

I Was Living Double Life, But Was I the Only One?

By JERRY THOMPSON

Suddenly on Nov. 30 it dawned on me I might not be the only person leading a double life — belonging to two different Klan factions that were bitter rivals.

It was only a week before I was to give up my role as a reporter working undercover in the Klan. Until that day it had never occurred to me that a fellow member of Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan might be infiltrating Don Black's Knights of the KKK, just as I had done.

YET THERE, standing under a tree in Woodrow Wilson Park — as I was preparing to don my white robe to march in Birmingham for the conclusion of the National Leadership Conference of the Knights — I saw a familiar face. It startled me. Across the way, other Klansmen of Black's Knights were gathering in the street in marching formation.

One of them was a Klansman, all right. But he was a member of the bitter arch-rival Invisible Empire. His name was Dudley Ham, a man I had known as a Klaliff, or second in command, of the Cullman, Ala., Klavern of the Invisible Empire. I knew him well because I also belonged to the Klavern. Ham was a Wilkinson man through and through the last time I saw him, only a month earlier.

The last time I had seen him face to face was at a Klavern meeting in Cullman, where he wore a 45-caliber automatic pistol in a shoulder holster as he sat in front of me in a basement meeting hall of Mel's clothing store.

NOW, HE WAS preparing to march with a rival Klan, but so was I.

I quickly stuffed my robe back into a grocery sack and tried to think. I had to figure out what role Ham was playing in Birmingham.

Ham had not attended our last Klavern meeting in Cullman. When someone asked his whereabouts at that meeting, the Exalted Cyclops, or Klavern commander, Terry Tucker, replied: "Dudley has some problems, and he's going to be laying low for a while."

Seeing Ham now with Don Black's Klan, I suspected that was a cover story. What was he doing here? Was he checking up on me? That didn't seem likely. More likely he was here to infiltrate Black's Klan, determine his strength and lure members to defect to Wilkinson's group. I still don't know.

A FEW DAYS later I called Tucker to alert him to Ham's presence in the Birmingham march with the rival Klan faction. I asked if Ham had "defected" from "us."

"Aw, I don't believe that was Dudley," Tucker replied half-heartedly. "I think he was up here all weekend. Surely there couldn't be anyone else in the whole world that looks like Dudley. If there is, I feel sorry for them."

But Tucker never did flatly deny it was Ham. I think he was right. Nobody I know looks like Dudley. I saw Ham — unless unknown to Tucker, he has a twin.

BECAUSE OF Ham, I did not "robe up" or take part in that Birmingham march to end the leadership conference. Although this was the national showing that Black had been planning since he took over from David Duke in July, only 27 robed Klansmen participated in the demonstration. About a dozen more were in security uniforms, and one girl, about 10, with her arm in a cast, marched fully robed with the others. She was a pitiful example of what Klan parents are doing to their children. But in terms of turnout, Black's national Klan convention was a flop.

During the two-day conference in a meeting room in Birmingham's huge civic center downtown, Louis Beam, Grand Dragon of Texas in Black's Knights, boasted of the paramilitary camp he operated near Houston.

BEAM told of having teen-agers and Boy Scouts in his camp "wring the necks off chickens. It teaches them how to kill, and the day is going to come when that kind of teaching will be essential to survival."

The Scout troops who visited the site have disbanded since then.

Don Black has always said his Klan members are not violent. But Beam told a small crowd that the Klan "is getting ready to reclaim this country for the white people — the people who fought and died for it in the first place. We'll take what's ours."

IT MAY BE THAT Black's faction of the Klan, losing members to Wilkinson's Invisible Empire, which is openly militant, has decided to change its strategy. This meeting, two weeks ago, was my last with Black's Knights.

As I had moved from the world of Black to that of Wilkinson, I



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

A Message of Hostility

Tennessean reporter Jerry Thompson carries a picket sign protesting the influx of Cuban refugees into Fort Walton Beach, Fla. The newsman, as "J.W. Thompson," worked undercover in the Klan.

*My Life
with the
KLAN*



found Wilkinson's faction more angry, heavily armed, better organized and growing faster. Black's group was more passive, disorganized and losing members.

While with Black's Knights, I attended den meetings in north Alabama where I saw and heard the private side of David Duke, the Imperial Wizard before Black, who referred to blacks as "niggers" — something neither he nor Black does in public. And once, when comparing the black birthrate to that of whites, he used the phrase "little mentally retarded nigger bastards."

I ATTENDED Klan meetings in Birmingham, marched down the streets chanting silly slogans, helped disrupt a public meeting, picketed a Birmingham television station showing a Klan documentary, and picketed the president of the United States who appropriately called me and my fellow Klansmen cowards.

Although I was involved in many events during my first 11 months with Black's Knights, they were stretched over a considerable period of time with many days of inactivity between.

With Wilkinson's Invisible Empire, more meetings moved at a faster pace and the goals were stated loudly and clearly: Klansmen must arm themselves for the coming race war against the "enemy." As in Black's Klan, the "enemy" means, in Klan talk, "the niggers and the Jews." Black's verbal abuse includes a more strident attack on Jews. Wilkinson concentrates more on black Americans.

I WAS INITIATED into the Wilkinson Klan Oct. 4 and attended my first business meeting that same night. For more than two months I would attend regular Klavern meetings, participate in a march through the streets of Birmingham, and find myself surrounded at every Klan event by more guns than I had ever seen in one place.

As I have said earlier in this series, the Klan, especially Wilkinson's militant group, must be disarmed. Federal and state gun laws need to be defined, strengthened and enforced. Otherwise when that many people with that many guns get together, the potential for violence is too great. A small provocation could result in bloodshed.

My second meeting with Wilkinson's Empire occurred in the basement of Mel's clothing store in Cullman. Following earlier instructions I parked my car in a city lot next door, entered through the basement and walked through row after row of clothing before I found a cleared area in the rear of the room. The Confederate flag, the Klan flag and another Klan symbol, a Maltese cross with a drop of blood in the center, were draped on the wall behind a plain table.

ONCE THE MEETING got under way I noticed that a pistol, still tucked in its holster, lay on the table with its barrel pointed directly at me. Apparently I was not the only one who was nervous. A trucker and Klansman named Red Willingham left his chair and changed the position of the gun. I felt better.

A semi-automatic rifle was propped against the wall, and several members wore pistols. Dudley Ham's 45-caliber gun protruded from his shoulder holster.

At this meeting we discussed fund-raising activities, and then Tucker urged everyone to remain quiet about the special forces training camp. Although selected persons from the media had been invited into the camp, they were always blindfolded, and Tucker wanted no leaks about the camp's location.

WE ALSO discussed the upcoming presidential election, with Tucker urging us to give strong support to Republican Ronald Reagan "because he's the only hope the white man has got to get rid of the nigger welfare programs. I wish we had somebody stronger than him, but if he's going to be any worse than Carter, at least it'll take him four years to do it." As I have said earlier, Reagan's endorsement by both KKK groups must have been as welcome as a case of mumps.

Then we discussed the list of local candidates. Tucker suggested a vote for a judicial candidate, Wilford Tucker.

"HIS NAME IS Tucker, and he may even be a little kin to me," Terry Tucker said, grinning, "but he's always shot straight with us in the past, and I think we ought to support him." (Wilford Tucker eventually won the race by 500 votes.)

Terry Tucker urged that we support Adm. Jeremiah Denton, the Republican senatorial candidate running against Democrat Jim Folsom Jr., a native of Cullman. The reason: "Folsom has a nigger secretary." (Denton beat Folsom.)

We discussed our march through downtown Birmingham to protest the "nigger mayor's" restrictions on when police can use their weapons. Everyone agreed we needed to make as strong a showing as possible — the unstated purpose of which, I thought, was to embarrass Black, who never managed to muster more than a few dozen persons for his biggest marches. But Tucker put it another way: "I'll tell you this, if we go down there with just a handful, we're going to get our butts kicked."

HE DIDN'T elaborate, so I asked him about it during a telephone conversation a few days later. He said he "had information" that we might be confronted "by those damn Communists down there."

"We feel like we're going to have a confrontation with those damn Commies," he said. "I don't think they'll have more than 50 to 60 members there, and we'll need to have three to four times that many."

Vividly remembering the bloody incident in Greensboro, N.C., a few months earlier, I called my publisher, John Seigenthaler, and told him what Tucker had said. Seigenthaler alerted the Justice Department to head off any violence.

SEIGENTHALER and I had talked to our lawyers, Bill Willis and Al Knight, who had stressed that I should never go armed under any circumstances. I was fearful that the situation would get so tense that Wilkinson might issue weapons to use at the march. I didn't know how to refuse.

The Cullman Klavern drove in a convoy to Birmingham, but on the way my truck's radiator hose burst, and I had to catch a ride with Dudley Ham and another Klansman. As I climbed into the pickup I saw a large-caliber pistol

on one side of the dash and a 45-caliber automatic pistol on the other side. Behind my head, a semi-automatic rifle, with bayonet attached, hung in the window. Literally surrounded by guns, all I could think of was Willis and Knight repeating, never go armed.

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the Woolco shopping center in Center Point, a Birmingham suburb, police greeted us with enough security for several heads of state. Dozens of tactical squad officers rode motorcycles through the area, while plainclothes officers in unmarked cars roamed the neighborhood. Helicopters whirled overhead while four horse-mounted officers trotted through the parking lot. I felt much better.

A police sergeant in the tactical squad approached us and said:

"Look, we're going to let you have your protest march and we will protect you, but we're not

going to allow you to have guns. You've got 30 minutes to lock up your guns. We don't want to do a body search, so tell your people to lock up their guns, and we'll take your word for it."

MY FELLOW Klansmen put their pistols, rifles and knives into toolboxes on two of our trucks. The wife of one Klansman agreed to drive one of the trucks halfway down the parade route and stay in radio contact, so that in the event of trouble, she could be there in minutes.

The march proceeded without incident. Although we were told the route covered 3½ miles, it felt closer to six. The Klansman marching beside me from Arab, Ala., leaned toward me at the end of the march and said:

"Whoever said this was a 3½-mile march? I sure would like to buy land from that feller."

AT THE END OF the march



Young children such as this one at Ku Klux Klan meetings reminded Jerry Thompson of his own nine-year-old daughter and "made me want to cry," he said.

route in East Lake Park, Grand Dragon Roger Handley led off the speaking by shouting warnings that a "race war is coming. The niggers are itching for a confrontation, and when it comes they are going to wish that it hadn't."

While Wilkinson, Duke and Black refrained from using the word "nigger" in public, that did not stop several of their associates.

Bill Riccio, the Alabama chaplain dressed in Army fatigues and wearing a green beret, repeated the racist rhetoric, only louder and in more alarming tones:

"I'M TELLING YOU white people, we have got to be prepared when the ape niggers think they have enough power to challenge us on the streets of Birmingham. We're going to meet that challenge, and we're going to turn it back, and we're going to take our country back from the ape niggers. The government has given them everything they want, and we're going to take it back.

"Get yourself in shape, go to the library and get books on guerrilla warfare and study them and learn how to survive. Get at least 2,000 rounds of ammunition for every gun you own and make sure everyone in your family knows how to use it. Lay in some food. We'll be ready, and the white niggers who support the ape niggers won't be. They will just have to go down with them."

I HAD NEVER heard this kind of talk sounded in Black's organization. These rantings scared me, and Wilkinson's people hoped this would scare people into their ranks for promised security and survival.

My next attempt at a meeting with the Cullman Klavern, on Nov. 1, was thwarted by a rumor of police interference. As I arrived at the parking lot next to Mel's, Tucker and several other members stood near their trucks. Tucker said he "got the word" that police would raid the meeting if we met again in Mel's.



Bill Wilkinson
Group is openly militant

A line of communication seemed always open between the Klan and the police. Whenever we had a march or event, someone had always discussed it with police and the ground rules were laid down. I never discovered who initiated the communication, but at the marches I attended, I always found the police cooperative and friendly to us.

"WE WON'T BE doing anything illegal," Tucker said, "but they can bring a bunch of news reporters and photographers in here and search everybody. All that would do would hurt this man's [the owner of Mel's] business, and we don't want to do that."

We scheduled a meeting for the next week, and were told that someone would call us about the location. Tucker called in midweek and told me the meeting would be Nov. 8 at the home of Tommy and Peggy Parsons in Hanceville, Ala. He gave me directions.

That day I arrived to find several members standing on the Parsons' porch, with Bill Riccio instructing how to place, and then remove, a spot weld on a semi-automatic rifle. Many Klansmen carried the civilian version of the Army's M-16 rifle.

THE ARMY WEAPON has a switch on the right side in front of the trigger with three modes — automatic, three-round bursts and semi-automatic. This switch on the civilian weapon is welded in the semi-automatic position. I never learned, though, exactly how removing this weld made the weapon appear legal to law enforcement officers.

In an earlier article I recounted that Riccio also talked of the Klan's "coming to power" and how "we can't let any fed off when we come to power because if he's been a fed, he's our enemy."

Tucker arrived late wearing his fatigues, green beret and 45-caliber pistol strapped to his side. He carried a semi-automatic rifle. Once inside, I saw another rifle leaning against the wall, and several members carried guns. One Klansman brought an extra gun, a 38-caliber pistol he said was a "German officer's gun" he was offering for sale. I never inquired about the price.

TUCKER, appearing nervous, was anxious to get the meeting under way and asked Jerry Jones, the Giant or regional commander, for permission to consider the meeting a social gathering so he could dispense with the standard ritual. Jones said OK.

Tucker announced that earlier that week he and another member had been served with legal papers in which a black citizens group sought an injunction against the Klan and threatened violence.

The Southern Poverty Law Center had filed a \$43 million damage suit Nov. 4 against Wilkinson and 42 others, including Tucker, in connection with a shootout at Decatur, Ala., May 26, 1979. Members of the Invisible Empire and blacks protesting the imprisonment of Tommy Lee Hines — a mentally retarded black man charged with raping three white women — had clashed on the street, with two blacks and two whites suffering gunshot wounds.

TUCKER DISCUSSED ways to raise money for the defense.

"I think we can win this thing," he said, "but it's going to take money and time. God, I sure hope we can win it."

Jones broke in with a request from Wilkinson: "Bill wants every Klavern to take up an extra donation each month to establish a national legal defense fund for things like this."

"Well, I'll tell you," Tucker replied, "we've just about donated out. We've got to get some money for a defense fund in Cullman be-

fore we go worrying about the rest of the country."

WE THEN discussed a series of turkey shoots to raise money, but the first Saturday it rained all day, and the shoot was called off. The next Saturday nobody showed up to work it, and finally, eight days ago, at my last meeting with the Klan, Tucker took down the names of those who volunteered to work Dec. 13. I didn't volunteer for that date.

Tucker urged that we solicit defense fund donations from business people. He also said all Klansmen named as defendants in the case should band together and hire one lawyer because "it is cheaper and better to handle it that way."

We broke up. This Klavern may be well organized, but it is hardly well financed. My own view of the Klan from the inside is that Black's organization is living hand to mouth. Wilkinson's Klan owns a private plane and is better backed financially — but is not affluent.

AS I PREPARED for my last meeting with the Klan on Dec. 6, I decided to make one last call to Don Black. His wife Darlene answered the telephone and was warm and friendly as always.

She had talked to me earlier about the small turnout for the Klan convention and said, "We'll just have to concentrate on quality members, not quantity." I don't know whether I was quality or quantity, but she was losing me as a member in a few hours. Black also was cordial and boasted about the results of his national conference, especially the wide variety of people from as far away as "Canada, Texas and Arkansas."

During the conversation Black told me he was still searching for a building in Birmingham in which to set up a national Klan office. I mentioned a building I knew was vacant and suggested he get in touch with the owner, whose name I furnished. Black said he was definitely interested and asked if I would contact the owner "because he'll probably be more willing to talk with you than with me." He now plans to banish me from his Klan at a "trial."

AS FOR MY LAST Klan contact, an election was scheduled for the Klavern meeting at Willingham's Salvage in Cullman — better known to Klansmen as Joe's Junkyard. I was more nervous about this meeting than any other. Several Klansmen had arrived before me, most of them wearing guns. Would I be discovered on my last night with Wilkinson's Klan?

I first spoke to Joe Reynolds, a Klansman and member of the special forces paramilitary team, who had been mentioned as a candidate for Exalted Cyclops. I offered my support.

"I will take it," he said, "but I really don't want it. There's really a lot of people who could do a better job."

"Like who, for instance?" I asked.

"Like you," he said, to my surprise, "or Terry again. You all can talk to people, you're level-headed and you can get things done."

I SAID THANKS, but argued that I was out of town too often selling furniture to be an officer.

As it turned out, his name was not put in nomination. Terry Tucker and William Parker were the only two nominated. I voted for

Tucker, but Parker won. No vote count was ever announced; Tucker said Parker had a big year ahead of him.

Later, at the paramilitary camp where Wilkinson was giving a tour for newsmen, Tucker and Wilkinson laughed about the election results. Reporter Bob Dunnivant, one of the reporters visiting the camp, said Tucker told Wilkinson his loss was "arranged."

ALTHOUGH Reynolds was not nominated for Exalted Cyclops, he was nominated for Klaliff, or second in command, to run against Peggy Parsons. I voted for Reynolds, but Mrs. Parsons won.

Reynolds was finally elected secretary.

Once inside the meeting room, I had felt comfortable until a tall, loud fellow, obviously under the influence of alcohol, kept hearing noises outside and repeatedly reached for his pearl-handled 45-caliber automatic, holding it behind his back as he stood in front of me. Since I was sitting in the seat behind him, the gun was at my eye level. I decided to shift to another spot in the crowded room and had to move a rifle to find a place.

THE REST OF THE meeting moved at a fast pace as Tucker apparently was in a hurry to get back to Wilkinson and the camp. As in the past few meetings, location of a meeting place was a worrisome topic. One Klansman volunteered use of a former restaurant building, but it needed repairs and electricity.

We decided to meet again at the junkyard until the repairs were made. We also decided to meet on Tuesdays instead of Wednesdays to allow Klan members the opportunity to go to Wednesday night church services.

Finally the meeting was over. Tucker rushed to the door, asking me to follow him to the parking lot. He wanted a bottle of 101-proof Wild Turkey I had brought him from Tennessee — only 86 proof is available in Alabama.

"YOU'D BETTER let me pay you for this, J.W.," Tucker said.

I vehemently refused his offer, promising: "The next time we get together with a fifth of Wild Turkey, we'll enjoy it together."

"OK," he said. "I sure do appreciate this."

I hope it tasted sweet.



Don Black
A posture of non-violence