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Southern History

Junior

“Ku Klux Klan Hood (Ca. 1920s)”

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Clothed in White

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A prominent image when one thinks of the Ku Klux Klan is the masked hood that many members wore. At the time that they were most common in the 1920s, they were not identified as terror-related, but as an item of ordinary and prestigious attire. The hood was representative of the practices and the goal of the 1920s Klan which was to embrace Protestant Americanism. They sought to impose an identity on American society that was often in conflict with the developments that were beginning to take shape after World War I. The organization often used the hood as an emblem that represented intimidation but also a form of unity among their own members. The 1920s KKK hood represents a mysterious symbol that was blind to progressive ideals and sought to impose traditional rule on an ever-changing American society.

The origins of the first Ku Klux Klan dates to just after the Civil War. The North had beaten the Confederacy and they sought to impose Reconstruction authority on the South. The first KKK was organized in Pulaski, Tennessee by former Confederate soldiers that sought to drive Republican politics and newly enfranchised blacks from public life in the South (Pegram 6-7). In the sense, this organization was exclusively in the South at a time after America fought a divisive Civil War due to the issue of slavery. The movement was an exclusive anti-black platform that sought to deny the civil liberties that were granted to newly freed slaves. They often responded to those seen as opponents with harsh violence, such as beating and whipping. The costumes that they wore at the time were not the same attire that they are known as wearing, such as white robes and hoods. They would wear extravagant objects such as gigantic animal horns, fake beards, coon-skin caps, or paper hats. They often drew on elements of folk traditions (Kinney). These forms of exotic wear were meant to give that Klan a unique style that was designed to increase the degree of fear in their opponents. Due to the attitudes at the time after

the Civil War in the South, the group became popular, but also prompted a threat to American democracy and the liberties given to blacks. In response, Congress passed the Force Acts from 1870-1871 that were designed to impede the KKK operation, and it proved to be largely successful (Schaller et al. 530). However, after WWI and the progressive ideals growing within American society including popular media, the KKK was able to ascend to a rebirth of historical proportions with a new physical identity.

During the middle of WWI, a historical contribution of cinematic masterpieces was laid upon the eyes of America. In 1915, D.W. Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*. The film was highly influential on leading members of society including current president at the time Woodrow Wilson. The film depicted the KKK as South's saviors by saving white women after the Civil War. Blacks were negatively cast as simpleminded or vicious (Schaller et al. 692). The KKK were seen as heroic figures in a time when blacks were cast in a narcissistic view with society. They reflected images such as Thomas Jefferson's viewpoint that they were inferior to whites. The costumes these "heroes" in *The Birth of a Nation* wore are what today give the KKK its current identity. In the film, the KKK was dressed based on illustrations by Thomas Dixon Jr. in his book *The Clansman* released in 1905 (Gilad). This represented the beginning of the white robes and pointed hoods that have characterized the KKK today.

The founder of the second Ku Klux Klan that was popularized in the late 1910s was William Joseph Simmons. In 1921, the new leader E.Y. Clarke and the Klan "opened the Gates City Manufacturing Company in Atlanta to mass produce regalia imitating *The Birth of a Nation*'s design (Kinney). The mass production of KKK merchandise was often due to the increasing membership that came about because of fears that were being stocked in the 1920s. The design of the hoods that the KKK came up with was inspired by sixteenth century Spain

dating back to the Spanish Inquisition. At the time, Spain evoked sinners atoning for their sins and they did so by wearing *capirotes* that had different colors and symbols based on the sin that they committed (Gilad). This sort of spiritual foundation connected with the KKK when they embraced Protestant values within their ranks. The Klansmen saw it as their duty to uphold the Christian values America was founded on and enforce them during an onslaught of shifting cultural norms and attitudes. Their intolerance of values other than those that were Protestant was growing as new ideas began to gravitate toward mainstream America.

What made the second Ku Klux Klan different from the first was that it was much more intolerant with a growing number of Americans that they saw did not fit their nativist vision of America. Their aim of dispute grew from just anti-black to anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, and anti-bootleggers. They blamed immigrants and non-Protestants as stealing jobs and they denounced corruption that was taking place with the urbanites (Gordon 3). Many of these arguments can still be applied to the circumstances that are occurring today. They feared Catholics that would take office because they saw them as pulpits of the Pope that endangered nativist American values. They saw the influence of Jews as dangerous because they saw them as radicals who had influence in banking and finance (Schaller et al. 769). A lot of the rhetoric that was hammered by the KKK reflects a patriotic tone at the turn of WWI. The nationalistic tone that was projected by leadership encouraged massive numbers of members. The most shocking aspect of this group was the ordinariness and indifferent nature it took. Their advertisements were plastered across the press and large KKK events were scheduled publicly to celebrate the patriotism and fraternalism aspects of the organization (Gordon 79). It was not until the average American learned the corruption and scandals that were plaguing the KKK that they understood the true nature to what was behind their white clothed hoods.

When one sees the image of the 1920s KKK hood, the first thought that comes to mind is one of overt racism. However, that conclusion forges the attitudes that were presented to ordinary Americans living in a time of prosperous economic growth. The organization grew during the melting pot structure of American society that they saw as threatening Protestant American values. To disrupt the changing patterns, the KKK adopted techniques to intimidate their enemies and one of these tools was the infamous pointed hood. The hoods represent an organization concealed by a vision of the past facing off against a more progressive and diverse American future. The hood highlights the vision to conceal and cast out current American society to advance a vision that was becoming increasingly threatened by a shifting American culture.

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