

KKK growth slower than leaders claim

ATLANTA (AP) — The message is the same: racial purity. Communists have been added to blacks as targets for their anger. The Ku Klux Klan has been burning crosses again.

Disruptions of rallies in Columbus, Ohio, and President Carter's home town of Plains, Ga., made front page news across America. There have been torchlight rallies scattered from New York to California.

But is there really a resurgence? The Klan says yes, but nobody else does.

"We're growing tremendously," said Robert Shelton, imperial wizard of the United Klans of America from his home in Tuscaloosa, Ala. "We'll be taking a more aggressive position in the coming

months; you're going to see a lot more of us."

But long-time Klan observers say the recent high visibility of "the invisible empire" far outpaces its influence.

The Klan is called "a relic of antiquity that doesn't amount to anything" by former U.S. Rep. Charles Wellner, an Atlanta Superior Court judge. Wellner was a leader in a mid-1960s House investigation of the KKK.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith said the Klan, no friend of American Jews, is no longer of much consequence. The Rev. Joseph Lowery, head of the Southern Leadership Conference which was founded by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., said he no longer thinks or worries about the KKK.

The FBI said it no longer counts membership in the KKK but estimated three years ago that there were about 1,200 hard-core members of various Klans.

A national headcount that low is "real-ly ridiculous," said Imperial Wizard Bill Wilkinson of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a Louisiana group.

Neither he nor other rival Klan leaders will give figures, so actual membership is unclear. But it is clear that the Klans have embarked on a new strategy — one of speaking out, going to court and going after recruits — after at least a decade in decline.

They still advocate separation of the races and admit no blacks or Jews. But

their rallies now contain more denunciations of Communists in the government and left-wingers in general than racial vilifications.

So far there's little evidence of new interest in Klan membership. Outsiders say KKK ranks remain thin.

Wellner said that in the 1960s the Klan was indeed growing and had reached as many as 15,000 members.

"It could have been a very dangerous force in the community," he said. But he said exposure through the congressional hearings defused it. "It's still defused," he said.

STALIN IN POWER

In 1941, Josef Stalin succeeded V. M. Molotov as Soviet premier.