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Article Summary: Beginning in 1921 the Ku Klux Klan made a major effort to recruit members in Nebraska. At its height the Klan claimed 45,000 members in the state. By the end of the 1920s the group had become known for racism and bigotry, and from then on its influence faded rapidly.

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Photographs / Images: Ku Klux Klan drills at Neligh during the 1920s (2 views), inset Ku Klux Klan flyer

# The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930

*By Michael W. Schuyler*

In 1915 D. W. Griffith produced *The Birth of a Nation*, a movie which portrayed the divisive years in the South following the Civil War. It was a landmark in the motion picture industry but flawed because of Griffith's superficial understanding of Reconstruction history. Blacks were portrayed as ignorant degenerates. The Ku Klux Klan had spread murder and mayhem throughout the South in the post-Civil War years before it was legislated against in 1871 by federal law. Never fully dissolved, it practiced violence and intimidation for years in the former Confederate states.

During World War I, 1914-1918, under the patriotic fervor engendered by the clash of Allies and Central Powers in Europe, William J. Simmons, an Alabama Methodist minister, dreamed of creating an organization which would stand for "comprehensive Americanism." Actually he was more interested in attempting to resurrect the Ku Klux Klan by putting a benign face on the organization while patterning it after the Know Nothing Party of the 1850s.

In 1915 with a small band of followers, Simmons burned a cross on Stone Mountain outside Atlanta, Georgia, and announced the resurrection of the klan to "call back to mortal habitation the good angel of fraternity among men."<sup>1</sup>

Between 1915 and 1919 the new klan emphasized fraternalism, while embracing white racism. By 1919 the klan had attracted only a few thousand members and remained a southern institution. In 1919 in an effort to spread the klan over the north and west, Simmons enlisted Edward Young Clarke and Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler of the Southern Publicity Association, who divided the nation into sales districts and launched a campaign to sell the klan. They emphasized "fraternity," and broadened klan appeal by identifying

enemies of what they called "100% Americanism": Catholics, Jews, Orientals, immigrants, moral transgressors, corrupt politicians, bootleggers, and radical revolutionaries. By 1924 when the klan reached its zenith, between two and five million Americans were members. More important, for the first time the klan moved from the South into the North. By the 1920s the klan was organized in virtually every state, with its greatest strength in the Midwest.<sup>2</sup>

The klan made a major effort to recruit members in Nebraska in 1921. Klavern Number One was founded in Omaha at 41st and Farnam Streets. Klansman Edward Young Clarke, who bore the title of "king klegle," visited the state. Promising that Omaha would have one of the largest initiation ceremonies in the United States, he instructed organizers, who founded klaverns (locals) in Nebraska communities. Clarke claimed the klan had been invited into the state and was not interested in soliciting members. He said that klan "adherence to law and order" was a basic principle. Clarke protested, "We are an organization of Americans. We are non-everything that is un-American . . . We are a secret organization of Protestant, white, gentile Americans, ready to uphold the constitution."<sup>3</sup>

W. H. Elroy, klan organizer from Atlanta, and local leaders such as F. Maxey and J. A. Ellerman of Omaha, and Paul Davis of York, continued to solicit members.<sup>4</sup> By late 1921 the klan announced 24 locals had been organized and 800 people a week were joining. Emboldened by its success, the klan displayed its power in open meetings, some of which (in Omaha) charged admission. Public initiation ceremonies were held in Lincoln and in Platte River towns as the klan recruited members.<sup>5</sup>

By the summer of 1922 the *Monitor*, Omaha's leading black newspaper, estimated Nebraska klan membership at 1,100.<sup>6</sup> In 1923 following an organizational drive, membership in Nebraska, according to Atlanta headquarters, reached 45,000. The klan was especially active in Lincoln, Omaha, Fremont, York, Grand Island, Hastings, North Platte, and Scottsbluff, but its membership was scattered over the state.<sup>7</sup>

By 1924 klan demonstrations, parades, and cross burnings had become common. As klan membership grew, state conventions were scheduled in Lincoln. The events were or-

chestrated to attract members and display klan strength. The 1924 state convention in downtown Lincoln featured 1,100 klansmen in white robes. Klan dignitaries rode in open cars; hooded knights marched on foot, frequently carrying American flags; others rode horses. One mounted klansman stirred the imagination of the crowd by carrying an electric cross. Klan bands from York, Lincoln, and Auburn, and drum and bugle corps from other parts of the state, provided music for the parade.<sup>8</sup>

In 1925 the klan state convention coincided with the state fair, and conventioners invited fair-goers to join an all-day klan picnic. Crosses were burned. A parade with floats and 1,500 marchers moved along Lincoln streets. The picnic, to which the public was invited, was attended by an estimated 25,000 people, many of them idle observers. It featured a fireworks display and a klan wedding, with the bride, groom, and minister all wearing hoods and gowns. In 1926 the kloreo (state convention) organized talent shows, baseball games, and a competition among klan drill teams. A highlight of the convention was a klan water pageant at Capitol Beach. Displays with patriotic themes such as "Washington Crossing the Delaware," were floated on the lake on pontoons. Illuminated by electric lights, frequently in the shape of crosses, the displays lit up the night skies<sup>9</sup>

While entertainment was a theme at klan conventions, the gatherings usually featured speakers from Kansas City, the regional headquarters, or Atlanta, the national headquarters. While the speakers explained klan ideology, other klansmen carried signs to underscore klan dogma. Among the signs carried in the 1926 parade were "Long Live the Little Red School House," "We Believe in Separation of Church and State," and "Do you Believe in Upholding Our Constitution?"<sup>10</sup>

Cross burnings, public displays, and organizational drives were not limited to Lincoln. On April 24, 1924, crosses also burned in Beatrice, Milford, Seward, Beaver Crossing, Barneston, and Hebron. A month later a cross burning was reported at Chadron. On July 25, 1924, in McCook, a crowd of 10,000 people watched a parade of 200 klansmen, many from surrounding towns, and listened to a lecture on "Americanism" by a Mr. Stewart, reputedly a minister and klan organizer from Kansas City. Stewart, who was intro-

duced to the crowd by the mayor, proved to be a "high powered" fellow and the klan demonstration a "spectacular affair."<sup>11</sup>

In 1925 in Curtis more than 1,000 people turned out at a meeting in the city park to hear Zack Harris, a klan organizer from Atlanta, lecture on "foreign elements," which, he warned, would soon inundate Nebraska. The same year in David City, 3,000 people listened to J. F. Watson, Presbyterian pastor and klan organizer, lecture on "Americanism and Christianity."<sup>12</sup> In Stratton, Alliance, and Scottsbluff, similar meetings were held.<sup>13</sup>

In 1925 Hiram Wesley Evans, the imperial wizard of the klan, traveled through the state accompanied by an entourage, including the grand dragon of Nebraska, Gail S. Carter. Evans made appearances in Omaha, Lincoln, York, Hastings, North Platte, and Sidney. In York the local klan entertained the imperial wizard with a presentation by its dramatic team and dined at the St. Cloud Hotel. Before leaving York, Evans predicted klan membership would double. He had found in the state an abundant number of "genuine Americans" and concluded, "It is good to know that the West is not being undermined as the eastern section of the nation by un-American elements." Still, Evans said, there were problems which needed to be addressed: "immodesty of dress" of American women, the "unwarranted predilection for foreign art," and "high taxes."<sup>14</sup> Evans, who realized the klan was already declining in other parts of the nation, urged klansmen to make the organization a permanent part of the social life of the state as "a dignified, dependable agency for the achievement of civic righteousness."<sup>15</sup>

The klan did not overlook women and children in its drive for membership. In Grand Island boys were urged to join the junior klan and the girls, Tri-K clubs.<sup>16</sup> For women in the state, the klan organized an auxiliary known as Women of the Klan, which in 1925 held its first convention in Lincoln. Following the pattern already established by the men's klaverns, women sang, listened to lectures by national spokeswomen, and marched in parades. The 1925 convention, presided over by Mrs. Frances McCarron of Kansas City, was attended by an estimated 2,000 women. For entertainment the women watched 30 girls in khaki uniforms execute drills

around a mammoth electric cross and an American flag. Klan women, especially active in Lincoln, York, Norfolk, Fremont, and Weeping Water, participated in discussions on Christianity, womanhood, separation of church and state, prohibition, strikes, white supremacy, and the "insidious trend" of Protestant church involvement in the peace movement.<sup>17</sup>

The appearance and rapid growth of the klan in Nebraska and the Midwest came as a surprise to observers of the American scene in the 1920s. Robert Duffus and John M. Mecklin pointed out that most klansmen were "ordinary Americans," good mothers and fathers, devout Christians, loyal to the state and nation. Writing in the 1920s, Duffus observed that politically klansmen would have been comfortable at a progressive rally only a few years earlier, while Mecklin concluded that the klan was particularly successful in appealing to middle class Americans in rural areas and small towns.

Duffus reasoned that stable community elements had been duped by the klan, while Mecklin argued that the middle class had reacted hysterically to fears and anxieties unleashed by World War I. More recent historians of the klan, such as Kenneth Jackson and Robert Goldberg, have demonstrated that most klansmen lived in urban areas, not in small towns, and that local issues, as well as national concerns, played an important role in the development of each local klan.<sup>18</sup>

In Nebraska the appeal of the klan differed from town to town. However, the klan was numerically stronger in the largest cities, particularly Lincoln and Omaha. The Lincoln klavern, with an estimated 5,000 members, was the largest and most vocal in the state. Klan membership in Nebraska was a heterogeneous coalition of white Americans from varied economic classes and political backgrounds. In spite of its diversity, it relied upon common themes to recruit members in the 1920s. Many Nebraska klansmen insisted that they were attracted to it because of its fraternalism. Others joined because it offered an escape from the tedium of everyday life. Ideology, however, also played a role in attracting members.

A number of Nebraskans joined, believing the klan would oppose the doctrine of evolution, resist moral change, support law enforcement, and limit the influence of the Catholic Church. Although major Protestant denominations denounced

the Klan, some ministers in Nebraska supported it and became members and organizers.<sup>19</sup> A common tactic called for klansmen, dressed in hoods and sheets, to appear at a church altar during services and make financial contributions. Not infrequently with the approval of the minister, klansmen would lead the congregation in singing hymns, reciting the pledge of allegiance, or reading a statement in support of "Christianity."

In Grand Island during the 1920s, seven klansmen appeared at the First Christian Church, led the congregation in singing "America," and left a \$25 donation. In Fairfield, when G. W. Adkins, minister of the First Christian Church, announced during a Sunday service that he was a member of the klan, he was joined by 75 robed klansmen who sang "America" and knelt to pray. In McCook 18 robed and hooded klansmen, carrying an American flag and an illuminated cross, entered a church. They gave the minister a Bible and a \$30 contribution, explaining that klansmen "accepted Christ as the model for their personal conduct." Before leaving, one of the klansmen read the following prayer:

Give us to know that the crowning glory of a klansman is to serve. God save our nation, and help us to be a nation worthy of existence on earth. Keep ablaze in each klansman's heart the sacred fire of a devoted patriotism to our country and its government. And Oh God, give us men. Our Country demands strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands. Men whom the lust of office does not kill, Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy. Men who possess opinions and a will, Men who have honor, Men who will not lie, Men who serve not for selfish booty, but real Men, courageous, who flinch not at duty, Men of dependable character, Men of strong sterling worth. The wrongs will be redressed, and right will rule the earth. God give us men. Oh God, for Thy glory and our good we humbly ask these things in the name of Him who taught us to serve and sacrifice the right.<sup>20</sup>

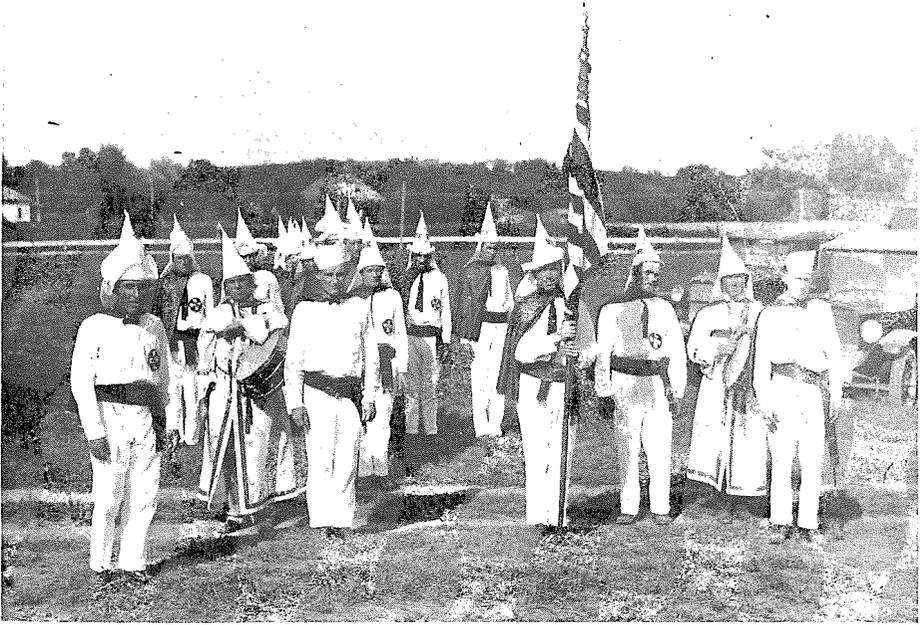
Some churches seemed to welcome (or at least accept without objection) klan disruption of their services, but the relationship between the klan and the church became a divisive issue in some communities. In Hastings, A. P. Renn, revivalist and klan recruiter, spoke at the Baptist Church on invitation of the minister, E. E. Shoufler. The deacons, insisting they were making no judgment on the klan, objected because Renn was "too controversial." Nevertheless, Renn, accompanied by hooded klansmen, delivered a lecture which intimated that Hastings needed to be "cleaned up." Following

Renn's address, the church mysteriously burned to the ground. Klansmen suspected arson and offered a \$500 reward for information. The fire marshal found no evidence that the fire had been set. In the wake of the controversy, both the minister and the board of deacons resigned.<sup>21</sup>

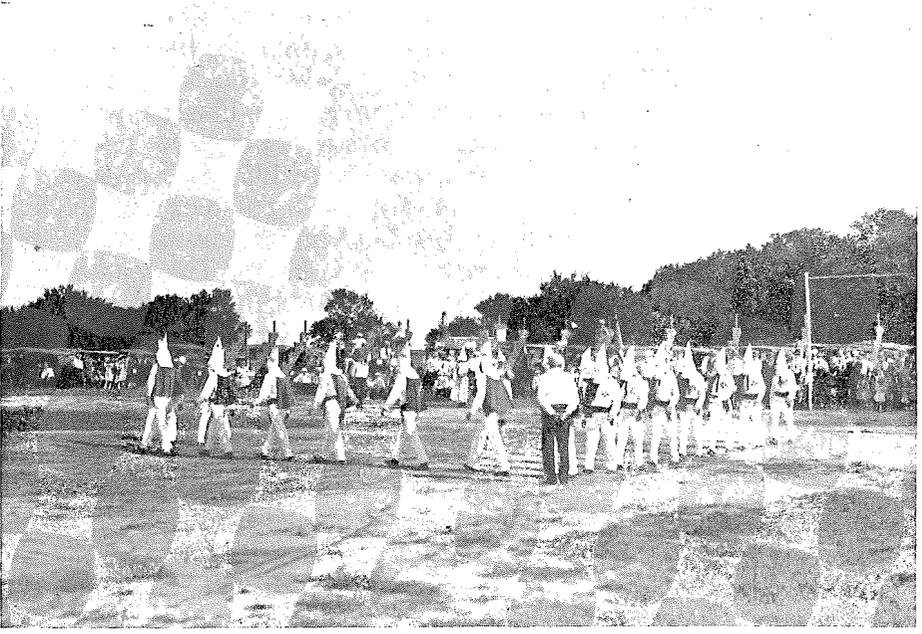
Klansmen insisted they were not anti-Catholic but charged the Catholic Church had plans to undermine the Constitution of the United States. Questions were raised about whether Catholics would give allegiance to the Vatican or to the United States. The klan charged that the Pope would end the separation of church and state and destroy religious freedom.<sup>22</sup> Concerns were also expressed that Jews did not have the same values as Protestants, making it impossible for them to be assimilated into American life.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the controversy which surrounded the klan, some Protestant churches continued to open their doors to klansmen. In Hastings, following the death of Joseph Daugherty in a hunting accident, klansmen participated in the funeral ceremonies in the Methodist Church. In other communities the klan was allowed to participate in church services. The *True Voice*, an Omaha Catholic newspaper, said Protestant churches should be "heartily ashamed" and they "would regret" their klan association.<sup>24</sup> *The Jewish Press* (Omaha) urged a Protestant attack on the klan. The *Press*, denounced by the klan, pointed out that neither Jews nor Catholics could lead the attack because it made them vulnerable to the charge they were anti-Protestant and anti-American. The *Press* said the klan symbolized an ugly growth, "unhealthy in root, disgusting in progress, and sickening in results."<sup>25</sup>

In 1926 some Protestant ministers broke with the klan and denounced the organization. The Reverend J. L. Beebe, pastor of Grace Evangelical Church in Omaha, was suspended from the klan by F. L. Cook for his active role in the 1926 election primaries. Beebe denounced the klan as un-American, un-Christian, and un-democratic and explained he had been duped into believing the klan would bring law enforcement, reform in government, and better education. The Reverend Edgar Merrill Brown of Dietz Memorial Church in Omaha attacked the klan after he became involved in a dispute with Cook. Brown, indicating he had friends who were Catholic,



*The Ku Klux Klan had a local in Neligh during the 1920s.*



Jewish, and black, said he joined the klan believing it a civic-improvement organization.<sup>26</sup>

Many Protestant churches were concerned about declining morals and maintaining Biblical orthodoxy, and in this the klan agreed. Also of concern was the failure of government to enforce prohibition. Elmer E. Thomas, federal agent for Nebraska in 1924, estimated there were 2,000 bootleggers in Omaha alone.<sup>27</sup> The klan, well represented in police departments, promised to aid law enforcement officials in the battle against illegal intoxicants. The klan was, the *Hastings Tribune* observed, an "unseen eye" which promised moral transgressors would be punished if they offended public decency.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of its protestations of civic improvement and morality, it was obvious the klan in the 1920s had elements of racism and bigotry. Accounts of its activities indicated that only white, Protestant, native-born Americans were members. The klan backed Jim Crow in transportation and worked to limit immigration. That the number of blacks and foreign-born in Nebraska was small did not lessen klan appeal. In communities with substantial minorities, whites wanted to maintain the status quo.

It should be pointed out, however, that the values and fears of klansmen in Nebraska would not have distinguished them from most non-klansmen. Prejudice against blacks, Jews, Catholics, and the foreign-born was common to liberals, progressives, and radicals as well as conservatives and reactionaries in the 1920s.<sup>29</sup> By 1920 there were 149,652 foreign-born whites in Nebraska, compared to 1,129,567 native-born whites. Still there was fear that land-hungry immigrants would look to the West as a place for settlement.<sup>30</sup> The *Jewish Press* announced on December 16, 1920, that 473 immigrants, aided by the Jewish Welfare Federation, were enroute to Omaha and more would follow.<sup>31</sup>

Even if no more immigrants arrived, there remained the fear that the foreign-born could not be assimilated. Less than 10 percent of the foreign-born in Nebraska were illiterate, but reformers professed concern that this was a threat.<sup>32</sup> In Lincoln, English classes were established prior to World War I to instruct immigrants. In 1922 over 200 immigrants representing 18 nationalities still attended classes. When money for the program ran out, the community was petitioned for support

with the warning:

Coming from countries where government means oppression, they have no conception of the real America... They settle down in groups and often years pass before they can understand the simplest conversation in English. In the meantime they are easy prey for the agitators who talk to them in their own language and give them many false ideas concerning their country and their American neighbors.<sup>33</sup>

The 1920s brought unemployment and a farm depression. Hard times increased the fear that immigration would flood Nebraska. In 1924 Congress passed a bill, placing limits on immigration; it won approval in Nebraska. The *Nebraska Farmer* (Lincoln) comment on the bill, which gave preference to western Europeans, defended the quota system: "These countries have supplied the stock from which the more substantial class of American citizens have come, and their racial qualities make them more assimilable."<sup>34</sup> The *Jewish Press* lamented the passing of open immigration and blamed the change on the klan:

The immigrant is greeted in the new world by a flaming cross, with a mask on the face, a nightgown on the body, a blackjack in the pocket, a dagger in hand ready to stab the new arrival in the back, and he hears a shout from a thousand lips, "You are a foreigner."<sup>35</sup>

There were fewer blacks than foreign-born nationals in Nebraska in the 1920s. By 1890, 8,913 blacks lived in Nebraska, most of them in Omaha and Lincoln. The collapse of the cotton economy and the lure of World War I jobs sparked an exodus of blacks from the South to the North and West. Between 1910 and 1920 blacks in Nebraska increased by more than 70 percent to a total of 13,242. By 1920 Omaha's population of 191,601 included 10,315 blacks; Lincoln, population 54,948, had 896 blacks. Grand Island had 126; Hastings, 81; and North Platte, 59.<sup>36</sup> The klan flourished in these communities in the 1920s.

As blacks left the South to compete with whites for housing, jobs, social status, and political power, racial tensions in northern states increased. In Omaha by 1917, Mayor James C. Dahlman was worried that the city was on the verge of a race riot. Ultimately he urged citizens to remain calm and asked gun dealers to be selective in the sale of ammunition and weapons.<sup>37</sup> Racial tensions eased as World War I soldiers returned from the service. In 1918, however, unemployment and inflation ravaged the economy, and unrest swept the

country. The "red summer" of 1919 was difficult, and frequently violent, for blacks trying to find homes outside the Old South.

Civic leaders hoped Omaha would be able to avoid the hysteria and mobs which plagued some cities. The *Monitor*, noting that in 1919 there were 28 lynchings in the US, termed the situation serious.<sup>38</sup> Rumors spread that blacks were responsible for increased crime, particularly rape. Black leaders pointed out that of 17 assault cases in the city, 13 of the accused were white. Nevertheless, racial tensions increased.<sup>39</sup>

The troubled atmosphere exploded in violence when 19-year-old Agnes Lobeck and her 19-year-old escort, Millard Hoffman, were assaulted by a black man, allegedly William Brown, a packinghouse worker. Brown was charged with stealing \$17, while holding a gun of Hoffman, and with rapping the woman.<sup>40</sup>

On September 28 a mob numbering about 5,000, led by Hoffman, milled around the courthouse where Brown was imprisoned and demanded that he be delivered for "immediate justice." Mayor E. P. Smith, armed with a revolver, tried to intervene and was seized and hanged from a trolley wire. The rescued mayor required hospitalization. Enraged, the mob set fire to the courthouse and took Brown into the street, riddled his body with bullets, and hanged him. The mob moved through the city, looting, causing damage estimated at \$1 million. Troops from Fort Crook and Fort Omaha restored order.<sup>41</sup>

There is no evidence that the klan participated in the lynching, which came two years before it was organized in Nebraska. Still, Brown's death played a role in determining the development of the klan. The lynching continued to be a topic of conversation and litigation throughout the 1920s. The lynching benefited the klan in two ways. First, it was evidence that Nebraska *had* a race problem. For those who believed blacks were shiftless, sexual degenerates, the klan became an instrument for subjugation. Claude L. Nethaway, a candidate for city council in 1921, insisted the way to protect women and prevent riots was to disenfranchise blacks and continue segregation.<sup>42</sup> For others, even if they welcomed blacks in the state, the breakdown of law and order following the lynching offered proof the law enforcement officials needed the klan's assistance to protect the public safety.

The klan promised to improve the economy and stand as a bulwark against radicals. When the klan organized in communities, it approached businessmen and civic leaders with promises of prestige and power.

Some business leaders denounced the klan as un-American; others openly admitted their association with it.<sup>43</sup> In Lincoln one clothing store advertised "K uppenheimer K orrect K lothes" to attract klan business.<sup>44</sup>

Members of the farm community, at times hostile to banks and business, were often attracted to the klan. Klansmen might be conservative on moral issues, but they supported reform programs promising relief to the farm economy. *Outlook* magazine concluded the klan favored a grain-export corporation, federal aid to co-operatives, federal purchases of surplus wheat, price fixing on farm products, extension of farm credits, development of the St. Lawrence waterway to aid farmers who suffered from low prices, tight credit, and high overhead costs.<sup>45</sup>

The klan was willing to support the expansion of federal power to assist the farm community, but made it clear that radical organizations would not be allowed to foment revolution in the countryside.

In August 1921 the *Lincoln Star* reported that members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were suspected of causing \$50,000 in damage to farm buildings fired near Benkelman.<sup>46</sup> Migrant wheat harvesters were especially feared. Constantly harassed by police, they lived in the open during the summer but moved into cities during the winter. When the Agricultural Workers Organization, the rural arm of the IWW, held its fall convention in Omaha in 1921, police searched the men for weapons, warned them to stay away from the business section, banned demonstrations, and persuaded leaders to order members to leave following the convention.<sup>47</sup> The notion that the IWW might foment revolution persisted. The perception that radicals might take over the government made the klan promise to resist revolutionary change an appealing one.

Klan success in the 1920s in gaining members is evidence that its appeals struck a responsive chord. The emergence of the klan was one of the dramatic and revealing developments of the decade. Still, when the Nebraska klan is compared to

those of Kansas, Oklahoma, Illinois, or Indiana, its membership and influence was less than might have been expected. As soon as the klan entered the state in 1921, opposition surfaced which limited its growth and power. By the end of the decade the klan was in retreat.<sup>48</sup>

An important factor determining the klan's fate was the opposition of influential citizens, including Chancellor Samuel Avery of the University of Nebraska. When the *Lincoln Star* reported in 1921 that the klan, standing "for clean politics and Christian ideals," had had an initiation ceremony on the campus, Avery announced that any student joining the klan would be suspended.<sup>49</sup> The chancellor cited a university senate rule banning secret organizations, and said klan beliefs were inconsistent with university values. "The university," he pointed out, "should be characterized by a broad liberal spirit of fellowship. Learning knows no distinction on race or color." Avery admonished students to shun the klan and warned that the organization might bring mob violence. It was offensive to groups which had already shown "300" per cent Americanism by supporting the war effort, he said.<sup>50</sup>

The klan found a generally hostile press. In 1921, as soon as the klan began to attract attention, the *Omaha World-Herald* carried editorials condemning the klan. In 1926, when the klan reached the peak of its power in Nebraska, the *World-Herald* editorialized against it and following the 1926 elections urged Nebraskans to deal with it "vigorously and boldly";

It is a question of whether we are to have a people's government or an invisible government; or whether our campaigns are to be waged upon the character and qualifications of candidates and the merits of honest and important issues, or to be determined clandestinely, furtively, in the dark, on no other issue than an un-American, un-democratic and anti-social prejudice that strikes at the very vitals of our democratic society and representative government.<sup>51</sup>

J. Hyde Sweet of the *Nebraska City News*, in an editorial widely reprinted, charged that the klan surrounded itself with mystery, hokum, and bunk. It played on American weaknesses, particularly anti-Catholicism, with only one purpose—to make money for imperial wizard Hiram Wesley Evans.<sup>52</sup> Other newspapers avoided the subject of the klan, but none appear to have championed it.

Jewish, Catholic, and black newspapers in the state called

attention to klan excesses. The *Jewish Press* mocked the klan initiation: "The altar of initiation is provided with an American flag, a Bible, bottle for water, fiery cross, and a dagger. What could you add to that except a skull?"

The Klan is "an organization of Protestant Americans" and as such is anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-foreigner and evidently anti-everything else. Organized on the crudest principles of mob rule...The klan has enrolled thousands of members whose mentality would average that of a twelve-year-old child. Brought face to face with threats of punishment for violation of rules of obedience, even a twelve-year-old knows when to stop. Let us hope that the klansmen do too.<sup>53</sup>

In Omaha, Rabbi Frederick Cohn of Temple Israel accused the klan of being un-American.<sup>54</sup> The Catholic *True Voice* charged that the klan was a "cruel hoax" and kept its readers informed about klan developments.<sup>55</sup>

In 1921 Omaha's *Monitor* warned that Nebraskans would need to organize to fight the klan. Klan members were represented as intolerant, un-American suppressors of freedom who labeled themselves "100 percent Americans" to justify their conduct.<sup>56</sup>

The *Monitor*, which viewed the klan revival as part of a broader conspiracy to drive blacks into the South, urged blacks to look to their natural allies, Catholics and Jews, to resist the klan:

[With] the combined efforts of the Jews, the Catholics and the foreign-born, the klan may expect the battle of its life. If actual bloodshed is desired, then the allies are prepared to do battle. If the war is a social and industrial one, then the allies are ready to meet that kind of warfare. The common enemy will drive the common allies together in their own defense.<sup>57</sup>

Black leaders refused to allow the white community to forget what had happened in Omaha with the lynching of William Brown in 1919. The *New Era* (Omaha), reflecting a militance on the part of blacks, insisted, "We...serve notice that we will not stand for any intimidation or imposition from the KKK or any of their sympathizers." Blacks would no longer submit to being intimidated.<sup>58</sup> The newspaper warned that the Omaha race riot in 1919 would be "only a mild prelude to what is in store...unless some action is now taken...to stop the advancing horde."<sup>59</sup>

Fears that the klan, with its history of vigilante justice, would bring violence to the state followed the organization throughout the 1920s. Opponents of the klan, remembering

the events in Omaha in 1919, reminded Nebraskans of the consequences of mob rule. The charge that the klan would promote violence also encouraged Nebraska public officials to speak out against it. In 1921 Nebraska Governor Samuel McKelvie, responding to an inquiry from the *New York World*, said that although he saw no need to suppress the organization, he did not regard the klan with favor and was not "in sympathy with the movement."<sup>60</sup>

In Omaha, Mayor James Dahlman and the city commission placed severe limits on klan activities. Dahlman, robbing the klan of one of its most effective organizing techniques, ruled that no public klan meetings would be tolerated. The mayor promised that the city could not interfere with secret klan meetings but indicated that the police would keep the meetings under surveillance.<sup>61</sup> On the national level Nebraska Congressman C. F. Reavis of the 1st Congressional District spoke against the klan and joined with other congressmen to demand an investigation of its activities in 1921.<sup>62</sup>

As the klan grew, opposition to it was led by Omaha Republican Senator Robert Strehlow, who on January 10, 1923, introduced an anti-klan bill in the Legislature. The bill prevented private citizens from meeting "in disguise to conceal their identities" and provided penalties for interfering with the power of the state to determine "the guilt or innocence of any person" or to inflict punishment for real or imagined violations of the law.<sup>63</sup> Strehlow pointed out that the klan was anti-Catholic, anti-black, and anti-Jewish, but emphasized that the klan's greatest threat was to the maintenance of lawful procedures. He said the klan, if operating secretly, would result in mob violence and vigilante justice and, if unchecked, would usher in mob rule. Strehlow assured his supporters, "We will not wait again until the mob is organized. We will...prevent any direct action organization from growing so strong that it overshadows all law and all government."<sup>64</sup>

Following Strehlow's plea, the bill passed the House 65 to 34. In the Senate, however, the bill, introduced by Senators John Gumb (D-Fremont), and Phillip Tomek (D-David City), ran into stiff opposition. On February 14, 1923, the Senate Judiciary Committee, after a month of inaction, voted to postpone consideration of the bill. Senator Tomek forced a record vote to determine whether the bill should be taken out

of committee. The motion, requiring a two-thirds vote, failed 14 to 15, but the maneuver at least forced senators to record their votes.<sup>65</sup>

The Legislature's failure to pass the anti-klan bill should not be interpreted as a pro-klan vote. During the debate only Senator J. W. Good, Chadron, defended the klan, stating he agreed with its positions, which, he said, were "meritorious and American in spirit." Senators who voted against the bill indicated they did not believe it necessary and suggested the klan should not be dignified with a special law against it.<sup>66</sup> Also, in spite of Strehlow's arguments, there was no evidence that the klan in Nebraska had engaged in violence or that it represented a threat to society.

Political leaders were increasingly reluctant to battle the klan. Since membership figures were secret, it was impossible to measure its political strength. Consequently, most politicians did not want to condemn the klan and were also afraid that its endorsement might be a political liability. Klan opponents tried to force the issue. *The Monitor* warned the Legislature that failure to oppose the klan—"an association of cockroaches"—did not sit well with the black community.<sup>67</sup> Omaha's other black newspaper, the *New Era*, informed Governor Charles Bryan, who had succeeded Samuel McKelvie in 1922, that the majority of Nebraska citizens opposed the klan, which was meeting "in the very shadows of the state capitol," and cautioned the governor not "to fool us."<sup>68</sup> In spite of the pressure, given the uncertainty about klan power, it was easier for Nebraska lawmakers, whether Republican or Democrat, urban or rural, to avoid taking a stand on the klan. The safest, most expedient approach was what the Legislature did—nothing at all.<sup>69</sup>

The failure of the Legislature to act against the klan may have been cowardly and may have prolonged its life. However, the Legislature may also have robbed the klan of martyrdom and free publicity, which would have attracted even more members. The organization failed to win the endorsement of any leading Nebraska politician. It remained a social, rather than a political, force in the state. The klan became a convenient excuse for a good deal of name-calling, especially during elections in 1924 and 1926, but failed to have a significant impact on the political process.

In 1924 Nebraska Governor Charles W. Bryan was chosen vice presidential nominee of the Democratic Party to run with John W. Davis against Republicans Calvin Coolidge and Charles Dawes. The Republican Party managed to avoid the issue of the klan during the campaign, but the Democrats, faced with a resolution to condemn the klan by name, became involved in a bitter, divisive brawl. The resolution was defeated 542 to 541 after a battle which scarred the party. A compromise resolution, which did not mention the klan by name, passed, reaffirming the Democratic Party's devotion to the Constitution and to the guarantees of "civil, political, and religious liberty therein contained."<sup>70</sup>

Neither Charles Bryan, nor his more famous brother, William Jennings Bryan, would condemn or endorse the klan. Their inaction, while understandable politically, led to the charge that they dodged the issue because they were klansmen at heart. The klan seemed grateful. When William Jennings Bryan died following the Scopes evolution trial in 1925, the klan held a memorial service for him in Dayton, Ohio. A cross with the inscription "In Memory of William Jennings Bryan, the greatest klansman of our time," was burned in his honor.<sup>71</sup>

While the state's two leading Democrats tried to avoid the klan issue, a number of Republicans running for state and local offices in Nebraska were also charged with being klansmen. According to the *Omaha World-Herald*, which had close ties with the Democratic Party, the klan met in Hastings prior to the 1924 elections to endorse the Republican ticket. Adam McMullen, the Republican candidate for governor, remained discreetly silent on the klan and won by more than 40,000 votes. Coolidge carried the state by a larger margin, almost 70,000 votes. There is no evidence, however, that the klan had any impact on the outcome of either campaign.<sup>72</sup>

By 1926 the klan had reached the height of its power in Nebraska and had increased, especially in Omaha, its involvement in politics. During the primary campaign, two Omaha Republicans, John Briggs, a candidate for county commissioner, and Charles McDonald, who sought the nomination for sheriff, were accused by their opponents, John Larkin and Joe Koutsky, of being klansmen. Black leaders in Omaha were especially alarmed by the possibility that a klansman might be elected sheriff and organized a rally to give candidates a forum

to express their views. The *Monitor* said: "The Negro race has too much at stake to take a chance. We do not want hundreds of klansmen patrolling Omaha streets as special deputy sheriffs."<sup>73</sup>

McDonald, faced with increasing pressure from the black community, denied that he had ever been a klansman. Both Briggs and McDonald won nomination and went on to victory in November.<sup>74</sup>

# KU KLUX KLAN

TO THE LOVERS OF LAW AND ORDER,  
PEACE, JUSTICE and MORALITY:

**Crooks  
Boot-Leggars  
Law Violators**

This is where we begin and where you quit. The Ku Klux Klan stands for law enforcement by law enforcement officers only and we intend to see that they do their duty.

**Officers of  
The Law**

The Ku Klux Klan backs you to a man when you enforce the law. We and all good citizens condemn you when you don't. The 18th Amendment is a Part of the U. S. Constitution.

**Newspapers**

PROTESTANTS are tired of your favoritism to Catholicism and your insults to PROTESTANTISM.

**Picture Shows**

Don't book any more pictures that deride and discredit PROTESTANTISM.

**Petting Parties**

ARE A MENACE TO NATIONAL MORALITY  
Married men, do your joy riding with your own wives. We watch these parties and can and will furnish license numbers, time, place and names if necessary.

WE BELIEVE IN LAW AND ORDER

The Roman Catholic controlled PRESS can show no indictments or convictions against us with all of their false charges and deceptive publicity.

THINK IT OVER.

MORE WILL FOLLOW

LINCOLN KLAN No. 11

On the state level the klan also tried to influence the outcome of a number of races. Before the elections in November, the klan distributed a sheet evaluating major candidates for office, emphasizing their religion, stand on prohibition, and performance in office. When charges began to circulate that the klan was trying to control the election, grand dragon J. W. Reed insisted that the klan had never—in 1926 or any other year—endorsed candidates. He explained that in contests in which klansmen were running for the same office, it would be impossible for the klan to tell its members how to vote. He said that the klan had distributed information about candidates in order that members could vote “intelligently.”<sup>75</sup>

The Republicans, as expected, swept to victory in 1926. The *Omaha World-Herald* in the wake of the Republican triumph charged that several major candidates for office, including Republican Governor Adam McMullen, who narrowly defeated Charles Bryan, owed their victories to the klan. Editor J. Hyde Sweet of the *Nebraska City News* charged that Superintendent of Public Instruction John M. Matzen and Chief Justice Andrew W. Morrisey were defeated by the klan. Morrisey, it was assumed, was defeated because he was Catholic; Matzen had refused to insist on the inspection of Catholic schools. The *Monitor* also charged that klan wards in Omaha had turned the tide in many of the 1926 elections.<sup>76</sup>

It is impossible to prove that the klan had any impact on the outcome of the elections. Nebraska was an overwhelmingly Republican state. Klan support was hardly necessary to explain Republican ascendancy in the elections. None of the nominees ran as klan candidates, nor is there evidence that the major Republican candidates sought klan endorsement. Certainly klan influence was exaggerated. Other election results in 1926 suggested that klan efforts to influence the election benefited its enemies more than its friends. In 1926, for example, F. L. Barnett and John A. Singleton were the first blacks to be elected to the Legislature in 20 years.<sup>77</sup>

The Nebraska klan, although it would linger in a number of communities well into the 1930s, soon faded from the public scene. Its primary appeals to “fraternalism, racism, nativism, anti-Catholicism, and 100 per cent Americanism” had not entirely lost their attraction by the end of the decade. However, its image as the guardian of law and order, keeper of the

public morals, and patriotic savior of the republic had been destroyed. By the end of the 1920s, charges filled Nebraska newspapers that the klan promoted violence; that its leadership was corrupt and degenerate; and that it was more interested in making money than anything else. The rallies and parades, no longer glamorous and exciting, had become commonplace and boring. The mystery, the majesty, the purity were gone. The hooded knights were no longer objects of envy and admiration but rather subjects of ridicule and public condemnation for "un-Americanism." The klan's fate was sealed. It would soon become a fading memory.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, A Division of Franklin Watts, 1981), p. 30. For other general histories of the Klan in the 1920s see John M. Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924); Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966); and Kenneth Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

2. *Ibid.*; Allen Devere, "Substitutes for Brotherhood," *World Tomorrow*, VII (March 1924), pp. 14-16.

3. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 11, 1921. For an expose of Klan practices by a member of the Klan in Omaha, see Edgar I. Fuller, *The Visible of the Invisible Empire* (Denver: Maelstrom Publishing Company, Inc., 1925). A discussion of the Klan's organizing efforts in the Midwest are in Robert L. Duffus, "The Ku Klux Klan in the Middle West," *World's Work*, XLVI (August 1923), pp. 363-372.

4. *Lincoln Star*, September 13, 1921.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Monitor*, June 9, 1922; *Lincoln Star*, August 21, 1921; *Nebraska State Journal*, September 21, 1922.

7. *Lincoln Star*, July 1, 2, 1924.

8. *Ibid.*, April 28, July 1, 2, 1924.

9. *Ibid.*, August 22, September 9, 11, 1925; July 6, 15, 19, 1926.

10. *Nebraska State Journal*, September 11, 1926.

11. *McCook Republican*, July 26, 1924; *McCook Tribune*, July 26 1924; *Nebraska State Journal*, April 7, 1924; *Grand Island Independent*, April 8, 1924; *Seward Independent-Democrat*, April 8, 1924; *Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 16, 1924.

12. *Ibid.*; *Curtis Enterprise*, June 5, 1925; *Omaha Evening Bee*, August 11, 1925.

13. *Jewish Press*, June 25, 1925; *Stratton News*, August 19, 1926; *Alliance Times and Herald*, August 27, 1926.

14. *Lincoln Star*, July 6, 1925; *York Republican*, July 9, 1925.
15. *Lincoln Star*, August 26, 1925.
16. *Grand Island Independent*, September 3, 1926.
17. *Lincoln Star*, April 25, 26, 1925.
18. Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 96; Duffus, "The Ku Klux Klan in the Middle West," pp. 363-372, and "Ancestry and the End of the Ku Klux Klan," *World's Work*, XLVI (September 1923), p. 535; Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, pp. xi-xv; Robert Alan Goldberg, *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. 164-175.
19. The author was unable to find membership lists for the klan in Nebraska during the 1920s. Interviews with a number of former klansmen, and the names of klansmen taken from newspapers, suggest that the klan attracted a following from a cross section of the Nebraska population. For a discussion of the positions of various Protestant churches on the klan see Robert Moats Miller, "A Note on the Relationship Between the Protestant Churches and the Revised Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of Southern History*, XXII (1956), pp. 355-368.
20. *McCook Tribune*, December 24, 1924; *Grand Island Independent*, January 14, 1924; *Nebraska State Journal*, January 15, May 6, 1924.
21. The *Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 10, 1924; *Nebraska State Journal*, May 13, 1924; *Lincoln Star*, April 15, 1924; Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Tales From the Prairie*, IV (Adams County Historical Society, 1979).
22. For a discussion of intolerance in the 1920s see Paul Murphy, "Normalcy, Intolerance, and the American Charter," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XL (1964), pp. 445-459. For a discussion of anti-Catholic thought see Goldberg, *Hooded Empire*, p. 8; George Estes, *The Roman Catholic Kingdom and the Ku Klux Klan* (Toutdale, Oregon, George Estes, 1923).
23. For a discussion of the Jewish community in Nebraska see Carol Gendler, "The Jews of Omaha; The First Sixty Years" (Masters thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1968); Ezra Cook, *Ku Klux Klan Secrets Exposed Attitudes Towards Jews, Catholics, Foreigners, and Masons* (Chicago: Ezra A. Cook, 1922); George S. Clason (ed.) *Catholic, Jews, Ku Klux Klan; What They Believe, Where They Conflict* (Chicago: Nutshell Publishing Company, 1924); R. E. Dale, "Back to Normal," *Nebraska History*, XXXVIII (September 1957), pp. 179-206.
24. *True Voice*, July 3, 1925.
25. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1924; *Jewish Press*, August 14, 1924.
26. *Monitor*, October 1, 8, 22, 1926; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 11, 1926.
27. Elmer Thomas to Adam McMullen, December 17, 1924, Adam McMullen Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska; Violet Watson to Charles W. Bryan, January 8, 1923, Julia Deaver, WCTU, to Charles W. Bryan, January 9, 1923, Charles W. Bryan Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 12, 1924.
28. *Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1924; *Lincoln Star*, July 5, 1924; *Taylor Clarion*, April 29, 1924.
29. *Lincoln Star*, July 28, 1925; *New Era*, April 20, 1923. For an example

of the klan's promotional literature, "Invitation to Orin Peterson, May 18, 1925," A/MSS, Ku Klux Klan, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

30. There were also 189 Chinese, 805 Japanese, 16 Filipinos, 13 Koreans, 1 Hindu, and 2,888 Indians living in Nebraska in 1920, *Lincoln Star*, September 8, 18, 1921.

31. *Jewish Press*, December 16, 1920.

32. Bryan Papers, "Illiteracy Statistics for the States," April 24, 1924.

33. *Lincoln Sunday Star*, February 19, 1922; Raymond T. Crist, Department of Labor, to Charles Bryan, January 31, 1924, Bryan Papers.

34. *Nebraska Farmer*, June 14, 1924.

35. *Jewish Press*, August 14, 1924.

36. Eldora F. Hess, "The Negro In Nebraska" (MA thesis, University of Nebraska at Lincoln, 1932), pp. 1-14.

37. *Monitor*, July 21, 1917.

38. *Ibid.*, July 24, September 4, 1919.

39. *Ibid.*, October 9, 1919.

40. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 29, 1919, October 6, 1919; *Monitor*, October 23, 1919; for varying evaluations of the incident see Dale, "Back to Normal," p. 284; Hess, "The Negro in Nebraska," p. 62; and Louise E. Rickard, "The Politics of Reform in Omaha, 1918-1921," *Nebraska History*, LIII (Winter 1972), pp. 419-446.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Claude L. Nethaway to Charles Bryan, March 5, 1923, Bryan Papers.

43. *Lincoln Star*, July 20, 1921; *Weekly State Journal* (Lincoln), October 5, 1921; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 26, 1921; see also Charles Alexander, "Kleagles and Cash: The Ku Klux Klan as a Business Organization, 1915, 1930," *Business History Review*, XXXIX (1965), pp. 348-367.

44. *Nebraska State Journal*, September 21, 1922.

45. "Pink Ballots for the Ku Klux Klan," *Outlook*, CXXXVII (June 25, 1924), pp. 306-309. For a discussion of the farm economy in Nebraska see Frederick Luebke, "Political Response to Agricultural Depression in Nebraska, 1922," *Nebraska History*, XLII (March 1966), pp. 15-56; and Carol A. Valdrighi, "Agricultural Credit in Nebraska During the Depression, 1920-1923" (MA thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1969).

46. *Lincoln Star*, August 19, 1921; *Lincoln State Journal*, September 7, 1921.

47. *Lincoln Star*, October 23, 1921. For a discussion of the IWW'S troubled history in Nebraska see David Wagaman, "The Industrial Workers of the World in Nebraska, 1914-1920," *Nebraska History*, XLVI (Fall 1975), pp. 295-338.

48. For a discussion of Klan membership in other states see Jackson, *The KKK in the City*, p. 237; "The Klan's Political Role," *Literary Digest* LXXIX (November 24, 1923, pp. 13-14; Sheldon Neuringer, "The War on the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XLV (1967-1968), pp. 153-179; Gerald L. Marriner, "Klan Politics in Colorado," *Journal of the West*, XV (January 1976), pp. 76-101; Charles W. Sloan Jr., "Kansas Battles the Invisible Empire: The Legal Ouster of the KKK from Kansas, 1922-1927," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XL (Autumn 1974), pp. 393-409.

49. *Lincoln Star*, September 18, 19, 1921; *Jewish Press*, September 22, 1921.
50. *Lincoln Star*, September 21, 1921; *Jewish Press*, December 22, 1921.
51. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 9, 1926.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Jewish Press*, September 22, 1921.
54. *Monitor*, February 24, 1921.
55. *True Voice*, October 14, 1921.
56. *Monitor*, February 17, 24, 1921.
57. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1921.
58. *New Era*, April 6, 1923.
59. *Ibid.*, September 7, 1923.
60. *Lincoln Star*, September 24, 1921.
61. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1921.
62. *Lincoln Star*, September 19, 1921. For results of the investigation see US Congress, House Committee on Rules, *Hearing on the Ku Klux Klan, 1921* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1921).
63. *Senate Journal of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, 42nd Sess. Convened January 2, 1923; Adjourned May 2, 1923*. Compiled under the Authority of the Senate by C. H. Barnard, Secretary (Lincoln: Line Publishing Company, 1923), pp. 363, 820.
64. *Monitor*, January 26, 1923; *True Voice*, March 23, 1923.
65. *Nebraska State Journal*, January 27, 1923; *Lincoln Star*, February 14, 1923.
66. *Senate Journal*, p. 820; *Omaha World-Herald*, March 1, 1923.
67. *Monitor*, March 2, 1923.
68. *New Era*, March 9, 1923.
69. Of the 33 members of the Senate in 1923, 23 were Republicans, 10 were Democrats. On the vote to consider the anti-klan bill, 12 Republicans voted for, 9 against; 5 Democrats were for consideration, 5 were opposed. Urban senators from Lincoln and Omaha, all of whom were Republicans, were also divided, by a vote of 3 to 2. *Senate Journal*, p. 820; *Nebraska Blue Book for 1922: A Publication of the Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau* (Lincoln: Jacobson and Company, 1922).
70. Robert K. Murray, *The 103rd Ballot: Democrats and the Disaster in Madison Square Garden* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1976), pp. 19-20; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, pp. 202-212.
71. *Lincoln Star*, August 1, 1925; J. C. Cales to Charles Bryan, April 30, 1924, Bryan Papers; F. C. Radke to J. C. Cales, May 8, 1924, *ibid.*; *New Era*, August 22, 1924; *Jewish Press*, September 4, 1924.
74. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 4, 20, 1924; *New Era*, October 17, 1924.