

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

WKKK: Ladies of the Invisible Empire



PHOTO PROVIDED Daughters of America pin, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society.





EDITOR'S NOTE: The Williamsport Sun-Gazette, in no uncertain terms, does not condone or excuse the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK was and still very much is an evil, white supremacist organization. However, we feel it is important to educate about the local legacy of white supremacy, specifically white women's roles in it. We also believe it prudent to shine a light on the mundanity of much of the organizations' approaches.

Beginning in the early 1920s, when it revived nationally, the Ku Klux Klan saw steady growth in Pennsylvania. Much of the activity was in western Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and Harrisburg, but there were also Klanners in this area. A cross burning — a tactic to intimidate and harass minorities — illuminated by a circle of automobile headlights, was a common event.

Why Did Women Join?

Contemporary scholars have studied the WKKK and why women became such an important part of the resurgence of the KKK during its second wave. Many even believe that without the women the renewed activity would not have been so successful. In *"Knights in White Satin: Women of the Ku Klux Klan,"* a thesis presented to Marshall University, author Kelli R. Kerbawy explains that the suffrage and temperance battles had united women from many backgrounds and beliefs, and

once the vote was won, women used their new-found public leadership and political skills to support various diverse movements, one of them being the hate-filled rhetoric and actions of the KKK.

Headlines in our local newspapers featured many national articles about this group that was spreading through the south and eventually “*invading*” the northern states. The Williamsport Sun carried an article proclaiming that the federal government might take action against the Ku Klux Klan, and the Grit stated that legislators denounced the Klan. Despite these headlines about the dangers of the Klan, the local news columns often failed to reflect the violent reality of the Klan. On Aug. 2, 1925, “*Fraternal News*” in the Grit invited the public to join with Klan men and women at the Hughesville Fair Grounds for fireworks. There would also be parades, a band and drum corps, and singing. Lycoming County was in Province #4, and there were announcements about regional meetings in Wilkes-Barre.

On Aug. 13, 1929, the Clinton County Times reported that “*Many Attended Klan Celebration.*” The headline was referring to a Mill Hall Park picnic and celebration under the auspices of the Lock Haven chapter, at which several hundred members and friends were present. The women’s auxiliary carried out various drills, and once again a display of fireworks closed the program.

The WKKK Constitution and Activities

At first it might seem that a woman’s membership in a Klan auxiliary would be in the shadow of her husband or brother. However, the WKKK, unlike many auxiliaries of churches and other organizations in the past, had strong views and often came in conflict with the male-dominated KKK. The WKKK Constitution clearly stated the mission of the group and explained why white Protestant women of that era might be attracted to it. Women had to believe that the purity of the race rested in native-born, Protestant men and women. There was no room for African Americans, immigrants, people of Jewish descent, or Catholics. These women wanted their homes and children to be “*protected*” by the Klan members, but at the same time they also wanted to be independent and have their voices heard. Their constitution stated that emancipated women were freed from old-world shackles and were equal to men in political, religious, civic, and social affairs. That is, of course, if you were the right kind of woman. They endorsed and partnered with the prohibition movement, believing that it would protect the family unit. Action was taken against men who abused their families. An article in the Sunbury Gazette from June 10, 1922, reported that members of the Klan had visited a fellow member who beat his wife and had made him promise to reform and provide food for his family—otherwise the Klan would be back.

The whole family could be involved in Klan activities, which were given names starting with a “K” if possible. Infants were registered on the Kradle Roll, and girls aged 12-18 were Krusaders in the Tri-K-Klub. Women read the magazine The Kluxer, which carried fashion trends and recipes.

Women had become involved in education after winning the vote, and WKKK members were no exception. However, the schools had to teach their white supremacist “*values*,” and definitely parochial schools were not supported. So-called “*charitable*” efforts included Klan Haven, an orphanage in Harrisburg that was mainly for children of Klan members but also housed some children who were placed there by the state. When the orphanage burned down in 1926, it was the women who organized fund raisers and rebuilt it. Women from this area joined others from all over the state to attend events and rallies on the grounds of Klan Haven.

The Diary of Catherine Sholley from Northumberland County

Local historian Alison Hirsch wrote an article in the winter issue of Journal of the Lycoming County Historical Society, 2004-05, titled “*Women of the Ku Klux Klan: A Local Diary and Letters*.” The article included diary entries by Catherine Sholley, who documented activities of the Sunbury Council of Women of the Daughters of America, a nativist organization that was closely related to the KKK in ideology and often joined with the KKK for events. This diary is also part of the Lycoming County Women’s History Collection.

Sholley’s diary notes her various activities illustrating the life of a young woman at that time. There were dances, plays, Halloween and Easter parties, corn and wiener dinners, and ham and egg suppers, as well as the oyster suppers that were so popular during that era. Interspersed with entries about attending motion picture showings in Williamsport would be an entry about a 30-foot cross burning on Good Friday, at which the women sang Old Rugged Cross and America the Beautiful, or the fact that she had joined 200 Klan members attending a funeral for one of their own— a sheriff — in Bloomsburg. She wrote that the “*Williamsport Klan was down strong—also Muncy*.” There was the exemplification of ritual, displays of pageantry, and the wearing of female regalia.

The Resignations of Lillie Harris and Helen Russell

Lillie Harris and Helen Russell both wrote letters of resignation to the WKKK in 1927. By looking at their biographies, we can get an idea of two local women who joined the Klan and then decided better of it.

Lillian Kissel Harris was born in Jersey Shore on May 22, 1886. Her mother was originally from Germany, and her father worked at railroad boiler shops. In about 1907, she married Oscar B. Harris, who had a farming background and became a salesman for a general store and a blacksmith helper on the railroad. They had two children. Lillian died on her birthday, May 22, in 1950.

Helen Herritt Russell was in her 20s at the height of the WKKK movement. In her resignation letter, Russell explained that, upon a thorough investigation, the organization was not all that she had hoped, and she no longer wished to be a member. Russell would become a leading figure in her community and was often referred to in newspaper articles about local history. She wrote two history-based columns over the years for the Lock Haven Express: *“Along the West Branch”* and *“Over the Fence.”* Russell served the Daughters of the American Revolution Fort Antes chapter as chairman of genealogical records, wrote several books and a pageant, and gave genealogical workshops at the Annie Halenbake Ross Library. She was a wife and mother and is buried in the Jersey Shore Cemetery.

The Demise of the WKKK

Nationally as well as locally, the WKKK was declining by the 1930s. It had been supported by the tendency of women of the era to seek out organizations that were interested in social reform and moral, civic, and educational endeavors.

Unfortunately, in the case of the WKKK these efforts were focused on only one very select group of Americans to the exclusion of and hostility toward other groups who also represented the fabric of the country.

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