

Sisterhood of Supremacy:
The Ideology, Activities, and World of the Women's Ku Klux Klan, 1923-1930

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Few images capture American white supremacy more vividly than men in white robes gathered beneath a fiery cross, a spectacle of hatred, power, and intimidation. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) made violence both a public ritual and a form of theatre; hooded processions wound through small towns, vigilante night rides invaded homes, and the glow of a burning cross lit the sky as both warning and declaration. Yet the Klan's power was not solely a display of masculine violence. Between 1923 and 1930, women also organized under the banner of white supremacy, forming the Women's Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), a group separate from but ideologically aligned with the men's order. Sometimes meeting in secret, sometimes appearing in public, and donning white cloaks of their own, the WKKK propagated white Protestant supremacy through parades, rallies, festivals, religious propaganda, and campaigns to reform public schools. They spread Klan culture into the mainstream through gossip networks and community events, while portraying themselves as the moral guardians of America. In doing so, Klanswomen helped shift the Klan's influence; white supremacy was no longer sustained only through overt displays of terror, but also through everyday acts of civic engagement, domestic influence, and moral framing. Significantly, the WKKK operated as a space where women could assert agency and participate in the public sphere, by using established gender norms to legitimize and extend the Klan's extremist ideology.

The emergence of the WKKK occurred within a historically male-dominated context. The original Klan, founded in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, was created by Southern males seeking to reassert their political, economic, and social supremacy in response to the newly gained rights of Black Americans following the Civil War.¹ The Klan functioned as political and social terrorists; its members utilized violence, lynching, night rides, public humiliation, and campaigns of political intimidation to suppress Black political participation and restore white supremacy.² Klan activity largely diminished in 1871 and 1872 in response to federal intervention. However, the organization left behind powerful legacies that

¹ Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9.

² Johnathan Bryant, "Ku Klux Klan in the Reconstruction Era," in *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Georgia Southern University, 2020).

would be reimagined and redeployed during the Klan's national resurgence in the early twentieth century.³

Women were barred from membership in the Reconstruction-era Klan, but they played crucial roles in the broader ecosystem of white supremacist politics. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, women participated in Klan activity through unofficial Klan auxiliary groups and Protestant patriotic societies.⁴ A second iteration of the male KKK was chartered in 1915. Due to a rise female political activism and the ratification of women's suffrage with the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, male Klan leaders recognized that women could be strategically mobilized to spread Klan ideology, and their membership promised additional revenue through initiation fees and dues.⁵ Consequently, the KKK convened representatives of women's patriotic organizations in Washington, D.C. in June 1923, and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan was officially chartered on June 10, 1923 in Little Rock, Arkansas.⁶ The WKKK enrolled a charter membership of approximately 125,000 women, largely composed of wives, sisters, and mothers of Klansmen as well as all members of preexisting women's auxiliary and patriotic societies. The WKKK formally operated for seven years, until 1930, and chartered chapters in every continental state of the United States, including the Canal Zone and Alaska.⁷ A central element of this organization was its secrecy, including high levels of confidentiality surrounding meetings, rituals, and plans, balanced by public-facing actions and parades to promote their agenda and assert their local presence.

Traditional cultural and scholarly narratives often assume that women's activism is progressive in nature; however, the WKKK demonstrates that women's formal organizing can also serve extremist,

³ For comprehensive historical scholarship on the first Ku Klux Klan, see also Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Harper and Row, 1971) and, David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Duke University, 1987).

⁴ There is limited historical scholarship on these organizations, given a lack of primary sources, oral history records, their informal nature, and varying levels of secrecy. However, Blee discusses a few of these organizations in her book on pages 25-28, specifically highlighting: Ladies of the Invisible Empire, Queens of the Golden Mask, the Grand League of Protestant Women, and White American Protestants.

⁵ Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (University of California Press, 2009), 20-28. Chapter 1 of Blee's book, especially the subsections "Rebirth of the Klan" and "Organizing Klanswomen" contain detailed descriptions of the KKK's internal power conflicts, and the formation of the WKKK.

⁶ Blee, *Women of the Klan*: 28.

⁷ Blee, *Women of the Klan*: 31.

reactionary causes. Operating within the male dominated network of the KKK, women could only participate in this world by aligning themselves with dominant gender norms. Their Klan activities had to be framed as an extension of their duties as wives, mothers, and moral guardians. In doing so, they transformed the influence of Klan ideology: they brought it into new social spheres, domestic spaces, and community institutions, helping to normalize and mainstream it. In this way, Klanswomen exercised a form of power. Though constrained by feminine gendered expectations, they leveraged these same expectations to their advantage: accessing spaces, networks, and roles that male Klan members could not. They presented themselves as virtuous, self-sacrificing mothers committed to “saving” the nation. This moral framing allowed them to seep Klan ideology into everyday life: church groups, schools, charity work, and the home. Because men and women occupied different social worlds and held different forms of cultural authority, women’s activism made Klan ideology both more palatable and pervasive.

Significantly, participation in the WKKK also provided women with an opportunity to cultivate and reaffirm a manufactured identity: that of the righteous white, Protestant woman whose purpose extended beyond personal or family interests to the imagined health of the nation. This identity was sustained not only through ideological alignment but through the Klan’s world-building: constructing a realm defined by organizational structures, rituals, social networks, and allegiance to a greater cause. Therefore, through examination of the WKKK’s beliefs, activities, and world-construction, I argue that white women’s participation in the WKKK was a gendered strategy of power: by mobilizing traditional ideals of femininity, Klanswomen exercised agency within a changing sociopolitical landscape and expanded the reach of white supremacist ideology.

The WKKK remains underexplored in historical scholarship. Sociologist Katherine Blee pioneered this field, exploring the intersection of gender, race, and reactionary politics. In journal articles that predate her monograph, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (1991), Blee argues that the male Klan constructed women’s oppression as a result of threats from immigrants, Catholics, and Jews, rather than as a consequence of patriarchy itself. Blee identifies a central contradiction in the WKKK’s gender politics: women were offered a form of empowerment through public activism and

moral leadership, yet this empowerment was conditioned to their patriarchal role.⁸ She also argues that Klanswomen cannot be understood as mere auxiliaries or passive participants in the second Klan, because they were active agents who participated in the white supremacist movement.⁹ Building on these arguments, Blee's monograph, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, provides an overview of the WKKK's history, ideology, structure, and activities. This book also includes some of the only oral histories ever conducted with Klanswomen. Blee examines the gendered political symbols present in both the male and female Klans of the 1920s and analyzes WKKK operations through a detailed case study of Indiana Klanswomen.

Subsequent scholarship has drawn heavily on Blee's framework while extending it in new directions. William Pinar and graduate researchers build upon her analysis to argue that Klanswomen employed gender-specific strategies distinct from the male organization's reliance on violence and intimidation.¹⁰ These works emphasize how the WKKK provided women with avenues for political participation in a moment when the Suffrage and Temperance movements had recently legitimized women's presence in public life. Other scholars highlight the organization's complex agenda: WKKK members advocated for women's rights and political participation while perpetuating white supremacy, nativism, and antisemitism.¹¹

The historiography of the Women's Ku Klux Klan reveals a significant gap in scholarly understanding of how and what the organization provided for its members: how it created opportunities and spaces that were not previously available in the public sphere, how members participated in world building, and what it offered women socially, culturally, and politically. Because the WKKK has received

⁸ Kathleen M. Blee, "Gender Ideology and the Role of Women in the 1920s Klan Movement," *Sociological Spectrum* 7, no. 1 (1987): 73-97.

⁹ Kathleen M. Blee, "Women in the 1920s' Ku Klux Klan Movement," *Feminist Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991): 57-77.

¹⁰ To read scholarship of this perspective, see William F. Pinar, "White Women in the Ku Klux Klan," *The Gender of Racial Politics and Violence in America* 163, 555-619 and Kelli R. Kerbawy, "Knights in White Satin: Women of the Ku Klux Klan." Master's Thesis, Marshall University, 2007.

¹¹ For WKKK scholarship focused on its exclusionary progressivism, see Ellis Hall, "A Legacy of Fire: Alma Bridwell White, the Second Wave Klan and Complexities of Religion, Race and Feminism." Master's Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2025 and Nancy Clydelle Dixon, "The Women Behind the Hoods: An In-Depth Look at the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, its Leaders, and the Appropriation of Feminism." Master's Thesis, Western Illinois University, 2018.

limited academic attention and is often examined only in relation to the male Klan, historians have frequently overlooked the distinct implications for Klanswomen themselves. Though I seek to build upon existing scholarship by Blee and others, I extend their work by analyzing the WKKK as a national organization rather than offering a single-state case study. Doing so provides a sense of how Klanswomen across the country engaged in the WKKK's project, promoting supremacist ideology, mobilizing gendered strategies of power, and accessing forms of civic participation.

My project also examines the WKKK as a site of reactionary world building, a space in which a highly constructed white Protestant womanhood identity was both imagined and enacted. Rather than analyzing the WKKK's relationship to the male Klan, I approach it as a distinct environment for women. This framework allows me to explore the benefit and incentives the organization offered its members: an extremist space that provided forms of opportunity and agency they often could not access elsewhere. Participation in the WKKK enabled women to access leadership roles and engage in white supremacy activity based upon their prescribed femininity. Accordingly, I ask: How did membership in the Women of the Ku Klux Klan offer opportunities for women to exhibit agency through their gender? How did Klanswomen construct their racial and gender identity through their activities in the WKKK? Did the WKKK function as a hate group or as something more invasive: a fabricated world, a space of agency, community, and public participation of supremacy? And how are the legacies of the WKKK present within later conservative female movements? Addressing these questions is essential to understanding how white women both shaped and were shaped by the Klan's ideology, and how their participation complicates traditional narratives of female activism and oppression in the early twentieth century.

“A Great Patriotic Order of American Women”¹²

The WKKK was an ideological successor to a long tradition of white women's conservative activism. Beginning in the 1890s, many elite white Southern women participated in Confederate memorial associations and women's auxiliary groups that shaped the “Lost Cause” narrative, a post-civil

¹² WKKK, *The Truth about the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 6.

war myth portraying the Confederacy as heroic and honorable, downplaying the role of slavery, and blaming the war on states' rights.¹³ By centering their efforts on creating monuments and educational materials, they reinforced white supremacy through cultural and civic means rather than direct violence.¹⁴

This tradition of moral activism expanded through the Temperance and Suffrage movements of the early twentieth century. Organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) framed political engagement as "patriotic duty" necessary to protect the home.¹⁵ This reform was often rooted in nativism; white activists frequently portrayed alcohol consumption as a trait of European immigrants that threatened Protestant American values. Similarly, many white suffragists marginalized women of color, arguing that granting women the right to vote would preserve white political power.¹⁶ By participating in these earlier movements, white Protestant women developed organizational, leadership, and public speaking skills. The WKKK emerged out of this cultural and organizational groundwork, utilizing the "moral guardian" framework to blend white supremacist ideology with the language of faith, family, and public morality.

Emerging in 1915, a second wave of the Ku Klux Klan evolved from a loose collection of Reconstruction-era groups into a national organization with formal recruitment and hierarchical structures.¹⁷ Central to the Klan's resurgence was its broadened definition of the "enemy." Whereas the original Klan primarily targeted Black Americans, the 1920s Klan directed its hostility toward anyone

¹³ Karen L. Cox and John David Smith, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (University Press of Florida, 2019), 2-3.

¹⁴ For discussion of white women's role in creating and spreading the "Lost Cause" narrative, see the groundbreaking novel: Karen L. Cox and John David Smith, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (University Press of Florida, 2019).

¹⁵ To read more about women and their role in the Temperance Movement, see Erin M. Masson, "The Women's Christian Temperance Union 1874-1898: Combating Domestic Violence," 3 *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice* 3, no.1 (1997): 162-188 and Melissa Strong, "Women and the Temperance Movement." Digital Public Library of America, 2018.

¹⁶ To learn more about the implications of racism within the Suffrage Movement, see Cathleen D. Cahil, *How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement: Recasting the Vote* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020) and Tamar A. Alexanian, "Black Women & Women's Suffrage: Understanding the Perception of the Nineteenth Amendment Through the Pages of the Chicago Defender," *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 29, no. 63 (2022), specifically page 64.

¹⁷ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 17-20.

considered “un-American,” including Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and other nonwhite or non-Protestant groups.¹⁸ Male Klan leaders also recognized that women’s growing presence of activism made them valuable allies for disseminating the Klan’s message. Furthermore, their membership also promised additional revenue through dues and initiation fees.¹⁹ In 1923, these strategic considerations culminated in the establishment of Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK). Its membership drew hundreds of thousands of white Protestant women from diverse social classes and regions across the country.

As white women’s political activism widened in the early twentieth century, the WKKK adapted these currents for its own purposes. Analyzing the group’s hierarchy and ideology reveals how Klanswomen utilized concepts of traditional femininity to espouse white supremacist ideology. To explore the group’s structure and stated beliefs, this section draws from several documents produced by the organization, including a pamphlet titled *The Truth About The Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, the lengthy internally circulated *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* document, a pamphlet titled *Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, and a pamphlet titled *America for Americans: As Interpreted by the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, which contains the “Creed of Klanswomen.” All of the documents, with the exception of the *Constitution and Laws*, are undated but attributed to being published by the WKKK. Although their precise publication dates are unclear, they were likely produced between 1923 and 1930, during the organization’s official operating years. Moreover, they were intended for Klans members only, reflecting the WKKK’s culture of secrecy and exclusivity.

The pamphlet titled *The Truth About the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* reveals the organization’s efforts to justify its existence through appeals to patriotism and gendered duty. The pamphlet narrates the history of the WKKK’s founding but is notably the only WKKK document that directly addresses both Klanswomen and Klansmen. It calls for “Klansmen! Klanswomen! Stand firm,” suggesting that it was

¹⁸ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 17-20.

¹⁹ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 20-28. Chapter 1 of Blee’s book, especially the subsections “Rebirth of the Klan” and “Organizing Klanswomen” contain detailed descriptions of the KKK’s internal power conflicts, and the formation of the WKKK.

intended for an audience of all Klan members, not solely women.²⁰ This audience reveals a particular strategic intention: to present the WKKK as a counterpart to the men's organization. By acknowledging both genders, the pamphlet reassures male Klansmen of women's loyalty while simultaneously validating women's involvement as a moral and civic duty. The pamphlet describes the WKKK as "a great patriotic order of American women," who have the responsibility to defend Protestant values, while "side by side with their husbands, fathers, and brothers are driven toward their common goal" of upholding white supremacy.²¹ This frames women's activism not as independent leadership but as an extension of male authority. It also redefines traditional femininity to include public, organized action. Thus, *The Truth About the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* reveals that WKKK identity was constructed a paradox: it empowered women through the very structures of white supremacy and patriarchy that confined them.

The *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* is another rich source to understand WKKK's organizational structure and hierarchy. It includes a creed (known as "Kreed," among the Klan) a preamble, and twenty-four articles outlining the organization's purposes, membership qualifications, officer roles, symbols, and amendment procedures. The WKKK restricted entry to "a white female Gentile person, a native-born citizen of the United States of America...a believer in the tenets of the Christian religion," thereby institutionalizing racial, religious, and national exclusivity as the foundation of belonging.²² Moreover, women connected to the Reconstruction-era Klan, through their family or peripheral support, were exempt from the \$10 initiation "donation," emphasizing the importance of heritage and the organization's imagined lineage, inscribing further hierarchies even among those who qualified for membership.²³

²⁰ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Truth about the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, Box 1, Women of the Ku Klux Klan collection, MS3686, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

²¹ WKKK, *The Truth about the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 6.

²² Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 6 January 1927, Box: 2, Folder: 3. Ku Klux Klan collection, SPEC-113. Special Collections Repository, Ball State University Libraries.

²³ WKKK, *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 11. According to the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank, \$10 USD in 1927 equates to \$185.66 USD in 2025. Women of all economic classes joined this organization, but it is significant to note the required dues, which may have served as a barrier to entry for women without these economic means.

The WKKK modeled its hierarchy closely after that of the men's Klan. It established a legislative body composed of top-ranking officers and delegates from each realm and province. Sixteen imperial officers governed the national organization, led by the Imperial Commander, the supreme executive authority. Realms were subdivided into provinces, which contained individual Klans, creating a highly structured, bureaucratic network of power. Moreover, the Constitution defined the outside world as "the Alien World," and all nonmembers as "Aliens."²⁴ They used the term "Invisible Empire," to signify the WKKK's universal jurisdiction and its "secret work and workings."²⁵ This language underscores an entrenched "us versus them" mentality central to the group's worldview. The creation and use of a constitution constructs a disciplined form of womanhood: an identity rooted and governed by duty, secrecy, and service.

Given this organizational background, two pamphlets further our understanding of WKKK ideology and ideals. The pamphlet, *America for Americans: As Interpreted by the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, articulates an exclusionary ideology by blending patriotic history and Christian moralism. Structured around subheadings such as "Proud of Our Heritage," "Great and Glorious America," and "Not Refuge of Other Lands," the text retells American history as a sacred inheritance under threat from foreign influences.²⁶ The document presents figures like the Pilgrims, Boone, and Lincoln as moral ancestors whose achievements were made possible by "pure American blood."²⁷ The text claims that this heritage must be "kept pure as a sacred heritage" so that America can "take its place at the forefront of all nations... where purity, Christianity, peace and prosperity reign supreme."²⁸ This language reveals how the WKKK's idea of American nationalism depended upon exclusion: defining who counted as "American" through ancestry, religion, and race. Moreover, this document asserts that "the native-born

²⁴ WKKK, *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 9.

²⁵ WKKK, *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 8.

²⁶ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *America for Americans as Interpreted by the Women of The Ku Klux Klan: Creed of Klanswomen: Yesterday -- Today and Forever, God and Government, Law and Liberty, Peace and Prosperity*. Box 1, Women of the Ku Klux Klan collection, MS3686, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

²⁷ WKKK, *America for Americans as Interpreted by the Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 6.

²⁸ WKKK, *America for Americans as Interpreted by the Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 3.

American is the salt of the earth,” employing Biblical metaphors to sanctify whiteness, and calling for the preservation of “Christian manhood and womanhood.”²⁹ This document portrays women as responsible for protecting American virtue for future generations, justifying white supremacy through the lens of civic protection.

The final page of the document, titled the “Creed of Klanswomen,” codifies this ideology through fifteen “We Believe” statements. These range from affirmations of Protestantism, free public education, and freedom of speech to declarations that “principle comes before party” and that “no other allegiance...to any foreign power should be tolerated.”³⁰ These statements echo American founding ideals, like liberty and justice but do so through the lens of overt racial exclusivity. The creed culminates in the assertion that “the perpetuity of our nation rests upon the solidarity and purity of our native-born, white, Gentile, Protestant men and women,” positioning whiteness and Protestantism as the essence of American citizenship.³¹

The eight-page pamphlet, *Ideals of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, most explicitly defines the WKKK’s racial and moral ideology. The first line declares, “This is a White Women’s organization, exalting the Caucasian Race and teaching the doctrine of White Supremacy.”³² The text identifies the WKKK as a “Gentile organization,” excluding Jews, and framing immigrants as threats to the nation. It accuses immigrants of “obey[ing] the mandates of governments of which they are still subjects” and of seeking “to break down the government under which they find protection while seeking their nefarious ends.”³³ The pamphlet explicitly names “Irish-Americans, German-Americans, and all kinds of hyphenated Americans,” equating cultural diversity with disloyalty, and presenting white Protestantism as synonymous with proper American citizenship.³⁴

²⁹ WKKK, *America for Americans as Interpreted by the Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 5.

³⁰ WKKK, *America for Americans as Interpreted by the Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 6.

³¹ WKKK, *America for Americans as Interpreted by the Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 6.

³² Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Ideals of Women of the Ku Klux Klan*. Box 1, Women of the Ku Klux Klan collection, MS3686, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

³³ WKKK, *Ideals of Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 2-3.

³⁴ WKKK, *Ideals of Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 3.

The pamphlet also references patriotic ideals, pledging devotion to the Constitution and the American flag, and opposition to “domestic traitors and foreign foes.”³⁵ It names the Bible as “the sheet-anchor of our liberties” and “the most practical guide of right living,” while calling for the separation of church and state.³⁶ This juxtaposition is interesting, but the framing of Christianity makes these exclusionary ideals appear as divinely sanctioned duties. The text concludes with a call to put these ideals into daily practice to achieve the “brightest and truest form of a Klanswoman,” making white supremacist ideology more than a belief system but a lifestyle; framing racial exclusion, religious intolerance, and patriotic devotion as the moral responsibilities of white Protestant women.³⁷

Taken together, these sources reveal that the WKKK’s structure and ideology were centered on a vision of white Protestantism that intertwined moral authority, nationalism, and religious justification. The WKKK drew upon the rhetorical framing of previous female-dominated social movements, positioning itself as a moral guardian of the nation, charged with defending “true Americanism” against perceived threats from immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and African Americans. The sociopolitical context of the 1920s: widespread anxieties about modernity in the form of shifting gender role and growing ethnic and religious diversity created an opportunity for the WKKK to develop and promote these views in an extremist manner. Therefore, the WKKK embodied both the empowerment and nature of women’s conservatism activism in this era: it offered women a structure for leadership and civic participation, while servicing exclusionary and reactionary ideals. Understanding the organizational structure and beliefs provides essential context to understand how women’s participation enacted white supremacist policies by means of gendered activism.

Performing Femininity, Preserving Supremacy

³⁵ WKKK, *Ideals of Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 7.

³⁶ WKKK, *Ideals of Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 7.

³⁷ WKKK, *Ideals of Women of The Ku Klux Klan*, 8.

Women in the WKKK used performances of idealized femininity to sustain and legitimize white supremacy and these same practices allowed them to exercise agency within newly created organizational spaces. This section examines how women's Klan activity became a tool of racial dominance and an avenue for women's expanded public participation. The *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, a three-page pamphlet document produced by the WKKK, provides a comprehensive overview of the WKKK's goals, and how they planned to achieve them. The pamphlet includes fourteen thematic sections, including "Americanism," "Public Amusement," "Legislation," "Child Welfare and Juvenile Delinquency," "Civic Affairs," "Prohibition," and "Peace."³⁸ The pamphlet begins with "Americanism," highlighting the WKKK's nativist sentiments by calling for "special study of proper limitations of immigration," to determine restrictive quotas.³⁹ This section does not contain overtly gendered language, instead suggests that women should be involved in politics, studying, and advocating for legislation that aligns with their beliefs. This is significant, showing how the WKKK advocated for women's political participation. Other sections, such as "Legislation," "Child Welfare and Juvenile Delinquency," and "Public Schools" emphasize women's responsibility to protect the nation's moral character by safeguarding children and families. The "Legislation" section calls for a focus on "laws beneficial to women and children," which positions women's political activity as an extension of their motherhood and natural duty.⁴⁰ This type of rhetorical framing, focused on children, is not a part of similar male KKK documents and therefore this language is intentionally feminine. The "Public Schools" section proposes "training in patriotism, law enforcement, and loyalty to country. Absolute enforcement of compulsory school law," advocating for a nationalistic style of education, with attendance enforced by the government.⁴¹ This ideal is tied to motherhood and fulfilling women's civic duty to raise the next generation of American patriots.

³⁸ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, Box 1, Women of the Ku Klux Klan collection, MS3686, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

³⁹ WKKK, *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 1.

⁴⁰ WKKK, *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Moreover, the “Public Amusement” section provides another example of this gendered rhetoric. Klanswomen were instructed to monitor forms of local entertainment: “vaudeville, legitimate drama, amateur performances, all films” and to report anything “obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, or corrupting to the morals of children.”⁴² Through this work, women became self-appointed cultural censors, using motherhood as justification for suppressing what they viewed as threats to moral Christian order. Their emphasis on protecting children’s innocence positioned them as defenders of the home and the nation, even as they advanced reactionary and exclusionary cultural values. This policing of entertainment reveals how the WKKK translated traditional domestic responsibilities into public activism, enforcing the same moral codes that sustained white supremacy.

Other parts of *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, show how this framing was entwined with male structures of power and surveillance. The “Law Enforcement” section instructed members to “ascertain ways and means of assisting the duly constituted officers of the law,” gathering information of crimes, wrongdoings, or offences.”⁴³ However, women were cautioned that “in no instance must this committee take remedial steps toward the violator.”⁴⁴ Instead, they were to report their findings to the WKKK Excellent Commander, who would decide whether to pass them to the “proper officials.”⁴⁵ These proper officials were males, most likely police officers. This structure demonstrates how women were encouraged to act as local investigators, but ultimately remained subordinate to male authority, even within their own organization. The section on “Prohibition” similarly reflects these gendered dynamics. Historically, the Temperance movement was female-dominated, with women advocating to protect and free themselves from abusive and neglectful men under the influence of alcohol.⁴⁶ WKKK members were directed to study the eighteenth amendment and “find how many violations of this law are being enacted”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ WKKK, *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 2.

⁴⁴ WKKK, *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ To read more about women and their role in the Temperance Movement, see Erin M. Masson, “The Women's Christian Temperance Union 1874-1898: Combating Domestic Violence,” 3 *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice* 3, no.1 (1997): 162-188 and Melissa Strong, “Women and the Temperance Movement.” Digital Public Library of America, 2018.

in their community. They were also told to “know the Federal enforcement officer...aid and asset by giving him information, thus helping him to the ‘proper performance of his duty.’”⁴⁷ This phrasing makes explicit that WKKK women were to report to and rely upon male law enforcement officials, mirroring the broader patriarchal structures of both the Klan and American society. Their efforts ultimately supported the performance of “his duty.”⁴⁸

Although the *Outline of Program* grounded women’s civic participation in traditional ideals of morality, motherhood, and domesticity, these activities reveal a deeper contradiction within the WKKK’s project. Klanswomen were mobilized through explicitly gendered tactics: framed as protectors of children and patriotic mothers because male modes of political power were unavailable to them. In this way, their activism was both a product of patriarchy and a subtle transgression of it. By entering the public sphere as moral guardians, WKKK women utilized their femininity as their source of agency, performing it to uphold white supremacy.

Blee discusses other examples of female Klan activity in her monograph, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, gathered through oral histories conducted with former Klanswomen. Given the numerous amounts of Klans nationwide, there was a variety in types of tactics, majority of which were nonviolent and civic focused.⁴⁹ Yet these activities recorded in oral interviews mirror that of the *Outline of Program*. The WKKK held parades, rallies, festivals, lectures, and participated in philanthropic initiatives, often for children in need.⁵⁰ These publicized actions reinforced the WKKK’s image as moral guardians and patriotic mothers, using gendered expectations to make Klan ideology appear respectable. By staging visible performances of civic virtue, Klanswomen softened the organization’s extremist message and allowed it to blend into everyday community life. This strategy was

⁴⁷ WKKK, *Outline of Program: Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 40-41.

In Blee’s entire monograph, she only details one example of intended violence from a WKKK member. Following a 1924 Klan riot, a member of the Homestead, Pennsylvania WKKK claimed she “paraded through town, carrying heavy maple riot clubs” and that “the WKKK was teaching its members to murder and kill in the interest of the Klan.” Therefore, this type of behavior was extremely uncommon, but occurred in a few instances.

⁵⁰ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 143.

effective as woman, not men, could wield the moral authority associated with motherhood and patriotic care. Their public presence enabled the normalization of white supremacist beliefs in local spaces, expanding the Klan's influence through socially accepted, feminine-coded forms of power.

The Women's Ku Klux Klan also utilized their garnered virtue and respectability within their communities to spread messages through word of mouth. Within the Klans themselves, they developed a voter guides, transforming their newly enfranchised women into political machines, who influenced the outcomes of local elections, electing politicians who aligned with KKK ideology.⁵¹ Women utilized their newly gained voting rights to propagate Klan ideology into the government system, and entrench their ideology in society. Moreover, they initiated boycotts and even closures of Black, Jewish, and Catholics owned businesses, through the social power of gossip, coined by Blee as "a poison squad of whispering women."⁵² Therefore, the WKKK, through their social positioning and personal relationships, created political and economic pressure, in order to enforce ideological conformity. Through manipulation of social networks, Klanswomen could destroy reputations, isolate families, and enforce community-wide compliance with white Protestant norms.

These tactics reveal how the WKKK used traditionally feminine forms of influence: a focus on women and children, their personal reputations, and social pressures to wield real political and economic power. This strategy offered a unique form of agency available to them specifically because of their gender identity: by leveraging the authority granted to women as moral guardians, they accessed influence they were otherwise denied in formal political arenas. In turn, this gendered agency enabled them to deepen and perpetuate white supremacy, expanding the power and reach of the WKKK in ways that were subtler, more socially embedded, and ultimately more enduring.

Experiencing the Invisible Empire

⁵¹ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 145.

⁵² Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 149-152.

Examining the internal structure and culture of the Women's Ku Klux Klan reveals that it functioned as a deeply immersive social world, one that provided members with a manufactured identity tied to white Protestant womanhood. This was particularly significant in a period where woman had recently gained the right to vote and were still fighting for a space within the public sphere. The *WKKK Constitution and Laws* demonstrates that the organization did not merely support the male Klan's agenda, but constructed an elaborate universe of its own, complete with rituals, hierarchies, symbols, and coded language that transformed membership into an identity. The women called this world the "Invisible Empire" (the WKKK's universal jurisdiction and its "secret work and workings")⁵³ contrasting it with the "Alien World" inhabited by non-members, thereby defining belonging in explicitly exclusionary and racialized terms. Within this imagined empire, members lived by new rules and traditions: each position bore a distinctive title beginning with "K," and time was reimagined through a unique calendar system that renamed the days, weeks, and months in ominous, terms such as "Dark," "Desolate," and "Frightful."⁵⁴ These linguistic inventions reinforced secrecy and exclusivity, marking the Invisible Empire as a space for insiders. The WKKK offered Protestant white women an opportunity to inhabit a sphere of importance and belonging. Participation blended fantasy, ritual, and ideology, allowing members to see themselves as protectors of civilization and agents of divine and national purpose. This structure helps explain the WKKK's appeal: constructed identity created a strong sense of belonging, arguing that authentic womanhood belonged only to white, Protestant, native born women. They framed this identity against their definition of Klan enemies: immigrants, non-Protestants, Black Americans, entrenching

⁵³ WKKK, *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 8.

⁵⁴ WKKK, *Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, 66.

The WKKK created their own calendar system. They considered their reign to exist in three major time periods: beginning with the Reign of Incarnation; starting with the Revolutionary War and lasting till the establishment of the First KKK in 1866. The Second Reign, named "Reincarnation" dates from 1866-1872, including the formal years of the First Klan. The Third reign, during which this document was published begins in 1915, with the formation of the second official Klan, and goes "on to the present and future." This retelling of history allows the WKKK to assert themselves as an organization rooted and central to American history. Moreover, they even created a new date system of days, weeks, and months. They renamed the days from Monday to Friday to: Dark, Deadly, Dismal, Doleful, Desolate, Dreadful, and Desperate, respectively. They also renamed the five weeks of a month to be: Woeful, Weeping, Wailing, Wonderful, and Weird. Moreover, they renamed the Months from December-January as: Bloody, Gloomy, Hideous, Fearful, Alarming, Terrible, Horrible, Mournful, Sorrowful, Frightful, and Appalling. This new vocabulary completely transformed their date system, reinforcing their exclusivity and making the chronology of their documents largely inaccessible to outside viewers.

themselves in an “us” vs “them” mentality. They framed white Protestant women as necessary and important, whose racial and religious identity was essential to the health of American society. This version of womanhood authorized public activism, expanding women’s roles beyond the domestic sphere. Klanswomen could lead meetings, run ceremonies, influence local politics, and shape community norms, all while fulfilling their obligations as wives and mothers.

Therefore, the *WKKK Constitution and Laws* provides an ideological framework for constructed world and identity, while its travel documents add a layer of social mobility. The Invisible Empire’s system for communication and movement between local Klans was the *Imperial Passport*. This document allowed members to travel between Klaverns across the country, serving as both proof of membership and authorization to participate in meetings beyond one’s home chapter (see Fig. 1). The passport’s text, which grants permission for a Klanswoman to “travel unmolested throughout our beneficent domain and grant and receive the fellowship of Klanswomen,” reveals how the WKKK sought to foster a sense of sisterhood, national unity, and create a system of socially enforced racial privilege within the existing social structure.⁵⁵ At the same time, the inclusion of a “void after” date on the passport indicates that this travel was conditional, given the secrecy of the WKKK. The very existence of such passports suggests that the Women’s Ku Klux Klan was not merely local social clubs but a nationwide network, providing its members with access, connection, and a shared identity. Paired with their prescribed rituals and coded language, these systems transformed secrecy into solidarity, allowing members to be apart an “Invisible Empire” that extended across the nation.

⁵⁵ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Imperial Passport*, Box 1, Women of the Ku Klux Klan Collection, ms3686, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

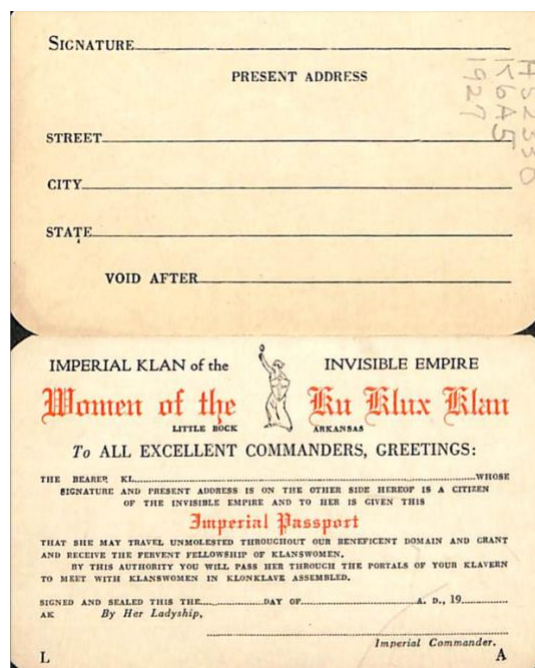


Figure. 1 WKKK, *Imperial Passport*, Women of the Ku Klux Klan Collection, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

Along with the passport that created access to the “Invisible Empire,” the WKKK’s culture of costume made this sense of belonging visible. The WKKK, modeled after the KKK, developed an elaborate system of robes and banners. *The Catalogue of Official Robes & Banners*, a 61-page document, outlines specialized garments for each rank and role within the organization: from ordinary Klanswomen to the Imperial Commander.⁵⁶ The catalogue reveals that as a woman rose in leadership, her regalia became increasingly ornate, reinforcing the link between status, visibility, and authority. A typical Klanswoman’s outfit featured a conical hood with an attached face covering, a half-cape draped over the left shoulder, and a long white gown cinched at the waist with a rope tie (see Fig. 2). The only color came from the red tassel on the hood and the WKKK insignia stitched to the chest.⁵⁷ In contrast, the Imperial Commander’s attire was richly adorned with gold and purple embroidery, a golden tassel, an elaborate

⁵⁶ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Catalogue of Official Robes and Banners*, undated, Box: 2, Folder: 2. Ku Klux Klan collection, SPEC-113. Special Collections Repository, Ball State University Libraries.

⁵⁷ WKKK, *Catalogue of Official Robes and Banners*, 2.

hood, and a detailed insignia, transforming her into a visual embodiment of power (see Fig. 3).⁵⁸ The catalogue even includes specialized costumes for members of the band, drill team, and glee club, revealing that the WKKK was not only a political organization but also a site of recreation and performance.

The WKKK's robes signified membership but were also visible symbols of the organization's constructed world, one defined by white supremacy and Protestantism. Through the act of donning robes, Klanswomen embodied the "Invisible Empire," and distinguished themselves from the "Alien World." Moreover, the anonymity of the full covering, masking their faces and bodies, created a sense of collective belonging to a greater purpose. Klanswomen wore these robes during both private WKKK ceremonies, and public parades and performances, providing secrecy and solidarity to a greater cause. Therefore, WKKK robes were more than just a costume; they transformed ideology into a visual hierarchy that reinforced both racial supremacy and women's authority.

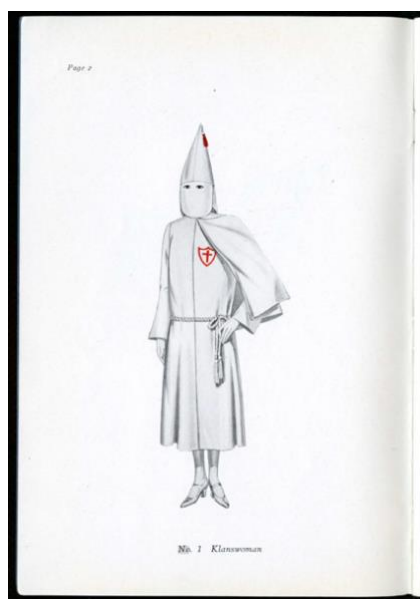


Figure 2. WKKK, Klanswoman, *Catalogue of Official Robes and Banners*, Ku Klux Klan collection, Special Collections Repository, Ball State University Libraries.

⁵⁸ WKKK, *Catalogues of Official Robes and Banners*, 16.



Figure 3. WKKK, Imperial Commander, *Catalogue of Official Robes and Banners*, Ku Klux Klan collection, Special Collections Repository, Ball State University Libraries.

Another example of this immersive world is shown by the *Musiklan*, a booklet compiling hymns and patriotic songs used in WKKK rituals and ceremonies. Some of these songs, when placed in the WKKK context, relate to Klan ideology. For example, the hymn “Whiter Than Snow” asks Jesus to “wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” In this context, the lyric may have racialized connotations, linking spiritual purity to the superiority of whiteness.⁵⁹ The very existence of a songbook underscores once again the ways that the WKKK functioned both as a political organization and as a space of community and recreation where racial solidarity was strengthened through cultural rituals. The act of singing draws people together and creates a sense of unity. *The Catalogue of Official Robes & Banners* also reveals the WKKK had drill, glee, and band groups, examples of recreational groups within organization.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Musiklan*, Box: 1, Folder 3, Item: 5, Women of the Ku Klux Klan Collection, MC 2296. Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas.

⁶⁰ KKK, *Catalogues of Official Robes and Banners*, 17-22.

Additionally, *The Code of the Flag*, reveals how the WKKK extended its mission into the everyday lives of its members. This sixteen-page pamphlet distributed by the Women of the Ku Klux Klan outlines detailed standards for the treatment and display of the American flag.⁶¹ This document was produced by the National Flag Conference in Washington, D.C. on June 14-15, 1923, a conference which included over sixty patriotic, fraternal, civic, and military organizations.⁶² Given the availability of historical documents, it is difficult to determine whether or not the WKKK attended this conference, however the act of producing and distributing this document is intentional. The pamphlet describes how the flag should be handled, displayed, and saluted, which extends WKKK ideology into the realm of civic ritual. This blurs the boundaries between faith, nationalism, and everyday behavior. This pamphlet illustrates the WKKK's impact on its members: embedding their exclusionary vision of America into daily life, such as hanging a flag outside one's home.

Therefore, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan was the creation of an entire world. Elaborate Klan hierarchies provided women with opportunities for leadership, passports allowed national travel, robes created visible allegiance to a greater cause, music served as a recreational activity, and flag manuals manifested the spread of Klan ideology into routine behavior. All of these elements represented their constructed world of the "Invisible Empire," where women could be leaders, organizers, and participants in both private and public spheres that were previously limited to men. Central to this world was the development of white Protestant womanhood. Tying in their virtue and duty, Klanswomen defined themselves against their enemies: non-whites, non-Protestants, and non-American born people, therefore necessitating and justifying their Klan participation. Thus, WKKK membership provided sense of responsibility and patriotic righteousness, but also an avenue to exercise leadership, agency, and

⁶¹ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Code of the Flag as Adopted by the National Flag Conference, Washington D.C., 14/15 June 1923*, Box: 2, Folder: 6. Ku Klux Klan collection, SPEC-113. Special Collections Repository, Ball State University Libraries.

⁶² Federal Flags, "A NEW ERA OF FLAG ETIQUETTE: FLAG DAY AND THE U.S. FLAG CODE." 27 May 2025. <https://www.libertyflagpoles.com/blogs/libertyblog/what-is-the-history-of-the-us-flag-code#:~:text=The%20Creation%20of%20the%20Official,Flag%20Code%20to%20this%20day.>

connection in a rapidly changing America. By developing an identity as white Protestant women protecting the nation, these women could claim meaning and authority in an empire of their own making.

Conclusion: The Legacies of the WKKK

The Women's Ku Klux Klan offers a glimpse into the lives of conservative white women in the 1920s, challenging the assumption that women's political participation is inherently progressive because it emerges from a marginalized position within patriarchal society. Klanswomen demonstrate that women could and did find empowerment and identity within extremist movements. They reshaped the Klan's impact by embedding in in the moral and civic language of womanhood, invoking religion, virtue, and maternal responsibility to justify racial hatred and exclusion. Through this process, they constructed a world in which their identities as "righteous" Protestant American women aligned with the preservation of white supremacy. Their participation redefined the boundaries of women's public engagement: by mobilizing their femininity, they claimed agency, assumed leadership roles, and built a sense of community and purpose within the WKKK.

Examining the WKKK from this perspective enriches our understanding of how extremist movements function internally. Rather than focusing solely on actions or outcomes, this framing explores what the organization provided for its members: a constructed world, identity formation, and a way to utilize their femininity as a form of agency. Moreover, studying the WKKK complicates traditional narratives of women's activism and the intersection of gender, power, and politics. Future scholarship can expand on this work by examining regional variations of the WKKK, comparing it to other extremist movements, and tracing its legacy of rhetoric and tactics in contemporary movements. By continuing to explore these elements, historians can more fully understand how women negotiate their power, revealing complex and uncomfortable truths about gender, ideology, and belonging in American history.

The history of the Women's Ku Klux Klan reveals the extent to which gendered strategies of power shaped the broader project of white supremacy. Klanswomen relied on methods culturally coded as feminine: educational campaigns, community organizing, gossip channels to bring Klan ideology into

everyday life. Through boycotting businesses, they spread white supremacy into ordinary consumer behavior; through advocacy in public schools Klanswomen influenced curriculum; and by censoring media, they shaped public consumption based on Klan standards of morality. Their efforts shifted white supremacy from spectacles of violence into the realms of civic engagement and domestic influence. These same efforts also allowed them to participate in the public sphere and in politics, in ways that were not previously available to women. The feminization of Klan activities made their ideology appear more respectable, and therefore more pervasive in American society.

Although the full impact of the WKKK is difficult to quantify, its reach was substantial. During the height of the Klan in the mid 1920s, “approximately four million men and women had enlisted.”⁶³ Therefore, the “Invisible Empire” became visible, overlapping with the bounds of everyday life. As Klanswomen’s sense of identity developed, Klan participation became less a belief system and more a core component of moral duty and personal identity. Women played a crucial role in normalizing these ideas; by tying ideology to identity, they extended white supremacist values into American cultural life, effects that lingered long after the organization’s decline.

The WKKK formally disbanded in 1930 after the public collapse of the male Klan, but its ⁶⁴ legacy lies in its demonstration that women’s activism can reinforce, rather than challenge systems of inequality and supremacy. The organization offered its members a way to exercise agency rooted in their femininity in the public sphere, participate in immersive world of the “Invisible Empire,” all while cultivating a shared sense of white Protestant identity. Through their gendered activism, WKKK members embedded their beliefs into American civic life, enacting white supremacy under the guise of moral guardianship. Examining the WKKK alongside later conservative movements such as the New Right clarifies how gender can influence political authority and ideological transmission. This history reveals difficult yet salient truths: women have been central not only in fights for justice, but also in the

⁶³ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 17.

⁶⁴ Internal leadership conflicts within the male Klan led to public turmoil, coupled with rampant organizational corruption and “public exposure of Klan atrocities.” The Klan fell into public disgrace and the WKKK formally disbanded in 1930. See: Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 175.

endurance and perpetuation of extremist and exclusionary ideologies that continue to influence American society. The Klan was never only the image of hooded men beneath a fiery cross, it was also sustained by “a poisoning squad of whispering women” who advanced its agenda from within the social institutions of everyday life.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Blee, *Women of the Klan*, 149-152.

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