

**Ku Klux Klan at the University of Illinois**

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The origin of a University of Illinois organization known as the Ku Klux Klan is shrouded in mystery. It is not even clear when the group was formed. Various sources list 1906, 1908, and 1909 as the organization's year of foundation.<sup>1</sup> During this period, the novels of Thomas Dixon— The Leopard's Spots (1902), The Clansman (1905), and The Traitor (1907)—had brought the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan back into public consciousness. Offering a romanticized portrait of the Ku Klux Klan, the novels reflected Dixon's view that racial equality would result in the destruction of civilized society. It is possible that Dixon's novels may have inspired the University of Illinois group's name. But absent any direct evidence, one cannot say that the campus group had racist aims. Perhaps the group's founders merely had a predilection for exotic-sounding names.

The first apparent Ku Klux Klan references in the University of Illinois yearbook occurred in The Illio 1909, with the names of several senior students being listed as members of the group; the 1909 yearbook, however, did not include a group photo page or a statement of its purpose. From early on, a defining characteristic of the group seemed to have been a penchant for extreme secrecy. Indeed, the "Roasts" section of The 1910 Illio even contained a satire mocking the "Flu Flux" and its ultra-secretiveness:

We must not omit mention of Flu Flux, which meets at midnight when the moon is in the fourth quarter, in the northeast corner of the cellar of the far cow barn on the south campus. No one may penetrate their awful secrecy without horrible punishment, the least penalty for intrusion into their mystic circle being instantaneous death. No initiate may profane with his presence

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<sup>1</sup>The Illio 1916 listed 1906 as the year of origin; The 1920 Illio and The 1922 Illio gave 1908 as year of origin; the Daily Illini, April 12, 1923, p. 1, col. 6, indicated 1909 as year of origin.

their profound deliberations. They serve at their meetings, which are devoted to obtruse investigations into why the Boneyard is only six inches deep, and kindred questions, pop-corn and sterilized milk.<sup>2</sup>

The Illio 1916 contained the names and a group photo of Ku Klux Klan members along with their fraternity affiliations and the organization is identified as an interfraternity honor society. On January 27, 1915, the Council of Administration approved a petition (submitted by Harold Pogue) to “perfect” the organization of the group. According to the minutes of the Council, membership in the group was limited to “one junior representative from each of the national fraternities at the University of Illinois.”<sup>3</sup> The campus Klan was listed in subsequent yearbooks until 1925, by which point its name had been changed to Tu-Mas. The Illio 1918, for the first time, specifically identified the Ku Klux Klan as a *junior* interfraternity society. For some reason, the organization briefly changed its name to Klu Klux Klan in 1919-1920. Interestingly, Timothy Messer-Kruse points out that a University of Wisconsin group of comparable name also added an extra “l” to the first word the very same year.<sup>4</sup> This was no coincidence as the Wisconsin organization had been set up by University of Illinois Ku Klux members J. A. Ingwersen, G. B. Bilderback, C. E. Lovejoy, Robert Lorenz, and Robert Tutwiler in May 1919.<sup>5</sup>

From 1917 onward, the Daily Illini regularly reported on the activities of the campus

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<sup>2</sup>The 1910 Illio, p. 461.

<sup>3</sup>Minutes, Council of Administration, Vol. XII, p. 61 (Record Series 3/1/1). Secretary of Council of Administration to Harold A. Pogue, January 28, 1915, (Record Series 3/1/2, Box 2 “P”).

<sup>4</sup>Timothy Messer-Kruse, "The Campus Klan of the University of Wisconsin: Tacit and Active Support for the Ku Klux Klan in a Culture of Intolerance," Wisconsin Magazine of History 77 (Autumn 1993), 13-14.

<sup>5</sup>Daily Illini, May 14, 1919, p. 1.

Klan. The group largely behaved like a traditional fraternity, holding regular dances, selling Homecoming badges, etc.<sup>6</sup> Before the onset of Prohibition, the campus Klan apparently was notorious for its devotion to alcohol. Writing in the Daily Illini in June 1919, the “Campus Scout” poked fun at the group:

Ku Klux Klan, secret beer drinking society, gave its annual hop Friday at the Delta Tau domicile. The Delta Tau house was selected for the affair because of its appropriate atmosphere, necessary for the proper accomplishment of the chief oath of the society, liquor lapping.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See for example, Daily Illini, September 29, 1922, p. 12, and *ibid*, October 26, 1920, p. 1. The campus Klan even secured subscriptions to dedicate a column in Memorial Stadium. Daily Illini, March 24, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Daily Illini, June 8, 1919, p. 5; a few weeks before, the DI (May 24, 1919, p. 5) contained a long poem mocking the drinking habits of the Ku Klux members:

CUCKOO KU KLUXERS  
(A POEM)

Reel I

Listen students and you shall hear  
The story of a keg of beer,  
‘Twas the night of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the month  
of May  
When out o’er the fields lighted by  
the departing day,  
A gang of Ku Klux carried it high  
You ask the reason? Why its hard to  
buy.

Reel II

The keg was tapped and all sat round  
Drinking the beverage with a gurgling  
sound,  
The time for stories came right away  
And the boys related stories of their  
college days,  
Women, beer, liquor and wine  
The stories were excellent, yea, even  
fine.

With the coming of Prohibition in 1920, the “Campus Scout” predicted as a result “the disbanding of Ku Klux, Delta Tau Delta, Kappa Sigma, etc.”<sup>8</sup>

While there is no evidence that the group had racist aims, the campus Klan apparently did at times emulate some aspects of the Ku Klux Klan as envisioned by Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith. (Premiering early in 1915, Griffith’s film “Birth of a Nation” portrayed members of the Ku Klux Klan as heroic defenders of a white South under siege by evil Northern carpetbaggers.) The humor section of The Illio 1918, for example, contained a rather obscurely worded

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#### Reel III

The night passed by and all went well  
 The stories were told till there were  
     none more to tell,  
 The keg was left as a header should  
 And the boys left the scene, (i.e.) all  
     who could.  
 They staggered in pairs like Ku Klux  
     will  
 Till they reached their homes to sit  
     on the sill  
 Till the racing dawn with her light of  
     gold  
 Chased away the effects of the beer  
     demon so bold.

#### Reel IV

Then the know-all dean with his know-  
     ing eyes  
 Got a hold of the facts, which put him  
     quite wise.  
 He called them one, he called them all  
 From the extra long to the extra small.  
 The 6:15 leaves at 6:15  
 That’s all he said, this wise old Dean.

<sup>8</sup>Daily Illini, January 8, 1920, p. 6.

statement possibly implying that University Klan members wore sheets as a uniform:

Be sure that your bedding is clean when you move into your room. That's your only chance to enjoy such modern conveniences as integral sheets. The style now is to use them for table-cloths and since Pan-Hellenic let down the bars there is a demand for several additional Ku-Klux uniforms.<sup>9</sup>

In October 1920, Ku Klux members were observed wearing *black* hoods and robes to a dance held at the Kappa Sigma fraternity house.<sup>10</sup> Early in 1921, the Urbana Daily Courier employed word imagery directly associating the campus Klan with the romanticized KKK depictions of Dixon and Griffith: "Members of the Ku Klux Klan will emerge from the shadows," the Courier wrote, "clatter down the road on horse back, each with a captive 'damsel' in his arms, in order that they may all dance at the Sigma Nu chapter house, 303 East John street, Saturday evening."<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the avowedly racist national Second Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1915. By the early 1920s, the group's membership grew rapidly in the North as well as the South. The national Ku Klux Klan began to organize in the Champaign County area as early as October 1921.<sup>12</sup> In August 1922, the national Klan held its first conclave in Champaign County--supposedly "the largest conclave in the history of Champaign county" up to that point.<sup>13</sup> "Urbana gazed with awe Saturday evening while an automobile procession of the Ku Klux Klan

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<sup>9</sup>The Illio 1918, p. 506. It's possible that this statement refers to the national rather than the campus Klan.

<sup>10</sup>Daily Illini, October 17, 1920, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Urbana Daily Courier, January 13, 1921, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Daily Illini, October 4, 1921, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, August 9, 1922, p.1.

moved northward thru the city,” the Urbana Daily Courier reported. “They seemed to come from every place and the crowd is said to have numbered 4,500.”<sup>14</sup> By late 1922, the activities of the national Klan captured headlines throughout the country. The organization's methods came under greater scrutiny especially after the December 1922 murders of two African-Americans by Klansmen in Mer Rouge, Louisiana.<sup>15</sup>

The University of Illinois Ku Klux Klan became embroiled in controversy at this same time. According to the Daily Illini, “on the evening of a recent Ku Klux Klan . . . dance, the hooded and gowned members of the organization overstepped the bounds of propriety at a number of organized houses.” The student newspaper elaborated on the incident, reporting that the campus Ku Klux Klan members had “disguised themselves in the red-crossed robes and hoods and loudly proclaimed their presence.” Maintaining that the incident was prompted by “simple idiocy,” the Daily Illini editorialist called on the university group to change its name in order to distinguish it from the national Ku Klux Klan:

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

The Daily Illini deemed it “unfortunate that the juniors should have the same name as the band of 100 percent Americans who have aroused such a storm of protest from coast to coast.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Urbana Daily Courier, August 7, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>New York Times, December 24, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Daily Illini, January 9, 1923, p. 4, col. 2. On January 30, 1923, the national Ku Klux Klan sponsored its first public meeting in Champaign-Urbana itself. That night, Rev. James F. McMahon, minister of the First Church of Christ of Mattoon and a Ku Klux Klan member, addressed a crowd of an estimated 1,000 at the Illinois Theatre. Urbana Daily Courier, February 1, 1923, p. 4, col. 1.

The writing was on the wall for the campus Ku Klux Klan. On January 8, 1923—one day before the Daily Illini editorial was published—the Committee on Student Organizations and Activities recommended that the Klan not be allowed to hold any more dances until it was “properly organized.” The following day, the Council of Administration accepted the committee’s advice and barred the group from giving any further dances until it was formed “in the usual way.”<sup>17</sup>

In March 1923, representatives of all the university Ku Klux Klan chapters—supposedly five in number—met in Chicago and provisionally agreed to alter the organization’s name. On April 11, 1923, the University of Illinois chapter of the Ku Klux Klan officially changed its name to Tu-Mas—reportedly a Native American term. H. C. Woodward, president of the group, reported that this decision had been made because of “confusion arising from confounding the college organization with the recently-revived Invisible empire (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ku Klux Klan).”<sup>18</sup> According to Messer-Kruse, the University of Wisconsin’s Ku Klux Klan followed suit, also altering its name to Tu-Mas.<sup>19</sup> Illinois’s Tu-Mas became inactive in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Committee on Student Organizations and Activities Minutes, January 8, 1923, Record Series 41/2/5, Box 2, University of Illinois Archives; Council of Administration Minutes, Volume 23, p. 189, January 9, 1923, Record Series 3/1/1, University of Illinois Archives. The note in the Council of Administration Minutes stated:

The recommendation of the Committee on Student Organizations and Activities to the effect that the request be denied and that no further dances be allowed this particular group until it is formed in the usual way was approved.

<sup>18</sup>Daily Illini, April 12, 1923, p. 1, col. 6.

<sup>19</sup>Messer-Kruse, pp. 32-33.

<sup>20</sup>“Tu-Mas,” Student Faculty Organization and Registration Cards, 1909-1994, Record Series 41/2/41, Box 26, University of Illinois Archives.

**Report Addendum, October 20, 2004**

In September 2004, a postcard was offered on eBay depicting a group of men dressed in the garb of the Ku Klux Klan. The men apparently were University of Illinois students taking part in the 1916 Interscholastic Circus. Only a few of the men's faces are actually visible. Two of the depicted students *may* be members of the campus Ku Klux Klan: H. J. Armstrong, of Chi Phi, and E. McEvers, of Phi Sigma Kappa.<sup>21</sup> However, according to the Daily Illini, two fraternities—Phi Kappa and Alpha Rho Chi—performed Circus "stunts" in 1916 that apparently related to the D.W. Griffith film "Birth of a Nation"—a box-office sensation of 1915. Phi Kappa's act was named "The Breath of a Nation" while Alpha Rho Chi (the professional architectural fraternity) titled its stunt "The Birth of a Circus." Given the centrality of the Ku Klux Klan in the Griffith film, it is reasonable to assume that these stunts involved the wearing of KKK garb and thus may be the group in the Circus photograph.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>The Illio 1918, p. 300.

<sup>22</sup>Daily Illini, May 13, 1916, p. 8, col. 2.