

A Dialogue on the Ku Klux Klan

(I.= Interviewer & Sub.= Subject) 16' min 30" sec

I. The interview is being conducted with Mr. Eugene Reynolds of Stewartsville, Indiana on April 20th, 1974 --- Okay Mr. Reynolds, now I've got it right! Okay ---

Sub. As I remember, which I do well, because I hated them to tell you the truth; I was in a business and I would'nt even go look out the window when they paraded right through town with their caps on, you know; white robes.

I. Right through Stewartsville?

Sub. And they,--- they were strong, they controlled elections along about '22, '24 they,--- they only, I guess, the only Republican sheriff was ever in Posey County was a Ku Klux Klansman, yes they did, they owned Democrats and Republicans. But Griffin was a stronghold they had a lot of meetings down there that,--- the first time I heard, you know, dynamite and a big noise when they burnt their first crosses in Griffin I was coon hunting one night, me and my brother, in the woods and we heard the durndest explosion, you know and come to find out that they touched that off, you know and then burnt a cross. It was these people routing up at that time---

I. It was these people; it was actually an explosion like?

Sub. Oh yeah, it was dynamite, I know, we were way out here and it was in Griffin.

I. Where were you living at at this time, in Stewartsville, or---

Sub. Oh yeah, yeah right down here at the next house.

I. Have you lived here pretty well all your life?

Sub. Never did get out, only when Uncle Sam took me out! Yes I have too,

ha ha, because I've deer hunted and coon hunted in Louisiana and Mississippi.

I. Do you remember any persons that were in the Ku Klux Klan around here?

Sub. Do I remember? Oh yeah,--- you don't want their names do you?--- Well, most of them are dead now, that is the older, elder one;--- there was McKinney,--- Edas McKinney; Bill,--- William Staley, they was hotheads, you know; they was taken in pretty heavy. Well I just,--- I just can't run down the line and---

I. Well I know that---

Sub. --- mention everybody, because---

I. If there were names that really stuck out.

Sub. Beasley,--- Dr. Phillip Beasley was,--- I think a half-assed organizer, whatever you want to call him, uh uh, but that's about how they paraded around, then when they'd have a funeral they'd ware their robes, you know at one of their brothers, I guess they's brothers.

I. They were pretty prominent citizens, I mean some of the leading citizens?

Sub. Oh yes, some of them was, yeah they sure was you know, they just got took in, they--- something new, you know and their slogan was,--- they had a good slogan, they wanted everything to be straight and honest and morally right, you know in every way,--- that was their slogan alright, but they turned out rotten.

I. I see.

Sub. This man D.C. Stevenson, we was tellin' you about the,---

I. Yeah, tell me about him.

Sub. the governor, well he got a,--- he--- he took a young girl off one weekend, kept her two or three days and just kept her out I guess and she killed herself see, well that's how come him go to prison, you know for years and years there 'till they sent him up for, I guess life and I think they finally got it paroled.

I. He was the governor of Indiana?

Sub. He was the governor of Indiana.

I. Would you know anything about another man; Mr. Joe Huffington?

Sub. I've heard of him, but I don't know much about,--- I've heard, oh yeah, Huffington, sure did, yeah, that's right.

I. As long as we're talking about some people in government; how about Ed Jackson?

Sub. Oh yeah, he was another'n', yeah.

I. I think he was down here at Evansville.

Sub. I think Ed was, yeah.

Wife. I'm borrowing some papers; Cecil wants to read it.

Sub. I left it out there; see if he wants to go fishin' sometime.

Wife. This evening?

Sub. Uh uh. Oh yes, they was all, you know notorious, they was the ones, the heads of it, you know I guess the Cyclops, or---. In fact us boys--- we didn't want to mingle in anybody else's business and that was,--- it seemed like their idea was tryin' to tell everybody else what they had to do and what they should do and, you know just meddlin' in everybody else's business and they was'nt--- they was takin' in--- churches and schools and everything, they was in politics; they got into everything and it looked like there for a few years they's gonna make it until it got so rotten they had to bust up, you know.

I. How did they--- how were they supported; a lot of people around here really hated them. How did they--- how did they manage to get as far as they did though?

Sub. What's that fella? You mean the Ku Klux?

I. Yeah.

Sub. Well they organized, you know and the ones that was here just stuck right

in there with'em, you know regardless how the others felt about'em. I--- I suspect there was as many, or more--- actually belonged to the Ku Klux right here in this little town as they did that didn't. Me and my brother, we never did fall for'em, 'cause we didn't think there was anything to'em and we didn't believe in meddlin' in anybody else's business--- too much and of course we was in the business there too; we tried to not to be too--- too strong, but whenever it got there kinda halfway threatenin', that was the time that we loaded shotguns, ha ha ha ha!

I. Really, you had shotguns?

Sub. Yeah we kept our guns loaded.

I. Were there any--- was there ever any violence; did anyone ever; were there ever any gunfights with any Klansmen?

Sub. Not around here, I think Kentucky and other places they--- they laid switches at doors, or and, you know and there was some shootin' I know, but there wasn't none around here, there was more of an ill feelin' and---.

I. Didn't a--- what did they have any a--- were they really affiliated with any particular political party?

Sub. They claimed not and I don't believe they did, I think they just coalated, you know and just got'em from both sides, you know that's the way they got strength see, political strength, you know they just took; coalated from both parties and--- they elected,--- well his name was Reil, he was a Republican, I guess he's the first one I ever remember, might have been the first Republican sheriff that was ever in Posey County; first or second. And they paraded right up and down the fairgrounds over here at New Harmony and just, you know showin' him out, you know sayin', "Haw and this is our next sheriff!", and he was ha ha; they was that strong!

I. They; did they actually control the governments of the towns in [Posey County], like Mt. Vernon, New Harmony, Poseyville?

Sub. Pretty much, pretty much; politically yeah, they sure did. They got some of the heads, you know, that's where they work, they got some of the heads of the parties and then the others, you know'd follow just like a bunch of sheep, you know would follow suit. That's the way they'd work. Well they just handed'em down like a--- just like a Democrat, a Republican party, they handed'em right down to the state, right down to the counties, townships and what have'ya.

I. Around in this area, about what years were they the most active that you remember?

Sub. The most active; the strongest? I'm gonna say from,--- can I have--- how many, how much scope you gonna give me; two or three years?

I. Oh, well just---

Sub. I'm gonna say from '21 to '25.

I. That was when they were the most,--- that was when they were the strongest?

Sub. Yeah, 'cause I so know they controlled--- the county election in '22, I do know that and I think they did pretty well in '24, that's only when they was runnin'. Then I think they commenced to weakness,--- you know I can't say now, instead of tryin' to strenthen up and rebuild back, you know after they do fall, but they got too many,--- the big ones up state like the governor and them Jacksons and--- Stevenson down, you know they went bad, well that soured--- got to souring everybody see when they was pulling that kind of stunt.

I. Yeah, I see.

Sub. We got the same thing in Washington today that them boys up there went crazy, why hell, they can't expect everybody else to go straight when they're carryin',--- you know when they're doin' the very same thing right today.

I. I see. Well, didn't the--- when the Griffin tornado struck; was that

in 1925 I think?

Sub. That's right.

I. Didn't--- I've heard that that--- sort of wiped out a lot of the Klan.

Sub. I suspect it did. I think they lost around--- fifty some-odd; I've seen the paper where some writer from the Courier, he said thirty, but it was fiftytwo or fiftyfour that was killed in Griffin, of course there was a lot wounded that wasn't killed, but the whole town was wiped.

I. That's true. You know, where--- did they have any really central meeting place like, say for the whole county where they held rallies and stuff?

Sub. Yeah, just here and there and yonder, you know just like any organization although Griffin was a pretty good stronghold and I think Mt. Vernon and--- and one over there out, oh Farmersville or Solitude maybe someplace out in there I think they met quite often. Now I just don't remember whether they met too much in Poseyville or not, I ain't gonna say, but they met here a time or two, but they wasn't--- I don't know; New Harmony met quite often. But if they ever met here I don't know where it was at, unless it was just out, you know in a field someplace, but they did burn some crosses. I remember--- one, two, three--- I remember about three or four crosses that was burnt around Stewartsville here during their period.

I. That was,--- the burning of the cross; what did that symbolize; was that anti-Catholic or what?

Sub. I think so, and Negroes, I think so, I think it was just to,--- tryin' to put a fear of God in'em and at the time there was --- some ill feelins', I do know that, yeah there was some ill feelins' goin' on.

I. I would imagine.

Sub. But there was; I'll tell'ya there was--- you just know how a bunch a youngsters is whenever they can do anything like that they--- they do a lot of that more for fun than anything else, I think so---.

I. Really?

Sub. Crossburnin' was done with some youngsters, I think so; gettin' a kick out of it.

I. Like a Halloween prank?

Sub. Yeah, that's right; just gettin' a kick out of it, you know.

I. But--- so--- so I imagine that you share the belief with a lot of people around this area that you don't--- you just didn't think too much of the Klan then.

Sub. Oh, I didn't like'em a bit, they just wasn't no good that's all. They acted like the start on they was gonna be fine, but oh they turned out bad.

I. Did--- were there any organized groups that went out against the Klan that you know of, you know any people?

Sub. No, I think it was all just personal, you know just your own feelin' that you was able to take care of yourself, or didn't pay no attention to them. We wouldn't even--- when they paraded up and down the street, we wouldn't even,--- we was in the grocery, we wouldn't even come up here 'cause we was playin' checkers in the back end we wouldn't even come up there and look out the window at'em where they'd go by. That's what I thought of'em.

I. That was their purpose I guess; the more people they could get---?

Sub. A whole lot of it, for show. Oh yeah when they advertised that stuff they had people for a distance comin' in a big crowd. They said Griffin one time was covered up with people.

I. Really? Did they--- were there a lot of--- was there a lot of coverage in the newspapers around here; did they have like, did the Klan actually have an add in the newspaper, or something announcing a rally?

Sub. No, that's something I don't know; I just don't remember about that.

I. I just wondered if their--- if their organization was more secretive, you know whether they---?

Sub. I think so; I think it was, yeah. I think they--- well I've heard fellas

say since that they got by with that stuff that--- now let me get this right. You only--- you was only at a meetin' and only belonged just when you was there and when everybody,--- just like these here--- just like these guerilla warriors; you sting, buzz and then you retreat and there's nobody's to be seen, you all disappear, I think that was their idea the best I ever heard of it.

I. In other words---

Sub. As long as there was a meeting they was together, but after that they was just, you know disintegrated like the guerilla warfare soldiers.

I. I imagine that sort of,--- that kept them kinda strong I guess?

Sub. And it did and it kept others, you know from, you know, "Well there's ole so-and-so right there," your neighbor see and like that. You didn't belong, I don't think, only when you was at a meetin', I think that's the only time you was supposed to be--- the best I've heard'em afterwards said that--- you didn't belong to'em--- the only time you belonged to that was when you was at one of your meetins' see. I guess you'd entered and then--- that was to keep you from giving you away, you know, at your neighbor or anybody like that, you know that you belonged. "I don't belong, see." The only time that he belonged was when he was down there. Now that's the way I've figured it afterwards. That's something I don't know too much about.

I. I see.

Sub. I'd see'em at their funerals where they'd wear their uniforms, up and down the streets, yeah.

I. The funeral of a Klansman you mean, if one of their fellow Klansmen died?

Sub. Oh yeah, yeah, oh yeah.

I. Sort of like a military funeral?

Sub. Yeah, that's right, they'd turn out there, you know, uh uh, that's right.

This was about the time, I guess that--- I would know if I could just think of it right quick, but---. If there's anything that you don't care much about you just don't--- it don't soak in too good, you know that? And I never did think much of the Klan myself. I didn't try to fight'em or nothin', but I just didn't think nothin' of'em, but I was willin' to take care of myself if I had to, that's all.

I. And like you said, many of the people did not fight'em, they--- they just--- it was personal---

Sub. That's right, yeah, that's right.

I. I see.

Sub. A lot of'em would say, you know if--- if they were gettin' pretty strong, "You're in the--- you're out--- your'e on the outside lookin' in, we're on the inside lookin' out," I'll never forget a saying like that they used.

I. That was one of their slogans?

Sub. Yeah, you'd get around'em, you know that's what they'd say, "I'm in the--- I'm in the inside lookin' out, you're on the outside lookin' in."

I. You know, are there any people around today that--- that oh are---? The Klan is still in existence.

Sub. Yeah, they say so.

I. Is there any,--- you don't know of any people around here that are---

Sub. Oh no, oh no I don't. I kinda doubt that, I don't think there's any paid-up membership you mean? I don't think so--- I really don't think so 'cause that's all passed over, you see that's been--- that's been fifty years ago and more; around fifty years, say--- '24 yeah, uh uh. Well, so many of'em were elder ones; they was the ones that fell into it seemed like the strongest--- the middle ages and elder people more so than the younger folks and they're about all passed out.

I. You don't,--- right now, do you think that the Klan would go over big

today; I mean do you think the people,--- do you think there would be the type of people today,--- today that there were then that joined the Klan?

Sub. No, no probably the types of people, but I think if they changed the name to something else that had just a little bit different, you know ideas--- then they might go, but as far as the name of the Klan, I think that's out.

I. Uh uh, I see.

Sub. But they might try something else see, you know.

I. I see, just---

Sub. Lately, in fact, it looked like they was tryin' to,--- when they was burnin' draft cards and desertin' service; you and the like of that, they seemed like then they was gettin', you know--- disorderly.

I. That would seem the same almost.

Sub. That was disorderly, you see. I know the army I was in--- by God they wouldn't a done that; I'll guarantee you that; they wouldn't a done it in there unless they got way away 'cause they'd a--- they'd a--- why they'd a strung them bastards up!

I. That's right. Well,--- well I thank you quite a bit Mr. Reynolds, I believe I've gotten quite a---

Sub. Okay!

I. good information from you and---

Sub. Okay!

I. Thank you. Just one final--- just one final remark; could you--- could you tell me how old--- how old are you?

Sub. Me?

I. Uh uh.

Sub. I'm 81 plus.

I. Uh uh, I see.

Sub. Be 82 in October.

I. Okay. Well, thank you very much Mr. Reynolds.

Sub. I was born in '92.

I. This interview was conducted by Joseph T. Effinger, age 21 plus; I'll be 22 in July; of Poseyville, Indiana.