

“OIL AND MORALS, THE KU KLUX KLAN IN GOOSE CREEK, TEXAS IN THE 1920’s”

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The 1920's was a period in which America was rapidly changing from an agrarian to an industrial society. While providing economic benefits, these changes challenged the traditional morality of American society. The economic benefits were greeted with enthusiasm; however, changes in moral values were often met with an intolerance that caused some to unite in an effort to halt these changes. One such organized effort was the Ku Klux Klan, which always conjures an image of a racially biased organization. Although the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920's did stress the stereotyped white supremacist image, it had an added dimension of moral rectitude. Charles C. Alexander, author of *The Ku Klux Klan of the Southwest*, states that the Klan's "earthier component" emphasized the "moral status quo" and strived to maintain "law and order" in an effort to preserve "crumbling Victorian standards" (Alexander 19). The Ku Klux Klan in Goose Creek, in the 1920's reflects Anderson's thesis as it fought for the preservation of the moral order in a small oil field and refining community on the industrialized Texas Gulf Coast.

Goose Creek, later incorporated into the larger community of Baytown, lies thirty-five miles southeast of Houston. Prior to 1916, it was a provincial agrarian community covered with fields of rice, which was the major source of income for most of its residents (Henson 76). Three successive oil gushers, however, changed the face of Goose Creek, since fields which lay in solitude were suddenly lined with pipes and cluttered with a forest of wooden derricks (Nicholson 215). An air of excitement permeated the little town. Local residents, like the Ashworth family, anticipated an economic boost and hoped for a discovery of oil on their land. Mrs. Leona Ashworth, who was fifteen years old at the time, recalled the enthusiasm in a later taped interview. Her family had decided that if oil had been discovered on their land, their family would have taken a trip to England, and the children would have been privileged to attend a private school.

As word of an oil boom spread, people rushed to Goose Creek from "all parts of the state and many of the oil fields" (Anderson 294). Goose Creek began to visibly change as new businesses opened to accommodate the growing community. In spite of positive growth, some saw Goose Creek as losing its accustomed home town characteristics. Shacks and tent settlements, known as rag towns, sprang up around the community (Henson 85). Bars set up in tents served "Ginger Jake," a potent whiskey, to thirsty oil workers who desired a nip after a twelve hour shift (Olien and Olien 199). And "hot on the heels of the first rough necks and roustabouts," prostitutes arrived with jitney drivers – more commonly known as pimps (Olien and Olien 213). By 1921 more concrete reminders of a changing community were erected: ten houses of prostitution. One such establishment was the Montana Hotel, located just outside the Humble refinery, which offered girls, gambling, and drinks for sailors coming into port or oil workers coming out of the field. And just one mile from this new red-light district stood the homes of Goose Creek's more respectable citizens (Fulkerson). As stories of street fights, along with other acts of indiscretion, circulated among the town's Victorian schooled, some of the citizens sought desperate measures to re-establish what they felt to be moral law and order in Goose

Creek. Ku Klux Klan recruiters, or Kleagles, offered a solution: establish a Klan organization in Goose Creek to clean up the town.

William Joseph Simmons had resurrected the Ku Klux Klan on December 4, 1915, in Atlanta, Georgia, as a fraternal order to represent the "epitome of heroism, the savior of white supremacy, and southern womanhood" (*Alexander 3*). Simon's Invisible Empire did not gain strength, however, until he hired recruiters, or Kleagles, to "play upon whatever prejudices were most acute in the particular area" they were working (*Alexander 7*). In the fall of 1920, a Kleagle arrived in Houston on a recruiting mission which coincided with a reunion of Confederate Veterans (*Lay 52*). He recruited over a hundred men, primarily blue collar workers, and established the Sam Houston Klan No. 1. To the southeast, Goose Creek Klan No. 4 was organized (*Alexander 39*).

The newly inducted Goose Creek Klan announced their presence in the community by holding a parade. Gathering at Pruett Park on Friday night May 28, 1921, Klansmen donned white robes and hoods which concealed their identity (*The Democrat 12-31-21*). "Old Sol," a black man, saddled horses for the masked men who led out in the parade. The horses were followed by black cadillacs and men on foot carrying fiery crosses (*Webber !*). Banners carried by the Klansmen bore the following messages, "Gamblers and Bootleggers Must Leave," and "God Pity the Soul That Commits a Crime in the Name of the Ku Klux" (*The Democrat 12-31-21*). Solemnly, they marched down Main Street and Texas Avenue as a crowd of curious spectators looked on. Among the onlookers, two young sisters watched with wide-eyed wonder as the parade passed by. Suddenly one of the parade members, dressed in a "long white robe and peaked hat," stepped out of formation and affectionately "patted" the little girls on the head. The action stirred the oldest girl to think, "Oh gosh, my father is a member of the Klan" (*Fulkerson*). The parade proceeded back to Pruett Park with their mission accomplished: to let the people know they were in town. The masquerades became a weekly event and served to reaffirm Klan presence in the community.

Another visible re-enforcement of the Ku Klux Klan was *Col. Mayfield's Journal*, a Klan newspaper. It was supported by many businesses and appeared on the porches and lawns of the local citizens. The paper featured articles about Klan activities, such as parades, and the Klan's role in national politics. However, most of the articles were anti-Catholic and fed prejudices against the Catholic church. Ironically, while condemning the Catholic church, the paper in a promotion of morality, urged its members, "To Church, Klansmen, To Church" (*Col. Mayfield's Journal 7-28-23*). Local Goose Creek citizens had varied responses: Mrs. Ashworth recalled throwing the "trashy" paper away. On the other side, an oil field "roughneck" reader wrote the paper expressing his appreciation: "Your paper has done wonders for Goose Creek. I see the biggest part of the ladies have lengthened their dresses both ways" (*Col. Mayfield's Journal 12-17-21*). The paper also served as a form of advertisement urging the men to join the ranks of those who stood for the "betterment of social and moral support" (*Col. Mayfield's Journal 3-14-22*).

Klan meetings in Goose Creek took place in the Oddfellows Hall every Friday. The members consisted of many of the prominent citizens of Goose Creek and it has been rumored to have had the support of Ross Sterling, President of the first Board of Directors for Humble Oil and Refining Company (*Haenel 32*). Also present were many of the officers of the Humble Oil Company who exerted pressure on their men to join . . . some of whom would have "rather used their funds for their wives and children" (*The Houston Chronicle, 1-17-23*). Notes in watch cases or billfolds ad-

vised them to reconsider (*Haenel 37*). Presiding over the Klan meeting was the Cyclops – a local minister. During meetings, the Klan made decisions that affected the local community members. These decisions could be whom to tar and feather or which church would receive a donation.

Church support was vital to the Ku Klux Klan since it lent sanctity to even the most severe chastisement issued by the Klan. To solicit church support, the Klan made a ceremony of the donation. When the Klan visited the Baptist church in Goose Creek, they marched into the sanctuary, dressed in full regalia, carrying bouquets of flowers, a Bible, and a letter containing fifty dollars. The letter stated that the gift was “given in honor of the Protestant church” (*Col. Mayfield’s Journal 7-15-22*).

The local black church also received a donation, according to Mrs. Ashworth, but the motive was far different. This donation was served with a warning to behave themselves or they would be whipped and named in *Col. Mayfield’s Journal*. As a further incentive for the blacks to behave, the tar barrel used for tar and feathering, as remembered by one local black resident, was kept “near the Davis Quarter on South Main,” the black side of town (*Webber 4*). Clearly racial biases existed in Goose Creek; however, most of the acts of violence involved white against white. The black of the 1920’s had been beaten down by a lack of even the most basic civil rights – he was in his place and did not present much of a problem. The Ku Klux Klan’s mission in regard to blacks was simply to keep them in their place through intimidation.

Blacks were not the only minority in Goose Creek to feel intimidation by the Klan. Catholics were said to be as popular as an “old rat at an old maids’ ball” (*Webber 5*). The Klan saw the Catholic Church as part of the Pope’s plot to replace the government with a theocracy (*Alexander 14*). This sentiment, further strengthened by articles in *Col. Mayfield’s Journal*, biased the Protestants and struck fear into the Catholics. Mrs. Ashworth recalled that the Catholics went to work in groups for protection. Jimmy Carroll, Catholic employee of Humble Oil, remembered that when the Klan threatened to whip him because he “talked too much,” it was “always the religion that caused the trouble.” Carroll went on to say that he “never did get that whipping” (*Webber 5*). There are not many accounts of whippings or tar and featherings involving minority differences on record. Klan chastisements nearly always involved an infraction of the moral code of the Klan.

An infraction of the moral code of the Klan was dealt with swiftly and harshly. Warnings were issued verbally or in the form of notes signed by the Ku Klux Klan. An unheeded warning earned a surprise visit from the “flogging squad” (*The Houston Press 5-5-23*), who would take the victim to an unknown location for punishment. There he would be prayed over, beaten until wounds appeared, and covered with tar. As an added humiliation, a necklace of feathers was stuck around his neck before he was dumped off close to home. Episodes following this pattern became a common occurrence and became the topic of hushed conversations. The success of the flogging squad was due to the cooperation of the local law enforcement and the fears of Klan reprisals if anyone dared to speak out against them (*The Houston Press 5-5-23*). Mrs. Ashworth remembers that the community “felt like a plague” had come over the town as people feared even their neighbor to be one of the masked riders. It was a fear that prompted her father and brother to risk carrying an illegal weapon when they went into town. Stemming from these fears, some of the citizens bonded together to form a group that openly opposed the Klan: the anti-Klan. The anti-Klan held meetings and parades just as the Ku Klux Klan did. How-

ever, beyond offering group support, the anti-Klan was largely unsuccessful because it tried to solve a problem within the framework of the organization. Goose Creek would require the power of the judicial branch of government.

Armed with the fear of the local citizens and the cooperation of local law, the Klan became more bold in its attempt to revive "crumbling Victorian standards" in Goose Creek (*Alexander 19*). At first the masked men focused their attentions on those who had committed what they considered to be moral offenses: jitney drivers or pimps, bootleggers, and prostitutes. Later the Klan broadened their scope to include those who committed personal offenses against members of the community, such as the flogging of a man who had many debts or a couple accused of adultery. Finally, the Klan's own members were not exempt as revealed by the attempted whipping of the postmaster, Mr. Slaughter, whom the Klan considered guilty for his part in the moving of the post office from the east to the west side of town. On another occasion the Klan went so far as to hold a mock trial of four of their own members for such petty offenses as calling a fellow Klansman a "bad name" (*Chronicle 7-24-23*).

These Klan activities went unhindered by local authorities from 1921 until January of 1923, when Audrey Harrison, whom the Klan accused of adultery and consequently flogged, dared to step forward and expose the Klan by taking her story to *The Houston Chronicle*. Her actions attracted national attention as a grand jury investigation into the Goose Creek Klan resulted in seventeen grand jury indictments. More significant, the incident served as the catalyst that brought an end to the reign of the masked riders in Goose Creek.

On the night of January 5, 1923, Audrey Harrison lay in bed recuperating from an illness as a visiting friend, R. A. Armand, sat by her side. A knock on the door prompted her young daughter to go to the door. Opening the door, she was surprised by an armed mob of men, some of whom were dressed "all in white," while others looked like "clowns" (*The New York Times 1-14-23*). The masked mob threatened and frightened children and proceeded back to the bedroom where they grabbed the surprised couple and forcibly took them from the house. They drove to a pasture about five miles from Goose Creek. There the two were forced to the ground as the ritualistic prayer was said over them. Mrs. Harrison later recalled that the voice was that of a local minister. Feeling sanctified, the men began to whip the couple with a belt as they discussed whether to kill them or let them live. The members decided to let them live, but not before they had laid stripes ten inches long and four inches wide (*The Houston Chronicle 1-14-23*). As a last act of humiliation and to show her a marked woman, they took hold of Mrs. Harrison's long brown hair and cut it to the nape of her neck. The severely beaten couple was then driven close to home and dumped out. They hung her long tresses in front of a gas station in the heart of town as a reminder of the consequences of what they considered immoral conduct. The couple wandered back to the house where they nursed their wounds (*The New York Times 1-14-23*).

Mrs. Harrison, not only afraid, was enraged as well. Taking a bold step forward, she called *The Houston Chronicle* for protection and support. The newspaper promptly responded by providing medical assistance, printing her story, and offering a two thousand dollar reward for the "capture and conviction of the criminals" (*The Houston Chronicle 1-14-23*). Three days after the flogging, people who had been reading the papers gathered in front of the filling station where they stared at Mrs. Harrison's tresses until a local doctor took it down, admonishing the crowd for their morbid curiosity (*The Houston Press 1-13-23*). News of the floggings had al-

ready prompted federal authorities to initiate an investigation. While “whispers and gossipings seethed from home to home,” no one was willing to tell who might be involved in the beatings. Goose Creek was under a “seal of silence” (*The Houston Press* 1-13-23). Members of the Ku Klux Klan publicly denounced the beatings and in a letter to *Col. Mayfield's Journal* denied Klan involvement. The letter was signed by the Grand Cyclops, who was Rev. Houck of the Methodist Church in Goose Creek (*Col. Mayfield's Journal* 1-20-23). Furthermore, when the Goose Creek law enforcement was ordered to check into the matter, the local deputy initially checked into the character of Mrs. Harrison before focusing on the men who had whipped the couple (*The Houston Press* 2-5-23). The masked mob, however, had been careless in carrying out their punishment of the couple. Not all had worn masks. One had painted his face red and powdered his hair white: the clown Mrs. Harrison's daughter had referred to. Bonnie Harrison, Mrs. Harrison's daughter, identified Claude C. Buckley and M. P. Rogers, as members of the group that had taken away her mother. The identified men were subsequently arrested, charged with attempted manslaughter, and jailed on a five hundred dollar bond (*The Houston Post* 1-18-23).

When the men appeared before Judge C. W. Robinson, they pleaded guilty as charged and suffered a one hundred dollar slap on the wrist. However, Robinson, citing the “protection of human liberty” (*The Houston Press* 2-5-23), issued a vitriolic statement to the grand jury revealing his contempt for the Klan. The jury was instructed to continue the investigation into the Goose Creek floggings until all of the “members of the masked mob” were found – even if they had to investigate every “organization” and every “man, woman, and child” (*The Houston Press* 2-5-23). Further probes revealed more suspects and an insight into the extent of Klan activities. As more arrests were made, the community of Goose Creek became a city that was divided, as some supported arrested Klan members and others did not. Klan support in Goose Creek was evident when the town rallied behind another three men, arrested as suspects in other floggings, who refused to talk when questioned by authorities. Six hundred supporters of the Klan marched around the jail house. The “prisoners were serenaded by a band, furnished with feather beds, electric fans, fried chicken, and various other comforts” (*The Houston Press* 6-28-23). In spite of local support and comforts provided, the unbearable June heat in a cell that was not air conditioned compelled the men to talk. The final tolls added up to the arrest of twelve men, including a local judge, who pleaded guilty to seventeen grand jury indictments which resulted in a one hundred dollar fine levied for each count against them (*The Houston Chronicle* 7-24-23). However, there was an even greater outcome as adverse publicity and fear of arrest brought an end to what was described as a “reign of terror” (*Goose Creek Gasser* 7-24-23). After the investigation revealed twenty beatings – some of women and children (*Goose Creek Gasser* 7-24-23), – the once popular organization became a group that people no longer wished to be associated with. When the Klan lost its local support, Klan membership declined until it was unable to function as an organization and disbanded. Just as members announced their arrival, they announced their departure – Mrs. Ashworth recalled that they held a final parade “and nobody interfered.”

An initial response to the Ku Klux Klan's role in Goose Creek would be a blanket condemnation. Certainly one cannot condone their attempt to sit as judge, jury, and executioner, or their willingness to deny their victims basic constitutional rights. However, in historic perspective, one can have some compassion for these men, who joined an organization that they were beguiled to believe would preserve

what they saw as the “crumbling Victorian standards” of Goose Creek (*Alexander 19*). Charles C. Alexander declared that “an increase of crime, the erosion of traditional morality and some degree of a social deterioration usually accompanied the boom of a new city” (*Alexander 29*). He went on to say that “many respectable, middle-class city dwellers” in “seeking to preserve the values of their rural upbringing, saw in the Klan a method to bring law and order to their city” (*Alexander 29*). Goose Creek, with its oil boom that brought so many changes, was a city that by Alexander’s definition was ripe for the Ku Klux Klan.

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