

MY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE KU KLUX KLAN

by *Leanore Goodenow*

In thinking of the many experiences of my life, I recall a series of encounters with the Ku Klux Klan more than sixty years ago. The first was on a Sunday in 1923. I was attending church in the small Iowa town of Whitten (in Hardin County) when a dozen robed and hooded Klansmen entered the church. They strode down the center aisle, deposited fifty dollars in the collection plate, turned without a word, and marched out of the church.

My next encounter came a year later in the summer of 1924 in Oskaloosa, where I was a student nurse. It disturbed me that each day the morning paper reported that at a Klan meeting in the amphitheater at the fairgrounds the previous night, every person present had pledged to become a member of the Klan. When a cousin drove into town I persuaded him to go with me to the Klan meeting that night. We took seats directly in front of the speaker's platform. Robed and hooded Klan members acting as ushers were walking back and forth in every aisle, scrutinizing us through the eye slits in their hoods. I was much amused to see on the wall behind the speaker the American flag prominently and improperly displayed with the field of stars on the right.

When several hundred people had assembled, the speaking began. Then we were asked to rise. When all were standing, Klan members were asked to be seated. The ushers resumed their walk up and down the aisles, eyeing those still standing, until the speaker asked all those who would join the Klan that

night to be seated. This still left standing several dozen persons. The ushers again stepped up their coercive "inspection tour," up and down the aisles. In due time, the speaker asked all those who would pledge to join the Klan to be seated. Gradually, those left standing succumbed to the pressure of the robed and hooded ushers, and dropped into their seats—except for me and my six-foot-tall cousin directly in front of the speaker's platform.

Now most of the ushers converged on our area. Eventually the speaking resumed and, after a bit, my cousin and I sat down. The speaker lost no time in pausing in his remarks to announce, "I see that tonight we again have 100 percent pledged to join the Klan." Whereupon my cousin and I rose! The morning paper did not report 100 percent, and I have always wondered how many actually did join.

My third encounter began when I was a year out of college, in 1929. I was invited to teach English at a twelve-grade consolidated school in Lee County. I had been born in that county, the southeastern-most tip of Iowa where the Des Moines River flows into the Mississippi at Keokuk. But I was not acquainted with the rugged, hilly country between the two rivers where the village of Argyle with its 123 houses stood.

The main line of the Santa Fe Railroad running west from Chicago passed through Argyle and supplied a valuable tax base, which made it possible to establish a twelve-grade school at the edge of the village. Five



The author (left) as a young educator in the late 1920s, and Lester Dumenil. Dumenil was secretary of the Argyle school board. Outspoken against the local Klan, he had been pulled off his horse and beaten up.

school buses covered most of the district, often requiring six horses to drag the buses over the hills and unimproved roads. Even so, some places in the district were beyond the bus lines, and many students depended on their own transportation. For instance, three boys rode horseback to school, two girls walked four miles up the railroad track each day, and a lone black girl drove whenever the roads were passable. There were over a hundred grade school students and fifty in high school. But no one told me there was an active Ku Klux Klan in Argyle.

The Klan had managed to place Klan members in almost all the businesses—or to run the owners out of town. When I arrived, the Klan had control of the service station, the poultry house, the restaurant, and the two grocery stores. The Klan also controlled the road-clearing equipment. The one church, served by an out-of-town minister, had two ladies aid societies—one Klan and one non-Klan.

The barber, however, was allowed to remain neutral, and I was fortunate to room in his home. Definitely non-Klan were the postmaster, his unmarried daughter in her thir-

ties who ran the telephone office, and the blacksmith. The blacksmith had a cross burned in his yard repeatedly, but he refused to join the Klan. Because a rural community could not manage without a blacksmith, he remained.

I cannot begin to recall all the trouble the Klansmen caused, but they knew no bounds. One night when the postmaster's daughter left the phone office at nine o'clock, she was intercepted by a group of Klansmen and taken to the blacksmith shop next door. There the Klansmen threatened her with tar and feathers. These were men she had gone to school with, and she begged them to go for her father. They refused and held her there until dawn, when she broke out and ran to her home two blocks away.

Farmers who didn't join the Klan were often pulled off their horses and beaten, as were Catholics. The Klan had two members on the school board. The board secretary, often outspoken against the Klan, was also taken off his horse and severely beaten.

Students going into the village at the noon hour offered the Klan businessmen their best opportunity to gain influence among students, encouraging them to disrupt classes and undermine authority. These students then plotted their mischief behind the closed door in the cloakroom that opened off the main assembly hall. The superintendent and principal did not, and seemingly could not, cope with the situation.

When contracts came up for renewal, neither the principal nor the superintendent was rehired. I was offered the principal's job, which I declined. I enjoyed teaching, but I had no interest in keeping attendance records and making out report cards.

The night the board interviewed prospective superintendents I acted as hostess for the six applicants, but I did not see one I thought could handle the situation. When the last one departed I walked into the boardroom, applied for the job, and then went home to bed. The next morning when I arrived at breakfast, my landlord, the barber, greeted me with, "Good morning, Miss Superintendent!"

I was away that summer, contemplating

what I had undertaken. Once the school year started, I made only three changes. First, I moved my residence to the home of the blacksmith. This was where the Klan had burned crosses in the yard—but to be honest, it was the only house in town with a bathroom. Second, I had the school janitor remove the door from the cloakroom, which had become the school headquarters for mischief-makers. And third, I cut the lunch hour in half and made a new rule: No one was allowed to leave the school grounds during that half hour. Because certain students had often gone into the village during the noon hour to meet with Klan members, this was a blow to the Klan and, of course, it was challenged. The penalty for breaking the rule was suspension; reinstatement required a conference with parents in my office. I was not unaffected when parents who belonged to the Klan arrived with fire in their eyes. My remedy was to excuse myself for a few minutes, enter an empty room, open a window, and practice deep breathing until my heartbeat returned to normal. I then returned to the office and handled the situation.

At my first school board meeting as Argyle superintendent, a board member who had recently moved here from Kentucky arrived at the meeting with his two teenage sons. All three carried guns. The father belonged to the Klan. Intimidated, I wondered what I should do. Finally, I rose to say I should like to convene the meeting but would first have to ask the teenagers to withdraw. I know of no law that says teenagers cannot be present at school board meetings—but it worked. The two teens withdrew. Now faced with only one gun, I proceeded with the meeting.

The school year advanced more smoothly than I had anticipated, until it was time for the school board election. With two members of the Klan on the board, the Klan now nominated a third, a man who owned a large farm near town. I was not concerned as they had failed to elect their candidate the previous year. Unfortunately, there was a heavy snowfall the day before the election. Because Klan members controlled the road-clearing equipment, they opened roads on a selective basis—and their candidate was elected. They

now had three Klan members on a board of five. I had no idea what would take place next, but I was certain the Klan would make some move. Meanwhile, I concentrated on teaching.

As the school had no library, I often ordered books from the State Traveling Library for my English classes. On one occasion I had ordered a book for myself, an English translation of a novel by Knut Hamsun, a Norwegian writer. That book was lying on my desk

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when a student approached and told me his classmates had already taken all the other books. Seeing the Hamsun book, he begged to take it for the weekend, which I allowed him to do.

Arriving at school on Monday morning, I found a note from the county superintendent (who had played tennis with my father). He said he believed my job was in jeopardy. The Klan had in hand a book I had given a student to read that was considered most unsuitable, he said, and the board was being called into special session that afternoon to deal with the situation. Of the books I had ordered, the only book I had not read was the one by Knut Hamsun. I got in my car and set out to find the book. It was, as I expected, at the home of the new board member (the Klan's candidate). In his absence his wife felt she could not let me have the book, but I persuaded her to give it to me. I returned to my office, canceled my classes, and read it from cover to cover. It is an excellent book.

I have tried for several years since to track down the title of this book. In 1920 Knut Hamsun won the Nobel Prize for literature for *Growth of the Soil*, a long, involved story in which he characteristically repeats several in-

cidents from the book I read, but in different circumstances. It takes eight hours to read *Growth of the Soil*; I read the earlier book in three.

I had the book in my possession that afternoon when the school board president arrived at my office requesting it. When I asked why, he said the school board was meeting and had asked for the book.

"But," said I, "I am a member of the board and I was not notified of the meeting."

He said, with a very red face, that I need not attend.

I assured him that as a member of the board I would certainly attend. "But," I said, "I have a class to teach and will come down in fifty minutes bringing the book with me."

I found five board members waiting for me. The new board member said he had found the book most unsuitable and had marked passages he wanted board members to read. He suggested that the book be passed around. I said I felt that would be very time consuming and that instead I would read aloud his marked passages.

The first passage was about a bull having gotten to a heifer "much too soon." I paused to remark that I was surprised that Argyle farm children were not acquainted with bulls and heifers.

Of his four marked passages, I can recall only one other, but I remember that one vividly. The story is of a woman with a cleft lip who roamed the hills as an outcast. There she met a man who also roamed the hills, and she cohabited with him in his crude domicile. He was often away for weeks at a time, and on one of these occasions she gave birth to their child. Like her, the child had a cleft lip. Knowing from her own experience that the child would live a hard life as an outcast, she killed the infant. The birth and the killing were described in vivid detail, as only Knut Hamsun could write it.

I explained to the board that I had read the book that morning and had also marked four passages, to share with my English students. "But," said I, "having noted your interest in Hamsun's writing, I should like to share them with you."

Again, I can remember only two of my four

passages. I read Hamsun's description of the great loneliness of the woman when the man would be away for weeks at a time. One day on his return he brought her a clock, and after that she was never lonely, with the clock's "tick tock, tick tock." Another passage described how during another of his absences, she bore a second child. This child did not have a cleft lip. When the man returned, she placed their son in his callused hands.

Having read suitable portions around each incident, I now read Hamsun's conclusion and closed the book. Not a word was spoken, and I doubt if there was a dry eye. I don't suppose any one of these farm men had ever been read to before—certainly not from such a skilled writer as Knut Hamsun. Finally, the Kentuckian spoke. "God, men," he said, "there's worse things than that in the Bible." Not another word was said. One by one the men rose, put on their coats, and departed.

I was astonished by Knut Hamsun's victory over the Klan.

No word was ever spoken to me or in my presence about this board meeting. If it was mentioned elsewhere, I never heard of it. But from that time forward I had the full cooperation of the board members—Klan and non-Klan—and I was reelected unanimously as superintendent for the coming year.

I spent the following summer starting work on my master's degree at Columbia in New York. Perhaps not surprisingly, I came down with a severe case of shingles. The staff at the medical center of Columbia was adamant that I should not try to teach the following year, and I sent my resignation to the Argyle school board. They replied that they preferred I returned, and if I would return they would hire an extra teacher to lighten my load. I returned.

My third year at Argyle was reasonably good. The Klan members made themselves known from time to time, but met with small success. The bizarre happenings of the past gave way. The crude attempts to intimidate me ceased, and Klan influence in general declined. But at the end of the school year I moved east to finish my master's degree, leaving behind my encounters with the Ku Klux Klan. □