From W.R. Burner to Governor Olcott, 1923

By W.R. Burner

This letter, written in 1923 by W.R. Burner of Holland, Oregon, to outgoing Governor Benjamin Olcott, hints at the social and political divisiveness caused by the Invisible Empire of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Oregon during the 1920s.

The Klan of the 1920s was only indirectly related to the Klan of the 1860s, a short-lived organization formed in opposition to Reconstruction. Although also devoted to white supremacy, the 1920s Klan was less violent than the original Klan and had a broader political agenda, centering on “100 percent Americanism,” a perceived decline in moral values, and, to a lesser degree, economic inequities.

In 1921, KKK organizers chose Medford as the first town in Oregon in which to work. The Klan, a Protestant organization, focused most of their attention on Roman Catholics, who made up about 8 percent of the state’s population. In 1922, the Klan successfully backed a statewide ballot measure making it mandatory for children to attend public school, an attempt by the organization to shut down private Catholic schools. Federal courts later ruled the measure unconstitutional.

The Klan also backed several candidates for local and statewide offices in the election of 1922, campaigns that were vigorously opposed by anti-Klan Oregonians. In the gubernatorial race, incumbent Benjamin Olcott, a Republican who opposed the Klan, lost by a wide margin to Democrat Walter Pierce, who ran with Klan support. Of the 55 voting precincts in Jackson County, only eight supported the anti-Klan candidate.

Though the majority of Jackson County voters supported Klan-backed candidates in 1922, many southern Oregon residents, like W.R. Burner, were strongly opposed to the organization. By the end of the 1920s, the KKK had faded away in Oregon, partly due to this opposition and partly because of internal strife caused by leadership struggles, organizational fragmentation, and a number of state and national scandals involving prominent Klansmen.

Further Reading:


