

THE FOOL OF THE FAMILY: NATIVISM AND THE KU  
KLUX KLAN IN OREGON'S 1922 ELECTION

by

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A THESIS

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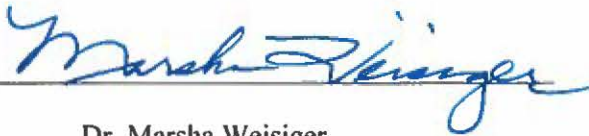
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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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The Fool Of The Family: Nativism & The Ku Klux Klan In Oregon's 1922 Election

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_



Dr. Marsha Weisiger

This thesis examines the intersection of national nativist trends with local peculiarities in Oregon's 1922 election. A surge of nativism in the United States during the post World War I period aided in the rapid expansion of the Second Ku Klux Klan, which came to be the prevailing political force in Oregon in the early 1920s. The KKK did not bring nativism to Oregon; rather, the state's unique social and political culture, coupled with the refusal of sitting Governor, Ben W. Olcott to recognize the Klan as a threat to social harmony, aided in the achievement of unprecedented Klan success in Oregon. The scope of this success is witnessed in the 1922 election, which resulted in a victory for a Klan backed governor, Walter M. Pierce, and the passage of the nation's first Compulsory Education Bill. To understand the prevailing sentiments before, during, and after the election this thesis analyzes the correspondence and speeches of both governors, as well as contemporary newspapers. As Oregon attempted to answer questions of the relationship between state and identity plaguing the nation it took actions that retain significance not only for Oregonians, but all Americans.

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Lastly, I have to thank the faculty and staff of my high school alma mater, Saint Mary's Academy. "All hail to thee, St. Mary's," with each passing year I find new reasons to take pride in calling myself a True Blue. I will always remain acutely aware of the shoulders I stand on and legacy that inspired this thesis.

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## **Introduction**

On a cold December day in 1922 a group of the United State's most powerful figures sat in the conference room of the Greenbrier Hotel in Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, thinking of the dinners and relaxation that soon awaited them. The event that brought them together, the Fourteenth Conference of Governors of the States of the Union, had a full docket of items to attend to, and the speech they now waited to hear would be the last piece of business for the day. The man who ascended to the podium didn't give the Governors any immediate reason to abandon thoughts of meals to come; with an average build and a soft-spoken demeanor, everything about him seemed perpetually understated. Yet when Governor Ben W. Olcott announced the topic of his address the assembly of career politicians immediately came to attention.

"I have been surprised since I came here," the Governor began. "Several of the Governors have asked me if we have the Ku Klux Klan in Oregon. I will say we have. We have a lot of them there." His audience listened carefully to hear how Olcott would treat a topic that most of those in attendance had already expended a considerable amount of effort to avoid discussing. Yet Olcott was acutely aware that as 1922 came to a close two groups of men sat in the room: those who would continue their duties into 1923 and those would shortly add the prefix "ex" to their title. Knowing that he resided with the latter, Olcott no longer had any reason to censor his words.

Now without a political career to protect and no particular feelings of warmth toward the people of his state at the moment Olcott outlined the scope of

Oregon's Klan problem. Putting it bluntly and in summation he explained, "We woke up one morning and found that the Klan had about gained control of the state." Despite whatever patriotism the Klan preached, Olcott declared the group to be, "one of the gravest menaces ever confronting our national or civic life" and asserted that the Klan threatened to rupture social harmony in communities, leaving "in its wake a trail of dissension, strife, bitterness, and rancor, that is far from American."

To illustrate this point Olcott recounted the story of the Compulsory Education Bill, a measure designed to close parochial schools by mandating that all children attend a public institution. The bill's passage, a key goal of the Klan, had been secured in Oregon the previous month, making the law the first of its kind in the United States. While Olcott astutely predicted, "this bill will no doubt be declared unconstitutional," he noted with sadness the damage it had already wrought. "It has caused hatreds that may not be ironed out this generation," the governor explained. Aware of the national attention the bill was garnering, the speaker warned, "this compulsory school movement, so-called, is not confined to Oregon. Oregon is the experimental station, the spawning ground for a similar crop of bills."

Coming to the close of his address, Governor Olcott pondered, "Perhaps these things are bad advertisements for our state. Perhaps it is not good policy for me to repeat them here." Yet the soon-to-be-former governor understood all too well the consequences of silence, and so he carried on, declaring that the facts should "for the good of our country, be told and should cause every other state to

pause before it permits repetition within its borders of what has happened in Oregon.”

As applause for the speech began, Governor Olcott made his way back to his seat, and the chairman of the meeting prepared to declare the day’s business adjourned, but Cameron Morrison, governor of North Carolina interjected, begging the opportunity to follow up on Olcott’s speech. Giving voice to widespread sentiments in the room Morrison admitted “I dislike to talk about this because it is a very delicate subject.” Yet the North Carolinian felt compelled to vocalize his disagreement with Governor Olcott’s speech, noting that while he was officially opposed to the Klan “it’s membership within my state is as of good citizenship as reside in the state [SIC].” Rejecting Olcott’s call to action, Morrison declared, “We’re not going to stop this thing by unwise and rash efforts; we can’t do it.”

As a stream of debate began between those gathered, Morrison waved off attempts to trap him in his own logic. “The Governor in Oregon can fight it in his own way,” Morrison announced, but “I think we have arrangements in North Carolina that if they commit any such atrocities as you gentlemen say that they commit in your states, we will put them in the penitentiary and let them stay there.” As the discussion became frenzied, Governor Olcott spoke up “That is what I have been trying to do.”

The heated debate continued, but the governor from Oregon had no more to contribute. Nothing else could capture the reality of his struggle against the Klan. The simple sentence carried the weight of a two-year battle, one that had swept

Governor Olcott from office and forever changed both his Oregon home and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Oregon's Ku Klux Klan, long forgotten by most, serves as a microcosm to understand the prevailing social sentiments that existed in United States during the 1920s. While Americans celebrated the end of World War I, most understood that the Great War had profoundly changed life in the United States. The economic stimulus injected by the war facilitated the rise to prosperity of numerous middle class Americans, and when the conflict ended, most found themselves vaulted back to pre-war conditions, deeply resenting their fall from success. Throughout the decade social tensions existed alongside economic depression, as nativist sentiments fueled by the war led citizens to lash out against the nation's immigrant population, as well as ethnic and religious minorities.

The Ku Klux Klan, reincarnated by William Simmons in 1915, served to vocalize the frustration and fears of a population confronted by economic and social upheaval. Differing from its predecessor, the keystone of the Second Klan was the promotion of one hundred percent Americanism, rather than white supremacy. The expansion of the Klan's rhetoric of intolerance to encompass Roman Catholics and Jews, in addition to racial minority groups, points to this broadened focus.

The violence that characterized the first Klan was generally absent in the second, which instead acted as a unifying political and social force for white Protestant citizens. Rarely did the Klan call attention to new issues, instead acting

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<sup>1</sup> Ben W. Olcott, "America Adrift," *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Conference of Governors of the States of the Union*, 14 December 1922.



as a vehicle for disenchanted Anglo-Saxons to voice existing sentiments of discontent and reassert control over a nation overwhelmed by social change and economic distress. The vast majority of Klansmen viewed themselves as community activists, striving to succeed where they believed the government had failed, by promoting Protestant morality and American values. Accordingly, the cause of the new Klan resonated with citizens from coast to coast, in both urban and rural areas.

Oregon, despite experiencing the same economic and social upheaval as the rest of the nation, rendered itself unique among Klan strongholds. In 1859 Oregon became the first state to enter the union with a law that forbade African Americans or anyone of mixed heritage from settling within its borders. The distinction points to the state's long history of racism, which, resulted in a population that was overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and conservative. The Pioneer spirit, revering independence and industriousness above all else, permeated every aspect of Oregon culture, creating a state where citizen' prided themselves on their political activism and progressivism. Oregon's unique political culture manifested itself in its system of initiative and referendum, widely known as the Oregon system, which allowed residents unprecedented influence over state legislation.

The nativist trends experienced nationally coupled with Oregon's peculiarities facilitated the Klan's meteoric rise to power in the state, the apex of which came in the 1922 election. The Invisible Empire's influence over the election was such that when the 1923 Oregon legislature convened for the first time Klan backed candidates enjoyed a majority, electing proud Klansmen, K.K.

Kubli as Speaker of the House. More notable was the fact that the legislature, overwhelmingly Republican in accordance with national trends, now answered to a Democratic governor. He, too, owed his office to the Invisible Empire. The most impressive victory however came in the passage of the Compulsory Education Bill, which manifested long percolating animosity towards Roman Catholics and immigrants into law.

The frenzied campaign leading up to the historic November election provoked debates by the candidates themselves as well as their supporters that served to vocalize a spectrum of opinions on contemporary issues. Discussion over the Compulsory Education Bill in particular revealed broader questions plaguing all Americans over the relationship between the state and personal identity. Similarly, the platforms of political candidates, designed to garner votes, articulated the positions that the voters wanted to hear. By contrast, those who stood against the Klan-backed nativist movement, fearing the potential outcomes of the election, were motivated to speak out against these candidates and their political stances, particularly through newspaper editorials. These pieces provide insights into minority opinions provoked by equal contempt for the Klan's surreptitious practices and its nativist platform.

Coincidence played a role in the success of the Klan recruiters such as Luther J. Powell, who upon arriving in Oregon, found a governor considered to be an apt administrator but a poor leader. Formerly Oregon's Secretary of State, Ben Olcott ascended to the governorship following the death of his predecessor. As a man who prided himself on his integrity, Olcott refused to adhere to a partisan

agenda and enjoyed only limited popularity within the state's Republican Party as a result. Aware that he was inheriting executive power over a state facing a terrible economic depression, the new governor did his best to serve the whole of Oregon's population, but could only soften the blow of a problem with national, rather than local origins. Despite possessing a conservative body of beliefs strikingly similar to those professed by the Klan, Olcott lacked the charisma or likability of a traditional politician and it was a simple task for his opponents to scapegoat him for Oregon's problems, thereby turning his constituents against him.

Coincidence likewise lent itself to the Klan's eventual alliance with Walter Pierce, the Democrat who, with Klan support, defeated Olcott in the governor's race. After their first choice candidate, Charles Hall, narrowly lost the Republican nomination to Olcott, the Klan turned to Pierce to win the governorship for the Invisible Empire. To their fortune, Walter Pierce was everything the sitting governor was not. The Democrat's affable personality and relatable background invited Oregon's Republican majority to cross party lines. A lawyer by training and a rancher by trade, Pierce possessed a keen understanding of campaign strategy, tailoring his message to Oregon's diverse demographic groups.

Although the Klan found a staunch opponent in Olcott, the governor inadvertently aided their success. While, as Olcott's Governor's Conference speech implied, the Klan did expand rapidly in Oregon, their rise to power did not occur overnight. The group's swift extension across the state received coverage, both positive and negative, from local newspapers, despite allegations the Governor later made to the contrary. Similarly, various citizens groups implored the

government to take action against the organization during its nascent stage, but to no avail. Correspondence from Olcott demonstrates that he repeatedly rebuffed arguments that the Klan posed a threat to the social harmony of the state and ignored signs of their growing influence. By refusing to act on the issue during 1921, while the organization was still working to gain a foothold in the state, Olcott allowed the Klan to settle into Oregon unimpeded by government resistance.

Even though Ben Olcott eventually took a firm stand against the Klan, at the cost of his own political career, his actions came too late. The governor's famous May 13<sup>th</sup> proclamation condemning the Invisible Empire was issued in response to a series of brutal, though never fatal, lynchings in Southern Oregon. As Olcott would soon learn, the most terrifying aspect of the incidents stemmed not from their violent nature, but that in carrying out the acts the perpetrators, three Medford Klansmen, felt confident that they would never face legal punishment. Their assumption proved correct; by the time their trial date arrived Oregon already belonged to the Klan. Olcott's action, while courageous and necessary, was unable to significantly change the mindset of a constituency whose loyalties had already been decided.

The nature of the event as a political election furnishes a number of primary sources. Given their notability as former governors, the personal papers of Olcott and Pierce have been well preserved. Consisting mainly of personal correspondence and public speeches by the politicians, the collections offer insight into each man's thoughts and beliefs. Contemporary newspapers likewise

demonstrate the prevailing opinions of the time and are valuable as the sources that voters looked to for information.

Previous work in the subject area tends to focus in on a particular person or place related to the time period rather than the election itself. For many years it seems that the eminent source of information on Oregon's Klan was *Forces of Prejudice*, a 1950 masters thesis by Lawrence J. Saalfeld at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. The thesis presents a broad survey of Klan activity in Oregon, from the arrival of recruiters to the group's eventual fall from power. *Forces of Prejudice* served as a foundation for a number of other articles focusing on klaverns in specific Oregon cities and analyzing the local circumstances that aided the Invisible Empire's success in that particular town. Notable examples include Jeff Lalonde's article "Beneath the Hooded Robe," which examines Klan activity in Oregon's Jackson County, and two articles from the anthology *The Invisible Empire in The West*, one by David A. Horowitz on the Klan in La Grande, and another by Eckard V. Toy on Eugene's klavern. While the Klan's political ally Walter Pierce has generally been forgotten, Robert R. McCoy's article "The Paradox of Oregon's Progressive Politics" provides a comprehensive analysis of his life's work. Paula Abrams' book, *Cross Purposes*, which tells the story of the Compulsory Education Bill is the most thorough contribution to the areas surrounding the 1922 election, offering insight into the political campaign as background to the ensuing legal battle over the measure.

This work seeks to provide the context necessary to understand the full implications of Oregon's 1922 elections and in doing so aims to address areas

previously undiscussed in other works. The role of Governor Olcott in particular has received but cursory attention in other works. This thesis utilizes the governor's correspondence and speeches prior to the Klan's arrival in Oregon to present a portrait of his political opinions and generate a context with which to understand his participation in the election. The role of the media in the election is another area that requires more thorough evaluation as well. For example, the work of *Oregon Voter* editor C.C. Chapman is often quoted by historians, yet never explained within the context of his journalistic and political beliefs, thus often altering the connotation of the quote. By drawing on the sole biography of Chapman, a 1953 University of Oregon thesis by Barbara Henderson, and seeking patterns within his own his own writings this work aims to shed new light on the significance that his publication, the *Oregon Voter*, played during the election.

Altogether, Oregon's 1922 election represents the intersection of national trends with local peculiarities, rendering it an ideal lens through which to understand the prevailing social and political climate of both Oregon and the United States during the 1920s. The nature of the event as a political election furnishes a number of primary sources, from the personal correspondence of the candidates whose records have been well preserved, to the newspapers that voters looked to for information. In studying them one garners insight into an episode that begged questions whose answers continue to define the social and political beliefs of not only Oregonians, but all Americans.

## Chapter 1: The Intersection

“The great problem in life for the common people now is how to make ends meet.”

-C.R. Wade, Coos County, OR, 1922

On a wintry Thanksgiving evening in 1915, 17 men trudged their way up Stone Mountain. There at the top of the peak they burned a cross into the ground, stoking the fire so that it could be seen in Atlanta, ten miles away. The symbol had little meaning yet for most of the world, but it soon would, for there by the light of the flames, the men gathered around their leader, William J. Simmons, to hear him proclaim the birth of the second KKK.

The image of the burning cross stemmed not from the rhetoric of the first Klan, but from D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth Of A Nation*. The film, which depicted the first Ku Klux Klan as the heroes of the South, stirred widespread controversy and led the NAACP to campaign for a ban on its showing.<sup>2</sup> Yet many white Americans eagerly flocked to view it, including Simmons.

Griffith’s film deeply resonated with the founder of the Second Klan. The son of an original Klan member, Simmons had long admired the organization which by 1915 claimed only a scant two thousand members concentrated primarily in the south.<sup>3</sup> Like many Americans, he deeply resented the influx of immigrants and the growing influence to members of ethnic, and religious minority groups. Accordingly, Simmons joined most other Georgians in paying

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<sup>2</sup> Kimberley Mangun, *A Force For Change* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2010), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold S.Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan In American Politics* (New York: Haskell House, 1972), 5.

special attention to the case of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory superintendent convicted of killing a white Protestant worker in his employ, Mary Phagan. In August of 1915, after a judge commuted Frank's death sentence to life in prison, a mob of men calling themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan kidnapped Frank from his prison cell and hung him. A number of men responsible for the lynching would join Simmons on Table Mountain the following Thanksgiving.

The Frank lynching as a catalyst for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan points to the broadened rhetoric of the organization's second incarnation. While the first Klan focused its hatred on blacks exclusively, the new Klan also preached anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-immigration. At the heart of the platform was a firm commitment to the dominance of white Anglo-Saxons and their Protestant morals. The styling of this platform as "100% Americanism" indicates a narrow interpretation of the American identity at odds with the modern notion of "the great melting pot" and points to a sense of collective entitlement shared by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants based upon their ethnic and religious heritage. While the first Klan had been a predominantly Southern phenomenon, the Second Klan soon discovered that its platform of "America for Americans" resonated with citizens across the country. Klan membership flourished as Americans from the Midwest and far western states flocked to join its ranks.

The Klan's reactionary populism gave voice to the growing malaise of many Americans in the face of social and economic upheaval. As World War I came to a close the United States witnessed a return to pre-war production levels, and Americans whose business' had flourished amidst the economic boom found



themselves now struggling. This abrupt prosperity, followed by its sudden loss, both confused and angered middle-class Americans. Unable to control over nation's fluctuating economy, citizens instead pointed to social factors as the root of their financial woes. Espousing a belief that America on the most basic level possessed an infallible purity, many middle class Americans cited foreign influence as a principle reason for the nation's problems. As nativist patriotism began to blossom during war time, a growing resentment built towards the United State's burgeoning immigrant population. Likewise, animosity rose against Catholic Church as a result of its foreign Vatican capital and use of Latin in masses.

Thousands of miles away from Stone Mountain, the climate in Oregon exemplified conditions on the national level. Just as in Simmon's Georgia home, Oregonians struggled to find order in the face of rapid economic and social change. Oregon's history of racism and exclusion laws presented an ideal foundation upon which nativist ideologies could take shape. While Oregon, even as a territory, never allowed slavery within its borders, early officials took measures to ensure the state's population would remain predominantly white. In 1844 the territorial government passed an exclusion law, declaring it unlawful for any African American or mulatto to reside within Oregon's borders.<sup>4</sup> Nineteen years later, in 1859, Oregon became the first state admitted to the union with an exclusion law written into its constitution.<sup>5</sup> The state legislature modified the law three years later, allowing African Americans, mulattos, Chinese, and Hawaiians to reside in

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<sup>4</sup> Oregon Department of Education, "Oregon Racial Laws And Events, 1844-1959," <http://www.ode.state.or.us/opportunities/grants/saelp/orraciallaws.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Oregon if they paid a yearly tax of five dollars. Those who failed to pay were pressed into labor for the state at a pay rate of fifty cents a day.<sup>6</sup> Similar attitudes pervaded Oregon politics for the next century. In 1870 Oregon joined seven other states in failing to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted African American men the right to vote.<sup>7</sup>

The ethnic makeup of the state at the time points to Oregon's history of exclusion laws and pronounced racism. People of color, including African Americans, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and Hawaiians, numbered 14,243 or just 1.82 percent of the state's total population.<sup>8</sup> Foreign-born whites accounted for a notable 13.3 percent.<sup>9</sup> However, at 86.7 percent of the population, white native-born citizens overwhelmingly dominated Oregon's population.<sup>10</sup>

Oregon's politics conformed to national trends, reflecting the continued dominance of the Republican Party in the 1920s. Throughout the decade only two major state political offices went to Democrats: Walter Pierce for governor during the 1922 election, and US Congressman Elton Watkins the same year. During the presidential elections of 1920, 1924, and 1928 Democratic candidates failed to carry a single Oregon county.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Oregon distinguished itself its commitment to progressivism. In Oregon, the Protestant work ethic melded with a western commitment to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Oregon eventually ratified the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1959, Oregon's centennial anniversary.

<sup>8</sup> "1921 Census Figures," *The Oregon Voter*, November 5, 1921.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Marsh, *To The Promised Land* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2012), 145.

individualism to create a population deeply critical of large institutions and firm in their belief that committed citizens should wield the power to enact governmental change. The embodiment of this unique attitude can be found in the Oregon System. Passed in 1902 the measure allowed citizens to enact needed laws through ballot initiatives and recall objectionable legislation through referendums. Oregonians, who as a whole tended to harbor conservative morals, used the system to pass prohibition in the state, long before it became a federal law. The realization of women's suffrage in Oregon five years prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment also made possible by the Oregon System, demonstrated Oregon's tendency to spearhead growing political ideas.

These prevailing trends of discontent and nativism in Oregon were in harmony with the Ku Klux Klan's platform. Oregon's unique history of pronounced racism, conservative morals, and political activism rendered the state an ideal location for Klan expansion. Ironically, many of the traits that made Oregon an ideal locale for the Klan were also found in the governor who would famously defy the Invisible Empire.

Like all but one governor before him, Ben W. Olcott was not a native Oregonian. Born in 1891 in Keithsburg, Illinois, Olcott received a degree in business before heading west to Oregon in 1891.<sup>12</sup> Like many migrants to the state, he fell deeply in love with his new home. Looking back on the experience later, as governor, he wrote that the people of Oregon "were different, or seemed

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<sup>12</sup> National Governors Association, "Oregon Governor Ben Olcott," [http://www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/past-governors-bios/page\\_oregon/col2-content/main-content-list/title\\_olcott\\_ben.html](http://www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/past-governors-bios/page_oregon/col2-content/main-content-list/title_olcott_ben.html).

different, from the people of the region I hailed from. They were an open handed, hospitable people, and seemed to have time – or at least took time –to evince a friendly interest in the stranger from without her gates. In short, they made you feel at home.”<sup>13</sup>

In Oregon, Olcott worked a number of odd jobs over the years, but was eventually moved to enter public service at the behest of his close friend, the legendary Oregon governor Oswald West. Although Olcott is remembered today largely as a footnote to the saga of Oregon’s Klan, West remains exalted. His name dominates histories of Oregon in reference to his many notable achievements, such as declaring all state beaches open to the public and his support of the fledgling Oregon System of initiative and referendum. In 1909 West served as the State Land Agent and invited his friend Olcott to accept a position in his office. As a man more at ease with a set of figures to organize than a group of people to lead, Olcott quickly adjusted to the work.

Despite the fact that West was a Democrat and Olcott a Republican, the former asked his old friend to spearhead his 1910 campaign for governor. Upon winning, West appointed Olcott as secretary of state, a position he would continue to hold until 1919. When West’s successor, Republican James Withycombe, died while in office, Olcott ascended to governorship.

From the beginning Olcott’s governorship met with cool reception by many Oregonians, including fellow Republicans. Olcott’s close friendship with Oswald West, widely considered a political radical, served as the primary root of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ben W. Olcott, “Homecoming,” 11 June 1920, Volume 3, Ben W. Olcott Papers, University of Oregon Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene.

misgivings. As the *Oregon Voter* noted in 1919, following James Withycombe's sudden death, Olcott's association with West "occasioned much of the mistrust of Olcott by conservative people throughout the state."<sup>14</sup>

More damaging however, was the fact that at no point in his career did anyone ever consider Ben Olcott a politician in the traditional sense of the word. Priding himself on personal integrity, Olcott refused to make campaign promises he knew he could not keep and believed in making non-partisan appointments based on the merit of a candidate. Although his speeches possessed a candid lyricism which reflected the governor's intelligence, he lacked the panache of an orator and possessed no particular charisma. The *Oregon Voter* was mostly correct in its prediction that Olcott "will be a safe and sane, though not brilliant or meteoric, governor. He will be calm and quiet – never spectacular or sensational."<sup>15</sup>

Yet Olcott's nontraditional personality also served to endear him to some Oregonians. Throughout both of Olcott's victorious political campaigns for reelection to secretary of state, stacks of letters bearing praise and support inundated his home and office. A diverse body of citizens from across the state wrote to Olcott, representing a variety of occupations including county officials, bankers, farmers, and housewives. All pledged their continuing loyalty to Olcott, lauding this commitment to non-partisanship. Many of the letters read very similarly to that of Miss Ora D. Anderson of LaGrande, who wrote to assure Olcott that "the people do appreciate the fact that you have been a Secretary for the

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<sup>14</sup> "Governor Olcott," *Oregon Voter*, 8 March 1919.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

whole people and not for one party alone.”<sup>16</sup> H.C. Abbott, manager of a large Bend hotel concisely summed up the prevailing thoughts of Olcott supporters, declaring “your efficient management as Secretary of State speaks for itself.”<sup>17</sup>

Olcott’s sudden ascendancy to the governorship came during a time of both transition and hardship for Oregon. While the entire state felt the strain of the return to pre-war economic conditions, with an economy centered on agriculture and timber production, those in rural areas bore an unequal share of the adversity. This trend was exemplified by the 1921 tax delinquencies. In Multnomah County, home of urban Portland, the number reached 6 percent, yet the average of all other counties was 12.33 percent, with a state high of 38 percent in Wallowa County.<sup>18</sup> These economic trends fueled a growing fission between urban and rural interests in the state. Oregon’s economic woes became amplified in 1921 when the state witnessed a grave gas shortage and one of the worse droughts in its history.

Amidst these various challenges Olcott maintained beliefs that generally reflected contemporary state and national trends. Many of the pro-American principles that formed the basis of the Klan’s platform manifested themselves not only in Olcott’s speeches, but also his actions as a governor. Despite his famous battle against the Klan, Olcott’s political career was defined primarily by his nativist attitude and conservative morality.

Like other politicians at the time, Ben Olcott professed a staunch nativism. He believed that immigration laws should be rewritten so that “no aliens will be

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<sup>16</sup> Ora D. Anderson to Ben Olcott, 15 May 1916, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>17</sup> H.C. Abbot to Ben Olcott, 30 April 1916, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>18</sup> “Alarming Tax Delinquency,” *Oregon Voter*, 7 January 1922.

permitted to enter our country to live here unless they are of the type that could be absorbed into the melting pot as true blue American citizens,” and that every measure of the law should be used “to deport the disloyals already here.”<sup>19</sup> This attitude most obviously manifested itself in Olcott’s work on what he called “the Japanese question.” In 1921 Olcott wrote to Oregon’s congressional delegation, urging them to join the Californian delegation in calling for “absolute exclusion of Japanese immigration.”<sup>20</sup> The governor concluded his letter by noting his sincere hopes that the “Federal Government will take a strong position in this matter and insist upon rigid exclusion which, I believe, must eventually be the satisfactory solution of this great problem.”<sup>21</sup>

Olcott joined the majority of other Oregonians in asserting that Americans needed to recommit themselves to clean living and proper morals. Throughout his life he advocated for prohibition, making frequent speeches to the anti-saloon league. In a 1919 letter to the older boys of Albany’s YMCA, the new governor implored the young men to “keep your lives clean- - physically, morally, and spiritually.”<sup>22</sup> He noted that “no man is so well equipped to face the world and conquer as he who can look back into the past over a record without a blemish and without a blot upon any page in the book of his life.”<sup>23</sup> Though brief, the letter aptly summarized the commitment to both conservatism and integrity that would define Olcott as a politician.

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<sup>19</sup> Ben Olcott to the New York Herald, Vol 1., Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Ben Olcott to Oregon’s Congressional Delegation, 22 April 1921, Vol.2, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ben Olcott to the Conference of the Older Boys of the YMCA at Albany, 5 December 1919, Vol 1, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

At the heart of Olcott's morality lay a firm and abiding belief in a Supreme Being, whose approval he thought to be necessary for the success of a nation. Although Olcott never espoused an affiliation with a particular Christian denomination, he self-identified as a Protestant, and his wife belonged to the Episcopalian Church.<sup>24</sup> The governor professed his belief in God as a pillar of American society in his 1919 Thanksgiving press release, declaring that the "nation which fails to look to a Supreme being for guidance in its affairs of state as well as in the affairs of its citizens in the home, is a nation destined not long to endure."<sup>25</sup>

Altogether, Olcott's body of beliefs reflected not only the prevailing attitudes of contemporary Americans, but also the platform of the Ku Klux Klan, almost perfectly. The only significant difference came from his failure to highlight the Catholic Church as a subversive influence on American society. This one difference however, would be enough to make the governor the object of Klan hatred and effectively end his political career.

Before the so called "church question" came to define the 1922 election, Olcott existed as an easy target for a frustrated population and groups like the Klan which gave voice to their discontent. His non-traditional path to the governorship meant that his likability had never been tested by trial by fire of a gubernatorial campaign. It is unlikely that before Withycombe's death anyone ever intended Olcott to lead to the Republican Party, for his contemplative and soft-spoken

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<sup>24</sup> Ben W. Olcott, "America Adrift,"

<sup>25</sup> Ben Olcott, Thanksgiving Declaration, 28 November 1919, Volume 2, Ben W. Olcott Papers, University of Oregon Special Collections, University of Oregon (Eugene, OR).



demeanor failed to resonate with scores of citizens searching for order amidst societal and economic uproar. Olcott's background likewise served to isolate him from his constituents, for while the governor made a great show of speaking about the hardships of economic depression, even cancelling his trip to the 1921 Governors Conference in Alaska to save the state money, he failed to demonstrate that he ever personally felt them. <sup>26</sup>

In another time period, a man with Olcott's personality might have flourished in political office, or, more likely, simply served out his term quietly before fading from public memory. Yet the unexpected occurrence that launched Olcott into the governorship, the sudden death of James Withycombe only two months after his reelection, collided with a period of tremendous transition for Oregon, one that surely would have challenged even the strongest of leaders. The arrival of Simmons' reincarnated Klan in Oregon in 1921 would fuel the public unrest already festering, providing an ideal mechanism to voice grievances with both the government and society. This intersection of national, local, and personal circumstances set the stage for a spectacle that would hold the attention of not only Oregonians, but also the entire nation, as the so called Kluxing of Oregon began. <sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ben W. Olcott to Miles C. Riley, 23 July 1921

## Chapter Two: The Outrages In Jackson County

“The time has come to determine whether our government shall maintain it’s orderly way, controlled by the voice of all of the people, or whether it shall be turned over to some secret clique or clan, to be made the tool of invisible forces.”

-Ben Olcott, May 13<sup>th</sup> Proclamation

A number of uncertainties surround the early days of Oregon’s Klan, yet one thing is certain: it was wildly successful. Thanks to the charisma of it’s leaders and an arrival that coincided with the apex of local nativist sentiments, the Klan quickly gained a foothold in Oregon and began amassing power. For Oregonians, membership in the Klan offered both a means of vocalizing frustrations with state government and a failing economy and a range of practical benefits akin to those provided by other fraternal organizations. Although the Klan did meet with opposition from various citizen groups that recognized the divisive potential of the organization, the citizens’ worry long remained unanswered by state government. Only after a series of high profile lynchings in southern Oregon would Governor Olcott be compelled to issue his historic condemnation against the Invisible Empire. However by the time that Olcott began to seriously weigh in, the Klan was already thoroughly entrenched in communities throughout the state, threatening to dispel every voice raised against it.

It is difficult to discern the precise date that the Klan first began recruitment operations in Oregon. While the large klavern in Portland quickly began attracting media attention, the dubious honor of claiming Oregon’s first Klan chapter belongs to the southern metropolis, Medford. Unfortunately records for the Medford klavern have

not survived, but historians generally believe that operations began sometime in January 1921.<sup>28</sup>

Handpicked by Imperial Wizard Simmons to spearhead Northwest recruiting efforts, Luther I Powell arrived in Oregon hoping to make a name for himself. A native of Louisiana, Powell boasted the personality of a salesman. His powers of persuasion proved effective, and recruiting efforts in Oregon quickly took off, with prominent figures, such as the mayor of Medford, openly attending Klan meetings. Following success in Medford, Powell moved on to the major cities of adjacent counties, including Roseburg and Klamath Falls. Most notably, he soon worked his way to Portland, and founded what would become Oregon's largest klavern, eventually boasting nine thousand members.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever Powell's charisma, and however relevant the Klan's platform may have been to the prevailing attitudes of Oregonians, the organization did not always meet with approval during its initial recruiting efforts. Hood River, a small farming town approximately sixty miles east of Portland, serves as a prime example of this fact. Klan recruiters arrived in the community sometime during the summer of 1921, but met with indifference from the local population. While some historians have speculated that the ten dollar membership fee charged by the Klan was simply too steep for the predominantly farmer population, the local paper, the *Hood River News*, chose instead to highlight the superior common sense and moral fabric of local residents.<sup>30</sup> The publication proudly declared, "the community of Hood River county is far too progressive and educated to permit of Star Chamber and Inquisition methods and its

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<sup>28</sup> Jeff LaLande, "Beneath the Hooded Robe," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 83 (April 1992): 42.

<sup>29</sup> Paula Abrams, *Cross Purposes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Mangun, *A Force For Change*, 139.

attendant intolerance and mummerly.”<sup>31</sup> For the newspaper, the Klan’s tendency towards secrecy suggested an ominous nature, one that scorned justice and order. Reducing the organization to a punch line over a series of feature pieces throughout the summer, the weekly paper confidently asserted its belief that there was no reason to “fear that the Ku Klux Klan will ever be strong enough in Oregon to cause any of our law-abiding citizens to lose any sleep.”<sup>32</sup>

However, over the mountain, the rapid expansion of the Portland klavern challenged the small paper’s assertion. The same month that the *Hood River News* sought to dismiss the Klan’s presence in Oregon as a prolonged joke, the *Portland Telegram* featured a photo of local Klan leaders in full regalia posing with prominent figures such as the city’s mayor, the chief of police, and the district attorney for Multnomah County.<sup>33</sup> The following month the *Oregonian*, Portland’s leading newspaper, published a story citing Klan claims that the organization now boasted over eight thousand members throughout the state. Altogether the Klan would eventually claim approximately 20,000 members out of a total population of 750,000.<sup>34</sup>

The surge in membership, particularly in Portland, stemmed largely from the recruiting efforts of Fred Gifford. Eventually ascending to the role of Grand Dragon of Oregon’s Klan, Gifford took pride in recruiting some of the organization’s most prominent members, including Kaspar K. Kubli, eventual Speaker of the Oregon House of Representatives. Although he hailed from Minnesota, Gifford had resided in Oregon

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<sup>31</sup> “Common Sense Will Prevail” *Hood River News*, 5 August 1921.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Paula Abrams, *Cross Purposes*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

since 1888 and understood how to tailor the Klan's message to suit the local climate.<sup>35</sup>

Gifford's background as a line superintendant for Northwestern Electric Company helped him bring "middle-class respectability to the face of the Klan."<sup>36</sup> Gifford's desire to wield power within the Klan quickly forced Luther I Powell to retreat north and found Seattle's Klan. Although his poor leadership served as a major factor in the Oregon Klan's collapse only a few years after its inception, Gifford's short-term recruiting skills found no equal. As one editor noted "the fact that the Public Auditorium of Portland is required to initiate a single class of 1,100 or more applicants for admission into the KKK alone is evidence of his organizing efficiency."<sup>37</sup>

Aside from the persuasiveness of its front men, there was an array of reasons that led Oregonians to join the Klan in large numbers. The organization's platform resonated with the state's population not simply for what it condemned, foreign influence and loose morals, but for what it alleged to promote. As Gifford explained in a 1922 interview with the *Oregon Voter*, one of the Klan's most outspoken opponents, "we are opposed to control of American public affairs by aliens, or by so called Americans whose primary allegiance is to some foreign power. We're not anti-Catholic, or anti-Jew or anti-anything, but pro-American."<sup>38</sup> This seemingly reasonable explanation was espoused by Klansmen as the rationale behind their membership in the organization. Indeed, for the vast majority of Oregon's recruits, life as a Klansmen was a far cry from the violent outrages connected with the organization that came to

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<sup>35</sup> Oregon Historical Society, "Frederick Louis Gifford," [http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical\\_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc\\_ID=449C99C7-1C23-B9D3-68276CECA105A56F](http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc_ID=449C99C7-1C23-B9D3-68276CECA105A56F).

<sup>36</sup> Abrams, *Cross Purposes*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> "Klan Is Busy," *Oregon Voter*, 4 March 1922.

<sup>38</sup> "Gifford, Head of the K.K.K.," *Oregon Voter*, 25 March 1922.

dominate national headlines. Oregon's Klan, with some notable exceptions, tended to be non-violent, and attracted members not only through pro-American ideology, but also a plethora of practical benefits, similar to those offered by other contemporary fraternal organizations.

Membership in the Klan afforded Oregonians a number of economic benefits. One of the most tangible came from the principle of economic klanishness, which referred to the practice of patronizing Klan owned businesses above others. Therefore in a town with a large klavern, a man could guarantee himself a substantial amount of business by counting himself among the Invisible Empire. The phenomenon became more pronounced when competitor businesses were owned by Catholics, Jews, or minorities. Klan membership also provided job protection for men employed by Catholics and Jews. If a Klansman failed to receive a job from such a company or found himself terminated the local klavern "found it easy to accuse the company of religious favoritism."<sup>39</sup>

Like other fraternal orders, the Klan made a show of routinely participating in charity work, often while wearing their full regalia. Just as Klan membership remained limited to the "right" sort of men, the Klan reached out exclusively to what it deemed to be "the worthy poor."<sup>40</sup> White widows and their children tended to be a staple of Klan charity work, but other organizations such as veteran's hospitals also received their attention. It became custom for local Klaverns to routinely collect alms for these "deserving poor." Despite the fact that charity work represented positive public relations for the organization, most Klansmen seemed to

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<sup>39</sup> David A. Horowitz, "Order, Solidarity, and Vigilance: The Ku Klux Klan in La Grande, Oregon," *The Invisible Empire in the West*, ed. Shawn Lay (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 10.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Maclean, *Behind The Mask Of Chivalry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 85.

possess a genuine concern for the wellbeing of their communities. This fact is demonstrated by more understated acts, such as the choice of the La Grande klavern to report a local railroad worker to the county health nurse for failing to provide financial support to children from a previous marriage.<sup>41</sup>

The Klan similarly sought to legitimize itself as a morally righteous organization by fostering close ties with local Protestant churches. The Invisible Empire's staunch Prohibitionist attitude and conservative morals were in keeping with contemporary Protestant teachings. Klan recruiters made a point to reach out to local preachers, often waving their ten-dollar membership fee.<sup>42</sup>

As Oregon's membership flourished local klaverns increasingly advertised their presence within their communities. Klan initiations were frequently open-air affairs, with the result being that between 1921 and 1924 a number of communities, including Portland and Eugene, witnessed great crosses burning on hillsides as hundreds, or even thousands, of men pledged their allegiance to the Invisible Empire.<sup>43</sup> Klansmen likewise participated in parades across the state as both a show of strength and a recruiting effort.

Some citizens, however, viewed the Klan's burgeoning membership and local influence with wary eyes. On August 8 1921 a party of citizens from Springfield submitted a petition to Governor Olcott with the following letter attached:

We, the undersigned citizens of Springfield, believing that a crisis has arisen in the civic affairs of this State, on account of the organization of a branch of the KU KLUX KLAN, which assume for itself extra legal, judicial and plenary powers not granted by the constitution or the laws of the State, hereby wish to express our horror of the cowardly methods

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<sup>41</sup> Horowitz, "Order, Solidarity, and Vigilance," 205.

<sup>42</sup> Maclean, *Behind The Mask of Chivalry*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Mangun, *A Force For Change*, 139.

wont be used by this organization on defenseless people, and do hereby petition you to use your utmost executive powers, by proclamation, martial law or the calling of an extra session of the legislature, if need be, to suppress the activities of this anarchist gang, that the fair name of Oregon may continue unbesmirched by lawless raiders who are trying to hide their guild under the pretense of Americanism; and for the purpose of carrying out this request, we hereby pledge our support to the best of our ability [SIC].<sup>44</sup>

The governor's reply affected an attitude similar to that of the *Hood River News*.

He began by commending the citizens on their active civic involvement, but assured the signers that they had no cause to fret about the Ku Klux Klan "becoming any serious menace to our government." Olcott highlighted his "great faith in the sound sense of the people of our commonwealth" and argued that "our laws and our form of government require no secret associations to assist them in properly functioning for the liberty and happiness of our people."

A mere ten days later the Portland branch of the NAACP sent a similar petition to the governor. The group specifically asked him to prevent "any organization or public demonstration of the said notorious Ku Klux Klan under any pretext whatsoever."<sup>45</sup> Yet the group received a reply identical to the one sent to the citizens of Springfield. These petitions, penned during the Oregon Klan's infancy, point to the fact that Olcott's office received multiple early warnings of the threat posed by the Invisible Empire. The use of form letters by the governor demonstrates his refusal to grant the issue any significant attention, a choice that ultimately amounted to gross negligence.

As 1922 began, Governor Olcott remained resolute in this refusal, even as state officials began to voice their concern. On February 18 Olcott received a letter from C.C. Brower, the district attorney for Klamath County. Brower lambasted Olcott for his

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<sup>44</sup> Petition to Governor Olcott, 8 August 1921, Vol. 4, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>45</sup> Mangun, *A Force For Change*, 140.



failure to help improve “civic conditions” in the county, which he deemed to be “practically INTOLERABLE.”<sup>46</sup> The DA went so far as to implicate the governor for his negligence, asserting that the “damnable conditions heretofore allowed to exist” had in fact been “encouraged to exist by those whose duty it has been to prevent them.” Brower concluded his letter by imploring Olcott to “watch your step.” Olcott’s terse reply put forth equal frustration, observing “when a public official confesses he is unable to cope with the duties imposed upon him he has but one course to pursue, for the benefit of the community and his own self respect.”<sup>47</sup> That benefit, as Olcott made clear through the rest of his letter, was to resign office and make way for someone more capable. Thus Olcott remained silent, ignoring warnings as the Klan’s influence swelled around him.

One of the clearest manifestations of Klan influence in Oregon could be found along the state’s southern border, in Jackson County. Despite being home to Medford, one of Oregon’s largest cities, Jackson County’s economy continued to revolve around agriculture during the 1920s. Although the post-war era saw a surge in Jackson County’s population, the region experienced the same challenges as the rest of the state, including the failure of a prominent local bank in 1921.<sup>48</sup> Harboring a population that was predominantly white and Protestant, the county proved itself to be an especially fertile recruiting ground for the Ku Klux Klan.

Reflective of broader Oregon trends, Jackson County was home to few minorities; therefore Klansmen focused their attention on other issues. Although anti-Catholicism proved a strong draw for many of Medford’s Klansmen, members in

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<sup>46</sup> C.C. Brower to Ben Olcott, 18 February 1922, Vol. 5, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>47</sup> Ben Olcott to C.C. Brower, 1 March 1922, Vol. 5, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Lalande, *Beneath The Hooded Robe*, 44.

Jackson County harbored a particular focus on the moralistic platform of the KKK.<sup>49</sup> As a border county, residents witnessed frequent “bootlegging” of alcohol from California into prohibitionist Oregon. Fed up with what they viewed as inefficiency on the part of law officials, Jackson County citizens lauded the Klan’s drive to address bootlegging and aid law officials in their discovery and punishment of perpetrators.<sup>50</sup> As events would demonstrate, the Klan may have taken punishment for immoral actions into their own hands.

In early April 1922, a group of Medford Klansmen abducted a white piano salesman from Medford, JF Hale, and took him to the far outskirts of town. There they placed a noose around Hale’s neck.<sup>51</sup> Some historians have argued that Hale was then accused of maintaining inappropriate relationships with a number of young local women, but contemporary sources point to a lawsuit brought by Hale against a Klansman regarding an unpaid bill as the reason for his kidnapping.<sup>52</sup> Possibly motivated by a fake heart attack on the part of Hale, the Klansmen eventually drove their victim back into town and dropped him there. Of the three such “necktie parties” carried out by the Klan in Jackson County throughout February and April 1922, the Hale case remains the best known, a fact not surprising given that he was the only white man among the victims.

As the “necktie parties” continued, lead reporting of the issue came from one of the Klan’s most ardent opponents, Robert Ruhl, editor of the *Medford Mail Tribune*. While Klan supporters tended to be longtime residents of Jackson County, deeply

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Marsh, *To The Promised Land*, 148.

<sup>52</sup> Charlie Terrill to Ben Olcott, 14 May 1922, Vol. 4, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

entrenched in both its financial hardships and prejudicial attitudes, Ruhl was a relative newcomer to Medford. The Harvard educated newspaperman arrived in Jackson County in 1911 and preceded to purchase the *Mail Tribune* from another notable Oregon editor, George Putnam. Despite professing progressive republican personal beliefs, Ruhl “stressed his paper’s independent, nonpartisan stand on most issues.” By the time the Klan began its ascent to power in 1921, Ruhl had fully acclimated to life in Jackson County, taking great pride in the city of Medford and the influential status his career afforded him within the community.<sup>53</sup>

From the time he first noted the Klan’s presence in Oregon in 1921, to the group’s final departure years later, Ruhl stood out amongst newspapermen and indeed all citizens as one of the Klan’s most outspoken opponents. While Ruhl’s reporting of issues related to the Klan, including the “necktie parties,” remained unbiased, he utilized editorials as a method of speaking out against the actions of the Klan. A piece published on April 12 1922 entitled “Why” masterfully implied lawlessness on the part of the Klan without rendering a direct accusation, a move that would have guaranteed a public outcry against the editor in the Klan-dominated community.<sup>54</sup> Ruhl likewise insured that the Klan remained a story at all times by publishing pieces regarding the activities of the Klan in other states, particularly nearby California.<sup>55</sup>

Robert Ruhl found a foil in William Phipps, editor of the *Medford Clarion*. Differing from Ruhl in almost every possible way, Phipps spent his childhood in Jackson County witnessing the economic rollercoaster the region faced throughout the

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<sup>53</sup> Lalande, *Beneath The Hooded Robe*, 43.

<sup>54</sup> “Why,” *Medford Mail Tribune*, 12 April 1922.

<sup>55</sup> “Ku Klux Attend California Funeral,” *Medford Mail Tribune*, 22 March 1922.

early twentieth century. The child of active Populists, Phipps harbored political aspirations throughout his life as a Democrat, although they never reached fruition.<sup>56</sup>

While Ruhl fought the Klan, Phipps became a candid supporter, reshaping the *Clarion* to act as an organ for the organization throughout southern Oregon. Phipps took pride in publishing pieces that sang the praises of the Klan and those that harangued the subversive influence of the Catholic Church. Although Phipps' personal views certainly aligned with those of the Klan, his rhetoric likely had economic motivations. While Ruhl endured the loss of both readers and public influence, the *Clarion's* subscriptions soared during the 1920s. The so-called Medford paper war served to vocalize attitudes towards the Klan at both extreme ends of the spectrum, drawing both in-state and national attention to the issue.<sup>57</sup>

Those following the headlines of the cases included the still-silent Governor Olcott. As news of the necktie parties came to light Olcott began his own inquiries into the matter, soliciting help from Jackson County Sheriff Charlie Terrill. In a May 1922 letter, Terrill noted that the lynchings had noticeably affected the climate of the Jackson County community. "Everybody is on their guard looking for something to happen," he wrote.<sup>58</sup> Terrill added his personal fears that the Ku Klux Klan was "a dangerous organization and a menace to public welfare" and that "some innocent person or persons are going to be killed if it is not stopped."<sup>59</sup>

In the face of mounting violence Governor Olcott finally ended his silence, and on May 13 1922 issued a historic proclamation against the Ku Klux Klan.

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<sup>56</sup> Lalande, *Beneath The Hooded Robe*, 46.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Charlie Terrill to Ben Olcott.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

The governor began his proclamation by declaring, “Dangerous forces are insidiously gaining a foothold in Oregon.”<sup>60</sup> Olcott accused the Klan of attempting to “usurp the reigns of government” as well “stirring up fanaticism, race hatred, [and] religious prejudice.” Calling on law enforcement and citizens alike to take a stand against the Klan, Olcott warned that if the Klan menace continued it would not be long before “our wives and daughters will know no safety, our homes will no longer be our castles, and our streets will be the scenes of disgraceful riots.”<sup>61</sup>

Despite the praise Olcott’s proclamation would receive from Klan opponents across the nation, his words ultimately came too late. By 1922 tens of thousands of Oregonians were enjoying the benefits of Klan membership and the opportunities to reshape their local communities in accordance with their conservative morals and economic frustrations. Olcott’s proclamation served to heighten the disconnect between the governor and his frustrated constituents, fueling animosity against him. The action carried particular significance because 1922 found Olcott to be not only a sitting governor, but a candidate for reelection.

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<sup>60</sup> Oregon Historical Society, “Proclamation Against the Ku Klux Klan, 1922,” [http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical\\_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc\\_ID=CC091558-DB15-08CB-583F21043E8F36FF](http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc_ID=CC091558-DB15-08CB-583F21043E8F36FF).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Three: The Primary

“This Church Fight is a bad one and will have to be handled with gloves.”

-G. Johnson, May 21 1922 letter to Walter Pierce

Early 1922 found Oregon’s Democrats searching for a nominee to reclaim the governor’s office from the Republicans. Despite a state membership of only 83, 447 to the Republican’s whopping 215,233 majority, many Democrats remained resolute that the right man could manage a victory.<sup>62</sup> Although a number of men vied for the nomination, it became clear from the outset of election season that Walter Pierce would be the frontrunner.

Pierce’s career before the 1922 election was filled with defeat. Although elected to the Oregon state senate in 1902, he lost his campaign for reelection in 1906. Six years later Pierce secured the Democratic nomination for a US Senate seat, but suffered a loss to former Portland mayor, Henry Lane. A third consecutive defeat came during the 1915 gubernatorial campaign when Pierce endured a sizable defeat to republican James Withycombe. The following year Pierce successfully reclaimed his seat in the state senate, but once more failed to secure reelection for a second term in 1920.<sup>63</sup>

Yet Pierce’s political record failed to convey the degree of power he wielded throughout the state, particularly in eastern Oregon. Rather, his series of defeats reflects a persistent trend of Republican dominance in Oregon throughout the early twentieth

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<sup>62</sup> “Registered Voters in Oregon,” *Oregon Voter*, 2 July 1921.

<sup>63</sup> Oregon Historical Society, “Walter Pierce,”

[http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical\\_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc\\_ID=28131C90-DBB4-A4B2-E4849BFBC38D886A](http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc_ID=28131C90-DBB4-A4B2-E4849BFBC38D886A).

century and Pierce's continuous nomination to major races indicates the favorable standing he enjoyed in his own party. Other state legislators often wrote to him hoping to secure his aid in corralling votes.<sup>64</sup> Even Oswald West reached out to Pierce, seeking to identify and mobilize Democrats who felt a distance from their party. West mailed Pierce packets of party propaganda materials in 1920 and noted that while many would be sent from the Democratic offices in Portland "it was thought advisable to send some to you, as you are a better judge of to whom they should be sent."<sup>65</sup>

This prominence within the Democratic Party stemmed largely from Pierce's involvement with a variety of statewide organizations. Before ascending to the Governorship he helped to found both the Oregon Farmer's Union and the Public Power League, achieving a reputation as an advocate for the state's ranchers and farmers. This prominence in the agriculture community motivated his 1905 appointment to the board of regents for the Oregon Agricultural College, a position he held until 1927.<sup>66</sup>

Despite his distinction, Pierce endured the same economic hardships as the rest of the state during the post-war period. The politician's correspondence files are riddled with letters relating to charitable pledges never fulfilled, such as a 1922 note from *The Democracy* magazine inquiring about a \$35 pledge made in 1918 but never paid, despite three letters of reminder.<sup>67</sup> More seriously, a May 1922 letter from the California Joint Stock Land Bank of San Francisco noted that Pierce's taxes for 1921

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<sup>64</sup> Roy W. Witner to Walter M. Pierce, 20 April 1920, Folder 20, Box 1, Walter M. Pierce Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Oswald West to Walter Pierce, Folder 20, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers, University of Oregon Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene.

<sup>66</sup> Oregon Historical Society, "Walter Pierce."

<sup>67</sup> Publishers of *The Democracy*, Letter to Walter Pierce, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter M. Pierce Papers.

had not yet been paid at the time of writing.<sup>68</sup> Family correspondence too suggests that the Pierces felt the weight of the economic struggles. In a January 1922 letter, his daughter Helen, who resided in New York, expressed her pleasure that her father was finally “speaking very hopefully about the ranch” and asked if her father thought they were “coming out of the depression we had last year.”<sup>69</sup>

In light of these financial struggles, it is not surprising that Pierce’s gubernatorial platform revolved around the need for reductions of state taxes. The taxes related to Olcott’s various highway expansion projects received the majority of Pierce’s ire. Despite the necessity of the project, many Oregonians, particularly those in the eastern portion of the state, joined Pierce in asserting that Olcott’s administration had allowed engineers to spend exorbitant sums of money to complete the new roads. Such shared experiences formed both the basis of Pierce’s platform and his appeal to voters.<sup>70</sup> For many it seemed that Olcott merely spoke of financial hardships, while Pierce had survived them. These relatable features, coupled with a lawyer’s flare for oration, rendered Pierce a thoroughly likable candidate.

While Walter Pierce demonstrated a clear lead throughout the Democratic primary campaign, the republican race proved to be a contentious one from the outset. Governor Olcott faced five challengers for his party’s nomination, the most serious coming from State Senator Charles Hall. Like Olcott and Pierce, Hall’s birthplace lay across the country in Pennsylvania. He reached Oregon in 1901 and over the next two decades became a successful businessman, founding both a phone

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<sup>68</sup> California Joint Stock Land Bank of San Francisco, Letter to Walter Pierce, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter M Pierce Papers.

<sup>69</sup> Helen Pierce, Letter to Walter Pierce, 24 May 1922, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>70</sup> William Thomas Phy to Walter M. Pierce, 25 November 1921, Folder 21, Box 1, Walter M Pierce Papers.



company and a bank. A resident of coastal Marshfield, Hall was elected to represent Coos and Curry Counties in the Oregon State Senate in 1920.<sup>71</sup>

Hall's gubernatorial platform espoused beliefs similar to those of incumbent Olcott. A loyal advocate of the new highway system while serving in senate, Hall favored the completion of the project with special attention to the market roads that served farmers. A staunch nativist, he opposed ownership of land by persons of Japanese descent.<sup>72</sup> Yet Hall's platform came to be defined by only one issue, on which his opinion differed greatly from that of Governor Olcott: a proposed measure entitled the Compulsory Education Bill.

The School Bill, as it came to be known, sought to curb the societal influence of the Catholic Church by mandating that all children aged sixteen years or younger attend a state operated public school. If enacted parochial institutions, as well all other private schools, would be forced to close their doors. Like all other issues at play in the 1922 election, the School Bill raised questions that transcended Oregon's borders and occupied the national conscience throughout the next two decades.<sup>73</sup>

Originally the brainchild of the Scottish Rite Masons, the bill had its beginnings long before Charles Hall rendered it the key issue of Oregon's gubernatorial campaign. In May 1920, the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite Masons, Southern Jurisdiction, met in Colorado Springs where they adopted an innocuous sounding resolution only 122 words long. As with many nativist creations, the proposal focused its attention on what it sought to promote the "free and compulsory education of the children of our nation in public primary schools," rather than the existing institutions it sought to eradicate. Two

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<sup>71</sup> "Senator Charles Hall," *Medford Mail Tribune*, 2 February 1923.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Abrams, 7.

months later the Oregon Masonic Grand Lodge ratified the resolution, but little political action actually came as a result.<sup>74</sup>

It is possible that Oregon's Masons chose to shelve the issue of compulsory education after witnessing a nearly identical measure fail to pass in Michigan. Throughout the early twentieth century large numbers of immigrants flooded into that state, seeking work in the factories of Detroit. As a local nativist movement began to gain momentum, its leaders worked to place the question of compulsory education on the ballot. In November 1920 the voters of Michigan took to the polls to voice their opinion on the matter. Despite the fact that the proposed measure failed by a vote 610,699 to 353,818, the large number of votes it did receive pointed to growing nativist fervor throughout the state.<sup>75</sup>

The question of compulsory education encompassed broader issues regarding the relationship between state and personal identity that plagued Americans across the country. In all parts of the United States, citizens struggled to balance nativist-fueled desires for assimilation and constitutionally guaranteed liberties such as the freedom of religion. These interests intersected in the children of immigrants. As the American government waged foreign wars, citizens at home looked warily to the children on their streets who bore the rights of Americans but spoke the language of foreigners, and contemplated whether the juvenile's allegiance matched their tongues or their birth certificates. The government, advocates of compulsory education argued, bore a vested interest in ensuring that children were American not only legally, but socially and morally as well.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Abrams, *Cross Purposes*, 26.

These issues captured the attention of an America engulfed in social change. Before Oregon picked up where Michigan left off, “numerous other states - - including California, Texas, Oklahoma, Ohio, Wyoming, Arkansas, Nebraska, and Washington- - considered similar measures.”<sup>76</sup> A testament to the prevalence of the issue comes from the Klan’s inclusion of compulsory education in its national platform. Throughout the twenties, the Second Klan preached “One Flag, One School” from coast to coast to appreciative audiences. Yet nowhere did this goal find greater success than in Oregon.<sup>77</sup>

By virtue of its relatively homogenous population and unique political climate, Oregon represented the ideal location to turn the dream of compulsory education into a reality. As advocates discovered in Michigan, while nativist sentiments ran high in areas with large immigrant populations, opposition to such bills came ready-made. As a far western and predominantly rural state, Oregon had yet to experience an influx of immigrants on par with the industrialized East.<sup>78</sup> Yet the state’s population, politically active and conservative, didn’t need to experience the so-called immigrant menace to begin taking preventative measures. Once advocates of compulsory education had stirred up anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiments, the Oregon System of initiative presented a simple path to placing the issue on the ballot. Oregonians, overwhelmingly white, Protestant, and hostile to change, proved an easy group to win over, a fact Charles Hall, the Klan, and the Masons all realized.

While both the Klan and the Masons advocated for the bill’s passage, the precise relationship between the two groups is difficult to discern. Given that the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Sura Rubenstein, “Roaring With The 1920s”, *The Oregonian*, [http://www.oregonlive.com/century/1920\\_intro.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/century/1920_intro.html).

<sup>78</sup> “1921 Census Figures,” *The Oregon Voter*, 5 November 1921.

majority of Klansman belonged to at least one other fraternal organization the two certainly shared a number of members. Yet in June 1922 the National Trestle Board of the Freemasons publicly condemned the Klan stating that the beliefs of “the Ku Klux Klan absolutely subverts everything that Masons are taught as their first and highest duties.”<sup>79</sup>

Much like William Phipps’ support of the Klan, Hall’s endorsement of the School Bill certainly reflected his anti-papal attitude, but more importantly, it generated practical personal benefits. By campaigning upon an anti-Catholic platform, Hall effectively styled himself as the Klan and Mason candidate. When Olcott revealed that he opposed the School Bill it became an easy task to portray the governor as pro-Catholic, and therefore pro-subversive-foreign-influence, despite his strong nativist beliefs. Olcott’s official proclamation against the Klan, which came a mere eight days before the primary election, likewise served to marshal Klan votes for Senator Hall.

As the Republican Party tore itself apart over the so-called “church question,” Pierce masterfully distanced himself and the Democratic Party from the issue. Pierce’s chosen vehicle for this feat was a questionnaire issued by the state’s largest newspaper, the *Morning Oregonian*, to all gubernatorial candidates before the primary. The survey sought to illicit the opinions of candidates on the major issues of campaign thus far, including the School Bill. In a brilliant political stroke, Pierce elected not to pen responses to the individual questions, but to submit just one letter consisting of only two paragraphs. “As a farmer and stock raiser,” he began, “I know the desperate situation confronting those engaged in these base industries, and I hold that the paramount and only issue at this time is the reduction of taxes.” In his second paragraph, the candidate

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<sup>79</sup> “Official Organ of Masonry Condemns the Ku Klux Klan,” *Medford Mail Tribune*, 9 June 1922.

turned his attention to the Republicans. Pierce argued that he did not understand why as a Democrat he “should be asked to take part in the great split in the Republican Party.” He went on to condemn the Republican Party’s leaders for their not paying enough attention to tax reduction and their choice to replace the topic with “extraneous issues, which create hatred, passion and feuds in communities.” Pierce concluded his letter with a direct appeal to voters, stating that the only endorsement he sought came from “those who believe as I do that government should be simplified and taxes be lowered.”

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Following the publication of his response, letters of praise poured into Pierce’s La Grande home, commending the candidate for his tactful political maneuver. Donald Young, a Eugene attorney, noted “Some of the Democrats here thought that the *Oregonian* deliberately staged the affair to get an expression from you and we are glad that you did not fall for it.”<sup>81</sup> Many correspondents urged Pierce to hold his stance, or rather lack thereof, throughout the election. In this vain the superintendent of schools for Dallas, Oregon, R.R. Turner, informed Pierce that he would be in good shape if he continued to “refuse to recognize this fanaticism – on one side or the other – as anything except a fanatical fight within the Republican Party.”<sup>82</sup> In the span of two paragraphs Pierce successfully styled himself as the people’s candidate, made a travesty of the Republicans, and most importantly, failed to illuminate his position on the School Bill. The answer to that question would have to wait until after the primary.

As the May 20 primary approached, widespread speculation circulated regarding whether or not Senator Hall and his body of Klan supporters would be strong enough to

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<sup>80</sup> Walter Pierce to the *Morning Oregonian*, 15 May 1922, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>81</sup> Donald Young to Walter Pierce, 17 May 1922, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>82</sup> R.R. Turner to Walter Pierce, 22 May 1922, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

defeat incumbent Olcott. Democrats argued among themselves regarding which of the two Republicans would make the easier opponent for presumed nominee Pierce. Yet the debates rarely became too heated, for in the end most gleefully concluded “no matter how rotten or weak the damn Democrat may be he will be elected on account of the greatest religious split which the Republican party has seen perhaps in the history of the state.”<sup>83</sup> Despite the fact that “every Catholic [was] working his head off for Olcott” it remained to be seen if their support could measure up to that of the Klan, and Oregon braced itself for the most contentious election in state history.<sup>84</sup>

Following election day no one expressed surprise regarding Walter Pierce’s Democratic victory, particularly after his apt handling of the *Morning Oregonian* questionnaire. In a landslide victory Pierce received a total of 42,511 votes. His closest opponent obtained a mere 6,325.<sup>85</sup>

Having secured his nomination, Walter Pierce settled in with the rest of the state to watch the saga of the Republican primary play out, as a vote too close to call immediately headed into recounts following election day. The ordeal continued for a full two weeks until on June 9 Secretary of State Sam Kozer released what he deemed to be semi-official returns. If the primary campaign had not sufficiently demonstrated the disunity within Oregon’s Republican party then the voting results did. Ultimately, Governor Olcott received 43,032 votes to Senator Hall’s 42,511, securing him the Republican nomination by a mere 521 votes.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Robert E. Smith to Walter Pierce, 25 March 1922, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> “Election Results,” *Oregon Voter*, 24 June 1922.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Senator Hall, however, and the political forces behind him, refused to accept defeat so easily. As rumors of voter fraud perpetrated by Catholic supporters of Olcott ran rampant, the Hall campaign launched into a carefully calculated recall movement. The state senator requested recalls only in those counties where Olcott had carried a majority, looking for fault only in places where he disagreed with the outcome. The move forced Olcott to make his own requests and finance recounts in those precincts that leaned towards Hall to stem the possibility of a partial recount, yet Hall had “a heavy advantage as contestant, as he [was] amply provided with Ku Klux Klan funds.”<sup>87</sup> As the recount movement dragged on into August it became clear that Hall’s campaign was correct in its assertion that fraud had been carried out – just not by the Olcott campaign. After the discovery of blatant voter fraud by Hall’s supporters in multiple precincts, the campaign found that its “appetite for recount was suddenly, amply, abundantly, satisfied. [SIC]”<sup>88</sup>

As Senator Hall entertained the idea of running as an independent candidate, confusion engulfed both political parties. The continued viability of Hall as a candidate seemed woefully unlikely. As a correspondent of Pierce’s accurately summed up “Under present conditions, and at this time, I doubt if anyone can forecast the result in November.”<sup>89</sup> Oregonians on both sides of the aisle anxiously waited for an answer to the same question: what would the Ku Klux Klan do now?

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<sup>87</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 22 July 1922.

<sup>88</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 19 August 1922.

<sup>89</sup> EJ Adams to Walter Pierce, 31 May 1922, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

## Chapter Four: The General Election

“Our democratic form of government is strong enough to care for itself by its own great weapon – the ballot box.”

-Governor Olcott, 1919

Although Walter Pierce became the recipient of Klan support, historians have long speculated about the exact nature of his relationship with the organization. If Pierce himself ever wore the hood then it was a carefully guarded secret, for no conclusive piece of evidence suggesting that he was more than an honorary member has ever surfaced. It is notable that the Klan records for La Grande, Pierce’s place of residence, remain fairly intact and make no mention of the future governor in their membership rosters.

Nevertheless, Pierce’s personal correspondence throughout 1922 is saturated with references to the Klan. Some of Pierce’s contacts offer only cursory observations on the activities of the Invisible Empire. For example, C.B. McConnel, an attorney from rural Burns, noted in a July 26, 1922, letter that “a party from Portland attempted to organize a KKK here last week but met with no encouragement,” for everyone was “busy in the hay field.”<sup>90</sup> Others put forth straightforward critiques of the group. One Marshfield correspondent professed an acute suspicion of all Klan members and argued that while he was “willing to say Amen to the slogan ‘America for Americans’” the task needed to be accomplished through “legislation and not by secret conclaves and masked faces.”<sup>91</sup> The letters demonstrate that if Pierce did have a close affiliation with the Klan it was not known to all he corresponded with.

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<sup>90</sup> CB McConnel Walter Pierce, 26 July 1922, Folder 24, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>91</sup> Letter to Walter Pierce, 18 May 1923, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.



Other pieces of Pierce's correspondence, however, demonstrate that at the very least Pierce and those close to him sought the Klan's endorsement. Letters from a friend of the candidate in Marshfield illustrate a concern over the possibility of Hall running as an "Independent Klux candidate."<sup>92</sup> In response a band of local Pierce advocates sought to win over Hall's body of supporters, most of them Klan members, pledging "we will be on the job from now until...November and what may be done for you will be done without fear."<sup>93</sup> A.W. Cauthorn, a frequent correspondent of the governor employed by Salem's newspaper, *The Oregon Journal*, summed up the attitude of many Pierce supporters succinctly: "We must get the KKK vote some way."

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Certainly it was no coincidence that Pierce chose the period following Hall's defeat to break his silence on the so-called "church question." As the *Corvallis Gazette Times* caustically declared during the recount saga "That awful silence you hear in Eastern Oregon- that's Walter Pierce waiting for the official count of Hall and Olcott before he announces if he is a Ku Kluxer or an anti-KuKluxer."<sup>95</sup> When the verdict finally came, few were surprised to discover the former to be true.

On September third Pierce released a statement proclaiming his support for the cause of compulsory education. True to form, Pierce insisted in the statement that taxation remained the only significant issue of the election. Yet the piece emphasized religion, including the candidate's own beliefs, unknown to his previous campaign remarks. "I am a Protestant," Walter Pierce bluntly declared, "the ninth generation in

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<sup>92</sup> Letter to Walter Pierce, 25 May 1923, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> A.W. Cauthorn, Letter to Walter Pierce, 25 May 1923, Letter to Walter Pierce, 18 May 1923, Folder 22, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>95</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 3 June 1922.

America. Every one of my ancestors has been a Protestant for over 300 years. My wife and all her relatives are Protestants.”<sup>96</sup> His silence on the matter had helped to win Pierce the primary, and now many speculated, his support of the Klan backed bill would bring him the governorship.

As election season waged on, this abrupt embrace of the School Bill by Pierce, as well as his murky relationship with the Klan, received scrutiny from media outlets around the state. Now the official Democratic candidate, Pierce came under fire for his personal financial history and voting record in the state senate also came under fire. Leading the charge to impeach the newly pro-School Bill candidate was C.C. Chapman and his weekly publication the *Oregon Voter*.

A notable figure in both Oregon’s political and journalistic circles, Chapman came to Oregon as a young man, arriving in 1904. As tended to be the case with most new residents, he fell deeply in love with the Pacific Northwest. Recognizing Oregon as his new home, Chapman became immediately interested in the political questions before the young state.<sup>97</sup>

Even early in his lifetime, Chapman’s interest in public policy manifested itself in action. After personally lobbying legendary Oregon Governor Oswald West to recant an initial veto and pass legislation creating a State Immigration Commission in 1911, Chapman received an appointment from West to serve as an immigration agent, working to attract settlers to the state. Chapman served in the position for five years before the law creating the office was repealed, but the success of his work is at least partially reflected in the one hundred thousand residents who came to Oregon between

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<sup>96</sup> Abrams, *Cross Purposes*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Barbara J. Henderson, “C.C. Chapman and *The Oregon Voter*: A Study in Political Influence,” M.A. Thesis (University of Oregon, 1953), 51.

1910 and 1920.<sup>98</sup> Not to be dissuaded from involvement with the public sector, Chapman turned then to the pursuit of a lifelong dream, a political publication of his own.

Even at the apex of print media, the *Oregon Voter* distinguished itself as a unique publication. Chapman styled the *Voter* as the “magazine of citizenship- for busy men and women.”<sup>99</sup> Appearing as a particularly thick pamphlet rather than a magazine, the *Voter* came out each Friday. Although it’s circulation numbers never competed with any of the state’s major papers, the *Voter*’s readership included a high number of law makers and citizens who considered themselves to be particularly involved with local politics.<sup>100</sup>

While Chapman took pride in publishing information regarding all manner of voting returns, census data, and other relevant statistics, the *Voter* unabashedly represented his personal opinions. Chapman’s personal conservatism evidenced itself in all aspects of the *Voter*, from his regular endorsements of Republican candidates to his lamentation of poor censorship in movies. If the editor disagreed with a vote by a state legislator or felt a certain issue was not receiving the political attention it deserved then his readers would know about it. Chapman’s beliefs even spilled over the column borders and into the advertisements, for the ardent prohibitionist refused to sell commercial space to alcohol or tobacco companies.<sup>101</sup>

Yet despite his political frankness, C.C. Chapman believed in giving the other side a fair chance to voice their beliefs. No matter whom he intended to endorse,

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<sup>98</sup> Henderson, “C.C. Chapman,” 58.

<sup>99</sup> The slogan appeared on the index page of every issue of the publication.

<sup>100</sup> Henderson, “C.C. Chapman,” 64.

<sup>101</sup> Henderson, “C.C. Chapman,” 69.

Chapman published the full platform of every candidate mentioned in his publication without fail. When asked about his choice to do so, Chapman explained that “to the discerning reader who scans between the lines [platforms] yield much information as to the strong and weak characteristics of the candidates,” and that more importantly many a man “writes himself an ass.”<sup>102</sup> The editor frequently solicited opinions from the best-informed advocates on both sides of an issue to present to his readers.

Given the *Voter*'s status as a politically focused publication it was unsurprising that the magazine would dedicate a sizable amount of its column space throughout the 1920s to the Klan, Oregon's driving political force. This special interest in the Invisible Empire, coupled with Chapman's dedication to providing equitable coverage of political issues, renders the *Oregon Voter* an especially rich source of information regarding Klan activity. While other editors sought to remain silent, sometimes out of fear of Klan retribution and sometimes out of solidarity with the Invisible Empire, Chapman recognized the significance of the events transpiring around him. As the tumultuous 1922 election season began, the editor sagely predicted that it would “be a mistake to fail to attach importance to various agitations that have been set in motion by the Ku Klux Klan in Portland.”<sup>103</sup> Possessing a clear comprehension of Klan motivations, Chapman deemed it “a strong organization, determined in character, that is intent upon running several people out of office and upon electing people who are satisfactory to its own peculiar standard.”<sup>104</sup> So as many of his peers maintained editorial silence, Chapman began unflinchingly honest coverage of Klan activities.

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<sup>102</sup> Henderson, “C.C. Chapman,” 76.

<sup>103</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 21 January 1922.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the fact that he would become one of the Invisible Empire's most outspoken critics, his equitable approach to journalism manifested itself throughout Chapman's coverage of Klan activity. As rumors of Klan political activity circled throughout Oregon's journalistic circles, Chapman took his questions straight to the source. The March 1922 interview with Fred Gifford published by the *Oregon Voter* remains the clearest public articulation by Gifford regarding the political aspirations of the Klan. The editor's portrayed the Exalted Cyclops in a positive light, deeming Gifford "a pleasant man to meet," who "radiates a spirit of sincerity, and evidently is very much in earnest, believing he is performing a high patriotic duty to his country in promoting the Ku Klux idea."<sup>105</sup> Despite the disdain evidenced by Chapman's snide side comments, such as "we frankly told [Mr. Gifford] we disagreed with pretty much all of his program and regarded his organization as a menace to Americanism," the editor allowed the political boss' message to speak for itself.<sup>106</sup>

As Walter Pierce preached decreased taxes throughout the state, C.C. Chapman sought to impeach the politician's credibility by making the former state senator's voting record the subject of many feature stories. Chapman asserted that dramatic campaign tactics such as tearing a campaign bill in two before an audience while speaking "eloquent and sobful words which carefully avoid definite commitment" served to create the false impression that "if elected governor Pierce can cut taxes in half."<sup>107</sup> In point of fact, "Mr. Pierce voted for all the measures that contributed most to increasing state taxes and introduced more of those same measures than any other

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<sup>105</sup> "Gifford, Head of the K.K.K.," *Oregon Voter*, 25 March 1922.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> "Tearing the Tax Bill in Two," *Oregon Voter*, 7 October 1922.

member of the legislature.”<sup>108</sup> Chapman sought to highlight this truth by making Pierce’s voting record the subject of numerous feature pieces throughout the campaign season. Chapman’s commitment to publishing Pierce’s checkered voting record assured that the issue continued to be a topic of conversation throughout the campaign.

The *Voter* similarly asserted that Pierce had on multiple occasions sought to circumvent state laws during business deals involving land speculation. In particular, an article by C.E. Ingalls, editor of the *Corvallis Gazette* and a leading Oregon Republican, pointed to an instance in 1906 where Pierce successfully bucked a state law that limited farmers to borrowing five thousand dollars at a time. While many farmers throughout the state were forced to wait to receive loans of even one thousand dollars, Pierce, a lawyer by training, made off with a grand total of thirty thousand dollars. Ingalls asserted that by “making dummy sales to relatives and business associates” who could then apply for their own loans, Pierce effectively swindled \$25,000 from fellow farmers whose interests he claimed to hold at heart. Yet, true to the fair spirit of the *Voter*, the article noted that “there was nothing criminal in what Mr. Pierce did,” but declared it relevant to the election on the basis that it “revealed a laity of conscience in financial transactions where his own chance to use public funds was the reward in sight.”<sup>109</sup>

As the question of the School Bill evolved into the paramount issue of the election, the *Voter* detailed the arguments from both sides being placed before Oregonians. Tailoring their arguments to a middle class audience, advocates of the measure misdirected attention from issues of religion by speaking frequently of elitist

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> C.E. Ingalls, *Oregon Voter*, 14 October 1922.

private schools “intended for snobbery.”<sup>110</sup> The argument advanced by supporters of the bill that in public schools children learned “first the lesson of tolerance through association” struck voters as perfectly rational.<sup>111</sup> The measure promised to both break down class barriers in an increasingly stratified society and Americanize the children of immigrants whose loyalties many thought suspect, feats that most found uncontroversial proposals.

Chapman, however, hated the bill and endeavored to alert voters to the targeted bigotry and threat to liberty he believed it represented. The editor continually asserted that although the bill “includes all denominational and private schools in its sweeping abolition” it was “aimed at Catholic parochial schools.”<sup>112</sup> Chapman highlighted numerous flaws in the logic upholding the School Bill, pointing to historical witticisms, such as the fact that no American founding father ever attended a public school, to present day advantages, such as how the continual existence of private schools forced public schools to strive to meet a higher standard. Yet Chapman’s arguments ultimately found their foundation in the constitution. The greater question Chapman declared, was not how to teach the sanctity of American institutions in public schools, but how to promote the “upholding [of] those institutions themselves.”<sup>113</sup> As he pointed out, “One of these institutions is the regard for religious liberty. Another is the toleration for liberty in education.”<sup>114</sup>

Chapman’s outspokenness during the campaign stemmed not only from a distrust of Pierce and the Klan, but also from a sincere belief in the capability of Ben

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<sup>110</sup> “Gifford, Head of the K.K.K.,” *Oregon Voter*, 25 March 1922.

<sup>111</sup> William Wheelright, *Oregon Voter*, 7 October 1922.

<sup>112</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 15 July 1922.

<sup>113</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 4 November 1922.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Olcott to govern. From the time that Olcott ascended to the governorship in 1919, the *Oregon Voter* defended his qualifications, although Chapman also understood that the new governor's understated personality failed to inspire some people. However, as a man with a great disdain for partisanship, the editor placed his faith in the belief that Olcott would "make no changes for political reasons" and govern "for the good of the entire state."<sup>115</sup> As far as Chapman was concerned, Olcott fulfilled these predictions and proved "faithful to the whole people."<sup>116</sup>

The editor aptly asserted that the election would play a pivotal role in defining the future of Oregon not merely politically, but socially as well. Chapman feared that the progressive spirit of Oregon, which had born achievements such as female suffrage, would now be appropriated by sinister forces so that the state would again reclaim the national spotlight as "the only state in the Union which denies parents the fundamental right to choose the school, the teacher, and the methods of educating their children."<sup>117</sup> Speaking to readers in the same tone a preacher might adopt with their congregation, Chapman warned that the results of the election would answer as many questions about the moral character of voters as it would about the state's political trajectory. "Ben W. Olcott is not on trial," Chapman declared, "it is the people of Oregon who are on trial at the coming election."<sup>118</sup> How, the editor marveled, could the people of the state even consider not reelecting man who "has shown repeatedly that at any cost in personal prestige he will stand up for what he believes is right"?<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> "Governor Olcott," *Oregon Voter*, 9 March 1919.

<sup>116</sup> "Oregon On Trial," *Oregon Voter*, 14 October 1922.

<sup>117</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 7 October 1922.

<sup>118</sup> "Oregon On Trial."

<sup>119</sup> "Olcott's Fine Record," *Oregon Voter*, 28 October 1922.



Having broken silence on the Klan issue with his May 13 proclamation condemning the Klan, Governor Olcott continued to assert his opposition to the Invisible Empire, most notably through his removal of RC Ellsworth as the president of the Oregon State Board of Chiropractors. Having heard rumors of the physician's affiliation with the Klan, Olcott dispatched a letter on June 7 asking Ellsworth if the allegations were true, and if so, demanding his resignation. The following day Ellsworth, indeed an active member of his local Klavern, fired back at the governor. In a fervent tirade Ellsworth informed Olcott that he had "never before been advised that it was a crime, as your letter infers, for an American citizen to be a member of an all-American organization." The physician went on to list the tenets of the Klan's platform at length, including a belief in "unqualified allegiance to the Government of the United States," the "promulgation of free public schools," and a "desire for white supremacy in a white man's country," and he insisted that if they were crimes than he was certainly guilty and proud to say so.<sup>120</sup>

The final lines of Ellsworth's letter took aim at Olcott personally. Scathingly he reported that "it is beyond the comprehension of your best friends why a man who was as clean, square, and upstanding as you were when you inherited the gubernatorial chair, could allow himself to be enticed into such a filthy mess of political garbage."<sup>121</sup> The letter, widely circulated, served not only as propaganda for the Klan platform, but also styled Olcott as a politician who let personal feelings effect appointments and whose narrow mindedness threatened Americanism. In a July letter to Pierce, Ellsworth

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<sup>120</sup> R.C. Ellsworth, Letter to Ben Olcott, 8 June 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

proudly boasted, “Ben has admitted to a mutual friend who will not take sides, that my letter to him cost him thousands of votes.”<sup>122</sup>

Following the close of the Republican primary saga Ellsworth was not the only former ally openly antagonistic to Olcott. The bitter primary ripped the Republican Party apart in such a way that it could not be reassembled for the general election. Olcott, already a divisive figure within the party due to his staunch non-partisanship, had further enflamed agitation towards him with his May 13 proclamation. For supporters of the Klan, Olcott’s proclamation seemed “as a libel on the good State of Oregon,” which they deeply resented.<sup>123</sup>

Walter Pierce and the Democrats became increasingly assured of their chances for victory, as letters from around the state illustrated the full extent of the primary’s aftermath. Scores of supporters continuously informed the candidate that it seemed “that in the fall election, party lines are going to be almost eliminated” and that they had “been informed by a number of Republicans that if Olcott is the Republican nominee they will give you their support in November.”<sup>124</sup> Even more joy came from letters direct from Republicans such as J.E. Hunt, a Portland realtor, who wrote to inform Pierce of his unbridled support after Hall’s primary loss and his hope that a Democrat victory could “entirely eliminate both factions in this unseemly scrabble.”<sup>125</sup>

An address to a gathering of Republicans in Eugene on September 9<sup>th</sup> voiced the attitude that Olcott adopted throughout the remainder of the campaign in the face of a party divided against him. Most conspicuously, the address made no explicit mention of

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<sup>122</sup> R.C. Ellsworth, Letter to Walter Pierce, 26 July 1922, Folder 24, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>123</sup> W.T. Miller, Letter to Walter Pierce, 22 May 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> J.E. Hunt, Letter to Walter Pierce, 22 May 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

the Klan, a fact that is unsurprising given wide spread Republican sympathies toward the Invisible Empire. The governor did however acknowledge the upheaval around him, saying “We are caught in the surging tide following a great conflict. There is, and has been, more or less unrest. Shifting scenes, changing conditions, new thoughts, new ideals, all tend towards creating dissatisfaction in the minds of people.” Olcott commended the people of Oregon for making ends meet in the face of morose economic conditions, but spent the majority of his address highlighting his own accomplishments. The governor asserted “there has never been a time in the history of the state when the condition of the institutions has been better.” Perhaps knowing that his audience sat waiting for him to address issues of the campaign, Olcott concluded, “Frankly, I have little more to add. The people of this state are familiar with my record for many years back. By a man’s record he shall be known.”<sup>126</sup>

Pierce, by contrast, possessed with a naturally affable personality, found warm welcomes all along the campaign trail as he told voters precisely what they wanted to hear. The candidate’s grand talk of tax reduction resonated across Oregon, particularly in the state’s rural communities, where voters saw Pierce as one of their own. The Democrat’s correspondence points to the fact that he understood how to stir up nativist sentiments to work in his favor. One correspondent sagely advised, “draping every stand or rostrum you speak from with an American flag. This makes a good impression on the people and it is easy to get up enthusiasm early in the meeting by some reference to the flag.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, Pierce’s success stemmed largely from his understanding of the

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<sup>126</sup> Ben Olcott, Statement Before Republican Meeting at Eugene, 9 September 1922, Vol. 5, Ben W. Olcott Papers.

<sup>127</sup> A.W. Cauthorn, Letter to Walter Pierce, 20 June 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

fact that his campaign didn't need to be particularly anti-Catholic or anti-immigrant, but simply "Pro-American."<sup>128</sup>

The apt advice to play off enthusiasm for the flag came from A.W. Cauthorn, a frequent correspondent of Pierce's, who was employed by the *Oregon Journal*. The letters between the pair point to the fact that Pierce and his allies understood how to utilize networking and specifically targeted messages to garner votes. Even as the saga of the Republican primary began, Cauthorn recognized what the schism in the party could mean for Pierce and informed him that "I am already at the job for you among my advertisers" to win support.<sup>129</sup> In June Pierce sought to further this quest on his own, telling Cauthorn, "I wish to write quite a number of personal letters. I want to send them to people who might be persuaded to vote for me, preferably Republicans, men who are on the fence or men whom you think might be influenced by a letter."<sup>130</sup> While the fallout of the Republican Primary certainly dropped a large number of votes in Pierce's lap by chance, he and his campaign courted a great deal of others with widespread success.

Likewise, the Pierce campaign understood how to target their political message not only on the basis of party affiliation, but also according to gender. Female suffrage had passed in Oregon only ten years prior, and politicians found themselves still struggling to understand how to tailor their campaigns to women. The Democratic National Committee, however, believed it had the answer, urging Pierce to select "a woman's woman" to reach out to female voters, stating, "they understand each other,

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> A.W. Cauthorn to Walter Pierce, 25 May 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>130</sup> Walter Pierce to A.W. Cauthorn, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

and they have different reactions and work habits from men.”<sup>131</sup> Other correspondents similarly encouraged Pierce to “woo the women vote” and take heed that he “had better tell no religious jokes now that women are voting.”<sup>132</sup> The record turnout by female voters in the 1922 election, a key factor in nearly every race, points to the success of Democrats in courting female votes.

After eleven months of grueling and litigious politics, the campaign finally reached its apex on November 7 1922, Election Day. The various controversies surrounding the prior campaign season, eventful to say the least, spurred Oregonians to take to the polls in unprecedented numbers, with over 72 percent voter turnout throughout the state.<sup>133</sup> Having endured appeals to their sensibility from both sides of issues it was time for the people of Oregon to make final decisions. At home and across the country, Americans waited curiously to see if Oregon would again make national history.

The political strength of Oregon’s Klan evidenced itself in the results of local and legislative elections. Every circuit court judge elected in urban Multnomah County won with Klan backing, silencing critics who wrote the Klan off as a rural phenomenon. In the legislature, Klan candidates formed a sizable minority in the senate and a solid majority in the House, with Klansmen K.K. Kubli selected as Speaker for the 1923 session. Klan backing also helped to explain why for the first time in almost a decade, farmers would outnumber lawyers in the legislature, twenty-seven to twenty-four.<sup>134</sup>

The Invisible Empire even managed to buck the national trend of Republican

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<sup>131</sup> Democratic National Committee to Walter Pierce, 20 June 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce.

<sup>132</sup> A.W. Cauthorn to Walter Pierce, 20 June 1922, Folder 23, Box 1, Walter Pierce Papers.

<sup>133</sup> LaLande, *Beneath The Hooded Robe*, 51.

<sup>134</sup> *Oregon Voter*, 18 November 1922.

dominance and send Elton Watkins, a Democrat, to Washington, D.C. to represent Oregon's Third Congressional District.

Opponents of the Klan, particularly Catholics, watched with fear as early returns affirmed that the School Bill would become law. The measure so long discussed nationally finally became reality in Oregon as voters affirmed the proposal by a vote of 52 percent.<sup>135</sup> While the bill passed handily, the number of votes against it pointed to the controversy surrounding it and the lengthy appeals process about to begin, one that would prolong the spectacle of the 1922 election for another three years, carrying the question of the bill's legitimacy all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States.

The dominance of the Klan, of course, also evidenced itself in the most high profile race of the season. As returns from the gubernatorial election began to come in, it quickly became clear that no recount would be necessary. Walter Pierce won the governorship with over 57% of the popular vote, a margin of victory that remains the second highest in state history today.<sup>136</sup> For the first time since 1887, Oregon would have a governor from east of the Cascades.<sup>137</sup>

Ben W. Olcott, having become an object of ire to his constituents for condemning the Ku Klux Klan, proved unable to wage a successful gubernatorial campaign. The election marked the end of his political career. Two months later Olcott moved south to California to begin work as a banker, leaving behind the people who had once made him feel so welcome to dwell in their insidious utopia.

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<sup>135</sup> LaLande, *Beneath The Hooded Robe*, 51.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Marsh, *To The Promised Land*, 155.

## CHAPTER FIVE : THE AFTERMATH

“Whether or not Mr. Pierce should be recalled is a mooted issue. There are those who contend that he is a brake the wheels of progress and should make way for the welfare of Oregon for a more efficient executive. But there are also those who favor letting him muddle along as a rebuke to the people who elected him so that they can enjoy to the fullest the mess they prepared for themselves.”

-George Putnam, 1923

As 1923 began, Oregonians looked to leave the contentious debates of the previous year behind. The questions posed for so long now had clear answers ascribed into law and legislature: Oregon was a Klan state. The Invisible Empire, having fought so long for political control, now unquestionably yielded it. Supporters and opponents of the Klan alike from across America watched to see what they would do with it. The events of 1923 however, would demonstrate the impermanence of the new political order, as Oregonians failed to reap the benefits promised by the campaign and looked warily at the condition of other thoroughly kluxed states.

The March trial of the Medford men accused in the lynching of J.F. Hale showcased the extent of the new political order. After the so called “necktie parties,” the attorneys for the accused requested and received a postponement for the trial. They predicted correctly that the local political landscape, including the judges benches, would appear very differently following the November election.

Their patience was rewarded with the presence of Charles M. Thomas as presiding judge. An early leader in the Medford Klavern, Thomas won his judgeship with the support of his fellow Klansmen. As one of the first people to encourage Pierce

to run for governor, Thomas held a particular affinity for Oregon's new political order.<sup>138</sup>

An assistant state attorney spearheaded the prosecution of the three defendants, charging them with riot. The men, "a former Medford chief of police, a chiropractor-Methodist minister, and a prominent young orchardist," all held status within their community, attracting further attention to the case.<sup>139</sup> Although trial proceedings carried on for two full weeks, the jury needed only forty minutes to deliberate. When they returned, the foreman- the cousin of one of the accused- informed Judge Thomas of their verdict: all three men were found innocent and cleared of charges. The courtroom erupted in gleeful applause as the prosecutor stormed out of the courthouse. Less than a week later the state attorney's office dropped all other cases pertaining to the outrages in Jackson County.<sup>140</sup>

The Klan's presence in both the Democratic and Republican parties rendered challenging the Invisible Empire through political means a practical impossibility. Instead, the most vocal opposition of the Klan following 1922 came from those few newspaper editors who were not dissuaded by threats of retribution and the new political order. Notable among the small but outspoken group were Robert Ruhl of the *Medford Mail Tribune* and C.C. Chapman of the *Oregon Voter*. Throughout 1923, however, the most vociferous impeachment of the Invisible Empire came from George Putnam, editor the *Salem Capital Journal*.

A native New Englander, Putnam came to Oregon in 1907 and was already a seasoned newspapermen when the Klan invaded Oregon in 1921. His journalistic career

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<sup>138</sup> Lalande, *Beneath The Hooded Robe*, 51.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*



in Oregon began in Medford, where he operated the *Mail Tribune* until selling it to Robert Ruhl in 1919. No stranger to controversy, Putnam had spoken out against the Jackson County political machine early in his career, an action that resulted in jail time, physical attacks, and a 1909 court case trying the editor for libel. Not surprisingly, threats of advertisement boycotts from Klansmen failed to intimidate the editor.<sup>141</sup>

Beginning in autumn of 1923 Putnam launched a series of editorials aimed at belittling both Pierce and the Ku Klux Klan, the apparent leaders of Oregon politics. “As governor,” Putnam wrote in a September editorial, “Mr. Pierce has been one great disappointment.”<sup>142</sup> This sentiment found sympathizers around the state, as Oregonians realized that electing a traditional politician brought traditional frustrations: Pierce’s campaign sweeping campaign promises, precisely tailored to the desires of voters, failed to materialize during the 1923 legislative session. Putnam’s tirades against the governor drove the point home, asserting that Pierce “played the utterly unscrupulous demagogue as a candidate, appealing to religious prejudice and arousing class antagonism, capitalizing the unrest that always accompanies financial depression.”<sup>143</sup>

As the realization that the governor’s words had outpaced his abilities sunk in, rumors of a recall movement began to circle around the state. Through both news pieces and editorials Putnam ensured that the rumors remained at the forefront of discussion. Rejoicing in the “poetic justice” of the possibility, Putnam declared that “The recall is the perfect fruit of the fair flower of the Oregon system of simon-pure democracy.”<sup>144</sup> Oregon’s peculiar political climate and referendum system had worked to facilitate the

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<sup>141</sup> Oregon Encyclopedia, “George Putnam,” [http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/putnam\\_george\\_1872\\_1961\\_/#.U3GfKo7R3zI](http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/putnam_george_1872_1961_/#.U3GfKo7R3zI).

<sup>142</sup> “Call of the Recall,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 15 September 1923.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

rise of Pierce and his Klan supporters to power, and now Putnam wrote, it threatened to sweep them from power just as quickly. While skeptical that the rumors would come to fruition, Putnam noted that the simple discussion of the possibility of a recall signaled “a sign of returning sanity” for the state.<sup>145</sup>

The editor showed no remorse in suggesting that Oregonians had lost their minds during the prior election, but rather sought to drive the point home by highlighting the incompetency of Pierce against the integrity of Olcott. Putnam argued that during Governor Pierce’s first nine months in office he “introduced the spoils system into the state institutions” and “demoralized every department he monkeyed with” while “the cost of each to taxpayers has steadily increased.”<sup>146</sup> The politicians “antagonistic attitude” served to “throttle state development, without benefitting anyone.”<sup>147</sup> By contrast, Putnam argued that “Governor Olcott’s courageous move, which cost him reelection, effectually checked the progress of mob law in Oregon at its inception,” preventing the Klan from achieving even higher levels of control over the state.<sup>148</sup> Putnam depicted Olcott as a tragic hero, constantly reminding Oregonians that without the former governor’s actions, conditions in Oregon might have devolved to the levels of anarchy seen in other Klan strongholds.

Putnam likewise published a series of articles on Klan activity in other state, particularly Oklahoma, to demonstrate possible outcomes of Klan political power. While Oregon’s adoration of the Klan garnered disdain both locally and across the country, no one could argue that the extent of the problem remotely compared to the situation in the

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<sup>145</sup> “A Sign of Sanity,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 17 September 1923.

<sup>146</sup> “Call of the Recall,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 15 September 1923.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> “Why Oregon Escapes,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 10 September 1923.

Sooner State. In 1921 one of the worst riots in American history, carried out in Tulsa, had helped to stimulate the rapid growth of Oklahoma's Klan. By 1923 newly elected Governor Jack Walton simultaneously feared and deplored the growing power of the Klan throughout the state. Already unpopular for prior conflicts with state legislators, Walton incurred a full on rebellion against him by declaring martial law first in Okmulgee County, followed by Tulsa County, and eventually the entire state. When Walton attempted to suspend the writ of habeas corpus the state legislature correctly declared him to be in violation of Oklahoma's constitution and convened a grand jury to begin the impeachment process.<sup>149</sup>

While the 1922 Oregon election represented a political uprising, the situation in Oklahoma soon devolved into a literal one. Walton vowed that if necessary he would "arm every man in the state who is opposed to the 'invisible empire'" and when the grand jury attempted to convene, he ordered military units to train machine guns on the courtroom.<sup>150</sup> The ensuing saga was resplendent with ludicrous elements, counting everything from secret spies dispatched by the governor to the absolute censorship of newspapers in sympathy with the Klan. As legislators gathered in October to prepare their case for impeachment, the governor unapologetically declared the body to be an organ of the Klan. "The only thing that surprises me," Walton deadpanned, "is that they have not convened their legislature at night in the whipping pasture, where, in full regalia of masks and robes, in the presence of dragons, Cyclops, goblins, and wizards, they could impeach me in the sanctity of nature's temple that has so often resounded

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<sup>149</sup> Oklahoma Historical Society, "John Calloway Walter (1881-1949)," <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/w/wa014.html>.

<sup>150</sup> "Evidence in Klan Probe Made Public," *Salem Capital Journal*, 21 September 1923.

with cries of agony of tortured victims.”<sup>151</sup> On November 19, Walton joined the ranks of politicians run out of office by the Klan, as the state legislature voted to remove him from office less than a year into his term, making him the shortest serving governor in Oklahoma’s history.<sup>152</sup>

Throughout the saga Putnam prioritized stories pertaining to the situation in Oklahoma, making them front page news nearly every day for two months. For those who could not read between the lines, Putnam vocalized his intentions via his editorial pieces. In a clear articulation of his position, the editor warned Oregonians that “those who went into the Klan from lofty motives and high principles” would find an “object lesson in Oklahoma as to where it is leading them.”<sup>153</sup> Despite the fact that Oregon’s Klan was rarely violent, Putnam succeeded in forging an association between aggressive acts of the group outside of Oregon with local klaverns.

As Oregonians increasingly reached the conclusion that Governor Pierce’s mouth had outpaced his capabilities during campaign season a burgeoning recall movement signaled the impermanence of the new political order. Petitions that circulated throughout the state cited four reasons for the recall:

1. General incapability
2. Failure to fulfill his campaign pledges
3. Failure to reduce taxation and state expenditures as promised in his pre-election stumping tours of the state
4. Introduction of the spoils system into the conduct of state affairs in the appointment of subordinates.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> “Head Kluxer of Oklahoma Applied Lash,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 22 September 1923.

<sup>152</sup> Oklahoma Historical Society, “John Calloway Walton.”

<sup>153</sup> “The Worst Blight,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 27 September 1923.

<sup>154</sup> “Governor Alleged A Failure,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 14 September 1923.

Although ultimately successful, the recall movement claimed over 18,000 signatures for its cause.<sup>155</sup> The discovery that early petitions included large numbers of bogus names called to mind the voter fraud of the previous Republican primary, a fact made more compelling by rumors that the Klan initiated the movement as retribution for Pierce's failure to appoint an adequate number of Klansmen to state positions.

The allegations regarding the Klan's hand in the recall movement pointed to the growing discord in the political machine. As the Oregon's Invisible Empire struggled to assert control over the politicians it had backed the previous year, its leaders fought amongst themselves for control of the organization. Poor leadership by Grand Dragon Fred Gifford, coupled with allegations that the state Klan had become corrupt, contributed to growing resentment towards the organization by Klansmen. Equally dangerous, the lack of new issues to campaign resulted in disinterest in the group whose flashy recruiting tactics had so quickly ensnared Oregonians. There is no precise date for the end of Oregon's second Klan, but after 1923, local klaverns began to receive large numbers of resignations, and minutes for meetings become increasingly limited. Like a sparkler at one of the Invisible Empire's touted Fourth of July parades, Oregon's Klan first attracted attention as a glitzy spectacle; only to spend the rest of its existence fizzling down to nothing.

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<sup>155</sup> "18,600 Names Secured Upon Recall Lists," *Salem Capital Journal*, 26 September 1923.

## Conclusion

In early 2014, Gallup released two polls in their “State of the States” series of note to Oregonians. One list, ranking the most liberal states, found Oregon at the top. Not surprisingly, the other, order states from most religious to least, ranked Oregon at the bottom. The numbers offer insight into the culture of a modern Oregon that seems a world away from the state that elected Walter Pierce and a legislature of Klansmen. Other statistics however, testify to this legacy. Oregon’s 2 percent African American population, as compared to the national 13 percent, and 14 percent Catholic population, as compared to the national 25 percent average, represent the modern aftermath of the state’s history of intolerance.<sup>156</sup> For most Oregonians, who prefer to focus on their pioneer heritage and modern liberalism, the state’s prejudiced legacy is something generally glossed over or all together unknown. The most attention that the uproar of the 1922 Oregon election receives today comes from law students, who are taught every year about a United States Supreme Court case called, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*.

Even before the passage of the Compulsory Education Bill, a group of Oregon Catholics began the task of preparing to try the legality of the measure in court. At the center of the case stood Saint Mary’s Academy, an all girls preparatory school in the heart of downtown Portland run by the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. Having opened it’s doors in 1859, the same year Oregon gained statehood, the order refused to see it’s legacy perish without a fight. Along with Hill Military Academy, a privately operated institution for boys, the Sisters’ representation argued and won their

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<sup>156</sup> United States Census Bureau, “State and County Quick Facts.”

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/41000.html>.

Nancy Haught, “How Many Catholics Are There In The U.S., Oregon?” *The Oregonian*. 7 March 2013. [http://www.oregonlive.com/living/index.ssf/2013/03/how\\_many\\_catholics\\_are\\_there\\_i.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/living/index.ssf/2013/03/how_many_catholics_are_there_i.html).

case before a three-judge panel of the federal district court, which issued an injunction against the act on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1924. While the ruling dominated local headlines and made national news, including the front page of the *New York Times*, few expressed surprise when attorneys for the state submitted a petition of appeal to the United States Supreme Court.

In the Supreme Court case, heard in March of 1925 and decided three months later, the Sisters put forth two constitutional objections to the School Bill. The primary argument Sisters relied upon was a first amendment claim that the measure hindered the free practice of religion. In a secondary claim, almost an afterthought, they also asserted that the School Bill constituted a violation of those property rights protected by the Fourteenth Amendment, since its enactment would limit the order's ability to operate their business.

In a unanimous decision the court found in the school's favor and "soundly rejected the state's claim that assimilation of immigrants constituted a valid political emergency" necessitating the passage of such a law.<sup>157</sup> Omitting discussion of religious freedom, the court homed in on the secondary claim, and for the first time "explicitly held that corporations could claim the protections of the liberty clause of the Fourteenth Amendment."<sup>158</sup> While the uproar in Oregon had been clothed in religious discrimination, Compulsory Education's broader theme of the relationship between the state and personal identity ultimately won the justice's attention.

Eighty-nine years after its conclusion, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* retains contemporary relevance. Although the case bears little name recognition for most

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<sup>157</sup> Abrams, *Cross Purposes*, 198.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

citizens, it's status as a key precedent in the decisions for landmark cases such as *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe v. Wade* indicate the noteworthy role *Pierce* holds in the body of American jurisprudence. As modern incarnations of the state vs. identity question reach the high courts in the form of questions such as gay rights the significance of *Pierce* continues to grow.

Even more than the lower court's decision, the verdict in June 1924 captivated a country witnessing the decline of nativism. Widely heralded as "a triumph for liberty and a defeat for statism," the widespread joy over the decision indicates a nation whose agitation regarding immigrants had begun to subside, as World War I became an increasingly distant memory.<sup>159</sup> Such trends are reflected in the membership figures for the Ku Klux Klan, who in the early twenties claimed near five million members, but only a scant thirty thousand by 1930.<sup>160</sup> As Americans in 1925 celebrated the wisdom of the high court, they shook their heads at the Compulsory Education Bill and the fools who had voted it into law.

Oregonians joined the rest of America in celebrating the verdict. The first decision had spawned a ubiquitous sense of relief as the state began to witness the decline of the Ku Klux Klan's power and a departure from the new political order spawned by the 1922 election. Here too the unease of the post-war period had begun to recede, but even as press and politicians looked for new issues to focus on, all were aware that moving forward, Oregon would carry the scar of it's intolerance and the decisions of voters in the 1922 election.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Public Broadcasting Service, "The Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s." <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/flood-klan/>.



While the nation as a whole dealt with a surge of nativism during the post-war period, the pre-existing social and political conditions in Oregon allowed the Ku Klux Klan to appropriate those sentiments and dramatically restructure that state's political order. From its inception in 1859 Oregon stood out among fellow states, first for its exclusion laws and later for its uncommon system of initiative and referendum. Although Oregonians prided themselves upon the victories wrought by their progressivism, Harvey Scott, an early Oregon settler and founder of the prominent *Oregonian* newspaper, once noted the undesirable reputation Oregon held across the country as a "freak state." Scott succinctly characterized this reputation by declaring Oregon to be "the fool of the family." While nativism and the revitalization of the Ku Klux Klan pushed other states in America to the edge, Oregonians gleefully jumped off, resulting in injuries to the state's reputation that still endure today.

Although the Klan's power began to wane after 1923, the candidate they put in the governor's mansion, Walter M. Pierce, served through 1926. When Pierce sought a second term, Oregonians' frustration over his inefficient governing and their desire to move past their Klan era swept the Democrat from office. Without the political backing of the Ku Klux Klan, he lost the 1926 election to Republican I.L. Patterson by a sizable twelve-point margin.

Pierce's political career following his governorship followed a pattern similar to that of his early endeavors, oscillating between victory and defeat. In 1928 the Democrat waged an unsuccessful campaign for US Congress. However, in 1932 he proved victorious in the same campaign season that ushered Franklin Delano Roosevelt into the White House. While in Congress Pierce became a loyal supporter of the New

Deal. He won a series of reelections until his last career defeat in 1945, returning to Oregon to become involved with the anti-Japanese movement of World War II. In 1954, Walter M. Pierce passed away at age 92 at his Oregon home, leaving behind one of the state's most controversial political legacies.<sup>161</sup>

Ben W. Olcott never held public office again. Despite leaving for California immediately following the end of his term in office, Olcott returned to Oregon in 1924 to serve as director of a Portland bank. Whatever sadness and frustration he felt following the 1922 election, Oregon remained his adopted home. "Chance counts for so much in all of our lives," Olcott noted in a 1921 address to the people of Salem. "I came to Oregon and Portland largely by chance," fondly remembering the day.<sup>162</sup>

"I reached Portland Christmas Day 1891. It was raining that day. I distinctly remember that it rained continuously for several days after. This first rain experience does not add cheer to the stranger, but after the first or second winter of acclimation you would not have it otherwise, even if you could."<sup>163</sup>

Chance brought Ben W. Olcott to Oregon, where an unlikely friendship with a Democrat led the Republican to politics. Far more than chance brought the Ku Klux Klan's success in Oregon, but it was chance that brought Olcott to the governorship to face the Invisible Empire. In another era perhaps the introvert might have fared well in office, but the early 1920s were not such a time. Beset by social and economic struggles they represented a great shift in American culture, of which Olcott became a casualty.

Governor Ben W. Olcott passed away in July 1952 at age 79. He was buried in Salem, at the Mount Crest Abbey Mausoleum. Known as a popular resting place for prominent Oregon figures, the small building already housed the remains of Olcott's

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<sup>161</sup> The Oregon Historical Society, "Walter Pierce."

<sup>162</sup> Olcott, "Homecoming."

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

gubernatorial predecessor, James Withycombe, and his lifelong friend, Oswald West. It would be less than two years before the remains of his successor and political rival, Walter M. Pierce would come to rest there as well. The graves, each small and simple, convey little information about the men and none about their connection to one another. Yet the political conflict that forever united the pair on the pages of history books continues to represent an integral chapter in the history of not only Oregon, but the United States.

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