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The Ku Klux Klan in the Nashoba Valley

William Wolkovich-Valkavicius

The emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s is usually associated with a new-found spirit of American nationalism after the nation's disappointing involvement in World War I, as well as a response to the "threat" posed by the most recent group of immigrants to what had been a native American and Protestant society. In the light of this stereotypical view, however, it is interesting to review the progress of the Klan in a rural community of east-central Massachusetts, the Nashoba Valley. Here was a region with little large-scale industry, few Jews, and hardly any African-Americans. This region offered little appeal for the doctrines of the Klan, except for a slowly-growing immigrant population. This was an influx whose ethnic origins and religious beliefs provided the necessary ingredients for social confrontation.

Few if any regions of the United States had experienced such a homogeneous religious beginning as did Congregationalist New England. The eventual transition, such as occurred in the Nashoba Valley, from a Puritan stronghold to a large Catholic haven, was "so unusual that it can be understood only when told with historical backgrounds in clear view," remarked one writer in 1923. In pioneer times, there were

no boom-towns here; no rushing in of men of diverse creeds as common brothers in adventure. . . . Conditions such as existed here, the greater part of America never knew. [There was] constant conflict with this old and strongly-entrenched civilization.¹

For nearly two centuries, rural Groton and its neighboring villages remained practically untouched by Catholicism. Nevertheless,

1. William DeLue in Catholic Builders of the Nation (5 vols., Boston, 1923), I: 210-211.

fierce Yankee prejudice against Catholics had already been shaped from colonial days. As one leading historian observed: "The Puritans defined their religion largely in opposition to Rome." Thus, when Catholic immigrants began invading the Nashoba Valley in the 1840s, two entirely different cultures collided. Nativist sentiment stirred against the newcomers, not only because of their suspect faith, but also because of their undesirable ethnic stock. As the historian explained: "The Yankee elite viewed all outsiders to their ranks with condescension, but the Irish were the mudsill of society in the 1860s and 1870s."²

In the early nineteenth century, "Brahmins" in urban Massachusetts had already confronted alien hordes streaming into Boston, Lowell, and Worcester, but the Nashoba Valley was still free of foreigners. The rural citizens enjoyed a condition that Charles Quincy Adams, Jr., coveted a half-century later, when he permanently abandoned his beloved hometown of Quincy to resettle in Lincoln, "a rural village safe from the unbearable vulgarities of an urban municipality," and from the Irish who had displaced Adams and his peers in town government.³

By the 1840s, Groton and environs could no longer hold out against the immigrant. A scattering of single and married Irish penetrated the Nashoba Valley in search of work on the large farms and dairies of wealthy country squires. Muscular young Celts became blacksmiths, teamsters, and farmhands, while Irish maidens assumed the role of all-purpose domestics. A few frugal Irish families managed to save enough money from their meager factory wages to buy some farmland, away from the stench of the mills. The second and chief source of Irish newcomers was linked with railroad expansion. To extend the iron roadway into Fitchburg and through the Nashoba Valley, a shrewd entrepreneur, Alvah Crocker, recruited immigrant laborers right off the ships which were docked in Boston Harbor. When the railroad was completed in 1845, some of the foreigners stayed on as members of maintenance crews, while others found jobs on the many estates of the upper-class Yankees. Industry provided the third lure. During the 1850s, Irish and French-

2. Richard D. Brown, Massachusetts: A Bicentennial History (New York, 1978), pp. 189-190.

3. Barbara Solomon, Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition (Chicago, 1956), p. 30.

Canadians supplied the workforce for the cotton factory in Shirley and the paper mill in West Groton. Though the natives looked down on the immigrants, they recognized the need for inexpensive foreign labor for the farms and the dairies, for the railroads, and for the emerging manufacturing plants.

Inevitably, more tangible evidence of the Catholic immigrant presence made its appearance in the valley. In 1858, the chapel of St. Mary was constructed in Groton Junction, as a mission of St. Bernard Church in Fitchburg. In 1869 and 1872 respectively, the Irish Benevolent Society and the Ancient Order of Hibernians were organized. In the next dozen years new churches sprang up, at Groton Junction in 1870 (replacing the original one), at Pepperell also in 1870, and a larger chapel in 1882, a shrine of St. John at Townsend, and yet a third church in Groton Junction (which in 1871 had been incorporated as Ayer) in 1883. Such rapid growth caused the raising of eyebrows among the Protestants, especially the Congregationalists, whose religion was "the established faith of Townsend" and the surrounding towns. Indeed a recent local historian described the St. John Mission in Townsend as "a startling new building [that] took shape in 1883." It "represented a break with tradition."⁴

The need for church construction stemmed not only from a steady flow of immigrants, but also from the fecundity of the Irish and French-Canadians, a quality that also captured the attention of the natives. In 1888, one valley newspaper noted that in Ayer there were four married Frenchmen who accounted for a total of twenty-one children.⁵ In nearby Littleton, where Catholics long remained a small minority, the natives were alarmed to observe, as the town's birth records show, that the Irish were producing about thirty percent of the children, although they represented far fewer than thirty percent of the town's population.⁶

Littleton's Yankees also learned that the local Celts were to be reckoned with in more practical affairs as well, as an episode in the

4. Richard N. Smith, Divinity and Dust: A History of Townsend, Massachusetts, 1676-1978 (Townsend, 1978), pp. 163-165.

5. Groton Landmark, July 7, 1888.

6. For the decade from 1859 to 1868, there were 84 births to Irish-born parents, out of a total of 284 births; see Birth Register, in Town Clerk's Office, Littleton.

summer of 1877 indicated. The new town hall had been completed and its official opening was noted with appropriate ceremonies -- except that the town's Irish population was overlooked. The fiery response of the Celts resulted in the following account in a local newspaper:

WAXING WARM

It is said that the Irish residents of Littleton, who were not invited to the dedication ball, have been waxing warm ever since the event. Not to be outdone, they are going to dedicate the town hall, a second time, and no "Yanks" need apply for an invitation. It is to be exclusive. They feel so hurt that they have resolved to boycott Littleton's sturdy butchers, and the end is not yet in sight.⁷

But then perhaps the Irish deserved no particular civility, if they were anything in reputation like the ones complained about in Groton a decade later. An irate citizen penned a blunt letter to one of the selectmen in 1889: "Is there no Sunday law for this part of Groton? Every Sunday we have from ten to forty Irish from Pepperell gambling in the street. It is what they call bowling, a favorite game" in old Ireland. "Our yards are sometimes filled with them smoking, swearing, and betting. We do not say anything to them, for they are a lawless set."⁸

Still, throughout the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, the Nashoba Valley's Protestants outnumbered the Catholic immigrants by a wide margin. To some extent, Yankee apprehension about "Romanists" in their midst was anticipatory. Valley natives, only an hour by train from Boston, were watching Protestant-Catholic struggles in the Hub City during the final quarter of the 1800s. There, Catholics were demanding religious liberty in public institutions such as mental hospitals and jails, where priests' ministrations were severely restricted, seeking state subsidies, which were "so generously meted out" to Protestant institutions, for their own charitable organizations, and insisting on an end to discrimination

7. Groton Landmark, Aug 13, 1887.

8. S. B. Gustin to Mr. John W. Parker, April 18, 1889, loose letter inserted in pages of the Selectmen's Journal, in Selectmen's Office, Town Hall, Groton.

in public office-holding.⁹ This type of activism very likely was causing some nervousness among the Nashoba Valley Protestants.

The slow but steady arrival of Irish and French-Canadians by the end of the Civil War not surprisingly aroused dormant anxieties among many of the Yankees in the Nashoba Valley, and certain developments played into the hands of those who predicted dire consequences as a result of this Roman Catholic penetration. One such phenomenon was the appearance of a number of ex-priests and former Catholics who found it a lucrative business "to tour the country handing out to crowds of prurient bigots the hair-raising stories and obscene lies that such audiences wanted to hear."¹⁰

One such antagonist to show up in the valley was Reverend Narcisse Cyr, of Lowell, who lectured in Ayer in 1873 about a book called *Father Hyacinth and His Works*. Described as a "converted Romanist," Cyr had been working among French Catholics for twenty-five years, according to the newspaper article on his lecture. "The reform of which he will speak is one of deep interest, and no one should fail to hear him," admonished the *Ayer Public Spirit*.¹¹ Cyr spoke of the evils of the Roman Catholic Church, and he introduced the ideas of Hyacinth (himself an ex-priest), promoting the notion of an independent Catholic Church.

More extensive visits were made by Patrick Welch of Canandaigua, New York, a layman who came to the Nashoba Valley in 1877. His first attempt to lecture in Ayer provoked the wrath of the Irish. Six zealots successfully disrupted Welch's town hall gathering, though they were arrested and later fined eight dollars each for disturbing the peace. The second night, with police protection, the ex-Catholic did give his diatribe, which was described in the newspaper as "an all-absorbing topic . . . and all respectable people were determined he should lecture."¹² Welch returned that summer, this time to Townsend, where the Congregational Church was "full to hear him." A successful sale of the speaker's books reflected an appetite for anti-Catholic outpourings. Indeed, "the people were so

9. Lord, Sexton & Harrington, History of the Archdiocese of Boston (Boston, 1945), III: 64ff.

10. *Ibid.*, III: 65.

11. Public Spirit, Dec. 11, 1873.

12. Turner's Public Spirit, May 19, 1877.

well pleased with his lecture that they insisted on taking up a collection for him, and they realized quite a sum. He was very handsomely and cordially received by the people, and is doing a great deal of good."¹³ Almost a decade later, in 1886, Welch was again welcomed into the Nashoba Valley, this time by the Methodist Episcopal Church of Pepperell, for whose listeners he "fearlessly exposed error."¹⁴

The most interesting of these itinerant anti-Catholic "luminaries" was the pathetic figure of Edmond H. Walsh. This Irish-born immigrant spent a year and a half as a novice at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky, from December of 1877 to March of 1879, although he did not pronounce even temporary vows. Soon after his departure from the monastery, the troubled Walsh was drawn into the anti-Catholic lecture circuit. In 1888 he turned up at the Congregational Church in Littleton, billed as "a converted trappist monk," who lectured while garbed "in the white costume of his order." The audience welcomed Walsh, who spoke "fervently about the tyrannies of Romanism."¹⁵

The willingness of some Congregationalists to lend their church halls and lecterns to hateful former Catholics may have reflected their failing hope to uphold the old order, already once severely fractured a half-century earlier by the rise of Unitarianism. Certainly one Congregational minister was unhappy about the Catholic presence in his town. Father Charles Finnegan, first pastor of the Sacred Heart Parish in Groton, writing to Archbishop William O'Connell in 1907, testified that the "Congregational minister . . . has been influencing his people, who are in the majority, against the work begun here, hoping thereby to drive me out. We are very good friends ostensibly. Only one living in a remote country place can appreciate the narrowness and worse, of isolated people."¹⁶

In addition to the problems caused by wandering preachers, Catholics in the Nashoba Valley also became embroiled in

13. *Ibid.*, Aug. 4, 1877.

14. *Groton Landmark*, Sept. 25, 1886.

15. *Ibid.*, December 1 and 8, 1888; Fr. Felix Donahue to author, Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky, Sept. 24, 1981; for a different view of Walsh, see Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York, 1949), p. 164.

16. Finnegan to O'Connell, November 1907, in Archives, Archdiocese of Boston.

controversies associated with the public school system -- a bastion of Americanism zealously guarded by Protestants. In this regard, the American Protective Association took root in Boston in the autumn of 1892, and then radiated to other coastal cities with concentrations of British-Americans. Its chief mouthpiece was the *Daily Sentinel*, begun in Boston in March of 1895. Indeed, Boston became the citadel of A.P.A. journalism, producing at least four other publications: the *American Citizen*, the *British-American Citizen*, the *American Protestant*, and the *Women's Voice and Public School Champion*. In addition to concern over keeping Catholics out of public office, the A.P.A. aimed at preserving Protestant control over the public schools. In this goal, the Association was reiterating several "hysterical resolutions" composed in 1888 at Boston by the Loyal Women of American Liberty, namely, that no Catholic should ever be elected to the School Committee, and that no Catholic teachers should be admitted into the public schools.¹⁷

This attitude had its counterpart in the Nashoba Valley, as illustrated by an incident which took place in the 1890s in Shirley. In 1885 a young woman bearing a Yankee surname was hired by an unsuspecting school board to fill a vacancy in the primary grades. The committee's minutes graphically describe the teacher's fate:

After Miss Minnie Holden had been engaged for the coming term, it was learned by the committee that some dissatisfaction existed at the North [School] on account of the teacher's religious belief, she being a catholic. The trouble was personal in nature and it is thought best to retain the teacher as her work in school appears well.

The conciliatory board members then added: "Advice to all parties is to avoid further unfriendliness and to try for peace."¹⁸ Meanwhile, the superintendent of schools assumed that all teachers were Protestants, and he implied as much in the town's *Annual Report* of 1896. Encouraging parent-teacher cooperation, he encouraged parents to invite teachers to their homes, and to take them "to church and the

17. Lord, *Archdiocese of Boston*, III: 120 and 143; Donald L. Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association* (Seattle, 1964), p. 256.

18. Minutes of Shirley School Committee, 1830-1897.

evening meetings" if they desire to go.¹⁹ At this time, there were few Catholics in Shirley, and there was no Catholic church in town.

Parental grumbling persisted against Minnie Holden, who had been reared in the faith of her Irish mother. By the end of the stormy school year, in June of 1896, the school committee decided that "there being considerable friction . . . it was thought wise to make a change," despite the board's own testimony that Miss Holden's "methods of teaching were more than average." Some of the parents had engaged in a boycott, keeping their children out of class until a Protestant was hired to replace Minnie Holden. The town officials noted: "There seems no way of reconciling the parties. Another teacher might obviate the difficulty." The committee wavered; by the end of June it voted to reconsider its negative decision, after a two-member classroom visit to observe Miss Holden. Again they found that "her work was a credit to her, and advised further trial . . . toward reconciliation." Though the young lady "felt aggrieved" over parental antipathy, she agreed to stay on. Still, the Protestants could not bear the thought of a Catholic teaching their children, her superior ability notwithstanding.

In February of 1897, the superintendent appeared at the school board session, armed with a petition from hostile parents who demanded the removal of Miss Holden. Yet even then, the committee took no action on the request, "as there is general acceptance of her work as a teacher." In fact, she was reappointed for the next term, 1897-1898. But the pressure of public opinion prevailed; the anti-Holden forces scored a victory, when at a special session on June 8, 1897, they persuaded the school board not to rehire Miss Holden.²⁰ Despite this rejection, she went on with her teaching career, eventually spending thirty-six years in the public school system of Somerville. Significantly, her record of previous positions, which is on file in Somerville, lists several brief assignments in small towns in the state, but is silent about her painful experience in Shirley. She

19. Annual Report for Town of Shirley, Mass. for Year ending March 1, 1896, p. 13.

20. Minutes of Shirley School Committee, 1830-1897.

probably omitted mention of that teaching job, for fear of jeopardizing her acceptance elsewhere.²¹

Although public response to anti-Catholic preachers and official discrimination against Roman Catholic teachers were clear indications of a continuing basis of religious intolerance in the Nashoba Valley, there were several Protestants who were uninhibited by peer pressure, and who stepped forward with notable acts of kindness toward the Catholic minority. As early as 1887, "a wealthy and benevolent lady" from Pepperell graciously treated local Catholics to a new organ, as a Christmas present. At the turn of the century, Groton's Catholics were forming a parish in that old Yankee community. In 1905 millionaire William Amory Gardner, of the famous Groton School, donated to the Catholics the original (then vacant) Episcopal school chapel. The large wooden structure was placed on huge logs and drawn by teams of oxen to a new site a mile away, providing the Irish with a ready-made shrine. Then, socialite Clara Sears, while on a visit to Rome, purchased a crucifix and arranged for Pope Pius X to bless it. On her return to Groton, she presented her Catholic friends with this handsome addition to their chapel, and she conveyed the pontiff's personal blessing to the small congregation. About 1930, another Yankee, an official of the Boston and Maine Railroad, employed several Irishmen on the family estate in Groton. Learning of the need for a baptismal font at the newly-erected St. James Mission, in the western part of town, Frederick Dumaine generously provided a splendid multi-colored marble vessel. Still another welcome gift to the Catholics of St. James came from the Congregationalists in the center of town. In 1932, a recently-deceased Protestant left a bequest of \$25,000, for a new organ in memory of his father. Consequently, a committee was chosen to "dispose" of the old tracker instrument of 1850 vintage. Learning that West Groton's Catholics were willing to accept such a gift, the Congregationalists voted to make the transfer.²²

21. Minnie Holden was born in Greenville, New Hampshire on Sept. 27, 1872. Her parents were James Holden and Maria Hare. An alumna of Cushing Academy in Ashburnham, she died in Fitchburg on September 28, 1957.

22. William Wolkovich-Valkavicius, Immigrants and Yankees in Nashoba Valley, Massachusetts: Inter-ethnic and Inter-religious Conflict and Accommodation of Irish, French-Canadians, Poles, Lithuanians and Italians (West Groton, 1981), pp. 154-156.

Periodically, there were other amicable gestures towards Catholics on the part of individual Protestants and some of their churches. Oral history reveals stories of non-Catholics aiding Catholic parishes in their building programs, through cash donations and by participation in church minstrel shows and suppers. In particular, one notes the sympathetic business dealings of real estate figure William Varnum Bixby of Groton, who alone was willing to sell homes and property to the Irish. As a result of this "first," to this day there remains a cluster of Catholic-owned houses on Bixby Hill in West Groton. The local press likewise occasionally reported instances of scheduling conflicts, in which Protestant congregations changed their activities to accommodate events scheduled by their Catholic neighbors.

Such signs of tolerance had to be refreshing to the otherwise second-class inhabitants of Catholic immigrant origin. Unhappily, such fair play did not become the dominant mood of the Yankees in the Nashoba Valley. Uneasiness, if not outright hatred toward Catholics, lingered on well into the twentieth century. World War I created a temporary sense of unity among all citizens, although it proved to be superficial and transient. When the euphoria of national harmony dissipated soon after the armistice, the ugly specter of the Ku Klux Klan loomed in the 1920s.

At first glance, the KKK in the Nashoba Valley presents something of an enigma. The klansman here escapes the stereotype usually associated with members of the Klan in other parts of the country. His attention was not focused on Blacks or Jews, since there were few members of those ethnic groups in the region. Nor does it seem that he was prompted by fundamentalist religious beliefs. He was too sophisticated for that, for he was typically a descendant of citizens like Groton native Charles Jacobs, "a prosperous and progressive agriculturalist" who was described as "a typical representative of the educated and brainy farmers of New England." Jacobs was an 1853 Harvard graduate, and he was active in local politics.²³ Neither was the klansman responding to a new wave of foreign arrivals, for there was no such resurgence in the Nashoba Valley after World War I. It is true that two decades earlier, some Poles and Lithuanians found jobs in the local rope and paper factories, but they represented little more than 150 families, divided

23. Biographical Review, Containing Life Sketches of Leading Citizens of Middlesex County, Massachusetts (Boston, 1898), XXVII: 446.

among Shirley, West Groton, and Pepperell. There was no imminent danger of a Catholic or a foreign takeover of valley politics. When he wrote of the 1920s, one local historian's comment on Townsend generally held true for the entire Nashoba region, namely: "In those days the local Catholic population was just large enough to avoid invisibility while small enough to lack political clout."²⁴ Nor is another historian's remark about economic factors of particular significance in the valley: "The ethnic and class tensions of Massachusetts in the 1920s, dramatized . . . in the rise of the Ku Klux Klan assemblies in central and western counties, were exacerbated by a declining economy."²⁵ Finally, one quickly rules out any peculiar Nordic immigrant involvement in the Nashoba Valley Ku Klux Klan. There were no Swedes here, as was the case in Worcester, where Scandinavians swelled the membership rosters of the hooded order.²⁶ Why then did the Klan gain a strong foothold in a rural area of east central Massachusetts?

Evidence points in two directions, one local and the other national. On the local scene, the aggressive and ambitious Father Edward Mitchell arrived in Groton in the summer of 1922, as pastor of Sacred Heart Church. This former construction worker had barely unpacked his suitcase when he publicly announced that he would erect two new Catholic churches in that traditionally Yankee village. One would replace the wooden Sacred Heart building, while the other would equip the western part of town with its own place of worship. Mitchell's arrival apparently stirred up latent and irrational fears of Catholics. Not without reason did a local newspaper in 1978 recall that the "Ku Klux Klan was unhappy with the builder of this West Groton church."²⁷ It is no wonder that the fiery pastor of Irish descent often railed from his pulpit against the local Klan.

Another local irritation to area nativists was the presence since 1908 of a parochial school at St. Anthony Parish in Shirley. One can surmise the unfavorable view toward this Catholic institution, by

24. Smith, Divinity and Dust, p. 228.

25. Brown, Massachusetts, p. 198.

26. Kevin L. Hickey, "The Immigrant Klan: A Socio-economic Profile of the KKK Membership in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1922-25," paper presented at the meeting of the American Association of Geographers, Los Angeles, April 20, 1981.

27. Times Free-Press (East Pepperell), March 1, 1978.

recalling that in this same town only a decade earlier, the Catholic faith of schoolteacher Minnie Holden created such a furor. The KKK was believed to be responsible for the parochial school fire in 1923, although no culprits were ever apprehended.

Meanwhile, the national political scene provided another powerful stimulus for the rise of the Nashoba Valley Klan. Panic gripped large segments of the nation over the prospect of a Catholic, Governor Alfred Smith of New York, seeking his party's nomination for the presidency in 1924.²⁸ Many people believed that Catholics, and especially the Irish, must be kept out of public office. The ideals of Charles Francis Adams, Jr., still held sway, in that "only the farmers of old Yankee and seemingly related backgrounds might preserve the covenant of the democracy and safeguard the future American race."²⁹ The appearance of the KKK in the valley, therefore, was provoked by the arrival of Father Mitchell, with his church construction schemes, probably by the continued presence of a parochial school, and by nativist misgivings about growing Catholic political power on the national level.

It is appropriate to consider the Klan of the Nashoba Valley in the context of all of Massachusetts, and to describe the valley KKK as it came to public attention. In his classic work on nativism, John Higham wrote: "In 1924 and 1925 the Klan fell apart."³⁰ No doubt, he meant the national scene, because his words do not apply to the Bay State, much less to the Nashoba Valley. Indeed, the scope of the Klan's influence evidently escaped another historian, who wrote: "In New England, or at least in Massachusetts, the Klan obtained no serious foothold, though it made petty demonstrations now and then."³¹ More accurate is the comment of Kenneth Jackson, who stated: "Never strong in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, the Invisible Empire won moderate success in Connecticut and Massachusetts," further noting that: "Massachusetts Klancraft was

28. Michael Williams, The Shadow of the Pope (New York, 1932), pp. 253ff.

29. Solomon, Ancestors and Immigrants, p. 31.

30. John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925 (New York, 1963).

31. Lord, Archdiocese of Boston, III: 636.

probably strongest in Worcester," just twenty-five miles south of the Nashoba Valley.³²

One researcher gives an estimate of Massachusetts Klan membership as 130,780 for the year 1925, while another offers a more conservative figure of 12,000 for the state.³³ In any case, several hundred Klansmen were active in the Nashoba Valley. The first local evidence dates from 1924, when the largest local newspaper routinely described a meeting at Townsend Harbor:

On Tuesday evening a meeting of about 150 Ku Klux Klanners was held in a field near Cooper's hall. The road was patrolled by motorcycle police apparently to keep the road open and not allow any number of people to collect to make trouble. The guard at the entrance to the field was in klansman's regalia. The police searched every machine that entered and the guard required some password or identification. The field was lighted by the headlights of about fifty autos parked there. The klansmen left quietly at about 11 o'clock.³⁴

The police consisted of three town constables, aided by deputies and probably by state police, since it was common practice to summon backup help from nearby state police barracks. Later that year, in the fall, another meeting was held, this time in one of the many pastures of the dairying community. The October gathering was announced as the last of the season, to be resumed in the spring -- implying that it was to become a permanent activity. Townsend, though consisting of three sections (Center, West, and Harbor), barely reached two thousand in population. Even allowing for some outside Klansmen, the figure of 150 at the summer rally indicates a strong local Klan presence. A local historian sadly admitted of his home town that "In the twenties, after the war had infected many with fears of things

32. Kenneth Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930 (New York, 1967), pp. 181-182.

33. Rita Breton, "Red Scare: A Study of Maine Nativism, 1919-1925," unpublished master's thesis, University of Maine, 1972, pp. 241-242.

34. Public Spirit, August 9, 1924.

foreign, and politics took its cue from the festering twins, ignorance and distrust, the town turned its back on democracy. More than a few of its leading lights took up with the Ku Klux Klan. . . ."³⁵ The mention of motorcycle police and weapons search suggest the potential for violence. But such precautions were not necessary, for there were relatively few Irish and French-Canadians in Townsend. Still, angry immigrants and their descendants, combined with fair-minded, embarrassed Protestants, along with curiosity seekers, might have combined to create an unruly crowd interfering with the Klan assembly.

The fact is that in the summer and fall of 1924, Massachusetts suffered more than one outbreak of violence. At Blackstone, Lucien Sansouci, a reporter for the Woonsocket, Rhode Island, French-language newspaper, *La Tribune*, was discovered spying on a Klan gathering. As a result, he had the letter "K" branded on his forehead and left arm, and he testified that "the marks were made by the hooded Klansmen with a heated iron and torch."³⁶ Closer to the Nashoba Valley were riots between Klansmen and anti-Klansmen in the towns of Haverhill, Lancaster, and Spencer, at the end of July, and in Upton and Worcester in October. Hurling bottles, stones, and other missiles, and the firing of guns resulted in scores of injuries, and several court cases. Governor Channing H. Cox became so alarmed that he issued an appeal to the KKK to discontinue its assemblies. He admitted the constitutional right to gather and to express their views, but he was fearful of widespread violence.³⁷ Wisely, therefore, the small towns of the Nashoba Valley, which were staffed by one or two full-time policemen and a few deputies, regularly sent for the state police whenever there was a Klan meeting.

Beyond the village of Townsend, the wealthy and sophisticated town of Groton was called the center of "Klanhood" in the Nashoba Valley. The first recorded gathering occurred on September 10, 1924, in an intervale near a river, attracting some fifty automobiles. According to one informant, local members were brazen about their

35. Smith, *Divinity and Dust*, p. 228.

36. *New York Times*, August 6, 1924.

37. *Fitchburg Sentinel*, July 30 and 31, 1924; *New York Times*, July 30, October 19 and 20, 1924; *Worcester Telegram*, October 11, 1924; Former [Massachusetts] State Troopers Monthly News Letter, January 1980, pp. 4-5.

affiliation with the Klan, and their identity was common knowledge among townspeople. Curiously, though, the Groton movement kept a low profile, at least for the time being. Hardly more was reported in the local press for the next few years. Then an article appeared in the *Boston Review* of January 22, 1927 (and quoted in the *Public Spirit*, calling Groton "one of the strongholds of the hooded order" in Massachusetts. The village became the testing-ground for the political strength of the Klan. Members from all over the state were watching the outcome of the Groton town elections in the spring of 1927. The local KKK had endorsed a full slate of candidates, even for the innocuous post of tree warden. Significantly, none of the office-seekers disclaimed Klan support, at least not in public. Rather they were "principally men who have welcomed whatever support the Klan may be able to give them." In fact, the *Boston Review* indicated: "If the Klan is successful this year, and leaders are confident of success, none but Klansmen will be tolerated in office in the future." Though KKK membership in Groton was only slightly more than one hundred, the *Review* observed: "Groton, which is one of the strongest Klan centers in Middlesex County, and one of the most popular meeting places of the hooded order, will then be heralded through the country as the real Klan pioneer town of the Commonwealth."³⁸

It is difficult to assess the election results. Klan-endorsed aspirants were defeated in their bid for selectman, school board, and tree warden. At the same time, Klan-recommended candidates did win the posts of treasurer, electric light commissioner, and two of the three constable positions. Perhaps many voters heeded the admonition of fellow townsman Frederick G. May, who urged consideration of the town's welfare above all else. May decried the *Boston Review* article as "very rank propaganda, issued in a round-about and insidious manner to alarm and coerce the electorate."³⁹ Voters did not fully endorse the Klan's choices, nor did they repudiate the Klan's candidates. Some, perhaps many, Protestants privately deplored the menace of the secret society, but they were hesitant to speak out in opposition, either in public or through the frequently-used letters' column of the local newspapers. They may have been deterred because of family involvement in the Klan, as well as the presence in

38. *Boston Review*, as cited in the *Public Spirit*, January 29, 1927.

39. Letter to the editor, *Public Spirit*, February 5, 1927.

Klan leadership of a prominent local Protestant minister, along with numerous local business and political figures.

Although the *Boston Review* asserted that most of the Klansmen who came to Groton were from out of town, the contention of the newspaper was incorrect. An eye-witness who had access to Klan members informed this author that the town's merchants and professional men were at the core of the local Klan. This is confirmed by the silence about the Klan in the *Town Diary* and in the publications of the local historical society. People connected with these documents personally knew, as friends and neighbors, many of the participants in the movement.

Toward the end of the 1920s, although the Klan had been discredited around the nation, it still held on in Townsend. On election day in September of 1928, Klansmen gathered at the municipal hall. According to a local newspaper:

Memorial hall was the scene of a stirring but peaceful Ku Klux Klan meeting. The meeting was unadvertised and is believed to be the first to be held in this hall. Scores of voters who were casting their ballots in the lower hall knew nothing of the gathering. A cross illuminated with red electric lights stood at the left of the stage.⁴⁰

The speech for the occasion was given by an unnamed Congregational minister from Revere, to an estimated throng of three hundred, a large number for the small village of Townsend. The Klan surfaced still one more time in the summer of 1931. When the Imperial Wizard from the Washington headquarters went on a tour of New England, significantly his only Massachusetts lecture was on Bayberry Hill in West Townsend. By then, however, the Klansmen had shed their hoods, as they listened to a futile plea for the rebuilding of klaverns in the Nashoba region, in preparation for the local and national election campaigns of 1932.

In its heyday, the Ku Klux Klan in the Nashoba Valley seldom indulged in physical action. An exception was the treatment of one person who was reluctant to join the Klan:

40. *Turner's Public Spirit*, September 22, 1928.

Leon Marshall, a young war veteran and member of the Odd Fellows, was persuaded to attend one Klan meeting. He refused to join. "It got to be ten o'clock," his wife Ruth remembered, "then 11 o'clock, and I started to wonder what was going on out there. Well, I'm telling you, they manhandled him pretty well because he wouldn't join up. But he wouldn't."⁴¹

Otherwise, there seems to be no surviving evidence of disorder, such as the gunplay in Haverhill and the rioting in Lancaster and other communities. Nor did the Nashoba Valley experience anything as dramatic as the huge rally in Worcester in the fall of 1924, accompanied by an airplane with a fluttering promotional banner. Opponents (who apparently were members of the Knights of Columbus) positioned sharpshooters on secluded hilltops of the city, and subsequently claimed to have shot down the plane. Klansmen insisted, however, that the crash resulted from engine trouble.⁴²

In the Groton area, the KKK trademark was harassment by way of cross-burnings and through political action. In a missive to the local paper, an enraged Irishman described an episode on Gibbet Hill in his hometown of Groton. Seeing an ignited cross there, he rushed to the scene, where he found scraps of oil-soaked burlap several hundred feet from the charred wood. Around the knoll, he found small fires glowing, consuming flammable burlap pieces. The burnings were the work of "these so-called men of the snake-in-the-grass variety, whose actions are so contemptible they hide their own faces," fumed Thomas H. Connolly.⁴³

Elsewhere, in Shirley, in the late 1920s a Polish immigrant family purchased an attractive farm near the center. No sooner had they occupied their new quarters, when one Saturday night they were startled by the sight of a blazing cross on the edge of their property.

41. Smith, Divinity and Dust, p. 229.

42. Worcester Post, October 19, 1924. The author has relied on Kevin Hickey of Assumption College for this anecdote, and he is indebted to him for providing references to the Worcester Klan. When the author went to the Worcester Public Library, he found that the microfilm for October 1924 was missing.

43. Letter to the editor, Public Spirit, March 28, 1925. Connolly's letter was the only public outcry against the Klan which was found in the pages of the local paper during the 1920s.

One of the sons (who told the author about this episode) grabbed a rifle and was about to dash out to investigate, when his father stopped him. Similar tales of cross-burnings have been related to the author by eye-witnesses in Pepperell and Groton, and some have been published in Smith's history of Townsend.

A final intimidating incident⁴⁴ may be added. Members of a prominent Catholic family of Groton once left their automobile parked in the center of town for much of the day. On their return, they found that someone had taken the small American flag and its stem that had been attached to the hood of the car. When they arrived home, they discovered the national emblem crumpled up and its small handle broken, and both pieces were stuffed into the hedge bordering the lawn. Such annoyances, perhaps petty in themselves, took on an ominous character against the backdrop of interreligious tension. Repeated instances of such harassment created a cloud of unrest in the Nashoba Valley hamlets.

The Klan's presence in the Nashoba Valley weakened the community harmony that had slowly built up over decades of adjustment and accommodation. At least three damaging effects of the Ku Klux Klan can be identified. The *Worcester Telegram's* characterization of turmoil in Upton in 1924 was applicable to the Nashoba Valley. The Klan pitted "neighbor against neighbor, men who before the advent of the Ku Klux Klan were fast friends, tonight hurled charges at each other. . . ."⁴⁴ As an octogenarian told the author of this article, "It was the worst thing that ever happened to Groton. It divided the town into enemies: Catholics vs. Protestants. You were either a Catholic or a Klansman in the minds of many." Creating the illusion of numerical strength, the Klan often singled out prominent Protestants as members, something difficult for the Catholics to verify. In its own way, this insidious practice created at least minor rifts among Protestants themselves.

Klan-engendered unrest also dampened the spirit of interreligious romance, a second discernible negative result. Despite initial Catholic-Protestant aloofness in the Nashoba Valley between Irish and French-Canadian immigrants in regard to the Yankee natives, the circumstance of proximity led to at least a few mixed marriages each year. Though such unions generally remained small in number for several generations, there was a slight increase over the

44. Worcester Telegram, October 11, 1924.

years just prior to World War I. In the 1920s though, at the height of Ku Klux Klan demonstrations, it became socially undesirable for Protestants and Catholics to intermarry. Somewhat arbitrarily dividing the pertinent fifteen-year interval from 1919 to 1933 into pre-Klan, Klan, and post-Klan periods, the historian finds interesting statistics for marriages among the four Catholic parishes of that era. From 1919 to 1923 (the pre-Klan era), there were a total of 212 marriages, with 59 between Catholics and Protestants, representing 27.8 percent of the marriages. During the Klan years, from 1924 to 1928, the percentage of mixed marriages decreased to 17.9 percent (34 out of a total of 189). From 1929 to 1933, the post-Klan period, the percentage again increased, to 27.9 percent (57 out of 204).⁴⁵ There is nothing in the history of the Nashoba Valley to account for the noticeable decline in interreligious weddings, except to attribute this drop to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, and the increase in tension between area Catholics and Protestants.

A third, curious and unintended, effect of the Klan in the valley concerns the Groton Fair. Dating back for several generations, this annual event featured the finest of fruits and vegetables, displays of prized livestock and handicraft, along with horse-racing and other amusements. It happened that the Ku Klux Klan gained control of the sponsoring organization, the Farmers and Mechanics Club, and then indulged in an overt act of prejudice by ousting an Irish Catholic who had long been an official. Soon thereafter, increasing numbers began to boycott the festival, refusing to exhibit or even to attend. By 1931, the Groton Fair ceased, never again to be revived.⁴⁶

Here and there a voice against the white-sheeted society rang out. In nearby Whalom, an Episcopal clergyman, Reverend Sherril B. Smith, earned a headline on page one of the Fitchburg daily: "PREACHER DECLARES Klan BREEDS RELIGIOUS AND RACIAL ANIMOSITY AND FAILS TO UPHOLD CONSTITUTION." In Leominster, also nearby, the town publication assumed a courageous, though uncommon, editorial stance against the Klan, which was described as "preaching sound Americanism, tolerance and justice, and all the time the opposite course is being taken." A state official appealed to the very people from whom the Klan was

45. Parish Marriage Registers: St. Mary, Ayer; St. Anthony, Shirley; St. Joseph, Pepperell; Sacred Heart, Groton.

46. William Wolkovich-Valkavicius, Immigrants and Yankees, p. 140.

recruiting members. "It is up to the white, gentile, Protestant people," warned B. Loring Young, Massachusetts Speaker of the House, "to fight the Ku Klux Klan . . . tooth and nail until it is defeated."⁴⁷

In Groton and its environs, nevertheless, the Klan found a large following. From the date of its charter in 1655, the old colonial town long clung to the Puritan sense of divine election, and to the sentiment of English ethnic superiority. After nearly two centuries, the coming of Catholic immigrants to the homogeneous Protestant Nashoba Valley provoked hostility. Gradually, a small number of natives showed tolerance that developed into friendship with the new arrivals. Yet an ugly layer of ill-will lay dormant over many decades, coming to the surface in the resurgence of nativism after World War I. Now, a half century later, a healthy ecumenical attitude touches the majority of Nashoba Valley residents. A climate of civic and social equality permeates much of the fabric of this once exclusively Yankee haven.

47. Fitchburg Sentinel, September 24, 1923; Leominster Daily Enterprise, October 29, 1923; Worcester Post, September 29, 1923.