

The Power of a Piece of Cloth

Where does one hang a Ku Klux Klan robe? This was my dilemma when a private collector loaned me the Ku Klux Klan robe shown here. The night before I drove it to the photographer's studio, I searched for a safe place to hang it in our home. None of us wanted it overnight in our closets. My husband was frank: "It gives me the willies."

I understood my family's discomfort. In the car the next morning I covered it up as much to make it invisible to passing drivers as to care for it as an artifact. But I was nevertheless amazed at the power of a piece of cloth to evoke reactions. A simple five-button muslin robe stirred up strong feelings in my family, and I expect that the appearance of it and other Klan items in this *Palimpsest* may well stir up strong feelings in you. Something like a Klan robe can push the limits of one's historical objectivity because the national history of the Klan transforms any one Klan robe from a piece of cloth to a powerful icon. Yet it was someone's experience to stitch together the cloth, sew on the five buttons, insert the stiffening in the hood, and attach a red string tassel. It was someone's experience to wear the robe. And it was someone's experience to pose proudly in a Klan robe and be photographed.

How do we get beyond the robes and hoods to find out what those experiences really meant to the Iowans who wore the Klan uniform so openly and proudly? And suppose we find in these photos the smiling faces of our own relatives?

This *Palimpsest* presents three approaches to the subject of the 1920s Klan in Iowa. The

first relates a young teacher's encounters with the Klan. The second broadens the focus, as historian Robert Neymeyer discusses what new evidence suggests, what questions still remain, and what the teacher's experiences might reveal about the Klan. The third approach presents visual evidence of the Klan's presence in 1920s Iowa.

That the Klan was present is indeed a fact. What is harder to understand is what the Klan meant to the Iowans who joined it. What was its appeal? Was the Klan's national message the same one Iowans heard locally? No doubt, the answer is not simple. As with any organization—social or political—belonging to the Klan probably meant different things to different people. For some, it probably meant social interaction; for others, ideology; for still others, local control and power.

Our final article in this issue is not related to the Klan, but is also looks at local power in 1920s Iowa. And this we symbolize with a section of lace from the women's clothing store owned by Emma Harvat and her partner May Stach. As Anne Allen's story reveals, Harvat broke many stereotypes about the roles of women in a community. Raised in Iowa City, she held several clerking jobs—a new occupation for young women at the turn of the century. But she parlayed her skills until she and partner May Stach owned their own store. Then Harvat was elected mayor, reportedly the first woman mayor of an American municipality of 10,000 or more.

In this *Palimpsest* you'll discover several views of 1920s Iowa: A young educator challenging the Klan with the power of literature; compelling visual evidence of the Klan's power in Iowa; and finally, the power of a savvy Iowa Citian to break new ground in women's business and political roles.

—The Editor

