

Kansas was first state to boot KKK

Ban adopted a century ago to prevent business

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TOPEKA, Kan. – Carrying burning crosses and advocating white supremacy, more than 1,200 members of the Ku Klux Klan – many wearing hooded white robes – paraded in July 1923 in downtown Topeka, Kansas, The Topeka Daily Capital reported.

The Klan was rising in popularity in the state. But nearly 18 months later, it took a hit from which it wouldn't recover: Kansas became the first state in the nation to ban the far-right hate group from operating as a business. Other states then followed suit.

Friday will mark the 100th anniversary of the Kansas Supreme Court's Jan. 10, 1925, ruling that the Klan couldn't do business in the Sunflower State without a charter, which it lacked.

The Klan – initially formed by Confederate Army veterans soon after the Civil War to control newly freed Black men and their friends – was reestablished in 1915 as a fraternal group for white, native-born, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, David Chalmers wrote in his 1965 book, "Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan."

The Klan acted benevolently in public, including donating money to charitable causes. But members could be violent under cover of night, including using a whip to lash a Catholic mayor who spoke against the group in southeast Kansas. They spoke and acted against Black people, Jews, Roman Catholics and immigrants, as well as against scandalous sexual behavior, bootlegging, illegal drugs, nightclubs and graft, according to Chalmers.

Klan membership grew quickly after World War I. In Kansas, the group began recruiting in the southeast part of the state, where labor troubles in coal mines and on railroads had brought discontent, Chalmers wrote.

William Allen White was paying attention, said Kansas author Beverley Olson Buller, a retired teacher and librarian who has written four books. in-



Kansas was the first state in the nation to ban the Ku Klux Klan, and this Friday will mark the 100th anniversary of the Kansas Supreme Court's Jan. 10, 1925, ruling that the group couldn't do business in the state.

EVERT NELSON/TOPEKA CAPITAL-JOURNAL FILE

cluding a biography of White.

White, who turned 56 in 1924, had been owner and publisher since 1895 of The Emporia Gazette, where he became nationally famous.

White took note when the Klan began recruiting in 1921 in Kansas and kept in touch with his friend Gov. Henry Allen, who owned the Wichita Beacon, regarding what they could do to stop that organization, Buller said. Allen announced in November 1922 that Attorney General C.B. Griffith had initiated a lawsuit against the Klan alleging it was operating illegally in Kansas without a charter.

The Klan's rise in Kansas greatly concerned White, who called it a "hooded gang of masked fanatics, ignorant and tyrannical in their ruthless oppression," Buller said. At its peak in 1924, Klan membership in Kansas rose to nearly 100,000.

Kansans in the 1924 gubernatorial election found themselves faced with a choice between Republican Ben Paulen and Democrat Jonathan M. Davis, who both had Klan ties, she said.

White said in his first editorial after

buying the Gazette that he sought no political offer, Buller said. That was a break from the general practice of other newspaper editors of the time, who often ran for office. But White felt so concerned about the spread of the Klan in Kansas that he decided to run for governor as an independent.

He wanted to give people who opposed the Klan a chance to vote for someone who felt as they did, Buller said: "He was running for a principle, not an office." Winning a 1923 Pulitzer Prize for a 1922 editorial may also have increased White's confidence and helped convince him to run, she said.

White announced his candidacy on Sept. 20, 1924, about six weeks before the general election. To get on the ballot, White needed about 2,500 signatures. He got roughly 10,000, she said, adding that he didn't seek signatures in his home county of Lyon County.

"He didn't want anyone saying, 'Oh well, they're all your friends,'" Buller said.

Operating on a bare-bones budget and spending a total of \$474.60, White then gave 104 speeches over six weeks

while traveling 2,783 miles, generally riding in a car driven by his son.

He saved money by staying at the homes of fellow newspaper editors and eating his meals at those homes, Buller said.

White initially focused on one topic – getting rid of the Klan – but put forth a platform of issues he supported in October 1924, Buller said. He also asked Kansans to vote for other specific candidates who were anti-Klan, including Griffith.

White appeared in October 1924 on the cover of Time magazine. A political cartoon by Rollin Kirby in The New York World titled "A Real American Goes Hunting" portrays White carrying a rifle and chasing robed Klansmen.

When the results came in, White had placed third with about 150,000 votes behind Davis, who had about 183,000, and Paulen, who had about 323,000. But White came away feeling like a winner because Kansans elected other anti-Klan candidates he asked them to support, Buller said. Those included incumbent AG Griffith, who had filed the case that led to the January 1925 Supreme Court ruling.

Two months after that ruling, Kansas lawmakers defeated a bill that would have allowed the Klan to do business in Kansas without a charter. The state charter board then refused to give the Klan a charter later that year. White declared the Klan dead in Kansas in May 1926, writing that what had once been "a thriving and profitable hate factory and bigotorium" had now been "laughed into a busted community."

In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the Klan's appeal of the Kansas case, saying no question of federal law was involved. By that time, the Klan was on its way out. Its national membership plummeted from more than 3 million in the mid-1920s to no more than several hundred thousand by 1928.

The Klan hasn't gone away completely. As recently as June 2015, the Capital-Journal reported earlier, Topekans received fliers from the Klan.

Still, a century ago, "there is no doubt that Mr. White saved our state from being overrun by the Klan, as happened in many other states," Buller said.