

## **Brunswick, Brewster, and the Klan**

**On June 22, 1916, the front page headline of the Bowdoin College Orient read “Ku Klux Riders Terrify Campus” The article began:**

**“Last evening as the Commencement play came to an end, the audience was startled by terrific war whoops from the further end of the campus, and half a hundred men, clad in the uniform of the famous Ku Klux Klan of the south, dashed across the campus, headed by several men on horseback. It was members of the class of 1911, celebrating their fifth reunion, appearing for the first time in their uniforms.**

**At their head was the “grand wizard of the invisible empire,” William H. Clifford of Lewiston, and he carried a huge blazing cross. The uniforms were striking – long flowing robes of white, while on the breast of each man was emblazoned the southern fiery cross. The men were masked so that their features were indistinguishable and it was some time before the alumni as a whole knew what class it was. The idea was based on Thomas A Dixon’s “Clansman”, which recently attracted so much attention when it was dramatized for the moving pictures under the title “The Birth of a Nation.” “**

**The Klan was back, and spreading. But had it really been away? Hate lingers, festers, sends out new roots, finds new victims. There is always someone “other”, someone to hate, and as one Klan leader from the 1920s said ”You can make a lot of money off hate.”**

**By the early 1920s the Klan was growing rapidly, not only in the American South, but in the West, the Midwest, and the Northeast. The targets of their hate varied – in the south it was people of color, in some cities it was the Jewish population, in the Midwest it was Irish and Polish Catholics, and in the Northeast it was the Catholics – French, Irish, and Italian.**

**The New York World, in 1921, said of the Klan: ”Today it is primarily anti-Jew, anti Catholic, anti Alien, and it is spreading more than twice as fast through the North and West as it is growing in the South.”**

**James Weldon Johnson, of the NAACP said of the Klan’s growth that it was “commercializing race hatred” and enabling their staff to “seize the hate market.”**

**Klan organizers each were given a district, a sales kit, and a list of potential members. First contacted were the Protestant ministers, then the local**

**officials and police. There were lectures and talks with Klan speakers usually preceded by local pastors.**

**The Klan was set up as a pyramid scheme. Each new member paid a \$10 fee, and then were sold robes and other regalia. The sales force worked on commission, with a large percentage of the funds moving to the top leaders. By 1921 the Klan was adding apx. 3,500 members a day, and taking in apx \$50,000 per week.**

**When white (only) women won the right to vote in 1920, a women's KKK was created, finding another growth market for the Klan.**

**In 1924 a newspaper editor in Indiana wrote that “the political class, the evangelical supporters, the silent editors and pillars of the community are all allowing the Klan to grow.”**

**The Chicago Tribune wrote that “it came about that American citizens in Indiana were judged by their religion, condemned because of their race, illegally punished because of their opinions, hounded because of their personal conduct, and a state of terror was substituted for a state of law.”**

**The Klan leader in Indiana, D C Stephenson, claimed that he could make far more money from the**

**renewable hate of everyday white people than he could ever make as an honest businessman or member of Congress. After accumulating riches and power, Stephenson went to prison for life, for financial crime, rape, and murder. One writer said of him: “the man they had pledged fealty to and were effectively governed by was a rapist, a murderer, a drunk, and a dictator. He was not a man of God but a fraud. He was no protector of women’s virtue but a violent predator. If he embodied the highest character traits of one hundred percent Americans, what did that say about them?”**

**In 1922 the first open Klansman was elected to the U.S. Senate (from Dallas). In 1923 there were Klan backed governors in Indiana, Colorado, and Oregon. There were 15 Klan backed U.S. senators, and 75 Klan backed members of the House of Representatives.**

**The Klan came to Maine in the early 1920s. The leading organizer in Maine, F Eugene Farnsworth, said “This country was not built by Native Born Americans, but by Anglo-Saxon races and blood, not the undesirable aliens who are unable to demonstrate their ability and willingness to speak the English language, absorb the Anglo Saxon ideals**

**upon which our government is founded, and live according to the standards of the White Race.”**

**On December 19, 1923, Farnsworth came to the Brunswick Town Hall to speak on “Americanism and the KKK”. On the entrance ticket he is described as “A man who is fighting for clean homes, clean politics, and a clean State.” On the reverse of the ticket there was a questionnaire asking ”Are you a Protestant native-born white citizen of the United States? If so, will you help in building an organization to preserve our national heritage?”.**

**The Brunswick Record reported that the town hall was comfortably filled with an estimated crowd of 800, (Brunswick’s population at the time was 6500) and goes on to say that “Mr. Farnsworth proved to be a very fine speaker and impressed his audience greatly with some of his arguments. He gave an outline of the Klan and what had already been accomplished, and told of plans for the future.”**

**Fred Mosely, of Brunswick, wrote in April 1924 “The real issue is Americanism against Romanism. Thinking, intelligent people do not believe it is for the best interests of the people to place Catholics in office. If a person is not 100% American, he is not American. Let us elect good people to office.”**

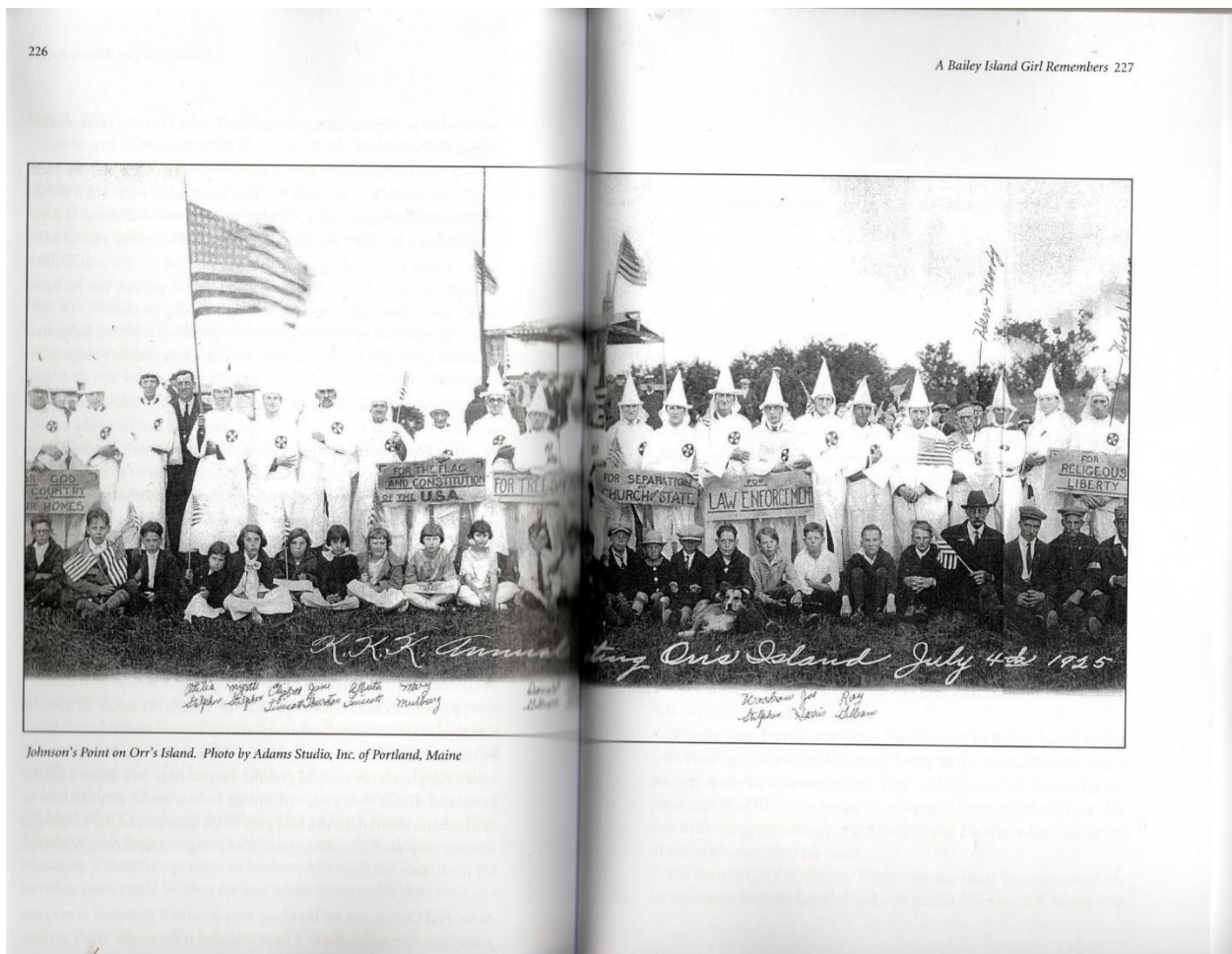
**Two months after the Brunswick talk, the Orrs Island Ladies Circle of the Methodist Church held a sociable and supper. The Klan attended in a body, and the local newspaper reported that after the supper was served the Ladies carried a large pot of coffee and dozens of doughnuts to the Klan lodge for a late lunch. The Klan had put up a burning cross which “could be seen from almost any point on the island.” The Klansmen stood in front of the cross and sang “Onward Christian Soldiers”. The paper goes on to say that “the music was loudly applauded by a large number of people who were in attendance at the supper at the Methodist Episcopal vestry.”**

**The Brunswick Record reported on Orr’s Island “no one knows how many have joined the order here, but from the attendance at the meetings it would seem that 65% of the adult residents are affiliated with the Klan.”**

**Local resident Charlie York said “The Klan came to our town in 1924. I joined that. I never enjoyed any lodge so much as I did the Klan at first. It had the principle of brotherly love for feller members and they was a high moral tone to it.”**

**In 1925 the Klan had a picnic at Johnson’s Point on Orr’s Island after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. In Klan**

**costume, they were photographed holding signs saying “For the Flag and Constitution of the USA”, “For Law Enforcement”, “For Separation of Church and State” , “For religious Freedom” and their motto ”Service for humanity, home, country, and God.”**



**Charlie York reports that about 100 Klansmen were there, mostly from Bailey and Orr’s islands. He goes**

**on to say “I was in charge of one booth where you could buy three baseballs for a nickel and try to hit an image of the Pope at the back of the tent.”**

**The Klan was gaining power in Maine. In 1922 the Governor of Maine, Percival Baxter, called the Klan “an insult and affront to American citizens”, continuing “I believe people prefer the light of day to deeds of darkness”.**

**Both Republican and Democratic party leaders were steering clear of the Klan, but in Ralph Brewster, a graduate of Bowdoin and Harvard, and a practicing lawyer and legislator, the Klan found a candidate that they could work with. Brewster was in favor of one of the Klan’s top goals in Maine – the adoption of what was then called a “Blaine Amendment”.**

**While serving in the U. S. House of Representatives Mainer James Blaine had introduced a constitutional amendment which would have prohibited direct government aid to educational institutions with religious affiliation, a move primarily aimed at Catholic parochial schools. The amendment failed to pass the US Senate, but has since been adopted in 37 states. Maine was not one of those states, but**



**earlier hearings had shown support for the bill from the Klan, as well as Baptist and Methodist ministers. Klan leader Farnsworth predicted that the Klan would elect the next governor, stating “We will not permit Catholics on the school board any more.”**

**Brewster had served as a fairly progressive legislator, supporting equal suffrage, prohibition, and was a deeply religious man. In 1923 he sponsored a bill seeking state control of Maine water powers, a bill heavily opposed by large landowners, especially Great Northern Paper.**

**Governor Baxter wanted the water issue to be the central issue of the upcoming election for governor, but Brewster saw a way forward by making the school funding issue his central issue. Brewster did not have, or seek, support from the state’s Republican leadership. He ran in the primary as an outsider, with wide support from the Klan, and won the primary after some last minute vote irregularities.**

**Now Brewster was running as the Republican candidate for governor. Governor Baxter gave a speech saying that he “did not question the good citizenship, the loyalty, or the Americanism” of the Klan, further stating that he had “many friends on**

**both sides of the issue.” When asked about Brewster a spokesperson for the Republican State Committee said that Brewster “stands by the side of the Fiery Cross”.**

**Brewster won the election, as did Klan mayors in Saco, Westbrook, Rockland, and a Klan-supported mayor (Allen Irish) in Bath. All of the Klan candidates on the ballot in Brewster’s home town of Dexter won.**

**1924 was essentially the high point for the Klan in Maine, as the Klan collapsed both locally and nationally under public pressure, lawsuits, and internal financial illegalities. Maine’s Farnsworth, the state leader, resigned from his leadership role in 1926 after being accused of charging women twice as much as men for memberships, signing up Canadians as well, and keeping \$4 of every \$10 membership fee. National Klan leaders were caught up in highly publicized criminal cases of financial fraud, rape, kidnapping, and murder.**

**On Orr’s Island the Klan dropped out of sight around 1926. Janet Freeman Baribeau writes about Bailey and Orr’s Island:**

**Feelings began to change when the dues they had to send to national headquarters seemed way too high, and the Klan started telling them how they**

**should vote in the presidential election that year. Suspicions were aroused, and they were beginning to think that maybe the Klan might be some sort of a racket. Many of the men came to feel ashamed of their association with the Klan, and when they were approached really didn't want to talk about it."**

**Ralph Brewster went on to serve two terms as governor, three terms in the U.S. House, and two terms in the U. S. Senate, where he worked closely with Senator Joseph McCarthy (a Roman Catholic with whom he shared anti-Communist ideals) and came to be known as "Wiretap Brewster" by the Democrats. Brewster would never admit being a member of the Klan, but ex-governor Baxter accused him of Klan membership, and of offering Baxter 25,000 Klan votes, which he "absolutely controlled", if Baxter would enter the governor's race while Brewster ran for Senate. Brewster lost re-election for the Senate in 1952.**

**In the 1950s Hannah Arendt was writing about the Nuremberg trials, and what she called the "banality of evil". She wrote that many of history's greatest evils were done by ordinary people, who accepted the ideas and information given to them by their leaders and the media. She wrote that the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi**

**or the convinced Communist, but the people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction no longer holds.**

**On January 20, 2025, the day of the presidential inauguration, the Proud Boys marched through the streets of Washington chanting “Whose streets? Our Streets!”**

**Gary Lawless**

**Sources**

**Janet Freeman Baribeau**

**A Bailey Island Girl Remembers**

**Harold Clifford**

**Charlie York: Maine Fisherman**

**Timothy Egan**

**A Fever in the Heartland**

**The Ku Klux Klan's plot to take over America**

**And the woman who stopped them**

**John Sysett**

**Principle and Expediency**

**The Ku Klux Klan and Ralph Owen Brewster in 1924**

**David Vermette**

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