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Cross-Burning by the Ku Klux Klan in Vale Summit

by Anton Urbas

During the early stages of the 1921-24 coal strike that swept through the Georges Creek coal basin, a group of men from our village formed a cell of the Ku Klux Klan. The identity of these individuals was a closely guarded secret among those families whose men were a part of this cell. As youngsters, endowed with a keen perception, we viewed these crude attempts of maintaining secrecy of identities as a throw-back of the Middle Ages--nothing escaped us.

These men generally met in the sanctuary of the Vale Summit Methodist Church under total secrecy during the late darkness hours, using kerosene lighting for illumination. They would come to the meeting place under total darkness, one by one, avoiding contact with all outsiders. They all wore white dress uniforms complete with total head coverage hoods to obscure their identity.

Encouraged by their growing strength, they started employing drastic measures to strike fear into the hearts of innocent families or individuals. Initially, they purchased 1" x 10" x 10' yellow pine boards from the Sleeman Lumber Yard in Frostburg which were delivered in the early morning hours to one particular home on the Top Row in Vale Summit. This lumber was reformed into the shape of a Cross, and then layers of white bed-sheets or white cotton materials were wrapped around the boards tightly.

For some unknown reason, (perhaps, I was too inquisitive in searching out the identity of this group), the Kluxers would bring this formed Cross up to a spot above the Consolidation Coal Company tramroad in Recky Hansel's pasture field above our home. First, they would dig a hole with a digging bar deep enough to set the cross upright in it, but before securing the cross firmly would douse it with kerosene thoroughly in an effort to maintain a high bed of flames when ignited. At the base of the cross, heavy rocks were rolled against it to maintain rigidity while burning.

Up the slope from the cross setting, a large flat table rock was in evidence. The Kluxers would place a stick of 60% dynamite, equipped with a detonating cap and a six-foot fuse cord attached and crimped to the detonating cap. Ignition at both points was synchronized, so when the flames on the burning cross were at their zenith, the explosive charge would detonate, spreading a powerful shock wave reverberating through the village area, bringing families out of their homes on the double-quick to investigate the source. Their attention was immediately attracted to the brightly illuminated area of the burning cross. In an instant the sight created a wave of fear among some of elderly inhabitants. Previously

printed stories in our local news media indicated the presence of a growing number of KKK participants totally committed to the supremacy aims of this organization, whose prime intent was to destroy or render immobile the presence of the black race and the Catholic religion with the Pope as the head of it.

As our home was the nearest to the explosive detonation, it shook from the shock waves. Rushing out past the kitchen door, I immediately spied the cause of concern, and in my bare feet sped towards the highly illuminated area. Passing our stable, I latched onto a six-foot pole, then bounded over the tramroad, through Recky Hansel's barb wire fence. In a matter of moments I approached the burning cross. Noticing a large stone anchored against the cross base, I slipped the six-foot pole between the stone and cross base and with a fast yank, wrenched the stone loose. In a few seconds I succeeded in toppling over the burning mass. I used the pole to strip off the burning cloth while beating the flames out.

After the hot boards had cooled off, I encountered no difficulty whatever in separating the nailed boards apart. While I was so engaged, I could hear voices faintly in the distance, sounding discontent among the group of men who were responsible for the culmination of this nefarious scheme, uttering words of foulness and retaliation, "That S of a B— will pay for this. That goddam hunky kid has to stick his damn nose into our business. He will pay!" Disregarding the threats, I brought the charred boards home so Dad could utilize them into some workable project.

Ten days later, this cycle of a cross-burning performance was repeated again above our home site in exactly the original area of the first cross-burning. The Ku Kluxers were adamant in creating a wave of fear in the Catholics residing within our village. Only this time, I was prepared to handle an episode of this nature more efficiently. I had sharpened our corn-cutting machete to a fine hone and with its extra length, I was in a position to strip off the burning cloth more rapidly in an effort to minimize excess charring of the yellow pine boards. My mother begged me to lay low for fear of angering this hostile group who would not hesitate to employ viciousness towards us. I kept my cool while formulating a plan to minimize exposure to any undue danger and be ready to vacate the immediate area if set upon in the darkness. Permit me to add, when I brought the slightly charred boards for Dad to use in any project, instead of praise, I received a severe tongue lashing for charging into hostile territory. I cautiously informed Dad that I possessed the ability to take care of myself.

I could not believe that the Ku Kluxers would come back on the identical area to set up their third demonstration. If they did, I felt it would be wise to employ a bit of precaution and common sense, as desperate men sometimes chose drastic measures that could cripple or destroy an outsider.

I was just leaving our stable area after checking that everything within was in order, when I heard a broken branch snapping under body weight up on the hillside. Glancing up, I noticed a clad individual whose white

garment stood out vividly when a lighted match was held against the oil soaked rags wrapped around the cross. I tarried about thirty seconds or so, anticipating that a dynamite explosion would follow.

The stillness of the night was punctuated with crackling sounds of burning wood as the flames swept upwards to the very top of the cross. When no shattering sound of dynamite explosion occurred, I automatically assumed that none would occur. I picked up the six foot pole and the machete and on a half run up the slope started moving towards the site of the burning cross. I just barely made it up to the lower side of the abandoned C & P Railroad bed, when an unseen hand or force pressed firmly against my chest area and an almost inaudible voice uttered the word, "Drop." Subconsciously, I dropped flat on my stomach and at the very moment of contact with the ground surface, an intense shock wave of an explosive charge swept over my body along with a mass of stone fragments whizzing by with a number raking across my butt-side, leaving red welts.

After the shock wave accompanied by the pelting of stone fragments against our out-buildings and home subsided, my mother came runnign out of out home, crossed the bridge walkway and came up to the stable area and in a deeply frightening voice, cried out in Slovenian, "Toni! Toni! Where are you?" To be honest, I could not move for a minute or so. I was so frightened that breathing became a task. My body trembled from the nearness to total annihilation. I could not understand what unseen power pressed against my body and uttered the word, "Drop!" so vividly. Before arising, I uttered a prayer of thanks to the Lord and my guiding angel for saving me.

When I didn't immediately respond to Mother's call, she became alarmed that I was a victim of the blast. When she heard me struggling to get up onto my feet and noticing how I was shaking from the fright and pain that was contributing to my body trembling, she assisted me to establish a bit of equilibrium. The first thing she said, was, "Why don't you listen? These crazy men wouldn't hesitate to destroy any one crossing their path!"

When we entered our home, I took Mom aside and exposing my back-side, I requested her to wash the red welts with peroxide and coat them lightly with iodine. I also cautioned her not to say a word to anyone, particularly Dad. I knew he would explode.

This last episode of cross-burning brought a halt to the demonstrations set up by the Ku Kluxers in our village. They must have witnessed what followed the explosive charge could have turned into a real tragedy. To this day I still hold to the belief that our family, especially myself, was the prime target to be eliminated. We were a Catholic family and our parents were of foreign extraction—Slovenes.

Note: The first and second charge of dynamite were placed on top of a stone flat. The third was placed under a pile of rocks, resulting in a mass of flying stone fragments. The dynamite charge was placed between Recky Hansel's pasture fence and the Consol tram-road. I believe these men calculated that in pursuit to douse the burning mass on the cross, I would be in the immediate area of the explosive charge when it detonated.

On a number of occasions, I was requested to identify the members of this clan. What was to be gained by creating another cycle of anger?