Introduction

An elderly white Protestant woman from rural northern Indiana described her time in the Ku Klux Klan movement of the 1920s with remarkable nonchalance, as "just a celebration . . . a way of growing up." The Klan fit easily into her daily life, as it did for many white Protestants in Indiana. At most, it was an exceptional chapter in an otherwise ordinary life. Even in hindsight, she showed little remorse over the devastation left in the wake of the Klan's crusade against Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and blacks. What she remembered—with pride, not regret—was the social and cultural life of the Klan; the Klan as "a way to get together and enjoy."[1]

For thousands of native-born white Protestant women like this informant, the women's Klan of the 1920s was not only a way to promote racist, intolerant, and xenophobic policies but also a social setting in which to enjoy their own racial and religious privileges. These women recall their membership in one of U.S. history's most vicious campaigns of prejudice and hatred primarily as a time of friendship and solidarity among like-minded women.

But the Klan's appeal to this Indiana woman was not based purely on racism and nativism. In an effort to recruit members among women newly enfranchised in the 1920s, the Klan also insisted that it was the best guarantor of white Protestant women's rights. The political efforts of a women's order, the Klan claimed, could safeguard women's suffrage and expand women's other legal rights while working to preserve white Protestant supremacy.

Decades later, former Klanswomen barely remember the victims of the Klan's malicious racist, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic campaign. Many insist that there were no victims, that to suggest otherwise is to fall prey to lies spread by enemies of the Klan. Most deny that hatred of racial and religious "outsiders" fueled the Klan in the 1920s. The woman in northern Indiana, though, still spoke in the dichotomies favored by the Klan, with rigid divisions between "us" (good white Protestant Klan sympathizers) and "them" (evil foreigners, minorities, and other Klan opponents). "All the better people," she assured me, were in the Klan. Bristling at comparisons between the Klan of the 1980s and "her" Klan, she insisted that hers was "different." Women were forced to join to defend themselves, their families, and their communities against corruption and immorality:

> Store owners, teachers, farmers . . . the good people all belonged to the Klan. . . . They were going to clean up the government, and they were going to improve the school books [that] were loaded with Catholicism. The pope was dictating what was being taught to the children, and therefore they were being impressed with the wrong things.

Many white Protestant women in the 1920s—perhaps half a million or more—joined the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK). Women constituted nearly half of the Klan membership in some states and were a significant minority of Klan members in many others. And women were major actors in the Klan, responsible for some of its most vicious, destructive results.

Nevertheless, women's involvement in one of the largest and most politically powerful racist right-wing political movements in U.S. history has been virtually overlooked in the voluminous writings on the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).[2] Most historians of the Klan dismiss the activities of Klanswomen as incidental to the movement or as mere cultural screens behind which men carried out the real politics of the KKK.[3] Both popular and scholarly accounts portray the terror of the Klan through images of bigoted, hate-filled white men, not women.

Yet the story of the immense and politically powerful Klan of the 1920s is incomplete without serious attention to the role of Klanswomen. Not only were women a significant portion of the Klan's membership, but their activities and ideologies differed sufficiently from those of Klansmen that an examination of the women's Klan changes our interpretation of the Klan as a whole. For example, when we look only at highly visible actions of Klansmen like electoral corruption, night riding, and gang terrorism, we might conclude that in many places the Klan's attack on Catholics, Jews, blacks, and other minorities was relatively ineffectual. When we include the less public actions of Klanswomen—the "poison squads" that spread rumor and slander or organized consumer boycotts—the picture changes. Klanswomen acted in different ways that complemented those of Klansmen, making the Klan's influence both more extensive and more deadly than the actions of Klansmen alone would suggest.[4]

An examination of the role of Klanswomen also reveals the Klan's pervasiveness and subtle influence in the 1920s. Women of the Klan drew on familial and community ties—traditions of church suppers, kin reunions, and social celebrations—to circulate the Klan's message of racial, religious, and national bigotry. They spread hatred through neighborhoods, family networks, and illusive webs of private relationships. The Klan's power was devastating precisely because it was so well integrated into the normal everyday life of white Protestants.

The story of 1920s Klanswomen exemplifies the complex ways in which attitudes on race, religion, and gender interact. Klanswomen asserted a political agenda that mixed support for white Protestant women's rights with racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic politics. In this, they do not fit the traditional categories that characterize political movements, such as right wing and left wing.[5] Like their male counterparts, Klanswomen held reactionary political views on race, nationality, and religion. But their views of gender roles were neither uniformly reactionary nor progressive.

Extremist right-wing and reactionary women are nearly absent from studies on women in political movements, which have focused on progressive and women's rights movements or, to a lesser degree, on antifeminist movements. We have no clear evidence whether this paucity of research comes from the unimportance or numerical insignificance of women in extreme right-wing organizations or whether women are assumed to be pacifist, social-welfare-oriented, and apolitical. It is likely, however, that the omission of women from studies of extremist right-wing movements limits, and perhaps minimizes, scholars' assessment of the consequences of reactionary politics. Traditional (and male-centered) definitions of politics that focus on workplaces, electoral contests, courts, and organized voluntary associations ignore the political effects of actions and organizing in neighborhoods or through kin and informal networks.

Without attention to the often-complicated ideologies and agendas of extremist political women, researchers might conclude that right-wing movements have uniformly reactionary ideologies. This assumption obscures important ways that such movements appeal to majority populations and conceals the reactionary elements within the political discourse of racial and religious majorities. To understand why people embrace political movements based on hatred and fear, we must examine the multiple, even contradictory, levels on which reactionary movements seek to attract ordinary people into extremist politics.[6]

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The Klan movement of the 1920s carefully guarded its membership lists (even when individual members felt free to flaunt their identities in public) and shrouded in secrecy the author, audience, and intent of most Klan documents. This policy created a number of methodological challenges.

A first challenge involved the two levels of reality in the extralegal Klan movement: the Klan's publicly disseminated image and its internal, secret reality. The public face of the Klan was often what attracted members. Many left the organization after a short time, dismayed at the disparity between the image and the reality of Klan life. Although former Klansmembers' testimonies to ignorance of the Klan's political agenda when they enlisted were often self-serving, the large number of such reports suggests that many members did see the Klan differently from without and within. This book examines both realities of the women's Klan: the moralistic public image for women's equality that brought many women into the secret order and its internal declarations of racial, nationalistic, and religious hatred and violence that were the private face of the WKKK.

A second challenge was to identify Klanswomen. Without access to membership lists, I could not use standard techniques to analyze Klan membership and recruitment. Only scattered rosters of the immense Indiana Klan, on which I focus, exist in public archives or in private collections, and none list more than a few women members. I identified Klanswomen in three ways. First, I used historical documents to trace Klanswomen who publicly revealed their membership, who were identified as WKKK members by anti-Klan organizations, or who were listed on Klan documents. Second, I used newspaper obituaries to identify women who were given WKKK funeral rituals by sister Klanswomen. Third, I interviewed living former Klanswomen, together with WKKK contemporaries and victims.

To locate interview informants, I mailed a notice about my research to every local newspaper, advertising supplement, Catholic church bulletin, historical society, and public library in the forty-two counties of Indiana in which the WKKK was most active. Twenty-eight people responded. Of these, six sent written recollections, three agreed to an interview, if unrecorded, and fifteen agreed to a recorded interview. In addition, I received many letters from local librarians, local and county amateur historians, newspaper editors, and descendants of Klansmembers who contributed material from private and small public collections.

Interviewing was difficult. Problems of memory distortion, selective recall, and self-censoring that plague all interview situations were compounded by the age of the informants and the topic of the interview. Almost all the informants were elderly—most of them over eighty years old—and some had difficulty recalling the exact sequence of events. Some informants felt uneasy about discussing a political past that subsequent generations had condemned for its violence and hatred.

Several aspects of the interviewing process, though, were surprisingly easy and productive. Many informants had little remorse about their time in the Klan. Some were proud of their Klan membership and anxious to clarify what they saw as historical misunderstandings of the order. For all, participation in the 1920s Klan was one of the most significant aspects of their lives. Many informants had remarkable recall for details of events over sixty years before, memories that I confirmed with newspaper and documentary sources.

In my notice soliciting informants, and in the interview itself, I gave no indication of my own judgment of the Klan. Few informants were satisfied with this; nearly all tried to elicit my evaluations of the Klan. Many interviews included polite sparring, with informants making laudatory comments about the Klan and seeking a positive response in return. Once informants decided that I was unlikely to denounce their Klan membership during the interview, though, they were forthcoming with opinions, prejudices, and memories. The ease with which we established such rapport is itself revealing. My own background in Indiana (where I lived from primary school through college) and white skin led informants to assume—lacking spoken evidence to the contrary—that I shared their worldview.

Other aspects of the interviewing process were difficult. When I pressed informants to talk about *why* they felt or acted a certain way, puzzlement or bemused forebearing often greeted me, as if they were carefully and patiently explaining the obvious to a child. Life in the Klan, to most of my informants, simply needed no explanation. What needed to be explained was the reputation that the 1920s Klan later acquired, the peculiarly negative way in which it was recorded in history.

I was prepared to hate and fear my informants. My own commitment to progressive politics prepared me to find these people strange, even repellent. I expected no rapport, no shared assumptions, no commonality of thought or experience. What I found was more disturbing. Many of the people I interviewed were interesting, intelligent, and well informed. Despite my prediction that we would experience each other as completely foreign, in fact I shared the assumptions and opinions of my informants on a number of topics (excluding, of course, race, religion, and most political topics).

Some of the women I interviewed who participated fully and enthusiastically in the Klan, expressing few regrets, were active in progressive politics, favoring peace and women's equality in the decades after the Klan collapsed. They saw their fight in the Klan as a campaign against the reactionary forces of Catholicism, Judaism, and rural Southern black culture—one they viewed as fully in accord with struggles to extend Social Security benefits or promote equal pay for men and women. These former Klansmembers were not the "other," with strange, incomprehensible ways of understanding the world, as I had earlier assumed. On some level, many were sympathetic persons. Even more disturbing, some Klanswomen had a facile ability to fold bitter racial and religious bigotry into progressive politics. One former Klanswoman, for example, insisted that she saw no inconsistency between participation in the 1920s Klan and her support of economic redistribution and feminism.

To conclude that Klanswomen were not the uniformly hate-filled stock characters in popular images of the Klan movement is not to diminish the destructive power of the women's Klan. The 1920s Klan shattered countless lives. It further eroded public tolerance of racial, ethnic, and religious difference and heightened discrimination against blacks, immigrants, and Jews. The outburst of majority hatred against minority populations left scars on individuals, communities, and American public life that remain to the present time.

But the popular stereotype of Klan members—as ignorant, simplistic, brutal, and naive—is historically and politically misleading. The true story of the 1920s Klan movement, and the political lesson of Klan history for those working toward a more just and egalitarian society, is the ease with which racism and intolerance appealed to ordinary people in ordinary places. The Klan perhaps exaggerated, but certainly did not create, ambitions of white Protestants for social and political supremacy. These citizens, comfortable in daily lives in which racial, ethnic, and religious privilege were so omnipresent as to be invisible to their possessors, found in the Klan a collective means to perpetuate their advantages.

White Protestant women and men with considered opinions, who loved their families and could be generous to neighbors and friends, were the backbone of the 1920s Klan. Generations of privilege blinded them to the lives of those who did not share that privilege. Those "others"—blacks, Catholics, Jews, immigrants, Mormons, labor radicals, bootleggers, moonshiners, theater owners, dance hall operators, radical feminists, and conservative oppressors of women—were targets precisely because their lives were so distant from the privileged majority. As incomprehensible others, they could be victimized by ordinary upright and God-fearing women and men. The mainstay of the 1920s Klan was not the pathological individual; rather, Klan promoters effectively tapped a pathological vein of racism, intolerance, and bigotry deep within white Protestant communities. In this sense, the history of the 1920s Klan, although distant in time, is frighteningly close in spirit to the pervasive strands of racism and unacknowledged privilege that exist among dominant groups in the United States today.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first part of this book examines the political symbols of gender in the 1920s Klan movement. Chapter one analyzes the use of "masculinity" and "womanhood" as motivating symbols in the first Klan and in the men's KKK of the 1920s; their significance changed when financial opportunism and power battles among KKK leaders prompted the creation of a women's Klan. Chapter two discusses conflicts that resulted as women entered the male bastion of the Klan. Although Klansmen and Klanswomen shared a political agenda on many issues, they differed on questions of women's place within society, the family, and the Klan. Chapter three analyzes the Klan's use of symbols of morality and sexuality, focusing on the large women's and men's Klans in Indiana.

The second part of the book examines the activities of the women's Klan of Indiana and the backgrounds of women who joined the WKKK. Chapters four and five present the political backgrounds of leaders and rank-and-file Indiana Klanswomen and explore the development and activities of women's Klans within the state. Chapter six examines the use of family and social ties by the women's Klan to create a political culture of "klannishness." The brief epilogue gives the history of the Ku Klux Klan after the collapse of the second Klan movement.