

Memories of the Ku Klux Klan in One Indiana Town

WILLIAM CLAYTON WILKINSON, JR.

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your tears wash out a Word of it.

Omar Khayyam, "The Rubaiyat" (1120 CE), LXXI

During the summer of 1924 the Ku Klux Klan carried out four distinct aggressive actions in the northern Indiana town of North Judson. I was a lad of ten years at the time; I watched two of these events unfold before my eyes and I witnessed the evidence of the others in the days that followed. A fiery cross, a public parade, a homemade bomb, and open vandalism—these acts threatened all of the Catholics in our community, and, for me, left scars that have not been erased in the intervening eight decades. Midway through high school I left North Judson behind, but though I graduated from Purdue University, moved to the East Coast, and worked a lifelong career as an engineer, the memories remain.

I have never really discussed the incidents with anyone, although I have, on occasion, reminisced for the benefit of my own four children.

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Twice I set out to put the story on paper, but neither attempt came to fruition. Some years ago I felt that I should check my own memory, and I hired a person to comb the Starke County newspapers for any shred of documentation of the incidents. She turned up a small amount of additional information but nothing at variance with my memory.

Having myself annotated two family histories written by my ancestors, I know that such recollections can in fact be accurate, particularly when they concern important events that have become firmly embedded in a person's mind.¹ This, I believe, is the case with my memories of the Klan in North Judson. I knew these people; I delivered newspapers to their doors; I went to high school with their children. In face-to-face encounters I never felt threatened by them; yet their public acts were committed behind a veil of secrecy.

Speaking of Indiana's Klan-marked past, one Noblesville resident concluded that "You can't burn history."² As Omar Khayyam writes, such tragedies of the past cannot be washed away with tears either. My purpose is neither to cry nor to condemn. I present these incidents only to record a bit of history not yet put to print. In so doing, I stress the deliberate and vicious nature of the Klan's activities in my home town.

Shortly before the time of my birth, a Starke County historian had pointed to "the spirit of progress" that typified the area in its early days. Beginning with a first white settler and first white child (1835), county boosters traced a line of development through a sawmill (1849), county organization (1850), and the founding of the towns of Knox (1850) and North Judson (1860). Soon, four different rail lines—the Chicago & Great Eastern (1861); the Chicago & Atlantic (1885); the Indiana, Illinois, & Iowa (1887); and the Cincinnati, Richmond, & Muncie (1902)—converged on North Judson, transforming the "enterprising little city" into the county's "railroad center."³

¹One of these was published as William C. Wilkinson, ed., "'To do for my self': Footloose on the Old Northwest Frontier," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 86 (December 1990), 399-420.

²Allen Safianow, "'You Can't Burn History': Getting Right with the Klan in Noblesville, Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 100 (June 2004), 109-54.

³Chester A. McCormick, *McCormick's Guide to Starke County, or, A Past and a Present View of Our Territory*. ([Knox, Ind.], 1902), 6, 22; Perry McCormick et al., *North Judson Review* (North Judson, Ind., 1965), 9; "The Railroad History of North Judson," <http://hvrn.railfan.net/history.html>.

By the time of my childhood, the rail lines (three of which connected to Chicago) not only brought progress but also speculation and vice to Starke County. Some of Chicago's better-known gangsters slipped out of the city for high jinks, bootlegging, and gambling at English Lake, a crossroads community on the Kankakee River in the northern part of the county, and at Bass Lake, a few miles east of North Judson.⁴

Three miles to the southeast of town, meanwhile, the C & O built a station in the Lena Park development, which boosters touted as a "new manufacturing Center" that would "becom[e] a Great City only surpassed by the World's most rapid growth town, Gary, Indiana." Each Sunday, excursion trains from Chicago provided free rides to persons wishing to escape the city for a chance to purchase one of "thousands of lots" spread across more than 2,000 acres. The bubble burst when manufacturers determined that the local sands were ill-suited for the cut-glass factory originally planned for Lena Park. Those who had purchased the lots lost their invested funds.⁵

The settlers who had responded to the opportunities promised at Lena Park were predominantly recent immigrants from eastern Europe. Still other immigrants followed Indiana's Monon Railroad to San Pierre, ten miles west of North Judson, or came to North Judson after having attended the Bohemian Turner Society's annual summer picnic.⁶ According to census records, almost 22 percent of the households in North Judson's Wayne Township in 1920 were headed by immigrants from Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), Italy, or Poland; Germans accounted for another 9 percent.⁷

⁴Today the Starke County Historical Society describes the lakes as having been "the playground of the 'rich and famous' during the early 1900s." http://www.in-map.net/counties/STARKE/government/starke_county_history.htm.

⁵Centennial Committee, *Starke County Centennial, 1850-1950* (Knox, Ind., 1950), 9-13; J. H. Koren & Co., "Lena Park Promotional Brochure," http://www.lenapark.net/history_2.html.

⁶*Starke County Centennial*, 21; North Judson-Wayne Township Public Library, *Pictures of the Past: Images and Descriptions of Italian Immigrant Life in North Judson, Indiana* (North Judson, 2001), 21, www.eboilini.com; Keith Ezra and Robert Jachim, *North Judson Centennial*, North Judson Centennial Committee (n.p., 1966), 61.

⁷Neighboring Railroad Township reported similar East European figures, with nearly 16 percent German in 1920. U.S., Fourteenth Census, Manuscript for Wayne and Railroad Townships, Indiana, Microfilm T625, Roll 466. H. J. Alerding, *The Diocese of Fort Wayne, 1857-September 22-1907: A Book of Historical Reference, 1669-1907* (Fort Wayne, Ind., 1907), 362-64; *Pictures of the Past*, 3.

These new ethnic immigrants brought their Catholic faith with them. By the turn of the century their numbers were sufficient to support a parish. This first church had been located in San Pierre, with the priests administering to the North Judson members on a mission basis. With time this situation was reversed, and North Judson became the more populated part of the parish.⁸ By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century there were enough Catholics in the North Judson area to finance a large church—Saints Cyril and Methodius—and a moderately-sized parochial school. The former is still in use. The latter, a four-room, two-story brick edifice, has been razed in recent years and a new building constructed at another location. Built near the parsonage and the home of the teaching nuns (four or five Sisters of the St. Francis Order), the structures created a close-knit Catholic compound one block from North Judson's main street.⁹

Many of the arrivals from Chicago were (or became) well-to-do families who did not fit readily into the category of "poor immigrant." Catholic immigrants soon owned the town's major general store (Two Joes, owned and operated by Joseph Dolezal and Joseph Sindelar), the Chrysler dealer (Frank Vessely), and the major café and ice cream parlor (the Picchetti family), among other businesses.

I knew of no blacks in the town. The only Jews, to my knowledge, were the Donchin family. Born in Russia, Ben Donchin and his family had emigrated from Chicago to North Judson. He and his two sons owned and operated the town's major men's clothing store.

My father descended from a long line of WASPs, while my mother descended from an equally long line of Irish Catholics. Upon their marriage, my father converted to Roman Catholicism. Both of my parents practiced the tenets, in the broad sense, throughout their lifetimes. I cannot recall ever having heard a bigoted remark from either. They had five sons, of whom I was the second-born. My older brother was smarter, larger, and more vocal. I did a lot of listening at the dinner table.

The Klan exercised a direct impact on our family and, although I was not much more than a child, I knew about it. For almost a full decade before their marriage, both of my parents had taught elementary school in the one- and two-room schools of Indiana. Later, my father

⁸Alerding, *Diocese of Fort Wayne*, 362-64.

⁹Ezra and Jachim, *North Judson Centennial*, 23-25.

became the teaching principal at English Lake. Then, as the result of the 1922 Railroad Township trustees' election—in which Leonard Rennewanz replaced Dr. W. J. Solt—my father suddenly found himself to be of the wrong religion and he was summarily dropped. This first jolt from the KKK sent us to North Judson, where my father ceased teaching and began to look for work in construction. Difficulties continued, but there were enough Catholic families with building and maintenance needs to keep our collective heads above water.

When we moved from English Lake to North Judson, my parents enrolled us in the public school. I spent a number of weeks in a single-grade classroom and thus became acquainted with some of the public school children. Following pressure from our priest, however, and much to my dismay, my parents transferred us to the four-room parochial school.

There was no formal interaction between we parochial school children and our public school counterparts, but we did have mixed group activities. A vacant lot on my end of town drew all of us to play baseball. Promoters of the Enterprise Development project had laid out streets and planted trees before the bust forced them to halt. Any available children played in the “work up” sandlot baseball games. We formed a team (named after the failed land project) and played another team from the north end of town. In addition to baseball, bicycling and the construction and use of hoops and wheels brought boys of differing backgrounds together after school hours. We boys also belonged to the same community-wide Boy Scout troop. I remember that one big event was a week-long campout at newly opened Schaffer Lake—at that time, still filled with stumps.

My acquaintance with public school children continued when I was hired as a weed puller in the onion fields. The muck lands of Starke County were very productive for truck farming, and there were many acres planted in onions, carrots, and mint. Each hot summer day, my employer, a Japanese man, trucked ten to fifteen boys and girls to crawl up and down rows of growing onions for the purpose of pulling errant weeds but leaving the tender onions. (Although I didn't realize it at the time, the salary of 20 cents per hour was more than I would earn for quite a few years as we approached the Great Depression.) During those long and tiring days, a certain amount of comradeship developed out of the commonality of our burdens.

We boys also found the railroad to be an endless source of adventure. The four major lines, with their switching yards and repair shops,

took up a significant part of the town. The elder boys of our group would occasionally hop on the side ladder of a freight car as it made a slow start-up; I was too small to participate. Another occasional interest was the collection of “babbitt”—a low-melting-point alloy from the overheated journal bearings of freight car wheels that had various uses by schoolboy experimenters. Our main interest came in trying to flatten pennies by placing them on the rails in front of an advancing engine. This brought us into contact with the railroad detectives who chased us away from the vicinity of the tracks. These men patrolled the extensive railroad yards of the town; we held them in great respect as on one or more occasions they had shot a hobo trespasser. The alley on the side yard of our school was the route for accessing the rear entrance to the funeral parlor that held one of these bodies. With some stealth and a certain amount of courage, it was possible for young lads to approach this rear entrance and peak through a window into the layout room.

We also respected Louis Danti, the town marshal. He was an Italian immigrant and a member of our church. Danti had a large number of children with, apparently, no mother. One of the boys, Joe, was in my room at school. Louis patrolled the town’s main business area after dark and into the early hours of morning. The local Ku Klux Klan purported to control lawlessness, and I was aware that the Horse Thief Detective Association had some connection with the Klan (at least this was what I understood). However, in North Judson there was very little that could be considered lawless—until the night of the shootout.

Donchin’s Men’s Clothing Store had a recessed entrance with numerous plate-glass windows, behind which stood dummies clothed with Hart Schaffner & Marx suits. It was within this almost closed area that Louis Danti surprised a burglar who drew on him. Louis immediately pulled his own gun and fired at the burglar, who escaped. This was Louis’s story, and there were holes in the plate-glass windows to prove it. However, there were also unkind murmurs to the effect that Louis had really shot at his own reflection.

The physical embodiment of law and order was the town jail, located in the basement of a brick building that also housed the waterworks on the first floor, and the fire department on the second. (From this height, the town’s single fire engine exited via a long ramp.) Whenever the jail held a prisoner—which was seldom—its ground-level barred windows could also be approached in a somewhat stealthy manner at dusk, and, if the lights were on, we could see into the cell and with quick glances examine the inmate.



Main Street, North Judson, Indiana

Late in the evening of July 24, 1924, robed Klansmen marched down Main and Lane Streets in a show of intimidation against North Judson's Catholic residents.

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society

In a public lot adjacent to this jail, at the corner of Keller Avenue and Main Street, the Klan committed its first public act of Catholic intimidation. Here, next to the nunnery, they erected two timbers or tree limbs configured as a cross of Christ. The two crossed posts were wrapped with burlap or some other cheap cloth, doused with kerosene, and set on fire. In the dead of night it was a spectacular sight. Across the street from a vacant jail, the charred structure stood for several days as a stern reminder of law and order, Klan style.

Several days later, the town's only newspaper, the weekly *North Judson News*, used the word "orderly" to describe the Klan's next act—an impressive parade routed down the extent of Lane Street and then onto Main Street, which began after nine o'clock p.m. on Thursday, July 24, 1924.¹⁰ I watched it from the corner of Adair and Lane Streets with my

¹⁰"Klansmen Parade in No. Judson," *North Judson News*, July 31, 1924.

CATHOLIC PARSONAGE AT NORTH JUDSON DYNAMITED

The Catholic parsonage at North Judson was dynamited about 12:15 A. M., Tuesday morning and considerable damage done. The bomb or whatever it was, was thrown through the glass door to the screened in porch and when it exploded, the glass in the doors and windows of the house were broken, a big hole was torn in the cement porch and other damage done.

Extract from the *Starke County Democrat*, July 30, 1924

classmate, Ralph Dolezal. I remember companies of marchers in white robes topped with the conical white hats and masks that covered their faces. These were preceded by numbers of similarly costumed members mounted on horses. Many were carrying flaming torches that added emphasis to the eerie and threatening spectacle. More than anything else, however, the most striking and impressive part of the parade was a float of a public school building. The attached labeling—which read “Little Red Schoolhouse”—left no doubt as to what was being targeted: our parochial school! To a ten-year-old schoolboy, this was a body blow.

The third act took place five days later, in the early morning hours of July 29, when an explosion rocked the home of our resident priest, Father A. C. Van Rie. He and the housekeeper, Mary McNeal, both awoke to the sound of shattering glass and headed to the door. The housekeeper, who reached the entrance first, was just opening the door as the bomb exploded. “Every glass window in the front of the porch and front of the house was broken to ‘smithereens’ and several windows in other parts of the house were also broken,” the *News* reported. “The front doors were blown completely off their hinges and much of the

siding on the building was torn into shreds. The ceiling was also badly damaged and a mass of glass was scattered throughout the house and yard."¹¹ The housekeeper suffered serious lacerations from the flying glass, but the priest—the attackers' likely target—remained physically unharmed.

Every boy knew that the bomb was surely a stick or two of dynamite. The materials for such an explosive—dynamite, a mercury fulminate detonator (called a cap), and a length of fuse line—were available at many of the farmsteads of rural Indiana. I have seen these items put together many times to blow out tree stumps. Using a pencil, a stick, or a knife, one made a hole and inserted the detonator into the end of the dynamite. One end of the detonator—a copper cylinder about one-fourth inch in diameter and two inches long—was hollowed out for insertion of the fuse. These detonators were so common in North Judson that they were used as trade goods among school boys. I once came into possession of one and carried it around in my pocket for several days. Eventually we fired it by rolling it up in a newspaper, lighting the paper, and running like mad for safety. A bomb left on a doorstep, however, leaves nowhere to run.

Several weeks later, in the early fall of 1924, vandals marred the stonework at the entrance to Saints Cyril and Methodius. This fourth incident may seem inconsequential in light of the earlier violence, but when I went up the steps to attend morning mass I felt that I was walking through a battlefield. Large spheres of stone, broken pieces of concrete, and other detritus were scattered over the steps to the entryway.

These four incidents seemed to have been orchestrated in their timing and gradation of violence and viciousness: flaming timbers in a public lot, followed by the parade of robed marchers at dusk, emphasized by the explosion at the parsonage, and capped off by the effacement of our church building. If the explosion and vandalism were not planned components of the intimidation campaign, they were, at minimum, encouraged by the emotions generated by the parade. In my mind it was patently clear that the Klan was the underlying cause, if not the direct perpetrator, of these hate-filled acts. I also knew that, by targeting my school and my church, the Klan aimed at me.

¹¹"Catholic Parsonage Bombed," *North Judson News*, July 31, 1924.

The events of the summer of 1924 became an issue in our home. At the outset, my mother had played down the burning cross as being of little importance. She could not continue to do so in the wake of the parade, the bombing, and the vandalism. Although the events were not really discussed, a sense of direness passed from parents to children without the necessity of words.

The incidents seem never to have been discussed by the nun in our classroom—at least I have no recollection of such. Nor do I recall any mention by the priest during Sunday masses. The Belgium-born Father Van Rie possessed a commanding presence—one that certainly displayed itself on those occasions when he stood at the front of the classroom as a higher authority for major classroom crimes. I think that by the time of the Klan episodes he had had considerable experience with bigots. Also, he ministered to a large parish of two communities, many of whose members had stature in their own right. This must have given him the courage to downplay these vicious acts in a spirit of charity and to maintain the goodwill of the mainstream of the town. He was an important and significant member of the community. When he was transferred to a larger parish a few years later, he left with the town's accolades.

Until quite recently I had never discussed these events with anyone from the North Judson area. One day I called an oldster in the town. He is a year older than I, but went through school two years ahead of me. At the time of our conversation he was quite lucid, attributing the bombing either to the Klan or to a dissident parishioner reacting to Reverend Van Rie's refusal to baptize the man's daughter. While the latter is not an unreasonable hypothesis, it in no way lessens the responsibility of the Klan, which staged its incendiary parade just five days before the bombing.

Neither the fiery cross nor the church vandalism merited mention in the town newspaper. The parade, on the other hand, received a lengthy and laudatory write-up on the front page of the *North Judson News*. Described as the gala event that it apparently was to the Klan's followers, the "spectacular parade" concluded with an open meeting in which Klan members and public "were brushing shoulders." The major speaker of the evening, a Reverend Tilman of Grass Creek, Indiana, addressed the "necessity of restoring the Bible"—meaning the King James version, certainly—"into our public schools." Despite its admiring tone, the account is also vague and distant, noting only that "hun-

dreds" of Klansmen were watched by "hundreds" of spectators while the rain kept "hundreds" of others away.¹²

The same day's front page also carried news of the bombing, "a most dastardly deed [that] was committed in our little city." The account emphasized that while the "terrific explosion was heard for several miles around and aroused many of our citizens from their slumber," no one had any foreknowledge of the event. The paper noted "several slight clues [that] will be traced in an effort to apprehend those guilty of this and other recent dastardly crimes, which are too low for any self respecting citizen to countenance." The *Starke County Democrat* (published in nearby Knox) also carried a front-page article on the explosion, noting that "[n]o clue whatever was left by the person or persons who threw the bomb, but it is the sincere hope of every good thinking citizen that the perpetrator be speedily brought to justice." Neither paper made any reference to the possible participation of the Klan. The "slight clues" apparently did not prove fruitful either.¹³ The desecration of the church was not covered in the papers, perhaps because vandalism seemed less "newsworthy" than a bombing and the near-death of a housekeeper. After that, the topic disappeared from public discussion.

I do not recall any incidents between children that had any connection to the Klan. Public and parochial school boys continued to interact with each other on the baseball field and in the scout troop. Such scuffles as there were resulted from the normal childhood differences in sizes and personalities.

The Catholic and Protestant parts of the community also continued to come together each fall at the annual weeklong Jubilee. The farmers exhibited their produce and entered it for prizes. The merchants and social organizations set up stands that sold food and trinkets. The town

¹²"Klansmen Parade in No. Judson," *North Judson News*, July 31, 1924. Grass Creek was a small crossroads community in the southwest corner of adjoining Fulton County, located about 30 miles southeast of North Judson.

¹³"Klansmen Parade in No. Judson," *North Judson News*, July 31, 1924; "Catholic Parsonage at North Judson Dynamited," *Starke County Democrat*, July 30, 1924. Both accounts state that the bomb was thrown through the glass door of the porch. This seems unlikely, as there was a real danger such a delivery would have shock-activated the detonator, thus injuring the perpetrator. As the front of the house was completely destroyed by the explosion there would have been no physical evidence of such throwing. I prefer to believe that the bomb was placed on the porch floor, and then the doorbell was rung or, possibly, the glass in the door was smashed to arouse the residents.

fathers built large elevated stages—one at each end of Lane Street (the Klan's parade route)—on which hired performers entertained several times each day. The town band participated by marching up and down the street and playing a few melodies. The week was an exciting period for all children, certainly. During my last year or so in North Judson I was a member of this band, full uniform and such. As my father had been a trombone player, my older brother had inherited the horn and joined the band. In a few years I, too, became a trombone player along with my friend Ralph. John Stejskal, a World War I veteran, was the director and gave us training sessions each week after school. In 1930, I moved away from North Judson, taking my memories with me.

Historians of the Klan movements distinguish the impulse of the 1920s from both the original movement after the Civil War and the modern version that surfaced in the 1960s.¹⁴ While different enough to allow separate descriptions, all three can be encompassed within a tent flying a pennant labeled "KKK." Inside one finds white antis, wearing white sheets and conical hats, imbued with their own sense of righteousness and sharing various forms and levels of bigotry. All operated to some extent outside of the law and used fear and intimidation to further their goals. Secrecy and mumbo-jumbo formed the glue binding the members.

The Klan of the 1920s recruited the greatest number of supporters from the greatest number of places, making it by far the largest and most widespread of the three movements. Between 1920 and 1926, the Indiana Klan gained control of the state government and of many county governments. This power grab ultimately landed Indiana Grand Wizard D. C. Stephenson and Indiana Governor Warren T. McCray in jail; Governor Ed Jackson, who was affiliated with the group, should have been put away as well.¹⁵

For all that has been written about this period, historians of Indiana's Klan have gained little access to firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of the organization, either at the state or more local lev-

¹⁴The standard history of the post-Civil War Klan is Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York, 1971).

¹⁵James H. Madison, *Indiana through Tradition and Change* (Indianapolis, 1982), 44-75; see also the bibliography on the Klan, 415-16.

els. There is likewise a dearth of evidence from individual members or from written organizational records. In my own purely pragmatic quest to know what happened in North Judson and what caused it to happen, I have reviewed some of the historical literature on the Klan in Indiana. While useful, I find that much of it remains speculative, and that it does not necessarily square with my own experience—however limited that may be.

The earliest historians and chroniclers of Klan activity generally cited nativism as the controlling force behind the group's actions. In this interpretation, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants united against the Roman Catholics, immigrants, and blacks.¹⁶ Others added to this picture, to the point that one reviewer of the historical literature in 1977 could cite "four major interpretations about the Klan's prominence in the 1920's, that it was 1) a nativist response, 2) a last stand by rural Americans, 3) an outgrowth of World War I hysteria, and 4) an urban phenomenon brought on by social dislocations."¹⁷

More modern revisionists have been kinder to the hooded secret society. Leonard Moore, one of the foremost among them, characterizes the group as a "populist organization" and locates the motivation behind Indiana's Klan in "the deterioration of a sense of cohesion, order, and shared power in community life," and "an awakened sense of white Protestant ethnic identity [that] could be used to gain greater popular control over community affairs." Moore concludes that "[s]upport for Prohibition represented the single most important bond between Klansmen throughout the nation." While he has done a great deal of research in the literature and in the Klan records of the 1920s, Moore's work is filled with contradictory statements, and the information in his tables is hidden behind statistical jargon. His sweeping statistical analysis prompts him to conclude that the Klan "went out of its way to avoid confrontations in Catholic, Jewish, or black neighborhoods."¹⁸ Such a

¹⁶James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way, A State History* (Bloomington, 1986), 292.

¹⁷Jill Suzanne Nevel, "Fiery Crosses and Tempers: The Ku Klux Klan in South Bend, Indiana, 1923-1926" (Senior thesis, Princeton University, 1977), 3.

¹⁸Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), 10, 11, 189-91. Moore lays out the revisionist position in "Historical Interpretations of the 1920s Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision," *Journal of Social History*, 24 (Winter 1990), 341-57.

judgment clearly misses the mark when one looks at the events of the summer of 1924 in North Judson.

Indeed, not all current historians agree with the revisionists. In 2004, Allen Safianow concluded from newly unearthed records in Hamilton County that “the Noblesville Klan was a manifestation of the racism, nativism, and anti-Catholicism that was a central ingredient of white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture.” It was a mainstream movement, but it had “a strong base of bigotry to draw on.”¹⁹

Available records certainly attest to the “mainstream” quality of the group in my own part of Indiana. Kluxers organized the Indiana Klan—the Realm—into thirteen provinces. Starke County fell into province number 13, along with La Porte, St. Joseph, Elkhart, Marshall, Kosciusko, and Fulton counties, all located in the north central part of the state. In 1925, two of the principal province officers, the Great Titan and the Great Kligrapp, hailed from Knox in Starke County. Each county also possessed its own lower-level organization. One of the top officers was North Judson dentist F. O. Davis who later headed up the Chamber of Commerce. Another was a Knox minister. The county officials were evaluated in the Klan’s local notes as follows: “Judge not member but O.K.; prosecutor a member and O.K.; sheriff a member but not true to the obligation; all other county officials are O.K.” With a population of 9,850 and a Klan membership of 725, Starke County boasted one of the highest percentages (31.8) of native-born white male Kluxers in the state of Indiana—appreciably more than any of the other counties in its province. Members came from a broad cross-section of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the area.²⁰

What brought on this relatively sudden enthusiasm for such a social phenomena? Broadly speaking, the onset of Prohibition turned many into lawbreakers by their continued manufacturing, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The surge of immigration and the flight of immigrants from the cities to the countryside aroused concerns for the continuity of local life. Someone was at fault! Individuals and communities blamed a variety of culprits: Roman Catholics, immigrants, Jews, blacks, bootleggers, mobsters, gamblers, corrupt politi-

¹⁹Safianow, “You Can’t Burn History,” 153.

²⁰Ku Klux Klan, “Local Officers in Indiana, 1925,” SC 2419 (Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis), 30, 43; Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 50.



Ku Klux Klan members leaving a Protestant church in Knox, Starke County
Indiana Picture Collection, Manuscript Section, Indiana State Library

cians, and other out-of-the-mainstream strangers. The crisis mandated change, and perhaps Hugh Emmons, head of the South Bend Klan, really sensed the heart of the Klan thrust: “sell them the thing they want.”²¹ Historian James H. Madison concludes that in Indiana, “[f]irst on the list of Klan enemies were Roman Catholics.”²² In North Judson, in the summer of 1924, Klan members obviously believed that their way of life was being threatened, and to some extent it was. They were not radicals, demons, or complete bigots, but they did see Catholics as the root of their problems. It is unlikely that the bombing and vandalism resulted from direct orders by the Klan leaders. However, an official Klan cross burning and parade clearly established an environment that led directly to the more violent acts.

²¹Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change*, 51, n78.

²²*Ibid.*, 46.

This memoir, as noted by its title, is limited to the Klan activity in one small community in northern Indiana: North Judson in Starke County. I believe that the Klan activity in any one area can be seen as the result of particular changes to that community. Attempts to categorize the Klan's enemies and acts at the national or even at the state level have failed because these acts were carried out by individuals or small groups. Likewise, attempts to portray the Klan as a civic organization that sought to "avoid confrontation" ignore the reality of the terror that many of us experienced firsthand. In North Judson there was violence, vicious and frightening, and as a ten-year-old boy I knew then, just as I know now, that it was directed at me and at all of the Catholics in my community.

