

Alabama Doctor's Home Klan Recruiting Station

By JERRY THOMPSON

The fashionable Alabaster, Ala. home of a prominent Birmingham area physician hardly seemed a likely place for a "recruiting meeting" of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

But on an unseasonably warm night last Feb. 23, Dr. Frank Abernathy welcomed approximately 60 of us — some were Klan members but most were not Klansmen — to his rambling ranch-style residence about 25 miles from Birmingham. There Don Black, then Alabama Grand Dragon, appealed to all who were there to join his Klan Knights.

"OURS IS the only organization in the nation doing anything to cope with the situation the niggers are creating," Black told the audience of grim-faced men and women who packed Dr. Abernathy's comfortably furnished den and spilled out onto his sundeck overlooking a lighted swimming pool.

A table in the corner of the den was covered with Klan literature and KKK application blanks.

"The Klan is the only group trying to help the police control the lawless niggers," said Black who within a few months would become Imperial Wizard — or national leader of the KKK.

BLACK KNEW well that he was playing to the crowd when he talked about helping the police. The Klan can't help the police, but most of the men in the room had come there that night motivated by a racial controversy then pending in Alabaster because a white police officer had shot a black woman he had stopped for speeding.

My Life with the KLAN



That gathering at the Abernathy residence was actually a protest against the demands by black leaders to fire the police officer involved in the shooting. But as I sat there and listened, initially to Dr. Abernathy and subsequently to Don Black who had led me to the meeting, I was struck by two clear conclusions drawn from my year in the Klan.

FIRST, AND sadly, there is surprising, latent sympathy for the Klan movement among many "respectable" citizens who shun KKK membership. In numbers, Klan members are small when compared to the thousands and thousands who belonged to what amounted to a Southern guerilla army in the 1960s. But many people, who decline to sign an application blank, still feel supportive of the white supremacy and anti-Semitic rhetoric of Klan leaders.

Second, Klan leaders are quick to exploit any racial incident—a police shooting, a school confrontation or an affirmative action controversy involving blacks and whites—to try to build membership and sympathy for the Klan's regeneration. These leaders are willing to travel hundreds of miles in an effort to leech onto any bleeding racial ulcer in a community.

THE UNDERCURRENT of friendly sentiment for Klan activities was a surprising trend I encountered too frequently as I looked internally at the KKK and participated in its activities. Dr. Abernathy was the obvious — but certainly not the only — example of the sympathy. Here he was, an affluent, in some ways influential citizen, a professional practitioner who had thrown open his home to a racist spokesman who believes blacks are inferior and the Jews are in sinister control of the blacks, a man who actually has said Adolph Hitler had admirable qualities.

Dr. Abernathy, who appeared to be in his middle years, was an affable host with an outgoing demeanor and had turned his plush homeplace into a forum for an organization known for more than a century as a symbol of fear and terror.

IN THE AUDIENCE that night was another physician, Dr. Buford Sanders, a well-known Birmingham ear-nose-and-throat specialist who at the time employed Don Black as a clinic technician. Dr. Sanders sat near me that night. He declined when Dr. Abernathy asked him to speak. But during Black's speech he repeatedly urged Black, in a sort of "Amen" chorus, to tell his audience that it was the Jews who had engineered the slavery in America in the early days of this country.

And Black accommodated him. "The Jews brought the black people here," he shouted at one point, "and they have kept the niggers in their control. They have used the niggers against the Christian, white population," Black told us. "We ought to blame the Jew for what has happened to this country. The Jew has been run out of every civilized country in Europe."

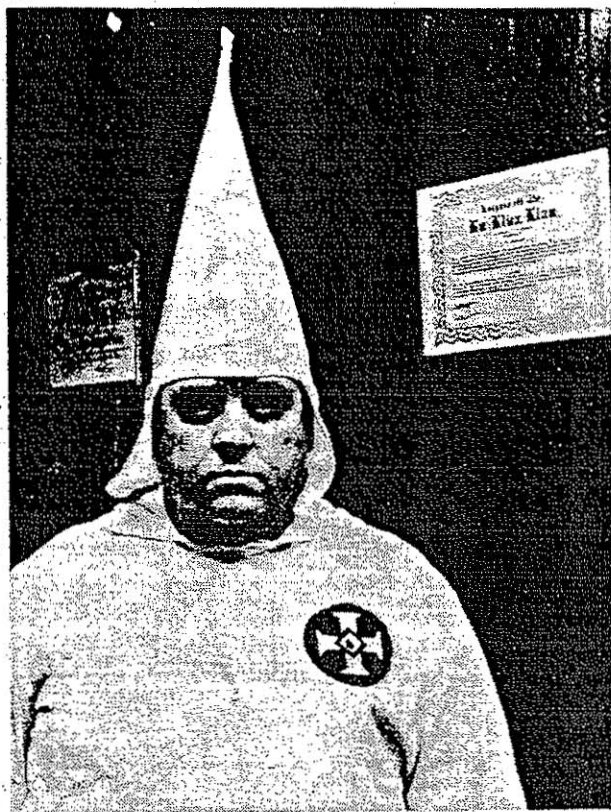
IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, of course, to know how many well-to-do professional people support — either personally, socially or monetarily — the efforts of Klan leaders.

But I well remember a Klan roadblock on Highway 79 in Birmingham, where I stood in the middle of a thoroughfare near the Centerpoint community. I held a container so that passing motorists could drop in money for the Klan.

I was truly shocked to find that many whites who passed by dropped money into my container. Although much of the money was coin contributions — a quarter or half-dollar — many gave bills, one of them a \$10. And the cars, driven by whites, that stopped and dropped in money included Fords, Chevies, and Toyotas — as well as Cadillacs and Lincolns.

MEMBERS ARE not joining the Klan in thousands of numbers. That is obvious to me after careful scrutiny of Klan activities. But there is a growing street support for the Klan.

On the other hand, blacks are concerned, harassed and angered by the new presence of the Klan. During my time participating at Klan roadblocks blacks who drove by let it be known that such a road-



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Plays Role to Fullest

Tennessee reporter Jerry Thompson wears the hood and robe of the Ku Klux Klan which he infiltrated as J.W. Thompson, a former Army sergeant and divorcee.

block was an affront and an insult. Frequently they shouted their insults. Once, a car carrying a group of blacks circled the block three times to pass by and shout at me. Each time the car roared by it passed a little closer to my toes. I was seared out of my wits. I knew that even the new computer terminal at my reporter's desk in Nashville — installed since I had joined the Klan — couldn't have been as intimidating as this.

And so, while Klan membership numbers are not expanding rapidly, there is a subtle, growing support for them in too many places.

THE KNOWLEDGE of this is what prompts the leaders of the Klan — Don Black and Bill Wilkinson — to travel great distances to try to monopolize on racial problems.

I well remember a conversation I had with Don Black a few days after the arrests of a group of Klan members and Nazis' in Greensboro on murder charges in the deaths of five Communist anti-Klan demonstrators.

"Black said he was going to a rally in Kingsport, Tenn., to try to recruit members there.

"I hadn't planned to go," he told me. "But in light of the shootings in Greensboro, I changed my mind and decided to take off from work and go."

The Klan faction in Greensboro was not a part of Black's national Klan organization, then headed by David Duke. But Black decided to take in a rally in Tennessee so he could use the killings to promote his own group's cause.

SEVERAL MONTHS later he told me he had heard of racial un-

rest on a military base at Columbus, Ga. He decided suddenly to go to Columbus to recruit Klan members among the military.

"The white soldiers are upset," he said. "I'm going to recruit them into the Klan."

He boasted to me in September that he had sent a telegram to Ronald Reagan chastizing the man who would become president because Reagan had apologized to the state of Alabama for mistakenly describing the state as the birthplace for the Klan. He called a press conference in Tusculumbia to release the text of the telegram. Later on he told me he had sent Reagan a wire demanding a seat at the presidential inaugural. He had a press release to exploit that in the media.

WHEN THERE was racial unrest in Boston, Mass., over busing in that city, David Duke — then head of the KKK — went to Boston to attract attention to himself.

Bill Wilkinson, the chief rival of Duke and Black, also journeyed to Boston to try to identify the Klan with the turmoil there. Wilkinson, who flies a private plane provided by the Klan, also has turned up in Chattanooga, Jackson, Miss., and other communities where there has been racial tension.

While my colleagues Susan Thomas and Nancy Warnecke were developing a story on Wilkinson earlier this year he flew suddenly one weekend to Idabel, Okla., after racial violence in that little town had left three dead.

"I'm going to Idabel to recruit new Klan members," he announced. When he got there he attracted a contingent of the state

police who shadowed him everywhere he went. He was willing to fly his plane to Oklahoma to exploit racial tragedy.

IT WAS THAT same opportunity for exploitation that had brought Black and our small contingent of Klan members the short trip from Birmingham to Alabaster that night in February when Dr. Abernathy opened first his home — and later in the evening, his bar — to a Klan recruitment session.

It had been more than two months since I had paid my initiation fee to Don Black. The ensuing period had been frustrating because Black, consistently had promised me he would set up a meeting at which I could go through the oath-taking ceremony called naturalization. He repeatedly set dates for my naturalization and then cancelled them.

On one occasion — Thanksgiving night a year ago — I sat in my Volkswagen at an intersection in Brompton, a Birmingham suburb, waiting for Black to take me to a naturalization. He stood me up.

I LATER discovered that the den he talked of in Brompton had been badly split by dissension and had only a few members.

On one occasion I attended a den meeting in Muscle Shoals, Ala. at which David Duke, then the Imperial Wizard of the Knights, and Black, who later was to succeed Duke, both spoke. There was discontent among the members at that meeting. Some of them demanded to know of Duke why he had shut down a den in Franklin County.

It turned out that the group in Franklin County was bickering with leaders of the Colbert County Klan. That group in Muscle Shoals was headed by Willard Oliver who still later in the year was to call a press conference and defect from Duke and Black and take his members over to Bill Wilkinson's more aggressive and militant organization.

IN RETROSPECT, it is clear to me that my decision initially to infiltrate the Duke-Black faction of the Klan movement was based largely on Duke's frequent, effective television appearances during which he gave the impression, because of his access to the media, that he was the dominant Klan figure; that his was the effective Klan group. Now I am convinced that while Duke was talking, and Black following, Bill Wilkinson — their foe — was out-organizing them.

Subsequently, when I joined up with Wilkinson's Klan and secretly held membership in both organizations at the same time — as I did as of last Saturday — it was clear to me that Wilkinson has gained the momentum over Black and Duke for two reasons:

First, his organizational skills and those of his subordinates seem to be superior to those of Duke and Black who are anti-Semitic, racist ideologues. Second, Wilkinson's haranguing about "a race war" echoed by his cadre of leaders which he predicts is just around the corner, has appeal for prospective Klan members who have feelings of anger and hostility for blacks and Jews. I never met Wilkinson, but I belonged to his Cullman Klav-

ern where his members are following his instructions to arm themselves to the teeth and to teach their families to shoot to kill in self-defense.

EARLIER IN THIS series of articles I had warned that federal and state laws need to be strenghtend to control the carrying of weapons by Klan members. Wilkinson's Klan needs to be disarmed.

At the outset of my assignment, it was my feeling that Don Black would provide a conduit into an active, effective Klan organization. I came to find that he leads very few. Even his national Klanvocation last month in Birmingham turned up only 50-60 Klan members.

Leaders in both groups may say that they knew all along I was a spy. But if Don Black had maintained those suspicions I never would have been led by him to Dr. Abernathy's home that night.

Nor would he have continued his conversations with me, which I cut off last week when the time came for me to leave the Klan. Nor would I have been in a den meeting of Wilkinson's Klan last Saturday night.

THERE WAS A Klan "recruit" named Jim Hulslander at the doctor's home that night, who Don Black later told me he suspected of being a police plant.

All during informal conversations that night at Dr. Abernathy's home Hulslander hovered close to Black, engaging many people in conversation about Klan activity. I had heard very little; before going to the Abernathy house,

about the police shooting controversy that led all those residents of Alabaster to gather there and listen to Don Black. But Huislander seemed to know it all.

"The way I hear it," he said to a group chatting just before Dr. Abernathy called us to order, "is that the policeman shot the nigger woman when she got out of the car with a gun."

As it turned out there never was a shred of evidence the woman had a gun. She was shot in the face. For six days in the hospital her condition seemed to improve. Then she died.

"IT WAS A heart attack that killed her," said Hulslander to the group. "The gunshot didn't have a thing to do with it. But the jigs want to blame it on the officer."

It was Huislander who told me that Dr. Abernathy had gotten active in the controversy when black leaders from Birmingham demanded that the officer be fired.

"The niggers went to the City Council in Alabaster and raised hell. The next time they met, the doctor took a crowd of whites in there twice as large as the niggers had. He isn't afraid to stand up for white rights," said my fellow "recruit."

When Dr. Abernathy called the group to order that night Huislander took a prominent seat in the front of the room. With his Klan shirt he seemed to me, as I think back on it, to be conspicuous — too conspicuous.

IN INTRODUCING Black that night, Dr. Abernathy described the Klan leader: "He is a courageous man who doesn't believe that outside agitators ought to come in and



Palatial Surroundings for Seeking KKK Members Secret Racist Meeting

A recruiting session of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan was held last February at this Alabaster, Ala., home of Birmingham physician Frank Abernathy. Here Don Black, then Alabama grand dragon — later to become the KKK's imperial wizard — made his pitch to a group of potential Klan members to join the racist organization.

stir up trouble with the police." The woman who was shot by the officer who stopped her for speeding was from South Carolina. As the doctor stood before us in slacks, sport shirt and white shoes it wasn't clear whether she was the "agitator" or whether he was talking about the black leaders from Birmingham who had appeared in the Alabaster City Council meeting to protest the attack.

Black's speech that night was almost identical to every declaration I was to hear him make during my months of association with him. At times, during telephone conversations, he would lapse into it, and run on endlessly about "the niggers being controlled by the Jews." In public, he — like both Duke and Wilkinson — are careful not to utter the offensive word "nigger." In Klan meetings it is different. Before he ended he asked all who were there to come back to Abernathy's in exactly two weeks for a follow-up meeting. Dr. Abernathy joined in this invitation. I wished when it was over that the second physician there had made a public statement. Except for Dr. Sanders urging Black to talk about who sent the blacks to America from Africa, he was silent.

ABERNATHY DESCRIBED Dr. Sanders that night as "the man Don Black works for." "Dr. Sanders gives him a lot of support and guidance," said Abernathy. Later, when it developed that one of Sanders' clinic associates was running for the Birmingham school board, Black was fired by Sanders. I was

proud to learn that the article was first published by my paper, *The Tennessean*.

Sanders said the meeting was supposed to be a community gathering for citizens concerned about the lawlessness and communism — and not a Klan meeting.

Saying he is not an active Klan member, Sanders added that he attends many meetings like the one at Abernathy's, to discuss the "creeping socialism" which he feels is destroying this country. When the speaking ended at Dr. Abernathy's home, several in the crowd said they had been Klan members in the 1960s. One of them proudly showed his old KKK card. Several took Klan literature from the table, a few filled out application blanks.

WHEN DR. ABERNATHY opened up the bar and offered us all a drink, Hulslander, my fellow recruit, roamed about the room offering advice to those who were there as to why they should follow him into the Klan.

At that point I told Black I needed to get back to town. He expressed his appreciation to me for joining him.

"See you Monday night at the Howard Johnson's," he told me. "We'll get you and Hulslander through the naturalization ceremony."

As I drove down Dr. Abernathy's winding paved drive his flood-lit house was still surrounded by the cars of most of those who had heard a Klan Dragon try to recruit them.



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

'Klansman' Sheds Sheets

Tennessean reporter Jerry Thompson, who spent more than a year with the Ku Klux Klan, checks identification for a photograph.