

Museum Notes

for the week of March 24 – 30, 2024
by Kristen Parrott, curator

100 years ago, a Viola correspondent noted in the *Vernon County Censor* of March 19, 1924, that, “An organizer for the Ku Klux Klan has been in our midst the past few days in an effort to organize at this place.” Yes, the KKK was active in Vernon County a century ago.

Henry Rogers, who ran a store on Viroqua’s Main Street, wrote a letter on March 21, 1924, to his daughter Alice, away at college, informing her that “The Klux had a fiery cross on the Court House rock Monday. Now they bring around a card asking what my religion is, mother’s, father’s.”

You can learn more about this controversial organization and turbulent time period at our next free public history program. The program will be held on Wednesday, April 3, at 7PM, at the Vernon County Museum and History Center. The speaker for the evening will be Dr. Michael Jacobs, a Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Baraboo campus. His topic is, “The Ku Klux Klan in Vernon County and Western Wisconsin in the 1920s”.

Dr. Jacobs earned his PhD in U.S. history at Marquette University in 2001, with a dissertation on the Catholic response to the Ku Klux Klan in the Midwest, 1920-1928. He researches and writes primarily on intolerance movements in the American Midwest. He served as a consultant on the PBS television series, “History Detectives,” and advises the Wisconsin Historical Society on Klan-related artifacts, papers, and photographs.

Dr. Jacobs describes his talk as follows: “The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was not necessarily comprised of like-minded racial bigots. The organization differed from the more familiar domestic terrorists of the post Civil War and Civil Rights eras. Jazz Age Klansmen made greater efforts to resemble mainstream fraternal orders. While African Americans remained an object of derision, western Wisconsin’s Klan paid greater attention to Catholics, immigrants, and Prohibition violators. The Klan was active in Vernon County and included some of its most prominent citizens.”

In early July of 1924, Klan meetings were held at Eckhart Park and at the county fairgrounds, both in Viroqua. In September, there was a KKK meeting in Dell. In early October, the Klan marched up and down Viroqua’s Main St. and burned a cross. A few weeks later, there was a KKK meeting in De Soto, and four crosses were burned on nearby hillsides. Meetings were also held in Valley and La Farge and Hillsboro.

The activities of the Klan around the state and the nation were much in the news in 1924. The *La Farge Enterprise* reprinted a long letter to the editor of the *Capital Times* written in December by a Klan representative in Madison. In the letter, the representative, Joseph Jones, plainly stated that the KKK stood for “supremacy of the white race”, “a limitation of foreign immigration”, and “the Protestant church”.

The KKK might have been trying to rebrand itself as a patriotic organization devoted to protecting the U.S. Constitution, but anyone who joined or attended a meeting or even just read the local paper knew that the Klan only supported white U.S.-born Protestants, and actively opposed anyone else. That anyone else included a lot of Vernon County residents.

From Italian Catholics in Genoa, to Norwegian immigrants in Westby, to non-white residents of Cheyenne Valley, to Bohemian Catholics in Hillsboro, many local people did not fit the Klan’s definition of “American”. And many local people were opposed to the KKK.

Lillian (Jussen) Proctor of Viroqua, a Catholic and the daughter of German immigrants, ran for Member of Assembly in 1924, in part on her stated opposition to the KKK and to all organizations founded on racial and religious prejudice. Her opponent, A.E. Smith of Viroqua, was a local leader of the Klan. Smith won the election. Come learn more about this difficult history at our April 3 program.