

*One Hundred Percent American
The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*

By Thomas R. Pegram

(Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011. Pp. xii, 281. Notes, index. \$27.95.)

Scholarship on the 1920s Ku Klux Klan has taken new directions over the past several decades. Historians have questioned earlier portrayals of the movement as a rural or small-town phenomenon defined by its violence and prejudice, and supported by marginalized, irrational fanatics on the fringes of American society. They have located Klansmen in urban centers and identified members as citizens who fell mostly within the social and economic mainstream, and who addressed a host of genuine local problems including political corruption, vice, and the enforcement of prohibition. Recognizing the significant geographic variations in the Klan movement, newer studies have tended to focus on particular regions, states, or communities and often emphasize the organization's populist and social aspects. In this invaluable book, Thomas Pegram provides the first thorough synthesis, overview, and analysis of this newer Klan scholarship. He does a superb job of providing examples of Klan activities across the country, and utilizes a wide array of secondary and primary sources to produce a well-written work that will interest general readers and academics alike.

Pegram understands the Klan within various contexts. He insists that the 1920s organization—the

largest and most sustained of all Klan manifestations—must be differentiated both from the post-Civil War Klan and from the numerous Klan groups that sprang up after World War Two. Like most current investigators of the Klan, Pegram appreciates the local variations found in the 'twenties Klan. This "New Era Klan," he maintains, often reflected wider developments in 1920s-era American society. The Klan amplified the biases of mainstream America, and it accepted many aspects of popular culture, including radio, recorded music, and especially motion pictures, which the group utilized for propaganda purposes. Yet its members' inability to recognize and accept a rapidly expanding pluralism in American life made their vision of a "one hundred percent American" society—defined in terms of a white, native-born, Protestant hegemony—increasingly unrealistic. The majority of Americans were also taken aback by the organization's extremism, its sporadic violence, and its blatant corruption.

Pegram's book is conveniently organized by topic. Individual chapters include fascinating discussions of the methods the Klan employed to attract members, the Klan's views on education, its role in prohibition enforcement, the place of violence and vigilantism in the movement, and

the quest for political power that ultimately contributed to the organization's precipitous collapse in Indiana and nationwide. The author provides a deft analysis of Klan ideology as it pertained to race and religion, a welcome clarification of the Klan's complicated positions on organized labor, and in an afterword entitled "Historians and the Klan," a perceptive critique of the civic populist interpretation. Sadly, despite references to Kathleen Blee's *Women of the Klan*, Pegram says relatively little about the role that women played in the movement.

Pegram, an Indiana native, gives considerable attention to Klan activities in the state where it attained the highest percentage of members. He discusses the famous July 4, 1923, "konklave at Kokomo," the Horse Thief Detective Association—which served as a kind of vigilante auxiliary to the Hoosier Klan—and the notorious machinations of Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson. He details the operations of the "military machine" that Stephenson created to gain political power. Pegram explains the difficulty of obtaining accurate membership statistics for a secret body but incorrectly states that Leonard Moore, "the most thorough historian of the Indiana Klan," (p. 26) placed the peak membership of the Hoosier Knights

at 166,000. In *Citizen Klansmen* (1997), Moore actually points out that this figure represents an internal Klan calculation made in 1925, when the organization was already in decline following the arrest and eventual homicide conviction of Stephenson for the death of Madge Oberholtzer (see Moore, pp. 46, 205). Pegram, again citing Moore as his source, later asserts, "Up to one-third of white native-born Protestant men in Indiana joined the hooded order" (p. 226), which would amount to well over the 166,000 figure.

One Hundred Percent American stands out as a sophisticated, nuanced, and essential examination of a subject which, as Pegram notes, constitutes "a particularly difficult puzzle for historians" (p. 221).

ALLEN SAFIANOW, Professor Emeritus of History at Indiana University Kokomo, has written several articles on the Ku Klux Klan, including "'You Can't Burn History': Getting Right with the Klan in Noblesville, Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 2004. He is now involved with the Howard County Historical Society's Oral History Program; his article on its Ryan White oral history project will be published in *Traces* in early 2013.