

2019

History of Maine - The Rising of the Klan

Raney Bench

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Repository Citation

Bench, Raney, "History of Maine - The Rising of the Klan" (2019). *Maine History Documents*. 224.
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THE BAR HARBOR TIMES, WEDNESDAY, MAY 31, 1919 7

SPECIAL MUSIC **STAR THEATRE** SPECIAL MUSIC

Two Days Only, MAY 30-31
"The Birth of a Nation"

<p>18,000 People 3,000 Horses Cost \$500,000</p> <p>First time at Popular Prices Repeated by popular request</p>		<p>Scale of Prices</p> <p>Matinee 2.30 Any Seat</p> <p>Adults 40c, tax 4c 44c Children 20c, tax 2c 22c</p> <p>Nights at 8.00 All Seats Reserved</p> <p>First 10 rows front 20c, tax 2c, 22c</p> <p>Back 20 rows front 40c, tax 4c, 44c</p> <p>Center 15 rows front 60c, tax 6c, 66c</p>
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Seats on Sale Tuesday morning, 9 o'clock, May 27. Don't Wait
 Use phone. Order seats early

The notorious film *Birth of a Nation* screened in Bar Harbor in 1919, just before the Klan became active on Mount Desert Island in the early 1920s. *Courtesy of the Jesup Memorial Library*

Maine's Gone Mad: The Rising of the Klan

Raney Bench

Christmas in Northeast Harbor, Maine, 1925. The moon shines brightly, almost full. The sound of hymns sung by a “large and orderly crowd”¹ on the lawn of the Neighborhood House can be heard drifting through town on the night air. Prayers are offered. Firelight dances on the windowpanes. A fiery cross burns on the lawn, illuminating the dark night. The Ku Klux Klan has come to Mount Desert Island.

Burning crosses, men in white hoods, large organized rallies filled with hate speech—all elements associated with the Klan, but rarely with Maine. Maine’s relationship with the Klan was short-lived, but surprisingly intense. Starting from virtually nothing in 1920, Klan membership grew from 23,000 in 1923 to its peak of 150,141 members by 1925. Just as quickly as those numbers rose, they fell again, with the membership decreasing by almost half in 1926 to 61,136, and dwindling further to 3,168 in 1927, leaving only 226 members in 1930.² At its height, membership in the Klan represented 23 percent of the population of Maine, with the largest groups belonging to the communities of Portland, Lewiston, and Brewer.³

The Klan in Maine rose rapidly because a charismatic leader was able to

rally middle-class Protestants around their opposition to immigrants and Catholics.

“Only the KKK and one hundred percent Americanism would save us.”

The Ku Klux Klan was formed after the Civil War in an effort to prevent freed slaves from gaining political power and integrating into white American society.⁴ The group was well known for effective organization and targeted oppression, primarily in southern states. The Klan was officially disbanded in 1872, but reestablished in 1915 in Georgia. This “new” Klan formed around the idea of “Americanism,” a movement concerned about rising immigration rates in the United States. The Klan and supporters of Americanism were struggling to define what it meant to be an American and, as a result, who should be allowed to live in the United States.⁵

According to the United States Census Bureau, “the 1850 census was the first census in which data were collected on the nativity of the population. From 1850 to 1930, the foreign-born population of the United States increased from 2.2 million to 14.2 million, reflecting large-scale immigration from Europe during much of this period.”⁶ Most of these immigrants did not speak English. They moved into the large cities where immigrants typically took up residence, and moved beyond—taking farming and labor jobs in rural regions of the country. Many wealthy, white Americans considered this trend a danger to the health and security of the country.⁷ Political parties and private organizations formed to combat the waves of immigration, seeking to rally support from citizens and pass laws to maintain a dominant role.

In 1843 the Know Nothing movement, also known as the Nativist movement, was formed in New York. This and similar movements focused their efforts against Irish and German Catholics, who, they argued, could not be loyal to the United States because they “were controlled by the Pope in Rome.”⁸

National immigration trends were seen to a lesser degree in Maine, but because of the relatively small population the effects were still noticeable; the state’s demographics were changing. In 1920 almost 4,000 immigrants arrived in Portland from a long list of European countries.⁹ French Canadians were also coming to Maine in large numbers, seeking employment in the textile and lumber mills. According to the Maine Memory Network, “between 1840 and 1930, about 900,000 French Canadians left Quebec to immigrate to the United States and settle, mainly in New England.”¹⁰ Many of the immigrants were Catholic.

The cities that experienced the largest growth of French Canadian immigrants, and often corresponding populations of Catholics, suddenly had different demographics than the smaller, more rural areas, which remained primarily Protestant. As Catholic parishes were established in Maine, Irish and French Catholics built separate schools and churches, hoping to maintain ties to cultural and linguistic traditions that defined their communities and identity. This rapid rise in immigrant population, and the resulting changes to demographics, religious identity, and language, fertilized the ground in Maine for the growth of the KKK. Outside of the southern states, Maine had the largest Klan chapter in the country in the 1920s, and the members' primary target was French-speaking Catholics.¹¹

“Klansmen are not ‘against’ the Catholics or ‘against’ the Jews, but are ‘for’ Protestant Christianity first, last, and all the time.”

The Klan in Maine was not the first organization to target Catholics, but rather came on the heels of other aggressive anti-Catholic movements. The Know Nothing Party was named for the response one got when asking a member about the party's activities: “I know nothing.” The party claimed responsibility for two violent acts of aggression against Catholics in Maine in the 1850s. One occurred in Ellsworth, when a priest named John Bapst was tarred and feathered and chased from the town in 1851. Bapst was a Swiss-born Jesuit who first came to the United States in 1848, and was soon sent to work with the Wabanaki because of his poor English. After spending time with the Penobscot in Old Town, he left for Eastport to work with the Passamaquoddy. Bapst established several temperance societies and he successfully converted large numbers of people, which attracted attention. He traveled the state for his work, and while in Ellsworth he denounced the public schools for forcing Catholic children to use a Protestant bible. Soon thereafter, a resolution was passed at an Ellsworth town meeting threatening him bodily harm if he returned. In October 1854, Bapst did return briefly, and was attacked, tarred and feathered, and run out of town.¹²

There were a number of anti-Catholic riots that took place along the coast of Maine, including one in Bangor in 1834. In Bath, a riot broke out in 1854 while James S. Orr preached to an audience of over a thousand, blocking traffic on Commercial Street. The group became excited by his anti-Catholic talk, and soon a mob marched to the recently established Irish Catholic Church and after smashing pews, set it on fire. A year after the riot, on November 18, 1855, the Catholic Bishop of Portland attempted to lay the cornerstone for a new church on the same site, but the congregation

was chased away and beaten.¹³

Tensions increased as the conflict between Protestant temperance advocates and Irish immigrants rose. Irish Catholics felt that temperance ordinances and laws—the prime example of which was Maine’s temperance law passed in 1851, the first in the country—were a direct attack on their culture. All of these issues simmered under the surface for years, and provided fodder for the Klan when it finally made inroads into Maine in the early 1920s.

“A Spell-binding Orator”

One can speculate about how successful the Klan in Maine would have been if not for the talents of its regional leader, King Kleagle Eugene Farnsworth. Born in Columbia Falls, Maine in 1868, Farnsworth moved to St. Stephen, New Brunswick as a boy, eventually returning to the States in 1892 to Fitchburg, Massachusetts to work as a barber. From this rather ordinary beginning, Farnsworth began to show some of the unusual talents that made him such a powerful organizer for the Klan later in his life.

Farnsworth married, and took an interest in the occult, becoming a hypnotist who performed for local venues with his wife and a small troop. He took the act on the road, and the group traveled to several New England states to perform. In Rhode Island in 1901, Farnsworth performed an illusion that required an assistant to balance boulders on his stomach while a member of the audience tried to break them. The act went terribly wrong; the boulder slipped and crushed Farnsworth’s assistant, and Farnsworth was tried for manslaughter. After some clever negotiations with the judge, Farnsworth was released and ordered to pay the court fees. He returned to Massachusetts and became a photographer, eventually opening a film studio. This venture failed as well. In 1922 Farnsworth became president of Boston’s Loyal Coalition, a small group founded in 1920 to oppose the formation of an Irish Republic, and more generally any possible loyalties for governments or cultures that foreign-born citizens might bring to the United States.¹⁴

That same year, Farnsworth traveled to Maine to give a talk in Portland on “Americanism,” though he did not mention the Klan. He gave his first Klan speech in Portland in January 1923, openly acknowledging his leadership of the group—and thus began a zealous campaign to grow the organization in Maine over the next several years.

Part of the success of Farnsworth and the Klan in Maine was that they avoided the public violence and intimidation that characterized the group elsewhere. Instead, the Maine Klan focused on fraternal rites, parades, and political campaigns.¹⁵ Two important actions took place in the early 1920s

that drew Klan attention to the state. The first, in 1921, involved an effort to provide state funding for private Catholic schools, and the second was a rejection by many Maine school boards of the requirement that the King James Bible be read every day in classrooms. Farnsworth began a state-wide speaking tour that drew huge crowds—anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 people at a time; after each speech, memberships were solicited for a \$10 fee.¹⁶

Farnsworth usually shared the stage with a local Protestant minister, and he began to focus his attacks on the growth of Maine's Catholic schools and the presence of Catholics and Jews on public school boards. Farnsworth stated in one speech that "Klansmen are not 'against' the Catholics, or 'against' the Jews, but are 'for' Protestant Christianity first, last, and all the time."¹⁷

According to several accounts, the tendency of small Maine towns to have strong social and civic clubs, in which "fraternalism and civic organizations dominated local society," created a framework in which the Klan could grow especially strong.¹⁸ The Klan presented itself as a respectable social club and directed its message to the "little people"—middle class businessmen, housewives, ministers, doctors, and community leaders. Understanding the nature of Maine communities, the organization began to focus its efforts on winning elections and influencing politics as an effective means of achieving its goals. Klan leadership was concerned that immigrants would gain control of local, state, and federal government by electing representatives from their communities. Accordingly, by the mid-



KKK Parade in Milo, Maine, 1923.

Collections of Island Falls Historical Society, courtesy of www.VintageMaineImages.com

1920s, Klan-backed candidates had been elected as mayors, state legislators, and members of school committees.¹⁹ The Klan had a very public profile in Maine, hosting the first ever daytime parade, which took place in Milo in 1923. Klan activity was so prominent in that town that Farnsworth was able to claim, “Everybody belongs to the Klan, including 600 citizens, town officials, and the sheriff.”²⁰ The Klan held a state convention in Waterville later that same year that attracted 15,000 people. The Klan headquarters were established on an estate in Portland, and offices were opened throughout the state, with a stronghold in Brewer.

The biggest success for the Klan came with the election of Republican Governor Ralph Brewster in 1924. Brewster never openly acknowledged membership in the organization, but he was clearly the candidate the Klan endorsed. Brewster was a proponent of a bill that would stop state funding for parochial schools, and his apparent membership in the Klan was a controversy that threatened to split the Republican Party. When asked about his position regarding the Klan, the Republican State Committee said Brewster “stands by the side of the fiery cross.”²¹ Politicians in both the Republican and Democratic parties denounced the Klan and all that the organization stood for, but large numbers of voters were also Klan members, and Brewster won the election.

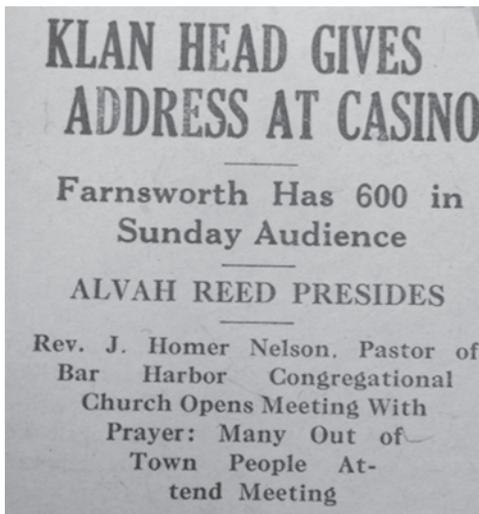
Of course, not everyone supported the growth of the Klan, or the messages and tactics of the organization. In some cities there was “forceful opposition” to Klan rallies, particularly by Catholics, including a march in 1924 in Fairfield where French-Canadians turned back the Klan with rocks and clubs, and also interrupted a march in Greenville and Biddeford.²²

“At first we were inclined to view with alarm the coming of the Klan to Bar Harbor.”

The Klan began recruiting on Mount Desert Island in the summer of 1923, starting with small meetings held in the homes of Island residents. Public meetings and lectures were also featured in most communities, and Farnsworth visited Mount Desert Island and spoke on several occasions. The *Bar Harbor Times* announced in October 1923 that there were meetings held on Tuesday and Thursday in Northeast Harbor at the Neighborhood House featuring speakers Dr. W.H. Lannin, a “retired minister who was a prominent Klan lecturer throughout New England,” and R.H. Howell, the regional Klan Kleagle headquartered in Bangor and introduced by Alvah L. Reed, “a civil engineer, Justice of the Peace, trial justice, and generally well-known citizen of Mt. Desert.”²³ In February 1924 Farnsworth came to

lecture on Americanism at the Neighborhood House and then at a public house in Southwest Harbor, and at a third location in Seal Harbor. He tried, unsuccessfully, to secure a venue in Bar Harbor.²⁴

The October meeting was advertised as a “Free lecture on Americanism;” however, it was reported that a “great majority of the 200 men and women in attendance were quietly invited by Klan members and sympathizers.”²⁵ Over the course of the meeting, which lasted more than two hours, the speakers explained the purpose and ideals of the Klan and promoted the strength of the organization based on membership numbers that were increasing by over 1,000 people each week.²⁶



Klan leader Eugene Farnsworth gave several speeches on Mount Desert Island, often drawing large crowds. *Bar Harbor Times*, April 9, 1924. *Courtesy of the Jesup Memorial Library*

In 1924, large public Klan meetings were reported in Southwest Harbor and Northeast Harbor again, each with over 200 in attendance. Farnsworth spoke at two events in February, where he claimed that the press was publishing inaccurate reports about Klan activity and asserted that he was going “to talk about anything he darned pleased.”²⁷ He went on to explain that the first immigrants to arrive in the United States “easily assimilated” into American culture and values, but that the “character of the immigrants has been steadily lowered until recent years

when the United States has become the ‘dumping ground for the scum of Europe.’”²⁸ Farnsworth reportedly spoke at length about two classes in America: Catholics and Protestants. He stated that the Catholic Church held a number of political prisoners, and he expressed concern that there were increasing numbers of Catholic teachers in public schools, working as policemen in cities, and controlling the courts. Farnsworth acknowledged that the Klan was a militant organization, with no political affiliations to a specific party. He made “brief reference to the Negro as another problem and briefly to the Jews as another race that cannot be assimilated,” explaining that “the Catholics, Jews, and Negroes are clannish and stick together, while the native born Americans are constantly rowing with one another.”²⁹

Because of the diverse population of Catholic and Jewish merchants, town leaders, and summer residents in Bar Harbor, the Klan was more active in Northeast and Southwest Harbors. However, several large public meetings were held in Bar Harbor at the Casino, then located on the corner of Bridge and Cottage streets. In April 1924, over 600 people attended a lecture by Farnsworth there, but it was reported that a large number of them came from other towns on the Island where the Klan had already been organized for months. A report of the lecture in the *Bar Harbor Times* stated that at least one person felt that Bar Harbor “will have our share of joiners and the Klan’s appeal to racial prejudice and hatred will attract a following,” but Farnsworth was notably restrained at this meeting.³⁰ According to the report, Farnsworth was more careful in his words and choice of language, and “generally refrained from his abuse of our citizens of the Roman Catholic faith that has been a feature of his former talks. Taken as a whole, there was little in Mr. Farnsworth’s Bar Harbor talk that one could object to.”³¹ The paper went on to say,

At first we were inclined to view with alarm the coming of the Klan to Bar Harbor. The knowledge that it has brought distrust, disorder and strife to many communities throughout the land was the reason for this view. However, the more we consider the Klan and its possibilities here, the less we are inclined to take it seriously. If a few of our neighbors want to pay \$10 for the privilege of parading in a white nightie and really think it worth the price, than perhaps they are entitled to this form of diversion. Our biding faith in the sound common sense of the majority of our citizens, regardless of race or creed, is our reason for having no fear of any serious disturbance here. For our part, if we had to make a list of all the things that Bar Harbor could do without, we would head the list with the K.K.K.³²

In celebration of Governor Brewster’s electoral victory that year, the Klan hosted a large “Klam Bake” on a farm in Trenton, with over 5,000 people in attendance. The *Bar Harbor Times* reported that “Fiery crosses were kept burning from nightfall until late in the evening. There were addresses by several speakers who pointed with pride to the election of Senator Brewster, the Klan’s candidate for Governor of Maine. Only a small portion of the Klansmen and women at Tuesday night’s celebration were in the hooded regalia of the ‘Invisible Empire.’ A well known citizen of the Town of Bar Harbor who admitted his membership in the Klan,

said that an estimate of 1,000 Klansmen for MDI would be approximately correct. He also said that membership was growing constantly.”³³

Notwithstanding the well-known citizen’s statement, the Klam Bake seems to represent the peak of Klan activity on and around Mount Desert Island. There are a few legends among Southwest Harbor families of men getting drunk, donning Klan hoods, and setting fire to a cross on the ledges in the harbor. But in 1926 one of the last reported meetings of the Klan appears in the *Bar Harbor Times*, which included a short entry about a meeting at the Bar Harbor Casino with 200 people in attendance to hear an unnamed speaker from Portland discuss the Klan’s support for H. C. Buzzell of Belfast for Republican Senator.³⁴

“In the future no candidate for public office in this State will dare to enter a campaign beneath the banners of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Several factors contributed to the fall of the Klan in Maine, starting in the mid-1920s. Farnsworth was removed from Klan leadership in 1924 over a dispute with how funds from the women’s auxiliary Klan group were being managed. He died of cancer two years later. Then, having purchased a large estate in Portland that was expensive to maintain, the Klan experienced constant money problems. In 1924 the Klan’s large auditorium in Portland burned to the ground and was not rebuilt. In 1926, the Klan’s last remaining property in Portland was sold to the city because the organization had not paid its taxes.³⁵ Negative publicity and increasing public outcry against the Klan’s message began to impact the ability of the organization to influence elections. In 1926 the Klan backed Democratic candidate Fulton Redman for Senate, and when he lost that election, the *Portland Press Herald* predicted that this would be the last election in which public officials were backed by the Klan.³⁶ Violent Klan



KKK member in Southwest Harbor
Courtesy of an anonymous donor

activities were becoming more prevalent in the South, and this tarnished the Klan's image with Mainers. Money was the final element that ended the fast rise of the Klan in Maine. As the Depression hit, collecting \$10 from new recruits became increasingly more difficult as people had less money to pay the fees. Mainers were losing trust in the Klan over tax issues and the use of membership funds, and as the reputation of both the Klan in Maine and nationwide became less and less savory, people became less inclined to support the organization.

In 1926 the mayor of Augusta canceled a large Klan rally and parade by prohibiting marchers from wearing hoods or otherwise covering their faces. The National Klan prohibited the wearing of hoods beginning in 1928, which also led to a decline in membership. Soon, the prominence of the Klan in Maine would become a memory and its presence on Mount Desert Island a surprising and little known element of our past.

It seems fitting to give the last words on the rise and fall of the Klan on MDI to one with first-hand knowledge who lived here. Ray Foster, a local plasterer and contractor, delivered this account to Island historian Bob Pyle in 1974:

The Ku Klux Klan was active then [1928] and a lot of us joined it thinking it was kind of like a cross between the Masons and the Boy Scouts. We liked the encampments [at what is now Barcadia near the Trenton Bridge]. . . . It wasn't long before we were told we had to hate black people. We weren't excited by that, but there weren't many blacks around MDI then, so it didn't make much of a practical difference. Besides, society was different then. Next, we were told we had to hate Jews. Guys started to get uncomfortable, then. There weren't many Jews around but there were people like Dan Rosenthal, a peddler who came in summer. Everybody liked Dan. He was a good man.

Then we were told we had to hate Catholics. Well, that did it. There were a lot of Catholics around. We knew damned well they were good people. A Catholic priest in Northeast—Father Kinney—was active in the fire company, for example. There was a Catholic church on Lookout Way in Northeast Harbor. The Catholic church had just bought one of the old local houses on Summit Road and was renovating it for a rectory. The Catholic church was enlarging that story-and-a-half little house into a larger three-story rectory.

Well, just about all the workmen in Northeast Harbor donated at least a day's work on that rectory job and we all signed our work. That was our message to the Ku Klux Klan, from every damn one of us. You'll find our signatures all over that house. That was the end of the KKK for Northeast Harbor.³⁷

Notes

¹ *Bar Harbor Times*, December 30, 1925.

² Edwin A. Garrett, III, "Report," Spring 1994, Bar Harbor Historical Society.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ <http://maineencyclopedia.com/ku-klux-klan>, accessed November 20, 2013.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Campbell J. Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States: 1850-1990," United States Census Bureau website at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/twps0029.html>, accessed November 20, 2013.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_US_immigration, accessed October 12, 2013.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know_nothing_movement, accessed October 12, 2013.

⁹ Rachel Miller, "Twenty Nationalities, But All Americans," Maine Memory Network on-line exhibit, <http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/879/page/1290/display?page=4>, accessed September 20, 2013.

¹⁰ Maine Memory Network, author unknown, "Peopling Maine," 4. <http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/879/page/1290/display?page=4>, accessed November 15, 2013.

¹¹ James Myll, "From French Canadians to Franco-Americans," Maine Memory Network on-line exhibit, http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/2122/page/3514/display?use_mmn=1, accessed September 20, 2013.

¹² Bapst returned to Bangor where he built the first Catholic church, dedicated in 1856, and later moved to Boston to work at Boston College. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bapst, accessed October 12, 2013.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath,_Maine_anti-catholic_riot_of_1854, accessed October 12, 2013.

¹⁴ Robert Boone, "A Kleagle and His Klan: F. Eugene Farnsworth and the Ku Klux Klan in Maine," (Masters thesis, University of Maine, 1965).

¹⁵ Richard Judd and Candace Kanés, "The Nativist Klan," Maine Memory Network on-line exhibit http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/783/page/1192/display?use_mmn=1&popup=1, accessed September 20, 2013.

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ku_Klux_Klan_in_Maine, accessed September 3, 2013.

¹⁷ Garrett, "Report," Bar Harbor Historical Society.

¹⁸ John S. Day, "Klan Once Big In State," *Bangor Daily News*, February 3, 1977.

¹⁹ Richard Judd and Candace Kanés, "The Nativist Klan," Maine Memory Network on-line exhibit http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/783/page/1192/display?use_mmn=1&popup=1, accessed September 20, 2013.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Bangor Daily News*, February 3, 1977.

²² Judd and Kanés, "The Nativist Klan,"

²³ *Bar Harbor Times*, October 3, 1923.

²⁴ Garrett, "Report," Bar Harbor Historical Society.

²⁵ *Bar Harbor Times*, October 3, 1923.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Bar Harbor Times*, February 13, 1924.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Bar Harbor Times*, April 9, 1924.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Editorial, *Bar Harbor Times* [month unknown], 1924, from Garrett, "Report," Bar Harbor Historical Society.

³³ *Bar Harbor Times*, September 10, 1924.

³⁴ *Bar Harbor Times*, November 3, 1926.

³⁵ Boone, "A Kleagle and His Klan," (masters thesis, University of Maine, 1965).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Robert Pyle to the author, November 21, 2013.