**United States History**

**Unit 9 Reading: “The Klan: A Child’s Memory” by E. E. LeMasters *(Ohio Magazine*)**

**I**

can still see the white robe hanging in my father’s bedroom closet. This was northeastern Ohio in the 1920s, and the Klan was so powerful in those days that it controlled most of the key elective positions in our county. Even the sheriff was a member, according to my father.

In our town the Klan was so prosperous that members bought a farm about five miles out and began converting it into a Klan Kountry Klub. They remodeled the barn into a clubhouse for meetings and dances and built a fine baseball diamond with a grass infield—unusual in those days in Ohio. The Klan farm had a hill where the huge crosses were burned when the Klan had a special conclave. I remember one event, when a crowd of about 25,000 came to hear the Imperial Wizard, or whatever they called him. The local papers reported that this was the largest crowd ever assembled in our county.

 I was there that day to be initiated into the Junior Klan. I remember the huge cross burning on top of the hill while the crowd sang the hymn, “The Old Rugged Cross.” The Klan in our town sponsored baseball games and I played on the Junior Klan team in our area. One year, our high school basketball team was sent to Chicago to participate in a national KKK tournament. One of my older friends—neighbors of ours—played on that team.

A little known fact about the 1920s Klan in Ohio was that its hatred was focused on Catholics. There were not enough blacks in our part of Ohio to hate, so the Klan focused on Catholics—they were coming into the United States in large numbers after World War I. My parents were so upset when my oldest brother became engaged to a Catholic that my mother attempted suicide. This was in spite of the fact that the girl came from a good family in our neighborhood and had a good reputation in our community. Decades later, after my mother died and my father was lonely, he often visited his Catholic daughter-in-law; he became very fond of her.

My father had Klan literature coming into our house and I used to read how the nuns were raped by the priests, that young girls were being forced to become nuns and that the Catholics were accumulating guns for the day when the Protestants and Catholics would battle for control of America.

In 1928 when Al Smith, a Roman Catholic, ran for president, my father was alarmed and literally forced my mother to vote for the first—and only—time in her life. I would like to think that when the curtains closed on the voting booth my mother secretly marked an X for Smith. Fifty years after the Al Smith debacle, John Kennedy faced the same bunch: Would Kennedy allow the Pope to move into the White House if elected?

My mother hated the Klan and once refused to wash my father’s Klan robe. This created a domestic crisis in our family. My father had marched in a Klan parade that weekend and had been hit on the head by a rock. When he came home that night his white robe was covered with blood. My mother was furious.

“I told him he would get shot or hit one of these days if he didn’t quit marching around in that outfit—a white sheet and a hood over his face. Decent people don’t have to cover their faces,” she said.

The crisis was resolved when my mother agreed to wash the robe and dry it in the basement—women in those days took great pride in their clean laundry hanging on the clothesline outside. She was not about to disgrace herself with the Klan robe waving in the breeze.

The Klan blew up in our area in the late 1920s when the local Imperial Wizard ran off with another man’s wife and took the Klan money with him. That was too much for my father and he dropped out.

I drove out to look at the Klan farm when I was in Ohio last summer; it had become a model beef operation. The big hill was as impressive as ever, but the men in their robes and hoods had moved on to other hills and other places.