

Klan 'Naturalization' Baptism ... A 'Silly, Stupid' Ceremony

By JERRY THOMPSON

There were many times when I was an undercover member of the Ku Klux Klan, garbed in my white, sheet-like robe and pointed hood, when I felt plain silly.

But never in my life have I felt any more stupid than the night I went through my "naturalization" ceremony and was, in effect, "baptized" into the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

AT THE END of the "secret" ceremony — which will no longer be secret after today — Don Black, who then was Grand Dragon of the Knights of the KKK — and who today is the Imperial Wizard — sprinkled me with water and sonorously decreed:

"By the authority vested in me I now declare and proclaim you a citizen of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and invest you with the title of Klansman, the most honorable title among men."

Somehow, having just gone through a 40 minute racist ritual in which I had dedicated my life to white supremacy, I didn't feel all that honorable. In fact, there was nothing about the title Klansman that made it "honorable" to me.

AT ITS VERY worst, I found elements of the Klan to be dangerous, armed to the teeth and literally preparing for a race war. In my view, those Klansmen, largely identified with the Invisible Empire of the KKK — the rival group to the one I first joined — are inviting and promoting the very race conflict they are predicting. As I have said in earlier articles in this series, laws need to be strengthened, defined and enforced to disarm these Klan members before a Decatur, Ala. incident explodes again and again.

Later on during my life with the Klan I joined the Invisible Empire, headed by Bill Wilkinson of Denham Springs, La. There I saw firsthand the commitment of that group to guns and heard their warnings about the race war.

But even a Klan leader like Don Black, who urges his members to avoid confrontations with police, stands with armed security guards close to him as he preaches his sermons of virulent racism and anti-Semitism.

BLACK AND I were alone in his Birmingham apartment that night he annointed me "Klansman." And while there were no guns around, still it was nerve-racking.

After all, I was living a lie: posing as a retired army sergeant, J.W. Thompson. In fact I was an investigative reporter for *The Tennessean*, investigating the KKK.

During my association with Black that covered more than a year I found him to be a man of many moods, with little or no sense of humor. He could be friendly, accommodating, even excited. Or he could be cold, reticent and suspicious.

IT WAS JUST a minute before 7 p.m. last May 23 when I knocked on the door of his apartment at 1325-A in the Chestnut Tree complex in Birmingham's Bluff Park

section. The Grand Dragon himself opened the door and welcomed me in to be naturalized.

He invited me to have a seat in his comfortably furnished living room, warning me about a broken leg on one of the chairs. On this evening he was friendly and outgoing and introduced me to his wife's cat, Loki — named, he said, for a Norse god of olden times. The cat was about to have kittens. He remarked that it should have been named for a goddess. It was the nearest thing to a joke I ever heard him utter.

His wife Darlene was shopping, he said. I had no idea who else would attend my naturalization. As it turned out, nobody would. Actually, that was no surprise.

IN THE MONTHS since I had

paid Don Black my initiation fee and dues and had participated in numerous Klan functions, he had never been able to produce at any meeting in Birmingham more than a handful of members.

Gradually I concluded he had a skeleton organization in his home town.

I was right. Later, when the Grand Dragon became Imperial Wizard he moved the Klan headquarters to Tusculumbia in north Alabama where he had a larger contingent of members.

NOW, IN the quiet apartment — the Blacks have no children — it once more came to me how shallow Black's Klan group really was.

For 15 minutes that night we engaged in small talk — the weather, the cat, the presidential primaries, and his concerns that the "niggers

and the Jews" were gaining more control every day Jimmy Carter was in office. Small talk, indeed.

Suddenly, his mood changed; he became solemn and serious. "Let's go on with the ritual," he said. He stood, walked to another room, leaving me watching the television set.

WITHIN A few minutes he was back wearing his long, white, silk robe. He turned off the TV, lowered the lights, lit candles and placed them on the dining room table. He brought a glass of water from the kitchen to "sprinkle" me. He made a couple of trips to another room to get all of the documents he would need, then escorted me into the dining room and directed me to stand directly before him.

His eyes sought direct contact with mine. He gazed into my eyes



—Staff drawing by Bill Duke

'Baptism' Into Klan Life

Following a highly ritualized 40-minute secret ceremony — which includes a blood oath — Klan leader Don Black "baptizes" kneeling *Tennessean* reporter Jerry Thompson into the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan organization, in this artist's dramatization.

and I tried not to blink. He is a tall, erect, muscular young man who takes karate exercises regularly and stands with a rigid, almost military bearing.

"Raise your left hand," he told me. "It is nearest to your heart."

I RAISED MY left hand. I couldn't help but feel the nervousness building within me.

"It usually takes four officers of the Klan to do this," said Black. "But as Grand Dragon I am empowered to do it alone." For months I had played a deceptive and what I feared was to be a dangerous role — considering the Klan's propensity for violence. I had known it would be that way from the time I took the assignment to become a Klansman in order to conduct an investigation of the KKK's potential for violence and disorder.

DURING THE period since I had paid my initiation fee and dues, I had participated in Klan gatherings in a variety of settings — protest meetings, den gatherings, rallies. And I had come to know Don Black, who soon would become Imperial Wizard.

Now, through this so-called secret, "sacred" ceremony I was to become a Klansman by "oath" as well as by dues, initiation fee and participation.

This was another big step in my life with the Klan.

BLACK IS 27 and 6-foot-3-inches tall and was an imposing figure in the flickering candle light. He began by congratulating me

on my "courageous" decision to join his Klan. Courage? My heart was in my throat.

The Klan, he told me — as if I didn't know it — was an organization dedicated to white supremacy.

"IT IS A Klansman's nature to assist those who aspire to things noble in thought and conduct and to extend a helping hand to those worthy," he said, reading from his official KKK documents.

"Your desire to become a Klansman is sincerely respected and has been considered in the light of honor and justice," he went on.

Suddenly I felt giddy and was worried that I might giggle. But Black was painfully serious, completely wrapped up in what he was saying.

"YOU MAY NOW come forward and advance to the next step of knightly honor," he intoned. "However, if you are of faint heart, advance no further, for this is no light honor. You are about to take a vow of blood and honor."

When he mentioned blood, I no longer felt like giggling.

The "next step" in the ritual was a series of questions, which he explained I would have to answer:

"ARE YOU a white American citizen and not a Jew?" I said I was a white citizen and was not Jewish.

"Is your motive to become a Klansman sincere and unselfish?" I said it was.

"Have you ever been rejected for membership into the Klan?" I had not.

"DO YOU believe in the Constitu-

My Life with the KLAN



seeking to develop them. "They are not found in social or financial standing, but are spiritual — namely: a compassionate heart, a prudent tongue, a courageous will bonded to racial purity, all devoted to our race, our country, our families, the Klan and each other."

HE WARNED me, then, never to betray the Klan.

"If you should prove yourself a traitor you will be immediately banished in disgrace without fear or favor. Your conscience will torment you and direful things will befall you."

I wasn't worried about my conscience, but the threat of "direful things" is not easy to forget.

Last Monday, the day after my first article appeared in *The Tennessean*, Don Black called a press conference at the KKK national headquarters in Tusculumbia and branded me a "traitor." He declared that I will be tried and banished from the Knights. But that night Black wasn't thinking of banishment.

"DO YOU understand all this?" he asked me, after warning me of the "direful things."

I said I did. "Then," he continued, "with heart and soul, I welcome you and open the way for you to obtain the most noble achievement on earth, that of a Klansman. Be faithful and true until death and all will be well with our people and we will reach our destiny."

I ANSWERED that I was willing. He then detailed what he said were "the distinguishing marks of a Klansman" and told me I was

THE RECITAL went on: if I had any doubts about my qualification



— Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Torches Readied for 'Sacred' Cross-Lighting

His torch raised, *Tennessean* reporter Jerry Thompson, second from left, wears his Ku Klux Klan hood and robe as he participates in a "sacred" Klan cross lighting under the watchful eyes of KKK leader Don Black, in civilian clothing, at the Cpllinwood, Tenn. ceremony.

or sincerity in becoming a Klansman he invited me to expose them at this point. "You can leave with the blessing of the Klan and they will understand," and said, without hesitation: "wish you well."

"I will stay." I didn't add that I wasn't sure how long I would stay.

We then had a prayer, almost a rhyming prayer that echoed many of the Klan's goals and purposes: a prayer that asked for guidance in achieving them.

AFTER THE prayer, he droned on about the "honor and dedication" required of Klansman.

Reading from his ritual program he told me the oath I was about to take would be lifelong and it would be one that I would defend to death if necessary. He was deadly serious.

"If you wish to stay, you will take the oath; if you wish to retire, you can leave now."

THIS TIME, he didn't say anything about the Klan giving me its blessing or offering its understanding. I knew this would be my last opportunity to leave. I stayed.

"Keep your left hand raised and repeat after me," he said. And I repeated the oath: "I, J.W. Thompson, on this date, May 23, 1980, do before God and man most solemnly swear that I dedicate my life, my fortune, and my sacred honor to the preservation, protection and advancement of the white race and to that great order, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan..."

It was a long oath. It dealt with Secrecy, Loyalty, Duty, Proliferation, Fraternity, Honor and Dedication.

WE HAD BEEN at it now for about 40 minutes, and we were near the end. He had me repeat the "dedication" clause:

"I swear I dedicate my life, from

this moment forward, to fostering the welfare of the white race and furthering the work of America's greatest movement, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan."

He then held up the small glass of water and read further from his papers:

"WITH THIS life-giving fluid, more precious than and far more significant than all the sacred oils of the ancients, I set you apart from the men of your daily associations... As a Klansman, may your character be as pure, your life purpose as powerful, and your Klannishness as real as this simple water."

It was then he asked me to kneel, and with water glass in hand, he continued:

"I dedicate you in body (placing a few drops of water on my shoulder) in mind, (placing a few drops

on my head) in spirit, and in life..."

THEN HE proclaimed me a Klan Knight.

It was the strangest moment of my 20-year career as a journalist.

Black then instructed me in his Klan's secret handshake: the forefinger and middle finger of one's right hand extend up the wrist of the person with whom he shakes hands. Then he told me: "AKIA stand for 'A Klansman I am.'" I repeated the initials, "AKIA."

SOLEMNLY he presented me with my Klan citizenship papers and a copy of my "blood oath."

I had come a long way in the Klan. I told myself as I drove to my apartment across town. I still had a long way to go. One trip still ahead was north to Tusculumbia where I would heckle and demonstrate against the president of the United States.



A smiling Jerry Thompson, clad in his Ku Klux Klan robes, "secret handshake" at a Klan rally shortly after his initiation into the secret society.