

Reporter Survives Sudden KKK Quiz

I was about to become an undercover member of the Ku Klux Klan — but only if first I could withstand Klan leader Don Black's rapid-fire cross-examination about my background.

And it was clear that he was suspicious, as he must be about every Klan recruit. His eyes, staring intently into my own, did not waver. He was looking for that flicker of hesitation, that momentary stumble, that one slip of mine which would tip him off that I was not what I pretended to be.

I HAD KNOWN THIS would come, some time, some place, but I had envisioned it as occurring in some Klavern meeting and had even feared I would be asked to take a lie detector test.

"Had you always lived in the North before moving to Birmingham?" Black asked me, sharply.

"No ..." I began, struggling, suddenly, to recall the detailed story I had concocted.

But then, interrupting, he was grilling me with his next question.

"What did your father do for a living? Was he a farmer?"

"NO," I RESPONDED, "he worked for a glass company. He made ..."

Before I could answer one question completely, Black had another.

I couldn't complain. Here was the opportunity I had hoped for and worked for the past two months, ever since I had agreed to accept the assignment from my publisher to infiltrate the Klan.

Before leaving Nashville for Birmingham, I had spent weeks preparing myself for the moment when a Klan leader would cross-examine me about my past. The identity I had created for myself was that of a retired Army sergeant, J.W. Thompson.

I HAD KNOWN, OF course, that Klan leaders would be cautious, that they would take precautions to try to make sure no spy got into their secret organization. I know I was well prepared. But I had not thought until this moment that there was any possibility the test would come, of all places, in the parking lot of a Birmingham restaurant.

But Black, who then was Alabama Grand Dragon of the Klan, picked his moment — obviously a moment when I least expected he would launch his blistering barrage of questions.

That was Nov. 8, 1979.

He caught me off guard.

TWO DAYS EARLIER I had met with him, talked with him, listened to him — and thought I was "in." I should have known it had been too easy that first afternoon. I should have suspected that Klan admission couldn't be so simple as that.

I had worked, during the preceding weeks, on the fringes of Don Black's racist campaign for mayor of Birmingham, in an effort to gain a link with him.

Then, when a black, Dr. Richard Arrington, was elected mayor, I telephoned Black at home at the suggestion of another campaign worker. I asked him to meet me and talk about my joining his "group." We agreed to meet the night of Nov. 6. I picked Sambo's restaurant in Zayre's Shopping Center on Greensprings Road as the spot for our encounter.

My Life with the KLAN



JERRY THOMPSON

A TALL, MUSCULAR young man of erect bearing, Black walked into Sambo's for that initial meeting. I recognized him immediately. He stood for a moment in the doorway until he spotted me in a booth, then he walked briskly — a sort of military march-step — toward me.

"You must be J.W. Thompson," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Don Black."

His handshake was firm and his eyes — very dark eyes — were penetrating. I knew there was no way this man could be stared down. No way he could be intimidated.

BUT COULD I deceive him? Could I, a journalist for *The Tennessean* 20 years, dupe Don Black into thinking I was a retired Army sergeant, now a cabinetmaker, who shared his racist and anti-Semitic views?

"We'll just see," I silently told myself as I looked across the table at this young man — at the age of 27 he is well groomed and assured — who appeared to be sizing me up also as we exchanged small talk about the weather.

I must say that, although nervous during that first meeting, I felt I held an advantage, however temporary that advantage might be. I knew who Don Black was, but he didn't know me.

BEFORE GOING to Alabama, I had studied the backgrounds of Black and other Klan leaders — and would continue to learn about them during my life with the KKK.

Since Don Black's teen-age years, there seemed to be a clear pattern of conduct that led him to his present position. I knew he was the Grand Dragon, or commander, of the state of Alabama in David Duke's Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. I knew he was Duke's right-hand man and confidant, second in command of the national organization.



Ritual of the Night

Don Black, Imperial Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, stands in front of a blazing cross at a KKK rally in Alabama earlier this year. It was Black who recruited *Tennessean* reporter Jerry Thompson into the Klan in November of last year after grilling the undercover newsman about his past.

I knew that since he was a teenager he had expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler. As a high school student he handed out racist literature at Athens (Ala.) High School. An investigation was conducted because it was said he made threats on the life of a Jewish schoolmate.

LAST AUGUST, Black told Bob Dunnivant, a correspondent for *The Tennessean*, that he had not made such threats but actually had tried to make friends with the schoolmate. The girl's parents, he said, "got the crazy idea" that he was trying to strangle her with piano wire.

This young man, with a "boy-next-door" appearance, once left high school to volunteer to work in the Georgia gubernatorial campaign of racist lawyer J.B. Stoner. It was then that he was shot and seriously wounded by Jerry Ray, brother of James Earl Ray, confessed assassin of Martin Luther King. Mystery still surrounds that shooting.

Black had ideas of a career as a military officer, but his racist views kept him out of the Army. Black had completed three years of the ROTC program at the University of Alabama when the Army investigated his background and racist attitudes. He was barred from completing the last year of the program that would have given him an Army commission. Later, he would join the Klan.

AT OUR FIRST meeting he sat across the table from me, sipping

coffee and looking nothing at all like the mental picture I had painted. Was this the man some suspected of wanting to strangle his Jewish classmates? Was this the man who was the "weird kid" who grew up to be a fanatic about such things as "race mixing" and "the brainwashing of the American people by the Jewish-controlled news media?"

It was, indeed, I was to learn quickly. Black wasted no time in giving me the spiel he has perfected in countless speeches during the past six years while trying to recruit members for the Klan.

"White people have been too complacent and have let the country erode to the point where we no longer have a country," he told me. "The Jews are carefully brainwashing the whole nation. But they've been run out of every European country at some time or another, and you could see it happen here."

I ACKNOWLEDGED, choosing my words carefully, that perhaps I was among those white Protestants who previously had not appreciated the gravity of the crisis facing the country. I was careful to use the word "niggers." And I said the prospect of a "nigger" mayor in Birmingham had driven me to him. I was playing back to him the line I had rehearsed, based on weeks of research, preparation and interviews with lawyers and a psychiatrist.

Black made clear to me his hostility for Jews and blacks. He also made clear during that first meet-

ing his hatred of rival Klan leader Bill Wilkinson. Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Wilkinson, I knew, had defected from the Klan group which then Duke and Black headed. Wilkinson, I knew, preached that "a race war is coming," and that whites should arm themselves against such an eventuality. Later I would join Wilkinson's Invisible Empire of the KKK and secretly belong to both Klan groups.

WILKINSON IS rough about the edges. Duke, who makes a good appearance on television, is smooth, polished. Wilkinson thinks Duke and his followers are naive. Duke sees Wilkinson as ineffective.

Wilkinson preaches vigilance and arms and violent response, if need be, to combat what he sees as the black menace. Duke, who once was convicted of inciting to riot, has counseled avoidance of situations which could lead to arrest. "You can't help us if you're in jail," he would tell his followers.

Now, across the table from me, Black was warming to his subject.

"I BELIEVE Bill Wilkinson is a federal agent," he told me. "He's done more to destroy the Klan than the FBI ever did. If he's not an agent, he should be."

Later, when I affiliated with the rival Invisible Empire, one of Wilkinson's top aides told me: "Don Black is a federal agent."

Our first meeting that day was timely since, only five days before, more than two dozen Klansmen and Nazis had been involved in a deadly shootout in Greensboro, N.C., with members of the Communist Workers Party who had been participating in a "death to the Klan" rally.

"THE ECONOMY, politics, national leadership, energy and several other factors are going to hand us the opportunity to reclaim our country," Black said, talking as though he were still campaigning for mayor of Birmingham, as he had been only days before. "We must be prepared to take advantage of that opportunity or be prepared to live under a tyrannical dictatorship."

Black had been running for mayor the month before, along with six other candidates. He had lost badly in the first election, on Oct. 9, 1979, finishing next to last with only 1,700 votes.

Then, in the runoff three weeks later, he had seen the city's voters elect Birmingham's first black mayor, Dr. Arrington, a city councilman and the son of a west Alabama sharecropper.

I HAD WORKED on the periphery of the campaign, trying to meet workers at Black's headquarters so I could drop their names later if I got the chance. I made a campaign contribution of \$20, I picked up literature to distribute and I even promised to help haul voters to the polls on election day.

I had studiously consulted the radio and TV logs in Birmingham in the days leading up to the Oct. 9 vote, watching for any program which might feature the mayoral candidates in a debate. I wanted to be well versed on Black's views, for it was he — I hoped — who would induct me into the Klan.

Black's supporters had been outraged when Arrington won. I feigned outrage, hoping this would lead me to Black, whom I had not been able to get close to — or even



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Secret Handshake: A Symbol of Belonging

COLLINWOOD, Ala. — *Tennessean* reporter Jerry Thompson, in his Ku Klux Klan hood and robe, shakes hands with Don Black, Imperial Wizard of the Knights of the KKK, during a rally and cross-burning

here last July. Note the secret Klan handshake, which includes extension of the first two fingers along the wrist of the other person. Thompson assumed a fake background to penetrate the Klan.

see — during the campaign.

"I CAME SOUTH," I told Black's friends, "because there are so many niggers up North who don't know their place. Now, it looks like there's no choice for me except to quit sitting on my butt and do something about this. I think it's time I thought about joining the Klan."

It was that kind of racist talk which I hoped would tie me to Black — and ultimately to membership in his secret organization. And if that happened, if my plan worked perfectly and there were no slip-ups, I would be in a position to learn firsthand what no journalist had learned before. I would be in a position to know the secrets and the inner workings of a Klan group.

The waitress at Sambo's, a young black woman named Edna, stopped by our table to ask if we wanted more coffee. Black was polite in declining, but I asked for a refill and sipped it as I listened to his diatribe, trying all the while to formulate in my mind how I would broach the question of whether I could join his "group."

I WAS CAREFUL to call it that — "your group" — because I wasn't sure how open he wanted to be about the racist organization. I sympathized that he had lost the mayor's race.

Again, Don Black surprised me. He had not had any illusions about winning his mayoral race, Black confided. But he still had the

Klan, and the Klan is the only group in the nation, he said, "that is truly looking out for the white people." He would be glad, he added, to take my application for membership.

We paid for our coffee and walked to his car in the restaurant parking lot. He opened the trunk, looking for an application blank.

THE TRUNK WAS cluttered with posters and bumper stickers left over from the campaign, with newspapers and car tools and a two-burner hot plate. On top of the heap lay Black's white, satin Klan robe.

He was unable to find an application blank, but he finally pulled out three copies of *The Crusader*, the official publication of his Klan organization.

"Take these," he told me. "They've got application blanks in them. Take them home, fill one of them out, and I'll meet you again in a couple of days to talk about membership."

"I'M HOME FREE!" I thought. I was certain I had made it into the Klan.

After two months of undercover activity, of taking elaborate precautions to establish my new identity in Birmingham, I had succeeded! Or so I was convinced when I left Black after that first meeting. I telephoned my publisher that night to give him the good news.

But now it was two days later. We had met again at the same restaurant, Sambo's in Birmingham. I

had pulled out my wallet and taken \$25 from it. Black had told me that would be my registration fee — a one-time "naturalization" fee of \$15 and \$10 for dues. Standing beside Black's car in the parking lot, I handed it to him.

HE IGNORED the money, and I suddenly felt foolish with my hand extended.

Piercing me again with those penetrating eyes, he asked — in effect demanded, it seemed: "You say you are a retired Army man. What was your MOS?"

I had the answer to that. In advance, I had decided that my bogus military occupational specialty was 058, the designation for a radio interceptor. I had thought that far ahead in planning my charade as one who just recently had moved to Birmingham to escape "the niggers up North."

I had concocted a facade, but I concluded now that I would play it by ear, knowing it would be impossible to anticipate every question that might be asked.

I HAD EVEN consulted a psychiatrist to prepare myself for entry into the bizarre world of the Klan. And he had told me some of the things to expect — and some of the weaknesses of Klan members that I might exploit. But there was no way, ultimately, that I could ensure in advance my acceptance into the Klan.

So I tried to make it as simple and general as possible, saying I

was a mess sergeant in the beginning, but had gotten into other areas toward the latter part of my Army career.

"What did you say your dad did for a living?" Black asked.

"He was a glass blower. He made thermometers on a contract basis for B.D. Yale. I think that was the company."

"WHERE WERE YOU last stationed in the Army?" He was skipping around in his questioning. I felt he was trying to throw me off-balance.

"Fort Devens, Massachusetts."

"Are you married?"

"No. That's the main reason I moved to Birmingham. I'm running from that, too."

"Where did you live after moving from Kentucky?"

"My parents lived in several places in Virginia — places like Staunton, Norfolk, Falls Church."

AND SO IT WENT, the interrogation while standing beside Don Black's car on Nov. 8 of last year. He was calm and intense — and persistent. I was outwardly nonchalant. But I knew, inwardly, that this was my chance, perhaps my only chance, and that I could blow it if Black got too detailed in his questioning.

Black had once wanted a military career. How much did he know about the Army? He had once been in the ROTC. Would he ask me a question which any private should know, but which I would fumble?

"Where did you say you work?"

"Over in Homewood [a Birmingham suburb]. I got lucky and got a job as a carpenter's helper, making cabinets. It's not great money, but it's a living."

"And you are a native of where?"

"GENEVA, ALA. I lived there as a kid but we moved to Birmingham when I was little, and then we moved on to Kentucky."

He did not ask about my education. I had been prepared to say I had attended Ramsay High School in Birmingham but had been a dropout. The school is now all black.

I had worried about my "birthplace" of Geneva. The name of the town in southern Alabama had popped into my head during my preparation for this assignment. I once spent a few hours there in 1970 while covering George Wallace's campaign for governor.

BUT HAD Don Black ever been

Knights Of The Ku Klux Klan

CERTIFICATE OF CITIZENSHIP
AWARDED TO

J. W. THOMPSON

BE IT KNOWN TO ALL MEN OF HONOR, TO LOVERS OF LAW AND ORDER, PEACE AND JUSTICE, RACIAL INTEGRITY AND WHITE MAJORITY THAT THIS INDIVIDUAL HAS STEPPED FORWARD AND DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF THROUGH HIS QUEST FOR CITIZENSHIP IN THE INVISIBLE EMPIRE, AND BY HIS UNSWERVING DUTY TO THE BETTERMENT OF OUR PEOPLE AND NATION. UPON THIS DAY THIS PERSON OF HONOR HAS BEEN DULY APPOINTED TO THE RANK OF

KLANSMAN

LET ALL KLANSMEN OF THE INVISIBLE EMPIRE, KNIGHTS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN TAKE DUE NOTICE OF THIS CITIZENSHIP AND GOVERN THEMSELVES ACCORDINGLY. THIS AWARDED CITIZENSHIP HOLDS FOR A PERIOD OF THE CALENDAR YEAR IN WHICH IT IS ISSUED OR UNTIL REVOKED BY THE ISSUING OFFICER OR EQUIVALENT AUTHORITY

27 MAY 1980
DATE ISSUED

WITNESSED

David Duke
DAVID DUKE
GRAND WIZARD

Official Ticket to the Invisible Empire

Tennessee reporter Jerry Thompson, in an undercover role, received this certificate of citizenship from the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan following his induction into the secret organization.

there? Did he know on what street the corner drugstore fronts? Did he know, perchance, the name of the local high school?

I had spent two or three hours in Geneva. Maybe Black had relatives there. Maybe he had vacationed there. Maybe ...

There was no way to anticipate his questions, no way to know when I would slip, providing him with the clue he would need to expose my charade.

He fixed me with what I felt were cold, calculating eyes. And then, suddenly, he took my money. Rummaging in the trunk of his car, he said, abruptly: "I'll give you a receipt."

It was then that I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'LL BE GETTING in touch with you in a few days," he told me. "We're going to have a meeting in a couple of weeks in Brompton on the Atlanta highway. I'll want you there then. We like to induct four of five new members at a time. That's when you'll officially become a Klansman."

I silently accepted the receipt —

which had been penciled on the back of a campaign leaflet left over from Black's race for mayor.

"I'm glad to have you with us," Black said. "It's going to take a joint effort by all of us to get done what we've got to do. We've got to stick together if we are ever going to have any power."

MY KNEES MIGHT have been shaking at that point, but I am sure my voice was strong and confident.

"I'm glad to be a part of your group," I said. "You'll be able to count on me."

I had finally made it! I was now inside the Ku Klux Klan!

But next, I knew, would come the other tests to my undercover assignment.

I wondered whether I could hoodwink veteran Klansmen into accepting me as a hardened racist. Could I mingle in a crowd of dozens of such people, dressed in a robe and hood? Could I picket with them, go to their Klavern meetings, listen to their speeches, maybe even torch the crosses they burn

from time to time as a ritual of their bizarre, and racist, faith?

COULD I DO all this, associating with them on a daily basis, without making a mistake that would expose my identity?

As time passed I discovered I could, and I learned a good deal more about the Klan movement. As I pointed out earlier in this series, I am convinced the Klan must be disarmed. Its potential for danger is growing. Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire of the KKK is the most militant faction and should be closely watched by authorities. Don Black's Knights are less militant and are losing membership, but they cannot be ignored. The two factions are their own worst enemies.

I also discovered there is a sad but surprising undercurrent of sympathy for the Klan movement among people who consider themselves "too respectable" to join. That discovery was to come at the next stage of my involvement with the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

*Recd of J.W. Thompson
\$25.00 for that. fee \$79 dues
Don Black
11-8-79*

Paid in Full - Another Inroad for 'J.W. Thompson'

This handwritten receipt from Klan leader Don Black details Tennessee Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. It was presented to Thompson after Black said reporter Jerry Thompson's \$25 initiation fee and 1979 dues in the agreed to accept the undercover reporter as a Klan member.