

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ku Klux Klan Project

KKK in Springfield Township

O. H. 300

MABEL DAVIS

Interviewed

by

Bernice Mercer

on

August 17, 1976

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INTERVIEWEE: MABEL DAVIS

INTERVIEWER: Bernice Mercer

SUBJECT: KKK members, Recruitment, Prejudice, Religion

DATE: August 17, 1976

M: This is an interview with Mabel Davis on August 17, 1976, in her home, 1172 Youngstown-Pittsburgh Road, New Middletown, Ohio. This is Bernice Mercer for the Oral History Program of Youngstown State University. We're talking about the Ku Klux Klan in Springfield Township. We are particularly interested in the general beliefs of most of the people before the Ku Klux Klan arrived. Was there something in the people's beliefs that sort of helped the Klan to get going?

D: The township was settled by German people. Most anyone knows who has lived around here any great length of time. They came from Germany by way of Eastern Pennsylvania and settled here. Naturally, if they came from Germany by way of Eastern Pennsylvania, they were all Protestants or they were either Lutherans or reformed, but predominately Lutheran. There were five Lutheran churches in the township at one time. They settled here and lived here for one hundred years before there were strangers ever moving in. It was a very stable community. They had learned to feel that, one might say, they were it. They were very proud of their inheritance, and I think rightly so. I'm as German as kraut.

At about the time of World War I, strangers began moving in. They didn't speak the mother tongue that natives in Springfield Township knew. You had to speak German because if you spoke Slovak or something else, they couldn't understand you. They would presume you were talking about them and plotting and planning. They were not only of another ethnic group, they were also Catholic. There were several strikes against them to

begin with. The people here had the feeling that the Pope would be coming next. If you were a Protestant in those days, you didn't know Catholics.

One little fellow said to me when I was teaching that part of world history about the Pope as the head of the church in Rome, he interrupted by saying that he wouldn't go into a Catholic church today because the Pope would burn you with a red hot poker. I said, "Oh, Billy Joe, I've been in Catholic churches." And he said, "They must have thought you were a Catholic or you would have been burned." So, you see, they had a great deal of fear. I think that is common to all of us. Those things of which we don't understand, we are apprehensive about, or at least cautious. So, these new people that came in were not a part of Springfield Township and that fear, apprehensiveness, that cautiousness took to the Klan just like a duck does to water; that's the most natural thing to do. Of course, that goes back in our own history of our country.

The Kl was organized back in the time when the carpet-baggers went south, and it could have been political even then, partially political; there are other factors. We know very well that the carpetbaggers that went south were politically minded because the south had their way and to keep it that way they tried to keep the colored people under control at that time. Their slogan was "America for Americans," "Save America for the Americans," that was their slogan in the 1920's.

M: At that time and in Springfield Township there was very little said about colored people?

D: No, no, there was very little said about colored people.

M: For one thing, they were Americans and it wouldn't fit the picture.

D: Another thing, people worked side by side with the colored people in Youngstown because there had been importation of that kind of thing going on before. We even had, I'm quite sure I'm correct in saying, that the Puerto Ricans were imported when Jim Campbell was president of Sheet & Tube. I'm sure that was in the dealings. So, they were used to working with Puerto Ricans even though they were Catholic. The Puerto Ricans had their own churches in Youngstown. There was no interference because they organized their own churches right away. But out here, I know it was pretty much against Catholics and the people, the foreign immigrants. I think they would have accepted them had they not been Catholics. That seemed to be the thing of which they were fearful.

- M: At that time there were several nationalities from Europe coming in here, is this right?
- D: Yes, but principally from Czechoslovakia. I know we had neighbors that were Russians. We have the Polish. Quite a number of people came from Poland. There were some Italians, but out here on the farms they were Slovaks. I think I'm using the term correctly. There were some Romanians and some Hungarians. But, more of one nationality than another.
- M: What is your memory of the enlistment, the recruitment of membership? How was this gone about? Several times you were approached to become a member, can you remember what the persuasion was to get you to become a member?
- D: They didn't get very far with me because their approach was just this very thing, "Save America for Americans." I'm pointing out, as I told you, that even children in the community thought that the Catholics were . . . You would be burned with a red hot poker and that kind of thing, that the Pope would take over.

Well, my background was that by this time I had been off to college where I worked in the laboratory next to a colored girl. A Jewish girl would take me out riding in her big motorcar, which was something new then. I had very good friends among the Catholics. I tutored a girl in chemistry who was a Catholic. I would go to her very own home and tutor there. I would eat their food and it wasn't poison. I was used to that kind of thing.

I believe the difference there, if I may speak about Cleveland instead of Youngstown, the ethnic groups came in about the same time and settled side by side. Yes, there are still ethnic groups in Cleveland; they are still segregated. They came in together about the same period of time. They grew up together; therefore, we had nothing like that in Cleveland. So, when these people . . . By the way, you may know that the very first organization within the township came statewide. They flew in an airplane and settled down and listed people in the community. There would be local people, people I knew. They would approach me and inside of me I was a little bit angry to think that people could be so mistreated. On the other hand, I laughed it off, and said, "Well, you see, I'm going to school and I don't have ten dollars." That was my reply. There was no use in arguing with one's next door neighbors over something of this kind.

- M: So, this Ku Klux Klan, a virus like, did come definitely

from the outside?

D: It came from outside.

M: So, it was organized and ready to recruit?

D: Yes, that's right. It didn't grow up around here and as far as I was concerned, this is my own opinion, in the history book then all I ever knew was the establishment of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War. My feeling was that somebody was making money. Ten dollars a shot way back then, fifty or sixty years ago, was a lot of money. It seemed to me that the very people who became the county organizers suddenly had money. Now that's a terrible thing to say, but it's just my own opinion of it. It was my husband's opinion too. However, we weren't married at that time, but we were definitely agreed on this subject of the Ku Klux Klan. We definitely agreed that even friends of ours had suddenly gotten rich.

M: There's another part, something to snoop out if people were interested, and this is a possibility. That might be a possibility. All kinds of things get snooped out after periods of time.

D: I think you will find that it has been snooped out as far as the nation is concerned. In the Encyclopedia Britannica we are told that the Ku Klux Klan was a moneymaking proposition.

M: Is there something further on this particular thing?

D: I'm writing the history of the township, a bicentennial bit. I have said something here about it. The people here by klanishly organizing hoped to frighten the strangers out of the community. The newcomers have told me, and I've always had a great many of friends amongst these farm people because I taught here, I lived with them, and we were friends. We are friends. They have told me of how they were harassed by the people in Springfield Township. They were really made to feel they were not welcomed. But, since then, I am sure, we have learned to know them and we accept them. I'm sure they are just as good of citizens as the old German settlers were to begin with. And proof of the pudding that they are considered good is our children have married their children. Today we are all one big family and the melting pot is working.

M: How did these harassed people feel? How did they suffer from this affair of the Ku Klux Klan? During this period you told me that you asked a Slovak friend of yours how they were reacting. Do you remember that? You named the person that you asked. They had a good

response. You said that her response was that "we love our country."

D: Oh yes, that's Kathryn. She didn't originate that. Let's say that it was her religious training.

M: Did that hit the Protestants hard?

D: Yes, definitely. I know that that is her feeling and I know that it's the feeling of others also. They were taught to be docile, keep quiet about it. In spite of the way they treated you, you turned the other cheek. If they wanted to borrow something from a neighbor and they knew that neighbor was lending his tools to a Protestant neighbor, suddenly that neighbor wasn't lending them to anyone, that kind of thing. If you wanted to buy it, it wasn't for sale. They knew that they were being discriminated against.

M: What was their response to this?

D: I told you about two different families already. Now, they are two different families, and in no way related. If they had responded otherwise, it might have flared up worse. I think their very attitude was a calm one and eventually we learned to know them and found them just as brothers under the skin.

M: Are we leaving anything out?

D: There is something. When did they come to Springfield Township? When did they choose Springfield? That grew out of the fact that there was suddenly land available out here. Their background was, they either had left a farm in Europe or they had hoped to own land someday. They found land out here available.

Our young people were finding eight hours a day in the mills in Youngstown more attractive than from sunup to sunset out on the farm. They had no leisure time. That was one of the reasons why the farms were for sale. There were no sons to carry on. In some instances, there were only daughters and they moved where their husbands were stationed. So there was property available. They liked Springfield Township. It is a beautiful farming area. Youngstown is still growing. Springfield Township has become the bedroom for the Youngstown people. By that, there are less farms available for farming purposes.

M: What was their behavior after they began to be organized? The whole thing as you remember it of the burning of the crosses and their other effects that they had in the neighborhood, would you say this lasted over five years?

D: No, it was at least five years.

M: Have the effects ever really been erased?

D: No, not even yet. There are some of these young people with whom I have talked to within the last year or two, they will never forget seeing these fiery crosses being burned. Some of these folks, with whom I talked today, were children then, old enough to be frightened by the fiery crosses. It was an ominous sight to see a fire of that kind. Even today, if there's a fire we rush because we're fearful of lives being lost or a loss of property. It was a fearful sight. After all, it was kind of spooky to see all these clansmen dressed in their robes. You never knew who these people were. I don't know if I had approached them if they would have recognized me. They would have recognized me, but I feel they would have kept their own identity secret.

M: Can you recall why they felt they had to be so secret?

D: I would like to treat my friends more kindly, but the lack of education makes one suspicious. I don't believe you could find anyone who had gotten out into the world, and who had associated with people out in the world, it was these people living in a smaller community who were not exposed to the outside world. They were just afraid of it, definitely afraid. Well, superstition goes out with education. I feel that in many cases it was just a lack of education. I don't mean formal education, necessarily.

M: Formal education might not have helped that much, but the contact with other people might. The things that you mentioned about being outside of this community were not things that you get out of a book.

D: Like I said, it's not necessarily formal education. If you're taking formal education, think of Ohio State-- and they have as much formal education as you did at Western Reserve--at one time there were a thousand students from the university that marched to the capital grounds in their robes and demonstrated.

M: That's really a difficult thing to picture, but there is no disputing it.

D: Again, I said that in Cleveland, which is where Western Reserve is situated, the town was settled by these ethnic groups coming there together and learning to know each other together, perhaps almost as early as Moses Cleveland got there. There were the Americans, and there were all these groups coming, many, many more than had moved out here. At Ohio State a large

percentage of these students would have come from the country, because doesn't Ohio State lean towards agriculture to start with? I think these students were more than likely to be from an agricultural area. This carried over to the university, that's my own observation.

M: Can you describe one of these parades? You witnessed some from fairly close range didn't you?

D: Yes, I witnessed some from a fairly close range, I would say, as far as parades are concerned. No, I wasn't a part of it. I would see the horse and buggies go by with people behind the horse and the buggy with robes on. You couldn't identify them. If I hadn't known the horse, I wouldn't have known who they were. Don't you know living in a community you know the old grey mare and which barn it goes home to. A cross was burned rather frequently on the farm next to which I lived; we sort of snuck up on them. We didn't trespass by getting off the farm. If it was a large gathering and they milled around, I don't know what they said or what they talked about.

M: Did they have any singing activities around this cross?

D: I don't remember. I don't believe there was that much noise. I mean, I wasn't close enough. There were speakers, but they weren't loudspeakers. They didn't have that kind of paraphernalia.

M: As many people as you knew that were a part of the Klan, you never got next to any of those people? Did you know any of their secret stuff?

D: I have a very dear friend whose husband was persuaded; she would have no part of it. She said she never had ten dollars and she didn't feel her husband had either. But she said all she knew about them was that every time he attended one, she had to wash his robe. Then she said she knew nothing about what went on. That was a secret.

M: It was between man and wife; she didn't know anything either?

D: In my family, my mother did join, but I never heard anything from her. It may be that, I don't know why, but I never heard anything. My father was against them. My father was very much opposed to that kind of thing because he too respected the Catholics and their religion. He had some Jewish friends. He respected his friends even though they were the peddler type of people. So my father was never part of it, nor was I ever a part of it. I never got in on their secrets.



- M: I would like you to describe the effects on the economics. There were certain activities that favored the Klan that were practiced by the merchants, right?
- D: Yes, there were, but I don't believe that I know enough about it because I believe our own merchants were not klanish. I don't believe our own merchants, I'm not making any distinction from that kind of thing, but I do know that the merchants were involved at that time. It's only hearsay as far as I'm concerned because the general store that I went to in our own little town just wasn't that kind of store, but there were others, I'm sure that there were.
- M: Now, for example, in New Middletown, you didn't have any knowledge of merchants that were saying if you don't join the Klan, you can't have credit or anything of this sort?
- D: No, I only know that some of them . . . I think we only had two in the market. We had two in the town at that time. The one was a member of the Klan. I don't know what went on in his store, it was just not the store that I dealt with. It wasn't anything as far as I was concerned.
- M: Was he in a position to be monopolistic?
- D: No, not at all. Then, this was of interest, that we did have a young married couple who moved into our town and opened up a meat market and I don't believe that that particular family was ever discriminated against. I don't know why.
- M: Were they Catholic?
- D: They were from Europe. The husband was an Austrian and she was a Slovak. It may be because they moved across the state line, but I just don't know. They were not discriminated against and had lived in the community a much longer time than these other people. It may be that people did know them, or on the other hand, maybe they wanted meat. Her husband was the only butcher in the town. Once they settled in New Middletown, they both left to join the counsel of the church. They had two daughters. There were no Catholics then, you see.
- M: Don't you think that's very interesting? Could you mention these people's names?
- D: You do know that the Catholics, the Episcopalians, and the Lutherans all have the same rituals? In other words, when I went to the home in those days, funerals were held in the home and not at a funeral parlor. As I went to the

homes to give my sympathy and such, knowing the family as well as I did, there was conversation that would lead over to how the Catholics held their service. I don't know what it was called. It was done in English, and I participated because it was a part of our Lutheran ritual. So, it may be that these people accepted the Lutheran religion because it wasn't too different from their own Catholic religion.

M: This example sort of explains why the Klan died out so fast as well as why it was accepted in the first place, religious-wise. This one family might very well have been sort of a broadening influence for a lot of these people that had never known anybody before.

D: They needed to meet; they definitely needed to meet. Here's something of interest; we had two families in our community whose names were foreign but they were not Catholic. The community thought everyone with a foreign name was Catholic. One of these families had children in school and they told me they would have liked to have attended our church, but they knew there were Protestants here and that there was this feeling about the Klan. They didn't know that we were not that hard-boiled, well, in a way. They moved into our community, but because Protestants were not neighborly, they drove the whole way to Leetonia or some way-out place to attend a church.

Another family moved in and even he was a teacher. He was discriminated against because they thought he was Catholic, and he wasn't. They wouldn't hire him because, I don't know how the word got about, but I do know that the powers that would have recommended him as a teacher did not recommend him because they thought he was a Catholic. I was told that by a man who would have recommended him. He said, "I would not recommend that man because we don't want Catholics on our faculty." And the man was not Catholic at all.

M: If they had just asked him, he could have told them that he wasn't a Catholic.

D: I think it was by word of mouth.

M: What did you feel, at the time, was the political influence? Did you really understand much about it at the time?

D: I think there were as many Democrats as Republicans involved in it. I don't believe there was any political connection in Springfield Township. I just don't believe there was because I know that they were deeply involved from both parties.

M: Do you mean members of both parties?

D: Yes, and amongst the organizers. Now, I don't know about the county.

M: I don't think that there's any doubt with the data that they have in existence now, there was definitely a connection which might have contributed to the fact that it ever came here in the first place. It might have been a person from one party, but that doesn't mean there was any connection out here.

D: I'm drifting from this subject a little bit, but it is politics. Springfield Township, at one time, was very politically minded. Now, that was a long time ago, back in the nineteenth century. We had five county commissioners from the time the county was organized. Five commissioners were representing us in the fifty years that we were a county. We had county treasurers. One of our very first commissioners was from New Middletown in 1846 at Canfield. A prosecuting attorney was appointed from Petersburg to serve until a judge could be appointed.

M: What was his name?

D: Our first commissioner was Sam Justice. The Justice Farm, the name has died out because a certain generation didn't marry. There were no children to bear the name. Richard Shale, from New Springfield, was a treasurer. His brother, Allen, had been a commissioner. The name of the man from Petersburg, Wallace, was very active, Sam Wallace.

M: Were these people Republicans?

D: No, I think that all these commissioners . . . I don't know about Sam Justice, but I know for a fact that Shale was a Democrat.

M: That makes the situation stranger still, doesn't it?

D: Yes. My mother was the Democrat in our family. She was a member of the Klan, but I don't think that it had anything to do with the fact that she was a Democrat; I don't believe that. My father was a Republican.

M: That gives weight to the other influence because you cannot, in this instance, account for it as a political thing.

D: No.

M: . . . which was true in some places. It was a Republican thing, but evidently not here. You can't account for it that way. So, there are other reasons that we have given

that account for it in Springfield Township.

D: In my history, I say it was the mother tongue; they spoke a different language and attended a different church.

M: Of course, that would account for quite a bit. What about the attraction by a lot of enthusiasm?

D: Oh, heavens yes, they were swept off their feet.

M: So, you feel there was a great attraction, the excitement, the newness, the dramatics?

D: Very definitely so.

M: Could you describe this a little better? Explain why this had such a hold around here.

D: It was something new. It was a secret organization. It was similiar to rushing to a fire. When someone starts a fire, there's excitement there, and you're all keyed up and away you go. I think there were a great many people who were swept into it because it was new and it was excitement and they wanted to learn about it, get on the bandwagon sort of thing.

M: It had been a while since there was excitement.

D: Oh yes, definitely. This was an area where you were a quiet farmer and there wasn't much to do. We didn't have television. This was excitement, period. Suddenly, people who had never had an opportunity to join a secret organization had the opportunity. It was the big thing, the thing to do. I'm quite sure I was in the minority in this township.

M: The additional factor of the dramatics and the excitement are easy to overlook.

D: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW