

The Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina and the Battle of Maxton Field

By Jefferson Currie II

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 44:1 (fall 2004).

One day in the 1930s, sixteen-year-old Sanford Locklear was riding in a car with his father near their home when he had an experience that would help him to decide later in life to defend his people, the Lumbee Indians. Mr. Sanford learned that day about a group of people called the Ku Klux Klan.

I saw a group of people out there in the field. There was a lot of people out there grouped around, and I saw people with hoods over their heads, and I, I was young, I didn't know, and I asked him [my father] what those people was doing out there. . . . He said, "Them's Klansmens." I said, "Wha, wha, what they gonna do?" And he told me, said, "That's an organization." He said, "When they gather like that," said, "they talk about," he said, "sometimes they go to people's house and beat them." I said, "Why," I said, "why don't somebody do something about it?" He said, "Nobody can't get, you can't do nothing with them." I says, "Why?" He said, "Well, it's an organization," he said, "and they pull together." Says, "You can't, you can't mess with them." I says, "Well, why couldn't, you know, a, a group of people go out there and run them away?" Says, "It's their land. They're having meetings on it. They can do what they want to do."

The Ku Klux Klan formed in Pulaski, Tennessee, after the Civil War had ended. Six former Confederate army officers established the social organization in the winter of 1865–1866. The society soon became an outlet for white southerners opposed to the blacks and whites who supported the new Republican-controlled Reconstruction governments in southern states. The Klan activities in North Carolina were often intensely focused on people (black, Indian, and white) who supported the civil rights gained by African Americans and Indians as a result of Reconstruction policies in the South. Often while wearing masks and hoods, the Klan staged raids to disarm persons of color, burn the houses and outbuildings of people friendly to blacks and Indians, and attack vocal Republican supporters. Eventually North Carolina arrested numerous Klansmen in the 1870s for these raids and activities, ending most overt actions. But some smaller groups, loosely affiliated with the old Ku Klux Klan, maintained their violent activities well into the late nineteenth century.

At the dawning of the twentieth century in North Carolina, African Americans and American Indians had lost all political power within the state and federal governments as a result of the actions of "white supremacist" leaders. Under the cruel system known as Jim Crow, people of color lost their right to vote and were generally oppressed by segregation laws and social customs. In the social, economic, and political instability

after World War I, the Ku Klux Klan gained new power. Blacks, foreigners, and trade unionists, among others, were blamed for the condition of the country and attacked by the Klan. Klan membership in the United States swelled to more than 3 million in the 1920s, and blacks and Indians continued to suffer the humiliation of persistent persecution by the group. By the 1930s, the large, organized Klan marches of the 1920s had ceased, and the organization again broke into smaller, local groups.

Following the end of World War II, returning black and Indian military veterans pushed for greater rights within their communities. After the United States Supreme Court ruled in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that school segregation was unlawful, African Americans and American Indians in North Carolina pushed even harder to break down the system of Jim Crow laws that limited their freedoms. The Ku Klux Klan reacted to this struggle for civil rights by intimidating people of color and their white supporters through cross burnings, marches, and rallies.

During the 1950s, a major leader of the Klan in North Carolina was an evangelist and radio preacher named James “Catfish” Cole. To generate support for continued segregation, Cole traveled the state holding Klan rallies that thousands of white North Carolinians supported. Into Robeson County, home of Sanford Locklear and hundreds of other Lumbee and Tuscarora Indians, Cole brought his message of segregation in 1958.

Locklear recalls that he first heard about the Klan’s coming to Robeson County while in a barbershop in Pembroke:

I heard them about burning cross, what, crosses, at Lumberton. And after then, I went [into the] barbershop to get a haircut, and there was men in there talking about it, and said they was coming to Maxton. Says, “Let’s meet them in Maxton; let’s not give them the chance to come to Pembroke.”

On a crisp, cold Saturday night in January 1958, the Ku Klux Klan began to assemble to hear Cole deliver a speech entitled “Why I Support Segregation.” Before he could begin speaking, Indians began to stream onto the field beside Hayes Millpond outside Maxton. The Indians, ready to break up the rally, brought sticks and weapons to intimidate the Klansmen. Locklear recounts how the Klan was defeated that night:

And we got there. I asked the man, I asked him what was he doing there. He said, “We come to talk to these people.” I said, “Well, you’re ain’t gone talk to these people tonight.” He said, “Yes, I am.” I said, “No, you ain’t.” And so words was exchanged, you know. And about that, about that time, I pushed on him and pushed him back, and I threwed the gun on him. I pushed him, you know, and I throwed the gun on him. And I told him not to move. “And don’t you move; if you do, well, I’ll kill you,” that’s what I said. And he had his light up there. My brother-in-law shot, he shot his light out, and when he shot the light out, I kicked his tape player, recorder. That’s what happened down there.

After Locklear and the other American Indians broke up the Ku Klux Klan rally, many Indians fired their shotguns into the air, and the Klansmen fled. Authorities arrested Cole shortly after the rally and charged him with inciting a riot. He was convicted in court and sentenced to a year in prison.

In spite of being stopped that evening in Robeson County, the Klan continued to hold rallies in North Carolina. Robert Jones pushed to organize the Klan in the 1960s and gained support throughout the state that lasted well into the 1980s. The Klan did not deter the Civil Rights movement, however. Today North Carolina is a different place. People of all races and minority groups are able to vote, receive a quality education, and live their lives free from oppression. Though the struggle took many long years, civil rights today are a reality. That achievement came about perhaps as a result of Indian activist Carnell Locklear's self-proclaimed three keys to success—"faith in what you're doing, and determination, and faith in God."

At the time of this article's publication, Jefferson Currie II worked on the curatorial staff at the North Carolina Museum of History.