The Truth About the Ku Klux Klan, 1921

By Reuben H. Sawyer

This image is the title page of a pamphlet containing an edited version of The Truth about the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a pro-Klan lecture presented at Portland’s Municipal Auditorium on December 22, 1921. A showing of the pro-Klan film The Face at Your Window followed the lecture. The author of the speech, Reverend Reuben H. Sawyer, was a part-time pastor at Portland’s East Side Christian Church and a popular Klan speaker who traveled to cities throughout the state to help organize new chapters, or klaverns.

Held just six months after the Klan began recruiting in Portland, the rally attracted thousands—the pamphlet says 6000—who came to hear Sawyer speak. The purpose of the speech was twofold. First, it defended the KKK and its Imperial Wizard, William Joseph Simmons of Atlanta, from charges of violence and vigilantism, charges that had triggered a Congressional hearing earlier in the year. Second, Sawyer spoke about the central tenets of the Klan’s philosophy and how they embodied a true and patriotic American spirit. To this effect, Sawyer extolled the Klan’s emphasis on patriotism and “unqualified allegiance to the U.S. Government, the flag, and Constitution” as being essential qualities for a member to attain pure “100 percent Americanism.” In addition, a Klansmen had to be white, native-born, and Protestant—traits that also described the composition of almost 90 percent of Oregon’s population. On the subject of white supremacy, Sawyer urged that his listeners “not lose sight of the fact that the white race is the ruling race by right of inheritance and that it does not intend to surrender this right or to compromise it with another race—black, red, yellow, or brown.” Given Oregon’s small minority population, Klan organizers such as Sawyer shifted the emphasis of their attacks to accentuate differences within the white community, focusing particularly on religious differences. Catholicism and Judaism became the primary targets of these attacks for not being “American” religions.

While many of these positions might sound extreme today, the Pacific Northwest has experienced an upsurge in racial and religious hate groups in the late twentieth century. White supremacists and neo-Nazis occupied large compounds in Idaho during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1988, a group of skinheads attacked and killed an Ethiopian immigrant in Portland, an event that cast a national spotlight on recruiting by hate groups within the state. With increasing numbers of immigrants moving to Oregon to work and live, a resurgence of nativist sentiment—like that upon which the success of Oregon’s Klan was built in the 1920s—may become the foundation of new racial tensions within Oregon’s social fabric.


Oregon History Project
https://oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/the-truth-about-the-ku-klux-klan-1921/