

Maudine Neill
September 13, 1988

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Interviewer

MG This is September 13, 1988. This is, we are in Montpelier, Vermont for the Green Mountain Chronicles, Vermont Historical Society interview with Maudine Neill. Let's start out with you identifying yourself and give me, just tell me very briefly where you're from and when you came to Vermont.

MN My name is Maudine Neill. I grew up in Oklahoma, came to Vermont in 1954 after marrying a Vermonter.

MG Tell me about finding that picture. You might want to even refer to the picture and point out. We can't do that on radio, but you can mention certain things about it if you'd like.

MN After getting into the family of the Neill's, I was looking at my mother-in-laws pictures and I found some small pictures of some people in Klan uniforms and she said well I have a big one. And she brought out the big one. It's about three feet long, seven inches high of a parade, a group of Klans people. She is in the picture, along with her mother and her sister-in-law. The picture was made on Towne Hill in Montpelier on the 4th of July, 1927. That's right.

MG Okay.

MN After, apparently it was a rainy day. It says so on the picture and then they marched back into town. There were speakers at this parade gathering on Towne Hill. It's where the _____ at that time.

MG Can you describe the picture? Since this is for radio, to give people an idea of.

MN At one end of the picture is an old truck that is decorated for the parade as a float. The people all had uniforms on with the exception of a very few. Their uniforms were white. Their leader had a red uniform they say. They had a band which apparently played as the parade went along and when they got to the place of meeting where the picture is made and the speeches were made, they had a place set up for the speaker to stand and in the background you see the cars of the people who had come. In the background is the mountains and some of the houses on Towne Hill.

MG It looks like there are several hundred people in that picture?

MN I think there were a lot.

MG And these were all probably Montpelier Klans members?

MN No, my mother-in-law was from Northfield. There is a banner that says "The Women of Northfield." There's the Montpelier women and then there were mens groups. The Barre Group is here. They even have a banner that says "Boston Tea Party Klan, Massachusetts No. 11," so apparently people came from other places for this parade.

MG Okay. So after you found the picture and your mother-in-law told you what it was, what was, what did you do then?

MN I didn't do anything for several years. Then I was taking a history course and I had to have a project to do and this immediately came to mind. Why not see what I could find out about the people that were in this picture.

MG Okay.

MN And that's what I did.

MG Okay, well what did you find out? I mean as we were saying earlier, I was surprised, you were surprised, everybody I mentioned this to was surprised that there actually was a Ku Klux Klan in Vermont, surprised and kind of horrified.

MN Well I went to newspapers at the State Library and went through them and anything that dealt with the Klan usually had KKK in them, in the headlines and I looked for that and got copies of everything I found that had a KKK headline. A lot of it was editorials by people who were against having it come to Vermont and others were descriptions of meetings and burning crosses. After that I began talking to friends and began to find out that other people were in the Klan. I found several who were. Most of them are dead now. That was fifteen years ago. And they all said that it was to them a club, a place to go to have picnics and good times and they didn't feel prejudice until later. But the main thing that hurt them was the money. The leaders were collecting a lot of money.

MG What was being done with that money?

MN Apparently the leaders were using it for their own use. It was supposed to be to run the group or to go to headquarters to keep up a headquarters. The headquarters for New England was in Rochester, New Hampshire.

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MG So this was affiliated with the regional and then a national Ku Klux Klan?

MN I think so. Especially the regional was conducted out of Rochester, New Hampshire. I don't know how much they got into the national groups, but there were national people. Maine was one of the strongest states.

MG You say that the people you interviewed said their purpose was mainly to have a good time social, but what were the stated purposes, the bylaws, the constitution, whatever of the Klan itself, do you know?

MN The Klan itself had a purpose of promoting white, non-catholic people. They were against the negroes in the south, they were against Catholics and foreigners here in New England.

MG What did they do to promote this anti-catholic, black and I assume Jewish also program?

MN In Vermont, I'm not sure that they did a whole lot. Possibly, just warning people, talking to people and the population was aware of their ideas and just didn't cross them I suppose.

MG Do you know when they came, when the Klan came to Vermont and when, when the major activity was?

MN The first indications were in the 1920, well about '22 to '24, by '27 when this picture was made it was quite strong, but it soon after that was over. It lasted about from '22 to '27 or '28 in Vermont.

MG Was there any particular reason that it came at that time? Was it connected to any particular historical event or social development that you know of?

MN I think, this movement began in Georgia. A man began it there and it spread throughout the country in the '20's. It got to Vermont soon after the others. There was a movie made called "The Birth of a Nation," in 1915 that dealt with the Klan and a lot of people even here in Montpelier, I read a diary of a man who lived in Montpelier that went to see "Birth of a Nation" and I think that promoted it a lot.

MG That was a...

MN At least the knowledge of it.

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MG ...that was a positive treatment of the post civil war klan, is that right?

MN I think so.

MG Yeah.

MN It really had died out after the civil war until 1915 or so.

MG Were there cross burnings or any of the things that we commonly associated with the Klan. These people in the picture are dressed pretty much as one pictures Klans people except you can see their faces.

MN Yes, they were not supposed to uncover their faces when they were out in public, but they did. All of these, almost all of these in this picture had their faces uncovered. I think by '27 that it, people didn't mind being known. Earlier they may have concealed themselves.

MG And were there any cross burnings or incidents that were linked to the Klan?

MN Yes, they burned a lot of crosses. The people who were in it, my mother-in-law especially said that it was fun to have a burning cross and everybody gather under and sing. Sometimes they were burned to scare people just for sensationalism I suppose. There was an account here in Montpelier of seven crosses being burned at the same time. And the person's husband told me about this. A lot of those, said that he went down the street with his kerosene and rope and different things they used and there was one in Hubbard Park, one on Towne Hill, different places around the city. She said seven. One was at the Catholic Church and that one apparently damaged some of the church, scared the outside of it some way. So there was a lot of anti-Klan ideas the next day about that.

MG Was there any prosecution of anyone?

MN Someone did go to court. I don't know just how it came out. It seems that newspapers will tell you the beginning of something but not the end. But Deane Davis was the lawyer for the ones who were accused. He was defending them.

MG Do you know what the basis of his defense was?

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MN No, that's one of the things I never followed up on. I think that it was, he said that they were set up, that it could have been started by a klansman were trying to, by a non klansman who were trying to accuse someone in the Klan.

MG Were there ever any actions against people and the individuals, crosses on peoples lawns, their homes or any harm to people?

MN The newspapers didn't cover anything of that sort that I found. I did hear an acquaintance say that the Klan burned a cross on her uncle's land, but in newspaper accounts I didn't find that.

MG Now when you were talking a moment ago about the seven crosses being burned in Hubbard Park, was this done secretly or was this a, like this picture that we have, this event that we have a picture of, a fairly open, this looks like it was a fairly open celebration if you will.

MN The person that told me about it said that her husband walked down Main Street unconcealed, going from one cross to the other and that people were, they lived on Main Street up over a pool hall and the people downstairs were having a lot of reactions about it and she was upstairs listening and knew that her husband was the one that was going off to light the crosses. (BELL RINGING) Okay. The lady that lived up over the pool hall where the people were observing the crosses and were very excited was listening to them and at the same time knew that her husband was going from one place to the other lighting the crosses.

MG What was the public reaction to the Klan? Were there any demonstrations or did you see, were there letters to the editor or the newspaper, how did the general population react to this in Vermont?

MN Actually there were debates in the newspaper. If an editorial came out against someone, often someone in the Klan would reply in a letter to the editor or an editorial of some sort. So there was a lot of debating in the newspapers.

MG Do you know how many Klan members there actually were in Vermont in the 1920's?

MN There were estimates. It's been fifteen years since I did this, I've forgotten what they were, but considerable.

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MG The figure I have and maybe it came from you is that national Klan officials claimed 10,000 members in Vermont?

MN That sounds possible.

MG But then someone else, a man by the name of, wait a minute, Kenneth Jackson, estimated 2,000 were formerly initiated into the Klan between 1915 and 1944 (inaudible) spoke about the Klan.

MN It probably would have to be an estimate unless the enrollment records were found and I don't know that they were. I did find on Liberty Street some Klan uniforms and I found the banner, the Montpelier Women's Banner, and I tried to buy it from the lady that had it and she didn't want to sell it when I was talking to her. Then a few years later I heard that she had put it in an auction and got practically nothing for it. The last I heard, it was in Charleston, New Hampshire in some kind of antique shop with a price of about \$700 on it.

MG During this period in the '20's, there was Klan activity primarily I guess in the south, but it was more overt, more aggressive than what it sounds like there was in Vermont. What was the, do you know what, how the Vermont Klans responded to that?

MN No, I don't recall any, anyone saying anything about knowing what was going on in other parts of the country.

MG What did the Klan do here in Vermont? How did they try to accomplish their mission?

MN They would bring people into their meetings and for \$10 they could become a member and I guess the object was just to get more members and they would have gatherings, speeches, good times they said, parades, I don't know anything more than that.

MG Did they disseminate literature, propaganda?

MN Yes, they did that.

MG Can you tell me about that?

MN I wasn't able to find any old literature. I did find a newspaper that had a picture of an advertisement that they had put out, but they had a hand bill type advertising.

MG Do you know what the literature might have stated?

MN No, probably no more than what, what the newspapers would.

MG This was a secret society?

MN It was secret. However, as you see from the picture, people did become known. But people didn't know other people that were in it. I know there was a lady that I talked to. Her brother was a member in Marshfield and he was drowned. He was swimming, he and his wife, and they drowned in a whirlpool of some sort and he was a member of the Klan. His sister who I knew later didn't know he was a Klansman until the time of the funeral. They had an elaborate funeral for him and Klansmen came from all over to his funeral and when he was buried, the Klansmen walked by and would throw flowers in his grave and she didn't even know, his sister didn't know that he was a member.

MG Did the burning cross have any symbolism, did it represent anything?

MN I don't recall what the symbolism was.

MG How widespread was the Klan in Vermont? Were there, what did they call their sub-groups?

MN A group was called a Klavern. All their words for their meetings, their officials started with K. The Klavern was their meeting. Each town it seemed had one, but they did get together several towns for a different occasions. But as far as I can tell each town had one. The official in Montpelier was a man by the name of Nichols, Edwin Nichols.

MG What was the head Klansperson called by his men? There were women in this too, right?

MN Yes, the women were a separate group apparently. They were called women of the Ku Klux Klan. Klegal was the name, the title for the leader. There was a Klegal in Vermont, in Burlington. In Montpelier, Mr. Nichols wasn't a Klegal, he was a lower official. I don't recall just what he was called.

MG How as, what was the Press reaction generally?

MN Originally, the Press was against having a Klan come to Vermont. They would write articles about how we didn't need the Klan. And they usually would ridicule the Klan. Most articles that I read were ridiculing the Klan.

MG What was the basis for their opposition?

MN They said that we didn't need people in Vermont who were against any segment of the population. We didn't need as they said, bed sheet people, secret societies.

MG What was your feeling on finding out that you had in your family that you married into members of the Klan?

MN It was just a historical event. It didn't bother me that I would talk to my mother-in-law. She said it was a club meeting that she went to, she enjoyed it and had a good time, she never hated anyone or did anything to harm anyone, so I took it like that.

MG It seems from what you've said that the main target was Catholicism, Catholics? Was there a response on the part of the Catholic Church in Vermont?

MN I'm not sure what the Catholic Church did as such. I know there was a case in Burlington where some Klansmen went into the Cathedral at night and stole some things. One man was telling another man that there was ammunition stored there, there was guns and that kind of thing and they were just mischievous, they just went in to see, and they were drinking at the time. So I think that case, although it dealt with the Cathedral and the Catholic Church were just some men trying to do something interesting.

MG The church didn't officially respond or...

MN No, those men were arrested and did have a trial, but the church as such didn't seem to get involved. It was the law enforcement.

MG I have read somewhere, it was actually in a novel, so I don't what its actual historical accuracy is, but that there was Klans, Klan activity in northern Vermont that was directed against French Canadians who came into work in areas wood and logging related industries up there. Do you know anything about that?

MN That would go along with their, their ideals, yes. There was one case of even of Jew here in Central Vermont. I talked to a friend of mine who knew of a Jewish, they didn't really do anything to the man, they accused her of harboring Jews because she would associate with them and that's when she got out.

MG She had been a Klans member?

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MN She was a Klans member and she had some good friends who were Jews and when the Klans people found out, they reprimanded her for having Jewish friends and she got out of the Klan at that point.

MG Do you know of any incidents involving French Canadians in the Klan?

MN No, not that.

MG So it just seems to you that that's a logical possibility?

MN Any foreigner. People who would come from other places to take jobs that they said should have been theirs, they were against.

MG What were the requirements for membership? Obviously you had to be white and non-Catholic, actually white and protestant, but was there any process for proving your lineage, the purity?

MN No, no, you did, you just had to swear to, I think it was ten things. One was that you were non-Catholic, that you were an American and you had to pay \$10. It seems that was the main focus, was getting the \$10.

MG Do you know what went on at the meetings, what they were like?

MN No, I don't recall any, any actual account of what went on at a meeting. I just know that they gave speeches. At one meeting a newspaper reporter went in and reported that, how he had gone in and had told them that he was trying to be a member, wanted to be a member. They didn't know he was a reporter and when they found out, they told him not to put it in the paper, but he did. But he didn't give details of what went on at the meeting, he just gave his own personal experience of getting in and being told not to publish anything.

MG When and why did the Klan decline or cease to be in Vermont?

MN One thing, was the Burlington Cathedral Case. Some of the officials in New Hampshire tried to help the men evade the law. But most of it was when the people here could see what it really was, that it was telling them to be prejudice against people that they had always befriended and it was the money. They saw money being taken and large amounts of money, being used for personal reasons.

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MG So at that point people just started dropping out?

MN Yes.

MG The Burlington Cathedral Case?

MN When the men went into the cellar of the Cathedral, stole some things and then were arrested, the official in New Hampshire, one of the people went to him, that was involved and was in New Hampshire according to the newspapers and there was quite a scandal about it.

MG This would have been St. Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, was that it?

MN Yes, I think that's it.

MG So I see, my notes say that they were actual, they were Klan members who were actually convicted of grand petty larceny?

MN Yes, they finally were, but they were in New Hampshire with some of the Klan officials and then the Klan officials finally, one of them turned against the Klan and said take these men back.

MG So when would all of this have taken place, this decline and when, is that relative to this 1927 picture?

MN Um, the '27 picture shows a large amount of people still in it.

MG I'm sorry would you start that over again, we were talking at the same time?

MN The picture of 1927, the parade, shows a large group of people, however it was about that time that it started to decline by '28 or '29 I think it was pretty well disbanded.

MG Are there any people around who I might be able to talk to who were actually involved that you know of?

MN No, my mother-in-law died in '71. Most of the people did die since I talked to them. There is one that probably is still living, but she asks that no one interview her.

MG Okay. It's hard to tell from looking at a picture, but these were not kids, these were adults right?

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- MN My mother-in-law was 27, she was born in 1900. She was 27. Her mother was a member. Mrs. Nichols who is the wife of the Montpelier leader probably was in her 40's, so they aren't young kids.
- MG Okay, anything else that we didn't cover?
- MN I think a lot of prominent people may have been in it too. There was a doctor in Northfield, Dr. Herley was a member. I haven't found any, I didn't find anyone in Montpelier of the older prominent people who admitted to being in it.
- MG Were there any government officials, state or local?
- MN Not that I know of, but there probably were.
- MG Do you know how Deane Davis became involved?
- MN He was a lawyer and he was asked to defend a couple of guys.
- MG So he had no particular connection?
- MN Not that I know of. I didn't talk to him personally, someone else has.
- MG Excuse me. Okay, I think if we just let the tape run for about another 30 seconds to get the sound of the room again, we'll be fine.