

KOMMEMORATING THE KU KLUX KLAN

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Pulaski, Tennessee, is the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan, a fact memorialized in a plaque that hangs on the wall of the old courthouse in the center of that town. Drawing on the post-Reconstruction myth of the "lost cause" of the Confederacy, Pulaskians have long celebrated the Klan in their town's history, remembering it as a noble and chivalrous group that saved the South from the ravages of Reconstruction. In recent years however, marches in Pulaski by the current Klan have led many Americans to believe that the Klan commemoration in Pulaski stands not for chivalry but for racism. The negative publicity of these Klan marches has created a problem of cognitive dissonance for Pulaskians, forcing them to rethink such commemoration. Ultimately, the people of Pulaski opted to turn the Klan plaque around so that its inscription now faces the wall and cannot be read. Pulaskians claim this turning of the plaque illustrates both their town's continued allegiance to the Reconstruction Klan and their rejection of the current Klan's racism. We explain Pulaskians' reaction with two prominent approaches to the study of collective memory: the social constructionist view that collective memories are shaped by current concerns and the Durkheimian view that stresses the continuity of collective memories over time.

Beginning in January 1985, the town of Pulaski, Tennessee, found itself the site of a most unwelcome yearly event. In protest of the celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday each January, the Ku Klux Klan staged a "homecoming march" in Pulaski, the site of the original founding of their organization in 1865. The main focus of the Klan marchers was a plaque that commemorated the Klan's initial founding with the following words:

KU KLUX KLAN
ORGANIZED IN THIS,
THE LAW OFFICE OF
JUDGE THOMAS M. JONES,
DECEMBER 24TH, 1865
NAMES OF ORIGINAL ORGANIZERS
CALVIN E. JONES. JOHN B. KENNEDY.
FRANK O. MCCORD. JOHN C. LESTER.
RICHARD R. REED. JAMES R. CROWE.

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Given as a gift to Pulaski by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1917, the plaque was proudly featured in local publications and guidebooks, becoming the centerpiece of Pulaski's historical narrative. Drawing on the "lost cause" conception of the Klan, Pulaskians¹ continued to relish their town's designation as the birthplace of what they considered to be a noble and chivalrous organization that had saved the South during post-Civil War Reconstruction.

With the beginning of the Klan marches in 1985, two groups outside Pulaski focused their attention on the town's Klan commemoration: the Klansmen and the American public. For both groups, the Klan plaque was no longer a marker of post-Civil War chivalry but instead a reminder of current racial tensions confronting US society. The increased attention from outside groups led a new generation of Pulaski townspeople to account for both the historic role of the Klan in their town's history and the admiration that led their great-grandparents' generation to erect a monument to the hooded order.

Two Views of Collective Memory

The story of Pulaski's commemoration of the Klan provides an interesting setting in which to examine the issue of how collective memories change over time. Recent research on this question has coalesced around two different approaches. While we recognize that each approach has various nuances and subtleties associated with it, in the interest of clarity we will highlight only each viewpoint's main emphasis.

One approach views the past as a social construction that is made and remade to reflect society's changing social structures and values. This approach has its roots in the work of George H. Mead (1929) and Maurice Halbwachs (1941; [1950] 1980). It is best expressed by Halbwachs's (1941, p. 7) declaration that "collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past [that] adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present." "Constructionists" further argue that this "memory work" "like any other kind of physical or mental labor, [is] embedded in complex class, gender, and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end" (Gillis 1994, p.3).

In contrast to the constructionist approach stands the belief that collective memory helps a society to "sustain the vitality of [the communities'] beliefs, to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness" (Durkheim [1912] 1965, p. 420). The fundamental argument of this "Durkheimian" approach is that the function of history is community solidarity. In this view, "commemoration must be understood as a model *for* the present society, a 'program' that articulates collective values and provides cognitive, affective, and moral orientation for realizing them" (Schwartz 1997, p. 492).

Despite their differences, both approaches share an emphasis on the positive nature of collective memories. Whether a memory is used to reaffirm existing power relations or to provide communal solidarity, the memory itself must be one that reflects positively on its commemorators. One recent example of this comes from Barry Schwartz's (1997) study of the meaning of Abraham Lincoln in the African American community. Schwartz (1997, p. 491) argues the African American community successfully "fabricated a racial equality champion out of a 'colonizationalist'" by joining Lincoln with African American leaders such as Martin Luther King. In so doing, African Americans make Lincoln's image useful to their community's experience and legitimate the African American community by mak-

ing its goals “seem continuous with [Lincoln’s] values and intentions” (Schwartz 1997, p. 489).

This emphasis on the positive aspects of commemoration begs the question of how “difficult memories” can enter into the historical record. This issue has been dealt with in other contexts, ranging from Germany’s attempts to commemorate its Nazi past (e.g., Koonz 1994; Herf 1997), to Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz’s (1991) examination of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial. One recent attempt to address the issue of difficult memories is Amy Campion and Gary Alan Fine’s (1998) study of Sauk Centre, Minnesota’s, commemoration of Sinclair Lewis. Despite the fact that Lewis’s depiction of Sauk Centre in his book *Main Street* was harshly critical of the town, people in Sauk Centre have used his image both as a tourist attraction and as a marker of communal pride. The key to this transformation was the townspeople’s ability to utilize a series of “neutralization techniques” that recast Sinclair Lewis’s sentiments about Sauk Centre in a more positive light.

Our research into the case of Pulaski’s commemoration of the Klan, while similar to Campion and Fine’s study in its general emphasis on difficult memories, builds on their analysis by examining reactions in Pulaski at two different points in time. This type of comparison is necessary because the image of the Klan has changed over time, from the Confederate “lost cause” portrayal of the Klan as a “chivalrous savior” to the image of “racist bigots” found in discussions of current Klan groups. By looking at Pulaski’s views of the Klan at two different times, we can assess the effect of the changing image of the Klan in US society.

The other advantage of looking at Pulaski’s Klan commemoration over two periods is to see the impact of the existing Klan organizations on the memory of the original Klan. Since the hooded order continues to exist, it is possible that the actions of the current Klan may impact commemorations about its ancestors within Pulaski. This scenario stands in contrast to Lewis’s *Main Street*, which is a static object and, unlike the Klan, cannot actively influence its meaning within Sauk Centre, Minnesota.

The disjunction between negative images of current Klan activities and Pulaskians’ positive beliefs about the Reconstruction Klan have led Pulaskians to a state of “cognitive dissonance” in which they seemingly have two choices. They can either continue to insist that the Klan plaque is a dedication to the Reconstruction Klan’s chivalry or condemn the Klan’s racist bigotry by removing the plaque from the courthouse wall. Pulaski’s dilemma provides an interesting case for examining the approaches to collective memory outlined above. In particular, we seek to determine (1) whether the two seemingly antagonistic views of the Klan can be mutually maintained in Pulaski’s Klan commemoration and (2) what insight, if any, do the above theoretical approaches give us to understanding Pulaskians’ resolution of their dilemma.

Method

To address these issues, we compare mainstream Americans’ opinions of the Ku Klux Klan with images put forth by Pulaskians in describing their Klan commemorative site. We make these comparisons over two periods in the twentieth century: (1) the period of the second Ku Klux Klan (1915–1929) and (2) the period of the current Klan (1954–1997). These periods are noted for high Klan activity, which provides us with the best opportunity to gather information on opinions about the group.

There is one problem inherent in this kind of analysis. Before 1935, we cannot ascertain what the majority of Americans thought about the Klan due to the lack of public opinion polls. Even if we were to interview individuals about their past feelings, these recollections would most likely be colored by present events and images. Thus, for the first historical period (1915–1929), we can examine only opinions written by a small number of people. Our analysis for this time period is based on a variety of materials, including textbooks, newspaper and journal articles, and public opinion surveys from the 1930s that ask people to reflect back on the Klan of the 1920s.

For the period of the current Klan, our task is much easier as there are several public opinion polls asking a variety of questions about the Ku Klux Klan. These public opinion surveys are supplemented with newspaper and journal articles to gain a greater insight into the details of public opinion on the Ku Klux Klan.

KLAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Historians of the Ku Klux Klan generally distinguish between three different Klans in US history. The first Klan existed immediately following the Civil War. This Reconstruction Klan was limited regionally to the South and was organized for the sole purpose of restoring the racial order the region had lost during the Civil War. After the demise of this original Klan in 1871, the Klan did not exist for roughly half a century.

The second Ku Klux Klan was born in 1915 and lasted roughly until 1929, although its decline began sometime in the mid-1920s. Unlike the Reconstruction Klan, the 1920s version used a wide variety of tactics to increase its appeal, ranging from Prohibition enforcement to immigration restriction to promotion of white Protestant Americanism.²

The third Ku Klux Klan made its appearance around the beginning of the civil rights movement and still exists today. Originally started in opposition to civil rights, the current Klans (there are many splinter groups that use the Klan name) still feature racism and anti-Semitism as their primary appeal.³

Despite the obviously negative connotations that all three Klans have engendered, one cultural narrative portrays the Klan in a positive light. Tying the Klan to the lost cause of the Confederacy, white southerners have celebrated the Reconstruction Klan's virtue and chivalry. Pulaski, Tennessee, as the birthplace of the original Klan, has become a focus for this celebration of the hooded order's bravery and honor.

This article examines whether views of the Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, were affected by the US public's views of later Klans. After detailing the lost cause narrative, we will focus on the historical periods of the latter two Klans. We discuss these historical periods separately, first describing Americans' views of the Klan in each and then detailing how Americans' views impacted Pulaski's Klan commemoration.

THE ORIGINAL KLAN AND THE LOST CAUSE

There is abundant historical evidence describing the original Klan as a direct ancestor to today's hooded order, a group whose purpose is to restore white supremacy throughout the South.⁴ While known Klan activities prompted congressional investigations resulting in two acts of Congress aimed at stopping the hooded order, not all groups viewed the Reconstruction Klan in a negative light. Shortly after Reconstruction, the original Klan's legacy was rewritten as part of the southern mythology of the "lost cause".

This myth, which owed its existence primarily to the work of ex-Confederate organizations (e.g. United Confederate Veterans, United Daughters of the Confederacy), portrayed the South during the Civil War as valiant and chivalrous and its soldiers as men who fought against enormous odds to defend and maintain their way of life. Through this honorable cause, “all Confederates automatically became virtuous, all were defenders of the rights of states and individuals . . . all steadfast, all patriotic” (Vandiver 1961, p. 200).

This myth took on religious qualities throughout the South (Wilson 1980) and was described by one southern theologian as “the holy of holies.” Southern holidays, such as the Confederate Memorial Day and the birthday of Robert E. Lee, were celebrated with special church services, and Confederate monuments were erected on the courthouse lawns of southern cities and towns (Grantham 1995; Vandiver 1961). Not content with honoring only local Confederate heroes, “tens of thousands of southerners purchased commemorative coins during the mid-1920’s to finance the sculpting of equestrian images of Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson onto the granite face of Stone Mountain near Atlanta” (Doyal 1996, p. 37).

Although the “lost cause” myth primarily celebrated the Confederate soldier, there were ties between the rebel army and the Reconstruction Klan that made it easy to draw a link to the “lost cause”. The Ku Klux Klan was organized by six ex-Confederate soldiers, the first and only Grand Wizard was former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and the first commander of the United Confederate Veterans in the 1890s, John B. Gordon, was the Grand Dragon of the Georgia Klan. This connection also filtered through the lower ranks of Confederate veterans as it was a natural step for the rank-and-file Confederate soldiers to become rank-and-file Klansmen. One old Confederate veteran’s tombstone illustrates the connection of the Klan with other major southern institutions: “An unreconstructed Johnnie, who never repented, who fought for what he knew to be right from ’61 to ’65 . . . belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, [and was] a deacon in the Baptist Church for forty years” (1980, pp. 112–113). Charles Reagan Wilson (1980, p. 112), historian of the lost cause myth summed up the connection noting, “The Klan was a vital organization of the religion of the Lost Cause. Southerners romanticized it as a chivalrous extension of the Confederacy.”⁵

The lost cause myth was an integral part of the Klan story. Supporters of the lost cause argued that, during Reconstruction, ignorance and corruption dominated politics, the indolence of African Americans hampered the economic system, and crime threatened all parts of white southern society. Into “that wild orgy of corruption, graft, thievery, and lust called Reconstruction” came the savior of the South—the Ku Klux Klan. “Christianity and civilization lay in the balance” said one southern pastor, and the emergence of the Klan was “a desperate attempt to restore good morals and civil order” (Wilson 1980, pp. 110–113).

The southerner who most sensationally explored the relationship between Klan and Confederacy was Thomas Dixon Jr. Drawing on the mythology of the lost cause as well as his own childhood experiences during Reconstruction, Dixon wrote two novels portraying the original Klan as the savior of white civilization. D. W. Griffith made the second of these, simply entitled “The Clansman,” into one of the most popular movies of all time, *The Birth of a Nation*. Response to this film was tremendous. After seeing the film, President Woodrow Wilson exclaimed, “My only regret is that it is all so terribly true” (Divine, Breen, Fredrickson, and Williams 1991, p. 477). Writing in the *Confederate Veteran*, Reverend A. J. Emerson, used the movie as an occasion to reassert the Reconstruction Klan’s worth. He claimed that the Reconstruction Klan “was one of the most remarkable and suc-

cessful armies that ever campaigned in any age or nation. They were good men and true.”⁶ Despite this support, the film had its share of critics. The film was egged in New York City, protested by riots in Boston, and banned in Chicago and St. Louis, the latter city banning it only after public pressure raised by “protesting delegations of Negroes, clergymen, teachers and doctors” (Rumbold 1915, p. 125).

U.S. Views of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan

Like the epic film, the reemergent Klan that it spawned had both supporters and detractors. At its peak in the early 1920s the new Klan had recruited between three and six million members, roughly 8–10 percent of the eligible population⁷. This membership was not limited to the South, as the Klan commanded large followings (and considerable political power) in states as far removed from the Old Confederacy as Indiana, Colorado, and Oregon.

The appeal of the Klan lay in its ability to enter a community and offer itself as a remedy for that community’s social problems. In particular, notes one author, “prohibition enforcement and crime . . . seemed most responsible for the Klan’s great popularity” (Moore 1990, p. 355). A biographer of the Macon, Georgia, Klan describes how these issues were exploited in that town: “Many Maconites felt a sense of frustration over the inability of organized law enforcement to deal with such things as marital infidelity and bootlegging. One cure for such frustration was an . . . appeal to the Ku Klux Klan” (Hux 1972, p. 68).

The Klan was only too happy to take on this role of public protector, waging a war against what it considered to be the undesirable elements in American society. “Bootleggers, marauders, traffickers in vice and other like gentry do not thrive where the Klan exists,” wrote one Klan leader (“Defense of Klan” 1923, p. 19). *Colonel Mayfield’s Weekly*, a Klan paper published in Houston, agreed with this assessment. “It is usually the lawless element that is found working secretly against the Klan” (ibid.).

The Klan’s drive for law and order won support from people not affiliated with the hooded order. Letters reprinted in newspapers around the country praised the Klan for its ability to rid towns of the “rough and tough bootleg element” (USHR, 1921, p. 6) and to discipline both “the men who make mockery of our laws” (“Klan as a National Problem” 1922, p. 13) and “businessmen who neglect their wives” (“Why Kansas Bans” 1922, p. 13). Klan remedies for these misdeeds were seen as “popular and deserved” (“Bibb’s Night Riders” 1923, p. 12), prompting one man to declare, “I am ready to be a Klansman” (“Klan as a National Problem” 1922, p. 13).

Support for the Klan’s war against immorality was not unanimous. Editorials attacked the Klan’s methods of punishing wrongdoers, claiming that “any organization which countenances extra-legal measures enacted by mobs is un-American” (“Quaint Customs” 1922, p. 49)⁸. One citizen of Macon, Georgia, questioned, “Is the United States to go back to star-chamber government-citizens tried in secret and executed in secret?” (“Losing the Fruits” 1923, p. 4).

In addition to its drive for law and order, the 1920s Klan also devoted its energies toward fighting groups it believed were un-American. The most prominent of these were “negroes who . . . can not attain the Anglo-Saxon level . . . [due to] the low mentality of savage ancestors . . . , the evil influence of Jews . . . , and the Catholics who bring with them . . . the illiteracy of Europe” (“Klan’s Challenge” 1923, p. 32). These groups responded to the Klan leader, Imperial Wizard Evans, accusing him of speaking “out of the

TABLE 1 SUPPORT FOR HUGO BLACK, 1937

Questions	Categories	% Y	% N
If a man has been a member of the Ku Klux Klan, should this bar him from serving as a Supreme Court Judge?	Total population	57	43
Should Justice Black resign from the Supreme Court if it is proved that he has been a member of the Ku Klux Klan?	Total population	59	41
	Region		
	New England	66	34
	Middle Atlantic	66	34
	East Central	61	39
	West Central	62	38
	South	35	65
	Mountain	57	43
	Pacific	67	33
	Race		
	African American	82	18

Source: Gallup (1972, p. 70–71).

fullness of his ignorance, not to say like an ass.” Others labeled Evans’s statements as “stale and specious anti-Semitic distortions and libels” or “deliberate, malicious misstatements” (“Klan’s Challenge” 1923, p. 33).

Despite protests of Klan activities the hooded order continued to thrive and began to gain political power. By 1923, at least seventy-five congressional representatives, as well as senators from Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Texas, were said to owe their seats to the Klan.⁹ At the 1924 Democratic National Convention, Klan leaders commanded enough votes to prevent the inclusion of an anti-Klan plank in the party platform, as well as to stop the nomination of the anti-Klan presidential candidate Al Smith.

From this pinnacle of success the Klan’s power deteriorated rapidly after 1925. Through a combination of sex and embezzlement scandals involving Klan leaders and the passage of stricter immigration laws, the Klan lost its hold on popular support.

Although there were no opinion polls on the Klan during the 1920s, the dissension it created in America could be seen a decade later in the contested nomination of Hugo Black for U.S. Supreme Court Justice in 1937. At the time of his nomination, protests began, largely based on the fact that Black was formerly an active member of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. A Gallup poll taken in October 1937 asked Americans if Black’s association with the Klan should disqualify him from public office (Table 1). The results show an almost even split between supporters and detractors of ex-Klansman Black, which seems to be consistent with the general impression that the 1920s Klan was a source of tremendous conflict in American society.

Pulaski’s Grand Knights of the Ku Klux Klan

Pulaski’s formal recognition of the original Klan began on May 1, 1917, amid the public debate over Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* and the second Klan.¹⁰ The impetus behind Pulaski’s commemoration was the donation of a plaque commemorating the Klan’s found-

ing by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC).¹¹ An elaborate program of songs, speeches, and prayers was planned for the unveiling of the plaque on the wall of the old courthouse. It was proposed that the street where the old courthouse stood be renamed "Ku-Klux Avenue" and the hill where larger Klan meetings were held be named "Cyclops Hill" for the purpose of attracting Confederate historical sightseers. "Now, when you come to see us," suggested one citizen, "we will take you from 'Ku-Klux Place' down 'Ku-Klux Avenue' to 'Cyclops Hill'" (Newbill 1917, p. 335).

At the unveiling, a local pastor honored the men "who came from dens and caves in the weird mystery of nightfall to the defense of our rights and homes. The Klan was an army of defense, a safeguard of virtue, and a victory for the right." As the pastor finished, the UDC representative, "Mrs. Grace Meredith Newbill, drew back the Confederate flag which veiled the tablet." Thus, the Klan entered Pulaski's history (Newbill 1917, p. 335).¹² In celebration of the town's connection to the original Klan, the editors of the Pulaski newspaper began to research the history of the hooded order. This history, published in 1924, drew heavily on the myth of the lost cause, and served as the inspiration for later Pulaski histories.

Pulaski's Klan narrative begins with a depiction of their town prior to the Civil War. In these early histories, prewar Pulaski is pictured as an idyllic community that combined "the glory which was Rome and the grandeur which was Greece" (Romine [1924] 1934, p. 2). Physically, the landscape was rich with plantations, while socially "the relation between slave and slave holder . . . was nearly always one of mutual trust, kindness and friendly interest" (Romine [1924] 1934, p. 1).

In contrast to Pulaski's glorious antebellum past stood the horrors of Reconstruction. In words that mirrored the lost cause, Pulaski authors noted that after the war "practically all the white men of the South . . . who survived had not only lost their fortunes but were disfranchised. Nearly all the Southern states were under military government" (Romine [1924] 1934, p. 4). Of special concern was the political power of African Americans, a group of people who were "faithful and reliable servants" but who "as free American citizens . . . , under the combined influence of liquor and evil associates . . . became dangerous savages. Men dared not leave their wives and daughters alone lest they be insulted, or assaulted" (Romine [1924] 1934 pp. 4-5). Together, "the carpetbaggers, scalawags, and a few negroes who would do their bidding, filled practically all the [political] offices. There was such an orgy of extravagant waste of public funds as the county had never known" (Romine [1924] 1934, p. 5).

At this point the Ku Klux Klan was first formed. Despite the devastating conditions in Pulaski, the Klan was not initially conceived of as a means for reasserting white political power. Instead, "the organizers of the new society were out for fun . . . [of] an innocent and harmless variety" (Cohen 1951, p. 19). One version of the Klan's innocent fun has been described:

"one night when the [K]lan sentinel was standing at his post, a young negro man from a nearby farm came along When he saw the white-robed figure . . . he called out in fright: 'Who's that?' . . . the sentinel . . . responded 'I'm a ghost'" (Romine 1924, p. 4). At this point, "the Klan realized that . . . by playing on the superstitions of the negro race to fight this new evil . . . [they could] bring law and order to their beloved Southland" (Cohen 1951, p. 19).

As word of Klan activities in Pulaski became public, other Klan dens organized throughout the South. Pulaski historians asserted that “the membership in these dens comprised the very best and most honorable men in their communities”.¹³ Following the myth of lost cause, Pulaski authors made every attempt to link the Reconstruction Klan with the chivalry of both the antebellum South and the Confederate soldier. In keeping with this honorable lost cause image, they stressed that “the members of the order never resorted to violence save in self-defense” (ibid.). Like good soldiers, the Klan mobilized only when and where “conditions in general called upon the Klan to protect and defend their helpless and disorganized land” (Romine 1924, p. 2).

By 1869, the Klan’s task was completed and following a “soldier’s agreement” between President Ulysses S. Grant and General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest (Klan Grand Wizard), Forrest ordered that the organization be disbanded. “Where it was promulgated, obedience to this order was prompt and explicit and it [ended] the Klan’s existence” (Cohen 1951, p. 23).

With its disbanding, the history of the Reconstruction Klan came to a close, leaving only “the memory of its men, their exalted purposes and dauntless spirit and the principles for which it stood” (Romine [1924] 1934, p. 14). As one Pulaski author summed up lost cause sentiment, “Ask any person whose ancestors lived in the South during that wild nightmare called the Reconstruction . . . and from the light in his eyes it will be easy to see that to him the Klan is clad in shining armor” (Cohen 1951, p. 23).

Americans’ Views of the Third Ku Klux Klan (1965–1997)

Between 1965 and 1997, Pulaski’s Klan commemoration was affected by three trends: decreased support for the modern Klan, increased connection of the modern Klan to the original Klan, and increased public awareness of the Klan plaque in Pulaski.

The first trend actually began following the hooded order’s opposition to the civil rights movement, most notably with the U. S. Supreme Court decision ordering desegregation of schools in 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*). Compared with the violence of the Klan and other white southerners against civil rights, the nonviolent tactics of civil rights protesters appealed to the conscience of middle-class white northerners. As Sarah Evans (1980, p. 60) has written: “The sit-in movement [1960] and the freedom rides [1961] had an electrifying impact on northern liberal culture. The romance and daring of black youth gave progressives an unassailable cause. The good guys seemed so good—Martin Luther King made them sound even better—and the bad guys seemed so horrifyingly bad”.

No doubt one of the major events that shaped the public’s opinion about the hooded order at this time was a probe into Klan activities conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Newspapers across the country reported on the proceedings that ended in February 1966. After listening to eyewitness accounts of Klan beatings, bombings, and murders, HUAC issued their final report. In this document, committee chairman Joe Pool commented that the thirty-five days of hearings “had revealed the Klan’s record to be a record of the activities of sneaky, cowardly men and a record of floggings, beatings, and killings for no other reason than the color of their victim’s skin or the fact that they disapprove of the policies and activities of the Klan” (Facts on File 1966, p. 86). Negative comments of this sort coming from national leaders and being written up daily in the press about the Klan’s campaign against civil rights helped to turn public opinion against the hooded order. As a result, the Klan of the 1960s and 1970s lacked the level of public support for its activities it had had during the 1920s.

TABLE 2. POPULARITY OF THE KU KLUX KLAN BY YEAR

Year	% Favorable	% Unfavorable
1965	10	68
1973	4	79
1975	3	76

Source: IRSS Harris Polls, S1561, S2344, S7490.

The first indicator of this is the level of Klan membership. From a high of roughly 42,000 in the 1960s, Klan membership had declined to 1,500 by the mid-seventies. Despite a brief revival in the early 1980s, Klan membership since the civil rights movement has never come close to equaling its support during the 1960s, averaging somewhere around 5,000 members.¹⁴ This total represents far less than 1 percent of the total native-born white male population, a number that pales when compared with the 8–10 percent of native-born white males who joined the Klan during the 1920s (USBC 1920, p. 963; 1980, p. 22).

Further evidence of the decline of public support for the Klan comes from a series of public opinion polls taken in 1965–1991 (Tables 2–4). Tables 2–4 indicate that, regardless of the question asked, support for the Klan since 1965 is less than the support given to the hooded order in the 1937 opinion poll on Hugo Black.

The second trend in American public opinion on the Klan followed directly from the first. As the public's view of the 1960s Klan became increasingly negative, this view was projected back in time to include the original Klan as well. As one scholar has pointed out:

The popular perception of the Klansman is the image of the southern racial terrorist, the midnight raider with the lash or club in hand and the hangman's noose or shotgun within easy reach—the image, in other words, of the Reconstruction-era Klansman and his descendant who emerged during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s . . . as the self-appointed shock troops of white supremacy, the most radical and dangerous bigots in American society. (Moore 1992, p. 1)

TABLE 3. COMPARISON OF REGIONS IN 1937 AND 1979

Region	% Pro-Klan 1937	% Pro-Klan 1979	% Anti-Klan 1937	% Anti-Klan 1979
East	66	7	34	88
Midwest	61.5	9	38.5	83
South	35	12	65	80
West	62	11	38	79

Note: The Gallup polls changed geographic categories between 1937 and 1979, so we have combined some geographic regions and taken the average to make a comparison. The categories for 1937 are as follows: East = avg. of New England and Mid-Atlantic; Midwest = avg. of East Central and West Central; South = South; and West = avg. of Mountain and Pacific.

Source: Gallup Poll (1972, p. 70; 1979, p. 276).

TABLE 4. ACCEPTANCE OF EX-KLAN MEMBERS IN PUBLIC OFFICE

Year	Position	% Okay to Hold Office	% Not Okay to Hold Office
1937	Supreme Court Justice	43	57
1965	Congress	2	84
1976	Vice President	14	79
1991	David Duke-Governor	15	81

Source: Gallup Poll (1972, p. 70); IRSS, Harris Polls, S1561, S7681, S911204.

Further support for this claim comes from a 1986 assessment of high school students' knowledge of history. Of the roughly 8,000 students who completed the survey, 83.9 percent correctly identified the Ku Klux Klan as an organization that used violence to oppose minorities. This percentage of correct answers was the eleventh highest score of the 141 history questions (Ravitch and Finn 1987, p. 263).

While public support for both past and present Klans was declining, public awareness of Pulaski's Klan commemoration was increasing. Beginning in January 1985, the Klan's yearly visits to Pulaski also brought increased media attention. Publicity of Pulaski's troubles with the Klan peaked in the fall of 1989 when the town was featured in a *USA Today* article and on three national newscasts between October 1989 and January 1990 (VTNA 1989, p. 1706). While this is not intensive media scrutiny, Pulaskians feared the labeling of their town as a haven for white racist groups. Seeking to combat this image, the townspeople renewed their campaign to tell their version of Pulaski's Klan history.

Pulaski: "Their Klan Is Not 'Our Klan'" (1965–1984)

The change in American public perception of the Klan did not go unnoticed in Pulaski, Tennessee. By the mid-1960s, Pulaskians were very concerned that "much adverse publicity directed at the present-day Klan . . . [would lead] many people to take a harsh attitude towards the original Klan" ("Great Organization" 1973, p. 1). Believing this new attitude to be without foundation, Pulaskians set out "to tell more of the goodness of this [original Klan]" in the hope that "true southerners, white and black . . . will relieve themselves of all bitterness they may have developed toward it" (ibid. 1973, p. 1).

In trying to convince Americans that "murder and arson were not invented in Pulaski" (Barker 1965, p. 16), Pulaskians asserted that their Klan was different. Local newspapers claimed that the current Klan was a group of "bigoted racists [who] have endeavored to exploit the name and the heroic service of the original [Klan] organization" (Milstead 1971, p. 4). The truth of the matter, Pulaskians asserted, was that "the only real relation between the two [Klan] organizations is the fact that the 20th century group has usurped the name which, hit upon quite by accident, proved to be clever and easily remembered" (ibid.).

To make their point, Pulaski writers in the 1960s contrasted the modern Klan (as a group that fostered racial hatred across the country) with their Reconstruction Klan that used "brotherly love [to] avert bloodshed between the blacks . . . on the one side and the more astute whites on the other side" ("Great Organization" 1973, p. 1). To attain this goal

of racial harmony, Klan members posed as ghosts and used fear and superstition to keep newly freed slaves in their place.

Believing Klansmen to be ghosts, African Americans would then listen attentively as they were "counseled as to their future behavior" (Solomon 1976, p. 106). This kind of social control gave the Klan the ability to dominate without "all acts of violence—killing, whipping and the like" ("Great Organization" 1973, p. 1). Thus, the hooded order "averted bloodshed, and in our opinion, was one of the greatest peace-minded organizations ever organized in America" (ibid.).

Pulaski Is Not a Racist Town (1985–1997)

The success of Pulaskians' distinction between "our Klan" and "their Klan" allowed the townspeople to distance themselves from the modern Klan's activities until 1985. In January of that year, the Ku Klux Klan began a yearly tradition of marching to the Klan plaque as a way of celebrating their ancestry. These yearly appearances of Klansmen at Pulaski's Klan monument, along with television cameras and newscasters, changed the town's relationship to the hooded order. No longer was distinguishing between "our Klan" and "their Klan" an effective means of defeating negative publicity.

Throughout the nation, articles appeared in newspapers linking the Klan with Pulaski's history.¹⁵ The description of the march offered by a *Los Angeles Times* reporter is typical: "Many of the racists carried Confederate flags and wore klan robes or military-style uniforms bearing Nazi and klan insignia. . . . Racists are attracted to Pulaski, a town of 8,000 about 90 miles south of Nashville, because the Ku Klux Klan was formed there" ("Town Closes" 1989, p. 28).

Other reports, such as the following from the *Washington Post*, focused on the Klan's history: "The Klan began here in 1865, organized by community leaders who were afraid the local government would be turned over to former slaves and northerners. . . . Today, the marchers stopped briefly at Bank's Barber Shop, the place where the Klan held its first meeting, to mark what Richard Butler of the Arian Nation called 'hallowed ground'" (Benedet 1986, p. A23)

Faced with such reports, Pulaskians realized the need to combat the growing negative sentiment toward their town. As one columnist opined, "The Klan problem does not involve race hatred, but rather the perception of race hatred others envision about this community . . . due to the media, especially television coverage of what has come to be annual visitations by the Klan" (Collins 1989, p. A4).

Concerned that their town would be seen as "a hot bed for the Ku Klux Klan" (Collins 1989, p. A4), Pulaskians moved quickly to convince Americans that "Giles County Tennessee [is] a land where black and white residents have lived together, struggled together, and progressed together in harmony with common goals, common problems, and a common faith" ("Society's Resolution" 1989, p. A4).

In making this claim, Pulaskians again turned to their town's history. Part of this history detailed the familiar refrain that the modern-day Klan has nothing to do with Pulaski's original Klan. In recent years Pulaski's newspaper editorials have repeated this assertion so often that it now seems that Pulaskians are genuinely confused about the motives of the modern-day Klansmen. One editorial summed up these sentiments: "But for the history books, Pulaski's original Klan has been buried for 120 years So why doesn't the present-day Klan hold its parades somewhere else?" (Phelps 1989, p. 1).

In addition to this old piece of history, Pulaskians in recent years have also added something new. In order to directly counter television images of Klan marches in their town, Pulaskians have spent a great deal of effort publicizing the town's past of racial harmony. Not only were "Giles County's schools the first in Tennessee to integrate without a court order . . . in 1965" (Mayfield 1989, p. 3A), but they did so without incident. As further signs of their racial progressiveness, Pulaskians are quick to note that their town was also the first in Tennessee to "produce a black city alderman and several black Giles County commissioners" ("Society's Resolution" 1989, p. A4). Pulaskians present these successes as signs that "conditions [in Pulaski] are in sharp contrast to those some non-Giles Countians are misled to imagine" (ibid.).

As a more direct response to the Klan marches, Pulaskians formed a committee called Giles Countians United. This group "convinced local merchants to show their opposition to racism by staying home the Saturday of the proposed [Klan] march" (Spear 1994, p. 1). The highlight of anti-Klan activity in Pulaski came in 1989 when the Klan plaque was turned around so that its inscription was facing the wall. The owner of the old courthouse noted, "I turned [the plaque] around as a symbol that this community turns its back on other signs of prejudice" ("Memento of KKK" 1989, p. 1).

This public relations campaign on the part of Pulaski did have its effect on how the town's battle with the Klan was reported, as several newspaper reports accepted Pulaski's assertion that the current Klan organizations had no legitimate connection to the Reconstruction Klan. A March 19, 1989, *Boston Globe Magazine's* version of the Klan's history, for example, contained two important elements from Pulaski's narrative about the Klan. First, the article acknowledged that the Klan was founded by gentlemen: "It all began in Pulaski, Tennessee, where several Confederate army veterans gathered shortly after the end of the war to organize a social club." Second, the article rejected any association with current Klans by noting, "Leaders of [current] Klan groups formed since the end of World War II deny any links to the old Klan" ("Ask the Globe" 1989, p. 61).

As of 1994, Pulaskians believe they have successfully fought their negative image. According to the town's mayor, "Pulaski's image changed from being that Klan town to being the town that stood up to the hatemongers" (Spear 1994, p. 1). One Pulaski resident adds, "It shows a real spirit of unity. We're trying to keep the Klan out and it's worked. The Klan has not visited Pulaski for over two years" (Williams 1994, p. 1).

While Pulaskians rejoice over the expulsion of the modern Klan from their midst, they still pay homage to its ancestors in local tourist guides. Although slightly altered to appeal to the changing times, this Klan story would still be recognizable to the people who first wrote it seventy-five years ago.

The Ku Klux Klan met for the first time in the law office of Judge Thomas M. Jones . . . all disfranchised Confederate soldiers, they gathered to have a little fun. . . . They practiced their farcical initiations and adopted attire that they found would scare carpetbaggers and Negroes. . . . The modern Klan, which claims Pulaski as its birthplace, was actually born in Atlanta. (Butler 1995, p. 16-17)

CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE PAST IN THE PAST

Earlier in this article, we posed the question of whether Pulaskians can maintain their commemoration of the original Klan while rejecting the racist image of the current Klan.

Pulaski has dealt with its "difficult memory" of the Klan by denying any connection between the post-Civil War Klan and today's Klan. But what does Pulaski's commemoration suggest about the ability of the theoretical approaches discussed above to explain the inclusion of "difficult memories" into its community's narrative?

One way of answering this question is to compare Pulaski's Klan commemoration with Schwartz's description of the changing image of Lincoln and with the case of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, discussed by Campion and Fine. Each case involves an image that changes over time, albeit with some important differences.

In the case of Lincoln, "African Americans made Lincoln a symbol of racial equality by starting with the real man and improving him: 'omitting the inessential and adding whatever was necessary to round out the ideal'" (Schwartz 1997, p. 491). This process of sorting through the historical record to find elements that support one's view is also evident in Pulaski's commemoration of the Klan. The difference is that unlike African Americans' attempts to appropriate Lincoln, Pulaskians are trying to stop the appropriation of the their Klan by others.

When African Americans create their image of Lincoln, they are building on and attempting to change the already existing white community's version. In contrast, Pulaski's townspeople are the original proprietors of their Klan's image, allowing more control and ownership of the image. Pulaskians, then choose to perpetuate their version of the Klan and to keep outsiders, namely Klansmen, from changing the image.

In attempting to deny outsiders a voice, Pulaskians are still forced to respond to what those voices are saying. This observation is consistent with Schwartz's (1997, p. 471) contention that "every new commemorative symbol 'enters a field already occupied. If it is to gain attention, it must do so . . . by entering into a conversation with others.'" Thus, as Pulaskians deny the validity of the current Klan's racist image of their ancestors, they are forced to combat this portrayal directly. Therefore, we see the inclusion of the theme of racial harmony in Pulaski's Klan story, a theme that was wholly ignored in the original dedication of the plaque.

In Sauk Centre, townspeople who were confronted with a negative object, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, changed this object's meaning to reflect a positive image of their town. In Pulaski, townspeople began with a positive object, the Reconstruction Klan, which over time was made negative by people outside the community. To counter this, Pulaskians retained the original meaning of that object, so that it might remain a symbol that the community could rally around.

Taking this comparison to a more general level, we might try to relate both of these cases to the theoretical approaches discussed above. In some respects, this is the classic case of constructionism, where a partial shift in political/social power between groups (blacks and whites) has changed the view of a symbolic object. This dynamic would certainly be found in other cases, such as the declining historical reputations of General George Custer or Christopher Columbus.

The case of the Klan differs in that the representation of the symbolic object is partially dependent upon current actions of the group being commemorated. Custer and Columbus are deceased and therefore unable to change their reputations. In contrast, the Klan continues to be a living entity. As such, any actions by the current Klan may impact the commemoration of their organizational ancestors. Specifically, by protesting the changing racial order of the South, the Klan contributed to a change in the meaning of the commemoration in Pulaski and ironically led to the hooded order being cut off from that commemoration.

From the constructionist perspective then, future research may lead us to look at how organizations are commemorated, because organizations are active participants in social life longer than individual people, speeches, or books. It is not that the meanings of people, speeches, or books are fixed throughout time but rather that these objects can do little to change their symbolic meaning, while the continuing activity of organizations may allow them this opportunity.

For Durkheimians, the role of collective memories is to produce community solidarity. In Sauk Centre, this has been achieved through a myriad of celebrations such as the annual festival, Sinclair Lewis Days. There are no such celebrations in Pulaski; in fact, the interesting thing about the Klan plaque is the lack of rituals Pulaskians perform around that object. Indeed, the closest thing to a solidarity-producing event associated with the plaque is Pulaskians closing their shops and leaving town to protest Klan marches. If the Klan plaque and the ancestors it represents can be considered a sacred object, then the community's collectively ignoring this sacred object appears to be the direct antithesis of a Durkheimian ritual.

While initially the case of Pulaski seems to contradict the Durkheimian approach, Durkheimians can still explain some of what has happened there. The key to this explanation lies in the current meaning of the Klan plaque. Unlike most commemorations that stress the positive values the community wishes to remember about itself and its past, the Klan plaque stands, first and foremost, against the values and people that Pulaski most abhors (racist Klansmen). Thus, the continued existence of the Klan plaque, and the admittedly bizarre group behavior surrounding that plaque, give Pulaski a sense of solidarity. But unlike most commemorations that solidarity is based on the values the community least admires.

Given these conclusions we may want to look for cases similar to the Klan plaque where the object being commemorated illustrates the values that the community wishes to deny. Admittedly, these might be rare, for even when a society commemorates a villain (Benedict Arnold, for example) they usually only commemorate those aspects of that person's life that are deemed worthy of honor (Ducharme and Fine 1995).

On a final note, future research might examine cases where instead of changing history in its commemoration, a community attempts to stop a change in meanings. Neither constructionists nor Durkheimians seem to be able to account for Pulaski's insistence that their original Klan be kept in the past, that is, not related in any way to today's hooded order. One reason for this common failing is the assumption made by both constructionists and Durkheimians that, in order for the past to be useful, it must be made to live in the present. Because the hooded order continues to exist, however, there is no need to recreate its image for people in the present who might be unfamiliar with it. Instead, Pulaskians are trying to stop the projection of this image backward in time to include another event they claim does not fit with the modern Klan's image. Thus, we have a reversal of sorts in Pulaski's Klan commemoration. Instead of bring the past into the present, Pulaskians are attempting to keep the present from being brought into the past.

NOTES

1. Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, when we refer to Pulaskians we are primarily discussing white Pulaski townspeople only.

2. For a more comprehensive history of the second Klan, see Alexander (1965), Jackson (1967), and Chalmers (1965). In recent years historians have undertaken many local studies of the 1920s Klan. Among the best are Goldberg (1981), Gerlach (1982), Lay (1985), Moore (1992), and MacLean (1994).

3. Unless otherwise stated, we use the phrase "current Klan" to refer to the multitude of white supremacist organizations that use "Klan" as part of their names. While we recognize that there are complex internal divisions among these groups, these distinctions are unimportant for the purpose of this article. Our primary concern is not the distinctions among the various Klan groups but their common public persona of white racism. For more information on the distinctions among the current Klans, see Dobratz and Shanks-Meile (1995). For an overview of the Klan's successive incarnations, see Chalmers (1965), Rice (1962), and Wade (1987).

4. The best primary source on the activities of the original Klan is the Joint Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, 43rd Cong., 2d sess., 1872. For a presentation of some of these documents, along with a broader discussion of the politics of Reconstruction see Kennedy (1995). For a more neutral, dispassionate view of these events, see Chalmers (1965).

5. It is difficult to ascertain how many southerners believed the lost cause myth of the Reconstruction Klan. Some historians (Wilson 1980; Osterweis 1973) believe that the majority of white southerners supported this myth as a means of justifying their superiority to African Americans, while other historians (Bailey 1994) argue that the lost cause myth primarily served the interests of the southern upper classes. For a more detailed discussion, see Foster (1987) and Connelly and Belows (1982).

6. Despite the protests, the movie was a major success, grossing nearly eighteen million dollars. For more information, see Parrish (1992, p. 115) and Wilson (1980, p. 114).

7. Due to the difficulties of obtaining Klan membership records, the numbers cited here are estimates. For an in-depth discussion of this issue, see Jackson (1967), Chalmers (1965), MacLean (1994), and Moore (1992). Blee (1991) is the best estimate for membership in the Women's KKK during the 1920s. She estimates the membership at around half a million.

8. These opinions were common across the country. In August 1922, the *Literary Digest* wrote to newspapers across the country, trying to elicit editorials that would gauge the public's view of the Klan. The magazine received over one hundred editorials in response to their query, not one of which was pro-Klan.

9. The Klan's power in government was even stronger at the local level. For a detailed discussion of the Klan's political strength, see MacLean (1994) and Moore (1992).

10. Despite the public debate, Pulaski newspapers did not report any incidents at the unveiling. Due to lack of opinion polls and records, it is difficult to determine how many people in Pulaski actually approved of the Klan plaque. Giles County's population at this time was 69.7 percent native-born white. The only significant minority group was African Americans (29.5 percent) who would have had little political power to stop the Klan plaque ceremony. Given these demographics, it is likely that there would have been little overt opposition to the Klan plaque ceremony (statistics from USBC 1916, p. 309; 1920, p. 963).

11. This honoring of the original Klan was only part of a UDC campaign to distinguish the original Klan from the second Klan of the 1920s. Claiming that the second Klan was "unworthy of the name made sacred by men who bore it in years gone by," the UDC petitioned state governments in an attempt to ban the use of the Klan name by the 1920s organization (UDC Notes, *Confederate Veteran*, February 1921, p. 73).

12. Interestingly, the *Confederate Veteran* was the only journal to report on these events. A survey of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *New York Times* index for the years 1915–1940 revealed no articles on either the Klan plaque or Pulaski, Tennessee. Thus, it seems likely that the people who most supported the honoring of the Klan were the ones who knew about the plaque in Pulaski.

13. Ku Klux Klan document, no date, available from Giles County Old Records Department, Pulaski, TN. Although there is no date on this source, we can surmise its date from the early part of this century through two pieces of information. First, the author claims to have interviewed one of the founders of the Klan in 1874, meaning that the article could not have been written more than sixty years or so after the Klan's founding. Second, the author also notes that at the time of this article all the founders of the original Klan were dead. Since the last original Klan founder died in 1923, we date this article somewhere between 1923 and 1934.

14. As was the case with the Klan of the 1920s, these are only estimates. These numbers were taken from Klanwatch, an organization dedicated to the monitoring and eradication of the hooded order. To control for potential bias, we consulted two other sources were consulted. Both Sims (1996) and Tucker (1991) put Klan membership in the 1960s at 40,000–50,000 and argue that it declined significantly thereafter. Admittedly, our singular focus on the Klan has excluded other right-wing organizations whose members would agree with the Klan's goals. The Southern Poverty Law Center's Klanwatch Project estimates that there are roughly 200,000 members spread across 101 militia groups that have openly aligned themselves with racist or anti-Semitic causes (<http://users.powernet.co.uk/orion/usa.htm>).

15. Klan activities in Pulaski, while not front-page news at this time, did receive a fair amount of attention in newspapers across the country. One measure of this is the number of AP and UPI reports on the events in Pulaski. There were forty-one reports issued by these news services during 1985–1989. While many of these news reports were rather brief, merely describing how many Klan marchers there were, other reports gave lengthy descriptions of the attitudes of the Pulaski townspeople. Among these are George (1986) written for the Associated Press and UPI reports dated October 9, 1989 (“Brotherhood”) and November 2, 1989 (“Fight Brewing”).

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