

Fellow Workers Wondered Where Thompson Went

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By ROBERT SHERBORNE

Tennessee Publisher John Seigenthaler stormed into the newspaper conference room where a dozen staff members were waiting for the afternoon news meeting to begin.

Slamming his hand down on a stack of newspapers lying on the glass-topped table, he turned to Managing Editor Wayne Whitt and angrily declared:

"LOOK, WAYNE, Jerry Thompson's at it again, and I've had it with him! I'd like not to see him around here for a while. Can you see to that?"

Whitt, looking exasperated, nodded his head in agreement. He would take care of it immediately.

And then, in a rather subdued atmosphere, the news meeting finally began that September afternoon of last year. Later, after the meeting broke up, one of the editors who had witnessed Seigenthaler's outburst strolled up to Whitt and casually asked, "What's the problem with Jerry?"

"I THINK HE just needs to dry out a little," Whitt replied.

And so it began — the charade which hopefully would lead Thompson, a veteran of 20 years with *The Tennessean*, into an undercover membership in the Ku Klux Klan.

It was necessary, Seigenthaler knew, that absolute secrecy prevail if the plan was going to succeed. Thompson's friends and colleagues could not know the real reason why — suddenly — he disappeared from *The Tennessean* city room.

CALLERS FOR Thompson were told merely that he was "on leave of absence." No, we did not know when he would return. No, we did not know where he could be reached. And no, we had not heard from him lately.

His colleagues at the paper were told, in a way that left much to their imagination, that Thompson was "having problems." Some assumed that meant he was drinking too much. Others thought he had angered Seigenthaler in some drastic way.

Many of Thompson's friends and fellow workers — both here and in Alabama — were stunned to learn he was a reporter who had infiltrated the Klan.

"OH MY GOODNESS!" gasped his Birmingham landlady, Mrs. Nell Armstrong when told the man she knew as J. W. Thompson, a cabinetmaker, was affiliated with the Klan. Actually, W. really is Thompson's middle initial.

"I had no idea," Mrs. Armstrong said. "No idea." She was speechless last night when told he is also a reporter.

"We thought he was up to something, but we weren't sure exactly what it was," added David Skelton, owner of Village of Woodwork where Thompson spent 15 months laboring as a cabinet maker. "We thought he might have been some sort of government agent."

"WHERE HAS HE really been?" asked several of Thompson's co-workers, who had also been kept in the dark until he reappeared in the office a few days ago.

One reporter said he was thinking about taking a few days off "to go find Jerry and help him out of his mess, whatever it is." One editor said he planned to "pray for Jerry."

Another reporter concerned for Thompson called his home and happened to catch him on a rare visit with his family. Thompson politely declined an offer to come visit him.

GRADUALLY MOST of the newspaper's reporters had come to disbelieve Thompson's cover story: he was undergoing treatment at an alcoholic rehabilitation treatment facility. Yet, they remained unsure where he was or what he was working on.

After *The Tennessean*'s series of articles about the Klan appeared earlier this year, several reporters speculated he had gone undercover, probably in the Klan, but they were never sure.

Two newsmen for other organizations with whom Thompson had worked in the past did recognize him while he was participating in public Klan activities.

JON SMITH, a CBS photographer who formerly worked for Channel 5 here, recognized Thompson at a Fort Walton, Fla., Klan rally. Thompson quickly extracted a promise not to divulge his identity. Smith later saw Thompson picket President Jimmy Carter at Tusculumbia, Ala., as did Associated

Press photographer Joe Holloway of Atlanta. Seigenthaler phoned Holloway immediately afterward, and he agreed to keep the secret.

At one time, Chris Clark, anchor man and vice president for news at WTVF, came to see Seigenthaler, to let him know that Larry Brinton, that station's crack investigative reporter, was on to the role Thompson was playing. WTVF protected the secret and will broadcast its story on Thompson tonight on its news.

Among his Birmingham acquaintances, Mrs. Armstrong, 80, was most awestruck to learn Thompson was not the simple cabinet maker he pretended to be.

TERMING THOMPSON a "perfect gentleman," Mrs. Armstrong said he was the best tenant she ever had — a man who was quiet, and kept to himself, though unfailingly friendly.

"If I had known he was notorious, I would have asked him down for coffee," she said.

Although the two of them sometimes talked about fishing, they did not become close friends, Mrs. Armstrong added.

SKELTON OFTEN asked Thompson about his weekend trips.

Thompson would tell him he was visiting a girlfriend in Chattanooga. In reality, he was rushing to Nashville to spend a few rushed hours with his wife and family. Sometimes, he was away at Klan gatherings.

Despite Thompson's explanations about his fictitious girlfriend, Skelton and his business partner, Chris Smith, said they were suspicious.

WHEN THOMPSON answered a newspaper ad for a job at the cabinet shop, they skeptically considered him.

"He just didn't act like what he looked like," said Skelton, referring to the bibb overalls and T-shirt which Thompson often wore to work.

"He seemed too intelligent and knew too many things to be somebody who looked like that.

"AND WE COULDN'T figure out



David Skelton

"Thought he was up to something"

why somebody his age would want to get involved in a business like this. We weren't hardly paying him anything, and he had to learn everything from scratch."

However, Thompson learned his new craft quickly, staying long hours at night at the cabinet shop, gradually assuaging Skelton's and Smith's suspicions. They came to believe Thompson's claim to be a retired army sergeant who had divorced his wife and bitterly moved to Birmingham to start a new life.

Yet as the months passed their suspicions renewed.

"HE JUST KNEW too many people to be a retired army sergeant," Skelton said. "He knew people at the head of TVA. He knew a lot of reporters, and he knew some pilot that kept flying all over the world."

The two men wondered for months what Thompson might be doing. On a "fishing trip" they made together to Fort Walton, Fla., Skelton was surprised when Thompson took him to a Klan rally. "I thought then that he probably was working for the government," Skelton said.

Skelton and Smith did not find out Thompson's true identity and role until Thompson told them Nov. 30. Despite their suspicions, they were shocked.