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York Had 'Kyklos' in 1868

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# South Carolina's First Klan

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**YORK**—The Ku Klux Klan, subject of a current congressional investigation, is not a stranger to York County, the county seat of which was put under martial law nearly a century ago because of the activities of certain of the area's inhabitants who had a penchant for night-riding, white robes, burning crosses, and mystic rites.

According to modern historians the KKK was organized in Pulaski, Tenn., in 1865 as a social group for Confederate veterans of the War Between the States. However, many Southerners found the flowing robes frightened their former slaves and began using the Klan as a front for terrorist activities.

The Klan was formed in York County two years later, the first county in South Carolina to boast such a "circle" or "kyklos" as it would be

known in the Greek.

The infamous group's activities here brought recriminations from Washington in the form of martial law enforced by carpetbagging Yankees and newly-freed Negroes.

It was this action and its repercussions that put the tiny town of Yorkville in the national spotlight, and later into the international news. Later developments also strained relations between the United States and the United Kingdom.

The Klan as a fighting civilian organization was composed mostly of the aristocratic elements of the area society. To understand how well-educated, thinking men could lend their efforts to a terrorists organization, it is necessary first to explain the conditions in the South at that time, particularly in the York area.

To begin with, South Carolina, as the state which began the secession, was slated for long-term punishment in Reconstruction. York County, known as "the Charleston of the Up-Country", was the center of up-state society and aristocracy.

Northern speculators and recently freed slaves had been placed in positions of authority and power across state.

Newspapers of the day car-

ried accounts of white women being ravished, land being seized, occupation by an army of companies of Negro militia, and crime and pillage being carried out against Southern white leaders by their new and unwanted masters.

1868 was also the year the 14th amendment to the Constitution was proposed, making all men, including former Negro slaves eligible to vote. Resentment to new patterns

which disrupted a traditional way of life was natural. Also natural was the resentment to living in fear of the companies of Negro militia who controlled the lives of their former masters.

This then, was the ferment in which the Klan was conceived and grew.

The "Yorkville Enquirer," on April 2, 1868, carried the following notice:

**DEADMAN'S HOLLOW**  
Southern Div.  
Midnight, March 30.

General Order No. 1:  
**REMEMBER** the hour appointed by our most excellent grand captain - general. The dismal hour draws nigh for the meeting of our mystic circle. The shrouded knights will come with

pick and spade, the grand chaplain will come with the ritual of the dead. The grave yawneeth, the lightnings flash athwart the heavens, the thunders roll, but the past grand knight of the Sepulcher will recoil not.

By Order of the Great Grand Centaur.  
**SULEYMAN, G. G. S**

The words had little meaning to the general public, other than to announce a meeting of the Klan, but their very tone was calculated to frighten the superstitious and illiterate, mostly the Negroes of the community.

A newspaper published in 1926 gives this account of the feelings in York County when the Klan was organized there.

"In no county and town in the South during Ku Klux days was the Klan stronger and more determined in its purpose than in Yorkville and York County.

"Klansmen made numerous visits to whites and blacks throughout the country when they considered 'regulation' necessary. Many were the reports reaching Federal authorities in Washington and spreading into northern and eastern states regarding Klan activities in this section."

York County was such a spot of Klan ferment that the New York Herald sent a reporter to Yorkville in 1870-71 to write about the conditions here.

Probably the most famous or perhaps infamous, of all the early Klansmen was Dr. Rufus Bratton of Brattonsville in York County.

His activities became the subject of a novel by the Rev. Thomas Dixon, "The Klansmen," which later was made into the controversial motion picture, "The Birth of a Nation."

Bratton is believed to have been the real-life counter-

part of Dr. Cameron, central figure in the book, and York was purported to be the setting for the book.

Bratton's Klan activities came into national light because of the untimely death of the Negro captain of a company of Negro militia. One Jim Williams or Jim Rainey (he was known by both names) of Mc Connellsville had let it be known that he would not put up with threats from the Klan.

"I will kill from the cradle to the grave and I will lay this country to waste", he is reported to have said.

In 1870 on a March evening Klansmen gathered from over the county and with Dr. Bratton at the front, rode to Williams' house, not far from historic old Brattonsville.

"Capt. Jim" as he was called, was taken quietly from his home and hanged from a stately pine nearby. A Klansman who was not at the hanging asked Dr. Bratton a few minutes later, "Where is he?"

"He is in hell, I expect," Bratton is supposed to have said.

Bratton remained in York County until the following year, practicing among the federal soldiers who were sent here to enforce martial law, and even testified before a congressional committee sent to York to investigate Klan activities.

A short while after he testified (without ever incriminating any of his fellow members of the Invisible Empire) word was brought to Dr. Bratton that a warrant had been issued for his arrest.

He slipped away and went to Barnwell, staying there with his sister for a short time. Word soon came that federal authorities were hot on his trail and he fled to Selma Ala.

There Bratton associated himself with another native of York, Dr. William Barron. Federal authorities were persistent, however, and Bratton soon had to flee to Memphis, Tenn., where he joined with his brother John S. Bratton, also a fugitive Klansman.

From Memphis, Dr. Bratton went to London, Ontario, Canada, where he became a respected citizen. However, the Pinkerton Detective Agency, under contract to the United States, learned of Bratton's whereabouts and conspiracy was made with a Canadian detective to kidnap the South Carolinian.

Bratton was brought back to York to stand trial, but was released from the Yorkville jail on bond. Then he learned that the British government had demanded his unconditional release and return to Canada on the grounds that he had been unlawfully kidnapped. Diplomatic correspondence of a threatening nature was sent to the United States by Great Britain and Bratton was freed.

Bratton returned to Canada. His Canadian kidnapper was convicted and sent to prison. Bratton lived there for eight years. Then he returned to York County and resumed his practice.

Source: The State, October 31, 1965