

## A Farmer and the Ku Klux Klan in Northwest Iowa

Dorothy Schwieder

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# A Farmer and the Ku Klux Klan in Northwest Iowa

DOROTHY SCHWIEDER

ON A COLD SUNDAY AFTERNOON in January 1925, a young farmer in northwest Iowa sat down to write a letter to his girlfriend, some 110 miles away. As he had done many times before, the young man wrote about the laborious nature of farm work, the activities of his parents and four siblings with whom he lived, and his many social engagements in and around Marathon in Buena Vista County. But he also wrote about an unusual activity for an Iowa farmer, his membership in the local Ku Klux Klan. In the letter written that snowy January day, John Smith described a situation that had become a familiar refrain in his letters to Sarah Brown: "Well, we have got our Klan all fixed up again and we are all right . . . but I sure do get tired of the way they quarrel among themselves."<sup>1</sup>

In the many letters—196 in all—that John wrote to Sarah from January 1924 to early 1927, John typically described Klan activity not only in Marathon, but also in nearby communities. His letters present an image of a restless young man who joined

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1. John Smith, Marathon, to Sarah Brown, Boone, 11 January 1925. At the request of John's daughter, I have used fictitious names for all persons in the article. All of the letters used in the article were written by John to Sarah. I received the letters from a nephew of John Smith; copies are in my possession. Letters written by Sarah to John during the same period were not in the collection. In his letters, John mentions several times that Sarah also belonged to the Klan, but her membership was in the Boone konklave. I thank John's nephew for informing me of the letters and his daughter for permission to use them and to allow this article to be published.

the Klan at age 19 and who, for at least three years, was enmeshed in Klan activities and doctrine. John's letters do not provide a systematic account of Klan meetings or the issues discussed there, but they do provide insight into certain aspects of Klan activity, particularly the difficulties the Ku Klux Klan encountered in sustaining a viable organization in Marathon. Equally important, the letters present the thoughts and feelings of a young Iowa Klan member who had a love-hate relationship with the Invisible Empire in the mid-1920s.

Several themes regarding Klan activity in northwest Iowa emerge from John's letters. Most evident is that the Klan's attention there was directed toward Catholics. John left no doubt that he viewed Catholics as the Klan's main target and saw them as people he could not trust.<sup>2</sup> Part of John's antipathy toward Catholics was related to bootlegging activities that apparently went on in the Marathon area. John believed that Catholics were responsible for the bootlegging. The second major theme in John's letters is the constant dissension experienced by the Marathon Klan. Klan members there seemed to spend most of their time squabbling among themselves, being called on the carpet by state Klan officials, and fending off attempts at takeovers by the larger Klan konklave (the term for local units) at Storm Lake. Given all the Klan's squabbles and disagreements, the Marathon konklave had a lot of trouble simply staying organized. A third theme in the letters is the conflict engendered by the Klan in the larger community, particularly conflict involving the local Methodist church.

John's descriptions of Klan activity in the Marathon area in the mid-1920s suggest that Klan members there were involved in an exercise in futility. This is not to deny the seriousness of their prejudicial behavior and hostile attitudes toward Catho-

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2. References to anti-Catholic views are replete throughout Klan literature. See, for example, David A. Horowitz, ed., *Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Carbondale, IL, 1999), 5–6; Robert A. Goldberg, "Denver: Queen City of the Colorado Realm," in *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*, ed. Shawn Lay (Urbana, IL, 1992), 44–45; Shawn Lay, "Imperial Outpost on the Border: El Paso's Frontier Klan No. 100," *ibid.*, 84–85; and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1994), 94–95.

lics; those behaviors and attitudes stand out in the letters John wrote. But in assessing the Klan's success or failure in making its discriminatory views manifest, in attracting new Klan members, and in promoting such practices as "klannishness" (supporting businesses owned by Klan members and providing assistance to fellow members), John's letters indicate that the Marathon Klan accomplished little. Klan members there did spend a lot of time venting their hostility toward Catholics, but except for several cross burnings, a few parades by robed members, and informing county sheriffs of the location of several alcohol-producing stills, the Klan achieved few objectives.

AT THE TIME JOHN SMITH JOINED THE KLAN, he had lived in Buena Vista County for three years. He was born in Illinois in 1904, the oldest of five children, and attended school there through the ninth grade. His parents left their farm in Illinois in 1920 to rent a farm 2½ miles north of Marathon. By 1924, when he began writing to Sarah, John was living at home and working on the family's rented farm. In his letters to Sarah, he described his involvement with all types of farm work, including both daily chores and seasonal tasks, indicating that his work was central to running the farming operation. On two occasions from 1924 through 1926, his parents returned to Illinois for three-week visits, and on several other occasions they spent two or three days away from the farm. At those times John performed all of the farm chores as well as caring for his younger siblings.<sup>3</sup> Although John had a busy social life, including his Klan activities, farm work clearly took precedence over any other activity. From his letters, John appears to have been a thoughtful, helpful son who often placed his parents' interests before his own.

The town that John Smith and his family had settled near was a small but economically viable community in 1920. Founded in 1882 by the Chicago and North Western Railroad, Marathon was no boom town, but it had experienced "a steady substantial growth." Ten years after its founding, the town had 600 people and more than forty stores and shops; by then it had become a sizable retail trade center in northeastern Buena Vista

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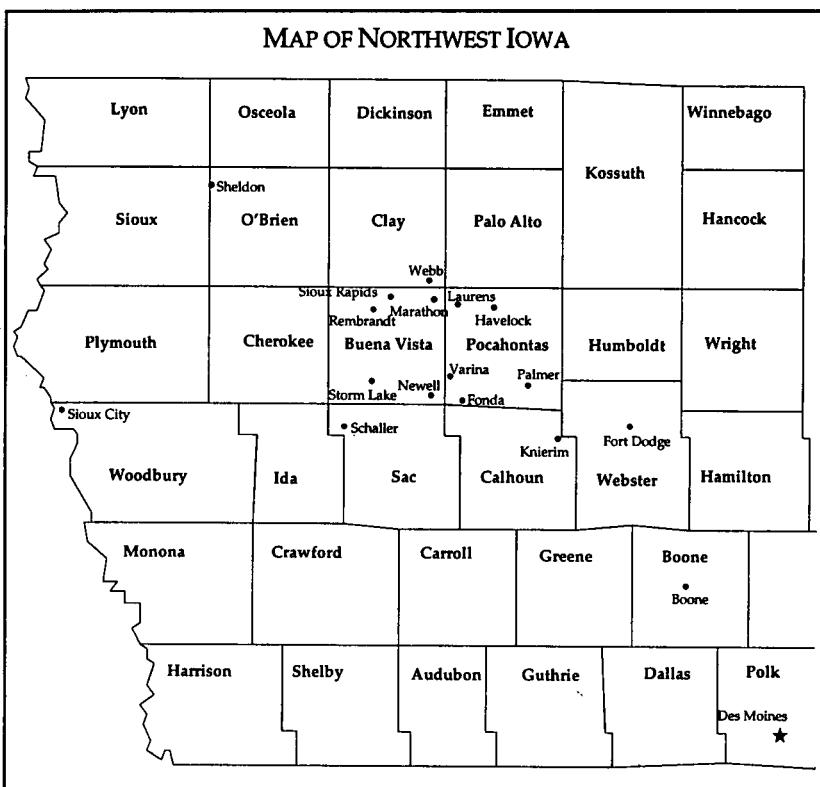
3. John to Sarah, 12 September 1925, 11 July 1926, 12 August 1926.

County. Marathon contained most, if not all, of the goods and services needed for its surrounding farming operations and their families' domestic needs. In 1920, businesses along main street included several general merchandise stores, a cream station, a lumberyard, an automobile dealer, a hardware store, several real estate agents, a barber, several restaurants, a drug store, a hotel, two banks, auto repair shops, a meat market, a grain dealer, a shoe store, a building contractor, and a harness maker and livery stable. Marathon also had some businesses that, while not essential, provided a shopping advantage for the town, including a jewelry store, a dry cleaning establishment, and two furniture stores. The town, moreover, included a variety of skilled craftsmen. The professional class was also represented by three physicians, a veterinarian, several ministers, a lawyer, a newspaper editor, and a number of public school teachers. Given the presence of these main street businesses and professional firms in 1920, area residents were apparently well served by the small retail trade center. Nonetheless, the town's trading area was limited; five other towns—Webb, Rembrandt, Albert City, Sioux Rapids, and Laurens—were located within a twelve-mile radius. Even with competition from neighboring communities, however, Marathon appeared to be holding its own; in 1920, the year the Smith family arrived in the area, the town's population still totaled 520, and its diversified business community remained intact.<sup>4</sup>

The town also offered a variety of social activities, evidenced by its many social, fraternal, and religious organizations. In 1902 the I.O.O.F. Lodge constructed a three-story opera house that served not only as a meeting place for the Odd Fellows but also as a center of community life for more than twenty years. One former resident recalled that "about everything that took place in Marathon took place in the opera house." The building served as the meeting place for various lodges, including the Modern Woodmen of America, the Masons, the Eastern Star, and the Rebekah Lodge. Along with its meeting rooms, the opera house included a theater where traveling repertory com-

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4. Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, manuscript census schedules for Marathon; *Marathon—Yesterday and Today* (Laurens, 1979), 10.



panies performed. By 1906, Marathon had its own high school, and soon graduates were holding alumni banquets in the opera house. Other town facilities included an American Legion post and a public library opened in 1920. During the teens and twenties, Marathon citizens also had the opportunity to attend Chautauqua performances.<sup>5</sup>

Like surrounding small towns, Marathon had several churches. The Methodist Episcopal church, where the Smith family worshiped, was established in 1882, the same year as the town's founding. In 1884 local residents built a Lutheran church, and the Evangelical Free church opened its door the same year. Sometime in the 1880s or 1890s, a Baptist congregation was organized but it did not survive. Later, in 1924, a United Pentecostal congregation built a church. Like a number of other small

5. *Marathon*, 15, 16, 25.

towns in the area, including Rembrandt, Webb, and Albert City, Marathon did not have a Catholic church. In fact, according to the state census of 1925, in all of Buena Vista County there was only one Catholic church, located in Newell, and one Catholic mission, located in Sioux Rapids.<sup>6</sup>

Marathon's ethnic composition was typical of many other midwestern communities in the teens and twenties. Like the majority of Marathon citizens, the Smith family members were all native-born, with the parents and four oldest children born in Illinois (the youngest son was born in Iowa) and both sets of grandparents also born in Illinois. Despite the predominance of native-born residents, the community still had a distinct ethnic flavor given the presence of a large number of first- and second-generation immigrants from Sweden. Foreign-born residents accounted for approximately 17 percent of Marathon's population in 1920; 65 of those (roughly 12.5 percent of the total population) were born in Sweden.

FOUR YEARS AFTER ARRIVING IN IOWA, twenty-year-old John Smith appeared to be well integrated into the Marathon community. He owned a car, which allowed him to leave the farm, independent of his parents. Along with his parents and siblings, he belonged to the Methodist Episcopal church in

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6. *Buena Vista County History, 1858–1958* (Storm Lake, 1984), 103–6; *Census of Iowa for the Year 1925*, 707. The Catholic Mission at Sioux Rapids officially became a parish in 1947.

7. Fourteenth Census of the United States; C. H. Wegerslev and Thomas Walpole, *Past and Present of Buena Vista County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1909), 114. In addition to the 65 Swedish-born residents, 143 residents' fathers had been born in Sweden. Other foreign-born residents included 8 people born in England, 5 in Canada, 4 in Germany, and 1 each in Denmark and Norway. The census also listed 4 Russian-born males, all railroad laborers; they were likely temporary residents as five years later they were no longer in the community. First- and second-generation immigrants from Sweden dominated other areas of northeastern Buena Vista County as well. Albert City in particular was a predominantly Swedish-American community: a county history described it as "a Swedish town in every sense of the word," and local residents claimed that the town contained only three or four families of nationalities other than Swedish. Poland Township, where the Smith farm was located, contained 639 residents (excluding Marathon), with the township's nativity record reflecting that of Marathon: 62 residents had been born in Sweden, 4 in Denmark, 3 each in Canada, Germany, and England, and 1 in Austria. See 1920 federal census.

Marathon, where he participated in Sunday School and Epworth League, a Methodist young people's organization, as well as attending church services on Sunday morning, all on a fairly regular basis. At Epworth League, he took his turn as group leader. The Methodist Episcopal church strongly opposed the manufacture and consumption of alcohol, and John's letters to Sarah made it clear that he shared those views. John also belonged to the Marathon chapter of the Modern Woodmen of America, a national fraternal society founded in Lyons, Iowa, in 1883, and he seemed to be a fairly active member. The Smith family had relatives in the area, and the families often visited back and forth. On several occasions, John helped an aunt and uncle with farm chores, and in 1925 he joined 37 other people at a family reunion in Laurens.<sup>8</sup>

Historians have traditionally described farm families as socially and physically isolated in the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> John and his family did not fit that description, however. Not only did all members of the family go to town often, but John, at least, was well informed regarding state and national events. The family subscribed to the *Des Moines Register* (but apparently not on Sundays) and John often asked Sarah if she had read about certain events or political issues. When John wrote to Sarah on a Sunday, which he usually did, he almost always mentioned buying a copy of the Sunday *Register* in Marathon. The Smith family also owned a radio by 1924.

John spent considerable time with other young people. Occasionally he wrote that he had attended events away from home almost every night of the week. Often, though, work interfered with his social life. In February 1925 he wrote that he had been invited to a party in Laurens but had shelled corn all day and was too tired to go. In addition to attending meetings of the Modern Woodmen of America and the Klan, John went to local

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8. John to Sarah, 24 August 1924, 21 January, 8 February, and 9 April 1925, and 6 June 1926.

9. See, for example, William Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900–1920* (Port Washington, NY, 1974), 63–64; and Dorothy Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s: Conflict and Continuity," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1983), 104–27. The *Report of the Country Life Commission* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1911), discusses the loneliness and isolation of farm women.

high school football and basketball games, high school plays, and, along with friends in Marathon, movies and private parties. Clearly John was well integrated socially into his community; he was not living an isolated life on the fringes of society.<sup>10</sup>

While John attended events in Buena Vista County, his thoughts often centered on his girlfriend, Sarah, who in the mid-1920s lived and worked in Boone. At the time she moved there, her parents lived in Marathon. Sarah had been born on a farm near Knierim in Calhoun County in 1907, the second of five children. The Browns' farming venture in Calhoun County proved unsuccessful, and in 1917 the family moved to North Dakota, where they rented a farm; after experiencing crop failure there, they returned to Iowa in October 1920. In Marathon, Sarah's father, Samuel, set up a small shop where he repaired harnesses. Sarah, described in a family history as a "quiet, reserved, gentle" person, left home "at an early age" to live with a relative in Marathon; according to the 1925 state census, she had an eighth grade education. Although Sarah lived apart from her parental family during some of her teen years, the family history indicates that she remained emotionally close to her parents and siblings and corresponded with them regularly. It is not clear when John and Sarah met, but by January 7, 1924 (the date of the first letter in the collection) Sarah was working in a hosiery mill in Boone. When possible, she returned to Marathon to visit relatives and to spend time with John.<sup>11</sup> She supported the Klan in Boone, probably as a member of the auxiliary. Sarah's letters to John were not included in the collection, so it is difficult to know the extent of her commitment to the Klan. In his letters, John sometimes urged Sarah to attend Klan meetings in Boone, implying that her attendance was not regular.<sup>12</sup>

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10. John to Sarah, 6 February, 12 September, 4 October, and 8 November 1925.

11. The preceding information was obtained from a 1984 privately published history of Sarah's family. To maintain confidentiality, I have not included the author or title of the family history. The family history lists Sarah's birth year as 1905, but according to the 1925 census, she was 18 at the time. If the census is correct, Sarah was born in 1907.

12. Officially, only men could be members of the Klan, but women joined as members of auxiliary groups or women's units. For a full treatment of women's role in the KKK, see Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, CA, 1991).

In Marathon, John frequently visited Sarah's father in his workplace, and his letters to Sarah sometimes included news about her father. Apparently the two men got along well and sometimes traveled out of town together. At least once, Samuel Brown accompanied John to a Klan meeting, although there is no evidence that Samuel joined the Klan.<sup>13</sup>

Following a long courtship, Sarah and John married in 1930 and moved to Illinois, where they rented a farm. They remained there only a short time and then moved to Sioux City. There John found employment at the stockyards, where he worked until he retired some 35 years later. The Smiths had one daughter.

THE SO-CALLED SECOND KLAN that John Smith joined in 1923 had emerged in Georgia less than a decade before. In 1915 William Joseph Simmons, previously employed as a circuit rider for the Methodist Episcopal Church and as a professional fraternal organizer, had formulated plans for the new organization. His outline for an organization he had long thought about—a new fraternity called the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan—drew on his knowledge of the first Klan that had existed in the South after the Civil War as well as his knowledge of fraternal organizations. From the latter experience he recognized "the drawing power of secrecy, ritual, mystery, and weird nomenclature." On Thanksgiving Day, 1915, Simmons and a small group announced the rebirth of the Klan as they burned a cross atop Stone Mountain. A short time later the state of Georgia issued a charter for the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>14</sup>

With charter in hand, Simmons began to seek members for his new group. He attracted several thousand people to the Klan, but memberships rose more rapidly after he linked up with two other southerners. His new associates, Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, were partners in the Southern Publicity Association, which raised funds for groups such as the Red Cross and the Anti-Saloon League. A major incentive for Simmons, Clarke, and Tyler—and subsequently for their solicitors—was

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13. John to Sarah, 30 October 1924.

14. Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington, KY, 1965), 2-3; Lay, "Introduction: The Second Invisible Empire," in *The Invisible Empire in the West*, 6.

the possibility of making money by securing new members. The initial fee for joining the Klan was ten dollars, nearly a week's wages for a farm laborer in the early 1920s. According to an agreement between Simmons, Clarke, and Tyler, two dollars of that amount went to Simmons and eight went to Clarke and Tyler, who were then responsible for paying other solicitors as well as their own expenses and clerical and secretarial help.<sup>15</sup>

The Klan had strict membership requirements and a set creed. Potential members had to be at least 18 years old, male, white, native-born, and Protestant; and they had to swear to uphold the Klan's creed, which included working for "100 percent Americanism" and promoting "patriotism and 'old time religion.'" Klan members, moreover, had to swear to "support 'native, white, Protestant supremacy.'" The creed included practicing klannishness, promoting moral purity and moral uplift in one's community (especially working for the prohibition of alcohol), opposing immigration, and condemning what the Klan saw as the encroaching powers of the Catholic church. Members were also to counteract the influence of African Americans and Jews. Klan memberships were secret, and meetings had a heavy militaristic tenor with an emphasis on drilling and parading. By 1924, the Klan also began working to elect political candidates, including school board officials, who were Klan members or non-members who agreed with Klan beliefs. As kleagles or solicitors traveled the country disseminating information about the Klan's creed and objectives, Americans responded in huge numbers. Indiana had the highest number of Klan members, estimated at 300,000 in the mid-1920s, while in the country as a whole as many as five million people joined the Klan.<sup>16</sup>

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15. MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 5; Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, 4–6, 7–8; *The Value of a Dollar* (Millerton, NY, 1999), 139. According to Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), 92, 212n, during the time that D. C. Stephenson was Grand Dragon, \$5 went to the national organization, \$2.50 went to a recruiting agent or kleagle, and \$2.50 went to Stephenson, who made more than \$250,000 from dues, which he used to "support a life-style that was grossly at odds with the traditional values for which the Klan claimed to stand."

16. MacLean, *Behind the Mask*, 5–6; Kay Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa: A Study in Intolerance" (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1967), 15; Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, xii, 46.

Determining why the Klan had such appeal in the teens and twenties is more difficult than defining their creed. Historian Shawn Lay believes that the reemergence of the Klan in 1915 can be attributed partly to changes in the way Americans viewed the first Klan. In 1905 Thomas Dixon wrote a best-selling novel, *The Clansman*, which in 1915 was made into the movie, *Birth of a Nation*. Lay believes that the movie, seen by many Americans, rationalized and romanticized the activities of the original Klan. About five years later, the KKK received national publicity, both through a series of articles in the *New York World* and through congressional hearings in Washington. That publicity, although negative, resulted in more men joining the Klan, and the forming of klaverns in the Midwest, New York state, and along the Pacific Coast.<sup>17</sup>

Historians also cite national unrest in the teens and twenties as a reason for the Klan's popularity. In 1917 the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia provoked a Red Scare in America as people feared the spread of socialistic ideas. In 1919 Americans everywhere witnessed an epidemic of strikes by American workers; in that year alone, some 3,600 strikes took place involving more than 4 million workers. Then, in 1920, the Census Bureau found that more than 14 million foreign-born people resided in the United States; many had come from Catholic countries in southern and eastern Europe. For many Americans, joining the Klan, a group that pledged to promote traditional values, conventional morality, and old-time religion, seemed to promise a return to a quieter, less contentious society.<sup>18</sup>

Just as there are differing explanations for the rise of the Klan in the 1920s, historians also have expressed different views regarding its activities, its members' backgrounds and motivations, and its impact on American society. The traditional interpretation portrays Klan members as backward people from rural areas who led parochial lives, held fundamentalist religious views, and resisted changing values, especially those they perceived to be urban values. The Klan, moreover, was portrayed as anti-black, anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, and anti-immigrant,

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17. Lay, "Introduction," in *The Invisible Empire in the West*, 7–8.

18. Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames, 1996), 164–65.

and as a group that used violence and vigilante methods to intimidate and coerce those they believed were un-American.<sup>19</sup>

Beginning in the mid-1980s, revisionist historians began to portray the second Klan in ways that departed dramatically from this traditional view. The revisionist historian Leonard Moore writes in his study of the 1920s Klan in Indiana that Klansmen came from every walk and station of life, not just poor, rural folk; and they belonged to mainstream Protestant churches, not just the fundamentalist ranks. While acknowledging the strong anti-Catholic feelings of Klan members, Moore portrays them as citizens who worked for civic and political betterment, much as participants in mainstream contemporary reform movements did. He notes that Klan members eventually turned to politics in efforts to elect candidates who were responsive to the electorate and who promised to work to eliminate political corruption and improve public education. Studies of the Klan in Oregon and in some southwestern states emphasize the same revisionist views of Klan activity in the 1920s. These revisionist studies' emphasis on the second Klan's anti-Catholicism and prohibitionist views and activities—rather than more extreme, racist, and violent attitudes and actions—reflects the dominant themes in the Marathon Klan.<sup>20</sup>

With the Klan's spread into the Midwest, konklaves began to appear in large and small Iowa communities. In 1920 a Klan organizer was active in Delaware County, perhaps the first such

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19. Influential traditional interpretations of the rise of the second Klan include John Moffatt Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York, 1924); and Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*. For a historiographical review of the traditional and revisionist interpretations, see Leonard J. Moore, "Historical Interpretations of the 1920s Klan: The Traditional View and Recent Revisions," in Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West*.

20. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 32, 36–37, 45. Also in the revisionist camp are Horowitz, ed., *Inside the Klavern*; Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West*; and Richard K. Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross: The Rise and Fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Middle America* (Hamden, CT, 1991). Robert Neymeyer, "The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s in the Midwest and West: A Review Essay," *Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 625–33, briefly summarizes the changes in historical views toward the Klan and provides a review of the books by Moore, Lay, and Tucker as well as Kathleen Blee's *Women of the Klan*. See also Robert Neymeyer, "In the Full Light of Day: The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Iowa," *Palimpsest* 76 (1995), 56–63, and the accompanying photo essay, "Images of the Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 64–75.

effort in the state. The following year, organizer J. G. Ellstrot claimed to have signed up a thousand members in Des Moines in five months. Within a year of the Des Moines activity, organizers began moving out into neighboring counties. In 1923 the Klan initiated a strong push for additional members, and by 1923 and 1924, "twenty field men were working every part of the state and the Klan was 'growing like a weed.'" The Klan's statewide recruiting efforts paid off: by 1924, according to one scholar, Klan membership in Iowa totaled 100,000.<sup>21</sup>

During these same two years, Klan activities got under way in at least a dozen northwest Iowa communities, including Marathon. In his letters, John Smith mentioned that Klan meetings were held in 1924 in Webb, Palmer, Varina, Storm Lake, Schaller, Rembrandt, Laurens, Newell, Havelock, Sheldon, Fonda, and Sioux City.<sup>22</sup> It is not clear from John's letters whether konklaves actually existed in all of these communities or if some meetings he attended were organizational in nature. Moreover, although John's letters provide graphic descriptions of some events, the letters do not provide a systematic discussion of Klan activities or of the creation of Klan konklaves in the area. In fact, even in his comments about the Marathon Klan, it is sometimes difficult to know when the konklave was inactive, apparently a fairly common situation.<sup>23</sup>

What is clear, however, is that the organization of the Marathon Klan was precarious, at best. John was never certain from day to day if the konklave would even survive. The letters John sent to Sarah in early 1925 convey that uncertainty. Writing on January 14, John expressed optimism that the Marathon Klan (apparently then in an inactive state) would reorganize: "We are

21. David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* (Iowa City, 1999), 184–86; Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 49–50, 56–57, 154. Klan organizing in Delaware County was related to a specific educational issue, the efforts of a rural area to consolidate the local school. Thomas Morain also deals briefly with Klan activity in Jefferson in the mid-1920s. See Thomas J. Morain, *Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ames, 1988), 47–48.

22. He also wrote about Klan activities in Boone and Mason City.

23. John's letters do not indicate when the Marathon konklave organized, but John himself joined in late fall of 1923. By early 1924, the Marathon konklave had received its charter from the state KKK.

going to have a Klan meeting in Marathon in about ten days. I hope so anyway. We are going to install officers in Marathon. I don't know whether I will get any or not. I sure don't care much." Three days later John wrote that the Marathon Klan meeting would be in about two weeks. He added, "We are going to have Preacher Osborne from Storm Lake and we are to have it in the Baptist church. It will be a closed meeting but every member can invite another person. That way we may be able to get a few more members and we sure do need some more in Marathon." On February 22, when John again wrote to Sarah about the Klan situation in Marathon, his hopes of getting the local Klan organized quickly had faded somewhat. "I went to Marathon last nite and talked to Jones. We made arrangements for the Klan here in Marathon for this summer." The plans changed once more, as John wrote on March 4 that he had attended a secret meeting of Klansmen at a local printing office, adding that the small group intended to meet again soon. The problem of low membership remained unsolved, however; on March 8, noting that the Marathon Klan had only ten members, John asked, "What can you do with only ten members?" Throughout John's letters, the refrain remained the same. The Marathon Kluxers, as John called his fellow Klansmen, had difficulty getting organized and attracting new members. For three years, the Marathon Konklave was an on-again, off-again affair.<sup>24</sup>

REGARDLESS of its organizational status, the Klan provided members such as John Smith opportunities for social activities and membership in a secret organization. Its institutional structure also provided a way for members to vent their antagonism and hostility toward groups they believed to be out of step with Klan ideals and objectives. In northwest Iowa, as throughout Iowa and the Midwest, Roman Catholics were their primary target. In this, John was a typical Klan member; his letters contain countless discriminatory references to individual Catholics, the Catholic church, and the Pope. His letters leave no doubt that he harbored hostility toward Catholics and often ridiculed their practices. He often referred to Catholics as "fish," because

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24. John to Sarah, 14 and 17 January, 22 February, and 4 and 8 March 1925.

of their practice of eating fish on Friday. Sometimes the practice became the butt of jokes. On one occasion, John wrote that his friend Earl Jones, also a Klan member, was selling fish and "you know today is Friday and we sure did have a lot of fun out of him. Called him fish-eater Catholic, anti-Klan and what not."<sup>25</sup>

Despite all the anti-Catholic rhetoric, however, John's home community of Marathon did not have a Catholic church. In fact, in all of Buena Vista County in 1915 there was only one Catholic church, located at Newell, some 18 miles from Marathon, and one Catholic mission at Sioux Rapids, approximately 8 miles away. The Catholic church nearest Marathon was 7 miles away in Laurens in Pocahontas County. That county had 7 Catholic churches with a total membership of 3,404 in 1915. By contrast, Clay County, directly north of Buena Vista County, did not have a single Catholic church in that year.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of the scarcity of Catholic institutions, John Smith and other Klan members focused their ire on Roman Catholics.

John's letters indicate that his hostility toward Catholics took many forms. On several occasions, he intimated that Klansmen needed to keep an eye on local Catholics. In September 1924 he wrote, "I understand that Jim Williams has joined the Catholic church and I heard him say to \_\_\_ with our Klan. So I think there is one guy that had better be watched." A few times he hinted of possible intimidation of Catholics. In May 1925, for example, he wrote that he and a friend were going to Storm Lake to "take in the sights. We also may make Father Wright a little call maybe." On other occasions, John wrote about listening to the radio speeches of Catholic officials. In April 1925 he had heard a Catholic bishop give "quite a talk on the fish church and what a fine thing it was to be a fish-eater. . . . I would have liked to been down there with a brick or two. I would have showed him how nice it was to be a Klansman." John occasionally noted

25. John to Sarah, 9 January 1925. In his letters, John referred to the Klan Korner, a column in the local Marathon newspaper. Apparently the column included news of the Marathon Klan. Unfortunately, although the Albert City Public Library holds most issues of the *Marathon Republic* from the mid-1890s to the mid-1960s, issues from the mid-1920s could not be located.

26. *Census of Iowa for 1915*, 508–9, 707, 710, 727; *Buena Vista County*, 89–90. Even though there were only two Catholic institutions in the county, the state census lists 550 Catholics in the county in 1915 (3.2% of the total population of 17,212).

that he was reading anti-Klan literature, which he believed had been published by Catholics. One such book, *The Society of Blood and Death*, stated that Klan members signed an oath in blood, a claim that John ridiculed.<sup>27</sup>

John's references to Catholics sometimes included mention of the Knights of the Flaming Circle, a group that apparently operated in northwest Iowa in the mid-twenties. It is unclear whether the group existed in other parts of the state; Kay Johnson, who has done the most extensive study of the Klan in Iowa, does not mention it.<sup>28</sup> John's references to the Knights of the Flaming Circle give little information other than his personal encounters with them. He seemed to view them as one and the same with the Knights of Columbus, and he never mentioned the Knights of the Flaming Circle without reference to bootlegging.<sup>29</sup> In April 1925, for example, John wrote of an encounter with members of the Flaming Circle in nearby Sioux Rapids. "The major of the Klan over there called up and wanted [John and a friend] to come over. The Knights of the Flaming Circle burnt a large circle and set off a lot of dynamite. They sure did try to do something. There was about thirty of them there. Some were from Storm Lake and Newell but the largest part was . . . from Sioux Rapids. They are bootleggers and said they were going to run the Klan out of Soo Rapids [sic]."<sup>30</sup> From his letters, it appears that the Knights' main activity was carrying out surveillance of Klan activities and then responding in kind, usually by digging out a large circle, filling it with a flammable liquid, and then setting it on fire, accompanied by setting off a charge of dynamite. The Knights of the Flaming Circle referred to this as a *fiery circle* apparently in response to the Klan's *fiery cross*.<sup>31</sup>

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27. John to Sarah, 7 September 1924, 16 May, 5 April, and 13 February 1925.

28. A rare appearance of the Knights of the Flaming Circle in the scholarly literature about the Klan is in MacLean, *Behind the Mask*, 13–14, where she writes briefly about the Knights in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio.

29. It is unlikely, in light of the dearth of Catholic institutions in Buena Vista County, that the Knights of Columbus were organized in the Marathon area or elsewhere in the county.

30. John to Sarah, 12 April 1925.

31. On 28 January 1925 John mentioned activity of the Knights of the Flaming Circle in Herrin, Illinois.

John believed that Catholics were responsible for the existence of the stills that remained in the county, which the Klan was committed to eliminating. In May 1925 John wrote that "three of the Flaming Circle guys" in Sioux Rapids had it in for him because they believed he had been responsible for a raid on a still south of Sioux Rapids. John admitted that he knew "where the still was at and I knew when it was to be raided but I wasn't there." He added that "some more [stills] in this county have got to go. I know where one is two miles from here and I think we will have that raided next week. . . . I am going out tomorrow and look at the still along the railroad, that is if Jones comes out and goes with me." Sometimes John collected evidence himself. On one occasion, he purchased a pint of moonshine whiskey from a local bootlegger and planned to turn it over to the Klan and tell them where he got it. He concluded, "We are going right after them and we are going to call on some of them some of these dark nights about 12 o'clock."<sup>32</sup>

As charges and countercharges flew back and forth between the Klan and the Knights of the Flaming Circle, John's rhetoric, for the most part, appeared to be mostly that, just rhetoric, delivered presumably in a blustering manner and frequently accompanied by a retaliatory comment. An example is his letter of April 14, 1925: "There is a big dance in Marathon tonite and I hear the Knights of the Flaming Circle are going to burn a fiery circle down there but they can burn it for all I care. I am not going down. If they do, we will burn a fiery cross Saturday nite."<sup>33</sup>

Only once in John's letters did it appear that a serious confrontation might take place. In mid-September 1926, the Storm Lake Klan planned a parade through their town. The parade had been highly publicized, and John believed it would bring a major turnout of Klansmen. Reflecting that anticipation, he wrote, "If there are any Kluxers down there [in Boone] that want any excitement tell them to come to Storm Lake. The Fish will do all in their power to break it up. I look for them to turn

32. John to Sarah, 16 May and 8 March 1925. On the issue of the Klan and prohibition in other areas, see MacLean, *Behind the Mask*, 99–102. According to the *Storm Lake Register*, 7 May 1926, the local sheriff had raided several stills located five miles northeast of Rembrandt.

33. John to Sarah, 14 April 1925.

in the fire alarm about the time we start and go thru the parade." But as usual, there were a few hitches in the planning process. Later in the same letter, apparently written over several days, John noted that the Klan was "sure having a time up here" as the Catholics in Storm Lake circulated a petition to have the parade stopped. John, however, could foresee no problem, as "the mayor down there is a Kluxer so they won't get any where." On a practical note, he hoped the parade would be held, as the Marathon Klan had all their money invested in it, including hiring a 16-piece Klan band from Dickens.<sup>34</sup>

Apparently believing that the Storm Lake parade might lead to violence, John decided to be prepared. "I got a gun permit and a gun so if the fish start anything I can account for myself. I bet there will be a carload of guns carried in the parade. I borrowed one from Jones and it weighs 3½ pounds, it sure is a young cannon. We are expecting trouble and are going to be prepared." John had been asked to go to Storm Lake around noon and appear to be "looking for work and loaf around in the barber shops and pool halls and listen to what the [locals] have to say." He concluded, with a bit of humor, "Be a regular Sherlock Holmes, I guess."<sup>35</sup>

About a week later, John wrote about the outcome of the Storm Lake parade: "the fish didn't do anything when they saw what kind of a mob we had."<sup>36</sup> Given John's anticipation of the event, the actual parade was anticlimactic. There was no violence, and the march apparently went off peacefully.<sup>37</sup>

A point of conflict between Catholics and the Klan concerned where the Klan would meet and whether or not some meetings might trigger confrontation between the two groups. In September 1924, John wrote, "There was a meeting right in the middle of a Catholic community Tuesday nite. The fish stayed at home and no trouble was had." About four months later he heard that "the Catholics are trying to buy the movie

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34. Ibid., 15 September 1926.

35. Ibid., 19 September 1926.

36. Ibid., 27 September 1926.

37. At the time, Storm Lake had two newspapers, the *Storm Lake Pilot-Tribune* and the *Storm Lake Register*. Neither paper covered the parade.

hall in Rembrandt where we hold our meetings and if they do, you know what that means." Three months later, John again referred to the situation when he wrote that "the fish at Storm Lake said if we didn't quit using the Hall at Rembrandt to hold our meetings in they were going to dynamite it." He added with a bit of humor, "I bet Ben [John's friend and fellow Klan member] that if they did that I would go higher than he did. Hope I win the bet." Five days later John reported that "the fish at Storm Lake didn't blow up the hall Thursday nite and I don't think that they will but they said they would. . . . I think they are just trying to throw a scare into us which they didn't do." On one occasion, the issue of a meeting place was settled in a surprising manner. When the Storm Lake konklave was going to host a speaker and John planned to attend, he described the upcoming event to Sarah, noting with some surprise, "And do you know that a Catholic in Storm Lake let us have his hall to hold them in?"<sup>38</sup>

From John's letters we can see that the Klan and the Catholics—the latter often personified by the Knights of the Flaming Circle—seem to have reached something of an uneasy truce. The rhetoric was sometimes inflammatory, and people on both sides engaged in a great deal of posturing, blustering, and verbal intimidation, but both groups apparently knew when to go no further or to back down. Although the two groups confronted each other from a distance, there is no evidence of face-to-face or violent confrontations. Nonetheless, the antipathy that John felt toward Roman Catholics and that he sought to act out through his involvement in the Ku Klux Klan is one of the dominant themes in his letters to Sarah.

A SECOND DOMINANT THEME running through John's letters is the almost constant dissension among Klan members. Klan members in Marathon had difficulty getting along with almost everyone or even with each other. Over a three-year period John wrote about disagreements with state Klan officers, local members repeatedly "getting in a row" with one another,

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38. John to Sarah, 11 September 1924, 28 January, 9 and 14 April, and 8 March 1925.

and the difficulty members had getting along with Klan members in nearby towns, particularly Storm Lake. Sometimes the difficulties extended to non-members in Marathon. In most of his letters, John described disagreements, lamenting members' inability to get along and the resulting lack of regular meetings. Disharmony ruled klavern activities, sometimes requiring state Klan officials to help local members settle disputes. Occasionally, local Klan members managed to settle their own disagreements, but before long, as John put it, the members were again having a "row."

The disputes between members took many forms. In the first letter in the collection in 1924, John wrote, "We are still having a little war out here and I think we will have to throw out some of our members. If we don't, I think I will quietly drop out."<sup>39</sup> Several months later, John wrote that the Marathon Klan had "a little racket" as members criticized John, fellow Klansman Earl Jones, and Jones's wife, Ruth, for attending a Klan meeting in nearby Webb. Apparently some Klansmen believed that if members attended other konklaves they were not showing complete loyalty to and support for their own group. The following year, John wrote about another type of difficulty with Klan members: "I have to go and get a robe this week of a Klansman that has quit but won't give up his robe. Gosh, I wish that they had given that job to someone else because I sure hate to go. I know that he won't give it to me [and] if he don't they are going to send the sheriff after it."<sup>40</sup>

Only rarely did John write about harmonious meetings such as in February 1926, when he attended a Klan meeting in Storm Lake and enjoyed "the peace and quiet." "We sure had a fine meeting," he reported. "Everybody seemed to be in a good humour again and everything went off fine. A lot more of the boys came back and paid up." Still, the meeting was not totally with-

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39. John to Sarah, 7 January 1924.

40. John to Sarah, 11 September 1924 and 14 April 1925. It is hard to tell from John's letters when the Marathon klavern was actually functioning and when John apparently attended (and maybe even joined) konklaves in other areas. At times it appears that Marathon Klan members were not to attend Klan meetings in other communities, but at other times that didn't seem to be a problem. It is clear, however, that John did attend Klan meetings in numerous other communities.

out dissension. John went on to explain that electing new officers presented a problem. "It took 3 hours to elect them. Nobody wanted any office. They nominated me for Kladd and I refused the nomination and then I was nominated Klextor and I declined that. I sure didn't want any office because if I didn't do everything O.K. I would [get called on the green carpet] and I sure have been there enough. None of the boys from Marathon would accept offices for that reason."<sup>41</sup>

The rows that John referred to sometimes centered on Klan members themselves. In April 1925 John's friend and fellow Klansman from Marathon, Earl Jones, was "kicked out" of his job as captain. John was clearly ambivalent about the action. "There is some in Marathon that told a lot of lies about [Jones] and I guess that there were some things that were true so I don't know what to do about it." Four days later, again referring to Jones's ouster, John wrote, "Gosh, but we sure are having a time up here in Marathon over the Klan. There is two sides here and we sure are throwing mud at each other." A week later, John apparently resolved the issue for himself: "I turned all my Klan books in last Thursday. I had them when I was Jones's helper but I didn't have any use for them since he got put out."<sup>42</sup>

Even after "turning in his books" to the Marathon Klan, John continued to attend Klan meetings in other towns. In May 1925 he attended a Klan meeting at Rembrandt, which was apparently no less contentious, as John wrote, "we sure have war." Dissension among Rembrandt Klan members was nothing new. Some eight months earlier, about the time John joined the Marathon Klan, he wrote, "We sure had a time at Rembrandt Tuesday nite. I thot [sic] there was going to be a fight. One man got up and said the sheriff was a bootlegger and a crook and another man got up and said the sheriff was a fine man." Apparently disagreements took place so often that John got into the habit of standing near the door so if things got out of hand, he could quickly leave.<sup>43</sup>

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41. John to Sarah, 5 February 1926.

42. John to Sarah, 14 and 28 April 1925.

43. John to Sarah, 10 May 1925 and 3 and 30 October 1924.

Sometimes state Klan officials got involved in Klan difficulties in Marathon and in surrounding towns. In January 1925 John wrote that a "State Man" appeared in Marathon to talk with him and Earl Jones and "he all but cussed [us out]. He said we hadn't done nothing as an organization and if we didn't do something there would be someone kicked out of the Klan in Marathon. He gave us Hail Columbia for what we did at Fonda and Storm Lake and said we shouldn't be allowed to keep our robes." The state official also told John and Earl that there were too many stills around Marathon "and that the Klan had better get busy and clean them up." John wondered what good that would do. "We have a Klan sheriff but our prosecuting attorney is a fish eater and he will do anything he can to fish the Klan."<sup>44</sup>

The reference to the community of Fonda points out another way that Marathon Klansmen drew the ire of state Klan officials. Some months earlier, John and two fellow members had attended a Klan meeting at Fonda. Sometime that evening, the trio's enthusiasm for the KKK got out of hand. Dressed in their robes, Earl Jones "rode a horse thru the town" while John and the other Klansman stood guard. Fonda residents apparently didn't appreciate the antics. Local citizens threw eggs, apples, rocks, and bottles at the three Klansmen. In describing the encounter, John wrote, "They didn't hit Jim or me either. The cats or fish sure were sore at us. We didn't let any of them in anyway. We are going again Tuesday nite and they said we had better not have any more meetings down there so when you get home I may not be here if the fish get me."<sup>45</sup> Klan officials in Des Moines viewed the conduct of John and his two friends as unacceptable and, interestingly, outside the bounds of proper behavior for members of the Invisible Empire.

About ten months later, John wrote again about a state Klan official visiting Marathon. "There sure is a mess in the Klan now and G-3 is coming up and give us a round up about the 16th of

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44. John to Sarah, 28 January 1925. Shawn Lay argues that national and state officials usually paid little attention to local groups once they had paid their dues. Lay, "Introduction: The Second Invisible Empire," 9. That view does not fit Marathon, as John mentions several occasions when state Klan officials confronted Marathon Klan members about issues.

45. John to Sarah, 24 August 1924.

July and believe me, I think I will hit for Minnesota or some-place till he goes back because he's the guy that Jones and I told to [go to] the devil and he probably will [have it] in on us again." John feared that the state officials would take away the Marathon Klan's charter.<sup>46</sup>

In his comments about state Klan officials, John occasionally referred to getting called on the carpet. State officials, and possibly local officials, actually had a green carpet on which members were to stand while being criticized for unacceptable behavior or for being derelict in their duties as Klansmen. John was called on the carpet on at least four occasions. As a result, he and his fellow Klansmen from Marathon were reluctant to accept offices because they feared that it would result in their being called on the green carpet.<sup>47</sup>

The dissension and disagreements among Klan members sometimes extended to local elections. In her study of the Iowa Klan, Kay Johnson noted that in 1924 the organization began to work to elect members to county and municipal offices and local school boards. It is not clear if the Marathon Klan began promoting candidates at that time, but in March 1926 John hoped that they could "get the Klan into all county offices we can in the June election." He urged Sarah to "be sure and get registered" in Boone so she could vote and to encourage her landlady to vote as well. John concluded, "We want to get the Klan in some state offices and show the Fish just how dead we are."<sup>48</sup>

Four days later John wrote that he planned to vote in the local school board election. He intended to vote for a bond issue to build a new school and expressed great surprise that some people—particularly people with children—might be opposed to the issue. At the same time, he noted that the Klan supported two candidates for school director in Buena Vista County. Klan solidarity broke down, however, as John intended to vote for only one Klan candidate because he didn't like the other person. Apparently there was also disagreement over the school bond

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46. John to Sarah, 28 June 1925.

47. John to Sarah, 21 June 1925, 5 February 1926.

48. John to Sarah, 2 March 1926. From this comment and several others, it appears that Sarah's landlady in Boone also belonged to the Boone Klavern.

issue, as John wrote, "We didn't run anybody for school election because we were all split up over voting for and against the school. Jones and your Dad and two or 3 others were against the new one and the rest of us were for it so we are split up proper right now."<sup>49</sup>

From personal squabbles to state officials' condemnations of the behavior of local members, and from questions about loyalty to the local klavern to disagreements on electoral issues, the Marathon klavern was wracked by dissension that limited its organizational effectiveness.

AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT as its internal relations was the impact of Klan activity on local communities. In a study of the Klan in Greenfield, Iowa, Kay Johnson observed that the presence of the Klan there made townspeople suspicious of one another. When folks passed on the street in Greenfield, Johnson wrote, they "made it a point not to speak to each other or else muttered under their breaths as they passed." In Johnson's view, the Klan divided Greenfield and "brought riot where once there had been calm."<sup>50</sup>

Because sources are limited, it is difficult to know if the Klan created the same degree of contentiousness in Marathon. But it does appear that early in its tenure in Marathon, the Klan divided members of the local Methodist church. In September 1924 the Marathon Klan was holding some meetings there. According to John, the Methodist minister belonged to the Klan and allowed the meetings, even though some members protested. One month later, John attended a lecture at the church presented by a Klan speaker, described as a fighter, an Englishman, and an ex-Catholic priest.

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49. John to Sarah, 6 and 14 March 1926. The latter letter was one of several in which John refers to attending Klan meetings with Sarah's father. It is not clear, however, whether Sarah's father actually belonged to the Klan. For the Klan's involvement in school and municipal elections in Iowa, see Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 127-34. For Klan involvement in a school consolidation issue in Delaware County, see David R. Reynolds, "The Making of Buck Creek: Country Life Reform, Religion, and Rural School Consolidation," *Annals of Iowa* 58 (1999), 374-84.

50. Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 86-87.

I went to church last night and we sure had a fine program and the church was just full of people. The biggest crowd I believe I ever saw in it. Some people came from Marathon who was never inside of the church. Gosh, there was some who got red in the face and you could tell that they didn't like what was said and some even left the church.

[The speaker] sure brought out the Clansman's Creed fine for those who didn't know it. Of course you know it so I won't explain it. . . . The preacher used to work for the Catholic Church and he told us some things too. He also gave the Lutheran Church the dicken.<sup>51</sup>

A short time later, church officials reassigned the Marathon Methodist minister to another charge.<sup>52</sup>

Apparently the large turnout for the Klan speaker emboldened John and others. In the same letter he wrote that the Klan in Marathon was "pretty independent" and at the next meeting would let in only people "we want there." He also commented on the Klan meeting in the Methodist church: "I guess the church board have decided that the best thing they can do is shut up because we never give them any peace so I think we will have our next open meeting in the church."<sup>53</sup>

On October 8, John wrote again to Sarah with what he considered exciting news: "And say, what is best, our new preacher is a Kluxer. He is a young man and this is his first charge. He is from Indiana. I sure am glad he belongs and every Kluxer from Marathon is going to be there Sunday nite to greet him. I'll twist his arm for him once and see what he does." The excitement would be short-lived, however. A few days later John related that the new minister was not a Kluxer after all. "And as a preacher I don't think much of him. I think Marathon should have had a minister of a little experience. This is this man's first charge." In the same letter, John noted another effect of the new

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51. John to Sarah, 5 October 1924.

52. Studies of the Klan often reveal that Protestant ministers were members of the Klan. See Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern*, 3. For links between Methodism and the Klan in another rural Iowa community, see Reynolds, "The Making of Buck Creek," 374-84.

53. John to Sarah, 5 October 1924.

preacher not being "a Kluxer": "The church board is meeting to decide if the Klan can meet in the church on Thursday night."<sup>54</sup>

John and other Klan members attended the church board meeting, but they were surely disappointed. Apparently the arrival of a new minister brought a different policy toward the Klan. The church board decided not to allow any more Klan meetings in the church, told the Klansmen that they "don't want us to have a meeting in the town even," and then, to add insult to injury, told the Klansmen to "get out" of the meeting. Klan members retaliated against the decision by deciding to burn a cross at midnight and set off dynamite. "We are going to wake up the old town for once anyway. Nobody knows anything about it but some of us Ks."<sup>55</sup>

By early 1925, the Marathon community, no doubt influenced by the actions of the local Methodist church, seemed to be taking a stand against the Klan. Members of the local American Legion informed the Klan that it could no longer meet in the Legion Hall. And on February 1 John wrote that they were "still having war here as far as the Klan is concerned."<sup>56</sup> A month later, he still felt unsafe visiting town.

My, but some of those birds down there are sore at us K's for burning that cross down there. They are trying to find out who done it and have us arrested for disturbing the peace so maybe I will be in jail. I was talking to Jones and he said that if they didn't shut up we would burn another cross and set off more dynamite. I guess us guys that done it are going to have a secret meeting tomorrow nite and decide what to do. I am almost afraid to go to Marathon for fear they will pinch me. You know I hauled the cross right up thru main street but they didn't see me help put it up. They don't know who set that dynamite off either and they won't find out who done it from me either. If we had of, they would have killed us.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, John and other Klan members continued to meet in Marathon and to wear their robes on different occasions.

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54. John to Sarah, 8 and 12 October 1924.

55. John to Sarah, 18 October and 2 November 1924.

56. John to Sarah, 18 October 1924 and 1 February 1925.

57. John to Sarah, 12 March 1925.

On February 3, 1927, John Smith wrote one of the last letters contained in the collection. By that date, he was writing less about the Klan and more about his personal life. He and Sarah had been courting for several years, and a serious relationship had developed, even though it was maintained primarily through correspondence. The couple did spend time together when Sarah occasionally visited Marathon on weekends, during her summer vacations, or on holidays. John apparently did not visit Boone often; in fact, his letters imply that often a month or so went by without a visit with Sarah. Sometimes the couple's plans to spend time together did not materialize because of work conflicts or because John's car needed repairs. Throughout 1926, John often expressed his desire to rent a farm so he and Sarah could marry. Unable to locate a farm in the Marathon area, he decided to look for employment elsewhere. In February 1927, some three years after joining the Marathon Klan, John moved to Missouri to seek better employment. His parents and siblings were also making the move (the parents had earlier rented a farm in Missouri). John would later return to the Marathon area, but by then he had lost interest in the Klan.<sup>58</sup>

THE NEARLY 200 LETTERS that John Smith wrote to Sarah Brown between 1924 and early 1927 shed light on many aspects of Klan activity in and around Marathon. Most evident are the Klan's hostility toward Catholics and the almost constant bickering among local Klan members resulting in a failure to stay organized and to carry out organizational goals. But the letters also provide some understanding of the writer himself and of his relationship to the Klan. What was his motivation to join and why did he remain a member despite his frustration with fellow Klan members' inability to get along and remain a viable group? Except when he wrote about the local Klan's failure to vote as a block in a school bond election, John did not generally express frustration about the Klan's failure to carry out organizational programs or actions. What most frustrated the young farmer was the local Klan's inability to attract more members, remain organized, and hold regular meetings.

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58. John to Sarah, 3 February 1927 and 12 December 1926.

John's motivation for joining the Klan remains elusive, but a study of a konklave in another small Iowa town does provide some insight into that issue. In her study of the Klan in Greenfield, Iowa, Kay Johnson found that people there joined for a variety of reasons. Some Greenfield residents viewed Klan membership as offering excitement and social opportunities in an otherwise drab social environment.<sup>59</sup> At times, John Smith wrote about Marathon being a "dead town" without much going on, but his letters are also filled with references to his busy social life. The Klan certainly provided some social outlets for John, but it did not by any means represent his only social activity.

Nonetheless, John undoubtedly found the social opportunities associated with Klan membership appealing, and Klan literature often stressed such opportunities to attract newcomers. As long as the Klan remained active in Marathon and surrounding towns, it provided many activities for members, particularly in 1924 and 1925. With konklaves in many neighboring towns, John had his choice of Klan meetings to attend almost every night of the week. Moreover, the Klan sponsored social events such as box socials, picnics, and programs with outside speakers. Kay Johnson suggested that people joined the Klan in Greenfield because "the order promised them a good time." The general atmosphere was that of a "county or state fair, complete with bands, stunts, contests, and fireworks."<sup>60</sup>

Economic factors may have joined social ones in considering Klan membership. John's parents were not landowners, but rather rented a farm near Marathon. Earlier they had been renters in Illinois, and, after their move from Iowa, they rented a farm in Missouri. Accordingly, they lacked the security of land ownership that would have allowed them to remain permanently in the Marathon area. There is no evidence that the Smith family felt alienated from their landholding neighbors. They

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59. Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 34-46. Johnson also suggested that the organization offered a sense of exclusivity because of secret membership and rituals. She also believed that economic change in the community—whereby some older, well-established families feared losing their economic status—contributed to the Klan's appeal to the affected families.

60. John to Sarah, 29 March and 17 June 1925, 8 and 12 October 1924; Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 104.

were well integrated into the religious and social life in their area, and they often interacted with nearby relatives. But tenants did sometimes experience feelings of rejection by landholding neighbors who looked upon the tenants as temporary residents who would soon be moving on. In a short story published in 1926, Iowa author Ruth Suckow describes a farm woman's bitterness and sense of helplessness when forced to leave a rented farm that she and her husband had improved.<sup>61</sup> For John Smith, perhaps his parents' lack of economic security (and, therefore, possibly his own) made Klan membership more attractive. In the eyes of some, Klan membership conferred status through joining a secretive and therefore exclusive organization, thus making members feel superior to those who did not belong.

Regardless of his motivation for joining, John obviously enjoyed certain aspects of Klan membership. He took pleasure in parading and taking part in klankraft (Klan ritual). Along with the pageantry of marching and drilling, Klan members also carried military titles such as major and captain. Clearly John also enjoyed the secretive nature of the Klan, made possible by wearing a robe and hood. On several occasions he wrote with smug satisfaction about taking part in parades or "just standing around on a street corner" with his identity hidden behind a mask. Yet at other times he seemed determined to let people know that he belonged to the Klan, as when he drove down Marathon's main street with three big K's displayed on his windshield. Under the guise of being a Klansman he could flout conventional behavior, defying anyone to object to his actions.<sup>62</sup>

John sometimes appeared to be a rather feisty person who enjoyed a good fight. The Klan provided him with something of a cover for that type of behavior. He might have been uncomfortable as an individual confronting church officials about policy or disagreeing with townspeople as to the best candidate for a school election, but being a Klansman made him part of a group that took such a stand. And the Klan's sanctioning of

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61. Quoted in Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany, NY, 1986), 41-43.

62. John to Sarah, 28 September and 18 October 1924.

anti-Catholicism allowed John to express his hostility without personal consequences.<sup>63</sup>

Even as John was drawn to Klan activities, he often found fault with the organization. At times he felt that it was a waste of money because the Marathon klavern did not meet regularly. Once he wrote that Klan leaders were only interested in making money through new memberships. On many occasions he expressed dislike for or unhappiness with Klan members for their mudslinging and for telling lies about fellow Klansmen; several times he was so fed up that he planned to quit. Over time, he vacillated between feelings of identification with the Klan and concern or outright disgust for it.<sup>64</sup> If other members of the Marathon konklave shared John's ambivalence, that may help to explain why the Marathon Klan proved so unstable.

There was no such ambivalence in John's identification with the Marathon Klan's hostility toward the Catholic church. Scholars who have studied the Klan have suggested that its members focused on the available minority—Jews, African Americans, or Catholics—implying that one first joined the Klan, and then became enmeshed in the group's hostility toward the minority group. John's letters suggest that this thinking should be reversed. His apparently deep-seated hostility toward Catholics probably can be traced back to his earlier years, his family, his community, and possibly even his church. As an adult, he divided the world into two groups—Protestants and Catholics. At one time he wrote that Marathon included 18 Catholics; at other times he noted the Catholic-Protestant composition of neighboring towns. And whenever an event took place that John viewed as improper or anti-Klan, he immediately suspected that Catholics were behind it. In March 1926, when a young female teacher (who belonged to the Klan) was accused of burning down her schoolhouse, John was certain that Catholics in the community had initiated the investigation.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, when town officials opposed Klan activity, John always believed that Catholics were responsible for initiating the opposition.

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63. John to Sarah, 12 April 1925.

64. John to Sarah, 17 November and 7 December 1924, 14 April 1925, and 24 October 1926.

65. John to Sarah, 30 March 1926.

Although Klansmen took an oath to "declaim" Catholics and their church, John joined the Klan with such views already in place. He was not alone in his views toward Catholics. Protestant denominations had earlier struggled among themselves, but by 1920 the focus of religious conflict was between Protestants and Catholics. In Marathon, as in many other small towns across the Midwest, the Klan allowed members like John to make explicit what had earlier been implicit. The KKK provided the institutional structure through which members could vent their frustration and hostility toward the Catholic church.<sup>66</sup>

Along with the organization's antagonism toward Catholics, Klan members often expressed hostility toward immigrants. Here there is an interesting distinction, however. Marathon's foreign-born residents were from western Europe and therefore of the same background as many other residents whose family members had arrived earlier from Europe. With a foreign-born mix of Swedes, Danes, Germans, English, and Hollanders, the matter of immigrants was apparently a non-issue in Marathon. Perhaps most important, the first- and second-generation immigrants there were overwhelmingly Protestant.

If the Klan so accurately reflected the anti-Catholic feelings of at least a segment of the local population, why did the Klan fare so poorly in Marathon? The simplest answer is low membership. But the wider explanation lies in the small towns themselves. In 1920 Marathon's population was 520; nearby towns such as Rembrandt had even fewer residents. Many of the small towns wanted their own konklaves, so each town had only its

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66. David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood*, 40–45 and passim, notes the antagonism between Protestants and Catholics in rural Iowa. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 36–37; and Tucker, *The Dragon and the Cross*, 291, also emphasize the strong anti-Catholic views in Indiana. Tucker writes that in Indiana "anti-Catholicism lay close below the surface," ready to emerge at any time. In the 1920s many Protestants believed that Catholics were storing guns in their church basements in preparation to take over the country. To understand fully the Klan's attraction in communities like Marathon, I believe far more study has to be done on the social climate of the 1920s. Excellent work has been done on the social issues surrounding World War I and on some aspects of the 1920s, but the accompanying religious conflict needs much more attention. For a study of Iowa in World War I, see Nancy Ruth Derr, "Iowans During World War I: A Study of Change Under Stress" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1979).

own population to draw on for members. Not only was the number of potential Klan members limited in a town of 520, but since most of the surrounding towns also had konklaves, the Marathon group had little if any success in attracting members from those towns. The presence of konklaves in so many small towns in the area weakened them all.

Other small towns were not the only source of competition. The larger and more active konklave in Storm Lake was always trying to draw members away from Marathon and other nearby towns. In addition, other groups such as the American Legion and the Modern Woodmen of America competed with the Klan for members. Sometimes the Woodmen's lodge and the Klan met on the same night and John would have difficulty deciding which to attend. At other times there were conflicts between church activities and meetings for the Klan or the Woodmen. And John sometimes attended high school events, such as plays, band concerts, and ball games. Far from being bored with a lack of activities in his small town, John's letters imply that residents sometimes had to choose between activities.

In light of the Marathon Klan's various activities—whether burning crosses, locating and destroying stills, or parading in full Klan regalia—how successful was the group in carrying out its objectives? John's letters mention six incidents of Klan cross burnings, incidents sometimes accompanied by dynamite blasts. The Klan burned crosses to protest actions of non-Klan people or to counter the fiery circles of the Knights of the Flaming Circle. But Klansmen apparently also burned crosses to celebrate special occasions such as obtaining a charter (from the state KKK office) or winning a school board election.<sup>67</sup> Other than being disruptive and, no doubt, creating unease if not fear, it is difficult to see that the Klan did much to oppose what it viewed as the encroaching powers of the Catholic church. Although there were sporadic efforts to get Klan officials elected to public office or to school boards, the Marathon Klan's inability to present a solid front precluded any success in electing Klan members to municipal or school boards.

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67. Klan members in Greenfield also burned crosses to celebrate election victories. See Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 110.

Another part of the Klan's creed was to practice klannishness—patronizing only the businesses of Klan members or helping fellow members in other ways. In a town the size of Marathon, where there were a limited number of businesses, Klan members often had little choice about whom to patronize. In his only reference to this practice, John, upon learning that Sarah was going to order something from the Sears Roebuck catalog, reminded her that Kluxers were to buy only from other Kluxers. He acknowledged, however, that "if I wanted to send an order to them tho I would send it."<sup>68</sup>

A less visible part of klannishness concerned extending charity to Klan members. John wrote of only one time when the Marathon Klan extended a helping hand to a fellow member. In 1925 a young Klan member and his wife who lost their three-month-old baby had no way to pay for the funeral. John, expressing sympathy over the death of the baby, wrote that the local Klan would pay the funeral expenses. John believed that was the least the Klan could do for a fellow member in need.<sup>69</sup>

The Marathon Klan was, at best, an ineffectual group. More often than not the konklave appeared to be in the process of disintegrating; at other times, it hardly seemed an organization at all. John often commented about elections for Klan offices in which no one wanted to accept an office. Without officers the konklave did not meet regularly. In the absence of regular meetings, members often attended Klan meetings in other communities rather than supporting their own konklave in Marathon, and members sometimes engaged in independent forays into nearby communities in which they flouted the Klan's presence. At other times, John and his friends strongly disagreed with state Klan officials, telling one official "to go to the devil."<sup>70</sup> In some instances, John and his fellow Kluxers appear to have used their Klan membership as a cover for following their own whims rather than adhering to Klan regulations and protocol. And when the Marathon Klan did hold meetings, most of the

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68. John to Sarah, 30 October 1924.

69. John to Sarah, 21 April 1925. See also Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, 91–94.

70. John to Sarah, 28 June 1925.

time was spent, as John put it, with members "having a row." Much of the time, then, the Klan in Marathon was hardly an organization at all.

Finally, there is the issue of whether John Smith's experience in the Marathon Klan supports the traditional view of the Second Klan or the revisionist interpretations. Was he a backward, isolated, and economically disadvantaged individual who joined an extremist, racist, violent organization on the fringe of society, or was he a reasonably well-integrated citizen interested in being part of an organization that had much in common with other mainstream reform movements of the time? On the personal level, John, on balance, seems to fit the revisionist interpretation better. Given the paucity of organizational records, it is difficult to assess the Marathon Klan as an organization in either context. John Smith wrote briefly about the need for supporting a school bond issue, but apparently other Marathon Klan members did not share his views. Otherwise, there is little evidence that the Marathon Klan promoted good government within the community. Prohibition was the one area in which Marathon Klansmen worked to uphold the law with their efforts to eliminate stills in Buena Vista County. If John's views were typical, Klan members there strongly supported prohibition. Although the Marathon Klan occasionally burned crosses, there is no evidence of any violence carried out by Klan members. On the other hand, John's letters leave no doubt that the Klan in Marathon reviled Catholics and believed their influence should be curtailed. In effect, it came down to a war of words, mainly between Klan members and the Knights of the Flaming Circle. Given the unease and community conflict engendered by Klan actions, and the general ineffectiveness of the group's efforts, it is difficult to place the Marathon Klan of the twenties in either the traditional or the revisionist camp.

BY THE END OF 1926, the Ku Klux Klan in Iowa and the Midwest was in sharp decline, if not in its final death throes. Klan konklaves in Iowa had burst forth in dramatic fashion in the early 1920s, but their staying power was extremely limited. Even by 1925, the organization in Iowa had reportedly lost half

of its members.<sup>71</sup> John Smith's letters reflect that decline. During the second half of 1926, he mentions the Klan less and less often. If he had any regrets about the Klan's demise; he did not mention them in his letters to Sarah. And if *he* had no regrets for the Klan's passing, what about his home community of Marathon? Although documentation is lacking, it is fair to assume that even after a brief life span of only four years, the Marathon Klan left behind a legacy of dissension, discord, and distrust. For Catholics, the Klan's presence had brought threats of intimidation, or worse, and must have left a painful scar on their lives. Protestants—especially those in the local Methodist Episcopal church whose members and clergy had both supported and opposed the Klan—undoubtedly felt relieved that the often fractious group had folded. Although memories of the Klan would linger even up to the present, 1926 was a good time both for the community of Marathon, and for John Smith, to move on. For his part, John told his daughter later in his life that he deeply regretted joining the Klan.

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71. Johnson, "The Ku Klux Klan in Iowa," 73. Although the Klan was rapidly dying out by 1926, some Klan presence was still evident in the Marathon area. According to an unidentified clipping sent to me by an Aurelia resident, a funeral for an Aurelia man in 1927 was attended by "large numbers of Ku Klux Klan in robes from various points in this part of the state."

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