

“NO KU KLUX KLAN FOR KERN”:

The Rise and Fall of the 1920s KKK in Kern County, California

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ABSTRACT: The Ku Klux Klan saw a rapid rise in Kern County, California, in 1921 but disintegrated in 1922. Local newspapers decried the Klan’s vigilante violence; a diligent district attorney pursued and prosecuted those involved; and the local press and the court cases revealed members’ identities. The ensuing backlash quickly neutralized the Klan in Kern County. The revealed identities enabled the author to profile local KKK adherents. The subsequent career paths of key members and their opponents confirm the shift of public opinion against the Klan despite its public relations efforts.

Keywords: Ku Klux Klan; vigilantes; Kern County; press and public opinion

In June 1921, thirty-nine-year-old Homer R. Pitts arrived in Kern County, California. A former roofer from Atlanta, Georgia, Pitts was on a mission. That summer, he was among the estimated 200 “kleagles” or recruiters canvassing the nation on behalf of the Ku Klux Klan. They sold Klan ideology as well as Klan memberships.

The author wishes to thank Christine K. Erickson, the late Owen M. Lisenbee, Christopher Livingston, F. Javier Llamas, and Lori Wear for assistance with this project. She is especially grateful to Patricia Cline Cohen, Douglas W. Dodd, and Merry Ovnick, each of whom provided generous support and help in many ways.

Southern California Quarterly, Vol. 99, No. 1, pp. 5–45. ISSN 0038-3929, eISSN 2162-8637. © 2017 by The Historical Society of Southern California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/scq.2017.99.1.5>.

White supremacy and a concrete vision of traditional morality capped the Klan's broad ideological vision for the United States and motivated men like Pitts as they sought to build a national organization. With Pitts's organized recruitment campaign, Kern County's Klan membership rose rapidly and immediately mounted a violent vigilante campaign against perceived moral transgressions. However, unlike in other communities in California and in the rest of the nation where the Klan grew in power and influence, Kern klansmen soon found themselves the objects of public condemnation and legal prosecution that led to their group's rapid decline.¹

This article studies the Kern County Ku Klux Klan's rapid rise in 1921 and quick disintegration in 1922 as a case study of the larger national movement. Because its decline was so much earlier than, and independent of, the national movement's decline, this study allows us to see the organization's specific missteps and to determine the ways in which the local press and local authorities were able to turn public opinion against it. In the process, the names of many members of the Kern Klan were revealed, enabling us to identify the ethnic and national-origin, age, marital status, and occupation of Klan members. The study follows former Klan members and their opponents in later years, confirming the shift in public opinion against the KKK.

Nationally, the Klan's message proved enormously attractive to white Protestant Americans in the cultural upheaval of the early 1920s. The First World War had divided Americans and taken the lives of sons, brothers, and fathers in a cause that, in retrospect, now looked dubious. The country had experienced the panic, suffering, and deaths brought by the deadly world-wide influenza pandemic. American culture was hurtling quickly away from its rural roots toward a fast-moving urban culture. The Scopes Trial was yet to

1. "Reveals Klan Raid to Jury," *Los Angeles Times* (hereafter, *LAT*), May 30, 1922; A. M. Rochlen, "Links Ku Klux to Defendant," *LAT*, June 27, 1922. "Idea Sparked by Sorrows, Reported 'Myth' Materializes," *LAT*, August 23, 1934; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 1920, accessed at Ancestry.com; David M. Chalmers, *Hood Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, 3rd Ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 121; "Joined Klan Not Knowing True Intent," *LAT*, May 23, 1922; "Bakersfield 'Knights' in Meet Vote to Oust 20 Members," *Bakersfield Californian* (hereafter *BC*), May 4, 1922. See Shawn Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992) and Christine K. Erickson, "'Kluxer Blues': The Klan Confronts Catholics in Butte, Montana, 1923-1929," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 53:1 (Spring 2003): 44-57, for examples of how the Ku Klux Klan fared in other cities.

come, but debates over evolution would soon embody the growing challenges to established religious beliefs.²

The 1920 United States Census confirmed for the first time that more Americans were living in urban areas than in rural ones, highlighting a major demographic and cultural shift. “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘em Down on the Farm (After They’ve Seen Patee)?” asked a popular 1919 vaudeville song. Increasingly, the answer seemed to be, “You can’t.” Conservative, tradition-wedded Americans found themselves flummoxed at the emerging modernist culture that included in its expanding landscape alcohol-drinking flappers who flouted their ideas of women’s proper roles, bootleggers and other Prohibition violators, racy Hollywood movies, and a confusing array of new immigrants of diverse backgrounds and creeds. Anglo-Saxon Protestants regarded Roman Catholics and Jews from southern and eastern Europe, along with non-Caucasian immigrants, as racial and ethnic “menaces,” to use a popular contemporary term. In this unsettling era, the Ku Klux Klan’s message of traditional values and an identity with “100 Percent Americanism” appealed to many old-stock native white Americans and comforted them in bewildering times.

Unlike the earlier manifestation of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction and its later iteration during the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, which were centered in the South and primarily concerned with opposing the expansion of African American rights, the Klan of the 1920s was the only one of the three Klan movements to achieve a national organization and following. Some five million Americans joined the Klan of the 1920s during its relatively short existence.³ While recent historians have come to some consensus on the broader issues regarding what led to the emergence of the first and

2. See David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Nancy Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–13; Michael Lienesch, *In the Beginning: Fundamentalism: The Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 34–39.
3. Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), xii; 1–9; Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and the Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 221–28. See also Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Shawn Lay, *Hooded Knights of the Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo: New York*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire*; and Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011).

third Klans in the South, they have struggled to explain who comprised the national 1920s Klan and on what foundations—ideological, regional, and organizational—it was able to build its vast and powerful empire. And, though the motivations that encouraged people to join the Klan fall under a broad ideological umbrella, local klansmen gravitated to issues mainly of concern to the local communities in which they lived. Concerns included immigrants, Roman Catholics, immorality, Prohibition, and anything perceived as preventing America from becoming a nation that did not fit their definition of what it should be.⁴

Early interpretations understood the group in the shadow of its nineteenth-century manifestation, in which violence, terror, and racism were defining characteristics. Some scholars have viewed the 1920s Klan as a movement of rural, backward-looking, disaffected men with a fringe-group mentality.⁵ More recently, historians have recognized klansmen—and women—as far more reflective of mainstream, white Protestant America in their values, attitudes, and xenophobia. Klansmen's values were not far removed from those held by members of mainstream service groups or fraternal organizations. However, their extremism, secrecy, and violent methods of enforcing community values were rejected by most Americans.⁶

The Kern County klansmen fit best into the latter interpretation. The targets of their vigilantism violated the mainstream community's norms of acceptable behavior. The Klan victimized men and women it suspected of small-time criminal activity or deviant morality, regarding them as needing moral correction. Census data indicate that none of the Kern Klan's victims of vigilante violence identified in the Grand Jury testimony were racial minorities, and only two newspaper-identified victims could be considered ethnic minorities (one Basque, the other Spanish-surnamed), though no newspaper reports, editorials, or Grand Jury documents mention or speak of race or ethnicity as motivating factors behind the attacks or threats. The Klan's use of violence, however, quickly turned the larger community against it. Significantly, as suspected Klan criminal activity

4. See Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, for a recent historiographical review.

5. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 2–7. Moore identifies Jackson's *The Ku Klux Klan in the City* as representative of the early standard interpretations.

6. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 9, 11–12; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, x–xxi; 6–20.

came to light in the local press, Kern County's district attorney quickly investigated, pursued, and prosecuted those connected to the Klan's extralegal activities. He also "unmasked" the Klan's members in the local press. The group's early turn to violence, the ensuing backlash and prosecutions, and the elimination of its secrecy, quickly neutralized the Kern Klan's potential for long-term political and social influence. An hour north, in Tulare County, the Visalia Klan thrived and remained in the public's eye as least as long as the national organization.⁷

At the national level, the 1920s Ku Klux Klan enjoyed great successes. While it did not find footing everywhere, the Klan's appeal was widespread, and its political influence was felt in many parts of the country. Klan-friendly officials were elected in the South, the Midwest, and in the West. The KKK was also influential in national

7. *Fourteenth Census of the United States*. Accessed using Ancestry.com. The author made this determination by compiling a list of names identified in Grand Jury testimony as victims of Klan violence and developing demographic profiles of them from U.S. Census records. Of those individuals identified by name and recorded in the census, none were racial minorities. In addition to those victims named in Grand Jury testimony, the newspapers identified eighteen other purported Klan victims. Significantly, none of the newspapers that regularly published reports of and editorials against alleged Klan violence suggests ethnic or racial identities as motivation for specific targets. Of these eighteen individuals, only two can be identified as possible ethnic minorities. One purported victim was of Basque descent. Another, not located in the 1920 census, may have been of Mexican descent based on his Spanish first and surnames. Neither of these cases was substantiated as a Klan-related episode in the Grand Jury testimony, and no newspaper reports mentioned race or ethnicity as factors. Many reports did not identify individual victims by name and there was speculation that some reports were fabricated, rumor, or carried out by copycat vigilantes. Nearly all attacks occurred in Kern's West Side, an area with historically few African Americans. According to the 1920 census, all but 130 of Kern County's 499 African Americans lived in the city limits of Bakersfield. Others likely lived in unincorporated areas of Bakersfield. "Outrages Pinned to Ku Klux Klan," *BC*, May 8, 1922; "Bakersfield Man Gets 'Black Hand' from Secret Body," *BC*, March 8, 1922; "Seeking to Get Names of Masked Assailants," *BC*, March 4, 1922. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 125; Newell G. Bringhurst, "The Ku Klux Klan in a Central California Community: Tulare County during the 1920s and 1930s," *Southern California Quarterly*, 82:4 (2000): 379–80, 383–85, 393. See also Richard Melching, "The Activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Anaheim, California, 1923–25," *Southern California Quarterly* 56:2 (Summer 1979): 175–96. Though Kern County did experience its share of vigilante violence in the oil fields, it did not have a noteworthy tradition of violence resulting in lynchings, though people of color were disproportionately the victims in those cases. There were fifteen lynchings in what is now Kern County between 1850 and 1935. Three individuals were lynched together in 1862, five more together in 1877, and two together in 1878. Race and ethnicity of the first group are unknown. The second group consisted of Mexicans, and the third group was identified as Anglo. There were two lynchings in Kern in the twentieth century. One was of a man of Chinese descent in 1901 at Breckenridge Mountain, thirty-seven miles east of Bakersfield in the Southern Sierra, and the other was an African American man in 1904 in Mojave, California, a desert town sixty-miles east of Bakersfield. There were no documented lynchings in what became Kern's West Side. See Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1950–1935*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Appendix, 220–21, 223–24, 226–27.

politics. At the 1924 Democratic and Republican national conventions, recognizing the group's power, neither party would formally condemn the Klan.⁸

Despite its rapid rise in the early 1920s, by the mid-1920s the national organization began to unravel. The perceived threats that had given the group's ideology momentum had dissipated, and scandal, as well as organizational infighting, caused many Klansmen to abandon ranks by 1926. The concerns that had fed the Klan either faded from the political and social forefront or paled in comparison to new threats the country faced. Immigration from southern and eastern Europe shrank after the adoption of immigration restriction in the National Origins Act of 1924. Enthusiasm for Prohibition cooled as more and more Americans came to regard it as a failed experiment. After the Great Depression hit, concerns regarding national and personal economic survival took precedence over the issues of alcohol as a social ill and the difficulties of enforcing prohibition. The latter became a nonissue after Prohibition's repeal in 1933.

Kern County's demographics suggest that its Klan, as it manifested itself in the region, was more concerned with enforcing morality and Prohibition than with racial and ethnic "menaces." In 1920 the county's population stood at nearly 55,000. Slightly more than a third (just under 19,000) lived in Bakersfield, its largest city and county seat. Taft, the center of oil production on the county's West Side, was home to 3,317 inhabitants, with more scattered among farming, ranching, and oil communities. Blacks made up only 0.9 percent of Kern County's population, with American Indians, Chinese, and Japanese together comprising 2 percent. Foreign-born whites, a category which would have included 1,856 foreign-born Mexicans, comprised just under 14 percent of the population, 2 percent below the national average. Nationally, while more Americans lived in urban than in rural America, Kern County tilted rural, with 60 percent of the population residing in rural areas, and 40 percent in cities and towns.⁹

8. Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 25–29.

9. *Abstract of the Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 26–29, 39–40, 98–101, 307–15, 324–32. Scandinavians and natives of the British Isles, not including Ireland, made up almost as great a percentage of the population as foreign-born Mexicans. Blacks, categorized as "Negro," comprised 1.9 percent of



Downtown Bakersfield in the 1920s: Chester Avenue looking north from 17th Street. Bakersfield, with a 1920 population of 19,000, was the largest town and the county seat of Kern County. It had two daily newspapers, the *Bakersfield Californian* and the *Bakersfield Morning Echo*, whose coverage of vigilante violence and the prosecution of the perpetrators had a powerful effect on public opinion. *Courtesy of the Kern County Museum.*

Just as authorities grappled with enforcing prohibition on the national level, Kern authorities also faced challenges. In 1920 there were 84 arrests for prohibition violation; in 1921 the number had more than tripled to 273 before falling slightly to 207 in 1922, and then to 194 in 1923. Other issues unsettled the county as well. Of the 3,676 “Kern County sons” who fought in the First World War, more than 100 had lost their lives. Some 800 Kern residents died as a result of the flu pandemic, 600 in the first year of 1918–1919. Indeed, the city

Bakersfield’s population, while they comprised only 0.9 percent of the county’s population. See also *American Panorama: Atlas of United States History*, “Foreign-Born Population,” <http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/foreignborn/#decade=>. Accessed April 19, 2016. Sociologist James W. Loewen identifies Taft as a “sundown town,” (i.e., a town from which African Americans were barred between sunset and sunrise) and claims that from 1930 until at least 1970, Taft had no black residents. “The Homepage of James W. Loewen,” Showing in Taft, CA, <http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu/sundowntownsshow.php?id=1059>. Accessed August 8, 2016.

of Bakersfield had the highest per capita death rate among the state's ten largest cities. The county also grappled with labor unrest. In 1914, oil-field workers in western Kern County, organized by the Industrial Workers of the World, initiated the first strike against the Standard Oil Company. In 1921 an even longer, more violent strike roiled West Kern, prompting accusations that law enforcement officials were afraid to perform their duties.¹⁰ All of these issues had affected klansmen along with many others living in Kern County.

In 1921, when Homer Pitts arrived in Kern County, its residents were aware of the Ku Klux Klan. Hollywood had recently popularized the image of the Reconstruction-era Klan in D. W. Griffith's technologically celebrated 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, introducing millions of Americans to an inaccurate version of the past. Based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel, *The Clansman*, the film advanced a fictionalized, romantic interpretation of Reconstruction-era klansmen that celebrated them as saviors who redeemed southern white society from oppression by vindictive, corrupt Republicans and by African Americans depicted as dehumanized brutes. Though denounced by civil rights organizations and liberal activists for its distortion of history and promotion of racial stereotypes, the film nevertheless enjoyed significant commercial success, grossing nearly eighteen million dollars. The film planted the seeds that led to the emergence of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan.¹¹

The film premiered in winter 1915 and it reached Bakersfield in October. Like audiences elsewhere, Bakersfielders were captivated by the film. It inspired students at Kern County Union High School to salute the Klan, though not necessarily in the form of a solemn homage. Preparing for the first big football game of the season, students organized a pregame parade and bonfire, calling for the student body

10. Richard James Roux, II, "Bootleggers, Booze, and Busts: Prohibition in Kern County, 1919–1933," MA Thesis, Department of History, California State University, Bakersfield, 2013, 104; J. Garth Milam, "Plague in the Boomtowns: The Spanish Influenza in Bakersfield and Kern County, 1918–1920," MA Thesis, Department of History, California State University, Bakersfield, 2012, 4, 104; *Mapping American Social Movements*, "IWW History Project," University of Washington. http://depts.washington.edu/iww/map_locals.shtml, http://depts.washington.edu/iww/map_events.shtml, Accessed July 18, 2016; William Rintoul, *Oildorado: Boom Times on the West Side*. (Fresno, CA: Valley Publishers, 1978), 143–64; "Kern County Officials Cowed by Oil Strikers," *LAT*, September 21, 1921; Armistice Day Program advertisement, *Bakersfield Morning Echo* (hereafter, *BME*), November 9, 1919.

11. Chalmers, *Hooded*, 27. John Hope Franklin, *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938–1988*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 15–23.

to attend dressed as icons of popular culture: sophomores came as the tramp clown Weary Willy, juniors as Charlie Chaplin, and the senior class students as Klansmen.¹²

The 1920s Klan sprang from Alabama native William Simmons, who was inspired by *The Birth of a Nation*. He outlined the organization's structure, complete with a Klan-specific vocabulary and rituals. In November 1915, Simmons circulated flyers announcing that on Thanksgiving night those interested in being part of a new Klan would meet at Stone Mountain, outside of Atlanta. Despite the dramatic fashion in which Simmons launched it, the organization sputtered under his leadership and failed to thrive. Only after he hired a professional public relations firm that employed special screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* did the group flourish and become a national organization. With its demeaning racial stereotypes and aura of righteousness, the film's popularity played a major role in fostering racism as well as in facilitating the rise of the 1920s Klan.¹³ Those screenings included Kern County and within a year, Homer Pitts, a kleagle from Georgia, found himself traveling Kern's roads, earning a living by selling Klan ideology along with memberships and robes.¹⁴

Pitts found Kern County very different from Atlanta, Georgia. Hot and dusty in the summer months, the arid county was experiencing economic growth. Around the turn of the century, oil had rapidly become a key foundation of the county's economy, especially on the West Side, where the towns of Taft and Maricopa anchored a district of oil boom camps and settlements. By 1913, the fields in west Kern were the "center of the oil universe," producing more than one out of every three barrels in California, and more than that produced by Texas and Louisiana combined.¹⁵

In the value of mineral production, with oil comprising the "greater part" of it, Kern County was "a long way ahead of all others,"

12. Bakersfield Opera House advertisement, *BC*, October 7, 1915; Karl C. Ingram, "Clansman' Is Overwhelming," *BC*, October 11, 1915; "Kern County High Making Ready for Saturday," *BC*, October 19, 1915; "Ku Klux Klan Will Join H.S. Parade Tonight," *BC*, October 22, 1915; Kern County High School, *Oracle*, [high school yearbook], 1916, 53.

13. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 7–8; Franklin, *Race and History*, 21–22.

14. "The Clansman' Here Thursday," *Maricopa Oil News* (hereafter, *MON*), March 4, 1920; "Links Ku Klux to Defendant," *LAT*, June, 27, 1922.

15. "Standard Oil Tops List of County's Largest Taxpayers," *BC*, December 9, 1922; Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 28; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920.

but agriculture was also significant and it was expanding. With rich soil irrigated by the Kern River, agriculture had long been the backbone of Kern County's economy. Earlier products like wheat, alfalfa, and livestock remained important, but the county's agricultural future seemed to lie with specialty crops, especially fruits like oranges, olives, peaches, and pears. Cotton was rapidly emerging, too. In 1920, cotton acreage had increased ten-fold since 1919, from 1,500 acres to 15,000.¹⁶

Railroads were also among the county's significant employers. In 1874 the Southern Pacific brought rail transportation to Kern, and with it jobs and tax revenue that helped finance infrastructure growth and the county government.¹⁷ The Santa Fe Railway would later reach Bakersfield as well, and it eventually developed and expanded its yards, car shops, and refrigeration facilities, creating more jobs and facilitating the county's economic growth.¹⁸

In this growing region, Pitts's summer 1921 canvass of Kern likely netted him a substantial paycheck from recruiting men into the Invisible Empire. Nearly 400 Kern men joined the Klan, with most of them—nearly 250—from the county seat of Bakersfield. Most of the remaining members lived in West Side oil towns, primarily in Taft. A small handful lived in Tehachapi, a mountain village with a population of some 500. Since kleagles kept a \$4.00 commission from every \$10.00 membership they sold, Pitts earned nearly \$1,600 from new recruits there, more than twice the average per capita income in the United States at the time.¹⁹

16. Anonymous, *History of Kern County with Illustrations* (San Francisco: Wallace W. Elliott & Co, 1883), 112. Reprinted Bear State Books, 2003; California State Board of Agriculture, *Statistical Report of the California State of Agriculture for the Year 1919*, (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1920), 262–63.
17. Richard J. Orsi, *Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West*. (Berkeley: University of California Press); 9; Assessment Records, Kern County, 1922.
18. Thelma Miller, *History of Kern County*, (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing, 1929), 431–35; Curtis Darling, *Kern County Place Names*, 2003; John R. Signor, *Southern Pacific-Santa Fe-Tehachapi* (San Marino, CA: Golden West Books, 1983), 29; Ed Cray, *Chief Justice: A Biography of Earl Warren*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 19.
19. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, 10; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent Americanism*, 8; W. Elliott Brownlee, *The Dynamics of Ascent: A History of the American Economy*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1988), 385. Pitts also helped organize in the Fresno area and in the Imperial Valley. According to kleagle reports seized in a Los Angeles raid on the office of Grand Goblin William Coburn, another kleagle, J. D. Gough, also recruited in the Central Valley town of Fresno. "Klan Inclined to Violence, Fresno District Reveals Raid Find," *LAT*, May 1, 1922. "Links Ku Klux to Defendant," *LAT*, June 27, 1922.

The new recruits organized chapters, or “klaverns,” including the Kern River Klan in Bakersfield and the Taft No. 3 Klan on the West Side. The Bakersfield group met at 921 Niles Street, the home of thirty-one-year-old Harry D. Reynolds, chief clerk at the yard office of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Reynolds lived two blocks down the street from the home of fellow Southern Pacific employee Mathias Warren, father of future California governor and United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, who lived there before he left for college.²⁰ As the Klan grew, its meetings moved downtown to the Taylor Building at 1660 Chester Avenue, its identity disguised by the innocuous name, “Kern River Club.”²¹

As the secret society expanded, its presence in Kern remained undetected at first. The local press wrote about the Klan menace, but focused its attention on the organization’s growth and activities elsewhere in the United States. Indeed, the *Bakersfield Californian*’s first anti-Klan editorial, on August 1, 1921, dismissed as “preposterous” the notion that “an organization as this alleged Ku Klux Klan professes to be should attempt to operate in California.”²² Before long, however, the Klan’s presence would incite fear among Kern County’s residents.

By winter 1922, there was no denying that the Klan had come to Kern and that it was engaging in vigilante violence. Reports of threats and beatings prompted District Attorney Jess Dorsey to request a Grand Jury inquiry into the wave of Klan violence. The press now found itself devoting significant time and energy to uncovering Klan activity and unmasking klansmen.²³ Dorsey’s aggressive action helped ensure that the Klan in Kern County would fall as quickly as it had risen.

Born in Missouri in 1877, Dorsey moved with his family to California at age eleven. The family arrived when a larger emigration of

20. *Bakersfield City Directory*, 1907–1908, 1922; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 1920; “Quiz on Klan Widened,” *LAT*, June 1, 1922; Cray, *Chief Justice*, 23. Earl Warren had left Bakersfield thirteen years earlier to attend the University of California, Berkeley. His father still lived there in 1922.

21. “Will Push Probe to Limit; Bare Names,” *BC*, April 29, 1922.

22. “The Ku Klux Klan,” editorial, *BC*, August 1, 1921. The address of the meeting place is in the vicinity depicted in the photograph on page 11.

23. “Will Push Probe to Limit; Bare Names,” *BC*, April 29, 1922; Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 160–65; Kent Miller, “The Ku Klux Klan in Kern County in 1922: Community Newspapers Respond to a Threat,” MA Thesis, Department of Journalism, California State University, Northridge, (1992), 7; Thelma Miller, *History*, 549.

Midwesterners dominated the influx of settlers in the state. Dorsey grew up in Delano, a northern Kern County farming community, where as a boy he worked in his father's blacksmith shop. He attended high school in Watsonville, California, but returned to Kern County after graduating from Northern Indiana Normal School (now Valparaiso University) in 1898, where he earned a Bachelor of Laws degree. He began practicing law in the mining district of eastern Kern County before moving to Bakersfield in July 1899, where he soon became Assistant District Attorney. Elected to the State Assembly in 1902, he served from 1903 to 1905, establishing a record as a Progressive Republican. Dorsey authored California's first child labor law, suggesting that he had absorbed the Progressive reform ethos that was becoming part of California's political culture.²⁴

In 1917 Dorsey was elected Kern County District Attorney, beating out a field of three other candidates for the job. He served during a tumultuous era, one in which enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment would keep authorities busy all over the country. At around age forty, energetic, and ambitious, Dorsey's most controversial period of his tenure in public service lay ahead.²⁵

In February 1922, the *Bakersfield Californian* launched its crusade against the Kern Klan when it reported the first local incident of alleged Klan violence. Eli Andrews, a forty-one-year-old Taft resident, had been whipped, beaten, and tarred and feathered.²⁶ A native of Wisconsin, Andrews was a single homeowner and a self-employed "rent car" or taxi driver living outside of Taft's city limits. He also had a criminal record. Authorities had previously arrested him for bootlegging and peddling drugs, and he had served a six-month term in the county jail for vagrancy. As a result of his arrests, authorities

24. Owen M. Lisenbee, "Forgotten Footprints: A Biography of Jess R. Dorsey," n.d. Unpublished, unpaginated, typewritten biography of Dorsey in author's possession. *Fourteenth and Fifteenth Censuses of the United States*. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth U.S. Census records identify Dorsey's date of birth as 1876 and 1878, respectively. Mowry, *The California Progressives*, 7–8, 21–22; *California Blue Book*, (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1903), 300; *California Blue Book*, (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1958), 101; http://www.valpo.edu/about_valpo/history.php, Accessed July 9, 2012; "Good Choice for Man of the Year Honor," editorial, *BC*, February 19, 1955; "Sen. Jess R. Dorsey Devoted Life to Development of Kern County," *BC*, January 2, 1959.

25. "Bring Three Indictments against the Dist Att'y," *BC*, February 10, 1917; "File Petition for Recall," *BC*, February 15, 1917; "J. R. Dorsey Installed as County's New Dist. Attorney," *BC*, April 23, 1917.

26. "Ku Klux Is Probed in Kern County," *BC*, February 21, 1922.

revoked his taxi drivers' license.²⁷ Though Andrews's beating and torture focused attention on the Klan, the press revealed that District Attorney Dorsey had begun investigating alleged Klan activity at least two weeks before the Andrews incident. Prior to Andrews's beating, two other Taft men were purported to be Klan victims; they had been taken from their homes at night and horsewhipped.²⁸

At first, the local press publicity generated by the beatings and the investigations seemed to play into the Klan's hands, as it provided the group with the opportunity to emerge from the shadows and address the public, educating Kern residents of its agenda and values, and warning those who might violate them. The Taft Klan distributed flyers declaring:

First, last, and only warning to gamblers, gunmen, bootleggers, loafers, lawbreakers of every class and description, black, white, or yellow. We are sworn to preserve the sanctity of the home, the virtue of our wives, mothers, and daughters, and we mean to do just that. We stand squarely back of law and order. We demand strict, impartial enforcement of the law. We are strong enough to enforce these demands and will back our officers to the last man enforcing the law. We demand that the town of Taft and the county of Kern be made clean and that happiness and welfare be safeguarded. No law-abiding citizen need fear our coming, but he who defies the law and common decency will do well to change his course. Law breakers you cannot escape us. We know who you are, what you are, and where you are. Change your ways this hour lest you be stricken as with lightning from the sky. The good will welcome us, the evil will meet with a swift, sworn retribution. We have given fair warning. Beware!²⁹

The next day the *Bakersfield Californian* published an editorial titled "No Ku Klux Klan for Kern," calling on law enforcement authorities to investigate fully, even though there was as yet no conclusive proof that it was the Klan that was behind the attacks. Roundly condemning Klan vigilante violence that—unchecked—had resulted in "chaotic conditions" in the South and Southwest, the *Bakersfield Californian* reasoned that "Lawlessness in the guise of punishing those who offend against law or morals, simply breeds more

27. *Fourteenth Census of the United States* (Population, Kern County, vols. 27 and 28), 1920. All subsequent volumes of the U.S. Census cited are the population manuscript enumerations unless otherwise indicated and were accessed using Ancestry.com.

28. "Tar and Feather Man, Hurl Him in Street," *BC*, February 22, 1922.

29. "District Attorney Informed of One Attack," *BC*, February 21, 1922.

lawlessness.” Such violence and chaos would be unacceptable in Kern County, the editorial concluded.³⁰

Following the Andrews attack, reports of new violence and warning letters sent to Taft-area residents continued. Klansmen visited the homes of two women who “catered,” as the newspaper put it, “to the ‘open town’ element” and a West Side oil worker reportedly sold his home and left town after receiving a note threatening him and calling him “an inveterate card player.” Additionally, in Maricopa, Klansmen attacked a druggist, George Bowman, whom they “charged with improper conduct.” Bowman was “beaten with ropes and dragged though [an oil] sump” before being advised to leave town—which he quickly did. Accused gamblers and others deemed by the Klan to be behaving immorally also received warning letters and subsequently left town. The press reported that these episodes—one story featured a photograph of a purported West Side klansman in full regalia on the paper’s front page—were, “partially or entirely substantiated by witnesses,” but the paper conceded that the “maze of rumors and street stories” probably fueled the terror more than actual vigilante acts. All of these episodes took place in western Kern County, in or around the city of Taft, creating a climate that one historian described as a “literal reign of terror” there. By seeking a Grand Jury investigation, District Attorney Dorsey hoped to sort facts from rumors.³¹

While two of the leading newspapers, the *Bakersfield Californian* and the *Bakersfield Morning Echo*, pursued the sensational KKK story as it unfolded and continued to publish editorials that spoke to the issue of lawlessness in the county and the Klan’s use of vigilante justice to curb criminal activity, the smaller oil workers’ paper, the *Maricopa Oil News*, downplayed the “Klan menace” as exaggerated in the “metropolitan papers.” The Maricopa paper editorialized that the “swarms of reporters in the fields” could confirm only a few of the cases of alleged Klan activity. While acknowledging that other “night visits” had taken place on the West Side, it proposed that “some have

30. “No Ku Klux Klan for Kern,” editorial, *BC*, February 22, 1922.

31. “Federal Officers Probe Ku Klux Klan Activities in Taft,” *BC*, March 4, 1922; “Local Officers in Dark about ‘Klan’ Activities,” *BME*, March 5, 1922; “Urge Pyles Investigate Activity of Secret Body,” *Daily Midway Driller* (hereafter, *DMD*), March 7, 1922; untitled editorial, *MON*, March 8, 1922; Grand Jury Quiz of Klan Slated, *BC*, March 9, 1922; “Twenty Witnesses from West Side Cited to Appear,” *BC*, March 9, 1922, “Grand Jury Witnesses for Probe Disappear,” *BC*, March 10, 1922; Chalmers, *Hooded*, 121.



The *Bakersfield Californian* illustrated a front-page article on the slated Grand Jury investigation with a small photo of a robed klansman to add weight to its sensational coverage of a local Klan menace. But its carefully worded caption protected the paper from the suspicion of inauthenticity: “A Ku Klux Klansman, as seen in full regalia on the West Side. The picture was forwarded to The Californian from Taft by a person unknown.” The image may have been “borrowed” from anywhere. *Bakersfield Californian*, March 9, 1922, p. 1.

likely been the work of others.”³² Most revealing, however, is that the editorial blamed law enforcement for the Klan’s violence:

We admit that when the law does fail, as it too frequently does, the people’s disgust finds expression in actions of some sort, and the present national contempt for all law that results because a large segment has declared that it will not recognize the Constitution of the United States as amended [i.e., the Eighteenth Amendment, Prohibition], has been responsible for the growth of the Klan into a national organization that can only be checked by law enforcement. . . . If county, city, and township officers were to do their duty and clean up . . . it would go along [sic] way toward securing the disorganization of the Klan, which, afterall [sic], is only an outgrowth of the era of law defiance which has come upon us.³³

Nevertheless, it concluded, lawlessness in the name of upholding the law could not be tolerated. The editorial conceded that while “the intentions of the Klan may be of the best” their vigilante methods “cast doubts upon their wisdom.”³⁴

32. Untitled editorial, MON, March 8, 1922.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

While the violence perpetrated by Klansmen generated fear in the community, in at least one instance Klansmen, perhaps in an act of political theater staged to demonstrate their self-proclaimed righteousness, appeared to exercise restraint and benevolence. In the West Side oil community of Fellows, fifty-one-year-old Baptist pastor Vandye Todd bore witness to a merciful side of the Klan, though time would reveal that the episode was likely staged. Todd had reportedly criticized oilfield violence and had subsequently received a note from the Klan admonishing him to desist. The pastor, however, reported that on March 6, five automobiles carrying some twenty white-robed Klansmen arrived at his church. Three of the hooded men walked into the church, interrupting the Sunday service, and told the pastor that they were “for him.” They made a fifteen-dollar donation to his church and denied that they had been responsible for the earlier threat admonishing Todd’s condemnation of the oilfield misconduct that had been signed “K.K.K.” The men left the church and drove away with the rest of their party, which had waited outside. The Klan’s appearance stunned the congregation. The episode prompted discussion of “fake” Klans operating in the area.³⁵ Though Todd’s story may have redeemed the group in the eyes of some community members, its authenticity would later be questioned when Todd, a Texas native, was later revealed to be a member of the West Side Klan.³⁶

The Klan appears to have been interested in fostering a positive image. Two weeks after the Todd episode, the press reported a second example of the Klan’s generosity. This time a group of Klansmen paid a visit to a widower whose wife had recently died, leaving him alone to care for six children. The hooded men reportedly delivered groceries to the family. They informed him that they had paid his wife’s medical bills. They also let him know that if he needed further assistance, they would help provide for his children.³⁷ Whether or not the episode was staged, clearly klansmen wished to burnish their image as altruists.

35. “Seeking to Get Names of Assailants,” *BC*, March 4, 1922; “Ku Klux Klan Invades Fellows Church; Stand Back of Pastor; Donate \$15,” *BC*, March 6, 1922; Untitled editorial, *MON*, March 8, 1922. “Ku Klux Appear Suddenly during Funeral Service,” *BME*, March 7, 1922.

36. “Kern Klan List Bared; Full K.K.K.,” *BC*, May 6, 1922; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 1920.

37. “New ‘Ku Klux Klan’ Activity Reported at Taft,” *BC*, March 22, 1922.

Though the press's spotlight had thus far focused on Kern's West Side, the activity soon moved to the county seat, Bakersfield. Jean Eyraud, a Basque immigrant who operated a cigar and soft drink stand, may have been the first person in Bakersfield threatened by Klansmen. He received a note by mail, allegedly from the Klan, warning him to "stop talking about the loafers' union." The cryptic letter puzzled Eyraud, who could think of no enemies. Indeed, the press identified the married, sixty-one-year-old Eyraud, who had immigrated to the United States from France in 1886 and had become a naturalized citizen three years later, as "widely known" and as someone who had "many friends." Thus Eyraud's experience prompted speculation that the note may not have been from the Klan but from one of the groups resulting from the "apparent spread of secret organizations in Kern, coincident with the launching of active operations by the triple K." Regardless, following the threat, Eyraud requested permission from the police chief to carry a concealed weapon.³⁸ It should be noted, however, that Eyraud's operation of a soda shop—a type of business that sometimes sold alcohol illegally during Prohibition—may have put him under suspicion by the Klan, which railed against those violating prohibition.

By March 9, 1922, just after the Eyraud episode and approximately two weeks after District Attorney Jess Dorsey began investigating alleged Klan activities, the Kern County Grand Jury launched a special session to investigate threats and violence carried out by the Klan and other secret societies suspected of having surfaced along with it. Despite the investigations, the warnings and beatings continued.³⁹

Fueling speculation that the Klan's activities had spawned and emboldened other vigilante groups, the press attributed one violent episode to a copycat group whose members wore black robes instead of white, and identified themselves as the "Black Beauties." This episode and a series of violent and threatening acts, including a note to a Bakersfield man warning him to "turn over a new leaf," and threats to the owner and editor of Taft's *Midway Driller*, fueled speculation

38. "Bakersfield Man Gets 'Black-Hand' Threat from Secret Body," *BC*, March 8, 1922; *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 1920; *Bakersfield City Directory*, 1922.

39. "Grand Jury Quiz of Klan Slated," *BC*, March 9, 1922; "Grand Jury Witnesses for Probe Disappear," *BC*, March 10, 1922; "Klan Grand Goblin in Bakersfield; To Hold Meeting; Jury to Continue Probe," *BC*, March 11, 1922; "Man Held in Jail Denies Knowledge of Assault," *BC*, March 24, 1922.

and discussion over to what extent the Klan was behind this activity and to what extent copycat groups were involved.⁴⁰

The reports of Klan violence in Kern County soon attracted the attention of William Coburn, Grand Goblin of the California Ku Klux Klan. Based in Los Angeles, Coburn claimed that his organization had “over 3,000 members” in Kern County but that the violence attributed to Klansmen had not been committed by them. Coburn angrily declared that he was “tired of this bunk” and that he would “put a stop to it.” He announced that he would soon visit Kern and “personally conduct a campaign to turn out evil doers.” Thus the situation developed into one with a remarkable irony: the Klan’s Grand Goblin of the Realm of California and the Grand Jury of Kern County were simultaneously investigating the outbreak of vigilante violence. Reports by the press captured the fear, excitement, and drama generated by the unfolding of sensational events in a community otherwise far removed from the state’s seats of power and influence, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento.⁴¹ Though no direct evidence suggests that the press deliberately engaged in yellow journalism to bolster sales, the stories in which the public surely wished to “read all about it,” likely increased circulation.⁴²

In this atmosphere, the *Bakersfield Californian*, relentless and unapologetic in its criticism of the Klan, published a forceful editorial in response to Coburn’s denials: “No matter if the so-called Klan means well towards society, as its leaders and its oath proclaim, the fact remains that it is simply pitting the way for the vicious and unscrupulous to violate the law with little fear of apprehension.” “The Grand Goblin,” the editorial continued, “says the Klan in this county could not have sent certain warnings, nor committed certain attacks on the West Side. Perhaps not. But the very fact that such an organization exists there makes the detection of those who did

40. Ibid.

41. “Grand Jury Quiz of Klan Slated,” *BC*, March 9, 1922; “Organizing in West Side to Oppose ‘Klan’,” *BC*, March 9, 1922; “Bakersfield Man Gets ‘Black-Hand’ Threat from Secret Body,” *BC*, March 8, 1922; “Klan Grand Goblin in Bakersfield,” *BC*, March 11, 1922.

42. While the circulation figures for both of the newspapers with extensive coverage of the KKK issue in 1922 did rise, they did not do so spectacularly and may only reflect general population growth:

Bakersfield Californian: 1920 = 6,230; 1922 = 7,295; 1923 = 7,933

Bakersfield Morning Echo: 1920 = 3,741; 1922 = 3,960; 1923 = 3,832

N. W. Ayer & Son’s Directory of Newspapers & Periodicals (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Sons, 1920, 1922, 1923 volumes), pages (respectively) 73, 74, and 76.

commit such offenses all but impossible to detect.” Finally, the editorial questioned the Klan’s allegations that the group existed because authorities failed to enforce the law. It challenged klansmen to “without any disguise whatsoever, give their time and energy to cooperating with the constituted authorities to abate the evils they say exist.”⁴³

Undaunted by, or perhaps encouraged by, the continued intense focus on Klan activity, the beatings continued. On April 8, the *Bakersfield Californian* reported that a Taft man, twenty-five-year-old George Pettye, had been taken from his home and whipped with ropes. He had apparently failed to heed Klan warnings to cease a relationship with an unnamed “girl.” Pettye left town following the beating.⁴⁴ Two more men who resided in the West Side oil town of Fellows were also reported to have been threatened by klansmen. One of the men was apprehended and transported out of town, where klansmen gave him a “lecture” to “seek employment.” The other gentleman successfully thwarted whatever the Klan’s intentions were for him. When klansmen arrived at his home, he produced a shotgun and threatened to use it. With that, the klansmen departed.⁴⁵

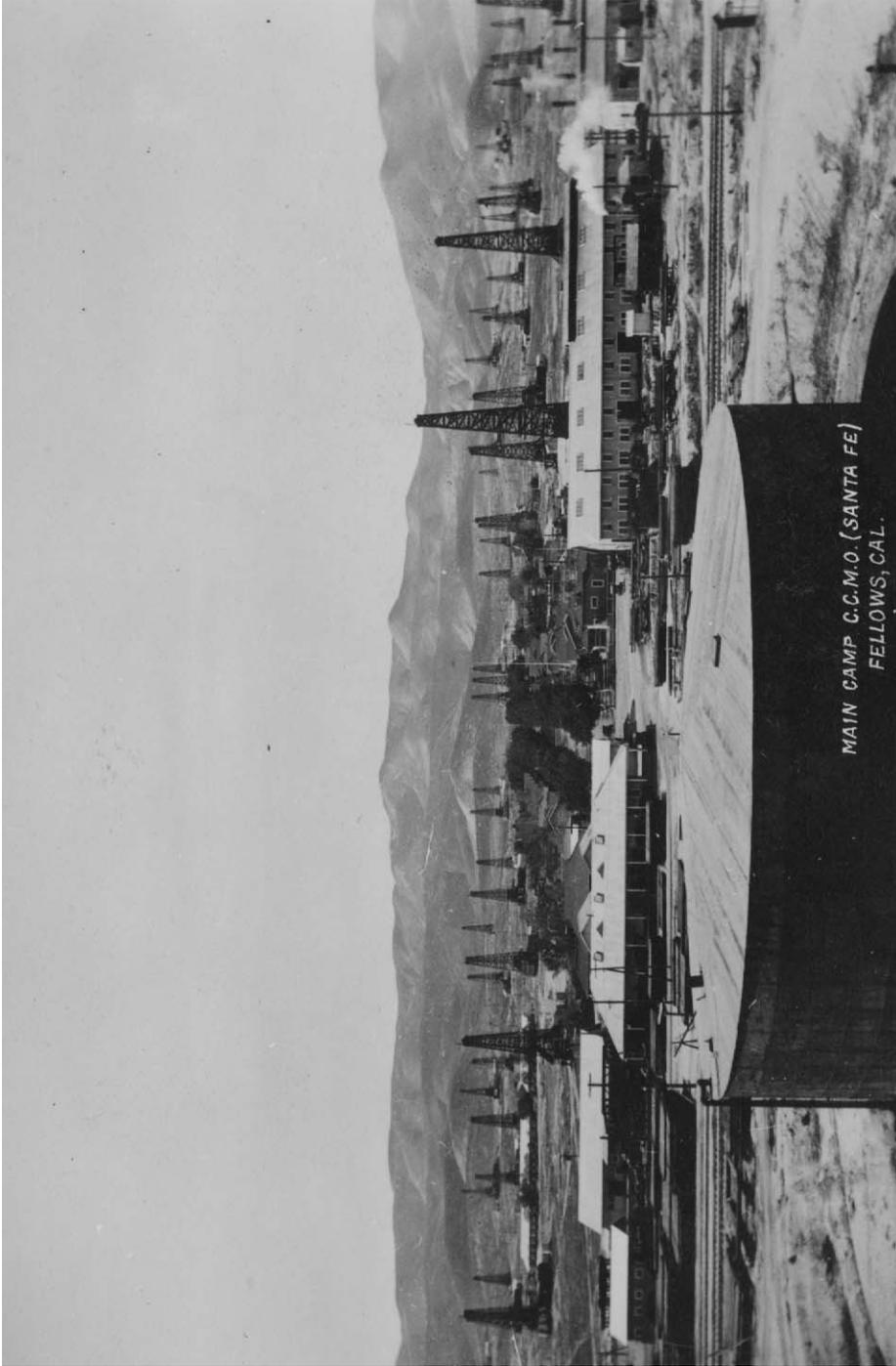
The climax of vigilante violence came in April 1922, when private investigator John Pyles fell victim to the most sensational, violent, and brutal beating by Kern County klansmen. Born in Texas in 1882, Pyles had made his way to Taft, California, by 1910. He became the proprietor of a grocery store there. By 1920, he was out of the grocery business and operating a private detective agency. His primary employers were oil companies, for whom he investigated union activity.⁴⁶ As a result, Pyles had aroused the anger of West Side oil workers in October during a strike against the oil companies. The

43. “The West Side Mystery,” editorial, *BC*, March 13, 1922.

44. “Taft Youth Flogged by Hooded Gang,” *BC*, April 8, 1922.

45. “Hooded Gang Held Off at Point of a Gun,” *BC*, April 11, 1922.

46. *Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Censuses of the United States, 1900, 1910, 1920*. Local No. 453, Oil Workers’ Industrial Union of the International Workers of the World, had been active between 1913 and 1917. In April 1914 oil-field workers went on strike against the Standard Oil Company for an eight-hour work day and issues concerning work load and pay. *Mapping American Social Movements*, “IWW History Project,” University of Washington. http://depts.washington.edu/iww/map_locals.shtml, http://depts.washington.edu/iww/map_events.shtml, Accessed May 13, 2016. There had, however, been a more recent strike in the West Side fields in 1921.



The Chanslor-Canfield Midway Main Camp in Fellows, California, 1920s. Oil was the foundation of Kern County's economy in the 1920s. The west-side towns of Taft, Maricopa, and Fellows anchored the district of oil boom camps and settlements. Taft resident John Pyles, a private investigator who had worked for the oil companies to investigate union activity, suffered the worst harm at the hands of the local KKK. Interestingly, the *Maricopa Oil News* downplayed Klan activity. *Courtesy Kern County Library.*

Maricopa paper criticized Pyles for his role on behalf of the oil companies.⁴⁷

During his investigation of the Klan, Pyles had discovered a five-gallon tar can, pieces of rope, and a bag of feathers. He interpreted these items as evidence of Klan activity on the property of the Midway oil field, a mile north of Maricopa.⁴⁸ Klansmen, it appeared, did not appreciate Pyles's snooping. According to press reports, on the night of April 17, 1922, Pyles received a tip regarding a Klan meeting that would take place near Maricopa. While at the location he had apparently separated from men who had accompanied him, and when a Klan guard discovered him, he brought the detective to other klansmen. They blindfolded him, drove him to a spot twelve miles west of Maricopa, bound his hands with wires, and flogged him. The severe beating left him badly bruised, with "raw, red cuts" on his back, and his skin cracked in a dozen places. His hands were left swollen from having his "wrists bound with wire that cut." His assailants warned Pyles to leave Kern County within thirty days or risk being shot in the back.⁴⁹

Undeterred, Pyles soon returned to the West Side, this time armed with a sawed-off shotgun and evidence that he claimed would destroy the Klan. He turned his evidence over to District Attorney Dorsey.⁵⁰ The *Bakersfield Californian* had published a fierce editorial condemning the attack on Pyles and strongly criticizing authorities for failing to arrest the perpetrators. "It will no longer suffice to say that investigation is underway; action must follow that will remove a real menace, one that if permitted will lead to more lawlessness."⁵¹

As the Pyles beating drew scrutiny in Kern County, Klan violence was erupting in Los Angeles. In a confrontation with law enforcement, klansmen killed Constable M. B. Mosher.⁵² On April 22, 1922,

47. "Pyles Flogged," *DMD*, April 18, 1922. Untitled editorial, *MON*, September 3, 1921.

48. Advertiser Asks Parley with Klan, Unknown Says He Has 'Duty' for Klan; Find Tarring Evidence," *BC*, March 13, 1922.

49. "Pyles Tells Horror of Beating," *BC*, April 18, 1922; "Pyles Flogged," *DMD*, April 18, 1922.

50. "Grand Jury to Probe Beating of Pyles," *BC*, April 19, 1922; "Local Items and Personal Doings," *MON*, April 26, 1922. "Declare War on Klan; Will Stop Reign of Terror in Oilfields," *BC*, April 22, 1922.

51. "End This Lawlessness," editorial, *BC*, April 21, 1922.

52. "Death Raid Laid to Klan," *BC*, April 25, 1922; "Three Officers of Inglewood Are Shot While Wearing Mask," *DMD*, April 24, 1922; "One Held in Night Raid," *LAT*, April 24, 1922.

Los Angeles County District Attorney Thomas Woolwine raided the office of William Coburn, Grand Goblin of the Klan's Pacific Coast Realm.⁵³ The raid yielded considerable intelligence about the organization's members and activities. Dorsey raced south to meet and confer with Woolwine and returned to Bakersfield with a list identifying the members of Kern County's klaverns. Armed with this membership list, Dorsey launched a new Grand Jury inquiry into the Pyles beating and other episodes of vigilante violence—an investigation that would lead to the Kern Klan's downfall.⁵⁴

While Dorsey and the Grand Jury investigated, the Kern County Board of Supervisors also took legislative action against the Klan. Ira R. Williams, the Fifth District Supervisor, introduced a resolution declaring the Klan “a menace to the peace and welfare of the community,” and calling upon “any county officials who are affiliated with the said Ku Klux Klan, immediately and without fail either sever entirely their connection with the Ku Klux Klan or their connection in official capacity with the county of Kern.” Though seemingly a sensible resolution that would not have warranted objection, given the Klan's suspected violence, the resolution died for a lack of a second, as the board's majority believed that such action should wait until official investigations could prove that the Klan was engaged in lawlessness.⁵⁵

The Board of Supervisors nevertheless passed an anti-mask ordinance and recommended other incorporated cities in the county do the same. Despite a request from Dorsey and Mayor E. L. Hougham, the Bakersfield City Council refused to do so. The council's failure to act prompted criticism not only from Dorsey, who said he did not attend the meeting because he never “dreamed” that the proposal would not be adopted, but also by the *Bakersfield Californian*, which criticized the council for its “failure” to cooperate with “the district attorney and with the grand jury” in the interest of law and order. The council's dereliction of duty would cause the public to “revive the

53. “Members of Grand Jury Gather to Probe Klan,” *BC*, April 24, 1922; “Impanel Special Grand Jury in South to Sift for Ku Klux Data; Indictment of Hundreds to Follow Quiz, Claim,” *BC*, April 29, 1922.

54. “Kern Grand Jury Meets in Quiz of Local Klan,” *BC*, April 26, 1922; “Seize Bakersfield Letters; Woolwine and Dorsey Confer,” *BC*, April 27, 1922; “Kern Klan List Bared,” *LBC*, May 6, 1922.

55. “Move Condemning Klan Dies for Lack of Second at Kern Board of Supervisors Meet,” *BC*, May 1, 1922.

question” of “Is it true, as is generally reported, that officialdom is liberally represented in the ranks of this secret organization?” “The public,” it concluded, “is going to insist upon knowing the answer to that question, and if current rumor is to be accepted, that answer will be disclosed at a very early day.”⁵⁶

Goaded by such accusations, the council met the next day in special session. A heated discussion ensued among Dorsey, the council, and other city officials. With “burning,” and “irate vehemence,” Dorsey denounced the activities of the “hooded night riders” in Kern. Police Chief Charles Stone, at Dorsey’s urging, addressed the council in support of the ordinance, saying that “Steps should be taken at once to prevent the repetition of these acts.” City Attorney E. F. Brittain and Grand Jury member F. J. Coddington of Delano also pushed the council to act. Under pressure from a united front of law enforcement leaders, the council finally relented and unanimously adopted the anti-mask law. After the ordinance’s approval, Grand Juror Coddington assured the council that they had done the right thing. He had been “astounded,” he said, by the evidence presented to the Grand Jury. “I was amazed to learn the things that had been proved to us. If you gentlemen could know what we have learned in this investigation, you would not have the slightest hesitancy about adopting this law.”⁵⁷

As the press and local authorities mobilized against the Klan, the Bakersfield klavern was forced to do some housecleaning in an attempt to halt the free fall of its reputation. It met, expelled members, and released a letter explaining its actions. The *Bakersfield Californian* under a front-page headline, “KLAN MAKES STATEMENT,” reported that some two hundred members of the Bakersfield group voted to oust twenty “undesired ones,” whose membership the

56. “Kern Grand Jury Meets in Quiz of Local Klan,” *BC*, April 26, 1922; “Leaders of Night Foray Promise to Surrender,” *BC*, May 1, 1922; “Move Condemning Klan Dies for Lack of Second at Kern Board of Supervisors Meet,” *BC*, May 1, 1922; “Quiz Officials in K.K.K. Probe,” *BC*, May 2, 1922; “Council Will Pass K.K.K. Ordinance,” *MON*, May 3, 1922; “Four Ordinances Introduced by Council,” *MON*, May 10, 1922; City of Tehachapi, City Council Minutes, series 1921–1930, June 5, 1922; “Kern Klan Climax Near: Ordinance Prohibiting Wearing of Masks Presented to Board of Supervisors,” *LAT*, May 2, 1922; “Quiz Officials in K.K.K. Probe; New Witnesses Testify; Dorsey Scores Council,” *BC*, May 2, 1922.

57. “Klan Mask Ordinance in Force; Council Acts on Plea of County Authorities; Hold Long Discussion on Law,” *BC*, May 3, 1922.

klavern decided was “detrimental to the best interests of the organization.”⁵⁸

The klavern affirmed that “The Ku Klux Klan stands at all times for law enforcement and we strictly bow to the authority and legal tribunals of the United States. The Ku Klux Klan believes in the legal tenets of the Christian religion, the perpetuity of our public schools, separation of church and State, owing allegiance to no power on earth other than the United States government.”⁵⁹ Extralegal violence, it suggested, had been the work of a few bad apples. “All new orders are most likely to obtain unworthy members, and those unworthy members are most certain to bring ill repute upon the order to which they may belong.” The Klan praised the Grand Jury’s investigation and boasted that Klansmen had aided the probe, providing information that enabled authorities to make arrests. The statement further “promised” District Attorney Dorsey “their support in this investigation and in return he promised that, should any member voluntarily present any evidence, such member would receive due credit.” The letter was signed by four members who now revealed their identities: R. L. Sheehan, superintendent of the county court house; Thomas Laird, a deputy sheriff; R. H. Hardin, president of the local cooks and waiters’ union; and W. E. Moody, an attorney.⁶⁰

Despite the statement’s seeming willingness to comply with local authorities, individual klansmen were not always forthcoming to the Grand Jury. Klansman E. A. Abbott, for example, appeared before the Grand Jury but refused to answer a question “because it would be a violation of the oath of the Ku Klux Klan.” Judge T. N. Harvey ruled Abbott in contempt of court and ordered the bailiff to transport him to jail. Several hours in the local jail had a salutary effect; the next morning Abbott, president of the Kern County Building Trades Council and a Sunday school teacher, complied with the questioning.⁶¹

58. “Bakersfield ‘Knights’ in Meet Vote to Oust 20 Members; 200 Attend Night Sessions,” *BC*, May 4, 1922; “Klan Makes Statement,” *BC*, May 4, 1922; “Officialdom in the Klan,” *BC*, May 4, 1922.

59. *Ibid.*; “Klan’s Side of Trouble Is Stated” *LAT*, May 5, 1922.

60. “R. L. Sheehan, Thomas Laird, R. H. Hardin and W. E. Moody on K.K.K. Committee,” *BC*, May 4, 1922; “Klan’s Side of Trouble Is Stated: Statement Is Issued at Bakersfield Outlining Ku Klux Principles, Klansmen Give The Other Side,” *LAT*, May 5, 1922.

61. “Witness Objects to Questions through Oath as Klansman,” *DMD*, May 4, 1922; “Vote to Oust 20 Members,” *BC*, May 4, 1922.

Other suspected Klansmen readily complied. As they were called to testify, they provided details about the various Klan groups in Kern County, which included the Kern River or Bakersfield Klan, the Taft Klan, and the Tehachapi Klan organizations. Those testimonies appear to have been instrumental in providing information that led to the first Grand Jury indictment and in connecting members of the organization to still other incidents of violence, including the beating of a Taft physician accused of marital misconduct. Ultimately, thirty witnesses, including law enforcement officers, investigator John Pyles, and a number of klansmen, testified before the Grand Jury.⁶² The stream of revelations emerging from the Grand Jury riveted the community's attention to the quickly unfolding drama, preparing the stage for new revelations that would soon surface and shatter the Klan in Kern County.

On Saturday, May 6, 1922, under a large red banner headline reading, "KERN KLAN LIST IS BARED," the *Bakersfield Californian* published the names of nearly 350 members of the Bakersfield, West Side, and Tehachapi Klans. The *Los Angeles Times* also published the list, which had been seized as evidence in Los Angeles District Attorney Woolwine's April raid on Grand Goblin William Coburn's Klan headquarters. A few days later, the *Californian* added fifty-five new names.⁶³ An organization that prized its secrecy and, indeed, made secrecy part of its appeal, was no longer a secret society in Kern County. The list shocked local residents. Some of the area's most prominent citizens appeared on the list. These included Bakersfield Chief of Police Charles A. Stone, Taft resident and Fourth District

62. "Concerted Fight on Ku Klux," *BC*, May 9, 1922; "More Klan Names Revealed," *BC*, May 11, 1922; "Halt in Klan Probe by Grand Jury," *BC*, May 24, 1922; "Indictments Out against Three Men at Hearing," *DMD*, May 6, 1922; "Collisions and Reynolds Plead Not Guilty to Indictment Charges; More K.K.K. Names Given," *BC*, May 8, 1922; "Dr. D. R. Mason Gives Story of Manhandling to Jury," *DMD*, May 8, 1922; Clerk, Board of Supervisors, Kern County Grand Jury, "Partial Report," May 19, 1922. Though the actual testimony occurred behind closed doors and those records were destroyed in compliance with state law, the Grand Jury's partial and final reports are available to researchers. The reports summarize the findings and identify those indicted as a result of testimony before the Grand Jury. The Grand Jury investigation and testimony unfolded over a month.

63. "Kern Klan List Bared," *BC*, May 6, 1922; "Taft Launches War on Klan," *BC*, May 8; "Collisions and Reynolds Plead Not Guilty to Indictment Charges," *BC*, May 8, 1922; "Kern Grand Jury Gives Out K.K.K.," *LAT*, May 7, 1922; "Klan Members' Names Given," *LAT*, May 7, 1922. The number of members listed totaled far fewer than the 3,000 Coburn had claimed back in March. "Grand Jury Quiz of Klan Slated," *BC*, March 9, 1922. "Along El Camino Real," *LAT*, January 12, 1939. This article, written by a former *Bakersfield Californian* employee, indicates that the banner line was published in red ink, not the typical black, and thus was unusual.

County Supervisor Stanley Abel, several deputy sheriffs, two justices of the peace, the Taft City Marshall, and other municipal employees of several county communities.⁶⁴

Their names now made public, the Kern Klan collapsed rapidly as klansmen scurried to resign from the organization. Many claimed that they had never been members of the Klan and professed puzzlement as to how their names appeared on the list. Still others said that they had been duped into joining. Bakersfield police officer John Gully explained that he signed up with the organization “unthinkingly” but had never been initiated into the group and never attended any meetings. Upon “learning what the organization really was,” he claimed, “I immediately tendered my resignation.” Some Taft city officials who were exposed as Klan members resigned from their offices. Bakersfield Police Chief Charles Stone maintained that he had “signed up with the organization, believing it to be one of high principles and devoted to enforcement of the law through regular channels of the law.” His intentions in joining were the “best,” he said, and he had not “deviated a hairsbreadth in the pursuit of his duty as an officer.” He condemned “mob rule” and insisted that he had “given every assistance” to “aid in the Klan investigation,” concluding, “I believe that District Attorney Dorsey will agree to that.”⁶⁵

Public resignations continued into the next month and local organizations issued formal denunciations of the Klan. Continuing press coverage revealed the secrecy oath required of Klan initiates. The oath’s text made clear why E. A. Abbott had resisted giving testimony before the Grand Jury: “I will swear that I will keep secure to myself a secret of a klansman when the same is committed to me in the sacred bond of klansmanship, the crime of violating this solemn oath, treason against the United States of America, rape, and malicious murder alone excepted.”⁶⁶

64. Kern Klan List Bared,” *BC*, May 6, 1922; “Taft Launches War on Klan,” *BC*, May 8, 1922; “Kern Grand Jury Gives Out K.K.K. Member List,” *LAT*, May 7, 1922; *Bakersfield City Directory*, 1922.

65. “Taft Launches War on Klan,” *BC*, May 8, 1922; Resignations from Klan Follow When List Is Published,” *DMD*, May 8, 1922; “Resignations from Klan Continue to Go Forwards Today to Grand Goblin,” *BME*, May 9, 1922; “Supervisor Discusses Klan Work,” *BME*, May 7, 1922.

66. “Crites Lauds Excoriation of K.K.K. by Mason Head,” *BC*, May 9, 1922, “Says Triple K Is Most Unpatriotic,” *DMD*, May 10, 1922; “Elks Lodge Condemns Klan,” *BC*, May 17, 1922; “Burke Says Was Not in Ku Klux,” *BC*, May 13, 1922; “Patriotic Orders of Kern Score Triple ‘K’,” *BC*, May 22, 1922; “Fever Heat Reached as Stigma Put upon Order,” *BC*, May 8, 1922; Kern County Grand Jury, “Partial Report,” 3, Kern County Board of Supervisors Records, May 1922.

A *Bakersfield Californian* editorial condemned the oath, which the paper regarded as inconsistent with public officials' oaths of office and the duties of public servants. The editorial commended other California locales for "promptly recognizing" this problem and "purging the public service of klansmen." "Nowhere else in California has Ku Kluxism so permeated official life as in Kern," the editorial continued. "The district attorney and the grand jury have done their duty in advising the public of the situation. It is for the authorities now and for the people themselves to remedy the situation, if they desire it remedied." Members of an organization who placed allegiance to their fellow members above those of the people they pledged to serve, the *Bakersfield Californian* concluded, had no place in positions of public trust.⁶⁷

Not all klansmen, however, were apologetic or quick to distance themselves from the group. In a public letter published in the local papers, West Side Supervisor Stanley Abel declared that he was "proud" to be a member of the Klan and to be "associated with many of the best citizens of Taft and vicinity in the good work they are doing." The Taft Klan, he said, deserved "praise for the good work it has done in ridding the community of the class of scoundrels who were selling bootleg whisky and doped candy to high school boys, and others, attempting to debauch the young womanhood of the community." "Grand juries are powerless unless they have co-operation from the district attorney's office. The bootleggers in McKittrick openly boasted that the sheriff's office would tip them off in case of a raid." "Good people cannot and will not stand idly by . . . and see the boys and girls of the community debauched by lawless aliens who curse the constitution [*sic*] and defy our laws." "I make no apology for the Klan. It needs none."⁶⁸

Some Kern County residents, however, stepped up to the challenge to rid the community, and especially local government, of KKK influence. Kern County Supervisor H. C. Rambo, a colleague of Stanley Abel, issued a powerful anti-Klan declaration. The *Bakersfield Californian* published Rambo's statement prominently above Supervisor Abel's praise for the invisible order, under a front-page banner headline: "TAFT LAUNCHES WAR ON KLAN."⁶⁹ Another

67. "The Klan in Public Service," editorial, BC, May 8, 1922.

68. "'Proud' He's a Klansman," BC, May 8, 1922; "Supervisor Discusses Klan Work," BME, May 6, 1922; and "Stanley Abel Issues Statement on Membership in Ku Klux Klan," BME, May 7, 1922.

69. "Taft Launches War on Klan," BC, May 8, 1922.

member of the Board of Supervisors, Ira Williams, issued a similar statement. Williams, however, went one step further in excoriating public officials who joined the Klan: "I cannot understand how any official capable of reading the Declaration of Independence and the constitution [sic] of the United States . . . can continue to affiliate with the K.K.K. unless he has hopes of being able to commit some crime or wreak some personal injury to an acquaintance under the cover of the hood and without detection and punishment."⁷⁰

In Taft, where Klan interest "was at a high pitch," record crowds gathered at impromptu grassroots citizen meetings and at official meetings of local government bodies to discuss Klan-related activities. The *Bakersfield Californian* reported that "A strong anti-Klan sentiment was manifested" at one gathering, and that a "tense atmosphere" had "pervaded the city" in the aftermath of "official war" being "declared in the county seat" of Bakersfield. "The populace is thoroughly aroused against the triple K," the paper reported, "[t]he people are determined that no more beatings, tarrings, and similar assaults shall be permitted in the west side."⁷¹ In a show of disgust toward klansmen in their community, patrons of Taft's Security Trust Company threatened to withdraw their deposits because the bank's manager was revealed to be a klansman.⁷² Later, when well-known Los Angeles minister Robert "Fighting Bob" Shuler spoke in Taft on the subject of "Americanism" and "compared the Klan to fraternal organizations such as the Masons and Odd Fellows," an angry crowd of 500 gathered to taunt and jeer him.⁷³

As anger crested in Taft, the Grand Jury prepared its first report, which it issued in May. The evidence collected during the Grand Jury proceedings linked criminal activity to klansmen and helped bring to trial five men in connection with Klan-related beatings.⁷⁴ As the Grand Jury called suspected klansmen to testify, the men began to

70. "Launch Investigation in City Officialdom," *BC*, May 9, 1922; "Bakersfield Supervisor Scores Klan," *BC*, May 9, 1922.

71. "Concerted Fight on Ku Klux; Excitement High in Taft as Crowd Attends Trustees' Meeting," *BC*, May 9, 1922; "Taft Rises to Wipe Out Klanism," *BC*, May 10, 1922; "People Act at Monster Gathering," *BC*, May 11, 1922.

72. "Fever Heat Reached as Stigma Is Put upon Order," *BC*, May 8, 1922.

73. "Taft Crowd Hoots Shuler's Speech," *BC*, June 30, 1922.

74. "Pledge Fight to End Klan," *BC*, May 19, 1922; Kern County Grand Jury Report, "Partial Report," Kern County Board of Supervisors Records, May 19, 1922; "Grand Jury Files Report on KKK," *BC*, May 19, 1922.

provide details about the various Klan klaverns in the county.⁷⁵ As a result of the testimony, authorities indicted and moved to try five men. These included brothers Elmer, a carpenter, and William Collison, a plumber, both single and ages thirty and thirty-eight, respectively. Natives of Maryland, they lived in downtown Bakersfield. Also included were John Vitelle, forty-three and married, of Taft, a contractor and native of Wisconsin; W. M. Pickens, a forty-seven-year-old native of Tennessee and a downtown Bakersfield taxi-driver; and Harry Reynolds, a married thirty-one-year-old native of Nebraska who lived in East Bakersfield near the Southern Pacific yards where he was employed as a chief clerk. Homer Cale, a single, forty-eight-year-old native Pennsylvanian oil worker who lived in the west Kern oil town of McKittrick, would later be included.⁷⁶

The prosecutions developed swiftly. W. M. Pickens faced trial first. Within two weeks of the press publication of the names of Kern klansmen, officials began the jury selection process. Pickens was charged with beating fellow taxi-driver Clyde Richey near the Lennox Hotel in downtown Bakersfield. Hailing Richey's cab under false pretenses, Pickens, along with the Collison brothers and Harry Reynolds, allegedly robbed him of \$350. Documents seized in the raid of Grand Goblin Coburn's Los Angeles office and provided to the Kern County Grand Jury identified Pickens's accomplices.⁷⁷ Empaneling a jury proved problematic for both the prosecution and the defense attorneys. Prospective jurors were dismissed for improprieties such as expressing a presumption of guilt or for voicing the view that the beating meted out by Pickens and others was justified. In the end, the court took what was considered the "unusual" step of swearing in

75. "Impanel Special Grand Jury in South to Sift for Ku Klux Data; Indictment of Hundreds to Follow Quiz, Claim," *BC*, April 29, 1922; "Authorities Are Getting Evidence on Ku Klux Klan," *DMD*, April 28, 1922.

76. "City 'Whitewashes' Ku Klux Klansmen in Office," *BC*, May 23, 1922; Kern County Grand Jury, "Partial Report: Ku Klux Klan Investigation," May 19, 1922; Kern County Board of Supervisors Records, County Clerk's Office; *Secretary of State, San Quentin Prison Registers*, California State Archives, Sacramento, accessed using Ancestry.com; "Vitelle Branded Guilty by Jury," and "Jail Another Klansman," *BC*, June 30, 1922; "Seek New Trial for Klansman," *LAT*, July 4, 1922; *Bakersfield City Directory*, 1922, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*; *Great Register of Voters*, Kern County, CA, 1922,

77. "Abel Quizzed by Grand Jury," *BC*, May 12, 1922; "W. M. Pickens Goes to Trial in Richey Assault Case; Shadow of Klan Seen in Opening Procedure," *BC*, May 25, 1922; "Richey Plot Disclosed; Dorsey Talks to Jury," *BC*, May 29, 1922.

a thirteenth, alternate juror in the case. Following two days of jury selection, the trial began May 29.⁷⁸

Dramatic closing arguments contributed to the courtroom excitement in what was billed as “One of the largest crowds that has frequented the courtrooms” in the city “for many years.” On the evening of June 1, 1922, after only thirty minutes of deliberation, the jury returned a verdict: guilty on counts of robbery and assault with a deadly weapon.⁷⁹ Five days later, Superior Court Judge J. W. Mahon sentenced Pickens to an indeterminate term of “one year to life.” Pickens’s conviction was the first in California stemming from vigilante activity committed by klansmen.⁸⁰ A *Bakersfield Californian* editorial applauded the conviction, lauding District Attorney Dorsey’s “vigorous and successful prosecution of Pickens” and praising the triumph of justice over cowardly actions committed in the name of high ideals.⁸¹ Pickens’s defense attorneys quickly filed motions for a retrial and arrest of judgment, but the court denied the requests.⁸²

The trial of Taft Klan Exalted Cyclops John Vitelle soon followed.⁸³ Charged with committing a crime in Taft, Vitelle’s case went to court on June 27, 1922. As with Pickens’s case, finding impartial jurors was a chore, and at least one prospective juror, a woman, said that she had “heard of the Ku Klux Klan” and thought favorably of “some of the work it was doing.” Another said that he was “in favor

78. “Shadow of Klan Is Seen in Opening Procedure,” *BC*, May, 25, 1922; “To Get Jury Late Today in Trial of W. Pickens,” *BC*, May 26, 1922; “F. T. M’Vey Is Chosen Alternate for Jury,” *BC*, May 27, 1922; “Shakeup at Taft; Officials in Klan Resign City Jobs,” May 26, 1922; “Stage Set for Trial of Pickens on Assault Indictments,” *BC*, May 27, 1922. Pickens was originally arrested for assaulting Richey in March. At the time, the Klan’s connected to the crime was not known. “Pickens Is Held in \$10,000 Bail,” *BC*, March 25, 1922; “Richey Plot Disclosed; Dorsey Talks to Jury,” *BC*, May 29, 1922.

79. “Klansman’s Trial Ended with Strong Arguments,” *BC*, June 1, 1922; “Klansman Faces Penitentiary Term,” *EXTRA* edition, *BC*, June 1, 1922; “Verdict in Klan Case Is Prompt,” *LAT*, June 2, 1922.

80. “Sentences Pickens to Prison; Klansman Gets 1 Year to Life on First Count,” *BC*, June 6, 1922; “Pickens to Remain in Local Jail on Appeal,” June 8, 1922; “From Year to Life for Klansman,” *LAT*, June 7, 1922.

81. “A Good Work,” editorial, *BC*, June 3, 1922.

82. “Pickens to Remain in Local Jail on Appeal,” *BC*, June 8, 1922; “From Year to Life for Klansman,” *LAT*, June 7, 1922. The Second District Court of Appeals upheld the lower court’s decision and did not grant the new trial. “Court of Appeals against Pickens,” *BME*, March 27, 1923.

83. “Klan Trial Dates Are Changed in Kern Court,” *BC*, June 12, 1922. Though the trials of William and Elmer Collison and Harry Reynolds were supposed to begin on June 26 with Vitelle’s to follow on July 5, defense attorneys and the prosecution mutually agreed to try Vitelle’s case over the summer and postpone the Collison and Reynolds case until fall.

of Klan action ‘under certain circumstances,’” “in favor of ‘cleaning up,’ when all other means failed.”⁸⁴ After a jury was finally empaneled, witnesses testified that Vitelle had allegedly summoned Dr. Dwight Mason under the pretense of having a sick child who needed care. The call was a ruse, and after luring Mason away from his home, Vitelle allegedly forced him at gunpoint to a Taft baseball park where a group of some thirty klansmen, including Vitelle, tortured and flogged him with ropes.⁸⁵ Vitelle, as the only assailant not in disguise, was thus identifiable. The klansmen had accused Mason of framing his wife for adultery, which had allowed the doctor to sue for divorce and custody of the couple’s child.⁸⁶

Again, the trial was a quick one; the jury began deliberations the day the trial began, and returned with a verdict after deliberating for four hours. Of the three charges Vitelle faced, including assault with a gun to kill, assault by hanging to inflict great bodily injury, and assault by flogging with heavy ropes to inflict great bodily injury, the jury found him guilty only of the third charge. The conviction, which came less than a month after Pickens’s guilty verdict, marked the second against criminal activity connected to Kern klansmen.⁸⁷

Vitelle, an army veteran who stood over six feet tall and who had served in the Philippines and in World War I, reportedly “broke down” and “wept bitterly” when sentenced to a term of one to ten years in San Quentin State Prison.⁸⁸ A “courageous district attorney had unmasked, unhooded, and disrobed him.” He was no longer the “‘holy terror’ of the ‘invisible powers that be,’ in the old days.” A chastened Vitelle swore that he would be a “model prisoner.” He exclaimed, “I will do anything they tell me with a smile on my face and of my own free will, for I want to be free again quick.”⁸⁹ Indeed, Vitelle’s stay at San Quentin was short. He appealed the case on the grounds that a member of the jury that convicted him was prejudiced,

84. A. M. Rochlen, “Links Ku Klux to Defendant,” *LAT*, June 27, 1922.

85. “Dr. Mason Details Klan Attack,” *BC*, June 27, 1922.

86. “Vitelle’s Fate Hangs with Jury,” *BC*, June 29, 1922; A. M. Rochlen, “Ex-Klansman Supplies Alibi,” *LAT*, June 29, 1922.

87. “Jury Finds Klan Chief Is Guilty of Assault,” *LAT*, June 29, 1922.

88. *San Quentin* 10 34222-36908, California State Archives, accessed using Ancestry.com; “Klansman Weeps When Court Gives Prison Term,” *BC*, July 5, 1922; “Klan Official Found Guilty,” *LAT*, July 6, 1922; “Klan Leader Gets One to Ten Years,” *MON*, July 5, 1922.

89. “Stripped of Power, Klansman Claimed, by ‘City of Silent Men,’” *BC*, July 7, 1922.

and he was granted a retrial. At the March 1924 retrial, postponed at least once while Vitelle was free on bail, the judge granted Vitelle's defense motion that his affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan was not to be mentioned in court. This time, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty and Vitelle walked out of prison a free man.⁹⁰

Testimony at Vitelle's first trial led to the arrest of another klansman accused of taking part in the assault. Authorities arrested Homer Cale and charged him in the assault on Dr. Mason.⁹¹ Cale's preliminary hearing was set for August 15, 1922.⁹² His trial date was set for January 2, 1923.⁹³ While it is unclear whether his case went to trial, Cale was a free man by December 1923, as he was listed among more than thirty California oil field workers who traveled to what was then called Persia to work for the Anglo Persia Oil Company.⁹⁴ William Pickens, who was convicted in June 1922, was paroled from San Quentin Prison on July 3, 1924. Cases against Reynolds, and the Collison brothers in the Richey attack went to trial in September, but charges were dismissed after they pled guilty to assault with a deadly weapon, which brought their trial to an end. Despite protests from District Attorney Dorsey, Judge J. W. Mahon, who received petitions with 1,500 signatures requesting leniency for the men, sentenced all three to probation rather than prison. When the judge asked them if they were still members of the Klan, they replied, "Absolutely not." They added that they "had learned a lesson," and that the Klan's method of "taking the law into its own hands" was wrong.⁹⁵

With the conclusion of these trials the excitement and fear that had roiled the county for months came to an end. Those found guilty of crimes served little or no jail time. Some klansmen who were not

90. "Seek New Trial for Klansman," *LAT*, July 4, 1922; "Jack Vitelle's Trial Set for September 15th," *MON*, June 27, 1923; "John Vitelle Again Facing Jury Trial," *BC*, March 25, 1924; "John Vitelle Is Found Not Guilty," *BME*, April 1, 1924.

91. "Homer Cale Charged as Flogger of Dr. Mason," *BC*, June 30, 1922.

92. "Set Preliminary in Ku Klux Case," *BC*, July 25, 1922.

93. "Ku Klux Klan Boasts of Greater Activity," *BC*, October 17, 1922; "Change of Venue Is Denied Cale," *BC*, November 29, 1922.

94. "News of Taft," *BME*, December 22, 1923.

95. *Secretary of State, San Quentin Prison Registers*, California State Archives, Sacramento, California; "Pickens May Testify in Klan Case; 3 Klansmen Guilty of Assault to Slay," *BC*, September 12, 1922; "Admit Assault Charge: Asserted Bakersfield Klansmen Plead Guilty When Robbery Count Is Dismissed," *LAT*, September 13, 1922; "Three Klansmen Who Admit Guilt Will Get Freedom," *BC*, September 23, 1923.

implicated in crimes, ironically, seemed to have suffered greater setbacks, at least in the short term. In the summer of 1922 angry Taft residents mounted a recall campaign against some public officials who had been exposed as Klan members. County Supervisor Abel, Taft Mayor H. C. Cain, Justice of the Peace George M. Cook, and Taft City Clerk C. Z. Irvine, were all targeted. Abel survived the recall attempt; the others did not.⁹⁶ That Abel was the only one of the men who had publicly praised the Klan and proudly proclaimed membership and yet was not recalled, speaks not only to his popularity and his ability to command respect, but also to the public's willingness to overlook his transgressions.

In the course of only thirteen months since Homer Pitts started recruiting for the KKK in Kern County—and only six months after the local press had first recognized the presence of the Klan in the county—the Klan had exhibited a meteoric rise and a spectacular descent into public disapproval and then disinterest.

Who were Kern's klansmen? Were they in a demographic that suggests that they lived on the fringes of society? Were they identifiable among the county's poorest or wealthiest residents? Did they hail disproportionately from a single region of the country, such as the American South? An examination of Kern's klansmen reveals that they generally reflected the community. Of those about whom demographic characteristics can be found, they do not, as a group, appear to stand out from the ordinary. They were a mix of homeowners, renters, and boarders. Some were railroad or oil company employers. Others were small business owners or managers or salesmen. Their average age was about thirty-eight, with a median age of thirty-seven. In Bakersfield, 26 percent of the named klansmen were single; in Taft, 18 percent. Sixty-eight percent of Bakersfield klansmen were married; in Taft 59 percent were married. The remaining were either widowed or divorced. The largest percentage of Bakersfield klansmen, approximately 20 percent, were native Californians. Illinoisans, who

96. "Taft Rises to Wipe Out Klanism," *BC*, May 10, 1922; "More Klan Names Revealed," *BC*, May 10, 1922; "Populace of Taft Demands Removal of Klansmen from Office; People Act at Monster Gathering," *BC*, May 11, 1922; "Citizens Committee Will Bring Recall Proceedings Soon against Officials," *DMD*, May 18, 1922; "Candidates' Petitions Checked to Fix Ballots," *BC*, July 22, 1922; "Complete Canvass of Votes in Kern Primary Election," *BC*, September 5, 1922; Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 185. Abel survived the recall by 103 votes: 1799 yes to 1902 no.

followed Californians in numbers, comprised roughly 9 percent of the group. Klansmen who were born in the former Confederate states made up around 15 percent of the total. In Taft, native-born Pennsylvanians comprised the largest number of klansmen—approximately 11 percent of the group. Indianans and Michiganders comprised 8 percent each, while native Californians at 7 percent, tied four ways with Kansans, Ohioans, and Texans. Those from Taft who were born in the former Confederate states represented approximately 16 percent of the total. Among all of Kern's klansmen, seven were foreign born, one of whose native language was French. All were born either in Canada or western Europe, with most of the Europeans' place of birth being Great Britain. Fifty had one or two foreign-born parents, and of the seventy-three parents, forty had a native language other than English, with the largest number having a native language of German or French, followed by native speakers of Gaelic. All of Kern's klansmen were either native-born white Americans or of Northern European descent, or both.⁹⁷ Thus, there appear to be no unusual characteristics about this group; they do not skew in any significant direction.

Among the 124 Klan members in Bakersfield whose political affiliation could be found, 46.7 percent were Democrats, 29 percent were Republican, 5.6 percent Socialists, 16.9 Decline to state, and 1.6, affiliated with the Prohibitionist Party. In comparison, in the party registration of the county's total population, Republicans comprised the majority at some 46 percent, followed by Democrats with 37 percent, Socialists 2.5 percent, Prohibitionists 6 percent, and Decline to state 12.6 percent.⁹⁸ Klansmen skewed more heavily Democratic than most Bakersfield registered voters, though taken with other demographic information, political affiliation does not appear to explain why Kern men became klansmen. In the early 1920s concerns about endangered

97. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920; Bakersfield City Directory, 1922; Taft City Directory, 1926, City of Bakersfield Map. Thomas Bros, 1928.* The census sample for determining state of birth included 155 men from Bakersfield and 101 from Taft. The sample for determining native language included an additional twelve men from Tehachapi. Though other men were found in the city directories, the directories provide occupation and place of residence, but do not include place of birth or other demographic information. Some men could not be located in either the census records or in city directories.

98. *Index of the Great Register of Voters, from the General Election of November 7, 1922, Kern County, California, 1922.*

morality were widely shared by native white Americans; this seems to have attracted some men to the Klan without regard to party lines.

Although there were some high-profile members in the 1920s Kern Klan, the organization does not seem to have attracted the most socially prominent—or the wealthiest—members of the community. While the recall and convictions were setbacks for the men involved, association with the Klan did not appear to have permanently damaged long-term career prospects. For example, Supervisor Stanley Abel, Police Chief Charles Stone, and rancher John Quinn, all enjoyed success in their post-Klan lives. After surviving the recall, Abel enjoyed a long career in public service. He served on the Kern County Board of Supervisors until 1941, and then worked for the Kern County Housing Authority. In fact, though not without controversy, his public service was considered so significant that in the 1930s Kern County residents informally began referring to a local peak, Cerro Noroeste, in the San Emigdio Mountains, as Mount Abel. Located in western Kern County, and part of Los Padres National Forest, the area became a popular recreational site, and beginning in the 1930s, the home of Camp Condor, a popular summer camp serving children from Kern County's West Side. Police Chief Stone left Bakersfield in 1923 to take a position with the State Criminal Identification Bureau, where he worked until at least 1940, at age 63. Delano area rancher John Quinn, who claimed that he had joined the Klan as a way to combat the Wobblies in the oilfields, was a prominent member of the American Legion. Despite his Klan membership, Quinn served as State Commander of the American Legion in 1923. Though the American Legion had denounced the Klan, Quinn was later elected the Legion's national commander. After moving to Los Angeles, he served on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors beginning in 1930, and in 1934 unsuccessfully sought the Republican gubernatorial nomination. At one point during his advancing career his involvement with the Kern Klan briefly surfaced but caused no damage. Voters later elected him six times to serve as Los Angeles County Assessor before he retired in 1962.⁹⁹ Detective

99. Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names: The Origin and Etymology of Current Names*, Fourth Edition, Revised and Enlarged by William Bright (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3. Though the name "Mount Abel" appears on U.S. Forest Service maps alongside the name "Cerro Noroeste," Forest Service officials and the Kern County Board of Supervisors acknowledge the common use of the name, Mount Abel. See United States Geological Service

John Pyles left Kern County shortly after the Klan turmoil had passed. He soon found himself part of another sensational case. After Owens Valley residents dynamited the Los Angeles Aqueduct in 1927, his detective agency conducted the investigation. Following the arrests of suspects he received a threat that read, "If Pyles isn't careful, he'll get a dam site [sic] worse than he got in Taft."¹⁰⁰

Jess Dorsey, the district attorney who doggedly pursued the Klan's vigilante activities and sought to put a stop to the organization's illicit activities, lost his re-election bid in 1922. Abel's comments on the District Attorney's failure to enforce the law and an editorial in the small West Side paper, the *Maricopa Oil News*, criticizing Dorsey for showing more interest in harassing the Klan than in fighting the immorality it targeted reflect an undercurrent of complacency about the Klan. "He went wild over the Ku Klux crimes, but never 'batted an eye' at the crimes that provoked the K.K. activities. Nor did he endeavor to stop them even after the K.K. pointed them out," the editorial complained. The complaints regarding prohibition enforcement were not unusual. Nationally, authorities conceded that enforcement simply was not working. Dorsey returned to private legal practice for a number of years before being elected in 1942 to represent Kern County in the State Senate. He was reelected for three more terms and served admirably until his death in 1958.¹⁰¹ His funeral was, ironically, held at a church in downtown Bakersfield that in 1922 had as its pastor a klansman, Earl Fife.¹⁰²

Geographic Names Information System, http://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=136:3:0::NO:3:P3_FID%2CP3_TITLE:1652876%2CCerro+Noroeste, for inter-agency correspondence and discussions regarding the peak's name. Accessed July 28, 1026. "Veterans Rap Ku Klux Klan," *LAT*, May 22, 1922; "Abel Confirmed as Supervisor," *LAT*, August 29, 1937; "Housing Job Action Assailed," *LAT*, January 20, 1941; "Quinn Takes Up Work as New Legion Head," *LAT*, October 20, 1923; "Idea Sparked by Sorrows, Reported 'Myth' Materializes," *LAT*, August 23, 1934; "Dynamiting Net Drawn, Five Aqueduct Arrests Made," *LAT*, February 23, 1928; "John N. Pyles," obituary, *LAT*, July 9, 1945; "Retired Assessor John Quinn Dies," *LAT*, April 30, 1979; Bakersfield Police Department, "Charles Stone and Perry Taylor," <http://www.bakersfieldcity.us/police/Chiefs/index.htm>, Accessed August 28, 2006. (Link and site are no longer active on the Bakersfield Police Department web page.); *Sixteenth Census of the United States*, 1940.

100. "Dynamite Net Drawn, Five Aqueduct Arrests Made," *LAT*, February 23, 1928; "John R. Pyles," obituary, *LAT*, July 9, 1945.
101. "Schmidt Is Victor over Dorsey," *BC*, November 8, 1922. There were rumors that the Klan played a role in his loss, but there is no evidence that supports them. Untitled editorial, *MON*, June 13, 1923; *California Blue Book*, 101, 1958; Cashman, *Prohibition*, 206-14; "Oldest State Senator Dies in Bakersfield," *LAT*, September 28, 1958.
102. "Throng Pays Last Respects to Sen. Dorsey," *BC*, October 1, 1958; *Bakersfield City Directory*, 1922; *Sixteenth Census of the United States*, 1940.



Jess R. Dorsey, pictured here in 1937, was elected Kern County District Attorney in 1917. Described as the “courageous district attorney [who] had unmasked, unhooded, and disrobed” Kern County’s Ku Klux Klan members, he failed to win re-election in 1922 under criticism from the west side of the county and the *Maricopa Oil News*. From 1942 to 1958, however, he represented the county in the State Senate. *Courtesy of Kern County Museum.*

Despite the community’s uproar when the news of the Klan broke, if having been a member of the organization appears to have had no long-lasting ill effects on the careers of its most prominent members, it likely did no damage to less high-profile members. Membership in the group in 1922 appears to have made no one a pariah of the community. Kern klansmen were part of the community in which they lived, a place where newspaper editorials confirmed concerns with morality. This shared concern might at once cause them to be considered mainstream but for their propensity to use violence to enforce their beliefs, which was unacceptable among the broader community and made them outliers. Public condemnation of their deeds doomed their organization to collapse.

Employing violence as a means to effect change was not unknown in Kern, especially on the West Side. Oil strikes had at times occurred

in the region; oil strikers in late summer and fall of 1921 had resorted to violence in an effort to unify workers and fight the oil companies.¹⁰³ Their methods were borrowed by klansmen, some of whom were frustrated by what they perceived to be moral transgressions and lawlessness.

In addition to their unacceptable use of vigilante violence, the times were changing. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had been lobbying for immigration restriction succeeded in reducing the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, even if they did not meet their goals in restricting all those they deemed undesirable.¹⁰⁴ The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 spread fear and panic across the nation. As banks failed, farm produce plummeted in value, and unemployment rose, all Americans, even those whose jobs were safe, turned their attention to issues concerning survival. By early 1933, 29 percent of California's work force, at least 700,000 workers, had lost their jobs. These concerns were more immediate than their neighbors' moral transgressions.¹⁰⁵ The repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933 made enforcement of prohibition a non-issue. Though a unified national Klan no longer existed after the mid-1920s, a shadow of the organization persisted in some parts of the nation into the 1930s.¹⁰⁶ Most Americans, however, including those in Kern County, focused first on the economy, on the fate of their nation, and on their friends and family. In these turbulent times, the ideology, the memberships, and the paraphernalia that Homer Pitts had peddled in 1921 now found few buyers in Kern County.

Though the group did not enjoy longevity or at least the ability to exert political power or engage in vigilante violence long term, what became of the Kern Klan after 1922 is murky. The Bakersfield-area Kern River Klan disbanded. In July 1922, Frank Page, Head Cyclops of the Taft Klavern, provided the Kern County Clerk with a notarized document confirming that group's dissolution.¹⁰⁷ In 1923 and 1924,

103. Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 150–64.

104. Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (Princeton: Harper Perennial, 1990), 287–94.

105. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and the Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 23.

106. Baker, *Gospel*, 231–32.

107. Clerk, Board of Supervisor's Office, untitled notarized testimony of Frank Page, subscribed and sworn, July 7, 1922, Notary Public, County of Kern; "Ku Klux Boasts Greater Activity," BC,

and in the later years of the 1920s, there were ephemeral glimmerings of local Klan activity, but they were regarded either as an annoyance or of little consequence.

For example, in 1923 the Bakersfield Women's Club unknowingly authorized the use of their hall for what was later revealed to be a plan for a Klan event. When the club members found out, they barred the Klan from using their building. The *Bakersfield Californian* seized the opportunity to condemn the group's attempt to revive itself, arguing that "Every good citizen can aid in averting its return by looking with disfavor upon the movement." In June 1924, "several hundred" people met at a location near Kern River Bluffs east of town to hear Dr. Bruce Brown of Los Angeles speak on the subject of "Americanism." The Klan reportedly sponsored the meeting and new members were being initiated. The sheriff responded to reports of people violating state anti-mask laws and interrupted the ceremony, forcing klansmen to remove their masks or be arrested. The confrontation came to a quiet end when the klansmen in attendance removed their masks before a crowd of onlookers.¹⁰⁸

In 1929 Thelma Miller, a journalist and local historian, published a history of Kern County. She wrote that occasional sightings of Klan rituals had continued, but "at present no one not connected with the organization knows or cares whether the Klan still exists. It has been exposed as silly at its best and criminal at its worst, but so long as it refrains from corporal assault it is free from molestation as any other foolish secret organization which ministers to the characteristic defined by the celebrated psychologist Dr. Joseph Collins as 'adult infantilism'."¹⁰⁹

As late as 1931 there were reports of klansmen meeting near Bakersfield. Its brief reappearance was likely a remnant of a broader national response to Roman Catholic Al Smith's 1928 run for the presidency on the Democratic ticket.¹¹⁰ In September 1931, Thomas Heflin, a virulently anti-Catholic klansman and former United States

October 17, 1922. According to a report in the *Bakersfield Californian*, a Los Angeles Klan publication claimed that the Taft group was in fact, enjoying growth.

108. "Women Resent Klan in Building," *BC*, January 1, 1923, "Klan Barred from Session at Woman's Club Hall," *BC*, January 16, 1923; "Proof and a Warning," editorial, *BC*, January 17, 1923; "Sheriff Makes Klan Members Doff Masks," *BC*, June 23, 1924.

109. Thelma Miller, *History*; 552.

110. Pegram, *One Hundred*, 20, 217-18.

Senator from Alabama, who had lost a bid for reelection in November 1930, came to Bakersfield. Klansman C. E. Rawlings, a shoemaker, who had been a member of the group in the early 1920s, had arranged for the use of downtown Bakersfield's Beale Park for an event featuring Heflin. Once the council learned of Rawlings's Klan intentions, however, it rescinded the permit in a fiery city council meeting where prominent Protestant and Catholic clergy members spoke out against the message of hate and religious discord that Heflin would bring, calling him a "slandering and malignant bigot." Extending an offer he probably expected would be refused, Father Michael Stack of Roman Catholic St. Francis of Assisi Parish, offered Heflin free use of the parish hall for as long as he wanted. Stack added that he would make sure that every Catholic in town attended. Heflin declined Stack's offer, and the city council remained firm in its unanimous refusal to allow Heflin and the Klan to use Beale Park. The Klan found an alternative venue for its rally at a chicken ranch just outside of the city limits. Several hundred persons reportedly attended the event where klansmen solicited donations to help Heflin pay for the cost of challenging his November 1930 election results.¹¹¹ The sight of members of the once-feared Klan banished to standing outside and sitting in automobiles at a rural chicken ranch donating to a washed-up politician confirms that the Ku Klux Klan was no longer a threat; it was rejected, scorned, and deemed irrelevant.

Though highly influential and prominent on the national political landscape, the 1920s Klan was relatively short-lived, with most scholars agreeing that scandals in 1926 led to its demise at the national level.¹¹² The 1922 outbreaks of Klan criminal activity in

111. "Heflin Denied Use of City Park; Park," *BC*, September 15, 1931; "Heflin Friends May Open Court Battle Here to Use Beale Park," *BC*, September 17, 1931; "Heflin Speech Given before Large Crowd Outside City Limits," *BC*, September 26, 1931; Alabama Department of Archives and History, <http://www.archives.state.a.us/conoff/heflin.html>, Accessed August 28, 2006; Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 199-210.

112. Baker, *Gospel*, 226-36. Though organizational in-fighting and questions over management of finances helped undermine the national Klan, in 1925 powerful Indiana Grand Dragon David Stephenson was convicted of raping and murdering a woman, and the scandal contributed to the Klan's demise. Baker argues that while most peg the demise of the 1920s Klan to Stephenson's arrest and conviction, the group continued as a national, yet not entirely cohesive, organization until 1936. Its influence, Baker contends, has, however, been long-lasting.

Kern County led to an even more rapid fall. Other California klaverns had longer lives, perhaps taking the events in Kern County as a cautionary tale that engaging in vigilante justice could have dire repercussions. The violence some Kern klansmen turned to early in the Kern klaverns' existence was condemned by the local press, by local authorities, by other local klansmen, by higher-ranking Klan authorities outside of the county, and by the broader public, however sympathetic the latter might have been to the ideology and values that the Klan officially professed.

In May 1922, the Grand Jury's report on the Kern Ku Klux Klan characterized the group as one that was "un-American, undemocratic, imperialistic," and "vicious," and one that sought to "substitute an 'invisible empire' for the visible republic of the United States." Two days after publishing the report's finding the *Bakersfield Californian* ran an editorial fiercely condemning the organization and its goals. It called upon the people of Kern to take appropriate action to ensure that the group would be neutralized. Its "elimination must depend upon the people. . . . If they permit the Klan to live beyond the investigation that now has aroused the ire of the public, they will have only themselves to blame for the events that may arise in the future, and will arise as certainly as this organization is permitted to continue its menacing existence." The people of Kern, however sympathetic some were to the Klan's ideology, rejected the Klan and its work and refused to allow it to use force to deliver its own brand of justice to undermine the rule of law and the democratic process.¹¹³

113. "Report of Grand Jury Is Death Knell to Klan," *BC*, May 20, 1922; "Wipe Out This Menace," editorial, *BC*, May 22, 1922.