**The Ku Klux Klan, 1868**

**I**ts very name struck terror in the hearts of its victims. However, the beginning of the Ku Klux Klan was innocent enough. In December 1865, eight months after the South’s surrender, a group of six young men living in the village of Pulaski near Nashville, Tennessee decided to relieve their boredom by organizing a social club. All were veterans of the Confederate Army and some had attended college where fraternities with three-letter, Greek-based names were popular. Their meetings would be secret and devoted to elaborate ceremonies. Members would disguise themselves with a costume made up of a sheet to cover their bodies, fanciful masks to hide their faces and pointed headgear that heightened their stature.

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/kkk1.jpg |
| Two Army officers pose in KKK costumes captured in a raid in Alabama, 1868 |

Although their motives may have been innocent, the appearance of these white-sheeted, horse-mounted ghosts on the town’s darkened streets triggered a panic-driven flight for safety by the community’s recently freed slaves. Soon, terrorizing Blacks became a prime sport and the transition of the KKK from an social club to a ruthless vigilance committee began.

Transmitted by word-of-mouth and newspaper articles; knowledge of the Klan rapidly spread through the South. Post-war conditions in the former Confederacy were chaotic. The rapid expansion of the Klan was fueled by a wide-spread fear among many Southern Whites of former slaves and bitter anger against Northern “carpet-baggers” who had invaded the South since the end of the war. Local organizations mimicking the original group’s secrecy and costumes sprang up in various communities. It wasn’t long before the Klan evolved into one of the South’s most powerful organizations. Former slaves and carpet-baggers were favorite targets for intimidation backed up by violent night-time raids that could end in beatings and death.

The KKK’s reign was short-lived, its decline hastened by the revulsion of many southerners to its extreme methods and suppression by local governments. By 1868, its power was beginning to wane. In 1871 Congress passed the Klu Klux Klan Act that authorized the use of federal troops in the Klan’s suppression and for the trial of its members in federal court. The Klan melted away, or at least did not make any further public appearances until its revival in 1915.

*Ben Johnson was born a slave around 1848. Eighty-five years later he was interviewed by a team from the Federal Writers' Project that was gathering recollections from former slaves. We join him and his wife as they sit on the front porch of their home near Durham, NC and he recalls his encounters with the Ku Klux Klan shortly after the end of the Civil War:*

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“I was born in Orange County [North Carolina] and I belong to Mr. Glibert Gregg near Hillsboro. I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout my mammy and daddy, but I had a brother Jim who was sold to dress young misses for her weddin’. The tree is still standing where I set under and watch them sell Jim. I sat there and I cry and cry, especially when they puts the chains on him and carries him off, and I ain’t never felt so lonesome in my whole life. I ain’t never hear from Jim since and I wonder now sometimes if he’s still living.

I knows that the master was good to us and he fed and clothed us good. We had our own garden and we was getting along all right.

I seen a whole heap of Yankees when they comed to Hillsboro and most of them ain’t got no respect for God, man, nor the devil. I can’t remember so much about them though cause we lives in town... and we has a guard.

The most that I can tell you ‘bout is the Klu Klux. I never will forget when they hung Cy Guy. They hung him for an insult to a white woman and they came after him a hundred strong.

They tries him there in the woods, and they scratches Cy’s arm to get some blood, and with that blood they writes that he shall hang between the heavens and the earth till he is dead, dead, dead, and that any nigger what takes down the body shall be hanged too.

Well sir, the next morning there he hung, right over the road and the sentence hanging over his head. Nobody would bother with that body for four days and there it hung, swinging in the wind, but the fourth day the sheriff comes and takes it down.

There was Ed and Cindy, who before the war belonged to Mr Lynch and after the war he told them to move. He gives them a month and they ain’t gone, so the Ku Kluxes gets them.

It was on a cold night when they came and dragged the niggers out of bed. They carried them down in the woods and beat them, then they threw them in the pond, their bodies breakin’ the ice. Ed comes out and come to our house, but Cindy ain’t been seen since.

Sam Allen in Caswell County was told to move and after a month the hundred Ku Klux came a-totin’ his casket and they tells him that his time has come and if he wants to tell his wife goodbye and say his prayers; hurry up.

They set the coffin on two chairs and Sam kisses his old woman who’s crying, then he kneels down beside his bed with his head on the pillar and his arms thrown out in front of him.

He sits there for a minute and when he rose he had a long knife in his hand. Before he could be grabbed, he done kill two of the Klu Kluxes with the knife, and he done gone out of the door. They ain’t catch him neither, and the next night when they came back, determined to get him, they shot another nigger by accident.”

**References:** This eyewitness account is a part of the collection of the Library of Congress: WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2, Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Chalmers, David Mark, Hooded Americanism: the history of the Ku Klux Klan (1981); Horn, Stanley, F. Invisible Empire: the story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871 (1969).

**Questions on KKK**

1. Describe the origins of the Ku Klux Klan.

2. Who were some of the favorite targets of the KKK? Why?

3. Describe the end of the KKK.

4. Describe 2 of the stories of Ben Johnson. What impression do these stories give you about the KKK? Write 2-3 sentences each.

5. Why do you think so many people in the South joined the KKK after the Civil War? Write 2-3 sentences.