



When the KKK Ruled Kolorado

In 1924, the Ku Klux Klan infiltrated both major parties in Colorado, and succeeded in electing loyal Klan members as governor, and U.S. senator. Klansmen even controlled the State Assembly. We may think of the KKK as a Southern phenomenon, but Colorado and Indiana were home to the Klan's greatest political success.

How could it happen? Then as now, the Klan lured members by denigrating Americans who weren't Protestant, white and native born. With few local blacks and Jews to target, Colorado's Klan went after Catholics. Persecution of Catholics began in Colorado in the 1890s with the formation of militant anti-Catholic associations such as the Knights of Luther. These factions boycotted Catholic-owned businesses, and black-listed Catholic political candidates. They made it hard for Catholic job seekers, especially teachers, to find employment. Rumors were circulated of a Vatican conspiracy to take over the world! Some Colorado believers in this trumped up conspiracy routinely tore the fabled Papal mark off the corner of dollar bills.

When first elected Denver's mayor, Ben Stapleton, namesake of Stapleton Airport, downplayed his membership in the KKK. But in a recall election, Democrat Stapleton was somewhat more open about his affiliation, even addressing a large hooded gathering at an Invisible Empire compound on South Table Mountain. Stapleton eventually appointed many Klansmen to government posts, including Chief of Police Bill Candlish. Candlish would later enforce a forgotten Denver ordinance that prohibited "...Greek, Japanese, Chinese, Mexican and black businessmen from employing white women".

The Klan enjoyed even greater success by using Republican Party machinery in the infamous elections of 1924. Gubernatorial candidate and Klan member Clarence Morley said, "Not for myself, mind you, do I wish to run, but for the benefit of the Klan." Under clear skies on November 4, voters went to the polls and gave the Ku Klux Klan control of Colorado. Morley became governor, and Klansman Rice Means became U.S. senator. Klan-supported candidates assumed the offices of lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general and state supreme court justice. True to his campaign slogan, "Every Man under the Capitol Dome a Klansman," Morley tried to eliminate Catholics from government.

A week after the election, Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans and the Grand Dragons of several states arrived at Union Station to bask in the great victory. A motorcade flanked by Denver police officers brought the "dignitaries" through downtown to the Brown Palace for festivities. That night, 35,000 Coloradoans packed Cotton Mills Stadium in south Denver to hear the Imperial Wizard speak.

Back then, many businesses sported Klan stickers on the front door. **Kool Kozy Kafe**, at 15th and Curtis, was a notorious Klan-owned hangout. A sign in the window read, "We serve fish every day – except Friday!"

Perhaps it all started on a summer evening six months before the November election, when thousands of hooded men gathered on South Table Mountain to await results of Denver's mayoral election. When victory for their candidate was assured, several giant crosses were set ablaze. These burning crosses could be seen from Denver...and suddenly the Invisible Empire was not so invisible.

Oh, but Colorado wasn't alone. Peek at this list of famous card-carrying members of the KKK: President Warren G. Harding, future president Harry S. Truman, Mt. Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum, future Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, and at least five U.S. senators, four governors and countless other public figures.