

# Children in Robes of Hate... It Made Me Want To Cry

By JERRY THOMPSON

As I reflect on more than a year as a reporter working as an undercover Klansman there are vivid flashbacks of moments that saddened me, frightened me, worried me.

Here are some of those recollections that caused me sadness, fear and concern:

● I was saddened every time I saw Klan children at a KKK function. In the flickering light of huge crosses in vacant fields there were always the beautiful, shining faces of small children — boys and girls — not yet in their teens: Klan children. They are being indoctrinated with the Klan's racist doctrine of white supremacy. Each time I saw them I felt sorry for them. And then, there was a Sunday afternoon, just two weeks ago, during a march of the Knights of the KKK through the streets of Birmingham when, suddenly, in the midst of two dozen Klan people wearing robes and hoods, there appeared this petite girl, striding along fully robed and hooded, her lovely face reminding me of my own 9-year-old daughter. Her left arm was in a cast. Her eyes looked straight ahead. She was expressionless. I have no idea what she was thinking. Our Klan people kept referring to her as "cute." Seeing her made me want to cry.

● Inevitably when I marched in my Klan garb, I would be moved by a sense of sadness and guilt when my eyes would lock into the gaze of black people standing along the sidewalks of our parade route.

I remember well the Labor Day march at Tusculumbia, Ala., in which I carried a sign which attacked public welfare. We were strolling along bellowing silly chants like, "White Power!" and "Wake Up White People; Wake Up!" — and I glanced suddenly to my right and met the gaze of a wrinkled old black woman, seated on a bench. I knew that she hated me. Worse, her look of contempt made it clear that she pitied me. I wanted, for just a moment, to rush over, smile at her and tell her, "I'm not really part of this."

● Fear? I lived with fear for more than a year every time I attended a Klan function of either the Knights of the KKK or its rival group, the Invisible Empire of the KKK.

I was a member of both groups at the same time. Because I was playing a triple role — reporter and member of competing Klan factions, I always was nervous. In the more violence-prone Invisible Empire there was the constant fear that some careless Klan man or woman with a gun would drop it, or accidentally discharge it, or inadvertently knock an automatic rifle off a table and spray the room with bullets.

● There was the fear of being discovered — by Klan members, or by reporters covering Klan functions who had previously known me.

Once, when we picketed the pres-

ident of the United States during his campaign opening at Tusculumbia, Imperial Wizard Don Black, noting that I was wearing dark sunglasses, pointedly said to me without smiling, "J.W., you're traveling incognito today." That slight case of paranoia that always afflicted me when I was around Klan people now took hold. I was afraid Black suspected me of being a newspaper reporter-spy. As it turned out, he didn't.

A couple of journalists did recognize me that day. That frightened me. But I sought them out and talked to them privately. My publisher at *The Tennessean*, John Seigenthaler, talked to one of them, as well. They honored our request that they protect my identity. They knew I might be in danger.

● I became fearful on another occasion when I telephoned Bill Wilkinson long distance at his na-

tional headquarters of the Invisible Empire of the KKK in Denham Springs, La.

Later, after I ended the conversation, I played back the legal tape recording I had made of our conversation. Suddenly, I was scared out of my wits. It happened as I listened to the recorded voice of Wilkinson's secretary answering the phone. When I told her my name was "J.W. Thompson" calling Imperial Wizard Wilkinson, I could



—Photo by Bob Dunnivant

## The Wizard and His Guerrillas

Bill Wilkinson, Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan, wears a sweater and slacks as he meets with the combat-garbed "commandos" of his special forces paramilitary team at their secret camp near Hanceville, Ala., where they train for what Wilkinson predicts is a coming "race war."



—Staff photo by Nancy Wornecke

## A Role for the Gentler Sex

Ann Reeves, secretary of a Ku Klux Klan chapter at Antioch — one of a growing number of women joining the Klan — shows off an automatic rifle the Klan raffled off at a Murfreesboro Road rally last May.

have sworn that she said, "Jerry?" I hadn't caught it when I was actually talking to her on the phone. But now the recording sounded as if she called me by my given name.

Could somebody have revealed to Wilkinson's Klan that I was not J.W. Thompson, retired Army sergeant, but Jerry Thompson, reporter? I rushed home to Nashville, and Seigenthaler and I listened as we played and re-played the tape. We became convinced that it was the recording re-play, not reality. Once again, my paranoia was working overtime.

● The time I became most frightened during my life with the Klan was a night when Terry Tucker, the Exalted Cyclops of my Cullman Klavern, told us we were to stage an armed march in Birmingham to confront the Communist Workers Party — "just like Greensboro." Five people had been shot to death when the Klan confronted the Communist Workers Party in Greensboro, N.C.

Now Tucker was telling us all to take weapons to confront the CWP in Birmingham.

Lawyers for the newspaper had instructed me before I took on the Klan assignment that I was not to participate in any unlawful activity, and that if I heard that violence was threatened by a Klan group I was to notify my publisher or the lawyers so that steps to curb the Klan could be taken to halt the danger.

I called Seigenthaler. He notified the Justice Department in Washington that such a threat existed in Birmingham. As a result, Birmingham SWAT team police surrounded us that day on the Birmingham march. They ordered us to disarm, and they meant business. We loaded up tool boxes in two pickup trucks with an arsenal of weapons. We marched, with police helicop-

ters hovering overhead and motorcycles escorting us.

There was no confrontation, and the only thing that got hurt was our feet from the three-mile walk.

● I remember worrying the night I sat in on my first den meeting with members of the Cullman Klavern of the Invisible Empire. Many of them routinely flashed and fondled their pistols and automatic rifles with something close to affection.

It dawned on me for the first time then: these people are ready for the "race war" their Imperial Wizard, Bill Wilkinson, keeps predicting.

The den to which I belonged in Cullman is an angry armed band whose members include people who are active in a paramilitary guerrilla warfare training unit near Hanceville, Ala. I am concerned that they are, in fact, promoting that race war.

● It worried me that day last April when I sat in the Birmingham City Council Chamber and saw Klan members sneer and heard them jeer and applaud as a black Army veteran, Willie James Williams, told about KKK members shooting into his home at night, endangering his wife and children.

Not one of those Klansmen would have wanted his own family to go through such an ordeal; still they clapped their hands with joy as Williams, a leader of the NAACP in Sylacauga, Ala., told the anti-Klan group conducting a hearing on Klan violence that police had ignored his pleas for help because they were busy investigating a television theft.

That display of pleasure in the knowledge that a black man was in danger and could not get police aid was an attitude that I regret was

shared by too many members throughout the KKK factions to which I belonged. At that time I was a journalist posing as a KKK member, and I was worried about being discovered. But I couldn't bring myself to applaud.

● It concerned me to see how members of the Klan seem to "turn on" when one of their leaders, such as Imperial Wizards Don Black or David Duke, launched into a discussion about the "problems" that they claim are being caused by the "niggers and the Jews."

Duke and Black are college graduates and are careful in public appearances never to use the insulting epithet "nigger." But in private, they use the word, simply to talk the language they think their Klan followers want to hear.

I had been prepared in advance during prepping sessions with a psychiatrist to expect the Klan to be filled with angry, insecure people. Without that advance warning I could never have been ready for the unreasoned dogma of dislike for blacks and Jews that rules the KKK.

● And I always worried when I saw so-called "respectable" people expressing sympathy for Klan actions and Klan literature.

It disturbed me when I attended a meeting at the home of a Birmingham area physician, Dr. Frank Abernathy, where Imperial Wizard Black, was introduced by the host. Dr. Abernathy clearly seemed to me to be sympathetic to the Klan.

I was gravely concerned because Don Black actually recruited new Klan members at that meeting and urged the guests to sign Klan application blanks and read Klan materials that were spread out on a table nearby.

I wrote about this meeting earlier in this series. Since then Dr. Abernathy told a United Press International reporter that I was wrong in saying this was a "Klan recruiting meeting" in his home. He said it was not a Klan meeting "per se" — and that he has all sorts of meetings in his fashionable residence at Alabaster, Ala. He insisted he was not a Klan member, and I never suggested that he was. I can only report what I saw at his home. And I stand by what I wrote.

I come away with these strong impressions about the Klan:

1. The KKK today is a growing threat to peace and order in cities all across the country. Whenever Klan members gather with guns concealed beneath their robes or on the hips of their so-called "security officers" — or in their automobiles nearby — it will only take a confrontational spark to set off a raging war.

The gunfire that has rocked a dozen cities and the blood that has stained the streets of Chattanooga, Decatur, Ala., and Greensboro is due to be repeated elsewhere unless authorities find some way to equally disarm the Ku Klux Klan.

2. Communities must find ways to deal openly, candidly and forcefully with the sense of false security Klan leaders somehow are able to impart.

Actually, the Klan has no answers for its members. It only has empty promises to offer. It cannot do anything to curb crime, help the police, improve the economy or assist society. In fact, were its rhe-

toric not so hateful and its potential for terror not so great, it would appear ludicrous. It is a silly

organization whose members and especially their children must come to understand how irrational they appear.

Every city in America needs to have its leaders well informed about Klan activities. Educational programs need to be initiated by human relations organizations to alert the public to the very real physical and social dangers posed by a growing KKK.

3. The news media should make every effort to make investigative studies of all aspects of the Klan so that reporters, interviewers and commentators are prepared to deal with gibberish, crafty, intelligent Klan leaders.

Too often journalists throw general questions at KKK Wizards like Don Black, Bill Wilkinson and former Wizard David Duke, giving them the opportunity to make generalized statements that should be challenged with facts.

There has been criticism that the media has given the KKK "too much publicity." My own view is that too often the media has given the Klan too much superficial coverage. Rarely is Imperial Wizard Don Black asked about his background as an anti-Semitic racist, dating back to his teens when he was investigated for making threats against a Jewish schoolmate — threats he told *Tennessean* correspondent Robert Dunnivant were misinterpreted. He claims he was trying to make friends with the Jewish girl. She says she still fears him.

Nor is he ever usually questioned about how he got shot several years ago by Jerry Ray, brother of James Earl Ray, or about why military officials found him unacceptable as an Army officer because of his racist attitudes.

Nor is Imperial Wizard Bill Wilkinson, of the rival KKK group, asked about the Klan front business he operated in New Orleans under the name "E.C. Productions" which sold advertising for a festival in that city — a promotion that fell through after it was exposed by colleagues of mine on *The Tennessean*.

Bill Wilkinson was born "Elbert Claude" but changed his name to Bill — thus the name, "E.C. Productions."

Nor is he asked about his "mail order ministry" in the Universal Life Church of Modesto, Calif. He had himself declared a mail order preacher in this church, then transferred personally owned real estate of his to the name of the church. Again, all that has been published in this newspaper.

4. Despite suspicions to the contrary by many people, my own impression is that the Klan today is poorly financed. Black's operation seems to live hand-to-mouth and Wilkinson's organization seems only slightly better off.

They deal in sales of gadgets, tee shirts, trinkets (I purchased from a Klan member a wristwatch that says *Drive for 255* and *race*), books, in addition to the initiation fees and dues. They also conduct roadblocks and turkey shoots to try to raise cash. True enough, Wilkinson flies his own private plane. But my observations convince me neither faction of the Klan to which I belonged has much money.

5. There is a concern that the KKK has infiltrated the police establishment.

My own experience suggests, at least at this point, that the Klan,

the Knights of the KKK, a fellow recruit, Jim Hulstander, who has said he was not a spy, was rejected as suspect because his father was a Birmingham policeman. While he was rejected, I was accepted.

And the strong response of the Metropolitan Nashville police to the efforts of the KKK to create disorder during the Nashville Christmas parade made me proud of my city and its Police Department.

There may be places where the Klan has risked letting in police officers as members. It won't happen where the police departments believe in upholding the law.

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MY YEAR and more in the Ku Klux Klan now has ended. It was never a pleasant experience. I went into the assignment with my eyes wide open. I discussed it with my

wife, Linda, in advance. The strain on her during much of this time has been nearly unbearable. I can never thank her enough for being both father and mother to our four children during this time. She is a brave lady, and I love her for many things — not the least of which is her support of me in this most dangerous news story of my 20-year career.

I also must express my appreciation to all of the members of *The Tennessean's* news staff — those few who knew of the role I was playing and the many who did not and who telephoned my wife and other relatives with words of encouragement during a time when they thought I was trying to lick a liquor "problem."

Many other friends who were worried that I lost my job also telephoned or came by my house to of-

fer words of encouragement to Linda. I thank them all.

TO TENNESSEAN Publisher John Seigenthaler, whose idea it was to infiltrate the Klan and who selected me for the job, I am appreciative for the confidence and his day-to-day advice and simple availability to talk over progress — or lack of it — and problems.

And I cannot forget my debt to other reporters who during my life with the Klan discovered me and kept the secret: Joe Holloway, a photographer for the AP Bureau in Atlanta; Jon Smith, cameraman for CBS-TV; Larry Brinton and Chris Clark with WTVF in Nashville. They could have blown my cover and made my life more problematical.

This has been a trying and troublesome time. It does not end with this series of stories. I know that

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the manuals of both factions of the Klan to which I belonged threatened "direful things" and "disgrace, dishonor and death" for those who violate the Klan oath.

THIS MEANS that my life will be different for a long time to come. I will have to have police protection in our house, and when we travel, for a long time to come.

That will be unpleasant. But while the story of the Klan will not end for me with this series, neither will it end for my community, the South or **TENNESSEAN**. The Klan is a menace. It is racist and anti-Semitic, and it threatens violence to any city where it has a Klavern or where it holds a rally.

I suspected as much before I joined the KKK. I know it positively now. I only hope my life with the Klan and these articles have helped them understand it.