

“The Affable Klansman:”

Local Author Discovers Family Tie to KKK in 1920s North Central Iowa

by Michael Luick-Thrams; article can be adapted by another, the only conditions: the www.roots.TRACES.org and the last paragraph must be included in the article

While researching his family’s history for a 350-page book now being released, a local-born historian discovered a few surprises.

“Every family has a skeleton in the closet” concedes Michael Luick-Thrams, “but I unearthed an entire cemetery lying beneath my family’s 400-year sojourn in North America.”

As a child he knew and loved his paternal great-grandfather, George Michael Luick. As the entire family seemed to esteem its patriarch, it came as a shock to Luick-Thrams when two of his dead father’s cousins revealed that the clan elder had been in the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.



Left: George Michael Luick and Lorena Ethel Jenison on their wedding day in 1907. George Michael (on left), author’s father Luwarren “Bud” and siblings, David and Debra Luick; the author, age five, is in the middle, summer 1968 in Thornton, Iowa.

“They relayed how Dad’s aunt later reported that as a girl, she was playing in the barn one day and discovered Great-Grampa’s white hood and robe. She said Great-Gramma, Lorena, was furious when George took part in the infamous Klan procession through Mason City.”

That display of the Klan’s short-lived presence in the American Heartland had a context:

As U.S. soldiers returning from World War I competed for jobs with women and minorities, incidents of racial conflict and Klan terror recurred across the Midwest. Flares up of hooded force, meant to muffle public discussion and stifle dissent, were sporadic but pronounced.

In a pamphlet published in January 1922, later American Civil Liberties Union chair Albert de Silver wrote that in summer 1921 a “group of rowdies first described as American Legion men [...] tore Mrs. Ida Crouch-Hazlett from a Socialist platform in Mason City, Iowa, and drove her out of town[. They] were quoted by the United Press correspondent as saying that ‘they preferred to be known as the Ku Klux Klan.’”

The first female candidate for U.S. Congress from Colorado and a former Prohibition Party member, Chicago-born Crouch-Hazlett had come to Mason City to address a public gathering. Before she could speak, however, the self-identified Klansmen kidnapped her and took her some ten miles into the countryside, at night, and left her there, alone.

A one-time elocution teacher, longtime journalist and suffrage campaigner, according to one of her biographers “This experience did not break Crouch-Hazlett’s commitment, but it did nonetheless coincide with an end to her tenure as a Socialist Party organizer.”

Once they had successfully shown they could block open debate through intimidation, local emboldened Klan members searched for their next publicity coup. They found one in the death of William Cook, a 51-year-old brick mason at one of Mason City’s cement plants.

Cerro Gordo County’s first cement plant had opened only eighteen years earlier but already had attracted a number of African-American workers to work and live in the area, along with immigrants from Greece, the Balkans, etc. Some Mason Citians found such growth more than they could deal with: From 1910 to 1925 the population doubled, to about 22,500 inhabitants.

A Postville (Iowa) *Herald* article printed on 10 April 1924 detailed the Klan rally and march that George Luick had attended in the up-and-coming county seat:

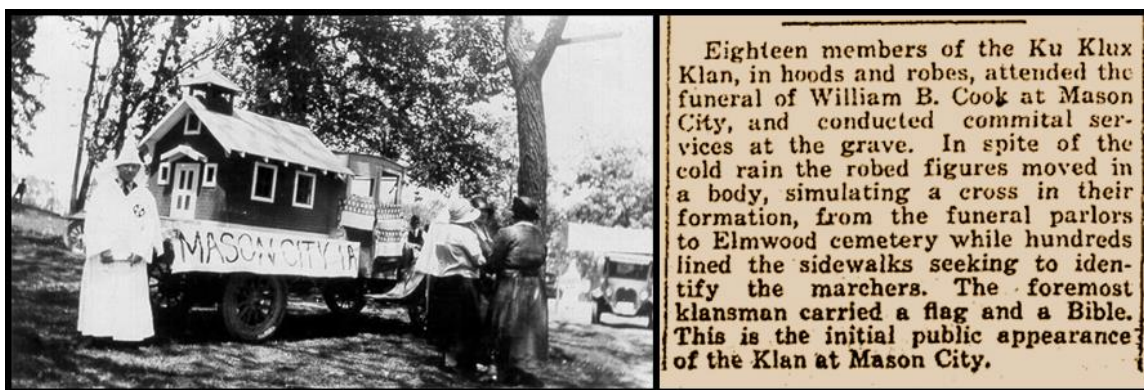
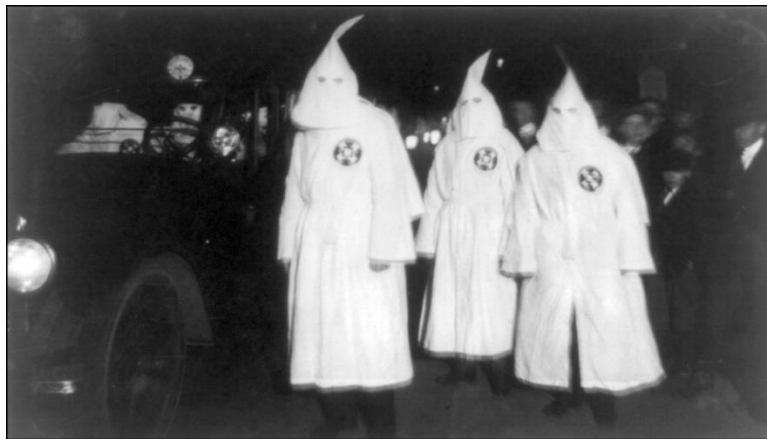


photo and article courtesy of Mason City Public Library

Having chosen Cook as one of the Klan’s own and to make him a martyr for their cause, Mason City historian Terry Harrison recounts that on a rainy day in April 1924 “[as] many as 4000 people attended [and watched as] 600 Klansmen paraded down Federal Ave. toward the Fair Grounds, and the newspaper reported claims that up to 200 Mason Citians were klansmen. A volunteer [has found] a MN klan tabloid [titled *The Minnesota Fiery Cross*] that shows a klan funeral in MC with the robed participants marching in a cross formation with the coffin from the MacCauley Funeral Home to Elmwood [Cemetery]. That was in 1924...”

“And” Luick-Thrams notes, “the Klan’s masked, volunteer foot soldier championing its racist cause in lily-white Iowa, tenant farmer George Luick, was on hand. Also according to relatives, ‘Grampa would be gone late some nights—away at some secret Klan meetings.’”



Ku Klux Klan members attending a parade in 1922

At first skeptical, Luick-Thrams questioned the accuracy of these second-hand accounts. Further research, however, confirmed them. A Belmond *Independent* article from 26 October 1922, for one, documented nearby late-night meetings of a then-ascendant Klan:

Ku Klux Klan
Organized Here?

Rumors Of Business Man Re-
ceiving Letter Signed By
Famous Initials.

MAY BE JUST A JOKE

The town has been running over the past week with reports of one of the business men receiving a letter recently, containing some severe advice and signed by the "K. K. K." Other parties also received such a communication, this paper understands, of a similar nature, and one or two others are reported as expecting to be favored (?) with letters. On top of these stories, the Independent has been told by a citizen of the community that several nights at 11 to 11:30 several auto loads of men in large cars have passed his place going toward the grove, and around 1 to 2 in the morning they returned. Pipe dreams? Many at least have been expecting to hear of the Ku Klux Klan organizing in Belmond. It is reported that one is being formed at Clarion also.

The tenor of the two articles run in Iowa at the time conveys a concern about the welfare of the writers' home communities. The Belmont article hints at underlying power struggles in the town: It was "business men" and "other parties" who were targeted by such harassment. Luick-Thrams wonders to what degree Iowa's Klan activity was a question of class, not just race.

"While individuals of all classes are drawn to fringe movements such as the Klan, Nazism, religious fundamentalism and the like" Luick-Thrams explains, "in 1920s America especially white, Protestant men among the Midwest's disenfranchised rural population provided the muscle behind the Klan's blossoming outside of Dixie."

Directly following the end of World War I, U.S. farmers as a group sank into hard times even as urban America boomed for most of the immediate post-war decade. They were a receptive audience for extremists' promises of a restructured social order—and that in short order.



Cross burnings arose on Stone Mountain on Thanksgiving night, 1915.

In an era when austerity marked life down on the farm, Klan theatrics appealed to many, as they offered distraction from otherwise often dull, defeating days. Already in 1932, social historian Frederick Louis Allen critiqued the Klan for its "white robe and hood, its flaming cross, its secrecy, and the preposterous vocabulary of its ritual [which] could be made the vehicle for all that infantile love of hocus-pocus and mummery, that lust for secret adventure, which survives in the adult whose lot is cast in drab places."

As director of two social-history-based non-profit education organizations, in Iowa and in Germany (see www.roots.TRACES.org), Luick-Thrams maintains that "Often, men from lower social echelons lack adequate education, despite any other personal strengths or resources they might possess. I knew my great-grandfather to be a gentle, jolly, contented man. It's undebatable, though, that all his life he remained poorly educated." The 1920 Federal census indicates that George Luick had completed the tenth grade and his wife, Lorena, the twelfth.

"When I contemplate how a sweet man could invest time and energy in such a reactionary, fear-driven project, it helps to see Great-Grampa in a fuller context. A man of little education and from a large family content to do with less rather than to aim for more, he attached his

dreams for a better life and a more decent community to hate-spewing terrorists. Clearly, he saw in the growing Klan a way out, a boost up. The problem was, at whose expense? *Not his!*”



*Henry (center) & George Luick (right) with a friend;
D.C. Stephenson, Indiana’s Grand Dragon, 1922*

Further details behind the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan in North Central Iowa, as well as other local stories as seen through one family, can be found in *Roots of Darkness: Our Family’s Dreams and Nightmares in America*, available in E-book form at www.epubli.co.uk/shop.



Ku Klux Klan members march in Washington, D.C., 1928

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