

Portland KKK

By Unknown

This image shows a photograph from the early 1920s, probably in Portland, in which robed and hooded Ku Klux Klan members share a stage with members of the Royal Riders of the Red Robe, a Klan auxiliary for foreign-born white Protestants. A large banner reading “Jesus Saves” occupies a prominent position on the wall at the rear of the stage and testifies to the strong role that Protestantism played in the KKK philosophy of “100 percent Americanism,” an ideology that developed during World War I as a reaction to the perceived threat to national unity posed by the influx of non-Protestant, non-English-speaking immigrants.

United States involvement in World War I signaled the end of the Progressive era of American politics, while the end of the war ushered in a new conservatism in the nation. Americans—especially those of the middle class—felt increasingly threatened by both foreign and domestic forces that were beyond their control. Fears of communism and unchecked immigration spurred the formation of patriotic and nativist groups throughout the country during the post-war period. In response to the latter, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 which severely restricted the number of immigrants who could enter the country. Within the U.S., the migration of Southern blacks to the industrialized cities of the North was viewed as an economic and racial threat by the North’s predominantly white labor base. Catholics and Jews were still viewed as “foreign” religions that threatened the fabric of American life. Capitalizing upon these fears, the founder of the Second Ku Klux Klan, William Joseph Simmons, created a nation-wide organization that both perpetuated and profited from this new conservatism.

The Klan philosophy of “100 percent Americanism” rested primarily on three attributes: belief in a philosophy of white supremacy; adherence to Protestant or “American” Christianity; and the superiority of native-born Americans. Given Oregon’s long history of racial exclusion and the fact that almost 90 percent of the state’s population in the early 1920s was native-born, white, and protestant, Klan organizers had little trouble enrolling new members. These kleagles played to the economic, religious, and political concerns of “ordinary” middle-class citizens by stressing the threats posed by immigrant labor, “foreign” religions, and communism. In addition, the KKK’s militaristic culture enhanced its appeal among members of other organizations structured along strict hierarchical and ideological lines. Recognizing this fact, the Klan organizers directed their initial recruiting efforts at local law enforcement officials, protestant clergy, and members of fraternal groups such as the Masons and the Elks.

To enhance the strength and influence of their organization, the KKK established auxiliary groups like the Royal Riders of the Red Robe for white Protestants born outside the United States and the Ladies of the Invisible Empire for women. Both of these affiliates helped support what in the early 1920s became one of the strongest state Klans in the country.

Further Reading: Saalfeld, Lawrence J. *Forces of Prejudice in Oregon, 1920-1925*. Portland, Ore.: 1984.

Horowitz, David. *Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*. Carbondale, Ill.: 1999.

Toy, Eckard Vance. *The Ku Klux Klan in Oregon: Its Character and Program*. M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon: 1959.

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