

The Ku Klux Klan:

Built on Fear and

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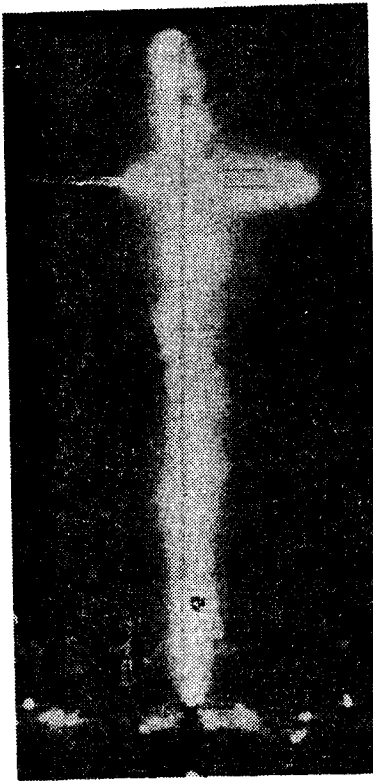
For an outsider, attending a Ku Klux Klan rally is a tourist excursion into the heart of darkness.

As he lets the experience happen to him, it feels dangerous, but he wonders how dangerous it really is.

Are the Klansmen surrounding him malevolent strangers, lying in wait to do harm? Or are they obliging his voyeurisms by dressing up in spooky costumes and yelling "Boo"?

The Klan rallied June 19 in a field in Rising Sun, Md., about an hour's drive out Rte. 1 from Philadelphia. They socialized and sold refreshments, signed petitions and heard recorded country music. They waited the appearance of their national leader, Robert Shelton, Imperial Wizard of the United Klans of America.

On one level it was very familiar—like a cutrate company picnic. With potato salad festering in the heat, the greatest menace appeared to be ptomaine.



Fiery cross . . .

Viewed from another perspective, the goings on were less gentle. One open faced clean-cut teenager, the sort that many mothers might wish their hairy sons would emulate, turned out to be an organizer for the American Nazi Party.

Adolescent boys in hoods and robes tried to get their hands on girls in hoods and robes — once they figured out that the girls were girls. But the concealed identities, and even gender, made them the faceless one who lurk in the darker edges of our fantasies.

One man was discussing the relative merits of different sorts of motor oil until another asked him about his case. It turned out that he was charged with whipping a black woman. Police had also found explosives hidden in his home, but he got off from that one on a technicality.

"If the Klan were as violent as the media makes it out to be," the amiable, modishly dressed Imperial Wizard told a reporter, "you would never dare come here."

"But would you call yourself a violent organization?" he was asked.

"As violent as we have to be."

Richard Widmark could have said that line, just before pushing an old woman in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs. Or Henry Fonda could have said it, defending his poor Okie family against the ravages of society and nature.

The way Shelton said it was somewhere in between.

Similarly, the Klan—symbolically if not numerically the most threatening of right-wing groups—is somewhere in between the conflicting impulses of populism and terrorism.

One large segment of the organization is composed of lower middle class people who are fed up with lives of work with-

Fed by Ignorance

out recognition or even very much pay. "They call us rednecks," Shelton told the group. "To me a redneck is someone who's willing to do an honest day's work."

Every month, the Klan's publication, "The Fiery Cross," tells these people why their hard work is not being rewarded. It's the Jews, the magazine says, using their black dupes and the Communist party, and the FBI, and the sex education movement, and the liberal church, and organized crime, who keep poor whites from leading tranquil and prosperous lives.

Everyone likes to have someone to blame. Most of those present at the Rising Sun rally will go back to their farms, or their little mortgaged houses and hate silently and impotently. For them, a rally is what the Women's Libbers call "consciousness raising," a collective

reassurance that there are many others who feel as they do.

Few of them would ever be found swooping down to do faceless violence in the night. Many drive cars that carry bumper stickers that read, Support Your Local Police. They would rather not be in trouble.

But the Klan also encourages another element—those who wish to recreate the group's periods of terror.

Many of these are young. Like their far-left contemporaries in the colleges, they look at society and see that they have little to look forward to.

"I stay active in everything—the Klan, the Nazis, the White Christian Crusade, and a lot of other local groups," one Kensington 18-year-old explained. "I'm always ready for some action."

"Most of the people I know wouldn't bother to fight Hitler if he came along



... hooded riders ...

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today," a Philadelphia man in his early 20's said.

Such people represent the hard edge of danger, the menacing vestiges that bring the Klan periodically to light. They are few in number, but they have some of the most emotionally powerful trademarks in American history—hoods and robes and burning crosses.

And as darkness fell on the gathering the housewives selling refreshments and the youngsters who were selling raffle tickets on a live pig became less evident, and the mood of the rally was dominated by these young, stern figures.

The faithful gathered to hear their leaders, the assorted Grand Dragons of several of the Klan's domains. Several of the speakers choked on and swallowed moths that were swarming around the microphone, but few in the multitude giggled.

"Are we going to let this happen to us?" One speaker shouted.

"Never," the crowd yelled back.

"Louder," the speaker cried.

"Never!"

"What did you say?"

Never!"

But scattered among the shouting weekend rightists were a few who know that, whatever it is, it has already happened. And they are willing to go faceless and desperate to change things in the dark of night.

Mr. Hine has been covering Ku Klux Klan activities for The Inquirer for several months.