

City of Union
Five Graded Schools, Water Works,
Sewerage System, Electric Lights, Three
Banks with aggregate capital of \$250,000,
Electric Railway. Population 7,000.

THE UNION TIMES.

City of Union and Suburbs Has

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The Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina

*Recalls to the Memory of Many Union Citizens
the Murder of Mat Stevens, near Union,
by the Negro Militia.*

By Wm. H. Brawley, United States District Judge for South Carolina.
In Centennial Edition of The News and Courier.

norant local officials, naturally caused great dissatisfaction, but the arming of negroes, and the frequent exhibitions of reckless insolence excited perhaps more disquietude than all the other causes combined.

About this time too, there were a great many incendiary fires, but whether they preceded or followed the Ku Klux crimes was never definitely established.

It was during the early winter that followed the election of 1870, that the Ku Klux Klan seems to have been reorganized in the County of York, which was the scene of its greatest activity. The organizations which had been formed in 1868 had practically died out, or at least there was no evidence that anything had ever been done by Ku Klux or any like organization until some time in the winter of '70-'71. York County lies along the North Carolina line, and it is not unlikely that the success of the Democratic party in that State in overthrowing the Radical Government, aided, as it probably was, by the Ku Klux, stimulated the organization in that county.

About the last day of December, 1870, there was an occurrence near the town of Union which led to fearful consequences and probably excited the public mind both at home and abroad more than any other incident in those troublous times. A young man named Matt Stevens, who had lost an arm in the war and was generally liked in Union because of his good nature and accommodating disposition, was coming to town in a wagon, hauling a barrel of whiskey, when he was met a mile or two from town by the negro military company which had gone out there for some purpose that never was satisfactorily explained.

He was halted in the road and some of the negroes asked him for whiskey and he gave them a flask. They then took possession of the wagon and helped themselves out of the barrel. When Stevens attempted to get away from them he was shot and his body mutilated. This atrocious murder naturally created intense excitement in the village. The citizens at once took the arms from the militia and arrested five of the men who were supposed to have been chiefly concerned in the murder. The deputy sheriff, who was engaged with the posse in making the arrest, was shot at from the house where some of the militia were and mortally wounded.

A few nights after a band of Ku Klux, variously estimated to be 50 to 100 in number, rode into town, all being disguised, took the five prisoners from the county jail and carrying them to the edge of the town, shot them, two of the men being killed; the other three were wounded and escaped, and subsequently rearrested. All this was so quietly done that a great many of the citizens knew nothing of it until next morning.

The regular term of Court for Union convened the week following, and I went there in the usual discharge of my duties as solicitor. Union at that time was a quiet little country village and such an occurrence as this naturally caused great excitement. Upon my arrival I went to the jail to see the wounded prisoners and to ascertain, if I could, whether they had any clue to the identity of any of the band. One of the men had been a waiter at the Tavern, where I had been in the habit of stopping and I knew him very well. The poor fellow was terror stricken. He was badly wounded and was still under the spell of the fearful night through which he had passed. He said that he did not recognize any of the men: that they had been taken from the jail in the early morning by men who were completely disguised, and carried to the edge of town, not a word being spoken on the road. There were several persons with me when I made this visit to the jail.

Subsequently I had a message from the boy that if I could be seen alone he wanted to tell me something, and I went back to jail. He then said that he was sure that if it was known that he had recognized any of the Ku

Klux, and had disclosed it, he would be killed. I thought that very likely and told him that if he gave me any information I would not let it be known that I had any knowledge as to the persons who were on this raid until things had so far quieted down that he would be protected. He thereupon gave me the names of three men, whom he said he recognized.

I, of course, kept this information in strict confidence, and never told anyone that I had any clue, knowing well that his life was in imminent peril if any such disclosure had been made.

Meantime six or eight members of the militia company, charged with the murder of Stevens, had been arrested and put in jail.

When the court met on Monday, after a conference with the leading lawyers of Union, it was agreed that the public mind was in such a state of excitement over the murder of Stevens that it was doubtful that fair trial of his alleged murders could be had at that term, and that the case should be continued.

The judge of the circuit was a Republican, and while he was not very highly thought of as a judge, there was no bitterness in him and he was not especially unpopular. He was in a very unhappy state of mind, however, during the whole of that term. We stopped at the same tavern, and on two or three nights he had his bed brought into my room and slept there. I never thought that he was in any danger. The week following the term at Union, he was in Columbia, where some proceedings looking to his removal from office had been commenced, for causes having no relation to these troubles now under consideration.

While there he was induced to make an order somewhat in the nature of a writ of habeas corpus, directing the sheriff of Union to bring the prisoners charged with the murder of Matt Stevens to Columbia. This order was carried to Union by a colored man not in any way connected with the court, and given to the sheriff, who, owing to its irregular form, consulted some of the lawyers at Union as to whether he should obey it, and there was a delay of a day in the execution of the order.

It would have been the part of wisdom to have removed the prisoners from Union in the then excited state of the public mind, but it was very unfortunate that it should have been attempted in the bungling way in which it was done, for the information had gotten out somehow that the prisoners were to be taken to Columbia, and on the night before they were to be taken there a body of Ku Klux said to be four or five hundred, rode into town, took them out and killed them. The organization must have been strong in numbers, when such a large body of men could be assembled upon such short notice.

I do not remember any other occasion in which the Ku Klux Klan operated upon such a large scale, but such was the apparent power of the organization, and such the awe that it inspired, that from early in January, 1871, it was felt that the counties of York and Union were to a great extent dominated by it.

The immediate effects of this raid upon the Union jail and of some of their operations in York was the breaking up of the companies of negro militia and some of the more obnoxious officials were under threats led to resign. The governor called in the arms of the disbanded companies and appointed better men to the vacated offices and the result was that a great many men that ordinarily were upholders of law, while feebly deploring the methods so far approved the ends accomplished, that the Ku Klux Klan was looked upon by the unwise as a sort of "saviour of society."

A particularly foolish fellow—the son of a former Governor, residing in a county where the Klan does not seem to have carried on its operations at all, was so outspoken in approval and so boastful of his connection with it that when at a later day his county was put under martial

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law, he was arrested and put in jail. He really had had no connection with any outrages, and there was nothing against him but his own boastful declarations, and he was released upon the filing of affidavits by his family and friends that he was such a liar that he could not be believed!

This case illustrates the effect produced upon the more foolish part of the community. The more judicious looked with grave apprehension upon the unloosening of a monster which threatened the very existence of organized society. There is reason to believe that in the beginning the Klan was under the control of men of good standing, who believed that they could direct its energies towards the accomplishment of public purposes beneficial to the community. Subsequent developments disclosed the names of those who were at the head of the Klans that were broken up, but I do not think that there were any that could be fairly called leaders in the State.

If they had been men of real ability and foresight they would have foreseen that it is in the very nature of secret societies, engaged in lawless operations, to fall under the control of the most violent and most reckless, and that in fashioning an instrument of such tremendous potentialities for mischief, there was danger of great abuses.

What might naturally be expected to happen did happen—for some months there was pandemonium. Bands of ruffians in disguise rode about the country at night committing nameless crimes. To what extent the regularly organized Ku Klux Klans were engaged in this work of murder and terrorism it is impossible to say, for it was easy to assume the name and disguise for the purpose of wreaking private vengeance or for other vicious objects.

Mr. Reverdy Johnson, who defended the Ku Klux prisoners that were brought to trial in the following December, thus refers to these outrages:

"But Mr. Attorney General has remarked, and would have you suppose, that my friend and myself are here to defend, justify or to palliate the outrages that have been perpetrated in your State by this association of Ku Klux. He makes a great mistake as to both of us. I have listened with unmixed horror to some of the testimony which has been brought before you. The outrages proved as shocking to humanity; they admit of no excuse or justification; they violate every obligation which law and nature imposes upon men; they show that the parties engaged were brutes, insensible to the obligations of humanity. The day will come, however, if it has not already arrived, when they will deeply lament it. Even if justice shall not overtake them, there is one tribunal from which there is no escape. It is their own judgment, that tribunal which sits in the breast of every living man—that small, still voice that thrills through the heart, the soul of the mind, and as it speaks, gives happiness or torture—the voice of conscience, the voice of God. If it has not already spoken to them in tones which have startled them to the enormity of their conduct, I trust in the mercy of Heaven that that voice will speak before they shall be called above to account for the transactions of this world; that it will so speak as to make them penitent; and that, trusting in the dispensations of Heaven, whose justice is dispensed with mercy, when

they shall be brought before the bar of that great tribunal, so to speak, that incomprehensible tribunal, there will be found, in the fact of their penitence, or in their previous lives, some grounds upon which God may say pardon."

I think that the explanation of much that occurred in this region in the spring of 1871 is to be found in social and economic, rather than in political causes, and while it is probably true that the organizers of the Klans looked to the accomplishment of some political ends through this instrumentality, their followers soon got beyond their control and most of the outrages were due to the fixed and deliberate, though probably unavowed purpose, of driving the negroes out of the country.

The first man that was murdered by the Ku Klux in York county was Tom Roundtree, a thrifty, industrious and successful negro, who lived near the North Carolina line, in a community where there were but few negroes. I prosecuted three men for this murder, all of whom prove alibis to the satisfaction of the jury.

Two of the men charged were, I think, innocent; as to the other there was ground for a reasonable doubt, the men being disguised there may have been a mistake as to their identity. Roundtree held no office, and I could see no motive for the killing, except that fierce race hatred, which is strongest among those who, in worldly estate, are most nearly on the same plane, and most likely to be in competition with the negro as laborer or as renter of lands.

It may well be asked how it was that in a country calling itself Christian and civilized, such a state of affairs could be endured. It is to our great shame, discredit and injury that crime was allowed to run rampant and unpunished for so long a time.

Several things may be said, not by way of excuse for our shortcomings, but in explanation. First, it may be said that an organization that could bring together upon short notice five hundred or a thousand horsemen, armed and disguised and bound together by most solemn oaths, moving mysteriously in the darkness, already stained with human blood, and with the callousness that follows a blunted conscience, was well calculated to excite fear and in a rural community, where there were no organized forces of police protection, men were loth to antagonize a power all the more to be dreaded, because of the mystery which did not admit the measuring of its force.

Second, some of the early demonstrations were secretly approved of as being directed towards the remedy of real grievances and the punishment of real criminals.

Third, and chiefly, the State Government was such that it was not supported by the public opinion of the better element of the State, and there would have been general acquiescence in its overthrow by any methods however violent and revolutionary. It is impossible here to describe fully the kind of Government that was established in South Carolina under the Reconstruction Acts. Mr. James S. Pike, a Northern man and a Republican, who had been Minister of the United States at The Hague, appointed by Mr. Lincoln, and who spent the winter of 1873 in Columbia, thus describes it:

(Continued on last page.)