

Blazing Crosses **INTZION**

The Ku Klux Klan in Utah

Larry R. Gerlach



Utah State University Press
Logan, Utah

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Logan, Utah 84322
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Gerlach, Larry R.
Blazing Crosses in Zion.

Includes index.

1. Ku Klux Klan (1915-)—Utah. I. Title.

HS2330.K63G45	322.4'2'09792	82-6922
ISBN 0-87421-111-5		AACR2
ISBN 0-87421-112-3 (pbk.)		

1924
engaged in formal recruiting.¹⁰⁵ Although Polly passed through the region en route to the more promising recruiting territory of Carbon County, he left the organizing of Utah County to another field representative. In November Milfred R. Yant, veteran Klan organizer who established several Klaverns in Nevada from his base in Elko, appeared in Provo to assess prospects for Klankraft in the area. Optimistic, he returned to Elko to arrange for moving his family to Provo. Utah County had been bypassed but not forgotten in the campaign of 1924: residents had not heard the last of the Ku Klux Klan.

Carbon County

The Ku Klux Klan made a dramatic appearance in Carbon County the night of August 30, 1924. About eight o'clock, shortly after dark, three or four automobiles came roaring into Helper from the direction of the mining camp of Castle Gate. As the caravan proceeded along Main Street, a torch carried by someone in the rear seat of the lead car caught the attention of the Saturday night crowd milling about town. Minutes later the sky was illuminated by a fiery red cross burning on a hill east of town at the south end of the Denver and Rio Grande Western railroad yards. The cross, which measured approximately ten by fifteen feet, burned for about twenty minutes. At the conclusion of the fireworks, the mysterious night visitors got back into their cars and "quiet as mice" sped out of town in the direction whence they had come. Although a reporter from the *Price Sun* stood within two hundred feet of the incendiary demonstration, his "curiosity did not impel him to make an inquiry."¹⁰⁶

No inquiry was necessary, for everyone knew, as the *Sun* announced, that "Carbon county has a Klu-Klux Klan [*sic*] and no mistake about it." The only surprising thing is that the Klan had not appeared much earlier. Given its polyglot populace and the smoldering embers of nativism remaining from the violent coal strike of 1922, Carbon County, like Bingham and Magna, afforded a hothouse environment for the growth of Klankraft. The sixty men disguised by masks or blackface who drove Greeks out of Spring Canyon at gunpoint during the strike were motivated by the same ethnic animosities that produced hooded Knights.¹⁰⁷ The belief among the mining establishment that the immigrants had formed "their own secret societies, the members of which are under the complete domination of

day Porter won a landslide victory.²⁵ In Price, an independent Citizens' ticket suspected of Klan involvement captured only the contest for mayor; the postelection pledge of ex-Klansman Sanford Ballinger, an unsuccessful candidate for a seat on the city commission, to engage in "no more campaigns" applied as well to the Carbon County Klan.²⁶

Increasingly ineffective and disorganized after 1925, the Carbon County Klan No. 4 finally disbanded in 1930. In what serves as both a fitting denouement to Klankraft and a testimonial to the primacy of cultural pluralism in the county, Glen Jackson, the die-hard Klansman who had taken over leadership of the Invisible Empire in its waning days, sold on February 15, 1930, the infamous hilltop tract west of Spring Glen to a pair of South Slavs, Anton Dupin and Martin Millarich.²⁷ Thus, the land Klansmen once used to stage their nativistic rituals by the light of flaming crosses became the Slovenian Central Cemetery.²⁸ Although remembrances of the Ku Klux Klan continue to haunt many of the county's older immigrant residents, a tangible symbol of the ultimate triumph of brotherhood over bigotry is the use of a portable electric cross once owned by the Klan as a Christmas decoration by a Spring Glen family of Yugoslavian descent.²⁹

Paradoxically, the only county outside of Salt Lake where the Klan enjoyed success in 1925 was culturally conservative, Mormon-dominated Utah County. The establishment of the Ku Klux Klan in the unlikely territory was a tribute to the superb salesmanship of Milfred R. Yant, veteran Nevada organizer who, in January 1925 had moved his family to Provo, which with a population of sixteen thousand was the economic and political seat of the county. Operating out of a small office on West Center Street, Yant first organized a Klavern in Provo and then moved out into the adjoining communities. By March, Klans had been established in American Fork, Lehi, and Spanish Fork in addition to Provo.³⁰

The birth of the Klan in American Fork is representative of the organization of Utah County. With a single Presbyterian church being the only non-Mormon religious edifice in town, American Fork, an unincorporated community of some thirty-five hundred residents situated fifteen miles northwest of Provo, held little promise for Klan recruiters.³¹ Nonetheless, a small band of Klansmen quietly coalesced in early March under Yant's direction. Then, on Monday, March 30, there mysteriously appeared throughout the town handbills inviting residents to a rally the next night at the Realart Theatre. A capacity

crowd showed up to hear Yant lecture on the Klan's solutions to the evils of "the 18th amendment, Jews and Greeks, national newspapers, the oil companies, the white slavery, and crime." Yant was apparently persuasive, for "the big majority" of the audience rose in support of the Klan and signed up during the membership drive that followed the lecture.³²

Despite winter weather, the Klan in Utah County showed signs of being especially active. All but two members of the Provo chapter traveled to Salt Lake City to participate in the parade staged on February 23, commemorating Washington's Birthday.³³ However, the most dramatic expression of Klan enthusiasm in the county was the participation of the hooded Knights in the funeral services for Calvin W. Beveridge—Lehi farmer, veteran of World War I, Mormon, and Klansman.

Klan involvement in funeral ceremonies was not unusual, but the Beveridge rites mark the only time in the history of the Invisible Empire that such services were conducted jointly by the Ku Klux Klan, the American Legion, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The principal speakers at the services held March 29 at the LDS Third Ward chapel in Lehi were Mormon Bishop William Hatfield and a Mr. Huss, allegedly a Klan field representative from Provo.³⁴ Members of the Lehi American Legion Post served as honor guards, while six Klansmen in full regalia served as pallbearers. Graveside ceremonies were performed by the Legionnaires, and after interment the local Lehi Klavern placed a remembrance on the grave of their departed comrade: an enormous cross made up of red and white flowers surmounted with three gilt *K*'s.³⁵

Perhaps benefiting from the publicity generated by the Beveridge funeral, the first outdoor Konklave held in Utah County reportedly drew more than forty-five hundred persons. Throughout the early evening of April 15, "hundreds" of Klansmen and Klanswomen, along with spectators from all parts of the county, followed the directions of the robed guides posted along the roads leading to the site near Provo. Following the standard lectures on Americanism and the Klan, initiation ceremonies for men and women were conducted by the light of a blazing cross. The "Major Kleagle" of Utah administered the rites to the women in the absence of a female officer; Yant presided over the induction of the men.³⁶

Thereafter, Klan fortunes in Utah County fell as rapidly as they

had risen. The social and cultural homogeneity of the county, along with the opposition of the LDS church, would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the initial enthusiasm for the Klan. But the fate of the order was sealed the moment Yant hurriedly left his Provo apartment about 3:00 A.M. on May 1 with his wife, two children, an illegally acquired automobile, fraudulent funds, and the Klan treasury.

Complaints filed with the Fourth District Court in Provo reveal that Yant had good reason to abscond. The initial charge was that he had defrauded the Provo Commercial and Savings Bank of \$365 by cashing a forged draft on an Elko bank. Subsequent investigations revealed that he had also cashed about \$700 in bogus notes endorsed by various Provo businessmen who now found themselves financially and socially embarrassed. Moreover, Yant fled in a new Nash sedan obtained from the Jackson Motor Company for a small down payment and a secondhand car, which actually carried a \$150 lien.³⁷

Law enforcement officials not only issued a nationwide warrant for Yant's arrest but also dispatched Deputy Sheriff Charles Coates across country in pursuit of the fleeing Klansman. Coates finally caught up with Yant and arrested him in Deland, Florida, on October 13. Following extradition proceedings, Yant was returned to Provo on October 22 and placed in the county jail.³⁸

Yant appeared in court under the custody of Sheriff J. D. Boyd for arraignment on Monday, October 26. Without legal counsel, the defendant entered a plea of "guilty" to the charges of forgery and was remanded to the county jail. City Judge George S. Ballif set bail at \$1,000. On October 28 Yant appeared before Fourth District Judge Elias Hansen for sentencing. Still without a lawyer, Yant pleaded for leniency from the court, telling a "vivid" tale of the debauched life of drunkenness and lewdness to which he had been introduced by young Provo males. The forgery, he argued, was the result of having spent "enormous sums" hosting parties, buying moonshine for "the fellows," and loaning money to compatriots that went unrepaid. Judge Hansen listened patiently and then, after hearing the state's case presented by District Attorney M. B. Hope, sentenced Yant to the Utah State Prison for an indeterminate term of not less than one or more than twenty years.³⁹

The zeal with which Provo law officers pursued Yant was no doubt motivated by more than a desire to serve justice by apprehending

a petty felon. They also wanted to arrest the spread of Klankraft in the county. More than anywhere else in the state, the Ku Klux Klan in Utah County was the creation of a single person. When Yant fled in May, the Klan literally lost its head; consequently recruiting activities and public appearances ceased as embarrassed Klansmen either left the scandal-plagued order or went underground. With Yant's conviction in October, the Klan was discredited in Utah County and, no doubt, throughout the state.

By the summer of 1925 the Klan in Utah had come full circle and was, as it had originally been, a Salt Lake phenomenon. Legislated effectively out of existence in Logan and Ogden, destroyed by community pressures in Helper and Magna, and discredited in Price and Provo, the Invisible Empire was firmly established only in the capital city of the Beehive State.

The decline of the Klan in Utah during the first six months of 1925 is attributable in part to neglect on the part of Klan leaders. In January and February Cortner and Polly were on an organizing tour of Nevada. And except for week-long visits to Nevada and Colorado, the Imperial Representative was on an inspection tour of Idaho from mid-April to mid-May. Idaho was clearly the keystone of his three-state Domain, and he sought to ready the Gem State chapters for incorporation into the Realm of Idaho, to be directed by a Grand Dragon in Boise instead of from Salt Lake City.⁴⁰ In fact, from November 1924 to May 1925 the only effective organizing in Utah was done by Myrtle Galvin, state Fieldwoman, whose success in establishing female chapters of the Invisible Empire brought her appointment as an Imperial Representative to the National Klonvocation of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan to be held in Detroit in late June.⁴¹

Concerned about the crumbling edifice of Klandom in Utah, Cortner and his Kleagles hit the hustings in late May. A dinner meeting given on June 1 at the Salt Lake Klavern by the women's auxiliary for more than "600" local Knights featured more than fraternalism, fellowship, and fine food. Of special interest was the announcement that seven new chapters had been established "in various places" in the state during "the past few weeks."⁴²

In a desperate attempt to expand the Invisible Empire, Klan organizers in late spring moved into the marginal recruiting areas of the state. The Klan made a brief flickering appearance in Tooele County; a few isolated cross-burnings, presumably directed toward a handful

Notes

25. Rolla E. West interview. Porter defeated Nyman 378 to 135; the Democratic candidate finished a distant third. *News Advocate* (Price), November 11, 1927.
26. *News Advocate* (Price), November 11, 1927.
27. The property was sold for \$150 by Jackson as "trustee" for the Klan. Deed Book, Entry No. 19230, Carbon County Courthouse, Price.
28. Nancy Taniguchi, "How Ku Klux Klan 'Helped' Carbon County's Foreigners," *Sun Advocate* (Price), July 2, 1979.
29. The cross is affixed to the porch roof of the John and Anne Kosec home. Kosec obtained the cross in 1935 from Glen Jackson, with whom he worked at Raines. At the same time, Kosec helped Jackson carry Klan regalia, some of which had become mildewed from storage in a trunk, to the town dump for disposal. Kosec interview.
30. *National Kourier*, March 20, 1925.
31. For background see George F. Shelley, *Early History of American Fork* (American Fork, 1945).
32. *American Fork Citizen*, April 4, 1925.
33. *National Kourier*, March 20, 1925.
34. Other speakers were Dr. Walter T. Hasler of Provo, Beveridge's former employer, and Henry Lewis, a longtime friend of the deceased.
35. *Deseret News*, March 21, 1925; *National Kourier*, April 10, 1925; *Western Recorder* (Payette), April 15, 1925.
36. *National Kourier*, May 1, 1925; *Western Recorder* (Payette), May 1, 1925.
37. As word of the scandal spread across the state, the Klan in general became an object of ridicule. *Evening Herald* (Provo), *Deseret News*, May 5, 1925; *Salt Lake Telegram*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *Ogden Standard Examiner*, May 6, 1925; *Logan Journal*, May 7, 1925; *Springville Herald*, May 8, 1925.
38. *Salt Lake Telegram*, October 14, 1925; *Evening Herald* (Provo), October 26, 1925; *Deseret News*, October 27, 1925.
39. *Evening Herald* (Provo), October 28, 1925; *American Fork Citizen*, October 31, 1925. The case of the State of Utah *vs.* M. R. Yant may be followed in the records of the Fourth District Court in Provo: Criminal Register, Book C, File 983, and Court Minutes, vol. 14, p. 435. State prison records show that Yant was incarcerated on October 29, 1925, and released on April 5, 1926.
40. For Cortner's itinerary and activities see the *Western Recorder* (Payette), April 1, 15, May 1, 20, 1926.
41. *Western Recorder* (Payette), June 20, 1925.
42. *Salt Lake Telegram*, June 2, 1925.
43. Anonymous interview. For setting see Mildred Allred Mercer, ed., *History of Tooele County* (Salt Lake City, 1961).
44. For the general history of the area see Alice Paxman McCune, *History of Juab County, 1847-1947* (Springville, 1947).
45. *Eureka Reporter*, June 5, 1925.
46. William J. Hill interview.
47. Maxine Haight and Jack McDonald interviews.