The Klan’s Retribution Against an Indiana Editor
A Reconsideration

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In the 1920s, the Indiana Ku Klux Klan had nearly 300,000 members, including a governor, legislators, mayors, city council members, prosecutors, judges, sheriffs, and police. On July 4, 1923, the organization held a Konklave in Kokomo’s Malfalya Park. One hundred thousand people—more than three times the population of the city—enjoyed the daylong picnic. They listened to speeches; watched circus acts, boxing matches, and pie-eating contests; and were awed by elaborate parades capped off by a gigantic fireworks display and the burning of 25 crosses.

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1 Leonard J. Moore, Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), 47. Moore acknowledges the difficulty of estimating how many people belonged to the secret society and notes that other writers have offered different estimates.

2 Moore, Citizen Klansmen, 76-77; and Kathleen M. Blee, Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 135-36. Several accounts of the Konklave have been written, and estimates of attendance vary widely: Moore estimates 100,000; Blee offers a range from 50,000 to 200,000; the Klan put the number at 200,000, which some other writers have accepted as possible.

INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY, 106 (December 2010) © 2010, Trustees of Indiana University.
By and large, Indiana’s newspapers either welcomed the Klan into their communities or avoided discussing the organization altogether. But a handful of editors opposed the Klan. Among them, Muncie’s George R. Dale and his Post-Democrat were notable for engaging in an all-out editorial war with the hooded order and its 3,000 local members, exposing its secret membership rolls and ridiculing its silly rituals and anti-Catholic rhetoric.

Although Dale’s crusade against the KKK was undeniably courageous and justified, some accounts of the Klan’s acts of retribution against him have been embellished so greatly that they oversimplify Dale’s relationship with his community and mask his real accomplishments. Many of the embellishments can be traced to efforts to rally support for the embattled editor; others are the result of later observers misunderstanding the nature of the 1920s Indiana Klan.

Dale’s fight against the Klan gained national media attention in 1923, after he accused Delaware County Circuit Court Judge Clarence Dearth of being a Klansman. He further charged that Dearth had illegally stacked juries to favor Klan defendants and had given light sentences to Klansmen convicted in his court. In response to the articles in the Post-Democrat, the judge found Dale in indirect contempt of court in March 1923, sentenced him to 90 days in jail and a $500 fine, and told the left-leaning editor that if he didn’t like America he should move to Russia. Dale’s comments about his court hearing, published in the next week’s paper, so angered the judge that he found Dale in direct contempt and doubled his jail time.

Dale appealed his case to the Indiana Supreme Court, which rejected his defense that publishing truthful information about a government official could not be deemed contempt of court. Journalists throughout

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3 See Bradford W. Scharlott, “The Hoosier Newsman and the Hooded Order: Indiana Press Reaction to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s,” paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, August 1979, Houston, Texas; Allen Safianow, “The Klan Comes to Tipton,” Indiana Magazine of History, 95 (September 1999), 203-231, describes the generally positive treatment given to the Klan by the Tipton [Indiana] Daily Tribune.

4 Carrolyne Frank, “Politics in Middletown: A Reconsideration of Municipal Government and Community Power in Muncie, Indiana 1925-1935” (Ph.D. diss., Ball State University, 1974). Others have estimated a larger membership for Muncie’s Klan Number Four.

5 Dale was released on bond after 11 days in prison when the Indiana Supreme Court agreed to hear his case. Ironically, Dale was later pardoned by Indiana Gov. Ed Jackson, himself a Klansman.
the nation saw the court’s opinion as a rejection of the First Amendment and of principles recognized in America since the colonial trial of John Peter Zenger. Newspapers, including the Hearst chain, the New York World, and the Chicago Tribune, published editorials calling the ruling an injustice. These newspapers emphasized that the costly three-year legal battle over the convictions had drained Dale’s savings. They encouraged their readers to contribute to Dale’s legal defense fund, and scores did.  

Sympathetic newspaper accounts tended to concentrate on freedom-of-the-press issues. But many added to the drama by repeating sto-
ories of a beating that Dale and his son had reportedly received by Klansmen on March 24, 1922, and of shots being fired into his house in 1926. The stories left the impression that, as the Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette reported, things “went smoothly” for Dale and the Post-Democrat “until the Ku Klux Klan descended on the city seeking converts.… Dale attacked the [K]lan editorially—attacked it with courage and bitterness. He was told to be careful but he refused. Accordingly, he met with adventure [the beating] a few nights later.” The Baltimore Sun described the lead-up to the beating with the same tone: “Dale turned his attention to the Klan, the organizers of which were enrolling citizens so fast that they ran out of nightgowns three times. His pen drips vitriol as he writes and there is no polite reading in his editorials. So the Klan decided he must be disciplined.”

H. L. Mencken’s American Mercury reported that “[t]hree times emissaries of the klan had waylaid Dale and thrashed him thoroughly. Once they included his young son in the castigation.” Dale’s 1936 obituary in the New York Times, published after his death at age 69, stated: “In his fight against the Klan, Mr. Dale was slugged and beaten and his dwelling was stoned and fired upon.” Time magazine’s obituary repeated many of the same stories.

Something of a showman, Dale contributed to this heroic image. As donations were being sought to defray his legal fees, he portrayed himself as a victim of Klan attacks and claimed to have killed a Klansman—who Dale said was a prominent Muncie citizen—during the 1922 attack. He even re-enacted the encounter for Chicago newspaper photographers, and the pictures appeared in several newspapers. He took to wearing a hat with a bullet hole, presumably to demonstrate the poor aim of a trigger-happy Klansman. Hanging on his living room wall were the masks he said his attackers wore. He called them “Kluckers scalps.”

Dale himself made appeals for contributions to his legal defense fund in Post-Democrat stories, in letters to fellow editors, and in

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9“Milestones,” Time, April 6, 1936.
He blamed his financial and personal problems on his struggle against the Klan. “I lost my advertising, most of my subscribers, my home, my liberty, and every dollar I had in the world,” he wrote.

These tales of the Klan's retribution against Dale's editorials have been repeated by sociologists, historians, and other writers. In *Middletown in Transition*, sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd praised Dale's “almost single-handed” fight against the Klan and wrote that “Klansmen waylaid him three times, beating him and twice attempting to shoot him.” In his well-researched biography of D. C. Stephenson, Indiana Klan Grand Dragon, William Lutholtz wrote, “Dale was beaten and his son was pistol-whipped, the Klan's crude way of sending a message regarding his editorial policies.” In thoughtful discussions of Dale's years as Muncie mayor, Carrolyle Frank has offered a more nuanced version of the Klan's role in the attack: “After Dale's efforts to link the Williams [political] machine to the Klan and to associate both organizations with lawlessness and vice, the zealous editor was attacked physically in broad daylight by hooded thugs in March, 1922. Intimidation through violence failed to silence the plucky editor as he began publishing the Klan roster in the *Post-Democrat.*”

There can be little doubt that the Klan contributed to Dale's problems and that the cost of appealing his contempt convictions through
the Indiana courts to the United States Supreme Court would have exhausted the resources of a small-town weekly editor. Yet many of the accounts of the physical and financial problems Dale suffered at the hands of the Klan are, at best, questionable.

The impression that Dale was living a peaceful, prosperous life until the Klan came to town is not accurate. The editor found himself under both economic and physical attack well before Muncie residents were donning white sheets and hoods in late 1921 or 1922. Within months of founding the Post-Democrat in 1920, Dale wrote that because of his investigations into bootlegging and other crimes, he “was assaulted by one man, threats of assault and murder were every day occurrences, plots were laid to plant liquor in our office and then have the police pull off a raid, a plot was laid to ‘knock off’ the editor [Dale] while making an automobile trip into Ohio, and our home was even invaded during our absence by a band of thugs, who told the wife of the editor that they would ‘get’ him before the night was over.”

The beating Dale received in March 1922 was unlikely to have been retaliation for what he had written about the Muncie Klan, given that Dale had not yet begun his crusade. In his own newspaper account of the attack, Dale did not mention the Klan. Instead, he described his assailants as “assassins in black mask” who had hit him with a blackjack and fired a shot at his badly injured son. Two weeks later, Dale wrote that he knew who his attackers were. He said he had evidence that this attack was inspired by a Post-Democrat article that had accused “corrupt republican politicians” of promising “certain democrats and republicans” that they could avoid federal prosecution if they secured votes in

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17Joseph M. Huffington, a Klan recruiter in Texas and Oklahoma, began the planning for the Indiana Klan in 1920 in Evansville. D. C. Stephenson began recruiting drives in southwestern Indiana in 1921; on July 4, 1923, he was named Grand Dragon for the state. See Lutholtz, Grand Dragon, 19-20. The Muncie Klan was probably established in late 1921 and peaked in 1922.

18Post-Democrat, December 16, 1921. In his columns, Dale switched between referring to himself in the first person and calling himself “the editor” or later “the mayor.”

19Post-Democrat, March 24, March 31, 1922. A week before the attack, Dale accused the Muncie Star of “making a mountain of a mole hill” by reporting an anonymous threat sent to a police captain active in gambling investigations and signed “Ku Klux Klan.” As for the attack on Dale and his son, the story in the Post-Democrat did not link it directly to the Klan, although Dale wrote that “it was along the same line as that adopted by the scoundrel who threw a brick through the window at police headquarters, and the cowards who sent Ku Klux messages to police officers.”
the upcoming elections for the Williams political machine, which Dale
contended ran the city in league with local bootleggers.20

A month later, Dale wrote an editorial praising a group of hooded
Klansmen who marched into a Methodist Church in the nearby town of
Eaton, gave the minister money, and pronounced that the Klan stood for
law and order. “There is certainly plenty of room for an organization of
this kind to work in Delaware County,” Dale wrote. Although he did
make fun of their white masks and costumes and noted that they could be
just as successful without them, Dale blamed bad law enforcement aген-
cies for the establishment of groups like the Klan. In the same editorial,
Dale expressed surprise at the size of Klan’s presence in Muncie: “Very few
people outside of those who belong, were aware of the fact that the Ku
Klux have an organization here, but it is known that the order is strong
here and that there are probably six hundred members in Muncie.”21

It was nearly three months after he and his son were assaulted that
Dale fired his first salvo against the Klan. On June 9, 1922, Dale wrote,
“Strange things are happening in Muncie these days. Hundreds of citi-
zens here, many of them being men of high character, are joining the Ku
Klux Klan, but we question very much whether or not a very large per-
centage of those are really aware of the things pulled off by an inner cir-
cle of Kluckers,22 who, most likely, refrain from informing the rank and
file of … their maneuvers.” He charged that a Klan organizer had illegally
been placed on a jury during the trial of a Klansman.23 In the next
week’s paper, Dale concluded that his old enemies, led by the Williams
machine, were trying “to obtain political supremacy here and keep
themselves out of federal prison by threatening free born white people
with the wrath of the Klan.”24

20Post-Democrat, April 7, 1922.
21Post-Democrat, April 28, 1922. To announce its presence in a city, the Klan often used the
technique of marching into churches with friendly ministers and presenting checks. David
Goldberg, “Unmasking the Ku Klux Klan: The Northern Movement Against the KKK, 1920-
22Klansmen sometimes referred to themselves as Kluckers. The Klan songbook, published by
Rhinehart Publishing of Muncie (undated), included the titles “The Klucker and the Rain” and
“Long Klucker.” A copy of the songbook is in box 1, Series 2: Ku Klux Klan Materials, Dale
Papers.
23Post-Democrat, June 9, 1922. Dale had made passing references to the Klan before this. For
example, on May 12, 1922, he compared a rowdy meeting of the Democratic Party to a “bul-
sheveeky camp or a Ku Klux Kluster.”
24Post-Democrat, June 16, 1922.
Once the Post-Democrat began its attack on the Klan, it was unrelenting. Almost every week, the paper was filled with new revelations about who was in the secret society and sarcastic reports on what the Klan was doing. Dale reprinted anti-Klan articles from national publications and exposed local hypocrisy, such as his account of an obviously intoxicated Klan leader who spoke in a Muncie park about the evils of drink. Dale noted that the bottle found in his car was Irish whiskey, not the “100 percent American” kind. Dale’s assault on the organization, he reported, caused Klansmen and women to jeer him on city streets.25

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25 Post-Democrat, September 8, 1922. See also Douglas, “The Mayor of Middletown,” 479, which describes the “sweet ladies of the Invisible Empire” who “had been ordered to spit on [Dale] whenever he appeared on the streets of Muncie. And they had spat till they had no spit left.”
About four months into Dale’s anti-Klan campaign, and seven months after he and his son were attacked, Dale began to claim, publicly and explicitly, that the March 1922 assault was linked to the Klan. He reported that police believed a car used in the attack belonged to a man who had been brought to town to organize the Klan. As time passed, Dale became more certain his attackers were Klansmen, noting that southern Klansmen sometimes wore black hoods. Dale later changed his description of his assailants from “assassins in black mask” to “hooded ruffians.”

A second widely reported attack occurred in 1926, when bullets were fired into Dale’s house, narrowly missing his family. Although some writers have linked the shooting to the Klan, it came after the Klan had lost most of its influence in Muncie. A week after the shooting, the Post-Democrat carried a story indicating that anti-Catholicism was still afflicting Hoosier politics even though the Klan was no longer in vogue. Dale himself wrote that the shooting was the work of “protected bootleggers and rum runners” who had befriended his archenemies in the Williams political machine. The shooting came as Dale was engaged in a heated exposé of Muncie’s illegal liquor industry.

Claims that the Klan retaliated against the Post-Democrat by scarifying off advertisers and subscribers are also suspect. While Dale was appealing for donations, he claimed that the Klan had cost him most of his readers. Yet, on May 30, 1924, after months of fierce attacks on the Klan, Dale wrote that, although defending lawsuits was taking all the money he had, the paper was flourishing: “Notwithstanding the determined battle made by its enemies to drive it out of the field, the Post-Democrat is enjoying a phenomenal growth. In March, 1923, when the Ku Klux Klan started its intensive legal battle against the editor of the Post-Democrat, the circulation was something like twenty-five hundred copies weekly. This week we are printing and circulating sixteen thousand copies.”

Furthermore, an informal analysis of July editions of the Post-Democrat from the 1920s found only a faint correlation between the number of display advertisements and the rise and fall of the Muncie

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26 Post-Democrat, November 3, 1922, January 5, 1923, July 23, 1925.
27 Post-Democrat, December 2, November 25, 1926.
28 Post-Democrat, May 30, 1924. By then, Dale was circulating his paper in many cities in eastern Indiana and western Ohio, which may explain much of the circulation growth.
Klan. Dale had had trouble selling advertisement for his earlier paper, the Muncie Post, and the paper had failed. Dale also enjoyed little success in finding advertisers for the Post-Democrat. Before the Klan came to Indiana, Dale accused merchants of not advertising in the Post-Democrat “because of the paper’s politics.” In July 1921, the four-page paper had on average only one larger ad (approximately three columns wide by eight inches tall), two midsized (two-column) ads, and about twelve small, one-column ads for local movies, eateries and other businesses. In July 1922, immediately after the start of Dale’s anti-Klan reporting, the number of ads in the Post-Democrat remained at about the same low level. In July 1923, in the middle of the most ferocious of the Klan coverage, advertising in the newspaper was down slightly, averaging less than one large, three midsize, and five small ads per issue. Dale now offered a new reason for his ad sales problems, complaining that “merchants hesitated to advertise in the Post-Democrat for fear of a Klan boycott.” He encouraged readers to come to the aid of the paper, and at least one did, signing the ads “a friend and well wisher.” As the paper’s exposé of the Klan continued into 1924, the year in which a Klansman was elected governor of Indiana but also the year the Midwest was hit by a major recession, July statistics show advertising still down, averaging one large or midsized ad and three small ones per issue. In July 1925, after the arrest of D. C. Stephenson on murder charges and at the beginning of the decline of the Muncie Klan, advertising increased somewhat to an average of one large ad, three mid-sized ads and three small ads. Even though statewide membership in the Klan was dropping rapidly by 1926, in July of that year advertising shrank to an average of two large ads, one midsized ad, and no small ads. Often one of the large ads was from the state Democratic Party. The July 22, 1926, paper had no display ads at all, although, as Martin Schwartz noted, “By the beginning of 1926 the Klan was mentioned only sporadically in the Post-Democrat.”

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29July was selected at random. In newspaper parlance, display advertisements are the typical department and grocery store ads, as opposed to classified ads and legal notices. The Post-Democrat did not have classified ads.

30Post-Democrat, February 24, 1922.

31Post-Democrat, July 13, 1923.

At no time before or during Dale's fight with the Klan would advertising and circulation income alone have been enough to sustain a profitable paper. The Post-Democrat derived much of its income from publishing legal notices. Even though Indiana law required governmental agencies to place ads in both Republican and Democratic papers, Dale had to fight to get this advertising. When he started the Post-Democrat, many county and township officials refused to recognize the paper, preferring to place their ads in Muncie's two Republican papers. Twice, Dale had to get court orders forcing them to advertise with him.

Two more attempts were made to keep these lucrative legal notices away from the Post-Democrat. After Dale refused to endorse the party's candidate for mayor in 1921, some angry Democrats tried to oust him from the party and start a "real" Democratic paper that would qualify for the legal notices. Dale claimed they were receiving support from the Republican political machine. That alternative paper did not materialize in 1921, but in spring 1924 another publisher succeeded in launching a second Democratic paper. Most county officials—all Republicans—
switched their legal ads to it. Dale claimed that the paper received support from some Democrats, Williams and his Republican supporters, and the Klan. It ceased publication in August 1924, but not before costing Dale, by his own accounts, thousands of dollars.33

Ironically, Judge Dearth, one of Dale’s biggest enemies, indirectly gave him and his paper a major economic boost. The judge’s jail sentence in the contempt-of-court case had provoked state and national newspaper editors—Republican and Democratic—to rail against the court rulings and to portray Dale as a hero of press freedom. With all the positive publicity, the Post-Democrat’s advertising revenue exploded. By July 1927, each issue averaged one large ad, seven mid-size ads, and thirty small ads. The newspaper’s circulation hit 18,000. Schwartz, in the first scholarly assessment of Dale, concluded that all the national support caused Muncie residents to reconsider Dale and his paper: “The people were beginning to wonder whether something should not be done to ‘make it all up’ to Dale for the suffering he had received in their midst.”34 In 1929, Dale, who had claimed that his fight with the Klan had left him friendless, was elected mayor of Muncie with a record number of votes. His popularity, however, was short-lived. As mayor, he battled with both Democratic and Republican council members and plunged the city into a costly legal dispute when he fired the police and fire departments because he believed they had campaigned against him.35 He sought re-election but lost in the Democratic primary. His legal problems continued. He was indicted for criminal libel and convicted on a federal violation-of-prohibition charge, which concluded in a pardon by President Franklin Roosevelt, who was convinced that witnesses had committed perjury.

Almost as quickly as the Klan took power in Muncie, the secret society faded. Middle-class and professional members were the first to leave, driven away by embarrassing episodes such as Klan members assaulting people at a 1923 parade if they did not tip their hats as a Klanswoman rode by with an American flag draped over her horse’s

33*Post-Democrat*, May 12, 1922, April 6, 13, 1923.
rupm. “By 1924, the political influence and membership of the Klan in Muncie was rapidly on the decline,” historian Carrolyle Frank wrote. Statewide, the Klan suffered when Stevenson, Grand Dragon of an organization sworn to “protect American womanhood,” was accused of raping a maid in a Columbus, Ohio, hotel and then was convicted in 1925 in the death of another woman, who apparently swallowed poison after he raped and mutilated her on a Chicago-bound train. Infighting among national, state, and local units furthered the Klan’s deterioration. The Post-Democrat and many other Indiana papers clearly relished covering these stories.

So, if the Klan was not the Post-Democrat’s major antagonist, then what explains the physical and financial attacks on Dale? The truth is that well before the Klan came to town, Dale already had a long list of powerful enemies. When George Dale moved to Muncie, the city had a reputation as a wide-open place where political leaders and police officers took money not to notice the city’s large red-light district, gambling halls, “Cocaine Alley,” and “blind pigs” (taverns that flouted Prohibition laws). Dale came with a reputation for supporting Prohibition and opposing gambling. He had been editor of weeklies that were credited with closing the saloons in nearby Hartford City and Montpelier. Dale was undoubtedly correct in blaming bootleggers for many of his problems.

Dale’s problems in Muncie, however, ran deeper than opposition from bootleggers. He had set out to publish a pro-labor, Democratic newspaper in a city dominated by anti-union industrialists and Republican businessmen. Dale blamed the local business community for failing to support his first Muncie paper, the Post, which ceased publication in 1918. Dale wrote that during the paper’s two-year existence, it “was boycotted by the majority of the merchants of Muncie because it advocated the cause of labor and consistently and successfully opposed those enemies of labor who sought to gain ascendancy in the city.”

Post-Democrat, June 8, 1923.

Frank, “Muncie Politics,” 35.

Lutholtz, Grand Dragon, has an extensive account of the trial, 215-301.


Post-Democrat, July 15, 1921.
When Dale launched the *Post-Democrat* in 1920, members of the city's Commercial Club—a predecessor to the Chamber of Commerce—warned him that he should abandon the paper’s pro-labor stance. He did not. In the first extant edition of the paper, Dale advocated the eight-hour workday; attacked the Indiana Senate for passing laws that allowed union pickets to be arrested on loitering charges, and argued that big corporations had framed Thomas Mooney, the San Francisco labor organizer whose arrest for a 1916 bombing in that city had made national headlines.41 While Muncie’s two daily papers paid little attention to labor,42 the *Post-Democrat* ran stories about major strikes as far away as London and small strikes closer to home, such as the walkout of forty-three women at a Goshen, Indiana, dress factory. Dale poured his vitriol on President Warren Harding and the day's industrialists: “The Harding administration was placed on its pedestal of power by the criminal wealth which is now starving millions in order to reduce the farmer to serfdom and the working man to the position of a bond slave.”43 Later he wrote that the moneyed aristocrats who complained of the spread of bolshevism were the “real un-American anarchists.” He argued for the nationalization of the railroads and coal mines and for abolition of the National Guard after the governor “sent three thousand troopers to southern Indiana to protect thirty-two scab strike breakers in the coal field.”44 Such opinions were exactly what most Muncie businessmen did not want to see in a local paper or to support with their advertising dollars.

Dale’s pro-labor, Democratic paper would also have put him at odds with Muncie’s financial-industrial leaders, particularly the Ball brothers, who dominated Muncie to such a degree that the sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd called them the city’s “reigning royal family.”45 Their glass company, which was said to manufacture most of America’s canning jars, was by far the city’s largest employer. At the turn of the

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41 Mooney was convicted but pardoned in 1939.
42 A content analysis at the time indicated that the *Muncie Star* and *Muncie Press* devoted less than three-tenths of one percent of their news holes to stories and editorials about labor. See Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1928; New York, 1956), 534.
43 *Post-Democrat*, April 29, 1921.
44 *Post-Democrat*, August 18, 1922.
45 Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 77. The Lynds referred to the Balls as Family “X.”
century, newspapers had dubbed Edmund Ball “Indiana’s richest man.” In the 1920s and ’30s, the Balls’ business holdings included several railroads and Muncie’s major department store; family members sat on the boards of many local businesses.⁴⁶ They had substantial investments in Muncie’s auto transmission, furniture, and meatpacking companies and in the local airport.⁴⁷ Family members were so anti-labor that they reportedly dissuaded many industries from locating in Muncie for fear that the companies would bring unions and higher pay scales with them.⁴⁸ The Balls were also politically active. George A. Ball was a Republican National Committee member for several years,⁴⁹ and the family owned a sizable stake in the city’s largest daily newspaper, The Muncie Star, and financially assisted other Republican papers in the state.⁵⁰

Dale’s earliest associations in the city contributed to his antagonistic relationship with the Ball family. Dale was brought to Muncie by Mayor Rollin Bunch and his brother Fred to edit a paper that they had begun in 1916. Dale later contended that the Ball family had a “fundamental hatred” of Mayor Bunch.⁵¹ Bunch himself, sent to prison on corruption charges, blamed his conviction on the Balls. Bunch was politically very much to the left. Historian Thomas Buchanan writes: “A strong case can be made that Bunch’s political beliefs leaned strongly toward socialism.”⁵² Bunch’s campaign manager and top aide, William Daniel, was an avowed socialist.⁵³

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⁴⁸ Post-Democrat, November 3, 1933; Lynd and Lynd, Middletown in Transition, 79-80.
⁵¹ Post-Democrat, August 9, 1935. Years later, Bunch again was elected mayor but was accused of bending to the will of the Ball Family.
⁵² Thomas W. Buchanan, “The Life of Rollin ‘Doc’ Bunch, the Boss of Middletown” (Ph.D. diss., Ball State University, 1992), 72.
⁵³ Post-Democrat, September 2, 1921; Martin, Indiana, 84.
In a town still clinging to the nickname “Magic City,” civic leaders saw that Muncie was in trouble. Crime was rampant; its mayor was a corrupt leftist; and a feisty weekly newspaper editor was trying to rouse workers to the cause of unionism, despite the disastrous streetcar strike and the ensuing riot and two-week-long declaration of martial law of 1908.54

Civil and business leaders believed they needed to do something to improve their city, and they turned to what would seem today to be a most unexpected organization. Throughout Indiana in the early 1920s, many city leaders welcomed the Ku Klux Klan into their communities because of the Indiana Klan’s reputation for anti-liquor, anti-corruption, and pro-American stances. A McClure’s magazine article in 1924 concluded that “the unbiased verdict in Indiana seems to be that he [the Indiana Klansman] has been, all things considered, a real factor for the betterment of municipal rule.”

A widely repeated rumor contended that a group of Muncie civic leaders had invited a Klan organizer to come to the city in hopes that the Klan would target Mayor Bunch and lead an effort to clean up corruption and crime. The first meeting of the Muncie Klan was reportedly held in the offices of the Chamber of Commerce, whose membership was limited to the city’s top business and civic leaders. It is unlikely that the Balls themselves were involved with the Klan. However, Ball families were members of, and donated heavily to, Muncie’s small Universalist church, whose minister resigned after he offended members by giving a sermon denouncing the Klan.

In many ways, the Indiana Klan proved a perfect fit for Muncie’s business leaders. Despite the popular notion that Klansmen came from lower socioeconomic classes, the Indiana Klan’s early membership was recruited from the professional and middle classes, and the Klan’s phi-

55Max Bentley, “The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana,” McClure’s, 57 (May 1924), 23.
56Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 481; Dwight Hoover, “To Be a Jew in Middletown,” in Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community, ed. Dan Rottenberg (Bloomington, Ind., 1997), xxvi-xxvii.
57“A Brief History of Our Church,” Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie website, www.uuchurchmuncie.org/web/our-church/a-brief-history-of-our-church.html (accessed January 5, 2010). From the original generation of five Ball brothers who moved to Muncie, four brothers and their wives joined the local Universalist congregation. In Middletown, the Lynds observed: “The conspicuous omission of ministers from the Rotary is possibly indicative of the attitudes of Middletown [Muncie] business men: some explain the omission by saying that if any minister were included it would have to be the pastor of the prominent millionaire manufacturer, and since they were Universalists, the more orthodox would object” (p. 349).
losophy was pro-business, anti-labor, and generally Republican. Its list of enemies included labor organizers, agrarian radicals, and socialists; its tenets included working for “closer relationships between labor and capital” and “preventing unwarranted strikes by foreign labor agitators.” Scholarly research has shown “that the secret order drew its membership from a generally balanced cross-section of the white male Protestant population, rarely engaged in violent vigilantism, and for the most part functioned in the manner of a typical civic action group.” It promised opportunities for community service; promoted “100 percent Americanism”; worked for stronger enforcement of Prohibition laws; and offered camaraderie in its weekly meetings, frequent parades, and massive festivities. The ridiculous jargon and costumes only added to the experience.

The Klan’s attitudes toward ethnicity would not have disconcerted most Muncie residents. Local Klansmen, by and large, treated the city’s small, segregated black community paternalistically, often making showy displays of their donations to black churches and charities. At one point they considered forming an auxiliary for African Americans, primarily to add more dues to Klan coffers. The Muncie Klan was more

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59 Klan recruiters often tailored the organization’s political positions to suit the audience, thereby creating inconsistencies. See Rory McVeigh, Daniel Myers, and David Sikkink, “Corn, Klansmen and Coolidge: Structure and Framing in Social Movements,” Social Forces, 83 (December 2004), 653-54.


64 The Middletown studies reported that 66 percent of Muncie’s male high school seniors and 75 percent of female seniors believed “the white race is the best race on earth.” Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, 200.

65 Post-Democrat, February 13, 1925.
vehemently anti-Catholic than it was anti-Semitic or anti-black, and that too was a common prejudice among midwestern Protestants in the 1920s. Its “100 percent Americanism,” which Dale later ridiculed, was at home with the nativism which dominated much of post-World War I America. Even Dale’s Post-Democrat reported that the influx of immigrants was acting to lower wages and “smash unions,” and the paper criticized immigration officials for allowing “vermin-infested aliens” into the country.66

The initial membership of the Klan would have included some of Dale’s most resolute enemies. Many of the businessmen and civic leaders who had boycotted his newspapers for their pro-labor stances and his association with Bunch were now joining the secret order. County officials, mostly Republicans who had been stung by Dale’s sarcastic editorials, would have had ties to the city’s business and industrial leaders and would have been drawn to the Klan. Even many Democrats had turned against Dale in 1921, after he refused to endorse party nominee Bunch, who was seeking re-election despite an Indiana law prohibiting convicted felons from holding office. Many of Muncie’s bootleggers, who already hated Dale for his anti-liquor crusade, were well placed socially and politically, and would also have reason to join the Klan.67

One can conclude that the Klan brought together and emboldened Dale’s enemies and made life considerably harder for the publisher and his newspaper. However, the assessment that the Klan was the primary cause of Dale’s troubles is overstated. Before the Klan came to Muncie, Dale’s reporting on the area’s illegal liquor business had caused bootleggers to threaten and assault him and to terrorize his wife. His rabidly pro-labor and leftist writings had angered Muncie’s industrialists and merchants and led them to withhold their advertising from his paper. And his attacks on the Republican political machine and refusal to support the corrupt Democratic Mayor Bunch had alienated him from most of the city’s political figures. Given Indiana’s history of vigilantism,

66Post-Democrat, February 18, 25, 1921.

67Such hypocrisy was common in the Klan. At least one Muncie Klansman was convicted of violation of liquor laws and investigated in the death of a man who bought bad whiskey from him. Bigger bootleggers also used their influence to get police to keep smaller dealers in line. See Post-Democrat, February 8, 1924, and March 30, 1923.
members of any of these groups may have been willing to finance violence against Dale.68

Because so much attention has been paid to Dale’s fight with the Klan, his real mission in Muncie has been largely overlooked. He should be remembered as an editor who fought vice and political corruption, stirring the wrath of powerful bootleggers and politicians. More importantly, he should be recognized as an editor who paid a heavy price for championing labor and left-of-center politics in a strongly anti-union city where workers, as the Middletown studies showed, toiled for long hours, were poorly paid, and had little job security. And, for his desperate fight against his conviction for indirect contempt of Judge Dearth, he deserves a place among Indiana’s champions of press freedom.

68Paul Musgrave, “A Primitive Method of Enforcing the Law: Vigilantism as a Response to Bank Crimes in Indiana, 1925–1933,” Indiana Magazine of History, 102 (September 2006), 124. Indiana law also allowed citizens to form “Horse Thief Detective Agencies” and gave the “agencies” law-enforcement privileges. These groups, some connected to the Klan, were still extant in the 1920s.