

MY LIFE IN THE KLAN

Introduction

For all of the years I have served as a staff member of *The Tennessean*—and soon I will mark my fortieth anniversary—our paper has felt a sentinel's duty to monitor and report on the periodic revivals in Ku Klux Klan activity.

The Klan, after all, is the only indigenous terrorist organization to survive for more than a century in our nation. Its birthplace was Pulaski, Tennessee, a small rural community south of Nashville well within the circulation of *The Tennessean*.

The periodic reincarnations of the Klan always have been attended by harassment, intimidation, and violence. Klan rhetoric, always ridiculous, and Klan costumes, always clownish, have sometimes masked motives and methods that were vulgar and vicious. Klan doctrine, preached with straight-faced, fanatic fervor, appeals to the worst instincts of those who are ill-informed and those who are plainly ignorant.

In 1979, after more than a decade of relative dormancy, the seeds of racism had once more taken root in our region and had produced another crop of neo-Nazis in white sheets and hoods. In rural communities around Nashville, it was obvious that Klan members once more were raising hell and collecting money.

The leaders of the movement were calling this rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan "the new Klan." There was nothing new about it. It was still racist. It was still radical. Its existence was an outrage. An editor who is aware that such an organization is operating in his back yard can ignore it and hope that it fades away, or he can expose it and hope that the exposure rubs it out. I chose the latter course.

I assigned a team of journalists to cover, report on, and expose the Ku Klux Klan for what it was.

A crucial part of that exposure was the assignment accepted by Jerry Thompson, a reporter and editor who at the time had twenty years' experience with *The Tennessean*. I asked him to go underground, to create a new identity, to join "the new Klan" and spend a few months observing it from the inside.

Jerry accepted the assignment—a dangerous one, of course—in good faith. But the task was tougher than either of us had imagined. "A few months" became many months. Then a year. Finally six months more. The strain on Thompson and his family was enormous. To add to his stress, the newspaper was sold to the Gannett Company, even as he was going underground. Fortunately, the support of Allen Neuharth and John Quinn, the ranking executives of Gannett, was as total as had been that of Amon Carter Evans, the previous owner, who had initially agreed with me that the assignment was a vital one.

The threat to Thompson's safety would last long after he left the Klan. He and his family would have to endure the presence of security guards for many months after his assignment had ended and after the series of articles he wrote was published in *The Tennessean*. Even then his ordeal continued. Months after he left the Klan, an earlier edition of *My Life in the Klan* was published and an irate Klansman filed a libel suit in a Birmingham, Alabama, court against Thompson and G. P. Putnam's Sons, the publishers. While it was a nuisance suit, it intimidated the publishing company from continuing its sales promotion of the book and contributed to its decision not to reissue it in a paperback edition.

I testified at the libel trial for Thompson only a few hours before the case went to the jury. Before I could drive back to Nashville that afternoon, the jurors reported a verdict in favor of Thompson.

The decision by Putnam to pull back from promoting *My Life in the Klan* and printing it in a paperback was a shame. It robbed many paperback readers of the chance to know about "the new Klan."

My Life in the Klan is more than a story about the so-called "new Klan." It is a story about Jerry Thompson. To fully appreciate his account, it is important to know more about him than he tells. It is important to know him as a journalist and person.

As a reporter, he has that unique instinct that I have come to call "a sense of story." As soon as I mentioned the Klan assignment to him, he grasped the full significance and potential of what was involved. Because he loves his family, he hesitated before declaring his determination to do it. Obviously, he had to share the details with Linda, his wife, and get her approval. But he had no doubt—nor did I—that he would accept the assignment, difficult and dangerous as it obviously was.

Jerry Thompson is an outgoing man who never met a stranger. He was born and reared on a Tennessee farm, the product of rural, middle-class upbringing. Many Klan members with whom he was to associate shared that same background. They accepted him naturally into their beer-drinking, joke-cracking, race-baiting conversations because he seemed so much like them.

He perfectly fit the Klan recruiter's image of what a Ku Klux Klan member should be like. They were at ease with him. Knowing their propensity for violence and vengeance, Thompson was never at ease with them. It is trite to call him "courageous." He is Cicero's man of courage: "Full of faith." He has faith in himself, in his family, in the bonds of friendship, and in the newspaper where he has made his career.

Still, he has about him that healthy streak of skepticism that marks every outstanding reporter I have known, assuring that while he may be betrayed, he will never be deceived.

Jerry Thompson is a big man in every way—in build and spirit and heart. He has a full, contagious laugh that adds to his powerful presence. And while he can be gruff and bluff, he has about him a sensitivity and humanity that translate into compassion for those who are powerless. There were times during his ordeal when his sense of humor and his ability to laugh at himself helped keep him stable and keen.

He is not a professional Southerner. He favors gin over Jack Daniel's, rare steak over barbecued ribs, Hemingway over Faulkner, traditional Protestantism over the Moral Majority, and one special Yankee woman over all the southern belles. At the same time, he does have some regional preferences: he thinks the soil on his Tennessee farm is the sweetest in the world, that country music is the music of the country, and that there never will be another football coach as great as Bear Bryant.

Naturally, questions can be raised about the deception involved in Jerry Thompson's assignment. He is not a racist redneck, and he posed as one. But at the same time, Klan leaders were posing publically as persons of virtue. To get behind their pious platitudes and expose what they really stood for, it was necessary for Thompson to misrepresent who he was. Had there been any other way to expose the Klan, Thompson's underground role would not have been necessary.

Thompson is a reporter with a sense of history. His re-entry to daily journalism after the Klan series was published proved that. He dug into an old and notorious murder case in which an innocent man named Leo Frank—a Jew—was convicted of killing a young Atlanta girl—Mary Phagan—in 1913.

The Frank case was tragic. The defendant was convicted in the wildest explosion of anti-Semitism in American history. When the Governor of Georgia was made aware that an injustice had been done, he commuted Frank's death sentence to life in prison. A mob soon kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him.

Almost seventy years later Jerry Thompson headed the team of *Tennessean* journalists that reopened the case. He produced Frank's one-time office boy, Alonzo Mann, now aging and sick,

who as a witness had lied under oath at Frank's trial. Mann recanted his testimony, which led to the Georgia Board of Pardons posthumously pardoning Frank.

Thompson is no poet, pundit, or prophet. He is a reporter who puts down fact after fact in one simple declaratory sentence after another. That is his strength as a storyteller. He is plain-spoken, and he writes as he speaks: plainly. Without frills. Without pretension.

There is an understated eloquence about his journalism and about this journal of his life in the Klan.

His story is as frightening today, and his reaction to his assignment as human as when he lived it nearly a decade ago.

I congratulate Rutledge Hill Press, the publishers of *My Life in the Klan*, for recognizing that even a decade after he lived it Thompson's story is still real, is still relevant.

—John Seigenthaler, Chairman, Editor, and
Publisher of *The Tennessean*, and
Editorial Director, *USA Today*