

## **The Ku Klux Klan in Tuscola** (excerpts from a paper by Judge Frank Lincoln)

To obtain an insight into the activities of a local Klan, the author examined the newspaper files of the *Tuscola Journal*, Tuscola, Illinois, for evidence of Klan activity. The newspaper reported the Klan's activity in a small, Midwestern, white, protestant, rural community. From 1922 to 1924, the *Journal* reported many instances of Klan gatherings and activities. On several occasions crosses burned in prominent places in town; other times crosses flamed in front of the residences of local immigrants. One time a cross was burned in front of the home of the Greek confectioner; another time a cross was burned at the rural residence of a German farmer who had sent money during the war to relatives in Germany. During the period between 1922 and 1924, two large public Klan gatherings were held in Tuscola. On September 6, 1923, a Catholic-Klan debate was held in Frahm's Grove on the southern edge of town. Klansmen and local citizens alike attended this event to hear a Protestant minister and a Klansman debate the Catholic issue. The *Journal* of December 6, 1923, reported a Ku Klux Klan wedding performed by a Christian minister who was a Klansman from Atwood, Illinois. The minister and the young couple were dressed in the Ku Klux Klan regalia; both the couple and the minister appeared at the ceremony unhooded. The *Journal* of March 8, 1924, reported that one hundred Klansmen visited the neighboring community of Atwood; after visiting one private house and one business house, the Klansmen persuaded the offenders to change their code of morals. The *Journal* said:

*"From the expressions of opinion heard on the street it seems that the citizen one-hundred-per cent for the Klan and recognize the fact that they cleaned up a situation in one night that the village authorities were simply unable to cope with through the regular channels of law and order."*

In July, 1924, the Klan staged one of its largest parades in Tuscola. The parade consisted of 1,965 Klan cars, one hundred marching Klansmen, a Klan band from Danville, Illinois, burning crosses, and a naturalization ceremony in Ervin Park. According to the *Journal*, some citizens came out of loyalty, some out of curiosity to see the Klan gathering, and some came to hear the band; however, no offensive remarks or actions were exhibited by anyone during the evening's activities. In reporting the parade, the *Journal* said:

*"Three huge wooden crosses wrapped with cloth and saturated with oil were placed in the north end of the Park. As the paraders headed by the band and one hundred robed Knights of the order entered the park, the crosses were set fire to and burned brilliantly for about a quarter of an hour. To the north of these huge blazing crosses, one of the automobiles from the parade had parked on the right and on the front of this car was an electric lighted cross about four feet high and three feet wide with red bulbs. The blazing crosses together with the fuses illuminated the north end of the Park and was a beautiful sight to look upon."*

The Ku Klux Klan activity in Tuscola terminated with the murder of Sherman Denny. Three men who were members of the Klan visited Mr. Denny on June 4, 1924, with the purpose of stopping Denny from bothering the wife of one of them. It seems Denny was afraid of the Klan and had bought a gun for protection. That fateful night a fight began and one of the Klansmen was shot in the leg, which prompted the fatal shot, which penetrated Denny's spinal cord. The whole crux of the defense was the claim of self-defense. A witness came forward and collaborated that they didn't shoot Denny until he struck them first. It didn't take the jury long to come back with a verdict of not guilty.

The hooded figures of the Ku Klux Klan were an expression of pain, sorrow and solemn warning. From anger and fear, not from knowledge and forethought, arose the Klan's methods. There is no room for a secret society such as the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. The Klan crusade to purify and stabilize spread contamination and strife everywhere. The Klan disrupted families, communities and states, turning husband against wife, neighbor against neighbor, and man against man, until it compacted an opposition as lawless as itself.