

The Source of "Ku Klux"

WILLIAM E. MOCKLER

NO MORE AWESOME AND DREADED A NAME than "Ku Klux Klan" has appeared on the American scene. As early as 1884, Lester and Wilson,¹ writing of the Klan's growth, declared that the hooded order never would have wielded the power it did had it not borne a name so meaningless and mysterious.

Had they called themselves the "Jolly Jokers" or the "Adelphi," or by some similar appellation, the organization would doubtless have had no more than the mere local and ephemeral existence which those who organized it contemplated for it. . . . But in this case there was a weird potency in the very name Ku Klux Klan. . . . The sound of it is suggestive of bones rattling together!

In a more recent study of the Klan movement, Stanley F. Horn² asserts that

the thing that caused the new organization to attract attention and later to spread beyond any dream of its organizers was unquestionably the impression created and the curiosity aroused by its mysterious, sonorous name. It was the kind of name people liked to repeat, just to hear the sound of its sinister syllables.

Adding further to the mystery associated with the name are the popular tales that have been woven about its origin: "Ku Klux Klan" is a Hebrew term met with in a very old Jewish work in which the orthography is "Cu-Clux Clan;"³ the name originated among Chinese merchants engaged in smuggling opium and was introduced into America by Hon. Humphrey Marshall;⁴ the designation was derived from "Cukulcan," purportedly the name of the god of light in ancient Mexico, stories of whom were brought north by fathers and uncles who had fought in the Mexican War;⁵ the click of rifles being cocked resembled the sound of the repeated letters "K.K.K.," and the name grew from them.⁶

Etymologists who, with some reservation, derive "Ku Klux" from the Greek κύκλος, 'circle,' find apparent authority in the historical account of the Klan's birth:

The Ku Klux Klan was organized in 1865-66 in Pulaski, Giles County, Tennessee, on the Alabama border, by six young men⁸ who had served in the Confederate Army and were seeking diversion in a community where life was dull and monotonous.⁹ It was, at first, purely a social organization for the purpose of affording amusement to the members who held secret meetings, wore disguises, called their officials by odd-sounding titles, and introduced would-be members to the game of snipe-hunting.¹⁰ One writer says that some of the initiation ceremonies "resembled those of the well known college fraternity—Alpha Sigma Sigma."¹¹

At an early meeting, a committee which had been appointed to suggest a name for the new society reported difficulty in carrying out its task, and some discussion ensued. Finally, according to the traditional account,

Richard Reed suggested that they call it the Kuklos, from the Greek word κύκλος, from which our words 'circle' and 'cycle' are derived; and this suggestion met with immediate approval. They repeated the word over a few times; and Captain Kennedy, having an ear for alliteration, suggested that they introduce another 'K' sound in the name by adding the word 'clan.' The alliterative sound was further improved by changing Kuklos Clan to Kuklux Klan. . . .¹²

To some of the Klan organizers—former college students—classical Greek was a familiar subject, and "Ku Klux" doubtless has its ultimate source in the Greek word κύκλος. At the same time, the possibility that the mysterious "Kuklos" came to the mind of Reed or of one of the others not as the κύκλος of college text-books but as the name of an already existing "Kuklos Society" cannot be overlooked.

The first suggestion that "Kuklos" was not unknown before 1866 as an organizational title appears in the testimony of Daniel Coleman of Athens, Alabama, before a Congressional Committee set up in 1871 to investigate Klan activities. Coleman stated that he was "first led to look into the Ku Klux organization by reason of the similarity of its name to the name of a society to which he belonged when he went to college—the κύκλος Society."¹³ Further identification of this "Kuklos" organization or evidence that its name was known to the first Klan members has not appeared.

A satisfactory solution to the mystery of Coleman's society, however, seems possible on the basis of materials uncovered by LeRoy S. Boyd and published in *Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities*.¹⁴ The forgotten "Kuklos Society" would appear to be the long extinct southern fraternity Kuklos Adelphon or "old Kappa Alpha."¹⁵ Founded in 1812 at the University of North Carolina by four members of Phi Beta Kappa, this order by the middle of the nineteenth century had spread to colleges throughout the South.¹⁶ Its constitution, ritual, and secrets are described as "so similar to those of the original Phi Beta Kappa as to indicate strongly that it was a descendant of one of the community branches chartered by Phi Beta Kappa before its dissolution at William and Mary in 1781."¹⁷ That the full name "Kuklos Adelphon" was not a secret designation is attested by its appearance upon the fraternity's badge, which is described in some detail and illustrated in Baird.

Perhaps because it remained sectional, Kuklos Adelphon became the largest college secret society in the southern states before the Civil War, with chapters—significantly called "circles"—in twenty-one schools.¹⁸ Circles existed also in county-seat towns where membership included "the professional and gentry classes."¹⁹ Dissolution of the society began in 1855 and was completed by 1866.²⁰

Evidence exists to show that more than one of the Klan's charter members, perhaps all of them, had sufficient opportunity for knowing of Kuklos Adelphon or the "Kuklos Society." At the outbreak of hostilities, John B. Kennedy was attending Centre College at Danville, Ky., where, according to Baird, a circle of the Kuklos probably existed.²¹ James R. Crowe was studying law in Marion, Ala., at the time of his enlistment in 1861.²² A circle of Kuklos Adelphon appears in the Baird list at Howard College, then located in Marion. For the other early members—Reed, McCord, Lester, and Jones—no information more specific than that they were college graduates is available.²³ No important institution of higher learning, however, in the region around Giles County was without a circle of Kuklos Adelphon before the War. There was one at not-far-distant Union University in Murfreesboro and probably one at the Western Military Institute of Tennessee near Nashville. Just across the Alabama line and even closer to Pulaski was the one to which Coleman apparently had belonged—that at

LaGrange College in Limestone County.²⁴ West of Limestone in the adjoining county of Lauderdale was a fourth at Florence Wesleyan. Farther south in Alabama were the circles at Howard College, Centenary Institute, and the University of Alabama.

It is hardly credible that to any young college man of the middle South in the late '50's or early '60's the name of so widespread a society would be unfamiliar. The presence of Kennedy at Centre College and of Crowe in Marion, Ala., the proximity of Pulaski to schools where chapters of Kuklos Adelphon had been placed, and the existence of community circles in county towns, all point to the conclusion that some of the Klan's organizers were acquainted with Kuklos Adelphon and that it rather than the classical Greek furnished the immediate source of "Ku Klux." Further, a name from such a source would not have been incongruous in view of the original Klan's aims and methods, which so closely modeled those of the Greek-letter fraternity. The chief irony of the whole situation lies in the fact that what would appear to be merely the borrowed half-title of a college society no more nocuous than the earlier Phi Beta Kappa became a vital factor in the rise to power of one of the most incredible organizations ever to mark the pages of American history.

NOTES

¹ J. C. Lester and D. L. Wilson, *Ku Klux Klan, Its Origin, Growth and Disbandment*, with Introduction and Notes by Walter L. Fleming, New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Co., 1905, p. 56. The first edition (1884) was privately printed in Nashville.

² Stanley F. Horn, *Invisible Empire, The Story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939, p. 11.

³ From an article in the *Memphis Appeal* quoted by Horn, p. 8.

⁴ From the *Richmond Whig*, 1868, Horn, p. 8.

⁵ From W. B. Romine, editor of the *Pulaski Citizen* (1939), in an interview in a Nashville paper in 1934, Horn, p. 13.

⁶ Professor Ruel E. Foster of the English Department at West Virginia University states that he has heard this story in his native Kentucky. Cf. a similar tale in Horn, p. 12.

⁷ The NED, for example, has: "Ku-Klux. More fully Ku-Klux-Klan. [A fantastic name said to be made out of Gr. *κυκλος* circle + Clan.]"

⁸ Maj. James R. Crowe, Capt. John C. Lester, Capt. John B. Kennedy, Frank O. McCord, Richard R. Reed, and J. Calvin Jones.

⁹ Eyre Damer, *When the Ku Klux Rode*, New York: The Neale Publishing Co., 1912, p. 90.

¹⁰ *Revised and Amended Prescript of the Ku Klux Klan*, West Virginia University Documents Relating to Reconstruction, (No. 2), Walter L. Fleming, ed., Morgantown, West Virginia, February, 1904, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Horn, *op. cit.*, p. 11. The author states (p. 12), "This is the story of the origin of the name as told by surviving charter members; and its authenticity seems beyond question." In his introduction to the 1905 edition of Lester and Wilson, p. 21, Professor Fleming quotes James R. Crowe, one of the two Klan founders then surviving: "A committee composed of Richard R. Reed and Calvin Jones was appointed to select a name for the organization. The Greek for *circle* was chosen. We called it Kuklos (*κυκλος*), which was changed to Ku Klux afterward when the name was proposed to the Circle. John Kennedy suggested that we add another *K*, and the order was then called Ku Klux Klan . . ." Other accounts of the choice of name vary only with regard to minor details.

¹³ Horn, *op. cit.*, p. 12

¹⁴ Fifteenth edition, Harold J. Baily, ed., Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, 1949, pp. 850-851. Earlier editions of Baird contain essentially the same information under the section devoted to inactive fraternities.

¹⁵ "Old Kappa Alpha" or Kuklos Adelpheon had no connection with either the Kappa Alpha Order, which was founded at Washington and Lee in 1865 and has remained distinctly southern, or the Kappa Alpha Society, which was founded at Union College (New York) in 1825.

¹⁶ Baird, pp. 850-851.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 850.

¹⁸ Baird names fourteen circles known to have been in existence. The others are thought to have existed.

¹⁹ Baird, p. 851.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Information contained in a communication of May 22, 1953, from Mrs. A. R. Richardson of Pulaski, a niece of Kennedy. See also the *Confederate Veteran*, Vol. XXI (1913), p. 240.

²² Lester and Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 19. In a communication of May, 1953, Mrs. Elliott M. Buchanan of Chattanooga, Crowe's niece, says that he was attending school at the Marion Military Institute in Marion at the time of his enlistment.

²³ Horn, *op. cit.*, p. 14. In a communication dated April 2, 1953, Mr. Horn says, "The early writers about the organization of the Klan state that the organizers were 'college graduates' . . . but that is as far as I have been able to go."

²⁴ As mentioned above, Coleman lived in Athens; and Athens is the county seat of Limestone.