

Reporter Finds KKK a Growing Danger

By JERRY THOMPSON

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The Ku Klux Klan today holds a strange, disturbing attraction for frustrated, fearful middle-income men and women — and a dangerous potential for violence and terror.

I know. For the last year I have been a Klansman. I have worn the white robe and hood. I have twice taken the oath pledging my life to the Klan. I have twice been "naturalized" into separate Klan empires. I have paid my Klan initiation fees and my Klan dues.

I HAVE FIRED Klan crosses, collected contributions at Klan road-blocks, marched in Klan street demonstrations and helped disrupt order at a public meeting with shouts in a Klan chorus. I have attended KKK den meetings where men armed with pistols and automatic rifles mouthed their routine racist rhetoric: "The niggers and the Jews are ruining the country."

Clad in Klan garments, I have picketed the president of the United States, demonstrated against a television station showing a documentary about the KKK, and been jeered by black citizens. And I have concealed the pistol of an ungarbed fellow Klansman beneath my flowing robes when he thrust it at me as policemen approached.

Through it all I was acting out a role — working as an investigative reporter for *The Tennessean*, striving to discover just how dangerous the Klan is, endeavoring to penetrate the secrecy veil that has obscured much of the Klan's life since its founding in Pulaski, Tenn., more than a century ago.

I ATTENDED my last Klan function just last night — a meeting in Cullman, Ala., of a local den of Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Wilkinson was said to be in Cullman, but he didn't attend the meeting. He was out "entertaining newsmen," I and my Klansmen buddies were told. After today, I doubt that Wilkinson will ever consent to "entertain" this newsmen.

I had hoped Wilkinson would be at last night's meeting, at which we elected new officers for the den, because I had never met him. I had, however, talked to him over the phone.

Today, Wilkinson's armed Klan plans a rally in Nashville. Obviously, I won't be there.

As I was escorted back to Nashville last night by members of the Metro sheriff's office who met me immediately after the den meeting adjourned, I was reminded that, during the past 18 months, 17 Klansmen in Alabama have been convicted or pleaded guilty to acts of violence or terror.

All of this leaves me with four basic impressions:

1. The Klan must be disarmed. Many Klansmen routinely carry guns on their public marches and demonstrations. State and federal laws need to be strengthened so that police can deal with this growing threat of violence.

2. The Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan, headed by Bill Wilkinson of Denham Springs, La., grows more dangerous each day, with a paramilitary training camp near Cullman. This militant faction of the Klan, of which I am a member, bears close scrutiny by authorities. The Justice Department agrees and has asked federal agencies to cooperate in an effort to combat the danger of violence posed by Wilkinson's group.

3. The rival Klan faction, of which I am also a member, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan headed by Don Black of Birmingham, is less militant because it is losing members. Still, Black, its wizard, is vehemently anti-Semitic and equally hostile to blacks. A Texas branch of this Klan also operates a paramilitary training team. Obviously, Black's Knights cannot be ignored.

4. These two Klan factions, whose leaders despise each other, constantly snipe at each other and are their own worst enemies.

For more than a year now, I have not lived as Jerry Thompson, staff member of *The Tennessean*, but as J.W. Thompson, a career Army man who took early, disability retirement as sergeant and who now works as a cabinet maker.

These last few months I have roamed Alabama towns from Birmingham, where Black lives, northward to the country bordering Tennessee where Wilkinson and Black hold the strongest concentrations of Klan memberships in the nation.

I HAVE POSED a "good old boy" — and some of my colleagues at *The Tennessean* would question just how much of a pose it has been.

For a year, I have met and talked with Klan people in a variety of forums and gatherings. Now I know, after being "inside," that many of them — far too many — truly believe the words of Wilkinson when he says, "The race war is coming."

Because they believe it, they are indeed arming for it. The gunfire and bloodshed that have shaken Chattanooga, Greensboro, N.C., and Decatur, Ala., can happen anywhere, anytime Wilkinson's KKK group gathers.

It simply is impossible to put so many guns underneath the robes of so many people who detest blacks and Jews without the danger of a violent explosion.

I HAVE ATTENDED den meetings of klaverns of Wilkinson's Invisible Empire in North Alabama where there were a half-dozen men wearing guns on their hips and in

camp near Cullman.

It was nerve-wracking at meetings to sit there and worry about somebody dropping a pistol or knocking a machine gun off a desk.

Where armed Klansmen gather, psyched up by hysterical speeches about "the niggers and the Jews," all that is needed to strike a spark is a confrontation — or enough liquor to make Klansmen reckless.

MY ASSIGNMENT was not to try to become a Klan leader or officer or adviser, but simply to belong, to get along, to be a follower, and to analyze the depth and nature of Klan membership and organization. I was to be just a joiner — to watch and to listen, to try to understand why this phenomenon I have always called "the Kluxers" has suddenly re-emerged in American society of the 1980s.

What I have seen worries me.

Klan people, generally, seem to have a sense that something they cannot define or control has caused their world to go out of balance. Part of it has to do with economic uncertainty. They are uneasy and insecure about a present that seems shadowed and a future that is obscure. They seem to believe that nobody — except the Klan — offers a solution to the question of how to put their world back on track.

THE "SOLUTION" offered them by the Klan leaders, of course, is no solution but merely a dogma of dislike for blacks and Jews. I have never attended a Klan gathering — a rally or den meeting, march or social party — when "nigger and Jew" talk did not dominate the conversation. Sometimes it was the only topic of conversation, and the gathering would have been pointless without it.

At a Birmingham rally in October, Bill Riccio, Alabama state chaplain in Wilkinson's Invisible Empire, kept shouting at us about "the spe niggers who are terrorizing the schools."

Roger Handley, the Alabama grand dragon of the Invisible Empire, constantly warned us that "the niggers want a confrontation, and they are going to get it."

DON BLACK, imperial wizard of the Knights of the KKK, regularly told me, "The Jews own all the media and are financing the niggers and forcing them down our throats." Once, when I picketed a TV station with him, I was given a picket sign attacking the "Jew media."

I was born and reared in a rural Tennessee setting, and during my 20 years as a reporter many of my own attitudes changed as I covered stories about race and worked with talented journalists whose cultural background differed from my own.

For years I sought to condition my thinking to be aware and sensitive to a changing society. Suddenly, in the Klan, I found myself submerged in a cauldron of racism and intolerance. It was necessary and important for me to undergo an immediate reconditioning. With a sense of guilt I would find myself engaging in the same sort of "nigger and Jew talk" that offends decency.

KKK MEMBERS don't seem to

My Life
with the
KLAN



have much to laugh about — other than racist jokes. And while the wizards of the two empires to which I belong claim they don't "hate blacks and Jews," Klan lessons still are lessons of hatred.

Sadly, many Klan parents told me they are teaching their children about "the threat of the niggers" and "the conspiracy of the Jews." They assumed I felt the same way. KKK members are indoctrinating their kids, through the Klan youth programs, with the same beliefs they have about Jews and blacks. I have met Klan members who boasted they are third-generation Klansmen.

This is not a year I have enjoyed. Through it all, I have been ill at ease. Sometimes I have been afraid.

I know, of course, that the handbook of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan warns that those who violate the Klan secrecy oath — as I am now doing — "will be fearful of the righteous wrath of the members of our movement."

THE MANUAL of the competing Invisible Empire warns that violating the oath "means disgrace, dishonor and death." Strong words from armed Klansmen.

Because I understand the full implication of those words, and because I know that Klan members can be stupid and violent, my family and I now live at our home near Nashville, protected by police security. Because we know the Klan is dangerous and Klan members can become angry, my family expects to live with police security in our home for a long time.

If this has been a difficult year for me, dealing with a double life and worrying constantly about being discovered, it has been an absolute ordeal for my wife, who was aware of my assignment.

Our four children, who have known nothing of my involvement in the KKK, surely have felt the family tension. The youngsters have known only that I have been away from home a great deal, coming back for occasional weekends.

I CAN ONLY hope that by the time our children are adults the fears and frustrations that push people into a hate club like the KKK will have evaporated and hostility toward blacks and Jews will have dissolved.

But for now, that is not the case. And that fact is why, in Klankraft,

I repeat the saying "AKIA," which means "A Klansman I Am."

Well, "A Klansman I Am" in two separate Klan groups. I have always known, of course, of the Ku Klux Klan's reputation for racism and violence. But I knew very little of the Klan, its structure, its ritual or its true potential for danger back in July 1979 when John Seigenthaler, publisher of *The Tennessean*, called me into his office and opened up the idea of attempting to become a member of the Klan for the purpose of conducting a journalistic investigation of the KKK.

Already there had been a bloody shootout on the streets of Decatur, which borders our paper's circulation area.

"IF OUR AREA is going to be threatened by Klan violence again, we had better let our readers know everything we can find out," Seigenthaler said.

His plan was for the paper's investigation to take two directions: first, to attempt to get me "inside" the Klan. At the same time, a team of three *Tennessean* staff members — colleagues of mine — would conduct an external, Southwide probe of Klan activities. In fact, that study, which produced a series of articles in *The Tennessean* (Feb. 17-24, 1980) by Kirk Loggins, Susan Thomas and Nancy Warnecke, turned out to be a nationwide survey of Klan affairs. The Klan is centered in the South, but it is now a national phenomenon.

Seigenthaler estimated that my assignment would last from three to six months. As it turned out, it lasted almost a year and a half.

WHY ME? It was a question I put to the publisher the first day he broached the subject. He was candid.

"First of all, you have the intelligence and the guts to do it," he said. Quite complimentary. I was flattered.

"Then," he added, "you fit my image of what a Klansman should look like. You have the rare advantage of looking like a redneck."

Seigenthaler has a way of balancing compliments.

Naturally, I hesitated before taking on this assignment. I considered for several days what would be involved. I knew it would require leading a double life — taking on a new identity. I knew it would necessitate my being away from home and family for a long period — with only occasional weekend visits back to Nashville. And I knew it might be dangerous. After discussing all of this with my wife, I took on the assignment as a challenge and told Seigenthaler on Aug. 2, 1979, that I would do it.

FROM THE OUTSET we were aware that I might not make it into the Klan. I might fail to make the right contacts. I might become suspect and blow my cover. I might not pass the screening process of the KKK. Seigenthaler had heard that one KKK faction was giving lie detector tests to potential members to protect against being infiltrated by law enforcement officers. Obviously, I couldn't pass a lie detector test.

Just as obviously, I couldn't just show up suddenly at Klan headquarters unannounced, panting to join.

In preparation, I needed to research the history and present of the Klan. I had to prepare myself



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Costume of Hatred: A Tool of Klan Pretender

Tennessean reporter Jerry Thompson, working underground as a Klansman, removes his robe after a march through Birmingham. The Birmingham police ordered Thompson's fellow Klansmen to disarm before they could proceed.

for confrontations with Klan people I would meet. I had to come to an understanding of what I could and could not do under the law. I had to create a new identity and commit to memory a story of how and where I had spent my life prior to showing up in Alabama as a prospective Klan member.

THERE CAME a night, three months later in November of 1979, when I faced Don Black, the Alabama Klan leader, in a Birmingham parking lot as he cross-examined me, personally and severely, about intimate details of my past life.

We stood there for 45 minutes beside his car in that nearly deserted lot, as he quizzed me sternly, seriously and thoroughly.

I was glad I had spent a month preparing for that ordeal. But when Black finished with me and I stood there in the chilly evening, sweat dripping from my face, I felt that I had passed his test. He never suggested a lie detector exam, and I never talked to another Klan member who was required to take one. Only when he finally took my Klan initiation fee, though, did I know for sure that I could say "AKIA."

"You understand, don't you," Black said to me that night, just before he accepted my \$25 for the initiation fees and dues, "that you are giving your life to the Klan?"

I said I did, but I hoped otherwise.

WHEN MY ENCOUNTER with Black ended that night, I was glad that I had spent the better part of a month preparing for that cross-examination. And in the weeks that were to come, I came to realize that the extensive efforts made to prepare me for the trial of Klan membership were all worthwhile.

What I underwent was an intensive indoctrination program to prepare me for any eventuality.

First, Seigenthaler sent me to William Grainick of Atlanta, regional director of the American Jewish Committee who is the nation's best-informed Klan watcher. I immersed myself in his files and came away with a sense of just how surreptitiously Klan activity has accelerated.

I devoured books, magazine arti-

cles and news clippings on KKK activities, past and current.

Next, with my publisher, I visited Dr. Otto Billig, a psychiatrist, to get a briefing on the sorts of personalities I might encounter during my experience.

"**THESE PEOPLE** often feel inadequate about themselves," Billig said. "They have feelings that they are alone. They need something to belong to, to feel a part of. And they need something to be against — a target for their feelings of aggression, somebody to blame for the inadequacy they feel. Thus, their sentiments about minorities."

Billig gave me words of advice that were helpful during the days ahead: "These people can be extremely suspicious if they think you are pushing too hard," he said. "Try to be as much like them as you possibly can. Be sympathetic to what they feel. But don't try too hard."

I later thought of that as I talked to Don Black, who sometimes seemed suspicious of everybody.

And then I began to work on the personality I was to assume: J.W. Thompson, sometimes simply called "Jay," a retired Army sergeant, divorced, childless and recently discharged for chronic high blood pressure.

WITH CONSIDERABLE help from my brother Ronnie, who served in the Army, I created a soldier's complete career: where J.W. had taken basic training; the parts of the nation and world where he had served; the places he had been stationed; the towns where he had enjoyed leave.

I memorized my serial and M.O.S. — military occupational specialty — numbers.

And finally, I had several meetings with William R. Willis and Alfred H. Knight, lawyers for the newspaper, to get their advice on how to deal with legally difficult situations.

Their advice was clear. I was not to engage in any activity that might be construed as a law violation. If I were to overhear any plan by Klan people that involved any act of terrorism, I was to use my high blood pressure to excuse myself. If violence or a law viola-

tion were planned and I knew of it, I was to contact the lawyers or officials of the newspaper so that steps could be taken to protect the potential victims and to alert law enforcement authorities in advance.

UNDER NO circumstances was I to carry a weapon.

As it turned out, there was only one occasion when I worried about actual violence that might involve me. A march was planned for Birmingham on Oct. 25 of this year, and we were told a week earlier that there would be a confrontation with the Communist Workers Party. We were advised to be armed and ready for war "just like they had in Greensboro."

I telephoned Seigenthaler, who notified Justice Department officials in Washington. When we gathered that Saturday at noon at the Woolco Shopping Center in Center Point, a Birmingham suburb, that city's police SWAT team was waiting for us. They ringed us. Helicopters flew overhead. We were told by police to disarm or be arrested. Dozens of Klan pistols, rifles and knives were stashed in a truck.

The march went off, under tight police escort, without anybody getting hurt — except most of our feet were sore after the three-mile walk. The Communist Workers Party members, who we were told number about 150 in Birmingham, failed to appear.

ONLY ONCE did I violate the admonition not to carry a weapon. It occurred at a cross-burning ceremony in Athens, Ala., on Oct. 18 of this year. A police car suddenly was coming toward me as I talked with a fellow Klan member, Dennis Thomas, security captain in the Knights. He was not garbed. He had a pistol in his belt. He quickly shoved it at me as the police car approached.

"Hide my heat," he said. I nervously stuffed the weapon under my robe until the patrol car left, then quickly shoved it back to my fellow Klansman. It was, once again, a cool night, but I was suddenly drenched with nervous sweat.

Looking back on it, I felt all those weeks of preparing for Klan involvement — starting in August

1979 — were valuable and worthwhile.

BY LABOR DAY weekend, 1979, I certainly felt my preparation was adequate, and I had come to some conclusions about Klan activity.

A possible source of action was emerging, as I studied the four national rival Klan organizations, all of them located in the South.

Two of the organizations seemed to me to be impotent and stagnant. The first was the once-powerful and vicious United Klans of America Inc., headed by Robert Shelton, 52, a federal ex-convict from Tuscaloosa, Ala. In the civil rights heat of the 1960s, Shelton's Klan was a chief perpetrator of Southern violence. Since his imprisonment in 1969 for failing to turn over his Klan records to a congressional committee, the fires of the United Klans had become dim, its membership skimpy.

The second group was the National Knights of the KKK, headed by 77-year-old James Venable whose organization now is reduced to giving periodic social parties concluded by cross-burnings on Stone Mountain, Ga.

NEITHER OF THESE groups was worth wasting time trying to join, I concluded.

The other two groups, both based at that time in Louisiana, seemed at the center of current Klan action.

One of these was the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, headed then by David Duke of Metairie, La.

Second-in-command in Duke's Knights was Don Black, his Alabama grand dragon. The two men, both college graduates, both racist, both anti-Semitic, both youthful and attractive in appearance, were theorists.

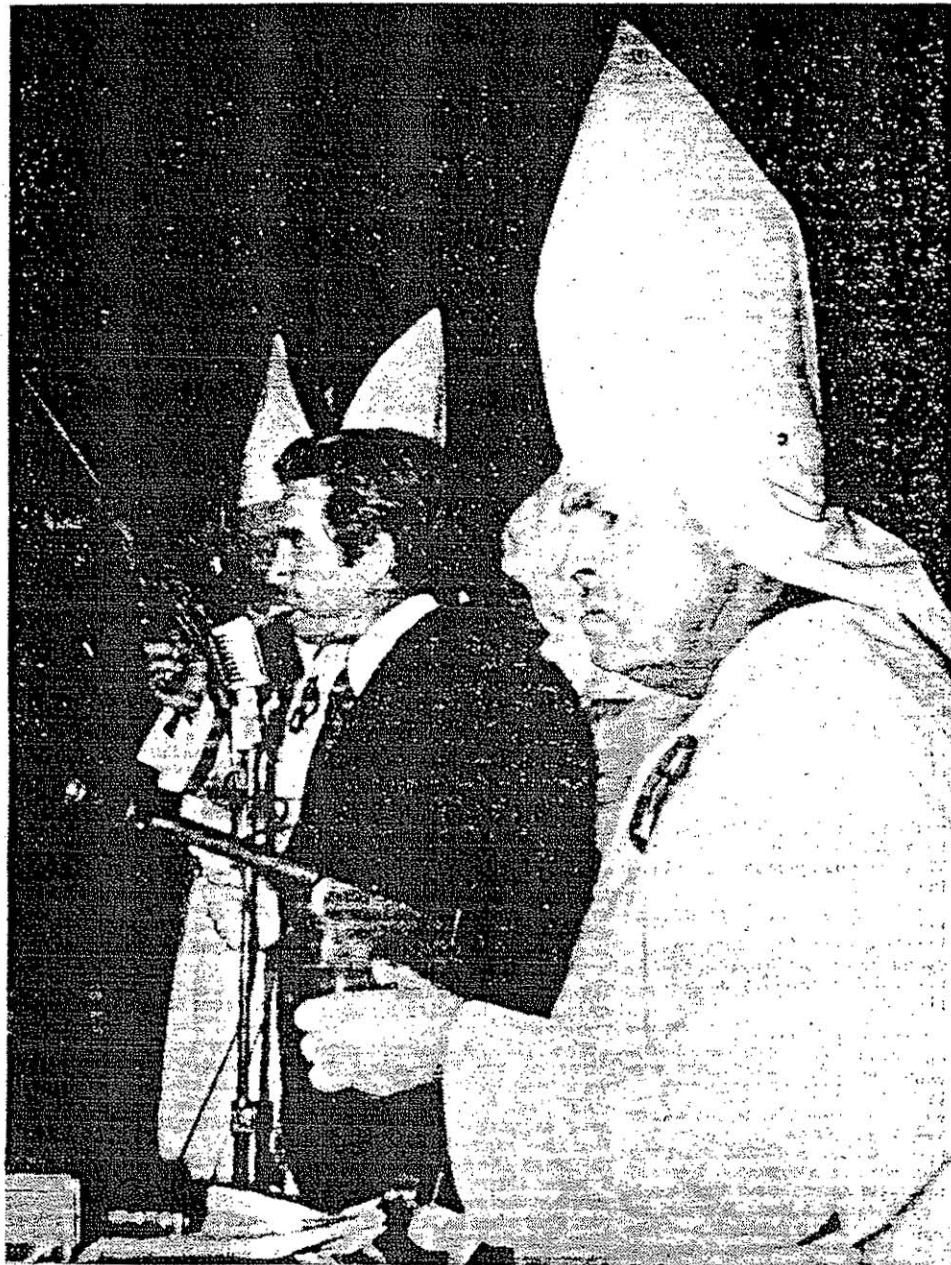
Duke had made some startlingly favorable national television appearances because talk show hosts like NBC's Tom Snyder had not been prepared to ask tough, penetrating questions. Because of those TV performances, national magazines were writing about David Duke. It seemed to me that his was the organization where most of the fire and the fury was to be found. My publisher and I decided that we would make our first pass at joining the Knights.

THE OTHER organization which clearly was viable was the Invisible Empire, headed by Wilkinson. He had been a protege of David Duke, but the two men had fallen out and become foes. Publicly at that time, they said little to criticize each other. But gradually their dislike for one another leaked out. Wilkinson was more an activist than a theorist. He operated his Empire out of Denham Springs, La.

After giving detailed consideration to everything we knew about the Klan organizations, Seigenthaler and I decided that I would go to Birmingham and make my first effort to work my way into the Klan there.

Politics was to be the vehicle I would try to ride into the KKK.

In Birmingham, Don Black, the Knights' Alabama grand dragon, had announced he would be a Klan candidate for mayor of the city. He was not given much chance to be elected. But once in Birmingham, with a residence and a job, I could volunteer to work in Black's political campaign. Obviously, it would



—Photo by Bob Dunnivant

Protected Wizard Leads Rally

CULLMAN, Ala. — Bill Wilkinson, center in business suit, leads a Klan rally while white-robed, sub-machine-gun-toting Klansmen keep a close watch for possible trouble.

be run by some people involved in the Klan. I would ingratiate myself with them, get close to them through the political effort, and then — once their confidence was won — seek admission to the Klan.

AN ASPECT of the mayor's race was clearly helpful: the leading contender was a black member of the Birmingham City Council, Dr. Richard Arrington, the son of a former sharecropper.

In such a campaign, race would be the only subject discussed at the Black for Mayor campaign headquarters.

Seigenthaler had heard that David Duke had announced on television that he was considering running for president. If I were successful in getting tight with Black through the mayor's race, I might,

after winning Black's confidence, volunteer to help in David Duke's presidential campaign. Still later, I might switch to Wilkinson's Klan group for a brief period to examine the vitality of that organization.

As it turned out, the Black mayoral campaign provided me with a thread of access to him. Fortunately, that thread did not break and Black later admitted me into his Klan group.

LATER ON, I would join the Wilkinson organization. And, as I have already said, I now belong to both the Knights of the KKK headed by Black and to Wilkinson's Invisible Empire. But I don't plan to pay any more dues. After today, I don't think they will ask me to.

The Duke presidential candidacy

never materialized. Like so much of his leadership, it was more conversation than substance. As my year in the Klan passed, Duke seemed to lose interest in the Klan. Finally, he tried last July to sell his membership list of the Knights to Wilkinson for \$35,000. Wilkinson exposed that effort to the media, and a few days later Duke gave up his imperial wizard's office in the Knights of the KKK.

And so, it was not necessary for me to go to Louisiana to get close to a Klan imperial wizard. Instead, I stayed in Birmingham and David Duke handed over his wizardship to Don Black who had "recruited" me into the Klan, "naturalized" me, accepted my money, and who last week still talked freely to me about Klan matters.