Author: Stephan Lane

Title: An Analysis of the UIUC Ku Klux Klan and the Surrounding Debates

About the Author: I am currently a student of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at the end of my sophomore year. I am a molecular and cellular biology major and plan to attend medical school after my graduation.

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Abstract: Was the Ku Klux Klan at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign a racist organization? Was it affiliated with the well-known national Ku Klux Klan? Two archivists at UIUC claim that the group was not racist and had no affiliation with the nationwide KKK. These archivists, John Franch and Maynard Brichford, assert that the group's ideals and purpose were entirely social.

This paper begins with a historical analysis of the student KKK from beginning to end. This first section is intended to provide the reader with the information needed to understand the debate described in the following two sections. Following the analysis, the arguments of the university archivists are examined and the involvement of the group's founder, Harold Pogue, is detailed.

Since much information about the organization has been lost throughout the years, the truth about the group cannot be determined with complete certainty. The intent of my research is to point out a possibility that has not been addressed by university archivists; it is far more likely that the campus KKK is not as innocent as these experts have claimed.

Initial Exercises:

Question: Was the Ku Klux Klan that existed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign a hate organization affiliated with the well-known national Ku Klux Klan?

Plan: After completing my initial research, the subject of my paper shifted and my original research plan was abandoned. Having decided to address the controversy surrounding the student group's ideology and affiliation, my new research plan can be broken down into three separate parts. I first want to establish a timeline of the significant events in the history of the student KKK. For each significant event in my timeline, I am going to determine national or local events that may have had an impact on the local group. For example, the release of films or books, media attention, and major court cases all could potentially impact the campus group or people's perception of it.

After this timeline has been established, I will conduct any further
research necessary to accurately analyze the arguments of John Franch and Maynard Brichford. Brichford's argument against any racist ideologies of the group is found in a letter he wrote debunking statements made in an article by Timothy Messer-Kruse. Also, Franch mentions several books that I should become familiar with to understand the portrayal of the KKK during its founding. Finally, I intend to search the archives for information on members of the organization. Currently, I know that the group's founder, Harold Pogue, eventually held some position at the university. I hope to find some information in the archives directly related to him that may shine some light onto some of the unknown information about the group.
Data: e a t h , n o f t h e o b i t u a r i e s
INTRODUCTION:

At one point during class this past semester, it was brought to my attention that the Ku Klux Klan was once a registered student organization (RSO) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This fact does not seem too surprising; though we are not proud of it, widespread racism and hatred are parts of our nation’s history. Despite not having nearly as much support as seen in the past, hate groups still exist in our country today.

What is surprising, however, is the debate surrounding the Ku Klux Klan that existed as an RSO. Few things about the group are completely clear; important sources of information have been lost throughout the years. As such, the purpose and ideology of the group has sparked discussion amongst researchers. Whether or not the student group is a chapter of the well-known national KKK is also debatable.

With limited information available, it is impossible to make definitive conclusions on many different aspects of this group. However, by carefully studying the timeline of the group and analyzing the information on sources available, reasonable educated guesses can be formed.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS:
The Ku Klux Klan emerged as a student group on our campus soon after
the start of the 20th century. The exact date is unclear; depending on the source,
the year of origin is listed as 1906[1], 1908[2], or 1909[3].

In order to put this date into a historical context, it should be noted that
Thomas Dixon had just published his reconstruction trilogy, a set of novels
glorifying the Ku Klux Klan. These novels, The Leopard’s Spots (1902), The
Clansman (1905), and The Traitor (1907), depicted African Americans as
incompetent, evil, and with an unquenchable desire to have sex with white
women. These novels increased favorable public perception of the Ku Klux Klan
due to The Leopard Spots’ “tremendous popularity.” In fact, the books were so
popular that the second installment in the trilogy sold 40,000 copies in the week
and a half following its release.[4] The release of this trilogy brought the idea of
the Ku Klux Klan back into the public eye, as it had been essentially destroyed
by the Civil Rights Act of 1871.

In early 1915, a student by the name of Harold Pogue submitted a request
to the Council of Administration to have the local group officially listed as a
registered student organization. This request was approved at a council meeting
on January 27, 1915 and Pogue was notified the following day.[5] D.W. Griffith
releases his epic film The Birth of a Nation shortly after on February 8. This
movie added to the effects of Dixon’s novels and brought his ideas to a wider
audience. Favorable perceptions of the national organization increase, and the
campus group receives little attention for some time.

In December 1922 the murders of two African-Americans by Klansmen in Mer Rouge, Louisiana bring negative press to the national organization and result in “greater scrutiny,” of the, “organization’s methods.”

Their fortune is short-lived, however; an incident occurs in 1923 which sets their downfall in motion. Following a dance the student KKK hosted, the “hooded and gowned members of the organization overstepped the bounds of propriety at a number of organized houses” by dressing “themselves in the red-crossed robes and hoods and loudly proclaim[ing] their presence.” Which “organized houses” this occurred at are unclear and the article does not report their exact words. This same article informs us that public attitudes towards the national organization have shifted and now “public sentiment appears to be against it.” This shifted attitude may be due to something briefly mentioned earlier in the article, media attention of “the investigation of [a] crime alleged to have been perpetrated by the members of the national organization.”

The article also marks the earliest point where the student organization is referred to as a separate entity than the national Ku Klux Klan. Though there is not yet any public statement by the group, the article claims that:

“The campus group is in no way connected with the older group that is now spreading so rapidly throughout the country; its aims and ideals are of a
different nature, its personnel different; the campus
Ku Klux Klan is purely a social organization.”

One might think this puts an end to the debate, that it is in some way
conclusive proof that the student group had no racist aims. However, the author’s
concluding remarks reveal possible bias and alternative motives for making the
previous statements. The author is concerned that the existence of such a group
on his university’s campus may bring bad press to the school:

“Considerable talk has taken place of late as to the
justification of the Ku Klux Klan’s existence in
the United States. . . At Present, public sentiment
appears to be against it. . . let the campus be free
from any possible difficulties that the name might
bring it.”

On the same day as the above article was published, the Council of
Administration acted to prevent further incidents by their decree “that no further
dances be allowed this particular group until it is formed in the usual way was
approved.” By banning them from holding social events, the group’s public
spotlight would be reduced greatly.

In April 1923, the Ku Klux Klan as a campus organization ceased to exist
when leaders of the group voted to change the name to Tu-mas, “an Indian one,
according to H.C. Woodward, 24, president of the organization.” In the first
official statement by the group addressing its affiliation with the national organization, Woodward explains that the group changed its name due to “the confusion arising from confounding the college organization with the recently-revived Invisible empire.” The decision was made at a conference in Chicago that included representatives from each subset of the campus organization.³

In judging history, people’s actions tell us more about their intentions than their words. The group first appears in the 1909 Illio, shortly after Dixon’s trilogy is completed. It registers as a student organization in 1915, less than a month before the release of Birth of a Nation. In late December 1922, Klansmen were implicated in the murder of two African Americans in Mer Rouge, Louisiana and negative press envelopes the national organization.⁷ Less than a month later, the student group dressed in their characteristic hooded gowns and “loudly proclaimed their presence” at “a number of organized houses.”⁶ The school then places pressure on the group by banning them from holding dances and effectively reducing their public spotlight. A few months later, the campus Ku Klux Klan undergoes a name change to Tu-mas.

Does this seem as if the group is concerned with the ideologies their name encompasses, or with the way the public may view them? Despite widespread public knowledge of the Ku Klux Klan as a racist organization, the campus group takes eight years to release an official statement denying affiliation with the national Ku Klux Klan. Furthermore, that statement isn’t even given until their name change in 1923 – after they received bad press and were
put under pressure by the university administration.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>EVENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>1902/1905/1907</td>
<td>Publication dates of Dixon’s trilogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906/1908/1909</td>
<td>Possible founding dates of student KKK</td>
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<td>January 27, 1915</td>
<td>KKK officially becomes an RSO</td>
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<td>February 8, 1915</td>
<td><em>Birth of a Nation</em> is released</td>
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<td>December 1922</td>
<td>Murders by Klansmen result in bad press</td>
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<td>January 1923</td>
<td>Campus Klansmen dress in the garb of the national organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 9, 1923</td>
<td>Council of Administration bans campus</td>
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This is a report of the history of Urbana-Champaign from the time of Native American tribes to modern times. Though most is irrelevant to my research, there is one useful piece of information within it. Towards the end of the paper there is an interview with Carrie Nelson, a woman who was born in 1900 and moved to Champaign in 1916. He asks her if she remembers any local Ku Klux Klan activity in those years and she says she recalls them “burning crosses and marching up and down” on horses on university avenue. She recalls this happening in 1918, which is a full five years before the student KKK dressed up in their robes and caused the controversy that eventually led to their disbandment. However, it is possible her statements are not completely reliable. After providing a date of 1918, she says, "it was when things were pretty tough during the depression and things." Because of that statement, it appears that this particular instance of Klan activity could have occurred after the student group disbanded. As such, I did not include her statements in my final research paper.

Reflect: My interest in the subject of this research began when I was informed that the Ku Klux Klan was once a registered student organization on campus. I became curious of the local and national environmental factors that fostered the growth and eventual decline of a hate organization at my university. This curiosity led to my initial research goal of identifying those factors. My tentative plan was to correlate the variation in membership numbers with race-related national and local events. Once I began my research, however, I soon abandoned my original plan. First of all, I learned that the the group was organized in such a way that led to membership numbers changing very little throughout its existence. Also, I discovered an even more interesting debate to examine; whether or not the student group was affiliated with the
national KKK or if the group was even racist at all. Though a bit frustrated by gaps in information—such as the fact that the campus KKK’s constitution and registration card have been lost—my research was overall very rewarding. I immediately signed up to present at the EUI conference when given the opportunity because I wanted to shed light on an issue which I thought had not been given enough attention. I admit the amount of work I expected to put into this research was intimidating, but in retrospect I realize all the time was worth it. On top of getting to learn about such an interesting debate, I have improved my academic writing skills and have been presented with many opportunities as a result of my research.

Recommendations: In order to explain my recommendations, I should first mention my initial experience at the university archives. I entered the archives in the main library and approached a woman working at the desk to ask her to point me in the right direction for my research. In terms of helping me find the information that was available, the archives staff was amazing. However, before I had a chance to conduct any research, I was informed that the campus group was unaffiliated with the national Klan and had no racist aims as if it was an undeniable fact. This practice could easily sway potential researchers away from the subject and is not conducive to educated discussion of the topic. I recommend that archives employees inform researchers that a lack of information has lead to differing conclusions on the subject. On top of being more accurate, acknowledging that different possibilities exist does not lead potential researchers to a particular conclusion.

On a similar note, John Franch’s research guide on the campus KKK should undergo major revisions or complete replacement. Franch seems better at writing persuasive articles than archival research guides; the entire guide is geared to lead the reader to the same conclusion as the author. Franch claims that, “absent any direct evidence, one cannot say that the campus group had racist aims.” However, the fact that the group called itself the Ku Klux Klan (and at least once dressed themselves in the Klan’s characteristic hooded robes) is enough to warrant the need of direct evidence of non-racist ideals to absolve the group from any accusations of racism.

My final recommendation involves the campus Klan’s founder, Harold Pogue. His name only shows up in the Klan’s subject folder in a letter written to him which informs him of the approval of the campus KKK to become a registered student organization. There is no mention of his subsequent employment with the university. I suggest the addition of something that guides a researcher to Pogue’s biographical folder. Similarly, Pogue’s biographical folder has no mention of his Klan involvement. The university needs to fix this gap in his biography and add information about his founding of a student KKK.

In its current form, information on the student Klan is provided in such a
way that leads researchers to a particular conclusion. The suggestions outlined above are very easy to accomplish and would foster better discussion on the subject.