

KLAN GATHERING YONDER

Smiths Falls and the Ku Klux Klan of Kanada

From 1925 until about 1931, the Smiths Falls Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan of Kanada (KKKK) played host to the annual Eastern Ontario conclave of the 'Invisible Empire'. Smiths Falls was chosen as an ideal site for the festivities because it was a rail junction, it lay within driving distance of both Quebec and northern New York State, and, with more than 700 members, the local Klan chapter had the manpower and resources necessary to stage an event that attracted up to 15,000 participants.¹

The Ku Klux Klan that gathered at Smiths Falls in the late 1920s was, however, at the high point of a largely unsuccessful attempt to transplant an American institution in barren Canadian soil. Even the American Klan itself was a bastard offspring of the 1870s nightriders who, in the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, defied the U.S. Federal Government and re-asserted White control over Blacks² in the American south. The 20th century Klan, in the United States and Canada, was the creation of Baptist Preacher Thomas F. Dixon Jr. (1864-1946).

In 1905 Dixon published his novel *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*³. The book was essentially a defense of Jim Crow segregation positing that, if made fully free, Blacks would turn violently savage, committing murder, rape and pillage. Dixon portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as protecting White southerners, and especially their women-folk, from the depredations of Blacks, carpetbaggers, and all things Northern. Dixon's book created much controversy but was a widely read best seller.



At the turn of the 20th century the American movie business was in its infancy, so it was 10 years before Dixon's book reached the silver screen. Re-titled *Birth of a Nation*⁴, the 1915 production by D. W. Griffith⁵ was the first full length feature ever made. With plot lines as racist and revisionist as the novel, it portrayed the heroic KKK rescuing the southern way of life from stupid and sexually aggressive Blacks (played by Whites in blackface).

¹ In the same years, similar 'demonstrations' were also held each summer at Kingston, Belleville and other locales in Eastern Ontario as well as several locales across the rest of the province.

² Replacing slavery with Jim Crow and segregation.

³ The second in a trilogy of KKK novels, between *Leopard's Spots* and *The Traitor*.

⁴ Not to be confused with the 2016 movie of the same name.

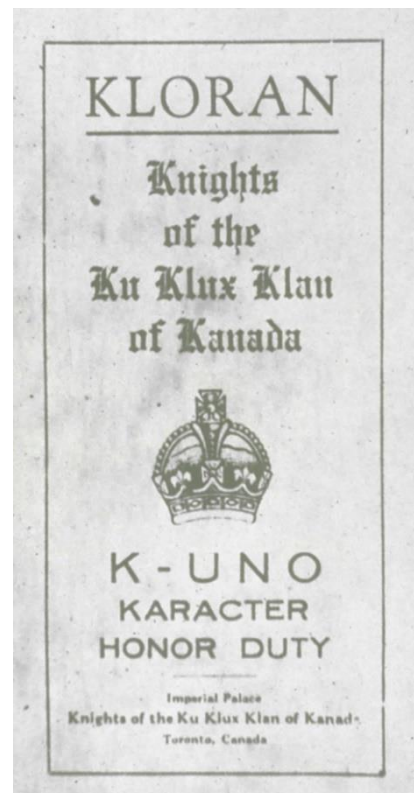
⁵ David Ward Griffith (1875-1948).

In the summer of 1915, with *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* at the height of their popularity, William Joseph 'Doc' Simmons (1880-1945), former Methodist preacher and lover of Kentucky bourbon, had a vision. Watching the sky one night he claimed to have seen ghost riders galloping among the stars, a sign he took to mean he was destined to revive the noble, patriotic Ku Klux Klan portrayed in the Griffith film.

Simmons' bizarre vision might not have survived the sober light of dawn except for the lynching that summer of Leo Frank, a Jew, who a Georgia mob decided had raped and murdered a Christian girl. There was great doubt that Frank was guilty, but his lynching was applauded across the south and the vigilantism it took to get the job done widely approved. By October Simmons had attracted enough support that his new Knights of the Ku Klux Klan was inaugurated with prayers, rituals and a cross burning on Stone Mountain⁶ near Atlanta, Georgia. The new Klan adopted a wider range of hatreds than the old, hunting Jews, Catholics, dissenting Protestants and immigrants, as well as Blacks, but stuck faithfully to the methods of the 1870s; fire, whip and noose.⁷

The first Ontario chapter of the Knights of Ku Klux Klan of Canada/Kanada was organized in Toronto in 1925 by Richard L. Cowan who became the Imperial Wizard (President). Because it was a highly secretive 'Invisible Empire' it is impossible to say how many members the Ontario KKK attracted. At its peak, a reasonable guess might be somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 with the lower end of that range being most likely, and most of those were in Western Ontario Klaverns. Clearly, the vast majority of those attending the Smiths Falls rallies were spectators seeking some free entertainment.

The task of adapting and transplanting the American Klan to Canada, and to Eastern Ontario in particular, proved daunting⁸. Blacks, the primary target of Klan hatred, were essentially non-existent in Eastern Ontario, the Jewish population amounted to a handful of small town shop-keepers and, with roots a century deep, the Loyal Orange Lodge had a lock on a white male protestant membership, hyper loyalty to the British Crown, anti bolshevism and baiting Catholics, French Canadians and immigrants. The Ku Klux Klan, was simply redundant. The Orange Lodge⁹, and to a lesser extent the Sons of England Lodge¹⁰, represented insurmountable competition for the same 'hearts and minds' coveted by the KKK.



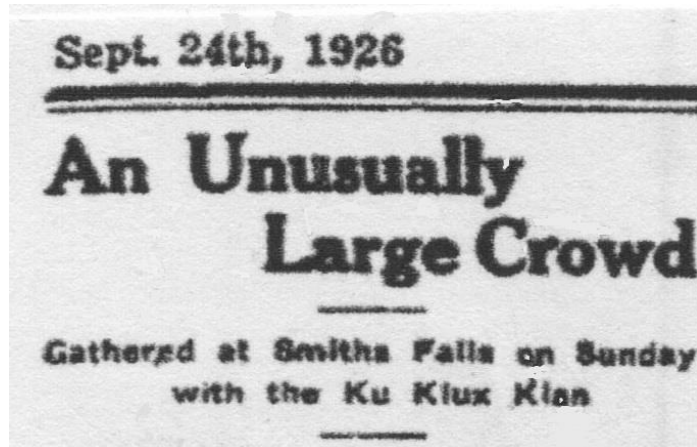
⁶ The largest bas relief in the world is carved into the face of Stone Mountain. It depicts three southern heroes of the Civil War; Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. Cross burning is an invention of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and the October 1915 event represented the first time the KKK staged a cross burning.

⁷ The preceding three paragraphs are excerpted from *Rendition on Wellington Street*, by Ron W. Shaw (2018), Global Heritage Press, ISBN 978-1-77240-098-4.

⁸ Although the KKK did meet with considerable success in Saskatchewan where, in the late 1920s, it claimed over 25,000 members and considerable political influence.

⁹ Founded 1795 in Ireland and 1830 in Ontario.

¹⁰ Founded in 1874.



Incidents of serious violence in Ontario were rare but the Klan had no more than begun to organize when a party of its zealots dynamited St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church at Barrie in 1926. Four years later a group of hooded nightriders attacked a mixed-race couple at Oakville, forcibly separated them and burned their house. Ontario media, politicians and civic leaders spoke out against such violence and, even though in sympathy with much the Klan claimed to stand for, the general public came to

regard the Klan as *"foreign, American, and inimical to the British tradition of commitment to fair play, common sense, tolerance, give and take, and the rule of law"*.¹¹

The following is an amalgam of local news coverage, taken from the pages of the Smiths Falls *Record News*, the *Almonte Gazette*, the *Perth Courier* and the *Kemptville Advance*, of Klan rallies held at Smiths Falls over the weekends of September 19-20, 1926, August 20-21, 1927 and September 8-9, 1928. The on-the-spot reporting of local correspondents conveys an excellent sense of the events and their time.

The fiery cross of the Ku Klux Klan blazed forth in Smiths Falls when the KKK held their annual gathering on the outskirts of the town.

A Klan demonstration had been expected for several days and citizens awoke on Saturday morning to find that members of the invisible empire had been busy during the night. At several of the most important street corners the symbolic letters KIGY were painted upon the streets and a huge arrow directed pedestrians and vehicles to McEwen's Field¹² on the east side of town. The letters KIGY mean 'Klan Is Gathering Yonder'.

That the Ku Klux Klan of Canada is strongly organized in Smiths Falls was evidenced at the mammoth demonstration. Klansmen and Klanswomen from Kingston, Belleville, Brockville, Gananoque, Picton, Prescott, St. Catharines, Ottawa, and scores of other places throughout Eastern Ontario, as well as points in Quebec and New York State, were present with local members. A conservative estimate places the total number of persons in McEwen's Field at the evening session at fifteen thousand, constituting the largest crowd that has ever been seen in Smiths Falls. The attendance in the afternoon was not quite so large.

Only Protestants were allowed into the grounds and the entrance was guarded by members of the order, attired in full regalia and in some cases carrying swords. A steady stream of motor cars continued through the grounds all day and many American and Quebec licenses were noted.

¹¹ *Shades of Right, Nativist and Fascist Politics in Canada, 1920-1940*, by Martin Robin (1994).

¹² Site of the Gallipeau Centre (formerly Rideau Regional Centre), 361 Queen Street, Smiths Falls.

Mounted white-robed members of the Klan rode through the crowds keeping order and now and then shouting commands in gruff disguised voices, but others, whether intentionally or in forgetfulness, raised their masks and rode around with their faces in full view. More than one who had got safely by the main guards was escorted off the field.

The Klansmen wore the usual peaked hood and white robes and the robes were decorated with the Klan insignia on one side and a green maple leaf in a red circle on the other. The horses wore white covers and hoods with the letters KKK painted on them in bright red.

The square in which the services were conducted was marked off with hundreds of Union Jacks. Speakers harangued the crowd from platforms and soap boxes scatted here and there. On another platform was stationed a twelve-piece orchestra under the leadership of William Yarwood which led in the singing of the National Anthem, 'Nearer My God to Thee', 'O Canada', and other sacred and patriotic selections.



Smiths Falls Klan parade moving south on Beckwith Street c1930

There was much to impress and entertain the curious. Hundreds of women attended the meeting. Many children were noticed among the crowd and some were tiny tots who were hardly able to toddle along and had to be assisted by bigger brothers and sisters.

The afternoon meeting, which started at about 3 o'clock, attracted a large crowd who heard the principles of the Klan explained by the Imperial Kaliff¹³ of the order who hails from New Brunswick, and by the King Kleagle¹⁴ of London, Ontario, both of whom showed themselves to be very able speakers. The former was not attired in the KKK uniform. The Kleagle wore his robes but was not masked.

The King Kleagle opened the meeting.

"The Klan is here in Smiths Falls", he said, "and it has been here for some time. At first there were only 20 members, but you can now multiply that number and put some 0's on it".



Imperial KKKK Kaliff & New Brunswick MLA, James Simpson Lord (1875-1932)

The Imperial Kaliff, Vice Wizard of the Klan movement, led in prayer, and then gave the chief lecture of the day. He referred to the Klan as the greatest movement of all time, a distinctly Canadian organization. Its purpose being to unite the White, Protestant, Gentile people of the land, and to combine and direct the sixty million¹⁵ White people of the world in the interests of White civilization. The Klan is first a Christian organization and then a national organization, he said, making a strong plea for British solidarity.

The speaker stated that the Ku Klux Klan had no quarrel with the Roman Catholic, in fact, he said, he had more respect for the R.C. who went to his church, and who was not afraid to tell the world his religion, than he had for the weak-kneed Protestant who was ashamed to proclaim his church.

The Klan was a legacy passed down from the ancient Protestant Scotch clans, the Kaliff declared. The KKK of Canada is Canadian. It is organized from coast to coast. Its aim is to make Smiths Falls a better town, Ontario a better province and to improve the Dominion as a whole. Klansmen believed that the one way to exist and thrive was by living a Christian life, remember that all mankind were brothers but believing above all else that the White race must be saved.

The Klan had no ill-feeling toward the black, yellow or brown races and was not out to fight them. It was a law-abiding organization and every member must swear to uphold national law and order.

"But the Roman Catholics have organized and put over a definite program," the speaker continued, "and the Jews, and the Chinese and the Japs have done the same thing, so we too, as a body of White men, need to come together and stand shoulder to shoulder so that every White man and every White woman is helping in the uplift of the White race.

¹³ James Simpson Lord (1875-1932), Conservative MLA for Charlotte County in the New Brunswick Legislature and 'Imperial Kaliff' (Vice President) of the Ku Klux Klan of Kanada.

¹⁴ The 'Kleagle' is the KKK official in charge of recruitment.

¹⁵ What this number alludes to is a mystery.

This is a distinctly White organization, founded on the belief that White women must be protected and God pity the man who dares trample on the rights of a White woman where the Ku Klux Klan is”.

The Vice Wizard spoke to the crowd many times on the evils of white women marrying outside their race and contaminating the blood line. He deplored the fact that White women were marrying men of other races.

“Let us put over a clean White program that will prevent our blood from being mongrelized,” he said.



KKKK rally at Kingston, 1927

Discussing the religious aspect of the organization the Imperial Klaliff said it was not narrow, believing in freedom and justice to all.

“We have a right to worship in our churches and we must protect that right. We are not anti anything. A man who is a child of God cannot hate anything”.

The speaker explained that apart from being a Christian organization the Klan is out with a pure White man’s program. He told Klansmen to trade with fellow Klansmen, to give their jobs and dollars to White men, and insisted that only the stores of white Protestants be patronized, not those of the Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Ruthenians¹⁶ and other foreigners who are usurping the White man’s place in Canada.

¹⁶ Ruthenians or Ruthenes, was a term applied to Eastern European immigrants from Lithuania, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

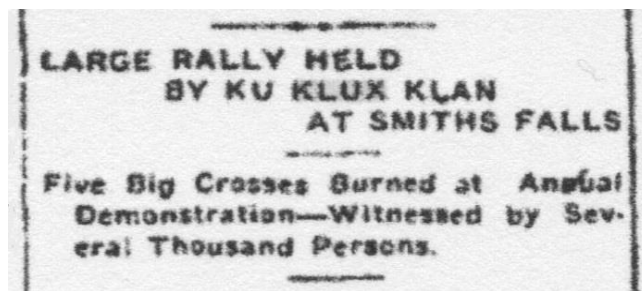
In conclusion the Imperial Kaliff declared.

“The Klan stands especially for true Christianity, pure patriotism, British solidarity and unity, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the separation of church and state, one flag, one free public school and the elevation of the White race.”

Before the meeting closed, the King Kleagle urged everyone interested in the Klan to seek further information at the tents in the grounds, one for men and another for women. He urged all people, if they never joined the Klan, to go home and consider the words that they had just heard and to try to apply them to their home life for the sake of love and happiness.

The evening session commenced about 7:30 o'clock and the rule of admitting only white gentile Protestants was once again very strictly observed. The same speakers were again heard. Each made an impassioned plea for true Christianity and for the upholding of the British Empire and the British flag.

After darkness had fallen five crosses were set ablaze. Ranged from 30 to 70 feet in height they could be seen even from the center of town. The largest cross presented an impressive scene as it burst into flames and illuminated the field, showing the white robed figures.



Against a beautiful moonlit sky, the evening service was most impressive and included the full initiation and obligation of 106 candidates, of whom 22 were ladies. This brought the total number in the Smiths Falls Klan to about 700. Each candidate was masked. The initiatory was very impressive and solemn oaths were taken by each new Klansman or Klanswoman.

The ladies of the Kingston Klan then demonstrated Klan drill. Light was provided by automobile head lights and by the burning crosses. In the semi-darkness scores of white cloaked and masked figures presented a rather impressive sight.

The evening session came to a close shortly after ten o'clock. While no announcement was made, it was freely rumored that a demonstration would be held in Hamilton next Sunday.

Both sessions were featured by perfect order through the crowd of fifteen thousand spectators. The speakers were given excellent attention and every member of the gigantic gathering appeared to be intensely interested in the proceedings. The weather was ideal for such an event.

The massive turnout at the Smiths Falls KKK rallies did not, however, necessarily suggest endorsement and support from community leaders or the public in general. Even before the Klan convened on McEwen's Field an Arnprior *Chronicle* editorial condemned the Invisible Empire.

The Ku Klux Klan –

The people of Ontario usually have looked upon Ku Klux Klan activities as something not very creditable to any country but nevertheless as something far removed from our peaceful country and not affecting us at all. But now we wake up to find the Ku Kluxers at our very doors. They have been burning crosses at Smiths Falls and in other places in this particular section of the country.

Furthermore, they promise to take an active part in the next Ontario Provincial election according to announcements made at public meetings held at Barrie and elsewhere a few weeks ago. Everyone knows what constructive policies these Klansmen seek to carry out, how suited they are in our country of two languages and different religions.

Why such an organization whose very existence depends upon its success in keeping discord, animosity and hatred alive in any community should find any footing in Ontario at all would be hard to understand if we did not know that there is a certain element in any community which will be attracted to any such thing no matter what it may be and if we did not know that organizers and Imperial Wizards of the Klan find Canadian dollars just as comfortable in their pockets as they have found millions of dollars in the United States.

There is no room for a Klan organization in any part of Canada. We have our little troubles of race and religion, but we are getting along very well, and the different races and creeds are coming to understand each other better every day. Any decent-minded Canadian with an eye to the unity of his fellow citizens will have nothing but contempt for the Klan and its agents.¹⁷

As alluded to by the Arnprior *Chronicle*, the Smiths Falls mass rally was not the only Klan activity in the local area. Over the summer of 1926, in the run-up to the Smiths Falls conclave, there was a rash of cross burnings across southern Lanark County. Three months before the Klan gathered on McEwen's Field, the Perth *Courier* reported ...

Fiery Cross In Montague –

The symbol of the Ku Klux Klan, a 13-foot fiery cross, was burned in Montague on the Franktown Road about one mile and a half beyond the corporation limits of Smiths Falls on Thursday night last week.

When it burst into flames at 10:10 o'clock it considerably startled the members of Mr. W. A. Bissonnette's family whose home is about 150 feet from the spot at which the cross was erected and other farmers in the vicinity were also given a shock on discovering the flaming symbol.

This is the fourth cross that has been burned in this district in recent months.¹⁸

¹⁷ Arnprior *Chronicle*, June 1926.

¹⁸ Perth *Courier* June 25, 1926.

The Klan's selection of the Bissonnette home as cross-burning locale is unsurprising in that the family was both French-Canadian and Roman Catholic.¹⁹

In the aftermath of the 1926 Smiths Falls conclave the *Perth Courier* continued to report cross-burning incidents.

Cross Burned Near Perth –

*A cross was burned on Tuesday night on the Scotch Line near Perth, apparently by the Ku Klux Klan, the fire lasting for a couple of hours and emitting a strong odor of coal oil in the neighborhood.*²⁰

After 1928 the Klan largely disappears from the pages of district newspapers. Local editors may have taken a decision to ignore their antics in the hope that the organization would just go away. In any case Klan attempts to entrench itself were faltering. By the mid 1930s the KKK in Ontario had withered, crippled by increasing negative publicity and severe financial difficulties brought on by the Great Depression. Attendance estimates for the annual summer rally at Smiths Falls, as reported by the local press, declined from a high of 15,000 in 1926, to about 12,000 in 1927 and 5,000-6,000 in 1928. The last rally held at Smiths Falls seems to have been staged in 1931 or 1932.

- **Ron W. Shaw (2018)**

¹⁹ As recorded in the 1911 census.

²⁰ *Perth Courier*, October 8, 1926.