



THE H O O D -ED EMPIRE

Members of the Ku Klux Klan burn a cross near South Table Mountain near Denver in the 1920s. The Klan was a driving force in Denver during the decade, targeting Catholics across the region.

Remembering the CATHOLIC CLASH with the Ku Klux Klan in the **1920s**

BY LUKE GRAHAM

Word had filtered to the Jesuit priests at Regis University. Just blocks away the Ku Klux Klan was preparing to march to campus, plant a cross and burn it.

It was the 1920s in Colorado, so the Jesuits had good reason to be alarmed. The KKK, who targeted Catholics, consistently burned crosses and gathered on nearby South Table Mountain. In part, Regis changed its name from College of the Sacred Heart to not provoke the KKK's ire.

But enough was enough. The Jesuits called on students to protect their school with anything they could find. They lined up every five feet around campus, many wielding baseball bats.

When word reached the KKK, the group abandoned its plan.

This story has been passed down over generations from Jesuit priests to Regis students, faculty and staff. Regis' stand is immortalized with a plaque in the southwest corner of campus, just one symbol of the University's and Catholics' fight against the Klan's 1920s reign in Denver.

A GROWING MOVEMENT

Between 1900 and 1920, more than 14.5 million immigrants entered the United States, most of whom were Irish or Italian Catholics. White Protestants, meanwhile, clung to their religious and political power.

The KKK arrived quietly in Denver in 1921, announcing themselves in a letter to various newspapers on June 17. Their targets were mainly the Catholic and Jewish communities. Their power came not just from violence, but from gaining economic and political control.

The Klan believed it was the embodiment of Christian righteousness. Members were encouraged to accept Jesus as their savior and affiliate with a non-Catholic Christian church. They believed they were the true Americans; they wanted American businesses, American managers and American workers. They denounced Catholic schools and Catholic teachers, preferring public schools that were true to their idea of American identity.

And at its height, one in 10 people in Denver was a KKK member. Colorado had the second

most Klan members in the nation — second to Indiana. At its pinnacle in 1924, the Klan had three to six million members nationwide.

In 1923, Klan-backed candidate Ben Stapleton was elected mayor. Stapleton denied a Klan affiliation, but soon started enlisting Klan members in multiple positions in his administration. By 1924, the KKK had gained control of the Republican Party and swept the majorities in the state general assembly and won other offices ranging from governor and attorney general to state auditor.

The Denver Post wrote the results of the 1924 election “proves beyond any doubt that the Ku Klux Klan is the largest, most cohesive, and most efficiently organized political force in the state of Colorado today.”

REACTION AT REGIS

Initially Regis students didn’t regard the Klan’s presence as an immediate danger. They even made jokes about the KKK in the student newspaper, the Brown and Gold.

That all changed on the night of April 1, 1924. Students had eaten and returned to their rooms when a cross near the south end of Carroll Hall was ignited. Students flooded outside, doused the flames and patrolled campus for hours without finding any of the instigators.

“Debates are hot as to whether the cross was a genuine Ku Klux demonstration or an April Fools’ Day prank, although the act was hardly appropriate in the face of recent friction with the Klan,” the Brown and Gold reported.

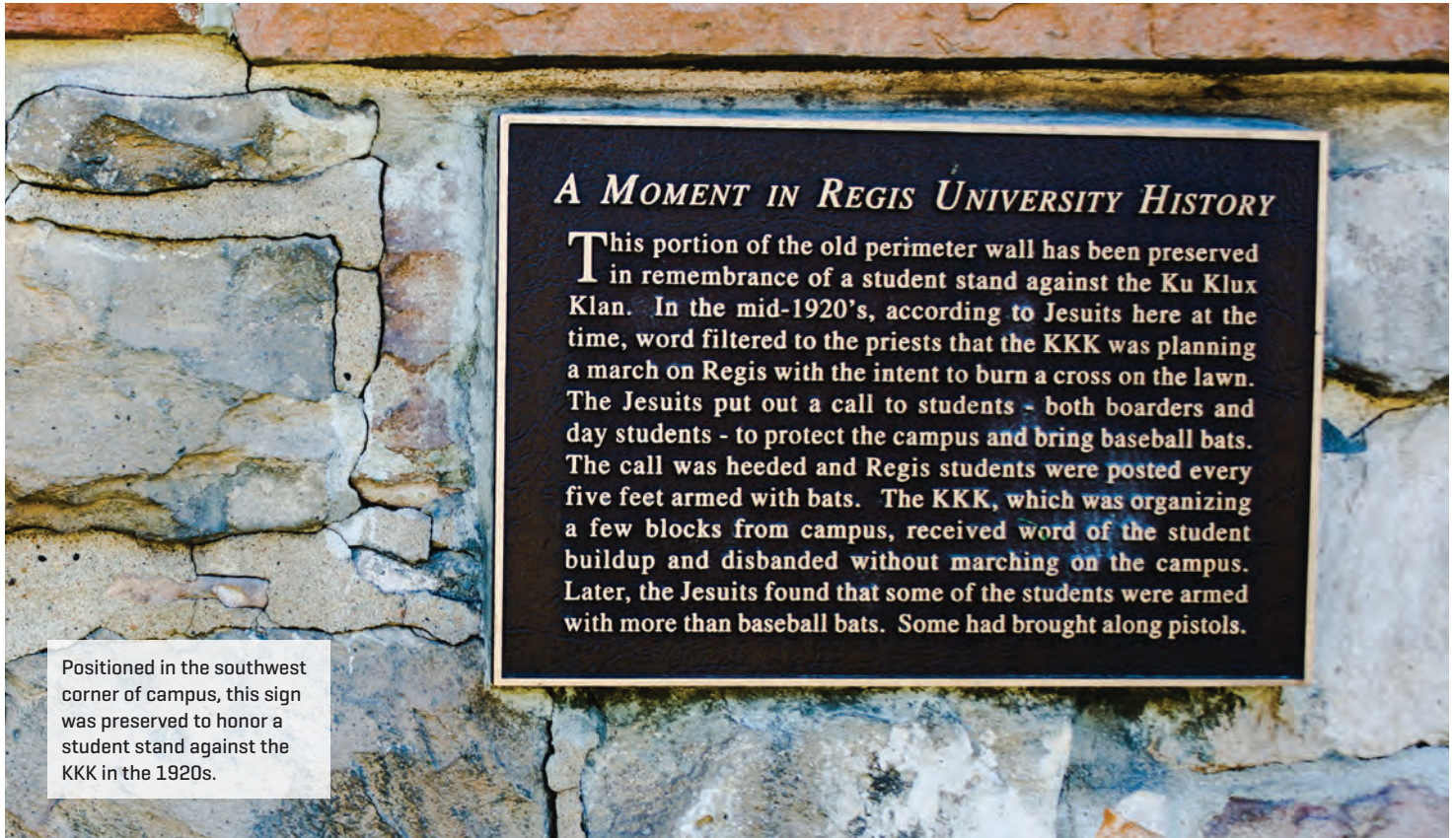
With the KKK’s power growing statewide, Catholics started to band together. On Sept. 20, 1925, 10,000 Catholics, dubbed Colorado’s first pilgrimage, met at Regis. Led by the Knights of Columbus and Knights of St. John, they marched in solidarity to the Shrine of St. Anne to hold an outdoor Mass.

Working with Jewish leaders and government officials, their goal was clear: Disband the KKK.

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At one point in 1924, the KKK was believed to have between three and six million members nationwide.



Positioned in the southwest corner of campus, this sign was preserved to honor a student stand against the KKK in the 1920s.

A MOMENT IN REGIS UNIVERSITY HISTORY

This portion of the old perimeter wall has been preserved in remembrance of a student stand against the Ku Klux Klan. In the mid-1920's, according to Jesuits here at the time, word filtered to the priests that the KKK was planning a march on Regis with the intent to burn a cross on the lawn. The Jesuits put out a call to students - both boarders and day students - to protect the campus and bring baseball bats. The call was heeded and Regis students were posted every five feet armed with bats. The KKK, which was organizing a few blocks from campus, received word of the student buildup and disbanded without marching on the campus. Later, the Jesuits found that some of the students were armed with more than baseball bats. Some had brought along pistols.

CRACKS IN THE KLAN

The KKK was continuing its push to eliminate state agencies and replace civil services with KKK members. Stapleton defeated a recall by appealing to the Klan's support. But when the general assembly balked at passing any of the KKK's agenda, and crime increased in Denver, Stapleton distanced himself from the Klan. In April 1925, he ordered the Good Friday raids. The Klan had positioned itself as an opponent of prostitution, liquor and gambling. But Stapleton's raid took down 40 bootlegging sites, 25 bordellos, three gambling parlors and uncovered dozens of Klan members who were involved in the illegal businesses.

With the Klan in disarray and feeling betrayed, the group cut ties with Stapleton as well as several other high-ranking officials. The "Klan governor" was ousted in 1926 and the group's power waned.

HATE TODAY

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) there are 917 hate groups across the nation today. The SPLC lists 130 active Ku Klux Klan groups, with one group listed in Colorado as of last year.

The SPLC lists 16 other hate groups in Colorado ranging from groups that are racist/white supremacist or designated as such because of their views toward gay people, immigrants, Muslims and white people.

Chris Pramuk, University chair of Ignatian Thought and Imagination, said the rise of the KKK in Denver during the 1920s is a reminder that certain groups continue to spew hatred toward marginalized and vulnerable communities.

"The danger of complacency is repeated in every generation," he said. "So, when you see or hear something that doesn't feel right in your belly, St. Ignatius urges us to pay attention to this. When it comes to political discernment, we tend to turn people into abstractions and numbers. But we tend to no longer demonize someone when we know their name and story. We are called as people of faith to see the person first, as God sees them, to seek to understand their story."

But like the Colorado Catholics in the 1920s, we must band together if we are to make any progress, as Regis President Father John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J., wrote in an August op-ed in The Denver Post.

He urged us to listen to others' stories and respond with courage, kindness and hope.

"These forces of hate will fail again — if good people stand resolute and not fall victim to their deceit," Fitzgibbons wrote. "This country is bigger than its differences. This world is larger than the forces that divide. ... We believe we can and will succeed in this difficult but sacred work because others have gone before us with challenges as big as ours, like Dr. King, who tell us that our only choice — our only choice — is to live together as sisters and brothers or perish together as fools."