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Interpreting Beyond the Battles: Could We Start with the Klan?

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Abstract

In 1925, the Pennsylvania Klan held its annual convention in Gettysburg in September. The *Times* called the Klan's parade through town a, "gorgeous display," and a, "monster procession." The *Times* headline trumpeted that, "vary-colored robes, capes and gowns present spectacle as Knights, Klanswomen and Junior Members march under warm September sun before large crowds along sidewalks." [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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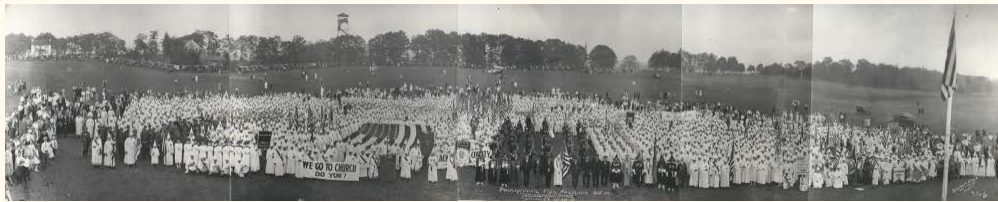


THURSDAY, JUNE 9, 2011

Interpreting Beyond the Battles: Could We Start with the Klan?

Jake has been [having fun imagining and observing](#) how battlefields can move beyond what I've called "[Three Days in July](#)" syndrome.

You might have noticed in the blog's background image the masthead of the *Gettysburg Times*, special Ku Klux Klan edition. Intriguing, isn't it? While doing research a number of years ago, I came across an amazing photo of the Gettysburg battlefield in the collection at Gettysburg National Military Park.



That image was so tantalizing, and has led down a rabbit hole of research. Suffice it to say for now that the Second Klan had a pervasive presence in Gettysburg and southern Pennsylvania. I'll unwrap how entrenched the Klan was as we move along. Right now, let's focus on that photo.



Detail depicting Oak Ridge Observation Tower before it was modified in the 1960s

In 1925, the Pennsylvania Klan held its annual convention in Gettysburg in September. The *Times* called the Klan's parade through town a, "gorgeous display," and a, "monster procession." The *Times* headline trumpeted that, "vary-colored robes, capes and gowns present spectacle as Knights, Klanswomen and Junior Members march under warm September sun before large crowds along sidewalks."

The procession marched out to the site of their rally for the weekend, the sweeping fields of the Forney Farm. They ringed the field with automobiles, using their headlights to illuminate the scene well into the night. They straddled the land where just over fifty years before men of Iverson's Brigade had marched and bled and died fighting for a nation which stood on the cornerstone of the utter subjugation of African-Americans. Now, a second time, an army descended upon that hill to advocate for the superiority of whites over blacks, this time adding Jews and Catholics to the list of undesirables.

Imagine that story on the landscape. Imagine telling that story right along with the story of the battle. It points to the continuum of the war, to the evolution of thought and the eventual consequences of the actions of the men who fought on that land.



The distinctive monument of the 83rd NYSV, surrounded by Model-Ts

And there are plenty of tangible reminders out on the field. In the background of the photo, you can pick out a number of recognizable features that visitors can easily find on today's landscape. The Oak Ridge Observation tower figures prominently in the skyline, before it was neutered to half its height. To its right, you can see the monument of the 83rd NYSV with the eagle spreading its wings above its pinnacle. Following the ridge line you can easily find the blurry soldier with an upturned rifle of the 11th Pennsylvania's monument.

You can imagine standing at one of those monuments, describing the scene to a group of visitors. Let them touch the monument. Then show them the photograph of the rally.



One marcher with the Klansmen sports a sign reading "Spirit of 1861."

The rally was huge. Groups from across Pennsylvania descended upon the fields of Gettysburg. The paper described the town as being festooned with red, white and blue to welcome their heroes. The Klan parade trekked through the streets of the borough, wending down Carlisle street and into the Diamond, then to Baltimore street. They turned onto High Street for a block, and then back north on Washington Street. The imposing group of hundreds of hooded figures skirted the core of the black community of Gettysburg as they marched in military lines.

One of the marchers carried a sign declaring that the gathering was celebrating the, "Spirit of 1861." But which spirit was that which this group of white clad ghosts was celebrating? Was it the spirit of 1861 which tore a nation apart over the brutal question of chattel slavery? Or was it the spirit which set out to preserve that nation and eventually morphed into a quest to rid the nation of the terror of human bondage?

The most curious thing to me, though? Front and center in the image is a line of Klan dignitaries, colorful hoods standing atop their heads. And who accompanies these men? For all the world, they look to be standing beside veterans of the Civil War. Those look suspiciously like uniforms of the Grand Army of the Republic.



Are these GAR members alongside the Pennsylvania Grand Dragon and assorted other officers?

How did these men, standing on the Gettysburg battlefield, rectify their participation in the pageant with Lincoln's, "new birth of freedom," declared half a century earlier? It's that sort of question which I think many people who visit Civil War battlefields would find not only interesting to ponder and reflect upon, but indeed crucial to understanding the road we've taken from the **Civil War to Civil Rights**.

And isn't that what this whole place is about, Charlie Brown?

This isn't the end of the story, but the beginning. I'm still digging. The Klan activity in this county in the '20s is intriguing. And it all takes on new meaning when you look at it in the context of the town as national emblem. The shifting memory of this place, and the political use to which the battlefield has been leveraged, is just as much an important story as the battle itself. Afterall, it had just as much to do with the shaping of the nation.