

KKK meets with Portland leaders, 1921

By *Portland Telegram*

This photograph was published by the *Portland Telegram* on August 2, 1921, after local reporters were summoned to the Multnomah Hotel in Portland by an enticing phone message the day before. Upon arriving, the newspapermen entered a room full of some of the most influential men in the city, including the mayor and the chief of police, who had received the same "mysterious" phone call. The calls were made by members of the Ku Klux Klan and at least two representatives of the Oregon chapter, dressed in the recognizable robes and hoods of Klan members, were on hand. The "Exalted Cyclops" to the right in the photograph was Fred Gifford, a former line superintendent for the Northwestern Electric Company. Gifford was made the Grand Dragon in 1921 in order to recruit new members and gain influence in government. The "nameless officer" in the center of the photograph was "King Kleagle" Luther I. Powell. Powell called the meeting in order to counter the recent negative press against the KKK's illegal activities and to document the supposed collaboration of Klan members and city officials in retaining "law and order." The civic leaders posing with Powell and Gifford in the photograph, from left to right, are: H.P. Coffin of the National Safety Council; Captain of Police John T. Moore; Chief of Police L.V. Jenkins; District Attorney W.H. Evans; U.S. District Attorney Lester W. Humphreys; T.M. Hurlburt, a sheriff; special agent of the U.S. Department of Justice Russell Bryon; Mayor George L. Baker; and P.S. Malcolm, the sovereign inspector general in Oregon for the Scottish Rite Masonic Lodge. This photograph makes clear how comfortable KKK leaders were in the public spotlight in the early 1920s—despite their supposed anonymity—and how indulged they were by many civic governments, at least for a short time. That night Powell announced, "There are some cases, of course, in which we will have to take everything in our hands. Some crimes are not punishable under existing laws, but the criminals should be punished." He did not elaborate, but the implication was clear: the KKK felt entitled to act outside the law. In a room full of enforcers of the law, Powell and Gifford spoke freely without fear of prosecution. Klan membership in Oregon grew starting in 1921, with chapters springing up throughout the state. Its brief popularity stemmed, in part, from a general racism against minorities (particularly Chinese and Japanese), anti-Catholicism, and a belief in the enforcement of social morality. Gifford successfully lobbied for anti-Catholic legislation in Oregon during his term as Grand Dragon. The political effectiveness of KKK chapters was due in large part to the relationships its leaders formed with the state's policy makers, law enforcers, and fraternal organizations. Mayor Baker remained close enough to Gifford to join Governor W. M. Pierce in honoring the Grand Dragon at a "patriotic dinner" in 1923. Pierce was endorsed by the KKK in his 1922 campaign and his success indicated to members a political legitimacy for the Oregon chapters. Whether or not this was the case is unclear. The anti-Catholic and anti-minority legislation passing through the Oregon legislature was broadly reflective of the political and social attitudes of Oregonians in general. It is likely that the KKK benefited from this environment rather than being its main architect. Still, cities like Portland tolerated the Klan's initiation ceremonies and often turned a blind eye to the burning crosses on Mt. Scott and Mt. Tabor. But some people resisted. In Eugene, a 1921 editorial in the *Register Guard* remarked on the KKK parades down the city streets: "We have a cynical notion that such pillow coverings as are used in this way will be chiefly useful for concealing the lack of furnishings in the wearer's attic." Judges and district attorneys across the country were denouncing the illegal acts of Klan members, as well. In the same *Telegram* article describing the Portland meeting in 1921, small press releases on community censure of Klan activity are listed, almost to refute Powell's assertion that "ninety-five percent of the stories are false." By the middle of the 1920s, the KKK began to decline in Oregon, and by the end of the 1930s, most of the klaverns had dissolved completely. Many people viewed the KKK as corrupt and had lost faith in its ability to solve social problems. The organization's ideologies, however, are still with us in various forms. Further Reading Horowitz, David. *Inside the Klavern: the Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. Lay, Shawn. *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. Written by Amy E. Platt, © Oregon Historical Society, 2009

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