

UNDER THE CLOAK OF THE KLAN

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About a year after newsman Jerry Thompson went undercover and infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan, he came face to face -- or face to hood, as it were -- with the President of the United States. And Jimmy Carter, the President from the South, got angry.

It was Labor Day 1980, and Carter, campaigning for reelection, was giving a speech in Tuscumbia, Ala.

"I was standing there with a group of Klansmen in a crowd of 30,000 people, wearing the damned robe, standing out like a sore thumb, and I felt like a damned fool," recalls Thompson, 42, a prize-winning reporter for The Nashville Tennessean.

"We got Carter's attention when we unfurled the Confederate flag, and he just -- well, a red glow came over his face and he really got angry and he looked right at us and he said, 'It takes a damned coward to hide under a sheet.'"

"Hell," Jerry Thompson says with a laugh, "I thought it took a helluva lot of guts to stand out in front of that many people looking like an idiot with a white sheet on."

And he laughs a little more. This is one of the few light recollections Thompson can evoke from the more than a year he spent inside two rival Klan factions while secretly on assignment for The Tennessean -- an assignment now amplified in Thompson's recently published book, *My Life in the Klan* (Putnam, \$14.95). In the book and in his accompanying appearances on the likes of the Phil Donahue show, and at speaking engagements around the country (two last week in South Florida, under the auspices of the American Jewish Committee), Thompson details the facets of his assignment.

* How he was chosen to do it:

Twenty-plus years of reportorial experience, a certain amount of toughness and, after his editor had finished buttering him up with that, the frank admission that the beefy, Southern-born, drawling Thompson "looked like one of them."

* How he had to adopt a whole new identity and mindset to infiltrate the Klan:

"I became 'J.W. Thompson,' retired Army sergeant, a bachelor, running -- I told the Klan -- from a bad marriage and the niggers up north." He had to fabricate and commit to his soul a whole 20-year life and career that didn't exist -- because the Klan is known for checking up on the backgrounds of aspiring members and in drilling them on it. Thompson learned what the bus fares would have been for servicemen between "his" Army base and his hometown. He "went" to school at a place where, he found, all the records had burned, years ago.

"The preparation alone took two months, seven days a week," Thompson says. "I literally had to become another person. I had to become comfortable using the words 'nigger' and 'kike' in conversation -- and not just in discussing the state of the world, but in casual chatter. I had to pepper it up, the way they would." When he was ready, he left his wife and four kids behind on his farm outside Nashville, got an apartment in Birmingham, Ala., and set up his new life. Without any experience, he took a job as a cabinetmaker and learned the trade.

He was able to sneak home to see the family maybe once every three weeks. His absence -- plus the ever-present danger he would be discovered -- put a strain on them that Thompson says was greater than anything he had to go through.

It wasn't exactly peachy after the assignment was over, either, and his articles began appearing; there have been many death threats, real ones, substantiated by the contacts he still has inside the KKK. Even today his newspaper maintains a 24- hour guard at his house, which The Tennessean equipped with floodlights and alarms. He has discontinued use of a personal bodyguard, which he had for a while.

* How getting inside the Klan finally was accomplished: Once in Birmingham, Thompson signed up to work in the mayoral campaign of Don Black, KKK grand dragon for the state of Alabama. But even after the election was over -- a black was elected -- no one had tried to recruit him for the Klan. Discouraged, Thompson took a bold gamble and called Black after the campaign, thanking him for running but telling him that he had decided to leave town.

"I told him I wasn't going to live in a town with a nigger mayor," Thompson recalls. Such admirably heartfelt racism finally got Black's attention. Two nights later, in a parking lot, Black met with "J.W.," interrogated him personally to ensure he was what he seemed to be, and personally recruited him for KKK membership.

Once inside, Thompson found out how the organization and its secret rituals worked, he participated in the ritual cross- burnings, he became drinking buddies with bigots, he discovered the intensity of their legacy of hate. He demonstrated at Klan rallies and picketed for "appropriate causes" -- in one case, against a local television station that had shown the mini- series, "The Holocaust."

He developed sources -- always keeping his cover -- that ultimately resulted in stories that damaged the effectiveness of Bill Wilkinson's militant Invisible Empire of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan by detailing its paramilitary orientation and training, and later, by disclosing the divisiveness in its ranks and Wilkinson's own extra-curricular activities as an FBI informant. Throughout Thompson's writings, and in any discussion with him, the single most powerful -- and distasteful -- impression conveyed about the Klan is the thorough ugliness of the hearts and minds of the racists therein.

But what surprised Thompson the most -- and scared him the most -- was the total family involvement in the Klan.

"I think the biggest threat they pose right now," he says, "is that they are raising a whole new generation of Klan members. ...

"I met many Klan members who were third generation, and proud that they were raising a fourth, that they were raising their kids 'right.' They hold summer camps that teach the kids to hate, and to shoot guns. ... Parents, of course, bring their children in, but there is also a sophisticated recruitment effort."

And though nationwide Klan numbers may seem relatively small -- estimates range from 10,000 to 20,000 among the many fractured Klan factions (there is no monolithic single group) -- Thompson says the general public cannot afford to be complacent about them. The number of sympathizers he came across -- respectable lawyers, doctors, businessmen, who wouldn't dare belong but who contribute money and support -- was staggering, he says. The "ripple effect" the visible robe wearers create -- garnering publicity, making it safe for others to hate secretly, letting closet racists know where they can send their checks -- may be the real danger.

"You can't afford to ignore a Klan presence. And everywhere there's a presence, there's a threat. We saw what just a few did in Greensboro,

N.C.," Thompson says, referring to the 1979 incident in which five leftist, anti-Klan demonstrators were shot and killed by Klansmen and Nazis at a "Death to the Klan" rally.

An all-white jury later acquitted the six defendants in the case on grounds of self-defense.

Caption: photo: Jerry Thompson, Burning cross

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