

*Reorganized in 1915 by William Simmons, a defrocked Methodist Episcopal preacher who once said that as a boy he saw visions of Klansmen riding on their horses, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) appealed to prejudice directed at African-Americans, immigrants, Jews, and Roman Catholics.*

As William Simmons described it, he revived the KKK in a ceremony atop Stone Mountain, near Atlanta, Georgia, surrounded by a flag-draped altar bearing a Bible, a burning cross lighting the night, and initiates dressed in white robes and pointed caps.

Through the Klan, Simmons wanted to rally white Protestants against blacks, Jews, immigrants, and Roman Catholics, and the social changes they brought. The Klan's rebirth came as immigrants entered the United States in unprecedented numbers, primarily from eastern and southern Europe and overwhelmingly Catholic in faith.

The rebirth came amid intensifying bigotry. In the South, prejudice took an ugly turn in the weeks before the Stone Mountain ceremony when a mob dragged Leo Frank from an Atlanta jail—just a few miles from Stone Mountain itself—and hanged him. Frank, who was Jewish, had been convicted of raping a teenage girl. Both his trial, filled with legally questionable proceedings, and his hanging, exhibited signs of anti-Semitism. So, too, did the ranting of Georgia political leader Tom Watson, a former Populist whose speeches attacked blacks, Catholics, and Jews.

In 1915, the release of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, a pioneering movie in terms of its elaborate production, added to the climate of hate and bigotry. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*, the movie portrayed blacks as imbecilic and dangerous, and the original KKK, formed shortly after the Civil War, as the saviors of civilization during the late 1860s and 1870s. Writing in *The Emergence of the New South* (1967), George B. Tindall says about *Birth of a Nation*, "One could hardly exaggerate its significance . . . in preparing the way for the revival of the Klan." In an intriguing bit of timing, Simmons printed his first public notice in an Atlanta newspaper about the Klan's rebirth while *Birth of a Nation* opened at theaters there.

Yet the appeal of the movie extended well beyond the South, playing to sold-out theaters from New England to California (and finding favor with President Woodrow Wilson). Around 1920, the Klan's reach extended beyond the South. To the American anxiety about blacks, immigrants, Catholics, and Jews (with the last three groups overlapping, since many immigrants were Roman Catholic or Jewish) was added the discontent with the way World War I had turned out—promoted as a war to make the world safe for democracy, it clearly had not—and dismay, at least among moral traditionalists, over open sexuality, liberated women, and the defiance of Prohibition.

Only native-born white Protestants could join the Klan. The group typically called foreigners "dirt," "scum," and "filth," and Simmons declared, "When the hordes of aliens walk to the ballot box and their votes outnumber yours, then that alien horde has got you by the throat." The Klan saved its greatest invective—at least outside the South, where it aimed mainly at blacks—for Catholics, derided as a threat to Protestant Christianity and a group likely to take orders from the pope. Combining its nativist and anti-Catholic stands, the Klan called the pope the "dago on the Tiber."

The Klan reached its peak in numbers and strength in the early to mid-1920s: membership estimates vary between three and four million. The KKK was strongest in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. It helped elect 16 senators and 11 governors; Earl Mayfield, a senator from Texas, was openly a member.

In 1925, articles in the *New York World* that detailed Klan bigotry and violence led to a congressional investigation. From the perspective of the Klan's opponents, the hearings backfired when in his testimony Simmons skillfully portrayed the KKK as the defender of American values.

Still, many people actively opposed the Klan. New York City banned the KKK from parading; Cleveland fined anyone belonging to a society promoting "racial hatred and religious bigotry," and that city's mayor said, "I cannot imagine a more vicious organization." The American Unity League, based in Chicago, infiltrated the Klan, stole its membership lists, and published the names of Klansmen, a move that exposed several prominent businessmen and politicians, including the chairman of the Indiana Republican Party. Other groups, some populated by bootleggers who disliked the Klan's call to more vigorously enforce prohibition, attacked the KKK, in one instance bombing its newspaper office in Chicago.

In the late 1920s, Klan membership declined rapidly, hastened by the conviction of a Klan leader for murder, passage of a law in 1924 restricting immigration, the failure of the Klan to show effective political leadership or widen its membership, and public disgust with Klan tactics. The KKK never again regained its size, but its bigotry, invective, and hate revived in the 1950s as the civil rights movement gained momentum.

#### Further Reading

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Wade, Wyn Craig. *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

## 1915 Joe Hill Executed in Utah

*On November 19, 1915, at 7:44 A.M., at the Utah State Penitentiary in Salt Lake City, a firing squad executed Joe Hill, a songwriter and activist with the Industrial Workers of the World. He had been found guilty of murder in a case that to many Americans was less designed to assure justice than to silence a radical.*



*Joe Hill. (Seattle-Post Intelligencer Collection; Museum of History & Industry: CORBIS)*

Joe Hill's past is shrouded in so much myth and legend it makes the details surrounding his arrest and conviction a true mystery. Hill was born Joel Haggland in Gavle, Sweden, in 1879 and, with his brother, immigrated to the United States in 1902. He spent some time in New York City before going out West and working as an itinerant laborer—as a longshoreman, miner, logger, and fruit picker. Between 1906 and 1910, for reasons unknown today, he changed his name to Joseph Hillstrom. Some say he was trying to alter his identity because he had engaged in petty crime; others say he was being hounded by company bosses who disliked his labor activism.

Hillstrom enrolled in the San Pedro, California, local of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW; see entry, 1905) in 1910 and the following year joined his fellow Wobblies (the nickname for IWW members) in Tijuana, Mexico, where they plotted to overthrow the Mexican government. Back in the United States, his labor protests resulted in several skirmishes with the police, and he later admitted to having spent 30 days in the San Pedro jail for vagrancy.

By that time, Hillstrom was using "Hill" as his last name and writing songs intended to rally Wobblies as they organized and engaged in