

Back in the Country...

Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold

In the Time of the Ku Klux Klan

1920 Sewickley Township was sparsely populated with 164 persons in thirty-eight families whose scattered farms dotted the hills that rise behind the Sewickley Valley riverfront. A few men earned a living in the local oil and gas industry while others labored in nearby mills. The predominant livelihood, however, was farming. Despite living on semi-isolated farmsteads, township residents were not insulated from the events and social forces that shaped 1920s America.



The decade known as the Roaring Twenties followed the First World War and subsequent flu pandemic that caused millions of deaths worldwide. It was a fast-paced time of economic growth with political and social changes, which would end with the 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression.

For the first time in history, the majority of Americans were not tied to farming. Women won the right to vote and began experiencing freedom from their traditional roles. Hemlines rose, hair was bobbed and many women began working outside the home. Automobiles came into wider use, allowing Americans greater freedom of movement. It was the age of jazz, speakeasies, flagpole sitting, talking movies and dance marathons. Charles Lindbergh soloed across the Atlantic and Babe Ruth was making baseball history.

Americans were also being influenced by darker forces. The manufacture and sale of liquor was prohibited, leading to illegal sales and the subsequent rise of organized crime. A fear of communism and socialism that emerged in Europe following the war gave rise to America's increasing prejudice toward immigrants, a prejudice which was also fueled by conflicts between native born and immigrant labor. The northern migration of Blacks from southern states added to social unease.

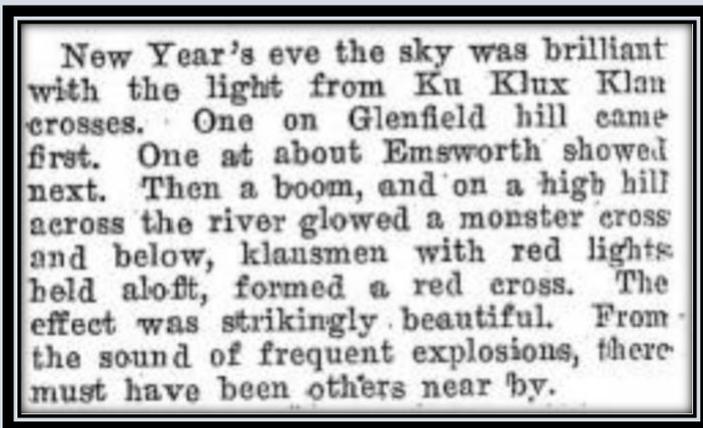
At the time, the majority of Americans were White Christian Protestants and the nation's dominant cultural force. There were those who felt threatened by the changes spreading across society and were eager for a return to what they considered traditional American values.

Originally organized for the purpose of terrorizing recently freed slaves in the years following the Civil War, a revitalized Klan emerged in the South in 1915. By 1921, envoys had established klans in Pennsylvania as well as in other Midwestern and Northeastern states. Growth was rapid and peaked in mid-decade with an estimated quarter of a million dues paying members and an unknown number of sympathizers in Pennsylvania alone. Allegheny County led the state with thirty-three klans while adjacent Beaver County listed nine. A Sewickley Valley Klan with sixty-five members residing in the area between Bellevue and Ambridge was organized in 1921, but was reportedly discontinued the following year due to internal strife.

While the Klan was undoubtedly racist and anti-Semitic, in Pennsylvania the movement was largely anti-Catholic. Did Catholics not owe allegiance to a foreign Pope? Did they not send their children to schools separate from public schools? A Franklin Park resident once described how a neighbor would place anti-Catholic literature in her family's mailbox despite repeatedly borrowing the family's wagon!

Protestant clergy were actively recruited by the Klan and it was not unusual for klansmen dressed in their white robes and hoods to appear at Sunday services to both intimidate and recruit. While some churches closed their doors to such visits, others did not. One country church in the Sewickley area received enough in donations from two such visits to be able to afford having the church painted.

Klan funerals with their rituals and processions were also reported in newspapers. A 1925 obituary appearing in the **Sewickley Herald** reported how klansmen “took charge and guarded the body as it lay in his home” and how “a line of nearly fifty automobiles proceeded to the cemetery where the body was interred according to the solemn and impressive rites of the Klan.”



New Year's eve the sky was brilliant with the light from Ku Klux Klan crosses. One on Glenfield hill came first. One at about Emsworth showed next. Then a boom, and on a high hill across the river glowed a monster cross and below, klansmen with red lights held aloft, formed a red cross. The effect was strikingly beautiful. From the sound of frequent explosions, there must have been others near by.

(Sewickley Herald January 1925)

The Klan was known for attracting attention in ways that were meant to both terrify and excite. Parades of white robed and hooded marchers, burning crosses, secret rituals and at times armed violence were used to provoke fear, outrage and confrontations that also had the desired effect of attracting new members.

One confrontation that was later used as a Klan recruiting tool was the Carnegie Riot of 1923. It was the result of as many as thirty thousand Tri-State area Klansmen rallying in Scott Township, Allegheny County, on August 25, 1923. They gathered to initiate 1,000 new members and parade in the predominantly Catholic Borough of Carnegie, population 12,000.

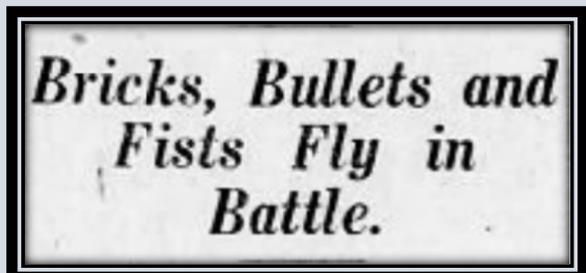
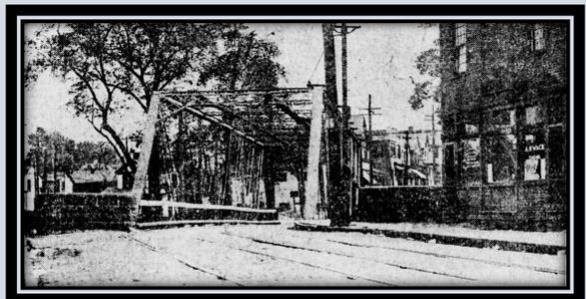
Late that night, after rituals were completed and crosses lit on surrounding hillsides, klansmen marched toward Carnegie. They were warned not to enter the borough, but forced their way over the Glendale Bridge (right) where residents attacked the procession with rocks, bricks and clubs.

Klansmen spilled onto Carnegie streets where violent fighting continued into the early morning hours, resulting in over a hundred persons being seriously injured and one newly initiated klansman killed.

(Pittsburgh Press and Daily Post headlines and photo.)



**ATTEMPT TO ENTER
TOWN TO PARADE
STARTS WARFARE**



**Bricks, Bullets and
Fists Fly in
Battle.**

CORAOPOLIS IS TAKEN OVER BY THOUSANDS OF HOODED MEMBERS OF 'INVISIBLE EMPIRE'

(February 24, 1924 **Pittsburgh Press** headline)

Parades became a sure way of attracting attention. Following the initiation of new members in February 1924, a parade was held in Coraopolis and Sewickley under the watchful presence of State, County and local police. While officials in both communities gave permission for the march, Sewickley required that hoods be removed within the borough.

The main gathering point of the Klan was Coraopolis. At a little before ten o'clock, a large cross on the hills back of the town was burned and accompanied by a rather good display of fireworks. As though that was a signal for the waiting members, the parade left Coraopolis immediately. It was over half an hour before some six hundred marchers, clad in flowing white gowns and pointed hoods appeared upon Chestnut Street from the bridge.

A halt was made before the Sewickley borough building, where the paraders attested their thorough Americanism by a united salute to the national flag there displayed. Then the march was resumed and turned into Beaver Street with no further demonstration.

Floats depicting colonial times, the Liberty Bell and the KKK were distributed through the marchers. The parade was divided into three divisions; Coraopolis, Sewickley and Woodlawn. About fifty automobiles followed, conspicuous among them being that of the State Police. Some of the Klansmen carried rifles and others flags. A number of women were noted marching side by side with the men. Only a bare half-dozen of Sewickley's citizens were recognized in the parade.

[Observers seemed] anxious to see the unusual exhibition, but by no means were carried away by it or aroused to unaccustomed enthusiasm.

(March 1, 1924 **Sewickley Herald** excerpt)



(September 8, 1925 **Harrisburg Telegraph** photo of a Klan parade.)

KLANSMEN PARADE

Hooded Procession Traverses Borough Saturday Evening

A strange and very impressive procession marched through Sewickley and Edgeworth on Saturday evening last, when the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan paraded in force, in full white-hooded regalia, but without masks. Probably 400 men were in the line.

The parade was in connection with a day's outing of the Knights and Ladies of the Klan, held during the afternoon and evening at Falck's Field, Leetsdale. By evening over 2,000 are said to have participated in the outing. A program of athletic events and amusing contests was run off during the afternoon. There was a baseball game between teams from Beaver and from Sewickley, Beaver winning 6-5.

A first-class bagpipes' band was in the lead, followed by contingents bearing banners of Bellevue, Coraopolis, Sewickley and Ambridge; Klansmen from various other sections were also in line, it was said, although without carrying distinctive insignia. The officers wore the neat white caped uniform and cap, with the rest of the marchers in the familiar hood and white robe.

Coming from Leetsdale, the parade marched through Edgeworth and along the Beaver Road as far as Nevin Avenue, Sewickley, thence returning by Centennial Avenue to Academy and thence through Edgeworth by the Beaver Road to the E. W. Falck property at the Leetsdale borough line, where an open meeting was held, several talks made, etc.

(August 29, 1925 Sewickley Herald)

The Ku Klux Klan is built upon religious and racial hatreds, drawing added membership from people who delight in flummery and fantastic costumes and who think it fine fun to terrorize communities in disguise, so there is the least possible chance of being caught.

(Sewickley Herald Editorial July 29, 1922)

A number of applications for Klan membership have been preserved in the Pennsylvania State Archives. While they show that it was younger working class men who were most often willing to pay the ten-dollar application fee, members were drawn from all age groups and professions. It was generally accepted that a large number of Protestant ministers were involved and at one point, accusations of Klan activities were made against a Sewickley area police chief. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black admitted to having once been member. Women were able to join a companion organization that often marched with the men.

As quickly as membership peaked in the mid-1920s, it fell. It is estimated that by the end of the decade, Klan membership in Pennsylvania was no more than 4,000 and would continue to dwindle to where it virtually ceased to exist. The Klan was never politically successful. Infighting, financial issues and bad press all contributed to the organization's demise.



(August 27, 1923 Daily Post photo of young boys examining a Klan cross featuring electric lights.)