine sold the Morning News. The paper was absorbed by the Journal the next year. In 1929, he took over as editor of a paper at Lincoln, Nebraska, and by 1940 was running a bookstore there.

His story — that of a small-town editor fighting a cultural torrent of hypocrisy and violence — is a just a minor part of the American saga. But it’s a story worth remembering, because all history is ultimately local history. What we do has meaning. Our individual acts of kindness and cruelty, our refusals to remember and our embrace of the past, imagined or actual, contribute to who we are as a nation.

Personally, I’d rather live in the America that A.J. Valentine thought was worth saving.



Commentary

Cuba’s Water Tower Reminds Water Still Flows, Life Is Still Lived



By John Plevka

Lots of people, including me, like to snap artsy photos of stuff in the sky: pretty sunsets, unique cloud formations and dazzling rainbows. Mother Nature’s canvas is always fresh and alluring.

By contrast, there is a less-dazzling, manmade thing that still dots certain skylines that continues to catch my eye: Old water towers.

These aging structures are more feats of engineering than works of art; yet, for whatever reason, I’m drawn to them. They have character and have literally stood guard over communities and withstood the tests of time and elements for generations. But the small, old towers are disappearing, typically replaced by the new curvy, cookie-cutter golf-ball-seated-atop-a-tee-shaped towers that now populate many horizons.

The newer design is a single-pedestal elevated tank. They are often smartly painted by a proud community and sometimes even sport some type of identifying signature or artwork.

In the case of Morton, Illinois, aka “The Pumpkin Capital of The World” (we’re the home of the Libby’s pumpkin-pie filling processing plant), a tasteful pumpkin design adorns one of the town’s towers. It’s neat, but the shape of the modern towers has a wallpaper effect: They blend in; they don’t stand out.

Whereas the distinctive older towers, often still found in small rural communities, have tanks of varying shapes and capacities seated high atop four, five or six welded steel legs.

I find these sometimes rickety-looking things fascinating. Always have. Several years ago, I was mildly relieved to find there are others who share this unusual affinity. In the small central Illinois town of McLean, several residents refused to let go of their retired hydro hero.

After the sleek, new single-pedestal tower was put into service in the

town, located about 150 miles south of Chicago on Interstate 55, several locals stood up to save the rusty, decommissioned, multi-legged structure. The town council initially rejected the plea but ultimately relented. In the days since, a neat new Tower Park has sprung up at the foot of the 95-year-old structure. The group continues to raise funds to clean the landmark and refurbish it with a mural to salute the town’s link to historic Route 66, which basically parallels the path of I-55 through much of Illinois.

You’ve got to love their spirit.

There is an appreciation that these elderly tanks, some with capacities of less than 100,000 gallons of water, are an identifying flag for a community.

For most rural towns, especially those on the flatlands, there are typically two things that poke into the sky and are visible from

would spend every other Sunday afternoon at the Cuba home of grandparents Frank and Bessie Makalous. They had moved to town after having sold their farm. For whatever odd reason, I was — and still am — fascinated by the Cuba water tower. It was within easy walking distance on the gravel streets. It was always fun to sit directly beneath, gaze skyward and ponder deep, kid thoughts.

Years later I snapped a photo from that same spot directly under the tank. I have randomly included it as an extra-credit “What is this thing?” question in pop quizzes given to my Illinois State University students. Mind you, most ISU students come from Chicagoland, so many of their answers/guesses have been entertaining. “Spaceship” is a common response.

Cuba’s friendly stove-pipe-shaped tank is kind of entertaining in another aspect. It sports what I’ve always believed to be a funny little party hat. In fact, for those old enough to remember the ancient TV cartoon show “Tom Terrific,” the pointy Cuba hat looks exactly like Tom’s.

But hat or no hat, I still marvel at these aging, yet still functioning, towers.

When driving westward on US 36 to visit my hometown of Belleville, located about nine miles west of Cuba, catching that first glimpse of the Cuba tower silhouetted on the grainy horizon means I’m almost home. It’s a friendly “Welcome” sign that beckons in the distance. And seeing it is a reminder that small farming towns like Cuba, despite years of serious economic headwinds, still have a proud identity. Still have a pulse. Fresh water still flows. Lives are still being lived here.

John Plevka is originally from Belleville and is the son of the late Frank and Eileen Plevka. He was a long-time daily newspaper editor in Illinois and later the adviser to the campus newspaper at Illinois State University. He is retired but continues to teach journalism courses at ISU.



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