

Transcription of
Green Mountain Chronicles radio show
“The K.K.K. in Vermont, through 1927”

[http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/
the-k-k-k-in-vermont-1924](http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/the-k-k-k-in-vermont-1924)

NARRATOR

Green Mountain Chronicles number six: The K.K.K. in Vermont

[Pete Seeger singing, banjo]

[Battle of Maxton Field, by Malvina Reynolds copyright 1958]

[<http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/MALVINA/mr011.htm>]

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IXvwIIorBM>]

Oh the Klan, oh the Klan

It called on every red blood fighting man

If you are free and white and bigot

And get your courage from a spigot

[fade to voiceover]

MAUDEAN NEILL

You just had to swear to, I think it was ten things. One was that you were non-Catholic, that you were an American, and you had to pay ten dollars. Seems that was the main focus, was getting the ten dollars.

NARR

Nineteen twenty-four, and the Ku Klux Klan—experiencing a nation-wide revival—begins a membership drive in Vermont. It soon gains a foothold in several Vermont communities, as Maudean Neill of Montpelier discovered after finding an old photograph of a 1927 Montpelier Klan gathering.

MN

They would bring people into their meetings, and, for ten dollars they could become a member, and they would have gatherings, speeches, good times they said, parades. The Klan itself had a purpose of promoting white, non-Catholic people. They were against the Negroes in the south, they were against Catholics and foreigners here in New England. They burned a lot of crosses. The people who were in it said that it was fun to have a burning cross, and everybody gather under it and sing. Sometimes they were burned to scare people, just for sensationalism, I suppose. There was an account here in Montpelier of seven crosses being burned at the same time. One was at the Catholic church, and that one apparently damaged some of the church. So, there was a lot of anti-Klan ideas the next day about that.

NARR

Resistance to the Klan's presence in Vermont took a number of forms. In Montpelier, an anti-Klan group, the Knights of the Flaming Circle, was organized. The town of Rutland outlawed

parades or meetings in the streets by hooded or masked individuals or organizations. A Burlington ordinance prohibited the wearing of masks in public. At least one Vermont town was divided by the Klan, as former governor Dean Davis recalls.

DD

It happened right over in West Topsham, Vermont. There were four brothers, two of 'em were Ku Klux Klanners and two of 'em were not, and you were either loyal to Joe and Jim, or you were loyal to Harry and Fred [chuckling]—that's not their correct names—and it just tore that little town apart. It tore the church apart, it tore the town government apart, and the social life whatever there was of it, it tore that apart too.

NARR

The press also generally opposed the Klan.

MN

They would write articles about how we didn't need the Klan. And they usually would ridicule the Klan. They said that we didn't need people in Vermont who were against any segment of the population, uh, we didn't need, uh, as they said bedsheet people, secret societies.

NARR

Still, national Klan officials claim ten thousand members in Vermont in the early 1920s. Others put the number closer to two thousand for the entire period of 1915 to 44. In any case, the Vermont Klan peaked in the 20s, and by 1927 membership was in decline.

MN

The main thing that hurt them was the money. The leaders were collecting a lot of money. Apparently the leaders were using it for their own use. It was supposed to be to run the group, or to go to headquarters, to keep up a headquarters.

NARR

The Klan was also hurt by the conviction of several members for a break-in at St. Michael's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Burlington.

MN

Some Klansmen went into the cathedral at night and stole some things, one man was telling another man that there was ammunition stored there, there was guns, and that kind of thing. And they were drinking at the time. But most of it was, when people here could see that it was telling them to be prejudiced against people that they had always befriended.

NARR

In Vermont, the last significant activity by the Ku Klux Klan was the rainy July 4th 1927 rally frozen in time in the photograph found by Maudean Neill.