

MURDER AT MER ROUGE:
A DIALOGUE ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE KU KLUX KLAN
IN NORTHWESTERN LOUISIANA, 1921-1924

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

HANNAH BETHANN PETERSON

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
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Majors: American Studies & History

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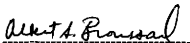
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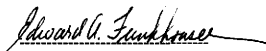
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Approved as to style and content by:



Albert S. Broussard
(Fellows Advisor)



Edward A. Funkhouser
(Executive Director)

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ABSTRACT

Murder at Mer Rouge:

A Dialogue on the Activities of the Ku Klux Klan

In Northwestern Louisiana, 1921-1924. (April 2004)

Hannah Beth Ann Peterson
Department of History
College of Liberal Arts
Texas A&M University

Fellows Advisor: Dr. Albert S. Broussard
Department of History

On August 24, 1922, in Bastrop, Louisiana, two men were kidnapped by a group of masked members of the Ku Klux Klan and were subsequently never seen again. Months later, two bodies were discovered in LaFourche Lake near Bastrop, Louisiana. While government officials were convinced that these were the bodies of the two men, many Klan members and non-Klan members alike believed that the bodies had been planted as part of a government conspiracy to uproot the Ku Klux Klan. Their murders sparked both an extensive investigation of Klan activities in Louisiana as well as a more general debate on the role that the “invisible empire” should play in American civil and social life.

The Ku Klux Klan first organized in the north-central part of Louisiana in 1921, but the Klan’s national membership had significantly grown during the previous decade. As is evidenced by the nation-wide correspondence of Louisiana’s then-governor, John Parker, people throughout the United States were also forming ideas on the Klan and its

pursuit of “responsible, wholesome government.” The Klan attempted to legitimate its ideology by infusing principles of patriotism with religious and racial purity.

In my research I have attempted to reconstruct the circumstances that existed in this town of approximately five hundred people in the years surrounding the incident. I describe the origins of a Klan network in the area as well as the particular circumstances that brought about the murder of two anti-Klan community members. Most of the resources available are primary documents, including newspaper reports, letters of correspondence between concerned citizens and government officials, and investigation reports. My research indicates that no work at all has been done on this incident, insofar as it relates to a larger narrative of Klan activity in the United States. I go on to argue that the Klan’s use of the moralistic language of patriotism and purity were major factors in the way in which the nation perceived the events.

To my mom and dad, who won't have to go to law school.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who assisted me in this project. First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Broussard, for his advice and direction. He helped me stay calm when the stress of the project was becoming difficult to handle. Thank you to Dr. Earhart, Donna Connor, and Dr. Funkhouser, who convinced me to try to stay in the Fellows program at the half-way point. Thank you to my parents who drove to Mer Rouge and Bastrop in order to take pictures for me and who supported me during the whole project, giving me ideas, and offering a shoulder to cry on.

Thank you to Joanna Patton, who was a great source of advice on how to structure my paper and arguments, and who was always willing to tell me if an idea made sense or not. Thank you to the Hall family, who helped me navigate around Lafayette, Louisiana when my research brought me to the Dupré Library and the Parker Papers at the University of Louisiana. Thank you to Ricky Bonnett, who helped me navigate around Mer Rouge, Bastrop, Lake Cooper, and Lake LaFourche.

The staff in the Louisiana Room at Dupré, including Carol Massey and Jean S. Kiesel, were the ones who first directed me toward the Parker Papers when I told them I was interested in researching race relations in Louisiana in the twentieth century. If they hadn't suggested the Parker Papers, I do not know in which direction this project would have turned. Carol helped me work out the issues with the copy machine there. Dr. Joel Kitchens, research librarian for humanities and social sciences at Evans Library at Texas A&M, gave me invaluable research tips on how to find hard-to-find sources.

Thank you to Fay Bowe, a docent at Snyder Museum, Bastrop, who was willing to share her perception on the state of people in Mer Rouge today.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ku Klux Klan, having organized itself in the post-Civil War years of Reconstruction, remained relatively unknown in parts of Louisiana until the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Many scholars point to a popularization of the secret society following its heroic portrayal in popular venues like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. The Ku Klux Klan in Northern Louisiana began organizing in the late teens and early twenties. In late 1991, George Mallory Patton was rummaging through some old records of the KKK in Morehouse Parish, Louisiana, and he discovered minutes from Klan meetings from its inception in 1921 through the end of 1924¹. This particular set of minutes is of great importance to this research project, as it covers the period during which the Morehouse Klan was responsible for several vicious crimes, crimes for which Klan #34 was thrust into the national spotlight.

Morehouse Parish sits on the Louisiana-Arkansas border on the far east side of the state. Bastrop, a town of about two thousand people, was the parish seat in 1922, and there are several small communities within a twenty mile radius of Bastrop, including Mer Rouge, a town of about four hundred people. Mer Rouge is located about seven miles northwest of Bastrop, and is accessible by road. Figure 1 shows a map of the northern half of the state of Louisiana, with both Morehouse Parish and Bastrop labeled in the top right corner. Despite the rather rural nature of the Parish, the Ku Klux Klan created a network of members and sympathizers in Morehouse Parish that was not to be reckoned with. According to Patton, the Morehouse Klan's purpose

This thesis follows the style and format of *The Journal of American History*.

¹ Patton, ii.

was perhaps unique among that of other locals. Klan #34 primarily set about ridding the surrounding community of thieves, bootleggers, prostitutes, womanizers, habitual lawbreakers, and other “grossly immoral people,” while other Klans tended to centralize more readily around the race issue.² Given the particular circumstances of Prohibition, the bootleggers in Morehouse Parish had organized into a collaborative network. They all distilled their whiskey on the same day, even though this did not eliminate the constant worry of getting in trouble with law enforcement. And so on distilling day, they would build a bunch of fires around the parish and burn old car tires. The haze of smoke created by the tire fires would cover large parts of the parish, so the sheriff was co-opted from locating the fires which belonged to whiskey stills from those which belonged to tire fires. This difficulty in controlling the bootleggers, in particular, seemed to be one of the major reasons why the Klan was attractive to the “law abiding” citizens of Mer Rouge and Bastrop, Louisiana.

But as was perhaps inevitable, relations between the Ku Klux Klan and the rest of the community followed a path of intervals of social and civil instability. The Klan’s demand for secrecy was unappealing to many of the people in Mer Rouge, and its frequent and calculated acts of violence alienated many others. Its claim of fulfilling civic duty rang deaf on the ears of those in Morehouse Parish who suspected the Klan of following a darker, secret agenda. The people divided themselves, more or less, into two loosely knit camps: those who supported the Klan and those who did not. Tensions

² Patton, ii.



Figure 1 Map of Northern Louisiana (Courtesy of Edith Garland Dupré Library, Lafayette)

would mount within the community as townspeople suspected and accused the Klan of acts of violence and mayhem, and they would diffuse as people stopped talking about the Klan's connection with the events. Within these two camps, the lines of division did not follow any strict rule, but a few very general patterns could be observed. It is important to realize that deviation from this pattern was common. Protestants seemed to be pro-Klan, while Catholics were more suspicious of it. Many ministers and pastors of churches in Louisiana were either members of the Ku Klux Klan or vocal supporters of it. In the unique demographics of Louisiana, where most of the northern part of the state was and is Protestant, an overwhelming majority of the southern part of the state was Catholic. This became particularly important when the Governor of Louisiana,

John M. Parker, was forced to deal with the problems that the Ku Klux Klan #34 caused in Morehouse Parish between 1922 and 1924.

The friction between the Klan and some of the people in Mer Rouge began in early August of 1922, and before the end of the month, two long-time anti-Klan residents of the community would be kidnapped and murdered by masked Klansmen. An aura of mystery surrounded the case because the bodies of the men were not immediately found, and speculation ran high as to whether the men had simply been kidnapped and deported to another state, or if they had indeed been murdered. Before the end of the year, the curious and accusing eyes of the whole nation were gazing down upon little Morehouse Parish and Klan #34 to see what would become of the case.

In a way, the future of the Ku Klux Klan, at least as a “respectable” organization, seemed to be at stake in this event. The Klan was being tried not only by the Grand Jury in Bastrop, but, perhaps more importantly, by the national court of public opinion. Prominent newspapers across the country kept daily record of the search for the kidnapped men and then of the investigation and court proceedings. Editorials and cartoons popped up across the nation in an effort to sway the nation either for or against the Ku Klux Klan’s program of moral and racial purification. The story’s appeal among its readership was due, on the one hand to the ease with which an event of this nature could be sensationalized and exaggerated, but also, on the other hand, because of the fact that the two murdered men were white men. While the KKK had been involved in hundreds, with some estimates reaching as high as three thousand, of lynchings of African Americans since the Civil War, many white Americans had

been more or less willing to overlook the deficiencies of the Klan and to ambivalently accept the Klan's role as moral police until Klan #34 made the mistake of killing two white men.

It goes without saying that in terms of race, Klan #34 was more likely to be supported by white Americans than black Americans. Even though much of the historical records that I've found indicate that the Klan in Morehouse Parish was less interested in the race problem than in what it perceived to be the "moral degeneration" of bootlegging and (white) prostitution, Klan members in Bastrop and Mer Rouge still signed membership cards that praised the superiority of the white race. Much of the discussion on the Klan in Morehouse Parish was recorded by white people, and one must keep this in mind while considering the Klan's activities and the rhetoric of patriotism and Americanism that surrounded it. While this paper does not speak directly on the Klan's historical participation at the national level in more than three thousand lynchings and other violent crimes committed against African Americans, it does focus instead on the great wave of national discussion that was prompted when the Klan acted against white Americans. At the fear of appearing to ignore the real problem of the Klan's racial agenda, I wish to note here the rather limited scope of this paper's treatment of the Klan. That the murders of two solitary white men in Louisiana could create such a sensation across the country is to a degree indicative of the ambiguity in the (white) public's mind of the Klan's legitimacy.

The Nation watched as individual members of the Klan were accused and defended, as the Federal and State special investigators were threatened and run out of

the country, as Governor Parker was driven to the brink of declaring martial law in the state, and as people tried to negotiate for themselves how the Klan was to be held accountable for the “Murders at Mer Rouge.” Accusations of conspiracy and fraud were abundant as the two camps became increasingly polarized and militarized. The main idea that I hope to communicate with this paper is to describe and analyze the sort of negotiation within the public mind of what the Klan was really about. The volume and content of what was described in national newspapers indicates to me that many Americans, particularly white Americans, during this time were grappling with the question of where the Ku Klux Klan was to fit in American society. While on the one hand the Klan claimed to fight for lost virtue and morality under the banner of Protestant Christianity, on the other hand the Klan was responsible for heinous acts of racial and domestic violence, bordering on the realm of terrorism. The American people were faced with the question of which acts of the KKK were to be accepted and promoted, which were to be blindly tolerated, and which were to be repressed. The dialogue that ensued between these parties was constantly framed in the rhetoric of loyalty to God, country, and family, and Americans had to decide where in the scheme of American patriotism the KKK would acceptably fit.

The paper is organized into roughly two sections. The first section is primarily set up as a narrative of the murders, a story pieced together from among the evidence I’ve discovered. One of the primary problems of writing about this story is embedded within the nature of the problem itself. Because the sensationalism of kidnapping and murder can overshadow the more subtle and complicated details of the story, it is

unfortunate that the primary sources of evidence come from parties which had a vested interest in slanting the story, by highlighting certain events more than others, while in the larger picture, the details which would be most important or interesting to us today were more likely to be left unnoticed or never written about. This seems to be the frustration of the primary source researcher. In contrast to those who would have been tempted to conjure and imagine sensational details, those closest to the events, the ones from whom the most accurate picture of what happened could be drawn were too emotionally connected to the story simply to publicize to the whole nation the deep wounds that were terrorizing them. This is to say that the people who really knew what happened were precisely those who were the least willing to tell their story. And so, consequently, I have had to rely heavily upon newspaper articles, notes from the Klan itself, and the investigation notes of state and federal agents. I can claim none of them as an absolute authority on what happened, so my narrative is at best a scattered attempt to piece events together. People's names were spelled differently in different places, and sequence details during the narrative do not always make perfect sense. I have tried to make as few value judgments as possible, but when they were unavoidable, I have tried to provide alternative points of view.

The second major section of the paper then focuses on the rhetoric of Americanism and patriotism that ran along embedded the narrations of the story in newspapers and in hand-written correspondence between the actors. While most of what has been written was decidedly anti-Klan, a significant amount remained decidedly pro-Klan. But it seems that the majority of people existed in some sort of

middle ground between these two extremes. People were aware of the shortcomings of moral and political life within their communities but were yet unwilling to wholeheartedly embrace the Ku Klux Klan as the solution to those short-comings.

My hope in this project is to tell a story that is worth telling. I find that it is worth telling on the level of local Louisiana history because of personal family connections, but I find it even more interesting on an ideological level, because of the extreme fervor with which ideas and perspectives on the Ku Klux Klan were volleyed between contingent parties. This reason alone is enough to make one inquisitive to discover what *really* happened in Morehouse Parish between 1922 and 1924. Putting aside the details that would have made it a unique, local, and relatively unimportant small-town story, the incident and its effects provide an interesting look into the way in which many Americans decided they did not like the Ku Klux Klan.

WARNING

The “facts” of the case were primarily established by interviews with citizens of Mer Rouge and vicinity, some of whom belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, many of whom were anti-Klan, during the time that federal investigator A.E. Farland was in Mer Rouge conducting interviews on behalf of the Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C. Farland made several reports during the period from October 1922 until December of 1924, when he ceased to work on the case. His report, though flawed in detail, provides a narrative framework from which to begin this story.

The Klan first organized in the Mer Rouge-Bastrop area around Christmas of 1921 to combat vagrancy, prostitution, and moral degeneracy.¹ Many of the prominent citizens of the town, including members of the local city and parish government, joined the Klan. The Klan aggressively recruited membership, with varying degrees of success. One resident of Mer Rouge, Mr. A.H. Davenport, had been asked to join the Klan, but he declined, saying he could not join anything that required him to wear a mask. Several weeks later, he began receiving threatening letters from the Klan telling him he talked excessively negatively about the Klan, and that if he failed to quit a committee would wait on him and judge him. Davenport must have kept talking because a short while later the committee told him he had to leave Mer Rouge along with several others. Davenport had several close friends in the Klan who spoke up on his behalf, and he was allowed to stay in Mer Rouge.²

¹ Farland, 28.

² Ibid, 28.

One of Klan #34's first acts was to chastise a young lady in Mer Rouge who was suspected of "improper behavior" with a man with whom "her conduct was not what it should have been."³ On January 2, 1922, a band of masked Klan members kidnapped the fifteen year old girl from her home and assaulted her mother. The girl, Addie May Hamilton, was taken to the train depot, given seven dollars for fare, and put on the midnight train to Little Rock. The men in black hoods told her never to return to Mer Rouge. Her beau, Fred E. Clemmons, was in her home at the time the Klan came to take her, and the Klan forced him to stay in the house until they were sure the train had departed.⁴ Addie's mother told special investigator A. E. Farland that the Klan members did not even give her enough time to change her clothes or put on a hat. When she was interviewed later in 1923, Mrs. Hamilton said that her daughter had indeed returned home a number of times since she had been forced to leave, but never without the permission of the Klan. At the end of 1923, Addie was still living in Little Rock without her mother. The young man who had been calling on her at the time, Fred, was taken as a member of the Klan as soon as Addie was sent away. Farland notes that this was done to prevent him from testifying in court should the matter be pressed that far. Clemmons told investigators that he did not consider himself a Klansman, since he never went to meetings or attended the "flogging parties," even though he did go to the initiation ceremony and paid his \$10.00 dues.⁵

³ Farland, 13.

⁴ Ibid, 24.

⁵ Ibid, 25.

Apparently, the men who were supposed to kidnap Addie were at first unwilling to do it. A certain Dr. Bunnie M. McKoin was head of the KKK in Mer Rouge at this time, and it was under his orders that Addie was kidnapped. But the men whom he ordered to do it refused at first to carry out the order. So McKoin called in Captain Skipwith, who was Kleagle (the highest ranking officer) of the Ku Klux Klan in Bastrop for advice. One of the Klan outfits just across the Arkansas border was called in to assist also, and perhaps three or four men came down to Mer Rouge for this purpose. This stirred interest in the venture again, and so it was suspected that Dr. McKoin, the leader, himself was in the party who kidnapped the girl from her home. The unwillingness of the original men ordered to kidnap Addie indicates a lack of consensus and cohesiveness in the objectives of the Klan. And while the kidnapping eventually took place anyway, the effort was not met without resistance among those who were unsure about what the Klan would accomplish by doing this.

The story proper of the mysterious murders at Mer Rouge starts with an alleged assault on Dr. B. M. McKoin, who was also serving as mayor of Mer Rouge in 1922 as well as being the founding Captain of the Ku Klux Klan in Mer Rouge.⁶ McKoin, according to newspaper articles, announced a premier campaign against “the lawless,” and just days later received an angry note ordering him to leave town.⁷ Upon flagrantly refusing to take heed of the letter’s advice, McKoin claims he became the victim of an attempted assassination. In late summer, McKoin, who was also one of the only physicians in Mer Rouge, was called by telephone one night to a certain house for a

⁶ Farland, 17.

⁷ *New York Times*. December 21, 1922.

professional visit. Later that evening, on his return to town around 8:30 PM, several shots from a shotgun were fired toward his car, apparently from a hidden ambush. Dr. McKoin had a reputation for being very active against bootleggers and “concubinage,” and his friends later speculated that this was the cause of the attempted assassination. Others speculated a more likely story that the attempted assassination was the work of family and friends of a man whom McKoin had murdered several years earlier, though McKoin had never been prosecuted of any previous crimes. As a result of this event, and continual perceived threats against his life, McKoin moved from Mer Rouge to Monroe, Louisiana, some thirty miles away.



Figure 2 Photograph of Dr. Bunnie M. McKoin (Courtesy of Author)

In the days following the attempted assassination, stories began to circulate among the townspeople of Mer Rouge that implicated rticular individuals, Samuel F. Richards and Filmore Watt Daniels, two men who had not embraced the Klan when it first came to Mer Rouge, and who were therefore the Klan's targets. What evidence that could have implicated Richards and Daniels is scant. Apparently some members of the Klan observed Daniels and Richards in a car one day, and Richards got out of the car, and went and put something inside of Daniels's yard, an object which the observers suspected to have been used in the assault against Dr. McKoin, though in what capacity we do not know.⁸ But, in any case, the Klan selected these two men, Daniels and Richards, to be the objects of their retaliation.

On August 17th, when Henry J. Neelis, proprietor of Neelis Motor Car Company and employer of Sam Richards, was making service deliveries to Mer Rouge from Bastrop, he was held up by masked men in two cars on the route from Bastrop to Mer Rouge. Pointing pistols and shot guns at him, the masked men told Neelis and his hired help, an unnamed African American man, to get out of the truck. When the masked men did not recognize the man for whom they were looking, they told them to keep driving and not to tell anyone what had happened to them. Neelis and his companion, continued driving toward Mer Rouge. When they came within three miles of town, another car drove up, with a non-masked man in the back seat, who pulled a gun and told Neelis to stop on the side of the road. The man, later identified as Jeff Burnett, the leader of the Klan in Speaker, Louisiana, told Neelis to drive back to the place where he

⁸ Farland, 17.

had first been stopped, but Neelis complained that his truck was not running well and asked if he could simply ride back in the truck with the armed Burnett and his driver. Burnett agreed, and Neelis, along with his hired help, got into the car with Neelis, and they all drove back to where they had been pulled over the first time.

While in the car, Neelis asked his captor what the meaning of the show was and what his intentions were. He demanded to know if this was the action of the Ku Klux Klan, and Burnett conceded that he was in the Klan. Burnett told Neelis that the Klan did not have any intention of harming him, but that they wanted to make sure he would keep his mouth shut about what they had done to him. When they arrived at the point where Neelis was first pulled over, the driver brought the truck about seventy-five yards into the woods where they found several other cars and dozens of masked men. Neelis pleaded with them to let him go as he claimed to have an engagement that evening in Monroe. He was on his way that very moment to Mer Rouge to catch the train to Monroe, but the Klansmen would make no accommodations for him. After a man whom Neelis identified as Fred Higginbotham of Bastrop had a short conversation with Burnett, Burnett told Neelis he was free to leave, but that he would have to walk back to his truck. At this point Neelis told his hired help to walk back to the truck and drive it into Mer Rouge, while he would walk back to Bastrop and catch the train from there. Neelis started walking along the roadside back to Bastrop, and he stopped the first car that passed him in the direction of Bastrop. It was a car driven by two ladies whom Neelis knew personally. He asked the driver if she would drive as fast as she could to Bastrop because he wanted to beat the Klansmen who were also trekking there. He

wanted to warn one of the men who worked for him, Sam Richards, that the Klan might be coming to get him. By this time, it was about 4:30 in the afternoon and Sam Richards, who had one of his children with him at work that day, began to look for a place where he could leave his child, should the Klan come after him.

Neelis walked out of his place of business, and saw Fred Higginbotham sitting in a car right out on the street. He walked over to him and yelled, "What in hell do you mean by driving down there and holding me up?" Fred told him he did not have anything to do with it, and he was sorry that it had happened to him. At this time, the caravan of Klansmen came up to the Neelis Motor Car Company, and demanded to know Sam Richards's whereabouts. Neelis protested, saying that this was his place of business, and no one had a right to come in acting like that. Rogers, the man who had been the driver for Burnett earlier in the day, pointed a gun at Neelis, and told him to get out of the way. They put Richards into the car and drove off.

Sam Richards was taken out to the woods just outside town, a drive Richards guessed to be five or six miles in the direction of Monroe, by hooded Klansmen, and they gave him a strong lecture. He was told that they had been informed that he had been involved in the McKoin shooting, and it would not be too much longer before he would be convinced to tell the Ku Klux Klan his connection to the shooting, and everything else he knew about it. They warned him that sooner would be better than later. Richards told them he knew nothing of the shooting, and that at the time, he and several friends had been playing poker at the home of J. L. Daniels in Mer Rouge. After having been gone for around two hours, the Klansmen returned Richards to the

Neelis Motor Car Company. His boss, Neelis, asked him whether he had recognized any of the men who had taken him out to the woods, perhaps by their voices, and Richards told him that he had recognized Captain J.K. Skipwith of Bastrop, Jim Tiedule of Monroe, and A.B. Campbell of Jones. The hooded men did not harm him in any other way, except to tell him that he could not talk to people about what had happened to him.

Now Neelis had gone looking for Fred Higginbotham, to further discuss the matter with him, just after the Klan had kidnapped Richards. But apparently Higginbotham had gone to pick up Captain Skipwith, after which they followed the band that was holding Richards. Neelis waited for forty-five minutes until Higginbotham returned alone, and they went into a restaurant to discuss the matter. Neelis charged that Skipwith was behind the whole demonstration that day, and Higginbotham told Neelis that he could not discuss it then, but he would be able to tell him the next day. Higginbotham told Neelis he hated what they were doing that day, and he was sorry that he had to take a part in it. When Neelis left the restaurant, he walked over to the courthouse, and he met a couple of men who jokingly told him the Klan was trying to put him out of business before he ever really got started, and Neelis told them that he would have killed some of the Klansmen if he had had a gun with him. The sheriff, Carpenter, overheard this conversation outside the courthouse, and called Neelis to come talk to him. Carpenter told him that he was well-liked around town, but that he better not talk badly about the Klan like that, or he would get in trouble. Neelis

discovered that Carpenter had seen the band of masked men take Richards away from work, and had made no attempt to stop them.

Tot Davenport, a resident of Bastrop, met Neelis at his work, and asked Neelis if he wanted a ride into Monroe, since he was on his way there. Neelis accepted the offer, and they rode out of Bastrop on their way to Monroe. On the road, they passed the car that was carrying Richards and the masked Klansmen back into Bastrop. Richards waved at his boss, but he was not able to recognize any of the other masked men in the car. The next day, Neelis again met Fred Higginbotham, and again asked him who was involved with the hold-up. Higginbotham said he was sorry, but he was not at liberty to talk about what he knew.

Mer Rouge and Bastrop being small towns, this incident caused considerable disruption in the town ethos. There is limited evidence to suggest that a certain Filmore W. Daniels, called "Watt" by most who knew him, was also victim to a similar kidnapping as the one Richards experienced, but the details of this kidnapping are almost non-existent. In any case, on the street and in the restaurants, the townspeople spent the next few days discussing what had happened to Richards and Daniels, and speculating on what it all meant. Both men claimed they could prove an alibi regarding their whereabouts on the night that Dr. McKoin's car was shot.

MURDER

On August 24, 1928, Bastrop was host to a barbeque and baseball game for the community. Between three and four thousand people came out to participate in the day's activities. Events of this sort were fairly common in Bastrop in the 1920s, and they often were followed by a community dance. On this particular evening, the baseball game ended just after 5 p.m. Families began making their way back home, and those who had driven in from Mer Rouge would have another eight miles to drive before they could get home. The Ku Klux Klan had made plans to discipline those men whom they suspected had been involved in the alleged shooting of Dr. McKoin's car. Klansmen began to gather, dressed in their full black regalia, outside of town to enact their plans. Rufus Eubanks, citizen of Mer Rouge, later told the following story to investigators. Early during the baseball game, an acquaintance of his, E.H. Gray, had come to him and asked him if he could take his family back to Mer Rouge after the game, as he had some business to attend. Eubanks agreed to take them home, but when Gray escorted Eubanks to where his family was sitting, Mrs. Gray refused to go home without her husband. So Gray took his wife home to Mer Rouge, leaving his children with Eubanks, and returned to Bastrop while the game was still in progress. When he returned, he met Eubanks out in front of a store in town, and Gray asked Eubanks if he could give him a ride down the road, to where his business was taking him. Gray told Eubanks not to worry about taking him home after the game, as he would be able to catch a ride with Willie Higginbotham. When the game was over, Gray's children were

riding home with Eubanks, and when they got to the place where Eubanks had just dropped Gray off, there was a band of cars with masked men.

On the road to Mer Rouge, the band of masked men had created a road blockade that was stopping every car on its way. A small Ford truck in the middle of the road created the blockade, and masked and armed members of the Ku Klux Klan manned it. There were perhaps seventy-five or eighty men in the masked crowd of Klansmen, and they searched each automobile as it waited in line. One man, Mr. J.T. Ellis, got out of his car to find out what the holdup was, and while he was walking amongst all the other people who had gotten out of their cars, he tried to figure out who the masked men were.¹ He noticed some men carrying old style double barrel shotguns, and others carried rifles. Between five and six p.m., in the broad daylight of a Louisiana August summer day, and in front of perhaps a hundred people, five men were taken within a half hour's time into the Klan's possession: S.F. "Sam" Richards, F. W. "Watt" Daniels, J.L. Daniels, W.C. Andrews, and C. "Tot" Davenport, all of whom resided in Mer Rouge.² J.L. Daniels was the father of Watt, and he was brought along because he had been speaking out against the Klan. The Klan kidnapped both W.C. Andrews and Tot Davenport for allegedly speaking out against the Klan in public.

Taken from their respective vehicles, the men were blindfolded and their hands tied behind their backs. B.J. Peterson, the man who was driving the car that J.L. Daniels, father of Watt, was taken from, remarked that of all the masked Klansmen there, only one was dressed in a white robe, and white mask, and this was the man who

¹ Farland, 23.

² Ibid, 23.

ordered old man Daniels to be taken from his car.³ E.W. Andrews was in the car that Tot Davenport was driving, and they also had Sam Richards. Both Tot and Sam were ordered out of the car, and E.W. Andrews had to drive the car from that point on.⁴ After these five men had been gathered, the some forty-five automobiles that had been searched were allowed to pass through the blockade toward Mer Rouge.

H.B. Andrews, W.C. Andrews's brother from Mer Rouge, was stopped on his way back from Bastrop, but unlike his brother, he was not detained. In a later interview, he said he could identify at least one man among the crowd of Klansmen. This was Lonny Calhoun of Franklin Parish. H.B. Andrews recognized Calhoun by his white eyebrows and hair and his wrinkles around the eyes. Even though Calhoun was masked, Andrews knew him to be the man who had visited his home several times in previous years. Calhoun, who was some sixty-five years old, and who had previously served the State of Louisiana as the State Demonstration Agent, vouched for the security of Andrews, and did not let anyone take him.⁵

R.A. "Barry" Whetstone, a farmer from Oak Ridge, Louisiana, was witness to what happened from the Klan's point of view. During the tenth inning of the baseball game, both he and his brother had left. He had no transportation, and he was hoping to get a head start on the crowd leaving, and he might even be able to catch a ride into Mer Rouge. His brother was a bit ahead of him and got by the blockade without being stopped, but after he had walked about a hundred yards beyond the Ford truck blocking

³ Farland, 31.

⁴ Ibid, 33.

⁵ Ibid, 21.

the road, someone who recognized him among the masked men called his name, and came up to him with a shot gun and a pistol. He was told to go get a pail of drinking water, and he was assured safe passage while doing so. Some of the men in the masked crowd had vouched for his identity, and the Klansman told him if he would go get some water, they would give him fifty cents. Barry was forced to leave his coat with the Klan and went over a nearby hill to fetch some water. When he returned, they told him he could not leave for perhaps another hour until they were finished with their business, and he had to go sit down on a log in the woods. Whetstone recognized Jeff Burnett among the group of men, because Burnett was walking around without his mask. Burnett was a distant relative of Whetstone, and Whetstone was therefore sure of his identity. While he was sitting on the log, Whetstone heard several of the Klansmen say for whom they were searching in the cars: Watt Daniels, J.L. Daniels, Tot Davenport, W.C. Andrews, and Sam Richards. When one masked man announced that all five men had been found, the heavily armed entourage unblocked the road and allowed the cars to pass on their way. Whetstone quickly slipped away from the woods, and got in the first car to Mer Rouge.

Barry Whetstone saw his kinsman Jeff Burnett twice around town in the next couple of weeks, and both times Burnett smiled at him, as if Whetstone was not aware that Burnett had been involved in anything. After giving a signed testimony to authorities, in which he positively identified Jeff Burnett as one of the leaders in the woods, Whetstone became afraid for his life, and requested that the governor, John M.

Parker, place him in the Louisiana State Penitentiary for safe-keeping, which the governor agreed to do.

The five men who were kidnapped that night by the Klan were taken away from the woods, and each was held accountable for his participation in the alleged McKoin shooting. As each man was found in a vehicle behind the blockade, he was taken out, blindfolded, tied up, and told to sit on the ground until everybody was found. After all five men were taken this way, they were loaded up in an automobile, and driven further outside of Bastrop, five or six miles by the victims' rough estimation, and were punished by the Ku Klux Klan. W. C. Andrews was the first to be flogged. After they were finished with him, Andrews recognized the voice of old man Daniels, who was pleading for mercy and begging not to be flogged, a plea to which the Klan chose not to listen. The Klan forced J.L. Daniels, a seventy-year old man who had been a property owner and citizen of Mer Rouge for years, to take off his clothes so they could beat him.⁶ Meanwhile, Davenport, the younger Daniels, and Richards were in a car a short distance away, and Daniels was shouting on behalf of his father, an "innocent old man." Davenport later told Andrews and the elder Daniels that while they were being flogged, and he was inside the other car with Watt Daniels and Richards, Watt tried to argue with the Klan for his father's safety. According to one newspaper article, at this point, Watt went so far as to rip the mask off of one of the Klansmen, and shouted aloud this man's name.

⁶ Farland, 13, *New York Times*, December 22, 1922.

At around 9 p.m., all five men were placed into cars and driven to the railroad station at Collinston, a small town a few miles away. The masked men released Andrews, Davenport, and old man Daniels, telling them they could take the first train back to Mer Rouge. One of the masked men took off their blindfolds, and gave Davenport a dollar for train fare. Andrews overheard some of the Klansmen say that of the two men still in their possession, Sam Richards, and Watt Daniels, one would be returned by morning, but the other would have to leave the country forever. They warned Andrews to “go home and be a good boy and not gamble or go around with women anymore”.⁷ They told old man Daniels to leave the country for good *that* night. (My understanding of the word “country” in this case meant the state of Louisiana.) All three were warned not to tell anyone what had happened to them.

Instead of taking the train, the three men went into town to inquire about hiring a car back to Mer Rouge. While walking down the street in Collinston, they passed by a gas station, where they saw the Klansmen filling up a Ford truck with gasoline. One of the Klan’s other cars was driving around from the back of the filling station, and its headlights passed over another truck, where the three men could see the feet of Watt Daniels and Richards hanging off the end. They also saw that the two men were still blindfolded. Davenport testified that he knew the gas station belonged to a man named Guy Boyd, and that Boyd was a member of the Ku Klux Klan.⁸

⁷ Farland, 11.

⁸ Ibid, 12.

In his testimony, Andrews says that Davenport hired a service car from Guy Boyd, and they used it to drive back to Mer Rouge.⁹ It seems confusing that Davenport would have taken a car from a man whom he knew was a member of the KKK, and whom he knew was a participant in their kidnappings, but since Davenport's testimony is silent about from whom they rented the service car, this is one of the ironic mysteries I have not been able to figure out.

A group of people from Crossett, Arkansas, had come down on the day of the barbeque and baseball game, and some of these people were also involved with the KKK there. Will Laney, one of these Klansmen, had tried gathering his party together for the return trip to Crossett, but he was unable to locate any of them. A man, identified only as "Russell" saw Laney in Bastrop between 10 and 10:30 p.m. that night. According to "Russell," Laney appeared "scared to death."¹⁰

When the elder Richards, Davenport, and Andrews returned that night, the Klan still held Watt and Sam. What happened to these two men is the grand mystery of this story. The fact is that they never returned to Mer Rouge, despite the hopeful expectations of their families. But beyond that, little is known beyond serious doubt. Several theories and possible conclusions are discussed here, but it is important to realize the lack of solid facts. Friends of Richards and Daniels waited on the morning of August 25, 1922, to see if perhaps the two would return on the trains, but they did not come back.¹¹ Old man Richards heard in town during the next couple of days rumors

⁹ Farland, 11.

¹⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹¹ Ibid, 29.

that his son would be coming home soon. He began receiving letters telling him the same thing, but all of these letters were anonymous.¹² Newspaper reports indicate that the search for the other two men was conducted casually as a “routine affair,” but as whispers began to circulate within the community that something more serious could have happened to the men, and it would be prudent for a more aggressive search to be conducted, concern began to rise within the ranks of government. There was a shift in public opinion from “belief to conviction that murder had been the fate of the missing ones.”¹³

W.B. Stucksy, a resident of Mer Rouge, had been in Hamburg, Arkansas, on the night of August 24 and was traveling by train back to Mer Rouge the next day. Sam Scott, an acquaintance, came to his window on the train, and told him what had happened the night before. The next Friday night, he was in Monroe, Louisiana, a large town to the south of Morehouse Parish in Ouachita Parish, and while downtown on Desaird Street, he witnessed large numbers of people discussing what was rumored to have happened the weekend before in Mer Rouge. Among all this talk, he heard a few people saying that a car had been sent up to Monroe early in the evening to pick up Dr. McKoin and take him back to Mer Rouge.

While in Bastrop during the next week, Stucksy overheard a man named Smith Stevenson asking Captain Skipwith whether the affair at Mer Rouge had been settled already. Captain Skipwith answered in the affirmative, adding, “I told them that every

¹² Farland, 14.

¹³ *New York Times*, December 23, 1922.

son-of-a-bitch from Morehouse Parish that don't keep his mouth shut about the Ku Klux Klan will get his damned ass [whipped] until he can't sit down."¹⁴

Mr. J.H. Jones of Mer Rouge told investigators that on the morning of the 25th, he went by Thomas Butler's house and E. Nute Gray's house, and neither was home from the night before. He sat outside of his garage that whole day, and he watched as several men met at the home of Hugh Clark, and were seen in heavy discussion. That was on a Sunday, and the following Tuesday, Gray came over to Jones's house-to supposedly give him an alibi for his whereabouts on Saturday night. Gray told Jones that he had been showing some men oil property, and therefore was not at home that day. This is the same Gray whom Rufus Eubanks had dropped off in the middle of the road on the day of kidnappings during the baseball game. Gray's neighbor testified that he saw Gray at home early in the evening of the 24th, and he overheard Gray tell his wife the same story about showing some men his oil property, just before he left. Gray's neighbor, J.H. King, said that after that day, Gray seemed to be always worried about something. King, not knowing whether is was safe to continue to be Gray's neighbor, moved to another town.¹⁵

Fred Eubanks, another resident of Mer Rouge, said he could positively identify some of the masked party, particularly those were who were related to him. Like Rufus Eubanks, who could identify his uncle, E.N. "Nute" Gray, among the masked band, Fred could second that identification. But the people in Mer Rouge were afraid of the Klan, and did not want to make an official statement of blame, for fear of their own

¹⁴ Farland, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

lives and property. Fred Eubanks said that conditions were such that if the Klan knew that he was talking to authorities, it was likely his house would be burned, and he run out of the state.¹⁶ Fred eventually agreed to testify in court, should the issues ever go to court, but only if the venue was moved somewhere outside of Morehouse Parish.

A grand jury was assembled at Bastrop in September of 1922 for the prosecution of an automobile theft that had happened in a separate incident. When the prosecution called Mr. J.R. McIlwain, a businessman in Mer Rouge, and who had been in his store the night of the kidnappings, Guy Boyd, who was sitting on the jury, asked McIlwain what he knew of the kidnappings of Daniels and Richards, to which McIlwain replied that he knew little. But then McIlwain accused Boyd of being involved in the incident, and that he saw no reason to be asked such a question, in which the asker already knew the answer, and McIlwain was immediately dismissed as a witness by the jury. One of the other members of the grand jury, J.B. Hornbeck, held anti-Klan views, and he complained that of the twelve men on the grand jury that day, nine of them were known to be members of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁷ This incident is important for several reasons. First, that the kidnappings would come up during an unrelated auto theft case shows that in September people were still anxious about what had happened to Richards and Daniels in Mer Rouge the month before, as they had not yet been found. Secondly, it is somewhat reflective of the power of the Klan that they were able to dismiss a key witness from a case simply because he was threatening to the Klan's program.

¹⁶ Farland, 15.

¹⁷ Ibid, 38.

If Richards and Daniels were indeed murdered, as was increasingly the popular belief in Mer Rouge, the question then became what happened to the bodies. Mr. Tom Williams, who lived a couple of miles outside of Oak Ridge, was crossing the ferry on Lake LaFourche going east on the night of August 24, 1922. He claimed that some time during that morning, he met three men in a car headed towards Bastrop. They told him that if he was planning on coming back across the lake that evening, he needed to take another route, because they would not let him take the ferry again.¹⁸ Lake LaFourche is some twenty miles southeast of Mer Rouge, and is accessible by road.

Mr. C.W. Thibadeaux, a resident of Mer Rouge, said that on the night of the kidnappings, he had two guests at his home, and when the guests got up to leave that night, they could see a large fire some distance off from the house. They decided to follow the fire, but on the way, masked men stopped them and told them to return back down the road they came on. Thibadeaux claims that the actual fire was located near Cleora, about three miles from Mer Rouge in the direction of Collinston. Some rumors were circulating around town that either Richards or Daniels had been placed on an iron and barbecued, and therefore the fire that Thibadeaux saw would be important evidence. The next time that agents talked to Thibadeaux, he was very nervous, and he told them he was probably mistaken, and that the fire was most likely someone's residence that had caught on fire. He was reluctant to give anymore information, stating that if the Klan knew he was talking to investigators, they would try to run him out of town.

¹⁸ Farland, 19.

Conrad McDuffy said he saw a bunch of Klansmen on the road to Rayville on the night of the kidnappings. Marshall Mott, then a nineteen-year old student of Mississippi College, in Clinton, Mississippi, was in Rayville on the night of the kidnappings. The next day, he met a friend of his, whose name is left unidentified, who asked Mott who the two men were who had gotten thrown into Lake LaFourche the night before, and Mott, who had not heard of anything that had happened in Mer Rouge, simply said he had not heard of anyone getting thrown into the lake. Apparently, this friend had been broken down in his car the night before on the edge of the lake, and had seen a party of men in a small Ford truck with two men in the back covered over by a sheet. When the band of men asked him why he was sitting on the side of the road, he told him his car had broken down, and then they left him alone. Some thirty or forty minutes later, while the man was still working on getting his car started, the same truck with the same band of men returned down the road, but this time, the friend observed, the back of the truck was empty.¹⁹ I have not been able to find the testimony of Mott's friend who actually said he saw this, and so the best record on this is hearsay. Mott refused to give up the name of the man, when he was later interviewed by authorities in Clinton, Mississippi, and the agent who tried to interview him, reported that Mott appeared afraid of giving up too much of the information he knew. Mott requested to be interviewed again a week after his first one, and the agent presumed that Mott wanted to write home and ask what information it would be prudent to disclose.

¹⁹ Farland, 22, 34.

On the night of the kidnappings, the man responsible for ferrying over people and cars across Lake LaFourche was at home. Both he and his son heard automobiles out by the ferry landing, but they were afraid to go out in the middle of the night. As a general rule, when someone needed to be ferried across during off-hours, he would blow his horn, and the ferryman would come help them. But on the night Richards and Daniels were abducted, no horns were blown, and the automobiles soon left. The ferryman warned his family not to talk to anyone about what they had heard that night, so what we know is limited to what the agents could get out of the ferryman's fourteen year old son.

Mr. G.L. Williamson, who was the mayor of Bonita in 1922, claimed to have overheard some talk among the Klan members in Bonita regarding the fate of Richards and Daniels. Williamson was a long-time resident of Bonita, which is about twelve miles from Mer Rouge, and openly held a grudge against the Klan since its inception there in December of 1921.²⁰ The Ku Klux in Bonita took it upon themselves to right what they saw as public wrongs. They had a reputation for being "makers or instigators of trouble," according to Williamson.²¹ On the morning of August 25, 1922, he heard J.B. Jones, brother of the head of the Klan in Bonita say that he [Jones] wondered how W.C. Andrews felt with his teeth "kicked down his throat" and how Watt Daniels and Richards felt "when they woke up in Hell."²² Williamson also said he heard Dr. Crodelle of Bonita say that Daniels body was going to be thrown in the Ouachita River.

²⁰ Farland, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

Williamson's night watchman, R.C. Carter, saw two known Klansmen driving in from Bastrop between three and four in the morning on the 25th, from the direction of Bastrop. Carter saw each man get out of the car with a bundle under his arm, but Carter did not know what was in it.²³

Williamson himself was in Bastrop the evening of the barbeque and baseball game, and had stayed in Bastrop for the evening dance. When he asked Sheriff Carpenter what he personally thought the outcome of this whole escapade would be, the sheriff said he thought it was bad, but that he was not sure where to go or what to do about it. Since he and his deputies had all been at the dance that night, none of them had observed any crime.²⁴ Williamson positioned himself strongly against the Klan, during his testimony, he said, "There is a general state of unrest at this time in Bonita, Gallion, this place and elsewhere and it is all due primarily to the Ku Klux Klan. My opinion is that unless something is done to curb these people they are going to ruin Morehouse Parish from a labor standpoint as they are driving everyone away."²⁵

The question of whether the kidnappings and alleged murders was premeditated or not is one which was highly debated in the newspapers. One day in early August, A.L. Fleming was at the home of J. H. Inabnet, and they were discussing some of the Klan's activities. Inabnet told Fleming that he thought the Klan was being "bluffed by the boys in town," to which Inabnet replied, "You wait and see within a couple of weeks the Ku Klux Klan will pull off one of the biggest stunts that was ever pulled off

²³ Farland, 21.

²⁴ Ibid, 20.

²⁵ Ibid, 21.

and you will be convinced then that the Ku Klux Klan is not bluffed.²⁶ About a week later, Richards and Daniels were kidnapped. On the afternoon of the kidnappings, Captain Skipwith went into the central telephone office at Bastrop and instructed the operator, Miss Wyman, not to send or receive any communication between Mer Rouge and Monroe later in the evening. When she told him she could only do so if her manager told her to do that, Skipwith walked out and a few minutes later, Miss Wyman discovered that the telephone wires had been cut, prohibiting any communication between Bastrop, Mer Rouge, and Monroe.

When the Town Marshall of Mer Rouge, W.F. Campbell, started to make an investigation of the two missing persons, he was advised by his friends to let the issue die out on its own. Asking why, he was told that the powers that be [the KKK] wanted it to die out, and that no action was to be taken. About a week after the kidnapping, the Mayor of Mer Rouge, Mr. Dade, received a letter telling him to clean up the town from all its "filth and rottenness."²⁷ The letter warned him that if he failed to take heed of its advice, one thousand regulators would appear and do the job for him. Whoever wrote the letter said that he knew who all had plotted the assassination of Dr. McKoin and the mayor should take some advice and leave town. About a week after receiving the first letter, they received another one, saying the same thing.

Up to this point, the whole premise behind the kidnappings and probable murders of Richards and Daniels was that they were the ones who had attempted to assassinate Dr. McKoin in the drive-by shooting of McKoin's car. Both men claimed to

²⁶Farland, 24.

²⁷ Ibid, 25.

have had alibis when the Klan came to pick them up the first time. Watt said that he had been playing poker at his father's house the night of the shooting, and Sam had been taking a friend home in his car.²⁸ During the investigation months later, the notion surfaced that in fact McKoin had gotten out of his car and shot into it himself. Mr. J.H. Jones, Deputy Sheriff for Mer Rouge, claimed that if McKoin had been inside of the car when the shots were fired, he almost certainly would have been hit, which he was not. An examination of the car gives the strong suggestion that McKoin was not in the car when the shots were fired. Some fourteen or fifteen buckshot holes between one and six inches apart on the back curtain of the automobile's top, directly behind the driver's seat. The bullets must have passed directly over the steering wheel. Another two or three buckshots lodged in the bows of the top on the left side of the vehicle. Several others were lodged in the top of the car's roof on the driver's side, but the windshield showed no signs of any bullet holes. It appeared as though no bullets had hit the body of the car, which was a Ford Roadster.²⁹ And when Jones offered to investigate the matter for Dr. McKoin, McKoin declined and said that everything was all right.

Seeing that nothing was being accomplished on the local level, several interested parties, including Sam Richard's wife, Watt Daniel's father, and others, approached Governor Parker in Baton Rouge, requesting that he furnish them with an investigation and protection against the Klan. Some of the leading citizens of Mer Rouge, including Mr. Dade, the Mayor, and several others related to Tot Davenport, went to Monroe to call on Dr. McKoin, and to ask him why the threatening letters had been written. They

²⁸ Farland, 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

suspected that Dr. McKoin himself had written them, and they wanted to know what he would say when approached. They asked McKoin what had to be done to Mer Rouge for it to be “cleaned up,” and he told them that they must gather all those who had participated in the attempt to assassinate him. He added that four particular individuals, including Mayor Dade had to vacate Mer Rouge immediately. Of the four people that McKoin named, Tom Milner did leave, and he moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The other three individuals stayed in Mer Rouge.

Dade, who chose to stay, was good friends with a man named W.L. Pugh. Pugh was a member of the Klan at Jones, Louisiana, and after Dade explained to him everything that had happened, Pugh went to talk to Captain Skipwith, and asked Skipwith to fix things up. Skipwith and his crowd approached Dade and told him that if he would quit talking about the Klan, they would leave him alone, and let him stay in town. Dade agreed, but he continued to discuss the Klan, if only more secretly.³⁰

The general feelings toward the KKK in Bastrop and Mer Rouge were different. In Mer Rouge, there was more of an anti-Klan support network. But in Bastrop, support for the Klan was particularly strong, and popular sympathy was with the Klan for its efforts to “clean up” the filth and evils of the town. So whenever people in Mer Rouge spoke negatively of the Klan’s activities, they were often subject to ridicule. Within a week or so of the kidnappings, a report began circulating around Mer Rouge that a dispatch of Bastrop Klansmen would pay a visit to Mer Rouge to punish those citizens who opposed the Klan. But in Bastrop, a rumor began circulating that the people of

³⁰ Farland, 26.

Mer Rouge were coming to attack Bastrop for their alliance with the Klan. A crowd assembled on the steps of the courthouse in Bastrop, waiting for the Mer Rouge crowd to arrive. Several boxes of ammunition and firearms had been shipped in from the Monroe Hardware Company, and on Saturday night, August 27, 1922, no one was allowed to enter or leave Bastrop. The mob stayed on guard again on Sunday night at the courthouse, but people were not prohibited from leaving town. Captain Skipwith was among the people who stayed in the courthouse for protection.³¹ Supposedly, Skipwith said while in the courthouse, that now that the first two men were out of the way, there were only four more to go: Town Marshal Campbell, A.C. Whipple, Hugo Davenport, and Griffin of Bastrop. These four men were ordered to leave the area within twenty-four hours and never to return again. After a series of negotiations by friends of these men on their behalf, the Klan leadership decided that they could remain, if they gave their oath to stay out of the Klan's business.³²

On September 5, 1922, a grand jury was convened in Bastrop, where the supposed casual investigation of the kidnappings was taking place. Of the three witnesses called, J.L. Daniels, W.C. Andrews, and Rufus Eubanks, the two victims told what happened to them, and Rufus told how he had dropped his uncle E. Nute Gray off on the side of the road and left. They were asked no further questions, and the case was dismissed.³³ When investigators attempted to interview Dr. B. M. McKoin, they were informed that McKoin was up in Baltimore, Maryland, taking a post-graduate course in

³¹ Farland, 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

medicine at Johns Hopkins University. But Johns Hopkins, when contacted, said that a Dr. B.M. McKoin had never attended that institution.

On September 8, 1922, Governor John Parker issued a proclamation, offering a \$500 reward for the arrest and conviction of those responsible for “this gross violation of the law.”³⁴ He wrote that masked men had forcibly taken citizens from their homes, flogged and punished them, in addition to the more well-known crime of Richard and Daniel’s kidnappings. He appealed to the citizens in Morehouse Parish to lend their assistance in bringing those guilty to justice. Investigators informed Governor Parker that solving the case would be more complicated because so many of the local leaders in Bastrop and Mer Rouge were members of the KKK, including the Sheriff, several of his deputies, and the District Attorney.³⁵ The special investigators told the Governor that it was fairly likely that the two bodies had been dumped into Lake LaFourche, and that it would be necessary to either drag, dynamite or send divers down into the lake for the purpose of locating the bodies.

Finding the bodies in Lake LaFourche would present its own set of challenges. By the time the governor was notified of this in late October or early November of 1922, such a long time had elapsed since the bodies would have initially been thrown into the lake. Lake LaFourche is full of large fish that could easily eat the flesh, but Governor Parker decided that he would use the full weight of his office to provide divers, drag, or dynamite for the lake.³⁶

³⁴ Farland, 43.

³⁵ Ibid, 43.

³⁶ Ibid, 43.

The investigators sent to Morehouse Parish were running into trouble in Mer Rouge and Bastrop, where people complained that they were there without any authority. The Ku Klux Klan had sought legal advice and believed that the matter was not one which the United States government would handle, but one which would have to remain with the state's jurisdiction.

After interviewing Governor Parker in Baton Rouge, the investigators went to Washington, D.C., to meet with the Director and Assistant Attorney General. They had a conference to discuss the matter of jurisdiction, and they had to go back to Governor Parker. It was necessary for him to take the matter up with the President of the United States for the purpose of getting Federal aid, under Section 4 of Article 4 of the Constitution. Governor Parker immediately wrote a letter requesting that the President furnish aid. A copy of the letter was immediately forwarded to Washington with the agents.

Though the federal government chose to stay as far away from the crisis as possible, Governor Parker would not allow the future of the case to become lost in the bureaucracy in Washington. He took a personal interest in the case, and he spent several thousand dollars of his personal money to carry out an investigation across several states in the South. Klan sympathizers saw his actions as excessive and deriving from a personal vendetta against the Klan rather than from any solid evidence that the bodies would be discovered. But listening to no one else, Governor Parker had teams of divers start searching the local waterways, in case the bodies had been tossed over. He started at Lake Cooper, which would have been a logical choice to someone disposing

bodies, and had men scrapping the bottom of the lake, when, on the morning of December 24, 1922, an explosion of dynamite on the banks of Lake LaFourche brought two decaying bodies to the surface of the water. Where the dynamite came from, and who set it off remains a mystery, but, in any case, the two bodies were almost immediately identified to be those of Richards and Daniels.

The discovery of the bodies created a national torrent of publicity and public discussion on what was to be done in response to the Klan's actions. The remainder of the paper focuses on some of the rhetoric and persuasion that was employed by everyone from journalist to minister to concerned citizen, in order to try to situate the blame for what happened.

PATRIOTISM AND AMERICANISM

Among the plethora of letters that were written in newspapers and in personal correspondence during the Mer Rouge affair ran a common thread. What connects all the various words spent on the kidnappings and murders is the effort that people spent to try to sway their audience's opinion about the moral rightness of the Ku Klux Klan. Most often it was framed in the words of patriotism to country, loyalty to God and family, and righteousness (or lack thereof) of the KKK.

Between August 1922 and December 1923, *The New York Times* carried more than one hundred articles on the development of activities in Mer Rouge. While most article writers attempted to catalog unbiased facts and often inserted entire interviews with the actors involved into their pieces, the editorial position of the more zealous writer often slipped through. The titles of the articles often included emotionally charged words like "Mer Rouge Terror"¹ or "Klan Usurped Law in Reign of Terror"² or the "Ku Klux Slayer."³ Some of the article titles, like "Louisiana Klan Goes on Trial Today," were rather prescient in acknowledging the wagers that a trial of this sort would represent.⁴ The author discusses the "far-flung ramifications of the Ku Klux Klan in Morehouse Parish" should any guilty sentences come out of a grand jury proceeding. Journalists highlighted certain developments in the case in order to contour their arguments to be more persuasive. As an example, in an article dated January 10, 1923, the author makes one grand jury witness, J.S. Norsworthy of Mer Rouge, into a

¹ *New York Times*, November 27, 1922.

² *New York Times*, January 12, 1923

³ *New York Times*, January 1, 1923.

⁴ *New York Times*, January 6, 1923.

hero for his bravery in testifying against the Klan. Notwithstanding threats against his life, and being always “in the shadow of the Klan’s vengeance,”⁵ Norsworthy admits that he was a former member of Klan #34, and he described its members “as holding the laws of their organization above the laws of the United States Government and of recognizing no laws but their own. He denounced the Klan as an organization from which he shrank because of its lawlessness.”⁶ After Norsworthy’s testimony, the *New York Times* reported that State Attorney General Coco said, “The Klan, not only in Morehouse, but in Louisiana and the nation at large, will have to consider seriously the narratives that were unfolded at today’s session in the open hearing.”⁷ After describing the events of the open hearing that day, the newspaper author inserts his own comment on the Klan: “A secret society that sets out, unrestrained by the forms of law, to regulate the morals of a community, whether it is in the South or in the North, inevitably becomes an instrument of tyranny. No good citizen can afford to associate himself with it or to give it a certificate of character.”⁸ On occasion, *The New York Times* would print entire records of what happened in court that day in Bastrop. Many of the more than one hundred articles appeared on the front page of the *Times*, and were often several columns long.

While the *Times* can, to a limited extent, speak for public interest in the subject on a national level, it was only one among many other newspapers across the country that regularly carried updates on the story. The murders at Mer Rouge received their

⁵ *New York Times*, January 11, 1923.

⁶ *New York Times*, January 10, 1923.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

share of comment and ridicule from the nation's cartoonists. Figure 1, an editorial cartoon from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, shows a crowd of masked members of the Ku Klux Klan in their full white regalia tossing a blindfolded and tied-up man into the water, with the obvious connotation that heinous crime is in the middle of being committed. The title, "When Klanhood Was in Flower," satirizes the notion of throwing seed out to be planted. This cartoon was published on December 28, 1922, just days after the two supposed corpses of Daniels and Richards were taken out of Lake LaFourche.



Figure 3 Fully-clad Klansmen depose of unwanted refuse. (Cartoon by unknown artist. "When Klanhood Was in Flower," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* [1922]. Image courtesy of The Edith Garland Dupré Library, Lafayette.)

The cartoon in Figure 2 comes from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in early January 1923. In January the open hearing in Bastrop was in full-swing, and this pencil drawing shows very clearly at whose feet the artist places the blame for the kidnappings and murders of Sam Richards and Watt Daniels. In the early weeks of January 1923, there

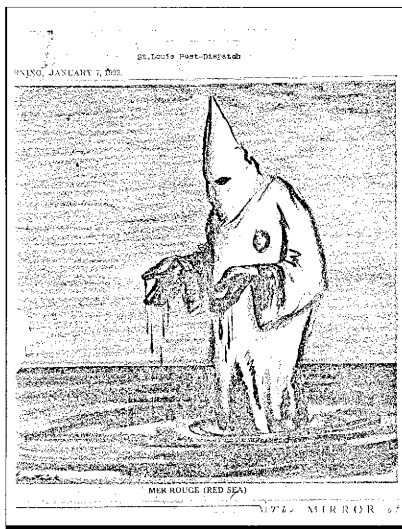


Figure 4 The blood of guilt drips from the hands of the Ku Klux Klan in Morehouse Parish. (Cartoon by unknown artist. "Mer Rouge (Red Sea)," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* [1923]. Image courtesy of The Edith Garland Dupré Library, Lafayette.)

was a lot of speculation that the bodies that had been discovered in Lake LaFourche were not really those of Richards and Daniels. Both Klan members and Klan sympathizers claimed that the bodies had been planted in the lake by participants in a conspiracy against the Klan led by Governor John M. Parker. Some artist's represented their critique of Parker's policies through cartoons like the one in Figure 4.



Figure 5 Governor Parker and Conspiracy Theory (Cartoon by Fontaine Fox. "Neighborhood News," *The Arkansas Gazette* [1923]. Image courtesy of Edith Garland Dupré Library, Lafayette.)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

When the Ku Klux Klan kidnapped these two anti-Klan men on August 24, 1922, in Bastrop, Louisiana, perhaps it was not their intention for the two men to never be seen again. Months later, when the two bodies were discovered in LaFourche Lake, near Bastrop, Louisiana, most members of the Klan were unwilling to claim any responsibility for what happened. While government officials were convinced that these were the bodies of the two men, many Klan members and non-Klan members alike believed that the bodies had been planted as part of a government conspiracy to uproot the Ku Klux Klan. The aura of suspense and mystery that surrounded the whole case was fuel to the fire of public discussion on the nature of the KKK in public life. The murders sparked both an extensive investigation of Klan activities in Louisiana as well as a more general debate on the role that the “invisible empire” should play in American civil and social life. Many people were hesitant to embrace the Klan’s self-proclaimed pursuit of “responsible, wholesome government.”

And so these murders were, in a way, simply a medium through which people could explore what future the Klan might have in American society. For the most part, the reaction was negative and reactionary against the Klan’s agenda. As much as the Klan attempted to legitimate its ideology by infusing principles of patriotism with religious and racial purity, there was an equal, if not stronger, flow of resistance to any connection between the Klan and patriotism, purity, and righteousness.

This project has attempted to reconstruct the circumstances that existed in Northeastern Louisiana in the years surrounding the murders of Sam Richards and

Filmore Watt Daniels. I described the origins of a Klan network in the area and the particular circumstances that brought about the murder of these two anti-Klan community members. Gathering evidence from among the available primary resources, including newspaper reports, letters of correspondence between concerned citizens and government officials, and investigation reports, I have shown that in many ways the Klan was fighting a losing battle. I believe that this is the first attempt to narrate what happened at Mer Rouge, as far as it relates to a larger narrative of Klan activity in the United States, and it is important that we realize how much more we can learn about ourselves from this incident.

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APPENDIX A

List of people implicated in the kidnappings and assaults of the Ku Klux Klan in Mer Rouge:

Guy Boyd
Jeff Burnett
Lonny Calhoun, the old man
Preston Carter
Minor Carter
Dalghan, of Collinston
E. Nute Gray
Jim Harp, of Bonita
Fred Higgambottam
J.N. Jones, of Bonita
Will Laney
Dr. B.M. McKoin
W.L. Pugh, of Jones
Mr. Spencer, of Collinston
Henry Stephens
Captain Skipwith

APPENDIX B

I have included here several letters of correspondence between participants in this story. To preserve the integrity of the originals, I have not changed any of the original grammar, spellings or punctuations.

Letter Received by Mayor Dade either September 7 or 8, 1922:

To the Mayor and Good Citizens of Mer Rouge:

You are wallowing in a cesspool of corruption and lawlessness that has become a menace to the entire Parish and surrounding country. You are shielding within your gates, men who live in open concubinage with Negro women, who manufacture and sell whisky, who formulate plots to assassinate good citizens in the night time and who are deluging the good, law abiding citizens of your Parish with written and oral threats against their lives. This condition of affairs must be rectified at once or we will swoop down upon your town and wipe out the organization that is responsible for these conditions and which are please to call themselves "The Anti Ku Klux Klan."

We know ever one of the men who formulated and attempted to execute the plot to assassinate Dr. McKoin. Two of them have passed into obscurity and the balance will soon follow unless they read between these lines and leave your community while leaving is good.

REGULATORS

Letter received by Mayor Dade either September 10 or 11, 1922:

We are reliably informed that there is in your town a bunch of disreputable characters who call themselves the Anti- K.K.K. 's, men who openly violate the laws by making whisky, living in concubinage with Negro women and who are making a practice of writing some of the best citizens of your Parish obscene, insulting, and threatening letters and who actually attempted to assassinate one of your leading citizens and physicians recently, forcing him to leave the community.

This is to notify you as Mayor to Mer Rouge that we will give you ample time to clean up this lawless condition of affairs and if you fail to do so, we will bring a thousand men down there and do the job for you right.

The names of the men who have sat at the round table and planned and submitted the planning to assassination of Dr. McKoin are known to us. We have had able men to get

all the data up so now we know what all have said and done and we will attend to them in due time.

100% AMERICANS

Letter to Governor Parker from Mrs. T. F. Richards, wife of Sam Richards:

Mr. Parker, I am left entirely without a home, no relations or money for my children of myself. I have two little girls to raise and was absolutely dependent upon my husband's daily labor for support – and just because he was not scared of the Klan they have done this, and they are now trying to make out it was not the Ku Klux Klan, but it certainly must have been, as otherwise they would have been willing and ready to help me find my husband. I believe he is dead because I know he would have written if he was alive, and I am nearly crazy with suspense and pray to God for help. Won't you do what you can?

Anonymous letter to Governor Parker:

In the name of right and justice I bid you God speed in pushing this investigation. I cannot suggest how to proceed but if Fred Carpenter, Judge Odom, David Garrett, John T. Bryant of Monroe, La. And Capt. Skipwith are locked up as they should be and held indefinitely – some of the lesser high ups will talk. As long as the above Leaders are at liberty they can scare and intimidate and offer assurance and their influence and protection to the others you stand but little chance to get information but if the Leaders are locked up somebody is going to talk. My conscience hurts me so bad I can't sleep though I took no part in the actual kidnapping. Capt. Skipwith acted as Judge in the mock trial given Richards in the first kidnapping. Laurie Calhoun acted as spy for the kidnapers and pointed the five men out to the actual men did the kidnapping.

Sleepless.

Anonymous letter to Governor Parker:

Pardon a letter without a signature and after you have perused contents I feel sure that you will forgive a man that is conscience stricken. Your determination to probe the Mer Rouge kidnapping is commendable. The situation here is awful. I joined the Ku Klux last year but when I saw it leading to Murder I did not withdraw but remained away from the meetings and became lukewarm. I have lived here for 40 years and never before have I seen so many men carrying pistols as now. Distrust and suspicion of your neighbor is the order of the day. I send you a copy of Monroe Paper in which you will note a boastful article from Skipwith. The Sheriff (Fred Carpenter) is a Ku Klux, Judge

Odom is a Ku Klux, the District Atty. is a Ku Klux, and Skipwith is a Ku Klux and all these men know all about the kidnapping and I have reasons to know that they know all about it. If I should sign my name to this and you should divulge it I would [be gone] in a week. My conscience hurts me is why I write this. John T. Bryant—Postmaster at Monroe, La., is the Grand Kleagle of this Klan and some of these plots have been laid and discussed in his office in Monroe. The above named men will deny their connection with this Klan but they are members and at the head of it for I have attended meetings with them and one of the by-laws is to kill any member that would betray them.

Excerpt from a letter written to Governor Parker from Thomas Robertson, Attorney at Law in Shreveport, Louisiana:

The Morehouse affair no more deserves the great publicity that you gave it then would any other assassination and you will certainly not deny the fact that murderers and assassinations are occurring every week or two throughout the United States, some of which are in our own State.

Your crowd—the crowd you are for— is knocking now at our gates and unfortunately many of them have already gained admittance. Go to any Federal Court and view the bunch who are becoming “Americans”, the kind of Americans you evidently approve, and ask them if they stand for the public schools and for American principles, and you will see that it is time for every true American to be on his guard.

I have always defended you so strongly and have been such a champion of your administration that I want to keep the record straight by letting you know that henceforth I cannot view you as any other than a disturbing element in the affairs of my native State and one whose high official position gives him opportunity to do real injury and damage to the peace and quiet of Louisiana.

Excerpt from a letter from Bayou Tech, Louisiana, to Governor Parker:

I wish it was possible for me to tell you how much I endorse your course in the More House Parish tragedy. Such outrages must be put down and the people must obey the laws of the land. Every right thinking 100% American in this fair land of ours endorses your course.

I personally feel sorry for the fellow who condemns your action. I am very proud of what you have done. Way back in 1866, my father was the organizer of the K.K.K. in North Carolina. When the work was finished, they disbanded and no outrage resembling this one in Louisiana was ever committed.

I hope and feel sure that this dangerous and un-American organization will soon be banished from our fair land. You have made a good start.

Excerpt from a letter from Marvell, Arkansas, to Governor Parker:

My dear Sir & Governor:

Congratulations, on the noble work which you are doing, at present, relative to the SCALWAGS that hold themselves above the Constitution of the United States, and OLD GLORY.

As I see it they are doing things that the President of the United States would at least take under advisement, before taking a hasty and speedy action as they do. Then if they do not expect to have the Liberty loving and progressive people to struggle for liberty, as our forefathers did, conditions must change.

Letter to Governor Parker from Geo Kimbro, a businessman in Houston, Texas, dated December 21, 1922:

Dear Governor:

Doubtless, you have read in the Press regarding interview alleged to have been held by Dr. H.W. Evans, the Imperial Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and Governor Henry Allen of Kansas. Evans states that he did not seek Governor Allen, which is a lie for you know full well that Governor Allen did not seek Evans. It is needless to say that it is being proven each and every day that man can not retain his membership in the Klan without completely destroying his veracity, as well as any other honor he might have had.

I note in late Press dispatches where they have employed an attorney in Kansas City to file a general demurrer in behalf of the Klan in the ouster proceeding instituted by the State of Kansas wherein this attorney states that the men whom service have been obtained on, were not authorized to accept service for the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. This is their usual method of procedure which, on the face of it, proves that they do not intend to co-operate with Constituted authority in the enforcement of the Law. If they did, they most certainly would welcome the most sweeping investigation by having their officers stand out in the open and be known to Constituted authority. They know that this rotteness and lawlessness exists in the ranks of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and they are aiding and abetting the guilty parties by keeping concealed their identity, as well as the identity of those upon whom service could be had. That gang has certainly prostituted the word "Americanism," as well as everything that the term Americanism implies.

VITA

Hannah Beth Ann Peterson
6391 Highway One
Shreveport, LA 71107
peterson_hannah@hotmail.com
318-349-4463

Educational Background:

B.A., American Studies & History, Texas A&M University, May 2005

Honors:

University Undergraduate Research Fellows, 2003-2004

Dean's List

2002-2004 Aggie Leader Award

Employment:

Texas A&M University, Department of Student Financial Aid, Scholarship
Office, Peer Counselor, 2001-2004