

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 4, Issue 2 (Fall 2024)

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1xn43799>

Journal

The UC Santa Barbara Undergraduate Journal of History, 4(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2024-10-01

Peer reviewed

FALL 2024

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF HISTORY

Vol. 4 | No. 2



© **The UCSB Undergraduate Journal of History**
3236 Humanities and Social Sciences Building
The Department of History, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
The University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California
93106-9410

Website

<https://undergradjournal.history.ucsb.edu/>

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Papers can be submitted for publication anytime through our submission portal on our website. Manuscripts must be between 3,500 and 7,500 words long and completed as part of a student's undergraduate coursework at an accredited degree-granting institution. Recent graduates may submit their work so long as it is within 12 months of receiving their degree. The Journal is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. See the Journal website for more information.

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Kalifornia Klan Kulture: The Ku Klux Klan's Usage of Media and Reporting in 1970s Southern California

*Jaden Huynh*¹

Lynchings, floggings, mutilations, kidnappings, brandings by acid, bombings, arsons, instances of chemical warfare, and robberies are just a few of the crimes committed and commonly associated with the infamous Ku Klux Klan.² Known for their pointed white hoods and fiery crosses, the group has attempted to strike fear in the hearts of Americans for over a century. There were three distinct iterations of the group, forming in 1865, 1915, and 1946.³ Despite its considerable distance from the South, California was not safe from Klan violence, and groups even formed in Oxnard, a neighboring city. While most would not think of Oxnard, California, as a Klan hotbed, a town known today for its beaches, agriculture, and “Nardcore Punk” scene, the city was once home to a significant and highly publicized Klan chapter. The most notable display of hate put on by the local Klan was the Oxnard Klan Riot of 1978. Using the fallout from the riot as a case study while also expanding to address Klan context across Southern California and the activity of earlier Klan waves, this essay will interrogate how the one-sided reporting habits of the mainstream media helped the Klan dictate national narratives and build up their presence in society. It will also analyze alternative entry points for the Klan in the realm of media and their manipulation tactics.

The First Wave

The first Klan's emergence dates back to Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1865 when a group of six white men formed a supposedly fraternal group based around the harassment of freed enslaved African Americans.⁴ The group would soon attract new members by drawing off civil unrest and fear regarding the reunification of the United States. Their anxieties about the depreciation of white supremacy would only be worsened in the coming years, as several Reconstruction policies would place Northerners in positions of power in Southern states. When paired with the increasingly growing

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² “KKK Series,” FBI, May 18, 2016, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/kkk-series>.

³ The Committee on Un-American Activities, *The Present-Day Ku Klux Klan Movement*. Washington, D.C., 1967, p. 8.

⁴ Michael Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan: History, Organization, Language, Influence and Activities of America's Most Notorious Secret Society* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2007), p. 6.

Black American population, now free from slavery, more and more Southern whites deemed it necessary to take up arms and act as vigilantes.⁵ Perhaps the most egregious offense that would drive these Southerners to join the Klan was the thousands of Black Americans who took positions of state and national political power in the aftermath of the Civil War. The agitation among Southern white supremacists was contagious and the group's nativist messaging spread rapidly across America, with Klan chapters even sprouting up in California as early as 1868 in the Bay Area.⁶

It became common for this early iteration of the Klan to assemble and hold riots, attempting to intimidate Black Americans through a show of force. With their large numbers, these riots would often result in high Black casualties with minimal white deaths. This first wave explicitly targeted Black Americans who gained moderate success in the Reconstruction Era, such as landowners and shopkeepers.⁷ White Southerners, especially educators and politicians, who the Klan saw as complicit in aiding Black Americans, were also targeted and victimized through acts of violence committed by the Klan. This reign of Southern terror helped to characterize the first wave as a period of extreme brutality.

Although it was largely apparent that first-wave Klan members across state lines shared a common tendency to engage in violence, their levels of political organization and coherence varied. Local chapters were often disjointed from one another, and their abilities to hold large-scale demonstrations varied by state and often even by county. Despite this fragmentation, the first wave of the Klan showed enough prowess in their ability to use violence to intimidate the voting public in their home states. Their constant threats against Republicans instilled fear into the public and swayed votes in statewide elections across the South.⁸ When things failed to go their way, in the event of a local Republican victory, the Klan sparked episodes of extreme violence against their dissidents. The riots would ensure that the public would be too fearful to vote against them, allowing the Democrats to win in the next election. This detached political influence, driven by a campaign of fear, proved to be another key marker of this first wave.

Throughout the early 1870s, many Democratic newspapers in both the North and South claimed that the Klan did not exist.⁹ It was a deliberate political misinformation and manipulation tactic that white supremacists used to spark skepticism. Unfortunately, it appeared to work as

⁵ David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, (Duke University Press, 1987) p. 14.

⁶ Kevin Waite, "The Shameful History of the KKK We Never Knew," History News Network, 6 October 2015, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/160657>.

⁷ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 10.

⁸ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 15.

⁹ Elaine Frantz Parsons. *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, n.d. p. 188.

Americans began to question the stories that appeared in the newspapers they read.¹⁰ Many were confused about the level of presence that the Klan held, with some questioning their existence. This lack of reporting was especially helpful in sewing confusion when paired with the weak organizing between local chapters of the Klan. It drew attention away from weaker, local Klan chapters, such as those in South Carolina and Florida, as their presence on a statewide level was low.¹¹ This deliberate aversion to the mainstream press was not present in the following iterations of the Klan and helped to characterize the anonymity of the first wave.

The media manipulation displayed here would continue to be ever-present throughout the next two waves of the Klan. Many newspapers in this period also intentionally smeared successful Black Americans and blamed them for issues associated with Reconstruction.¹² The authors wanted to undermine their success and integration into society through spreading anti-black rhetoric. By associating Black Americans with inferior traits, popular newspapers worked to harm their public image and portray them as lesser individuals. This was essential in downplaying brutal Klan violence, which proved to be a marker of this era, as the newspapers depicted the targeted Black Americans as lesser than white Americans. The mainstream media hoped to lessen the value of their lives and place the Klan under reduced scrutiny for their acts of violence. It was also an attempt to gain sympathy from the greater public as the demeaning depictions of Black Americans helped the Klan position themselves as self-proclaimed cleansers of societal plagues.

The Second Wave

Before the start of the second wave of the Klan, the film “The Birth of a Nation” would be released, and it would prove to be a staple in Klan media. The film was based on *The Clansman*, a novel released by Thomas Dixon Jr. in 1905 that romanticized the Klan and positioned them as heroes fighting against the oppressive Union.¹³ The novel and its subsequent film adaptation would further stoke racial fires as it depicted Black Americans as less-than-equal animals, building off of Jim Crow-era caricatures. Within a decade, Dixon worked with filmmaker D.W. Griffith, who turned the novel into a full-length picture with the new title “The Birth of a Nation.” The film told a revised version of America’s plantation era and Civil War, again villainizing the North. As noted by other historians in the past, the release of the film was detrimental to the nation’s unity as it worsened racial and political tension.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, the propagandistic film led to riots across cities in America, like Pittsburgh,

¹⁰ Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, p. 182.

¹¹ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 15.

¹² Boyce and Chunnu, *Historicizing Fear*, p. 135.

¹³ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Boyce and Chunnu, *Historicizing Fear*, p. 122.

Milwaukee, and Portland, by those who detested the film's racist messaging.¹⁵ The protestors here fought for a culture that opposed white supremacy, and their efforts were part of a legacy that continued in the clash over Oxnard's showing of the film in 1978.

"The Birth of a Nation" would prove to be instrumental in creating the second wave of the Klan, as its effects on society created an opening for William Joseph Simmons to take action. Simmons was a minister who had strong Klan roots in his family and used the release of the film as a way to mobilize support for his nativist cause.¹⁶ He hosted the first meeting of the second wave of the Klan in 1915 and even had two members of the original Klan in attendance.¹⁷ While this first meeting only drew fifteen individuals, Simmons sensationalized the event as he held the Klan's first cross burning, which would soon become a calling card for the organization.¹⁸ This iteration of the Klan would have significant strength in California, and during the 1920s, the state housed two headquarters, in Los Angeles and San Francisco, allowing the Klan to freely and openly recruit.¹⁹

Under Simmons' leadership, the Klan was significantly more organized than in the first wave. This was due in part to his process of collecting membership fees and appointing individuals for regional management. There were also systems in place for creating charters and hierarchies within each group.²⁰ This strong organization and coordination was a distinguishing factor of the second wave of the Klan as it allowed them to hold bigger rallies and marches.

As the second wave of the Klan grew, they gained increased power within the government. Although the Justice Department found them in violation of numerous amendments, the Klan was able to maneuver around any serious legal consequences to the organization as a whole as they had their claws deep in institutionalized power. In 1921, the U.S. House Committee called Simmons to stand and testify about Klan activities. In the session, he deflected most of the blame and attributed the outbursts of violence to extremist offshoots of the Klan. In the end, the investigation amounted to close to nothing and only increased Simmons' infamous reputation.²¹ This governmental control was crucial in further distinguishing this second wave of the Klan from other iterations. Throughout the 1920s, ten state governors and thirteen state senators had Klan ties.²² Many of these governors also had

¹⁵ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 30.

¹⁸ "Klan is Established with Impressiveness," *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 November 1919. <https://newspaperarchive.com/atlanta-constitution-nov-08-1915-p-1/>

¹⁹ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 197.

²⁰ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 34.

²¹ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 199.

²² Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission, *Ku Klux Klan*. Philip J. Rock et al. Chicago, Illinois, 1976, p. 21.

direct support from the Klan in their elections. Two of these Klan senators, from Texas and Indiana, were even investigated in the mid-1920s for their affiliations, though no negative action came from it.²³ Additionally, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at the time, Edward White, was also a former Klan member and an admitted fan of the film “The Birth of a Nation.”²⁴ He was not the only important politician who had deep ties to the film. The president at the time, Woodrow Wilson, hosted a showing of it in the White House for a select group of high-ranking officials and their families.²⁵ Although President Wilson was not a Klan member, he was an avowed white supremacist who exemplified how the Klan was able to gain footing in America. The Klan’s stranglehold over the government would largely define the second wave of the group and how they utilized their power on a larger scale.

With the Klan continuously attempting to ingrain itself into society under the second wave, mass publicity came with it. Numerous newspaper articles, such as those in New York’s *World* newspaper, were published about the Klan with clashing viewpoints and opinions about their work across America. Although many of these mainstream media sources were heavily critical of their violence and fear-mongering, the publicity was still highly beneficial for the Klan and its recruitment efforts. Simmons was aware of this exhaustive coverage and believed that it helped grow his organization.²⁶ Specifically, he felt that it propelled the Klan into the spotlight, allowing them to be noticed and investigated by Congress. The widespread dissemination of Klan reports helped to spread information about their membership process and even coupons for joining the organization. The Klan’s use of mainstream media, primarily newspapers that reported about them, would prove to be a lingering pattern that would continue well throughout the second wave and resurface during the third wave.

Another way that the Klan gained prominence was through independently publishing its own forms of media, such as newspapers, books, and pamphlets. This technique largely began in the second Klan wave, with the magazine publication of *The Fiery Cross*. Historian David J. Goldberg described how the Klan would use these forms of independent publication in order to gain sympathy from the public. He used a 1923 issue of *The Fiery Cross* utilizing mob violence as evidence and noted how authors of the Klan newspaper martyred one of their fallen members when he was killed in a 1923 riot

<https://archive.org/details/illinoislegislativeinvestigatingcommissionkukluxklanoctober1976175pp/page/n19/mode/2up?q=gov>

²³ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 199.

²⁴ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 26.

²⁵ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 26.

²⁶ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 38.

by “Catholics, Jews and Negroes.”²⁷ The author of *The Fiery Cross* issue positioned the Klan here as a peaceful pro-American group that was accosted and harassed by un-American minorities. The juxtaposition of the Klan as victims of Black American terror is ironic when considering the lynchings and systematic violence that they inflicted upon non-white Americans. Here, the Klan author completely ignored the implications of the riot and set aside any malice in preceding Klan activity, leaving the group blameless for their agitation of marginalized populations. Their publications in *The Fiery Cross* are an attempt at revising history and distorting their goals in an attempt to draw sympathy and attention from a white audience of nativist sympathizers, continuing a tradition from the first wave.

The Early Third Wave

The third wave of the Klan was established quickly after the end of World War II. Following the theatrics of earlier waves, the start of this Klan in 1946 was once again marked by a fiery cross appearing on Stone Mountain.²⁸ Samuel Green, a member of the second wave who clung to his beliefs even after the second official fall of the Klan, led this modern iteration of the Klan. For the purposes of this essay, the third wave is best understood when split into two halves, with the first being a period of strength and the second being a period of decline.

Extreme violence once again marked the first half of the third wave of the Klan. Subgroups in the Klan were created to help carry these acts out, such as the *Klavalier Klub whipping squad*.²⁹ It was a period of revival where many were eager to continue putting on public displays of hatred and bigotry. Cross-burnings and lynchings were especially common during this era, continuing a tradition from the second wave. This was also an issue locally in Southern California, as crosses were burned in the yards of Black Ventura County residents.³⁰ This violence continued a pattern from the first wave and showed some semblance of continuity across the Klan’s three distinct iterations. Due to this sudden surge in violence, the Klan faced significantly stronger political opposition from those in the federal and state governments. Politicians vowed to stunt the renewed Klan’s growth and put them down for good. Those in the Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted investigations into their affairs and tried to find ways to hold them accountable in court.³¹ This effective opposition from the institutions in power

²⁷ David J. Goldberg, “Unmasking the Ku Klux Klan: The Northern Movement against the KKK, 1920-1925,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 15, no. 4 (1996).

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502105>, p. 43.

²⁸ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 325.

²⁹ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 329.

³⁰ Frank P. Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie: A Transgenerational History of El Movimiento Chicano in Ventura County, California, 1945–1975* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), p. 23.

³¹ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 327.

proved to be a stark contrast to the dealings of the second wave of the Klan. Their dissidents were less afraid of Klan retaliation, and they found a renewed sense of confidence in taking legal action against the group, which would be a factor in the group's decline in the latter half of the century.

Ventura's Third Wave Klan

Ventura County was going through major demographic shifts in the lead-up to the second half of the third wave. Far from a majority white town, Oxnard was already a highly multiracial town that housed a large Latino majority. Many of these immigrants initially came in 1898 due to mass imports of agricultural workers for sugar beet production and citrus packing fields.³² The balance between races shifted further in the late 1940s as an increased number of Southerners were flooding the town, causing an increase in both white and Black residents.³³ This caused a growth in residential developments, along with an increased focus on segregation. Rumbblings of white agitation further sparked in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement. The movement was essential in weakening Klan power but also in stoking the flames of racial animosity. There was significant legal action being taken against the Klan, as legal authorities worked to imprison numerous Klansmen in this period for various charges, including murder, attempted murder, and illegal possession of dynamite.³⁴ These acts of social justice, paired with increasing societal change toward equal rights, helped to ostracize them from mainstream society and weaken their forces. While these events were all part of a national movement based on the East Coast, they still had considerable effect in the Ventura County area due to local figures such as John R. Hatcher III. Hatcher was the president of the Ventura National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for roughly forty years and vehemently fought against the Klan, the Confederacy, and racism as a whole throughout the late twentieth century.³⁵ Hatcher was a known activist who helped with the removal of a Confederate flag on California's Highway 101 and was actively involved with anti-racist groups during local instances of Klan violence.³⁶ His presence, and the presence of those like him, were seen as a threat by local Klan members.

With all of these moving pieces, it is possible to mark the second half of the third wave, the period this essay will primarily focus on, as somewhere in the early 1970s. Due to the effects of the

³² Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 14.

³³ Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 24.

³⁴ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 397.

³⁵ Wendy Leung, "Civil rights champion John R. Hatcher III remembered as great negotiator," *Ventura County Star*, 9 November 2017.

<https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/2017/11/09/civil-rights-champion-john-r-hatcher-iii-remembered-great-negotiator/846842001/>.

³⁶ Leung, "Civil rights champion John R. Hatcher III remembered as great negotiator," *Ventura County Star*.

Civil Rights Era, the Klan no longer had direct political control though they still asserted considerable influence with their one-sided support from the media and popular appeal strategy. The group took a parasitic approach, alongside its terror campaign, to burrow themselves into our government and society. In addition to the Klan, other hate groups were once again beginning to pop up around California, such as the California Anti-Communist League which targeted Jewish Americans in Southern California.³⁷ While Ventura County hate groups were sizably smaller than their counterparts in other Southern California cities such as Los Angeles and San Diego, the Ventura Klan was still well integrated into the community and proved to be a pervasive stain on our history.³⁸ As argued by historian Frank P. Barajas, the Klan's method of control in Oxnard was not typically violence, but rather the privilege of power in life and society.³⁹

The Oxnard Klan chapter experienced somewhat of a resurgence in 1971 when white supremacists felt emboldened to act following the end of Oxnard's school district segregation. The crux of this was a lawsuit based on racially restricted neighborhoods with parents fighting to remove the demarcation line that local policies and residential zoning laws had imposed over Oxnard's railroad tracks.⁴⁰ This movement gained significant support from local chapters of the NAACP and the Community Service Organization.⁴¹ A series of strikes that occurred between 1971 and 1974 put on by Mexican Americans who fought on behalf of better working conditions for migrant workers further angered local white supremacists.⁴² The strikes were part of the Cesar Chavez movement, as he enlisted Ventura County citrus workers into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.⁴³ The local movement also had support from the Community Service Organization and was part of the larger Chicana-Chicano identity movement. These citrus strikes largely agitated the local Klan group, allowing them to foster racial discord between migrant workers and white supremacists. Many white supremacists felt threatened by the idea of unionized farm workers as it would enable Mexican families to live better lives and therefore engage in more extracurriculars, integrating them into white social

³⁷ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 169.

³⁸ Carlos M. Larralde, "San Diego's Ku Klux Klan 1920-1980." *The Journal of San Diego History*, p. 46, no. 2 & 3 (Spring/Summer 2000). <https://sandiegohistory.org/journal/2000/april/klan/>

³⁹ Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Wendy Leung, "In Oxnard, segregation persisted for decades; library talk explores city's past racism," *Ventura County Star*, 19 September 2019. <https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/2019/09/19/segregation-oxnard-persisted-decades-ucla-professor-talk-explores-past/2342906001/>

⁴¹ Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 81.

⁴² Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 2.

⁴³ Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 139.

spheres.⁴⁴ There were additional concerns regarding housing and employment among Oxnard residents as the town's population, which was 71,225 in 1970, was rapidly growing due to increased migrant workers.⁴⁵

Looking at a notable outburst of violence in 1976 at Camp Pendleton, a marine base in Oceanside, reveals further Southern California Klan context. The incident involved at least seventeen white marine Klansmen stationed there who were openly wearing Klan badges and posting flyers with racist rhetoric around the base.⁴⁶ They were reported numerous times to base officers, but they routinely disregarded the complaints for several months. When a violent incident finally occurred following the ignored complaints, the Klansmen were finally outed to military superiors. A thorough search and interrogation were conducted, and military superiors found the Klan hoarding a secret stash of weapons. Furthermore, the Klansmen openly admitted to starting fights with Black marines in the base. Despite this, the government did not dishonorably discharge them, rather, they reassigned them to different bases around the country. The government failed to reprimand them and even put them into protective custody when they were being moved, thus concealing the identities of Klansmen who wanted to remain anonymous.⁴⁷ They effectively faced no consequences for their affiliations with hate groups and the harassment of their colleagues.

Additionally, this incident helped in revealing a trend of bias that would follow the Klan well throughout the twentieth century. When the fight was reported, Klan members who did not care about entering protective custody were interviewed by the mainstream media. While this decision was not startling on its own, there was an apparent lack of attention paid to the Black marines who were continuously harassed. The mainstream media spoke exclusively with the perpetrators, telling a one-sided version of the story. Mass media sources failed to emphasize the stories of the victims and honed in on the Klan. In an interview with *The New York Times*, one of the interviewees, Corporal

⁴⁴ Barajas, *Mexican Americans with Moxie*, p. 162.

⁴⁵ Madeline Miedema, "The Carnegie Library of Oxnard, Part 2: Post-War Growth and Outreach Programs," *Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly*, p. 37, (Winter 1992). <https://venturamuseum.org/journal-flashback/the-carnegie-library-of-oxnard-part-2-post-war-growth-and-outreach-programs/>.

⁴⁶ Everett R. Holles, "Marines in Klan Openly Abused Blacks at Pendleton, Panel Hears," *The New York Times*, 9 January 1977. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/09/archives/marines-in-klan-openly-abused-blacks-at-pendleton-panel-hears.html>.

⁴⁷ Andrew Dyer, "Podcast Explores 'forgotten' History of Ku Klux Klan at Camp Pendleton," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 December 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-podcast-ku-klux-klan-camp-pendleton-20181227-story.html>.

David Bailey Jr., stated that the Klan had “a lot more secret members, running into the hundreds here.”⁴⁸ While many celebrity Klan members, such as Tom Metzger and David Duke, who devoted their lives and careers to the Klan, would not mind their public image being tarnished, it is odd to see members of the Marines be open about their affiliations, especially when speaking with a national news outlet. This open admission of being a Klan member showed Bailey’s level of career security, as he had no fears of being discharged from the Marines. The media empowered him, as his story was prioritized over those that he harassed. His admittance of hidden Klan members in the Marines painted an image of distrust of those who should be protecting us. He tarnished the reputation of the Marines but was only able to do so with the help of the mainstream media.

A year after the fallout with the Marines, racial animosity and the festering of white hate reached a high point in Southern California. The crux of the event took place in Oxnard in 1977 when a handful of Mexican teens committed the heinous rape and murder of Paul Yenney Jr. and Linda Fiene, a young white couple. According to Fiene, they were walking nearby Channel Island High School when the three teens attacked her and her boyfriend, killing him and raping her shortly after.⁴⁹ This event was amplified and elevated in white discourse as what the Oxnard police chief called “the most vicious and brutal crime in Oxnard history.”⁵⁰ Following rhetoric like this in media coverage and local nativist sentiments towards the growing population of immigrants, issues of race were further agitated, appealing to the anger and fear of white supremacists. The Klan thrived off of the hate sowed between themselves and migrant groups, using it to manufacture division.

The Oxnard Klan Riot of 1978

Strain and unease between the Klan and local minority groups in Oxnard eventually culminated in an explosion of violence during the Oxnard Klan Riot of 1978. It was the result of decades of local anger toward migrants with the murder of Yenney Jr. acting as a crux. The event began on 30 July 1978, when local Klan members organized a showing of the film “The Birth of a Nation.” Although Klan members claimed that it was a fundraiser for the Yenney family, this would quickly become contested with testimony from the deceased’s mother. The screening of the film itself was problematic for the masses due to its strong influence in the creation of the second wave of the Klan just decades earlier. In addition to its effects on society, many detested the film itself due to its racist depictions of African Americans through the use of blackface and glamorization of Klan violence.⁵¹ Furthermore, this was

⁴⁸ Holles, “Marines in Klan Openly Abused Blacks at Pendleton,” *The New York Times*.

⁴⁹ “Victim Relives Rape and Murder,” *The Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa), 20 June 1978.

⁵⁰ “Murder Arrests Predicted,” *The Desert Sun* (Palm Springs), 24 October 1977.

<https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DS19771024.2.15&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁵¹ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 12.

not the first time that the third wave used the film as an organizing piece, so the film raised tensions regarding what may come from a public showing of it.⁵² Before the screening, anti-racist groups, such as the Progressive Labor Party, Committee Against Racism, and the Americans Against Racism, wanted to stop the screening and led a protest against the Klan outside the venue.⁵³ They were soon joined by local Mexican and Black ethnic organizations who also objected to the showing. In total, these groups numbered at least 300 Klansmen and anti-racists at the scene.⁵⁴ They eventually clashed, throwing sticks, bottles, and rocks, leading to the arrival of sixty helmeted police officers trying to end the conflict.⁵⁵ While the fight lasted hours, the efforts of the anti-racists sadly proved to be futile as the film was still shown to a crowd of roughed-up Klansmen. As for the immediate repercussions, twelve anti-racists and Klansmen were arrested, while five policemen were hospitalized.⁵⁶ Additionally, the fight led to an estimated \$5,000 worth of damage done by both sides to the Oxnard Community Center.⁵⁷ It became widely publicized once it was all over, appearing in both local and national news coverage.

The Reporting Aftermath

The ways in which reporters covered this incident were extremely important in shaping how the Klan functioned in society. When reporting the fallout of the Klan riot, the majority of mainstream media outlets decided to focus on the Klan's significance in the brawl. Similar to how the reporters acted regarding the Klan brawl at Camp Pendleton, they emphasized the opinions of the Klan, while largely relegating the anti-racists who were involved. The Klan appeared to have a stranglehold over popular newspapers, drawing their attention.

⁵² Boyce and Chunnu, *Historicizing Fear*, p. 123

⁵³ "300 Storm California Klan Group," *Courier Express* (Buffalo), 31 July 1978.

<https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=coe19780731-01.1.25&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁵⁴ "Anti-Klan Protest Leads to Melee," *The New York Times*, 31 July 1978.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/07/31/archives/antiklan-protest-leads-to-melee.html?searchResultPosition=1>

⁵⁵ "300 Storm California Klan Group," *Courier Express* (Buffalo), 31 July 1978.

<https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=coe19780731-01.1.25&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁵⁶ Gladwin Hill, "Polyglot City Is in Shock After a Melee," *The New York Times*, 3 August 1978.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/08/03/archives/polyglot-city-is-in-shock-after-a-melee-mayor-sees-a-lesson.html>

⁵⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Ku Klux Klan in Los Angeles, and anti-KKK melee in Oxnard, California*.

<https://hv.proquest.com/historyvault/docview.jsp?folderId=101790-006-0551&q=&position=-1&numResults=0&numTotalResults=>

This one-sided reporting was notable in Gladwin Hill's article in *The New York Times*, as he chose to formally interview Oxnard's Klan Den Leader, Gary Nemeth about the brawl.⁵⁸ Nemeth's opinion was recorded in the article alongside his justification for the Klan's anti-minority rhetoric. Additionally, Nemeth had his photo included in the article, proudly wearing a t-shirt bearing the words "WHITE POWER - KU KLUX KLAN."⁵⁹ This segment allowed Nemeth to spread his racist rhetoric and reasoning behind his prejudices. While the article referenced the anti-racist groups and local opposition involved, it failed to address their contributions to the brawl or provide them with a platform, as they did with the Klan. There was a notable absence of their side of the story and their organizing efforts. This inadvertently allowed the Klan to control national narratives, continuing a pattern from the second wave, and manipulating their presence on a national scale. In turn, this decision denied the anti-racist groups from having a platform to spread their message. *The New York Times* is a national news outlet, so their near-total disregard for the several anti-racist groups involved is telling of the Klan's standing in society in comparison to the anti-racist groups.

While Hill's article gave significant coverage and a platform to the Klan, it was not the only national instance where a Klan member was prioritized over their opposition regarding the riot. An article published by *The Courier Express* in Buffalo, New York, revealed that *The Associated Press* conducted a telephonic interview with Duke about why the Klan chose to show "The Birth of a Nation" in Oxnard.⁶⁰ Duke responded that it was "to make a statement for the white majority," and claimed that the funds raised from the showing would be donated to the parents of Yenney Jr., one of the teens who were killed in the years prior. The only other person who provided a statement in this article was Lieutenant Joe Hawkins of the Oxnard Police Department. Their statements were given the same treatment and were both included with equivalence, conveying the Klan's normalcy as a participant in political discourse. While this article spoke with the Klan and institutions in power, it again failed to address the position of the anti-racist groups or speak with them.

To contrast these instances, one can turn to more local newspapers such as the *Desert Sun*, published in Palm Springs. When reporting the riot, they emphasized a conversation reporters held about racial issues with Manny Soria, an Oxnard community representative.⁶¹ They also included the apprehensions of local minority leaders about how the mixed status of Oxnard could lead to increased white agitation. With these factors, the article's inclusion of an interview with Metzger, California's Director of the Klan, feels much more balanced. Metzger was one of the most prolific Klan members in

⁵⁸ Hill, "Polyglot City Is in Shock After a Melee."

⁵⁹ Hill, "Polyglot City Is in Shock After a Melee."

⁶⁰ "300 Storm California Klan Group," *Courier Express*.

⁶¹ Barbara Riegelhaupt, "KKK invades Oxnard," *Desert Sun* (Palm Springs), 4 August 1978. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DS19780804.2.54&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN----->

California's third wave, acting as the Grand Dragon of the state.⁶² Part of his duties included organizing the event, and in the article, he claimed that high murder and rape statistics in Oxnard were to blame for the Klan's presence.⁶³ Further, Metzger also claimed that the Klan had an "active group" and a "higher profile" in Oxnard compared to other cities. This local newspaper's decision to include testimony from both sides of the clash is essential in denying the Klan the opportunity to control national narratives. It tells a more complete story and helps to break the chain of Klan media manipulation in national news coverage.

Local newspapers were not the only ones to deviate from the mold of focusing on the Klan, as this also occurred in ethnic newspapers. *La Cucaracha*, a Chicano Colorado-based newspaper, chose to ignore the Klan as an institution in their reporting of the incident and instead focused on the local Chicano community and those affected.⁶⁴ The newspaper discussed how the Klan claimed they were fundraising for the Yenney family, the young couple killed in 1977. Rather than giving the Klan a platform and taking their opinion in this matter, they spoke with the parents of the young couple. In this interview, Yenney's parents revealed that they "knew nothing of the benefit of the movie and would not accept anything from...the Klan."⁶⁵ This is crucial to analyzing the news coverage of the riot as the family's lack of input became increasingly apparent upon a reading of mainstream coverage. The family's vehement refusal of the Klan's monetary assistance was not disclosed in any of the dominant newspapers mentioned above. This shift of focus to center on the victims, rather than the perpetrators, reveals inherent biases that plague the media. Other newspapers failed to incorporate victims into their narratives, providing a one-sided telling of events. Furthermore, *La Cucaracha* succeeded where others did not as they presented public opinions of the event, stating how "people feel that the Klan members are trying to exploit the charges filed on the Chicano youths to attract new followers."⁶⁶ The stark contrast in reporting styles from *La Cucaracha* to newspapers such as *The New York Times* reveals how mainstream coverage has failed to uplift local citizens that the Klan had harmed and instead perpetuated the interests of the Klan by giving them a voice.

In the aftermath of the Oxnard Klan Riot, the Klan's habit of media manipulation once again presented itself. In several instances, the Klan utilized the media's coverage of the riot to spread their messages and fearmonger. Newspapers gave white supremacists powerful means to spread hate, and some even included direct threats from Klan members. In one of Metzger's interviews following the

⁶² Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 78.

⁶³ Riegelhaupt, "KKK invades Oxnard," *Desert Sun*.

⁶⁴ "KKK Rally Ends in Violence," *La Cucaracha* (Pueblo), 7 August 1978.

<https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=LCP19780807-02.2.35&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxCO%7ctxTA-----0----->

⁶⁵ "KKK Rally Ends in Violence," *La Cucaracha*.

⁶⁶ "KKK Rally Ends in Violence," *La Cucaracha*.

riot, he was quoted saying “Next time we will react. If they get near us, we will do whatever is necessary to stop them...That means violence.”⁶⁷ By publishing this quote, the *San Bernardino Sun* unintentionally played into Klan antics and disseminated their hateful messaging. They allowed Metzger to publicly practice hate speech and attempt to terrify the community.

The mainstream media’s interaction with the Klan throughout the 1970s was negligent in many ways as it gave them a sense of security. By disallowing Klan leaders from fearing publicity, they had no concerns regarding rejection or societal exile from the public. They were open about their identity, as further evidenced by Nemeth’s photo in the newspaper. He, alongside Duke and Metzger, made no attempt to remain anonymous and were instead proud of their nativist views. Additionally, Nemeth’s interview provided considerable insight into his personal life, detailing his age, home, and city of birth.⁶⁸ This inclination to exposure reveals how the Klan remained openly adamant about their views, even in the age of racial equality. They had no apprehensions about being known Klan members, showing their confidence in their personal safety. This continued lack of social ostracization of the Klan from society can be seen as a side effect of their pervasive nature.

Alternative Forms of Media

Although the first issue of *The Fiery Cross* was published back in the 1920s, it went on hiatus between the second and third waves of the Klan and witnessed a resurrection in the 1970s. With its revival, alongside other Klan-published writings, these original publications were used by the third wave to disseminate white supremacist propaganda and rally against minorities.⁶⁹ This iteration of *The Fiery Cross*, published by a Klan subset known as the United Klans of America, attacked Jewish, Black, and queer Americans by depicting them as sources of moral decay. Another important piece of Klan publication that was spread in the third wave was *The Crusader*, started by Duke with help from other individuals who worked in later publications of *The Fiery Cross*.⁷⁰ The independent Klan newspaper worked in similar ways to *The Fiery Cross* as they both degraded their enemies in the public sphere. As mentioned above, gaining sympathy and lessening opposition from the public was an important Klan goal that they hoped to also achieve through the use of independently published newspapers and influence in the mainstream media. The papers published hoped to harm the reputation of these

⁶⁷ “Anti-Klan melee is blamed on outsiders,” *San Bernardino Sun*, 1 August 1978.

[https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SBS19780801.1.5&srpos=7&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-oxnard+klan-
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⁶⁸ Hill, “Polyglot City Is in Shock After a Melee,” *The New York Times*.

⁶⁹ John Drabble, “From White Supremacy to White Power: The FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE, and the Nazification of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s,” *American Studies* 48, no. 3, (2007). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40644149>, p. 59.

⁷⁰ Drabble, “From White Supremacy to White Power,” p. 62.

minority groups and turn white Americans against them. Their choices here mirrored the actions of the first two waves of the Klan and showed how they always had a hand in independent media. For the third wave specifically, this went hand-in-hand with their attempted manipulation of the mainstream press. It allowed them to have a two-pronged approach to the media consumption of white Americans.

Post-Oxnard Klan Riot

A year after the Oxnard Klan Riot, Tom Metzger held Klan patrols of the Mexican border.⁷¹ His makeshift border patrol unit wore uniforms and was armed with chemical mace and clubs, ready to attack any potential illegal immigrants who attempted to cross the border. While his success rate was not accurately recorded, there was a record of his group running into interference by citizens of the area who detested his racially motivated border management. Although these incidents typically did not end in extreme violence, it was an example of Metzger attempting to fearmonger and spark publicity.

California Klan violence did not stop at the turn of the decade and seeped into the 1980s. An early notable instance occurred when an armed protest broke out on 15 March 1980, taking place in Oceanside, California.⁷² The fight spiraled out of a Klan parade in a mixed-race neighborhood. Metzger organized this event, rallying together thirty Klansmen to hear his speech.⁷³ As locals heard about the event, they joined in protest, throwing rocks and bottles at the Klansmen. As agitation grew, a fight broke out between the Klan and the 150 protestors.⁷⁴ Although no arrests were made, the event led to seven injuries and the death of a Klansman's dog. The fight was another major incident of Klan violence in the third wave and was quite similar to the events in Oxnard's Klan riot.

In the same year, just a few months after the Oceanside protest, Metzger formed the California Knights of the KKK. It was a subset of the Klan, and although it was only active for two years, it gained a reputation for the targeting of Hispanics and Vietnamese immigrants in California.⁷⁵

While Metzger's border patrol, the Oceanside Riot, and the new iteration of the Klan may all seem disconnected from one another in the context of this essay, it is important to recall all of these instances as they directly preceded Metzger's political career. In 1980, Metzger announced he would be running for a seat in the United States Congress. Although it was a lofty goal, he was able to secure the

⁷¹ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 78.

⁷² De León, "Tom Metzger," *New York Times*.

⁷³ Mark Forster, "Klan, Angry Crowd Clash in Oceanside," *The Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 1980. <https://latimes.newspapers.com/article/the-los-angeles-times-klk-16-march-1980/22909448/>

⁷⁴ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 78.

⁷⁵ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 114.

Democratic primary with at least 33,000 votes.⁷⁶ Despite this turnout, he still lost the overall election but would be far from deterred from politics. Two short years later, in 1982, he began a bid for the United States Senate, earning approximately 75,593 votes in the process.⁷⁷ He was again unsuccessful, but his ability to garner tens of thousands of votes is quite shocking. It is appalling to consider his wide voting base when factoring in his heavy Klan activity just months before the election. As mentioned above, Metzger was consistently eager to showcase his Klan affiliations when interviewed and never shied away from the spotlight.⁷⁸ Through his ability to win a primary election, it is clear that the Klan still had some political power, despite struggling to hold the same amount of governmental influence that they had during their first two iterations. Unfortunately, his bid for government was only one of many that showed renewed efforts at an older strategy of political control. Furthermore, the support Metzger received from the public exemplifies how the Klan was still not fully outcast in the 1980s despite the social backlash that they faced. His relation to white supremacy groups was not seen as a hindrance, as he clearly had support from some part of the public.

Much of Metzger's power came from the media and more specifically his ability to utilize it. His constant press coverage mythologized him and helped to solidify his infamous status. Without his constant interviews and interactions with the press, he likely would have been unable to garner the tens of thousands of votes he had throughout various elections. As previously mentioned, the press typically had a positive influence on the Klan, with Simmons attributing the press' constant coverage to spikes in new second-wave Klan membership.⁷⁹ It seems as though the work of the mainstream media in the late 1970s had a similar effect in securing white nativist support for Metzger's work and political career as his political career was a direct result of the press he received.

The Lingering Effects of the Mainstream Media's Coverage Today

Through a thorough analysis of mainstream media reporting patterns, it has become obvious that the Klan was still active throughout the 1970s. Although this does not mean that society accepted them with open arms, it comes with the pretext that it was virtually impossible to report incidents involving the Klan's actions without taking down their opinions. While their inclusion was seemingly uncontested in the past, we can raise the question today of "Why was American society so intensely fascinated with the thoughts of the Klan?" Such an outpouring of Klan interviews itself has been

⁷⁶ Concepción De León, "Tom Metzger, 82, Who was a Notorious White Supremacist: [Biography]," *New York Times*, 14 November 2020.

<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tom-metzger-82-who-was-notorious-white/docview/2460220302/se-2>.

⁷⁷ Newton, *The Ku Klux Klan*, p. 78.

⁷⁸ Riegelhaupt, "KKK invades Oxnard," *Desert Sun*.

⁷⁹ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 38.

revealing. The mainstream media did not discriminate when consulting Klan members, as they spoke with anyone from low-level members such as Exalted Cyclops David Bailey Jr. to California's Grand Dragon Metzger. Due to this, it has not been difficult to locate Klan discourse and dialogue as it has flooded local and national news outlets. Their stories were sensationalized with a strong emphasis on the group's leaders, leading to an American infatuation with the Klan. That inclusion is all the more significant when contrasted with the treatment of anti-racist activists of the era.

It has proven to be surprisingly troublesome to find information on notable anti-racists in town, such as John R. Hatcher III. Hatcher is perhaps one of twentieth-century Ventura's most important civil rights activists. Still, narratives on his life-long battle against racism have proven to be scarce in comparison to the vast knowledge readily available regarding the Klan. His story was largely obscured due to a Klan-oriented focus, proving similar to the media's treatment of anti-racist groups during the Oxnard Klan Riot. He was even involved in restoring peace during the Oxnard Klan Riot.⁸⁰ Due to Hatcher's lasting impact on the community, President Joe Biden recently named Oxnard's post office after him in an act of commemoration.⁸¹ Despite all of this, a deep dive into his life and work in the Civil Rights Movement fails to be easily accessible to the public. The disparity between the reporting of local Klan activity and Hatcher's work is painfully apparent as a quick search of his name only reveals posthumous articles. While this is not to say that mainstream society has forgotten him, as he has a strong legacy and remains a pillar in anti-racist history, the one-sided reporting habits of the mainstream media have led to his work being largely unreported when it happened. While his story adds another dimension to the history of racism and anti-racism in the area, it has been painfully concealed by the media's inherent focus on the Klan itself that has been present in the last few decades. Oddly enough, the media's focus and reporting habits have had a drastic shift over time.

Conclusion

With the fiftieth anniversary of the Oxnard Klan Riot of 1978 just a few years away, it is important to look back on how the Klan operated in what could largely be seen as their last big local push for relevancy. A quick overview of how reporters covered their actions is quite revealing but does not fully elucidate their standing in society. Key contextual factors are crucial in looking back at Klan activity

⁸⁰ Wendy Leung, "Civil rights champion John R. Hatcher III remembered as great negotiator," *Ventura County Star*, 9 November 2017.

<https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/2017/11/09/civil-rights-champion-john-r-hatcher-iii-remembered-great-negotiator/846842001/>

⁸¹ Dawn Megli, "Biden signs bill to name Oxnard post office after local civil rights leader," *Ventura County Star*, 29 December 2022.

<https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/2022/12/29/oxnard-post-office-renamed-for-john-hatcher-local-civil-rights-leader/69764720007/>

and even analyzing current action by white supremacists. While the Klan encounters significantly less governmental support today, members are still trying to gain positions of power. Just a few years ago, David Duke, who had a lengthy political history, had an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate.⁸² Their persistence in attempting to gain positions of power serves as a constant reminder of their existence. Despite the Klan being effectively driven underground, as of 2022, there were still 103 recognized hate groups in California.⁸³ This list includes many white nationalist groups, including the proudly anti-immigrant group Californians for Population Stabilization, based out of Ventura County. While the modern-day media and institutionalized power have routinely detested groups like these, it is apparent that nativist groups are unfortunately ever-present.

⁸² Melinda Deslatte, “Ex-KKK Leader David Duke Runs for Senate: ‘My Time Has Come,’” *Associated Press*, 22 July 2016, <https://apnews.com/article/8ef9762cc2fe4ccfa059c2d9beb9dc43>.

⁸³ “Groups in California,” Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d. <https://www.splcenter.org/states/california>.