

Ku Klux Klan, 1868

Its very name struck terror in the hearts of its victims. However, the beginning of the Ku Klux Klan was innocent enough. In December 1865, eight months after the South's surrender, a group of six young men living in the village of Pulaski near Nashville, Tennessee decided to relieve their boredom by organizing a social club. All were veterans of the Confederate Army and some had attended college where fraternities with three-letter, Greek-based names were popular. In mock-imitation, they came up with the alliterative title Ku Klux Klan for their group. Their meetings would be secret and devoted to elaborate ceremonies. Members would disguise themselves with a costume made up of a sheet to cover their bodies, fanciful masks to hide their faces and pointed headgear that heightened their stature. Their leader would be known as the Grand Cyclops.

Although their motives may have been innocent, the appearance of these white-sheeted, horse-mounted apparitions on the town's darkened streets triggered a panic-driven flight for safety by the community's recently freed slaves. Soon, terrorizing Blacks became a prime sport and the transition of the KKK from an innocuous social club to a ruthless vigilance committee began.

Transmitted by word-of-mouth and newspaper articles; knowledge of the Klan rapidly spread through the South. Post-war conditions in the former Confederacy were chaotic. The rapid expansion of the Klan was fueled by a wide-spread fear among many Southern Whites of an insurrection by former slaves and seething resentment against Northern "carpet-baggers" who had invaded the South since the end of the war. Local organizations mimicking the original group's secrecy and costumes sprang up in various communities. It wasn't long before the Klan evolved into one of the South's most powerful organizations. However, there was no hierarchical chain of command – merely a loose-knit association of independent local groups that shared common goals and tactics. Former slaves and carpet-baggers were favorite targets for intimidation backed up by violent night-time raids that could end in death.

The KKK's reign was short-lived, its decline hastened by the revulsion of many southerners to its extreme methods and suppression by local governments. By 1868, its power was beginning to wane. In 1871 Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act that authorized the use of federal troops in the Klan's suppression and for the trial of its members in federal court. The Klan melted away, or at least did not make any further public appearances until its revival in 1915.

"I shook hands with Bob before they hanged him."

Ben Johnson was born a slave around 1848. Eighty-five years later he was interviewed by a team from the Federal Writers' Project that was gathering recollections from former slaves. We join him and his wife as they sit on the front porch of their home near Durham, NC and he recalls his encounters with the Ku Klux Klan shortly after the end of the Civil War:

"I was born in Orange County [North Carolina] and I belong to Mr. Glibert Gregg near Hillsboro. I don't know nothin' 'bout my mammy and daddy, but I had a brother Jim who was sold to dress young misses fer her weddin'. The tree is still standing where I set under an' watch them sell Jim. I set dar an' I cry an' cry, especially when they puts the chains on him an' carries him off, an' I ain't never felt so lonesome in my whole life. I ain't never hear from Jim since an' I wonder now sometimes if'en he's still living.

I knows that the master was good to us an' he fed an' clothed us good. We had our own garden an' we was gitten' long all right.

I seed a whole heap of Yankees when they comed to Hillsboro an' most of them ain't got no respect for God, man, nor the devil. I can't remember so much about them though cause we lives in town... an' we has a gyard.

The most that I can tell you 'bout is the Klu Klux. I never will forget when they hung Cy Guy. They hung him for a scandalous insult to a white woman an' they comed after him a hundred strong.

They tries him there in the woods, an' they scratches Cy's arm to get some blood, an' with that blood they writes that he shall hang 'tween the heavens and the earth till he is dead, dead, dead, and that any nigger what takes down the body shall be hanged too.

Well sir, the next morning there he hung, right over the road an' the sentence hanging over his head. Nobody would bother with that body for four days an' there it hung, swinging in the wind, but the fourth day the sheriff comes an' takes it down.

There was Ed an' Cindy, who before the war belonged to Mr Lynch an' after the war he told them to move. He gives them a month and they ain't gone, so the Ku Kluxes gets them.

It was on a cold night when they came and dragged the niggers out of bed. They carried them down in the woods an' whup them, then they throes them in the pond, their bodies breakin' the ice. Ed comes out an' come to our house, but Cindy ain't been seen since.

Sam Allen in Caswell County was told to move an' after a month the hundred Ku Klux came a-totin' his casket an' they tells him that his time has come an' if he wants to tell his wife goodbye an' say his prayers; hurry up.

They set the coffin on two chairs an' Sam kisses his old woman who's a-crying, then he kneels down beside his bed with his head on the pillar an' his arms thrown out in front of him.

He sits there for a minute an' when he rose he had a long knife in his hand. Before he could be grabbed, he done kill two of the Klu Kluxes with the knife, an' he done gone out of the door. They ain't catch him neither, and the next night when they came back, determined to get him, they shot another nigger by accident.

Bob Boylan falls in love with another woman, so he burns his wife an' four youngsters up in their house.

The Ku Kluxes gets him, of course, an' they hangs him high on the old red oak on the Hillsboro Road, After they hanged him, his lawyer says to us boys: 'Bury him good, boys, just as good as you'd bury me if I was daid'

I shook hands with Bob before they hanged him an' I helped bury him too an' we bury him nice an' we all hopes that he done gone to glory."

References:

This eyewitness account is a part of the collection of the Library of Congress: WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Chalmers, David Mark, Hooded Americanism: the history of the Ku Klux Klan (1981); Horn, Stanley, F. Invisible Empire: the story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871 (1969).

How To Cite This Article:

"The Ku Klux Klan, 1868", EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2006).

Name: _____

Use complete sentences as you answer questions from the article.

Ku Klux Klan, 1868

- 1. What month and year was the Ku Klux Klan created? Why?**
- 2. How did the Ku Klux Klan come up with their name?**
- 3. Why did the Ku Klux Klan wear masks?**
- 4. What was the leader of the Ku Klux Klan called?**
- 5. Explain the various groups the Ku Klux Klan targeted? Why?**
- 6. Did the various Ku Klux Klan groups work together or were they all independent?**
- 7. What did the Ku Klux Klan Act allow Congress to do?**
- 8. Why did the Klan melt away? When was it revived?**
- 9. What is unique about Ben Johnson? What happened to his brother?**
- 10. What reasons did the Ku Klux Klan give for hanging Cy Guy?**
- 11. How many days was his body allowed to hang over road? Why?**
- 12. Why was the Ku Klux Klan going to kill Sam Allen?**
- 13. How did Sam Allen fight back? What did the Ku Klux Klan do the following night?**
- 14. How is/was the Ku Klux Klan like a terrorist group?**

