

KKK preaches

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Fear is their tool, spreading hatred of Jews and blacks their goal; they see a communist behind every bush, look with a jaundice eye upon Roman Catholics and condemn the press.

Twice during their 112 years in the United States, they faced extinction by popular demand, yet, today, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan still live and claim they are doing well in Maryland.

Their stomping ground is a hill just outside the little town of Gamber in Carroll County, where monthly rallies are held during the summer.

The second rally this year was on a Saturday night and was distinguished by a visit from the so-called Grand Dragon of Pennsylvania.

Listening to hate messages bellowed in crude English over a loud speaker and watching grown men and women set fire to a cross is not normally my choice of an evening's entertainment.

But, since these hooded remnants of the Civil War are a part of the county in which I live and because I have always been too curious for my own good, a companion (the biggest one I could find) and I went to the rally, forewarned that the press would not be well received.

Tucking my camera out of sight and hiding beneath my slightly tanned but unmistakably white skin, I eased the car past two "security guards" who were dressed in army fatigues and capped by white helmets.

Each had a billy club at his waist, a walkie-talkie in his hand and a white scarf, bearing the KKK emblem, at his throat.

Once in KKK territory, we were surrounded by a song being blasted forth from a record player and best described as a Country - Western - March that never had a chance of making the top 40, not even in Tennessee, birthplace of the KKK.

There were more guards, about six total counting the two stationed at the entrance to the lane.

Only half a dozen-or-so men were dressed in the traditional KKK gowns and all were unmasked. The youngest appeared to be about 16 years old, the oldest in his mid-50's.

Except for an unusually large percentage of tattooed men, the crowd on a whole was nondescript. Before, during and after the rally, very little enthusiasm was displayed and there was little socializing among the few segregated groups spread out over the top of the hill.

"... stand up and be counted..." the record player wailed.

A guard adjusted his scarf in the reflection of a car window, a bored-looking woman with bleached hair and

snug pants sank into a lawn chair she had had the foresight to bring, a toddler trudged up the hill holding fast to his father's finger, and an overweight woman sagged against her husband's shoulder.

"... loyal Knights of the Ku Klux Klan," the record player droned on.

Suddenly, there was a rippling of interest. A brightly colored car boldly advertising a newspaper on its sides, appeared at the foot of the hill. It was a photographer from one of the local newspapers.

Walkie-talkies hummed, necks craned, tattooed biceps tensed and two or three guards were sent to the front lines as reinforcements.

"No news media," a Klansman dressed in a red gown ordered.

To punctuate this command, four or five blue-jeaned toughs who were hovering near a snub-nosed van bearing the Klan's flag, came to life and went charging down the hill like angry bulls, their fists clenched and eyes fierce.

The photographer backed off into neutral territory and parked his car in front of one of the two state police cars on the main road.

In the time it took him to snap a telephoto lens in place, the first photographer was joined by a second photographer from a Baltimore paper.

Tension mounted.

My nerves had barely adjusted when the red-gowned Klansman, who appeared to be running the show, began screaming "Security! Security!"

He had recognized a report among the small crowd. As he stood quivering with anger and pointing an accusing finger, the entire guard force came running, their hands on their lead-filled clubs, ready for the worst.

"No press!" the man screamed as the record player crackled "... stand up and be counted..." and the reporter paled.

"Get her out of here!" he ordered.

A chill ran up my spine and I considered eating my press card as the group of husky men surrounded the reporter, who, incidentally, can't weigh more than 115 pounds with note pad, Bic pen and camera.

The reporter tried reason.

"Out!" the Klansman shouted and the guards made a menacing lunge.

About the time we all expected to see her carried bodily from the grounds and dumped in the street, another man, who I later learned is the Grand Dragon of Maryland, came forward and joined the huddle.

An angry discussion followed. Her last story about the Klan had not been to their liking. However, after a severe scolding, the Dragon magnanimously consented to let her stay, warning "No notes and no taking pictures."

"If you take any pictures, your

hatred for blacks, Jews,

camera will be confiscated," a guard warned.

After the speeches began, it became clear that not being allowed to take notes was no real problem except in getting names, which was, no doubt, the reason for the command.

The speeches, probably from necessity, were geared toward a grade school education, and consisted mainly of trite slogans that have been brandied about by bigots for years. The only difference was that here they were shouted aloud.

"Send the niggers back to Africa" and "Jews are just niggers turned inside out" reverberated over the heads of weary listeners, against the American flag hanging forlornly from a rustic wooden pole, and slapped against the ominous wooden cross which served as a back drop to the whole pathetic scene.

The speeches lacked continuity and were contradictory. While claiming the Klan is a non-violent, Christian organization, lynching and breaking of arms and legs ("The worst you'll get is an assault and battery charge.") was advocated in the next breath.

Reminiscent of Nazi Germany, the speakers preached white supremacy. "Keep the nigger in his place," which apparently is somewhere between the knee and heel of a Klansman, and they openly admitted they fear Jews "because they control most of the money."

The ultimate fear, however, is intermingling of the races. "How would you like your white son or daughter to bring home a nigger? Then you would have rocky fudge grandchildren."

They lashed out at the vast amount of white Christians who aren't "standing up and being counted" like the "brave and loyal" Knights of the KKK, yet most of their own members waited until after

dark before coming to the rally and then several wore hoods over their faces.

Even the key speaker, Pennsylvania's Grand Dragon, was well over an hour late.

They claim they are completely loyal to the American constitution, yet venomously oppose those amendments that give equal rights to all races and religions. One speaker even spoke of the people uniting and rebelling against the government because of high taxes and especially because of the amnesty granted Vietnam protestors.

"If I were you young guys out there, the next time those guys in Washington handed me a gun and told me to fight, I'd go to Washington and use the gun."

The Civil Rights marchers were called "stupid" but a planned march to be held through Towson this year by 1,000 or more Klansmen, was triumphantly announced by Tony LaRicci, Grand Dragon of Maryland.

That figure was later boosted to 5,000 by a Klansman named Alan from Baltimore, who said the 1,000 would be made up of only the Maryland Klan. "There'll be 5,000 total," he said, "from all over the country."

According to LaRicci, the KKK is active in 28 states and the Maryland Klan is one of the "strongest." He takes credit for having brought the Klan to life in Maryland 13 years ago.

He also prophesied that Klan members will be running for public office within the next five years.

LaRicci expressed disgust that "communists" are allowed to hand out anti-American literature but later said one of the Klan's future goals is to start holding its rallies in public places.

More than any other speaker, LaRicci tried to white wash the Klan, saying it was made up of ordinary guy-next-door

types who are loyal Americans and good Christian family men.

When a member of the audience privately questioned Maryland's Grand Dragon about a speaker by the name of Bill, who openly encouraged violence toward blacks, he dismissed his fellow Klansman's words with the excuse, "Bill is a little overenthusiastic" and "just letting off steam. You know how young fellows are."

Bill appeared to be in his late 30s. LaRicci also confided that Bill is second in rank only to himself and will be the next Grand Dragon if he decides to retire.

It was Bill who ordered the reporter off the grounds and, during a plug for new members it was Bill who compared the KKK to the Elks, Moose and Masons.

"We (the Klan) are as American as apple pie," he said.

Apple pie, incidentally, is not nearly so "American" as chitterling.

Bill also reassured those Roman Catholics who might be present that they, too, could join the Klan "as long as you aren't a real good Catholic." Real good Catholics, he explained, put the Pope above the government and, in the KKK, that would never be acceptable.

Shortly after Bill, who was the second speaker of the evening, left the podium, there was an intermission (Pa.'s G.D. had not yet arrived) and chances were sold on a bar made of imitation rock.

Until the raffle was announced, I thought the bar was an altar, as it was supporting an illuminated cross with garish red bulbs. The cross was part of the props and didn't go with the winning raffle ticket.

Souvenirs, "only available through the Klan," were on sale but weren't moving too well. In a final attempt to raise funds, a few Klansmen walked

press

through the crowd of about 60 asking for donations, very few contributed.

There was, however, a momentary rush to the refreshment stand where hot dogs, soft drinks and coffee were being sold.

Somewhere in the vicinity of the refreshment stand a generator labored nosily, grudgingly feeding electricity to the string of bare bulbs over the podium and causing the electric cross to flicker first bright, then dim.

It was midway through the guest Dragon's speech that the faint smell of oil mixed with kerosene drifted through the air, alerting the senses to the long awaited pyrotechnics.

Anticipation, like the smell of kerosene, hung over the crowd.

It was time for Klan's moment of triumph, the high spot of the evening.

Forty-five or 50 Klansmen — some in traditional garb, many not — lined up, torch in hand, believers all in "God, white womanhood and the future of the United States."

First, a small cross was lit and, from it, each Klansman lighted his or her torch. Prolonging the drama, the large 20-foot-or-higher cross was not immediately ignited.

Instead, torches on high, the Klansmen circled the large cross three times, raised then dipped their torches three times and, finally, the large cross was ignited by LaRicci and the guards. The lighting of the cross is symbolic of illuminating the world to the threat of blacks and Jews.

"Have you ever seen a more beautiful sight?" a voice asked over the loud speaker.

The question was answered by silence.

"The imitation stone bar" — I wanted to say.