Building *The Life and Times of Ira Junius Johnson* Exhibit

The Life and Times of Ira Junius Johnson **exhibit is the product of collaborative research and design work by the students and instructor of Canada in the Making: Understanding Canadian History, a General Education course.**

Over the course of Fall Term 2017, the students became experts on Ira Johnson. They studied Ira's life in class and explored historical documents that described various aspects of his experience. They used their research, much of it original, to complete presentations and essays on Ira, his community and the historical forces that shaped his life.

As their final project, students applied their knowledge and creativity to produce panels detailing specific parts of Ira's experience. Students whose panels were selected then worked with the professor to edit their individual or group efforts into a uniform exhibit.

The Life and Times of Ira Junius Johnson **is a work of public history and is designed to improve the historical literacy of the community. A thorough understanding of history is a key ingredient to a healthy and functional community. We hope that this exhibit has helped to improve your understanding of Oakville's past and of Canada's history more generally. Thanks for taking the time to explore Ira Johnson's historical experience.**

Sheridan | Get Creative

The Life and Times of Oakville's Ira Junius Johnson

"The February 28, 1930 Ku Klux Klan cross burning in Oakville threatened Ira Johnson's life and attempted – thankfully, in vain – to prevent the World War One veteran from marrying his white fiancée, Isabella Jones…Although the ringleader was eventually convicted, some local leaders in Oakville sympathized with the Klan's view that a black man had no business taking up with a white woman. This sad but revealing episode deserves to be studied – rather than ignored."

- Lawrence Hill in Michael Howe, "Oakville's Forgotten History," *Burlington Post*, 30 July 2009.

"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

- Maya Angelou

For a long time, the image of the past accepted by the majority of Canadians depicted a tolerant society rooted in the ideals of "peace, order and good government" and free from the worst excesses of racial hatred and violence so common in the United States. The last few years, however, have brought challenges to this narrative as more Canadians have been exposed to the skeletons buried in their national closet – Residential Schools, the Chinese Head Tax, the existence of Jim Crow laws in parts of the country, to name just a few. As more of these stories are shared the image of Canada's past is starting to change.

The story of Oakville's own Ira Junius Johnson (1893-1966) reflects the racism, hate and segregation experienced by many African Canadians throughout the twentieth century. Ira's life offers a window through which to view the African Canadian experience during the First World War, the rise of the Canadian Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and society's intolerance towards interracial couples.

Ira's story has been told before by Lawrence Hill, Constance Backhouse, James Walker and others. This exhibit builds on their research, but also utilizes new sources including census records, Ira's wartime service file and stories from the *Chicago Defender* – a weekly newspaper and a prominent voice in the African American community. Ira's life cannot be reduced to one night and this exhibit tries to broaden our understanding of the man and his experience – particularly his early life, his service during the war and his working life.

Ira Johnson's Early Life in Oakville's Black Community

In 1893, John and Ida Johnson welcomed their son, Ira Junius Johnson, to the world. Ira grew up in Oakville's small and close-knit African Canadian community.

Ira's paternal grandfather, George Branson Johnson, grew up as a free man in Maryland. Johnson married Amanda Shipley, with whom he had 11 children, including Ira's father, John. The family migrated to Canada – possibly using the Underground Railroad – and settled in Oakville in the early 1860s.

A popular United States Coloured Troops recruiting poster. As part of the 28th Regiment, Junius Roberts would have participated in some of the bloodiest fighting of the Civil War, including the infamous Battle of the Crater, where nearly half of the unit's men were killed or wounded.

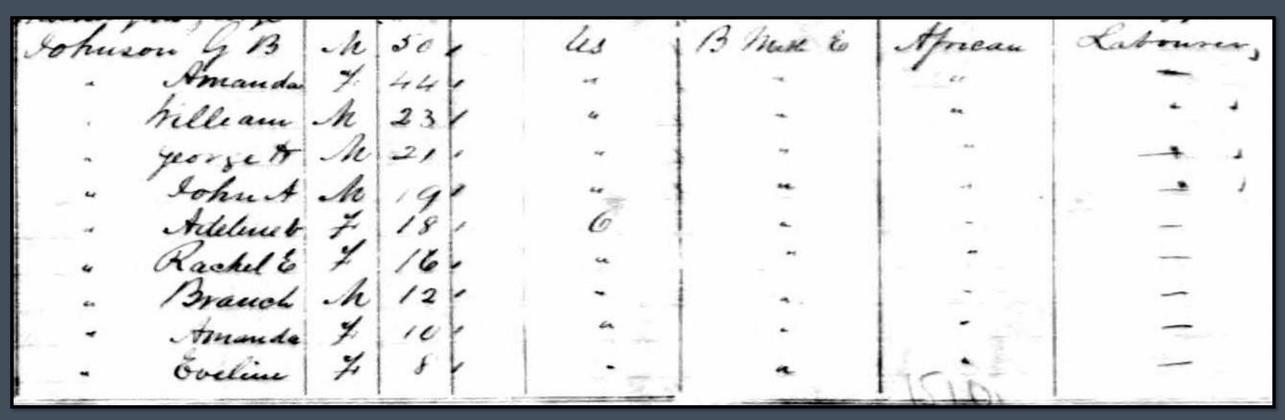
Ira's maternal grandfather, Junius B. Roberts, grew up in Indiana. Roberts served in the 28th Indiana Coloured Infantry during the American Civil War. His experiences in the war shattered his health for the remainder of his days.

After migrating to Canada, Roberts became a Minister with the British Methodist Episcopal Church (BMEC) and served in Guelph, Oakville and Hamilton. The church was an offshoot of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the U.S. and it played an important leadership role in many African Canadian communities.

Junius' wife, Francis, gave birth to their daughter, Ida Roberts, in 1870.

When Junius Roberts served as the minister of the BMEC in Oakville, the Johnson family were active members of the church community. It was probably through the church that Ida Roberts met John Johnson. On 27 September 1887, the couple married. John found jobs as a weaver and a labourer in Oakville, while Ida worked as a midwife in the community.

Ida and John had their first child, Lillie Viola, in 1888. Ira was born on 30 April 1893. A third child, Emily, was born two years later. A year after Ira's birth, Junius Roberts passed away and Francis spent her remaining years living with Ida and John.



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" George H	M	21		"	"		"							
" John A	M	19		"	"		"							
" Adelaide	F	18		C	"		"							
" Rachel E	F	16		"	"		"							
" Branch	M	12		"	"		"							
" Amanda	F	10		"	"		"							
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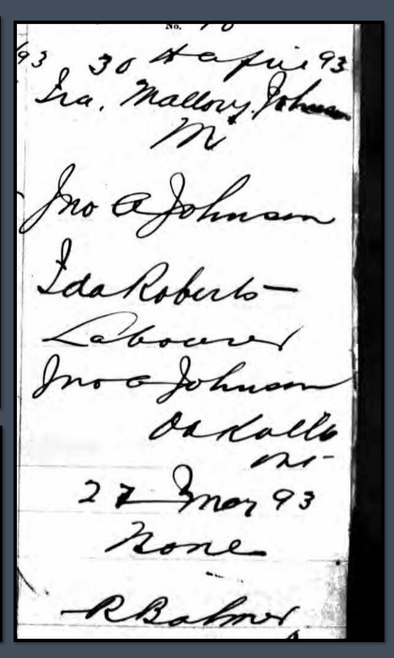
		" Ida Jo	f	"	Wife	M	25 Oct	1870	30	Simcoe Ont			"	"
		" Lillie V	f	"	Dau	S	31 Dec	1888	1/12	"			"	"
		" Ira J	m	"	Son	S	30 April	1893	7				"	"
		" Emily Jo	f	"	Dau	S	25 Feb	1895	5/12				"	"



The top left photo captures the entry in the 1881 Census of Canada for Ira's grandparents, George and Amanda, and their children. The bottom photo shows the entry in the 1901 Census of Canada for John and Ida's family, including Ira. The document on the right is Ira's record of birth.

As he grew up, Ira became well known in Oakville and gained a reputation as an athlete and a musician. His close friend, Alvin Duncan, remembered that, "Everybody liked Ira. He was an easygoing chap." (Lawrence Hill, *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, 216).

Still, Ira's early life was marked by hardship and illness. As a child he suffered from diphtheria and tonsillitis. At the age of 15 Ira contracted smallpox, which left him with permanent scars.

In the years before the First World War, Canada was in a recession and suffering from high unemployment. Despite this, Ira found work at Oakville's tannery – then called the Marlatt and Armstrong Leather Company. The tannery was the largest factory in town, employing almost 200 residents. These workers used steam machinery to convert hides into leather products such as shoe soles, purses, gloves and seat covers.

The Context: Jim Crow Canada

Ira Johnson grew up in a country beset by deep and institutionalized racism. African Canadians faced exclusion and separation from mainstream institutions, including hospitals, restaurants, theatres, cemeteries and, most commonly, education, which mirrored the racial segregation created by the Jim Crow laws of the American South. In many communities, African Canadians were excluded from steady and well-paying employment.

The racism that ran through much of Canadian society in the 19th and early 20th centuries inspired repeated attempts to ban black immigration and settlement. In 1911, the Canadian government issued Order-in-Council PC 1911-1324, which banned "any immigrants belonging to the Negro race, which is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada" – although it never officially invoked the ban.

Ira Johnson and the First World War

In 1916, Ira Johnson left his job at the Oakville tannery and volunteered to fight for Canada in the First World War. While the military rejected the majority of African Canadians who tried to enlist, Johnson was accepted and soon found himself in some of the fiercest battles of the war.

The Context: Systemic Racism in the Canadian Military

Throughout the First World War, the decision to accept or reject African Canadian recruits was left to local commanders and recruiting officers. The majority chose to reject African Canadians out of their own racism and concern that white soldiers would refuse to serve next to them.

A letter from Hamilton's African Canadian community highlighted the problem: Every young man that wished to enlist had been "turned down and refused solely on the ground of color or complexional distinction; this being the reason given on the rejection or refusal card issued by the recruiting officer. As humble, but as loyal subjects of the King, trying to work out their own destiny, they think they should be permitted in common with other peoples to perform their part, and do their share in this great conflict."

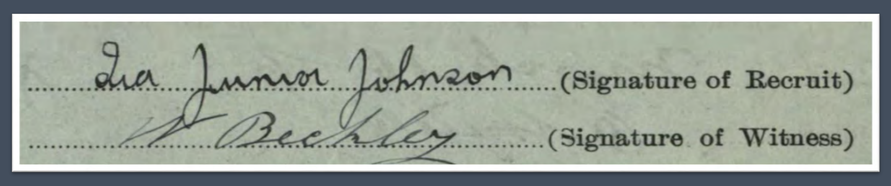
Eventually the military created a segregated African Canadian unit to serve as a non-combat labour battalion – the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

Still, some officers were willing to accept African Canadians into their combat units and around 2,000 saw action on the front lines, including Ira Johnson.

Three African Canadian soldiers in a captured German dugout near Arras. Canada. Dept. of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada PA-003201.

16 March 1916

Ira enlisted in the 164th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force while the unit recruited in Oakville. On his attestation papers Ira explained that he had previous military training, having served in the 20th Halton Rifles for two months. At the time of his enlistment, Ira was 22 years old, stood 5 foot, 8 inches tall and weighed 150 pounds.

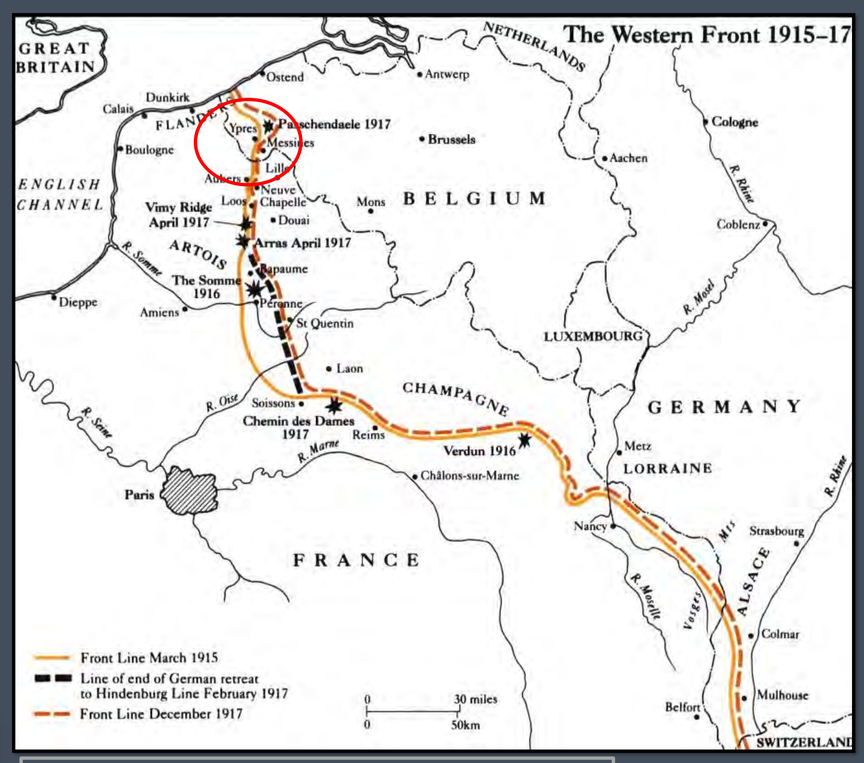


Johnson's signature on his attestation papers – a momentous moment in his young life.

April-October 1917

After his basic training in Canada, Ira travelled to England on board the RMS *Carpathia,* arriving on 22 April 1917. In May, Ira was transferred to the Canadian Machine Gun Depot, where he started training to serve as a machine gunner. In June, however, Ira was hospitalized with gonorrhea. Ira was not alone – the Canadian Expeditionary Force had one of the highest rates of venereal disease of all the military units serving in Europe. After recuperating, he continued his training.

These pictures depict the Vickers heavy machine gun – the weapon Ira trained to use. The Vickers required a crew of five and could fire 450-500 rounds per minute to a maximum range of 4,500 metres.



November 1917

Ira arrived in France in early November and was posted to the 9th Canadian Machine Gun Company. Ira arrived at the front during the last days of the Battle of Passchendaele (see map) – often considered the hardest engagement fought by the Canadian Corps. Unceasing rains turned the battlefield into a sea of mud and stubborn German resistance led to over 15,000 Canadian casualties. As the English poet Siegfried Sassoon put it: "I died in hell – they called it Passchendaele."

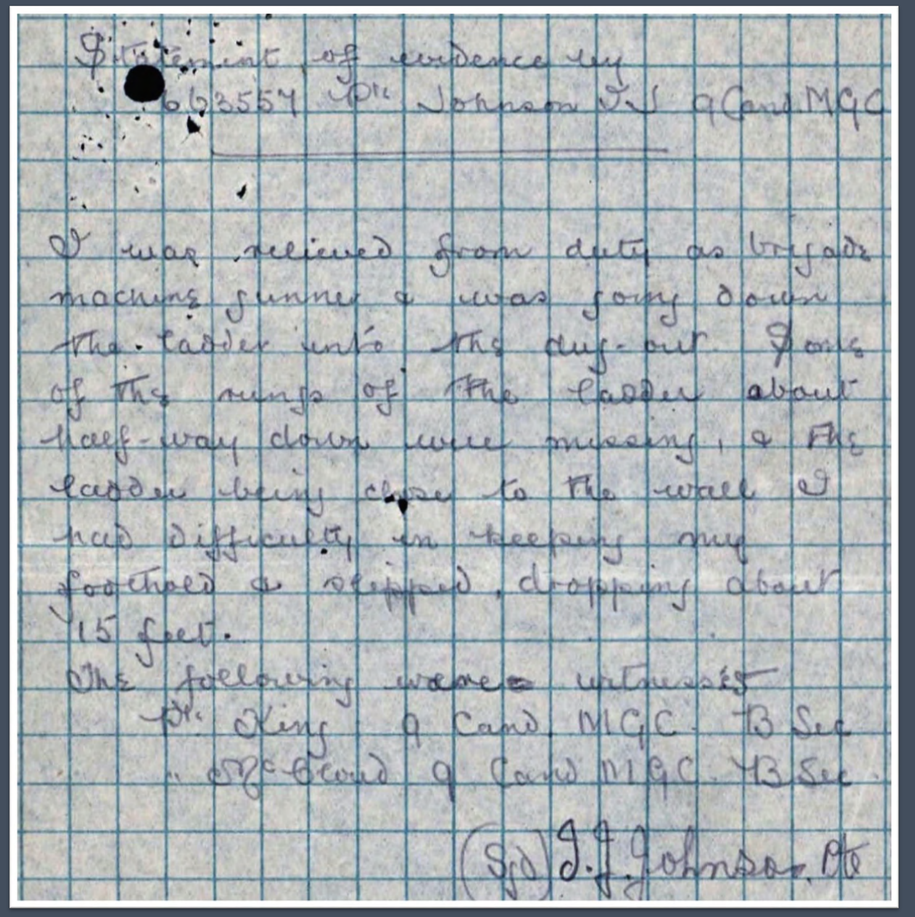
Ira Johnson's War

December 1917-July 1918

As Ira's experience on the front lines increased, he would have started to become accustomed to the routine – and the ever present dangers – of the trenches. On 1 March 1918, however, after spending most of the night at his machine gun post, Ira tried to climb down a ladder into his dugout. It was dark, the ladder was steep and covered in frost. Ira slipped and fell 15 feet to the hard ground below, fracturing his left leg at the ankle. Ira spent the following months in hospital, rehabilitating his leg.

August-September 1918

Ira was sent back to the front in August and joined the 3rd Battalion, Canadian Machine Gun Corps, in September. The final offensive of the war had started – a campaign called the Hundred Days – and the Canadian Corps spearheaded the advance of the British army.



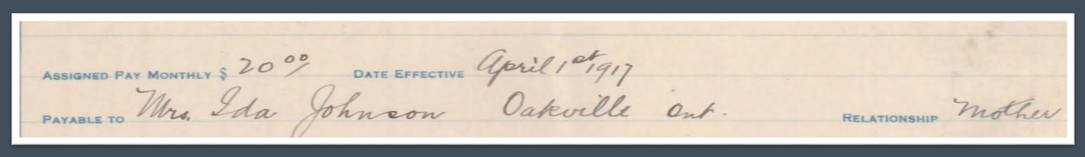
Statement of evidence by
63554 Pte Johnson I. 9 Can MGC

I was relieved from duty as brigade machine gunner & was going down the ladder into the dug-out. Some of the rungs of the ladder about half-way down were missing, & the ladder being close to the wall I had difficulty in keeping my footing & slipped, dropping about 15 feet.

The following were witnesses
Pte. King 9 Can. MGC. 13 Sec
" Pte Reed 9 Can MGC 13 Sec

(Sgd) J. I. Johnson. Pte

Ira had to prove that his fall was an accident and not an attempt to escape the front lines. He had two comrades vouch for him and wrote this explanation.



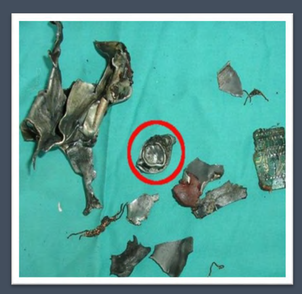
ASSIGNED PAY MONTHLY $ 20.00 DATE EFFECTIVE April 1st 1917
PAYABLE TO Mrs. Ida Johnson Oakville Ont. RELATIONSHIP Mother

Ira sent a portion of his pay back to his mom, Ida, every month.

28 September 1918

On 27 September, the Canadian Corps attacked Bourlon, part of the strong German defensive positions along the Canal du Nord. Johnson's unit started the assault with a creeping barrage while under "heavy shell fire" – winning praise from the battalion commander. The machine gunners then advanced with the infantry and provided covering fire. At some point during the advance on the 28th, Ira's unit came under enemy artillery fire and he was badly wounded by shrapnel. The jagged piece of steel embedded itself in his tibia, four inches below his knee, fracturing the bone.

Example of the kind of shrapnel that wounded Ira.



Ira spent months in military hospitals like this during the war.

October 1918 – July 1919

While the surgeons immediately set Ira's fracture, they did not remove the shrapnel. In the months that followed, Ira suffered tremendously from osteomyelitis, an infection of the bone, and severe nerve damage. He had four additional operations to remove the shrapnel and infected bone, and to drain the wound. While the operations helped, Ira complained about a consistent feeling of pins and needles below the right knee and his doctors worried about the leg's functionality. His medical officer suggested the Ira would not be able to return to his former occupation.

After months in hospitals in England, Ira was invalided back to Canada in May 1919. He was treated in the Brant Military Hospital in Burlington before his discharge from the military on 2 July. His discharge papers note a loss of "partial function" of his right leg. The war had left Ira with a permanent and debilitating physical injury.

X-rays of Ira's legs showing the extent of his wartime injuries.

Ira in Postwar Canada: Adjusting to Civilian Life

After his discharge, Ira returned to Oakville and lived with his parents. Like many veterans, Ira struggled to find full-time employment. As a result, he completed the vocational training necessary to become a motor mechanic. He worked for Hillmer Brothers in Oakville, which specialized in automobile sales and service. He worked as a mechanic for five years before he was laid off. Ira spent the rest of the 1920s taking casual jobs with building contractors in the area.

Ira and his parents in the 1921 Census of Canada.

The Context: Machine Gunners in the First World War

The machine gun dominated the battlefields of the war, proving especially effective against enemy troops in open ground. The machine gun forced soldiers from the battlefield and into the relative safety of the trenches – leading to the stalemate of the Western Front. Machine gunners were known to suffer from great strain when on the front lines.

Ira served as part of a five-man Vickers machine gun crew in the last year of the war. By that point, heavy machine guns like the Vickers were used to fire barrages into enemy trenches and other fixed positions. On some nights, the machine guns of Ira's unit would fire almost 40,000 rounds into enemy positions. While the heavy Vickers was ideal for barrages and defence, machine gun crews often joined infantry attacks to provide supporting fire, dragging their heavy gun, extra ammunition and water to cool the barrel across no-man's land. It was a very dangerous job.

A Canadian Vickers machine gun crew – like the one Ira fought with – at the front.

The Rise of the Canadian KKK

As Ira adjusted to life in postwar Canada, he would have read about a very worrying development in the newspapers – the rapid expansion of the Ku Klux Klan in his country.

The Context: Canada's KKK

Mirroring the growth of the American Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, by the middle of the decade the KKK counted its active Canadian membership in the tens of thousands. Cross-burnings, acts of intimidation, violence and property destruction became all too common across the country as the KKK targeted African Canadians, Jews, Asians, immigrants and Catholics to further their vision of a white, Anglo and Protestant Canada.

In particular, the Canadian KKK focused its anger on interracial relationships. A creed drafted for the Knights of the Ku Klux of Canada in Toronto on 22 October 1927 stated:

"We believe that our white race has a ministry of supreme service to mankind, and that the introduction of elements which cannot readily be assimilated or fused into our racial stock will lead to the corruption of racial health and seriously impair the service we might render to our fellow men. We therefore avow ourselves to be ever true to the maintenance of our racial integrity." *The Bisector*, February-March 1928.

The timeline on the right highlights the rapid expansion of the Canadian KKK, with a focus on developments in Ontario.

In the 1920s, chapters of the KKK formed throughout Canada, with names like the Ku Klux Klan of Kanada, the Kanadian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and the Ku Klux Klan of the British Empire. Photo from City of Toronto Archives, Globe and Mail Fonds, Fonds 1266, Item 19469.

1921

- The Ku Klux Klan was reported active in Montreal – soon there were reports of chapters opening across Canada.

1923

- An American organizer of the KKK, W.L. Higgitt, toured and recruited in Toronto.
- The growth of the KKK in the city did not go unnoticed by the African Canadian community.
  - "I know their songs, and their whistles, and their snares, and they are right here in Toronto. It is a living disgrace to our intelligence…a Ku Klux Canada is well on the way." Anonymous to *The Globe*, 18 July 1924.


CHIEF AIM OF KLAN TO CONTROL CANADA


KU KLUX REARS HEAD IN CITY OF HAMILTON WITH 32 INITIATIONS


HAMILTON MYSTIFIED BY BLAZING CROSS

Fiery Symbol of Ku Klux Klan Is Ignited Near Mountain Top

1924

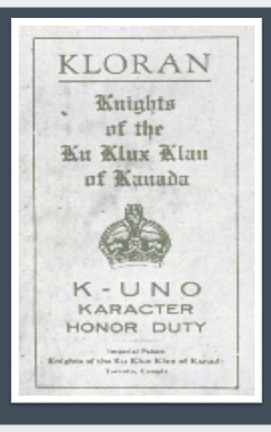
- In the summer, a large KKK rally took place in the woods outside Dorchester, Ontario.
- Members of the expanding Hamilton branch of the KKK also set crosses on fire on the Mountain in Hamilton, and initiated dozens of new male and female members.

1925

- By this point, the Klan's membership in Ontario was estimated to be in the thousands. The summer saw hundreds of cross burning across the province.
- Some spoke out against the KKK: "The obvious danger…is that innocent victims will be sacrificed to the mere blood-lust of the hungry and ruthless monster when it becomes too powerful to be contented with idleness…we may have to take vigorous action to resist it, for parading in nightgowns seems to exercise an overwhelming lure for the feeble-minded. Yet, sure, Canada, is a far finer word – and thing – than Klanada." *The Globe*, 21 December 1925.

1926

- The Klan continued to grow across Canada, counting more than 25,000 members in Saskatchewan alone.
- Three Klansmen used a stick of dynamite to blast a four-foot hole in the wall of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Barrie, Ontario.
- In Ontario, the Klan distributed pamphlets demanding that the government and businesses refuse to hire people of colour.


KLORAN

Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Kanada

K-UNO

KARACTER

HONOR DUTY


KLAN HOLDS PARADE THROUGH HAMILTON

Hooded Members on Horseback Lead Several Hundred Marchers

1929

- Hamilton developed into a focal point for Klan activity. In 1929, mounted leaders led 500 Klansmen in a parade through the streets of the city. Thousands watched as the Klansmen held an elaborate initiation ceremony and set four crosses on fire, one of which of was over 30 feet tall.

Ira Johnson, Isabel Jones and the Assault of the KKK

In February 1930, Ira Johnson made plans to marry a white woman, Isabel Jones. Their marriage plans placed them squarely in the sights of the expanding and increasingly bold Hamilton branch of the Ku Klux Klan.

Ira and Isabel

By early 1930, Ira lived with his parents and worked part-time as a labourer. By all accounts, Ira was well-liked in Oakville. His friend, Alvin Duncan, recalled that Ira "was popular around town too. His dad and himself were pretty good on the accordion and whenever there was a small party going on they would always invite Ira or his dad." *History's Courtroom: Disrobing the KKK*, 2002.

Ira met Isabel through his mother, Ida, who volunteered with her mom at the Salvation Army. When Isabel suffered from a nervous breakdown, her mother asked Ida to look after the young woman. During this period, Ira and Isabel fell in love and made plans to marry. Ira asked for permission from Isabel's mom, who gave it willingly.

Wedding Plans

Ira and Isabel moved in together for a few days in late February 1930. When friends told Ira that this had inspired a lot of gossip in town, Isabel moved into the home of his aunt, Viola Sault, on Kerr Street. The couple then secured a marriage licence from Port Credit on 28 February. That night they had a small celebration at Sault's home, with Ira's parents. Their happy celebration, however, would be cut short.

Ira was 36 when he met Isabel while she was 20. The Chicago Defender reported that, "The young couple were seen together openly about the town and their friendship was no different from that of other young folks and excited no more comment. When their engagement was announced they received congratulations from their white and Race friends alike." Chicago Defender, 8 March 1930. Photo from City of Toronto Archives, Globe and Mail Fonds, Fonds 1266, Item 19488.

The KKK Acts

As Ira and Isabel planned their wedding, Isabel's mom now retracted her consent and tried to end the relationship – apparently out of concern over Ira's employment status. She eventually turned to the Hamilton KKK, which she knew opposed interracial marriages. Upon hearing about Ira and Isabel's marriage licence, the KKK decided to act.

At around 10:00 p.m. on 28 February 1930, 75 members of the Ku Klux Klan in their white gowns and hoods marched to the centre of Oakville and set a large cross on fire in the middle of the road. The mob then marched to Ira's home on Head Street, only to find it empty. Learning that the couple was at Ira's aunt's house on Kerr Street, the Klansmen motored over.

"Ira Johnson would have been aware of [the legacy of the KKK] and he would have known when he saw 75 Klansmen come into town that his skin was on the line. I'm sure he was probably more viscerally afraid watching 75 Klansmen on Kerr Street in downtown Oakville than he would have been in France." Lawrence Hill, History's Courtroom, 2002.

Assaulted by the KKK

Ira recalled what happened next: "A knock came at the door. My aunt answered it and a man in civilian clothes asked for Mr. Johnston Jr. He asked me if I went out working and I said that I did, but that I was not working at present. We walked out to a closed car in front of the house in which four or five men were sitting. They were all in civilian clothes. Then the man who had been talking to me went to the house and brought Miss Jones out…[I] asked what authority they had for taking her away. They didn't make any reply, but closed the door and drove off. I was worried about the girl and went back into the house, grabbed my coat and hat and rushed out to see where she had gone. I walked around the street but saw no sign of her."

Ida Johnson reported that at 11:00 p.m. the Klan appeared a second time. She explained that, "They all wore flowing white robes with a crest, a fiery cross, over their left breast. Their heads were covered with long white masks, with two small slits for their eyes. The top of these masks were sort of cone-shaped, with a white tassel at the extreme top, I had seen pictures of the Ku Klux Klan and I knew who they were. They nailed a large cross to a post in front of our house and set it on fire….When the flames had gone out the spokesman came to the door and knocked. He asked for Ira, but I told him he was gone. He was the only one that spoke, but the house was surrounded by white figures. Then the spokesman told me that if Ira, my son, was ever seen walking down the street with a white girl again the

Klan would attend to him."

- *The Chicago Defender*, 8 March 1930

Responses and Reactions

The KKK's attack on Ira and Isabel gained national attention and led to a wide array of responses from various individuals and community groups.

Ira and Isabel

The KKK deposited Isabel into the care of the Salvation Army, where she stayed in the aftermath of the incident. A few days after the attack – no doubt hoping to protect himself and Isabel, and save their relationship – Ira told the press that the entire incident had been a misunderstanding because he was not black at all, but rather of mixed white and Cherokee ancestry. As author Lawrence Hill has pointed out, Ira grew up in Oakville's black community and he and his family had been listed as black or African on multiple censuses, but his story won him far more support from the press and the general public. "Ira Johnson proved himself as Canada's first spin doctor," concludes Hill. (*Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, 223)

Oakville's Leaders

As the Klansmen drove out of Oakville after their attack, police chief David Kerr stopped them. He recognized a number of them as Hamilton businessmen and let them drive away after shaking their hands. Kerr noted that "there was no semblance of disorder and the visitors' behaviour was all that could be desired." Local historian Alvin Duncan, who witnessed the KKK's raid, has explained that, "There was a lot of doubt at that time and still is there today that Chief Kerr was so lenient on the KKK he may have been one himself." (*History's Courtroom*, 2002)

Oakville mayor A.B. Moat praised the Klansmen for their good conduct and their motives. "Personally I think the Ku Klux Klan acted quite properly in the matter. The feeling in the town is generally against such a marriage. Everything was done in an orderly manner. It will be quite an object lesson." *The Star*, 1 March 1930.

Police chief David Kerr

KLAN STOPS MARRIAGE!

Burns Fiery Cross in Canada—Takes White Bride-to-Be and Turns Her Over to Salvation Army—Canadian Citizens Resent Outrage—Mayor in Sympathy With Hoodlums—Police Fail to Get Auto License Numbers—Pastors Flay Dixie Methods

The Press

The initial response of the press was quite flippant. The *Oakville Star and Independent* noted that "it was really impressive how thoroughly and how systematically the klan went about their task." The *Toronto Daily Star* called it a "show of white justice." The *Hamilton Spectator* explained that "the citizens of Oakville generally seemed pleased with the work accomplished by the visit." Where there was condemnation in the press – at least in the days that followed the incident – it was about the methods of the Klan, not their ideas or motives.

The KKK

The Klan continued to monitor the activities of Ira and Isabel, even watching the Salvation Army mission where they had placed Isabel. In the days that followed their attack, the Klansmen defended their actions and promoted their ideas on the pages of *The Globe*. When Reverend H.L McNeil and E. Lionel Cross, an African Canadian pastor and a lawyer, spoke out against the KKK, the Klan threatened them.

Voices of Protest

Many African Canadians protested the actions of the KKK. They were joined by Toronto's Jewish community, members of the labour party and the International League for Peace and Freedom. These voices came together at a mass protest meeting at the University Avenue First Baptist Church in Toronto on March 4. What follows are just a few of these voices.

"There is nothing that would tend more to create hatred between the races, and is more destructive to true citizenship, than such acts of violence. We are endeavoring to live amicably and peaceably in Canada…The thought of it makes me want to fight to protect our rights." Dr. D.A. Wyke, recent African Canadian graduate from the University of Toronto, *The Star*, 1 March 1930.

"I think it is most revolting. We are British subjects and our rights should not be thus trampled on. It is most absurd that one section of the citizenry should take the matter into their own hands. I have lived in Jamaica, where mixed marriages have been perfectly happy and there is no reason to believe that the present instance could not have been that way. The Coloured men who gave their lives in the World war made their sacrifices ungrudgingly and they are entitled to equality of rights with the other Britishers with whom they fought side by side." Wife of an African Canadian activist in Toronto, *The Chicago Defender*, 8 March 1930.

The Oakville incident is "the most revolting, unprecedented episode in this country with regard to our people." Reverend W. Constantine Perry, African Methodist Episcopal church in Oakville.

"That the chief of police and the citizens of Oakville should have witnessed this outrage without protest is most reprehensible… Only at the penalty of the decay of Canada can we afford to allow the Ku Klux Klan to gain headway in this country." Reverend H. Lawrence McNeill, First Baptist.

"They need not send us any pious resolutions. They need not try to fool us. We are suffering more than any other group in the world because we are too easily fooled. What we are fact to fact with is that they approve of the action of the Ku Klux Klan…If I made up my mind to marry a white woman, a Chinese women, a Japanese woman, or any other, and the Ku Klux Klan attempted to interfere, they would have to take up my dead body. The Ku Klux Klan is an unlawful, illegal organization, an organized band of night-prowlers who seem to think they can intimidate law-abiding citizens…If we sit by and allow them to do this, we shall soon find that their efforts will go further. This is the most important moment in the affairs of the existence of the Negro in Canada." B.J. Spencer Pitt, African Canadian barrister.

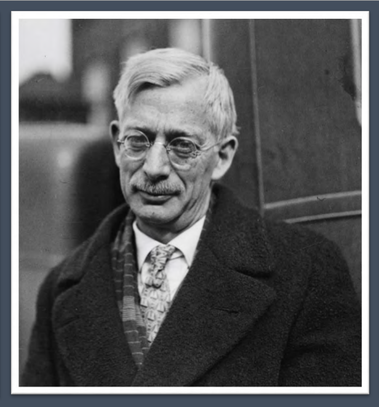
"The real menace to Canada lies not in the Ku Klux Klan, but in our own apathy thereto, in our tacit submission to the gospel for which it stands…Too many of us in Canada, though violently opposed to the lawlessness which the Klan has practiced, silently condone the work which it seeks to achieve. The Klan is saying and doing those very things which myriads of our fellow citizens actually want said and done. 'The Klan is silly,' they say, 'but then…' Both the Jews and the negroes have suffered from Klan bigotry and here is a marvellous chance to demonstrate courage, to meet this great challenge." Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, Holy Blossom Synagogue.

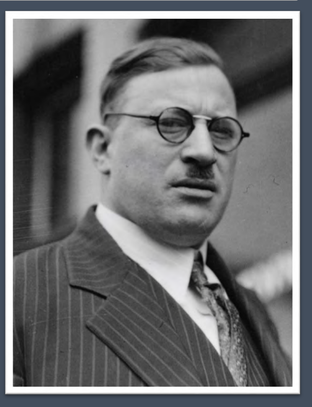
The KKK on Trial

Armed with a resolution from the mass meeting at the University Avenue First Baptist Church, African Canadian lawyers E. Lionel Cross and B.J. Spencer Pitt, and Reverend Lawrence McNeil, went to Ontario Attorney General W.H. Price and demanded that action be taken against the KKK. Price agreed to launch an investigation.

The Charges

After a quick investigation, three residents of Hamilton were charged under Criminal Code, Section 464(c): "Every one is guilty of an indictable offense and liable to five years' imprisonment who is found…having his face masked or blackened, or being otherwise disguised, by night, without lawful excuse, the proof whereof shall lie on him."

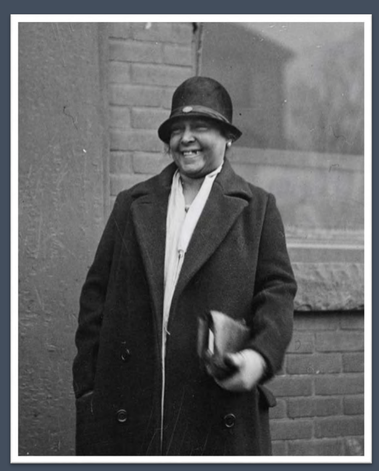




The three Klansmen charged: William Phillips, Ernest Taylor and Harold Orme. All were from Hamilton, where Phillips worked as a chiropractor, Taylor as the pastor of the Presbyterian Church and Orme as a chiropractic assistant. Photos from City of Toronto Archives, Globe and Mail Fonds, Fonds 1266.

The Trial Starts, 10 March 1930

The trial attracted large crowds of spectators. As they waited outside the courtroom in the Oakville police station, a Klansman distributed KKK literature. Many members of Oakville's African Canadian community also attended the trial. Ira attended and when the doors to the courtroom opened he took a seat at the back of the room.



The crowd gathers for the trial and Ira's aunt arrives at the courtroom. Photos from City of Toronto Archives, Globe and Mail Fonds, Fonds 1266.

The Context: Canada's Legal System

The law used to charge the Klansmen was developed to combat house burglars. As legal scholar Constance Backhouse has explained, many African Canadian activists were not impressed by the charges. E. Lionel Cross noted that more serious charges could have been laid – abduction, trespass and violence. Backhouse argues that several other charges also should have been considered, including intimidation, disorderly conduct, unlawful assembly and common nuisance. In 1930, however, there were no laws in existence that restrained racist speech and propaganda, prohibited discrimination or protected human rights. These laws were slowly added to Canada's legal system in the years that followed the Klan trial.

The Legal Battle

William Inglis Dick, a Brampton native, was the Crown prosecutor for the case, while Reid Bowlby, a lawyer from Hamilton acted as the defence attorney. Bowlby argued that the KKK had used no violence during their intervention and had been pursuing a just cause.

When cross-examined by Bowlby, Police Chief David Kerr, the man who had let the Klan get away with a handshake, suggested that Johnson had a poor reputation around the town, while he described the Klansmen as "fine types of men."

After Kerr, Isabel took the stand. When Dick asked her why she got in the car with the Klansmen that night, Jones said, "I thought I had to, there were so many of them. I thought I had to get into the car. I didn't want to contradict them – so I got in."

Wishing to discredit Isabel, Bowlby accused her of living with Ira "immorally" while badgering her to state that the Klansmen had acted "gentlemanly." As the crowd in the room cheered, Bowlby asserted that the "Klansmen were justified in their action," arguing, "I'm sure that there are hundreds of parents throughout the Dominion of Canada who would be eternally thankful that such a step had been taken." As the crowd cheered and laughed around him, Ira quietly left the courtroom.

In his closing statement, Crown Attorney Dick stressed that Jones was in the "house with Johnson and his aunt. No person had any right to go to that house and take her…" The Klansmen had understood that what they were doing was illegal, Dick argued, and they used the hoods to protect their identities. Excerpts from Backhouse, *Colour-Coded*, 206.

The Sentence

Magistrate W.E. McIlveen pronounced that Phillips had been hooded on the night of the attack and was guilty, fining him $50. The maximum penalty for the crime was five years in prison. Orme and Taylor were found not guilty and released.

This photo of Isabel and Phillips was taken right after the trial. City of Toronto Archives, Globe and Mail Fonds, Fonds 1266, Item 19487

A reporter from The Star overheard Phillips leave the courtroom and speak with Isabel, to whom he said: "You go home with your mother or you'll be seeing me again." To Isabel's mom, he said, "Everything will be all right now. Just send for me if there is any further trouble and I'll be right there.'"

Aftermath: An Appeal, a Blow to the KKK and a Wedding for Ira

In the aftermath of the $50 fine, the KKK increased its activity while African Canadian activists and their allies lamented a missed opportunity to deliver a stronger blow against the Klan. They would get another chance.

In the days that followed the verdict, thousands of KKK members protested the decision in Hamilton, dozens of threats were sent to African Canadian activists, Ira's home mysteriously burned down and KKK recruiters increased their activity in Oakville. Police chief Kerr did nothing.

An Appeal

Spurred on by an emboldened KKK, Phillips appealed his conviction and sentence. In response, the Attorney General launched a counter-appeal. The case was heard before the Ontario Court of Appeal (five white, male judges) on 16 April 1930.

The experienced judges immediately attacked Bowlby's arguments about the nobility and peacefulness of the Klan's cause. Judge David Inglis Grant asked, "What right has any crowd of men to take any woman anywhere, because they think it's where she ought to be?" Grant then stated that, "We will not tolerate any group of men attempting to administer a self-made law."

86-year-old Ontario Chief Justice Sir William Mulock delivered the court's decision. Phillips had interfered with Isabel's rights and committed an "illegal offence" against her. Worse, the Klan had ignored the law. The Klansmen had "committed not only an illegal offence as regards [Isabel Jones], but also a crime against the majesty of the law. Every person in Canada is entitled to the protection of the law and is subject to the law. It is the supreme dominant authority controlling the conduct of everyone and no person, however exalted or high his power, is entitled to do with impunity what that lawless mob did. The attack of the accused and his companions upon the rights of this girl was an attempt to overthrow the law of the land, and in its place to set up mob law, lynch law, to substitute lawlessness for law enforcement which obtains in civilized countries. Mob law, such as is disclosed in this case, is a step in that direction, and like a venomous serpent, whenever its horrid head appears it must be killed…"

The court sentenced Phillips to three months in prison, which he served. Upon his release, the KKK asked the Oakville Town Council if they could hold a parade in the town. The council rejected the idea, explaining that Oakville had already "suffered too much adverse publicity." *The Globe*, 22 July 1930.

One man handed out pamphlets to children at the Central Public School, which read: ***"You, sir, if you can qualify, have now that opportunity for which you have long waited. It is of vital importance that we have real red-blooded men, capable of carrying on that which has been so splendidly conceived and created."***

A Wedding

Ira Johnson: "We are only human and I wish the people would leave us alone." *The Star*, 24 March 1930.

Ira and Isabel's love survived everything. On 22 March 1930, Ira and Isabel were married by Reverend Frank Burgess, the white pastor of the United Church on the New Credit Reserve near Brantford. The couple once again had the support of Isabel's mother. When the couple raised the threat posed by the KKK to Reverend Burgess, he responded, "I was here before the Klan."

Finally wed, the couple took up residence in Oakville.


Canadian Klan Fails to Stop Wedding

Ira's Story

Ira and Isabel had two children together and raised them in Oakville, where Ira found relatively stable employment as a gardener on the estate of Major W.F. Eaton.

While the Chief Justice's ruling by no means destroyed the power of the KKK, it contributed to the general decline of the Klan in the 1930s. The decision provided clear proof that the government and the legal system would not support the actions of the KKK. As a result, Ira's children grew up in a community with a much weakened Ku Klux Klan.

Ira died in December 1966 at the age of 73.

I think Canadians like to imagine ourselves as a nation without a history of racism. When we go back into our history, we want to be inspired. We want to see the people who did the right things, and be proud of our country and our town. But I think that Canada has a racist history, and today, it's important that we know more about that and try to examine what that history left us with. We didn't come to this place…by accident. The more we learn about history, the more we become sensitive to the legacy of racism that is still with us."

- Constance Backhouse in Michael Howe, "Oakville's Forgotten History," Burlington Post, 30 July 2009.

We would like to thank you for taking the time to explore this exhibit. If you would like to learn more about Ira Junius Johnson's life, we suggest:

Backhouse, Constance. *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990

Hill, Lawrence. *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2001.

Hill, Lawrence. *Blood: A Biography of the Stuff of Life*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 2014

Walker, James. *"Race," Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies*. Toronto: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 1997.

See also, *History's Courtroom : Disrobing the Ku Klux Klan*. Toronto: Leading Cases Productions Ltd., 2002.

This exhibit was produced through the research and design work of:

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