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Santa Barbara

Hooded Figure\$: The Female Profiteers of the Ku Klux Klan (1899-1930)

An examination of the business operations of the Second Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan with a specific focus on the female leaders of the organizations.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

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This senior thesis is focused on the financial misconduct of the female leaders of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), specifically a reexamination of the KKK and WKKK as businesses with hatred as the product. Women within these organizations utilized their Klan leadership as an avenue to build wealth through legitimate and illegitimate means, particularly achieving large monetary gains by economically exploiting the KKK's ideology. Further, the existence of these women demonstrated a form of early conservative gender equality, as their leadership and fortunes are subversions of patriarchal institutions within the Klan and 1920s gender roles. The Ku Klux Klan is ultimately the combination of the 1920s capitalist consumer culture and the popular nativist, racist, and xenophobic political beliefs. The cultural climate was also the set of circumstances that allowed for a very specific subset of white women to get massively wealthy and powerful as a result. The economics of supremacy and the proliferation of the Klan went hand in hand. Financial crimes were rampant among the leaders of the Klan, including the female leaders.

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan is a generally underrepresented aspect of the second Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. It also marked the first and last time in the history of the Ku Klux Klan

when white women were true partners in the advancement of white supremacy. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan explicitly marketed the organization as a way to enact female political expression in the model of white supremacy. Female leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer were able to steal from the Klan because the Klan was inherently a business, with terror and white supremacy as its product. And in 1920s America, it was an incredibly popular product that fed into a deeply profitable business

A key primary source is the transcript from the 1921 KKK Hearing conducted by the House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, which investigated the Klan for tax evasion and potential mail fraud. Much of the primary source evidence used is taken from contemporary newspapers, both from Klan-affiliated and anti-Klan news organizations. These papers published much of the financial details of Klan misconduct. Notable newspapers are the *Muncie-Post Democrat*, which focused much of its criticism on the activities and financial misconduct of Daisy Douglas Barr in her role as leader of the WKKK in Indiana; as well as the *New York World*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, and the *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal* which was incredibly critical of Mary Elizabeth Tyler and the Southern Publicity Center; often publishing articles on the calls of her dismissal from the Klan as a result of the publication of her profiteering off fellow Klan members. Similarly, Robbie Gill Comer's critics were largely in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, *The Producers News*, and the *Birmingham Age-Herald*; the former of which was notable for publishing the details of her lawsuits, which triggered a state audit of the business operation of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. These newspapers are notable for nationalizing the stories of these women's financial gains and the ways in which they enriched themselves off the Klan, which in turn contributed to the downfall of not only these women in the Klan but the Ku Klux Klan itself.

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Realm of..... No.....
 NAME.....
 ADDRESS.....
 SHIP TO.....
 ARTICLE.....
ROBE MEASURE

1 to 2		
3 to 4		
3 to 5		
3 to 6		
7		
MEASURE AROUND CHEST		Measure length of each sleeve from shoulder to cuff. Sleeve should be 1/2 inch longer than body. Measure depth of V and add 2 inches for full measure. Size of hat and collar must correspond to size of robe.
SIZE COLLAR WORN		
SIZE HAT WORN		

To the Imperial Wizard, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,
 Atlanta, Ga.
 I hereby make requisition for.....
 Robe and Helmet which will be for my own use only so long as
 I am in good standing in my local Klan. If ever my connection
 with the Order is for any cause severed, I will deliver above named
 article to Exalted Cyclops of my Klan without delay. I agree
 that the above article shall ever be the property of the Knights
 of the Ku Klux Klan, (Inc.).
 Signed:.....
 Member.
 Date....., 19.....
 I hereby certify that the person signed above is a member
 in good standing of Klan No....., Realm
 of....., Knights of
 the Ku Klux Klan.
 Signed,.....
 Elitograph of Klan No....., Realm of.....
 Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.
 Date....., 19.....

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ABBREVIATIONS

KKK	Ku Klux Klan
WKKK	Women of the Ku Klux Klan
WCTU	Women's Christian Temperance Union
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
IRS	Internal Revenue Service

For Marcial & Mae
To Arianna & Manroop

From Suffrage to Supremacy: The Rise of Women in the KKK in 1920s America

“When women get involved, a movement becomes a serious threat.” - Lana Lokteff

In 1924, the law firm of W.F. Zumbrunn and Eerson & Donhum released a pamphlet addressing the accusations against Robbie Gill Comer, the Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK). Within *A.B. Cloud, Et. Al. v. Robbie Gill Comer Et. Al.*, the latter was charged with severe misconduct, financial misappropriation, and abuse of power as the leader of the WKKK. The pamphlet titled, “*The Truth About the Charges Made Against the Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*,” provided a point-by-point rebuttal against the accusations made against Gill Comer in court.¹ Her fellow Klanswomen were accusing her of stealing from the Women of the Ku Klux Klan and funneling thousands of dollars of stolen funds into both private accounts and her husband's business, in addition to gross profiteering of fellow Klanswomen, manipulation of her position of power by improperly removing her critics from office, and using her role as Imperial Commander to give favors and promotions to members of her family.

Despite the gravity of these accusations against Robbie Gill Comer, the national Klan lent her their full support. This is seen in the fact that her personal attorney, W.F. Zumbrunn, was the attorney for the national Ku Klux Klan organization. The aforementioned pamphlets were widely circulated by pro-KKK organizations and figures and printed with money from the Klan coffers. The fact that the national lawyer of the KKK was her attorney in this civil dispute denotes both

¹ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Truth About the Charges Made Against the Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* Parke-Harper Publishing Co.1924

her power within the Klan as well as her importance to the national organization. This was a Klan-printed, widely circulated pamphlet that further demonstrated not only the power of Klan leaders but also their control of operations within the Klan.

Robbie Gill Comer was not unique among her contemporaries. These allegations and accusations were widespread amongst the leadership ranks of the Klan. The crimes associated with the KKK and WKKK encompassed more than domestic terrorism, but also included the white collar crimes and financial fraud the leaders were actively engaged in. In their pursuits of sources of revenue in addition to their already high-paying salaries, the female leaders engaged in widespread abuses of power in order to enrich themselves. These were women who understood the resources and investments necessary to not only spread white supremacy across the nation but to profit off of it. Every aspect of the operations of the KKK and WKKK was monetized and made into a profit center where those at the top of the leadership were able to reap the rewards, often at the expense of not only fellow Klansmembers but also at the expense of the country itself.

This is simply an example of the type of power and control the female leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan wielded within the second iteration of the KKK. William Joseph Simmons founded the Second Klan in Georgia in 1915.² It was distinct from the first iteration of the Klan which formed in 1865, during the wake of the Confederate loss of the Civil War, emancipation and the establishment of citizenship for Black Americans, and Reconstruction in the American South. The refounding of the organization was inspired by *The Birth of a Nation*, a popular silent film romanticizing the role of the Klan in the Reconstruction

² Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Period as well as anti-African American sentiment and white supremacist ideology.³ This second Klan marked the first time the KKK was a national organization, expanding to the West Coast and particularly strongly in the American Midwest. It was also in this political and social environment that WKKK was able to be immensely popular among white, Protestant, middle-class women.

Power, Profit, and the Project of White Supremacy

Within the Second Ku Klux Klan, a handful of women were the leaders, business executives, and kingmakers of the white supremacist cause in the 1920s. These women were not baking apple pies or waiting for their husbands to come home after a long day of Klan activity; they were proactive members in this movement with legitimate financial power and influence. Their involvement went far beyond benign statements of support for the white supremacist cause. They built businesses and made fortunes from their command in the Klan. It is also crucial to note that while the Ku Klux Klan was a domestic terrorist organization, their ideas and the organization itself were not a fringe, taboo aspect of American society.⁴ And while this form of civic engagement may be on the periphery of representation of women's political agency, women have long been part of the white supremacist movement. This is why the Ku Klux Klan,

³ Chalmers, David Mark. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Franklin Watts, 1981.

⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan as organizations with high levels of female involvement and female leadership are important to the collective history of women in the United States.

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan was a part of the Second Ku Klux Klan and served as a secondary branch of the organization, often acting as an entirely separate organization but with many of the similar beliefs and end goals of the KKK. During the 1920s, there was a WKKK chapter within each state that the Klan operated in and it was notable for executing its racist and



nativist mandate through non-violent tactics, such as “whispering campaigns” which were vicious rumors and innuendoes spread by Klanswomen that lead to the widespread boycotts of Jewish or Catholic-owned businesses.⁵ The WKKK presented a very complicated aspect of the history of female

political engagement, yet it is a vital and critical part of that history.⁶ It is important to analyze this violent strand of female activism post-suffrage and examine how the Klan’s racist ideologies provided women an avenue for political power while ultimately reinforcing patriarchal gender roles.

Historical understanding of the WKKK is only now reflecting that sentiment by showcasing the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in its entirety, because presenting the women’s Klan as merely an offshoot, a lesser branch of the larger Ku Klux Klan has had the unfortunate

⁵ Pinar, William F. “WHITE WOMEN in the KU KLUX KLAN.” *Counterpoints* 163 (2001): 555–619. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42977759>.

⁶ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

consequence of whitewashing and erasing how women not only contributed but solidified the rhetoric and the ideology of the Klan into popular American culture.⁷ This was very much the case until the early 1990s, which saw the publication of *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* by Kathleen M. Blee and the subsequent publication of *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. These two works are the foremost research on the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. These sources demonstrated how the WKKK operated almost completely separate from the KKK, which is largely a departure from earlier research and analysis of the WKKK.⁸ These two works, but primarily the former, represent a paradigm shift in the way in which the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is thought about in terms of both the history of the Klan itself as well as the role of women in American terrorism. Thanks to the combined work of McLean and Blee, the leaders of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan and the extent of their power were highlighted, specifically the roles of key female leaders in organizing the WKKK to be as culturally relevant as it was and in how they contributed to the expansion of the Klan as an organization throughout the Midwest.⁹ These leaders did not feature prominently or at all in previous academic writings on the topic; however, their work within the Klan was vital to the social acceptability of much of the Klan's violent and extremist rhetoric, and they are notable for promoting and popularizing a racist and nativist strand of feminism.¹⁰ Research that has come after the publication of Blee and McLean's books highlights how the WKKK's interpretation of the role of women in the white supremacist movement contradicted the Klan's messaging, noting

⁷ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

⁸ Chalmers, David Mark. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Franklin Watts, 1981.

⁹ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

¹⁰ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

the conflicts raised between the KKK and the WKKK over the idea of the equality of women under white supremacy and the WKKK's ability to self-determine.

The methodology of this senior thesis is concentrated on primary sources, particularly archival newspaper sources found in the Midwest and the American South, in addition to government investigations, lawsuits, and local property deeds. The transcript from the 1921 KKK Hearing conducted by the House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, is an important primary source for this project. Lawmakers realized that the Klan was, in fact, a money-making operation with active business interest and property holdings. Based on this, Congress realized that the Klan had potentially committed federal tax evasion and federal mail fraud in addition to the fact that key members of Klan leadership were potentially engaged in embezzlement and business fraud. Much of the congressional testimony is dedicated to the finances of the Klan, including several business records and Klan ledgers; Congress was also incredibly interested in the founders and key leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and the financial dealings of the Southern Publicity Association, which provided promotional work and public relations for the Klan.

From Pins to White Sheets: The Post-Suffrage Female Involvement in the KKK

Since the publication of Blee and McLean's works, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan have been understood to be a noteworthy part of female activism after female suffrage. There is a connection between female activism in the lead up to the passage of the 19th Amendment and female involvement in the Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. Prior to the 19th Amendment, there were multiple avenues for political engagement for white, Protestant women, particularly through organizations that lobbied for female suffrage and other seemingly female

causes, such as prohibition, education, and anti-gambling legislation. All of these were political causes that were socially perceived to be appropriate for female involvement.¹¹

These aspects of female political life were so intertwined that some of the most popular political organizations for women of the time, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Anti-Saloon League, and the Daughters of American Revolution, not only had key ideological overlaps with the Klan, but a specific subset of women involved in the Klan began their civic engagement in these aforementioned organizations.¹² These ties between these organizations were so pronounced that prominent attorney Clarence Darrow in 1924 remarked, "The father and the mother of the Ku Klux is the Anti-Saloon League. I would not say every Anti-Saloon Leaguer is a Ku Kluxer, but every Ku Kluxer is an Anti-Saloon Leaguer."¹³ These organizations allowed a particular subset of women to gain the community organizing skills and the political experience that were utilized in the Women of the KKK; these skills were used to great effect as many historians credit the WKKK as better managed and better organized than their male counterparts.¹⁴ Political engagement in organizations like WCTU and even the WKKK was seen as an extension of the expression of gender roles of the 1920s. As McLean wrote, "Given its woman-centered principles, the WCTU might not seem akin to the Klan. But the kinship was mutual: the Women's Ku Klux Klan articulated similar women's rights claims, while the WCTU's racial and religious views mirrored those of the KKK."¹⁵ These values

¹¹ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

¹² MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹³ "Darrow Says He Opposes Prohibition - Attorney for Rich Murderers Boasts That He's Wet" *Fierly Cross*, November 7, 1924, Page 2.

¹⁴ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

¹⁵ MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995, Page 41.

included popular American moral crusades such as pro-Prohibition and Temperance activism, anti-Prostitution, and an emphasis on American family values, which sometimes veered towards anti-immigrant and racist sentiments. Women's civic engagement was largely relegated to the home and family; however, many women interpreted “home” as a community and saw the betterment of their community as part of their duty as women.¹⁶ Often this interpretation of womanly duty was intertwined with racist and nativist sentiment, which contributed to the popularization of the KKK and its prevalence in 1920s American culture.

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan explicitly marketed the organization as a way to enact female political expression in the model of white supremacy, and the female leaders of the WKKK accumulated their riches off of this interpretation of femininity, patriotism, and womanly duty. The overt political intentions of white women’s involvement make the WKKK more than a mere social club or women’s organization—this was domestic terrorism. Their involvement in the white supremacy movement was not episodic, nor was it tepid; women were instrumental figures within the second iteration of the Klan. Much of the function of the WKKK was not overtly violent as the KKK and centered around issues women of the 1920s cared about, such as education and the protection of the home. This manifested in economic terrorism and intimidation tactics, such as the aforementioned “whisper campaigns” against Catholic and Jewish businesses and teachers.¹⁷ These women overran local school board meetings and parent organizations, attempted to distribute Bibles in schools and establish them within the curriculum, and led boycotts and assaults on non-Klan businesses or those owned by Catholic or Jewish families.

¹⁶ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

¹⁷ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

Demure Zealotry and the Bottom Line: The Many Incentives of the Ku Klux Klan

The self-enrichment and the wealth-building of female leaders, such as Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer, have been largely unexplored in the existing academic literature. Despite the lack of examination into this particular form of female Klan involvement, the way they profited from their involvement in the Klan is fascinating. For these women, the cause of white supremacy was more than a political movement, it was a profit center. By catering and pandering to the bigotry and the racism of the Klan and Klan sympathetic supporters, these women were able to leverage their leadership into profit and ascend the ladder of political influence. These women had a vested financial interest in the Klan and white supremacy as a whole due to the interconnected relationship between their money-making operation and their leadership. In fact, this iteration of the KKK was foundationally married to profit as much as it was to the spread of its hateful ideology.¹⁸ These women were more than soldiers for the cause of white supremacy, they directed the Klan's moral war against what it viewed to be the ails of America.

The business operations of the KKK resulted in the intersection of money and power and these women used their involvement to achieve both; so much so that the extent of their money-making operations and the substantial profits derived from fellow Klan members were often used as justification to take power away from these female leaders and reorient the power structure of the Klan to be male-dominated. Enriching oneself off terrorism and hate was a big business, both in the 1920s and in modern-day iterations of white supremacist organizations; and the

¹⁸ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

association between Klan ideology and business came about in the 1920s, through the selling of merchandise, the creation of a Klan-affiliated and sympathetic media apparatus, and through the charging of membership fees.

Wealth begets power, and leaders such as Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer were able to leverage the wealth they obtained into power. They not only cultivated and centralized power within their leadership positions, but they also solidified their influence within the Klan through key business investments in Klan operations. These women engaged in strategic investments in both the business operations of the KKK and the larger success of white supremacy, thus making them integral and invaluable members of KKK and WKKK leadership. These women were not members of the Klan as a hobby or side project; this was their livelihood, so much so that they created business empires off of the Klan and turned the white supremacist project of the KKK into their own personal capitalistic project. These women had serious financial investments in all aspects of Klan operations that made it so popular and established. Their power contributed to their wealth, and they used their wealth to consolidate their power and to outright profit off the organization in the millions.

There were multiple ways for the leadership of the Klan to enrich themselves off of their ideology and their membership, and through those ways, leaders made millions. So much so that the large-scale investigations and court cases were centered around potential financial misconduct, misreporting, and misappropriation of funds, particularly federal taxes, which Congress was especially concerned with, so much so that there was an investigation into it. That investigation provides one of the clearest windows into the financial schemes of the various leaders within the Klan and is one of the strongest pieces of evidence of the muddled motivations

of the Klan.¹⁹ The public revelations of the dual motives of Klan leadership were a contributing factor to the downfall of the organization.²⁰ Not only did their leaders profit off of their commitment to white supremacy and their fellow Klansmembers, but they also profited to extremes.

Terror Incorporated: The KKK Business Model and the Business of Bigotry

The exponential growth in membership and national recognition of the Klan is wholly credited to the partnership between William Joseph Simmons and the Southern Publicity Association, which was founded in 1915. Its founders and owners, Edward Young Clarke and Mary Elizabeth “Bessie” Tyler would become leaders in their own right in the KKK and amass fortunes off of this partnership with the Klan. Together, Simmons, Young Clarke, and Tyler would comprise the “Big Three” of Klan leadership. As a direct result of this partnership, the Klan’s organizational structure would evolve overnight. Gone were the unorganized offshoots with only a handful of members. In its place, Tyler and Clarke implemented recruitment systems and an organizational hierarchy that placed the “Big Three” at the top of the Klan’s power structure and their business operation. In the aftermath of the involvement of the Southern Publicity Association, the Klan would become more organized, more politically inclined, and more ruthless in both its execution of its moral crusade and through the multiple avenues by which the organization enriched itself off its members. The introduction of a hierarchy-based structure within the organization meant that the money from the base of the pyramid would only

¹⁹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Accessed September 29, 2024

²⁰ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

flow upward, into the pockets of the key leadership, which was mainly Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke.

Mary Elizabeth Tyler is an important figure in the history of the Ku Klux Klan as she is credited with the expansion of the Klan ideology. Prior to her involvement, the sole focus of the



Klan's "crusade" was African Americans. However, Tyler spearheaded the expansion of the creed to include immigrants, Catholics, and Jews, as well as moral causes such as temperance, Prohibition, and family values.²¹ Not only that, she was a central advocate for the creation of a female Klan organization, which would eventually become the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in 1923. As the main figure behind broadening the scope of the Klan's enemies list and moral grievances, she, through the Southern Publicity Association, reaped serious financial rewards, eventually

building a fortune off her business ties with the Klan. However, her close association with these new reactionary moral stances, her wealth, as well as the details of her personal life led to her eventual expulsion from the Klan.

Although Mary Elizabeth Tyler was integral to the rebirth of the Second Ku Klux Klan, she is more often than not omitted from contemporary newspaper reporting and even in the academic scholarship on the Klan in the decades that followed. This omission from the early

²¹ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

founding of the Klan is partially because of her gender.²² In fact, one could make an argument that this oversight by contemporary newspaper reporting was done as a way to discredit her power and undermine her positions of authority within the KKK. Even though they had an equal business partnership within the Southern Publicity Association and equal positions of power within the Klan, much of the credit in non-Klan-affiliated newspapers and academic writings as well as her contributions and work in the Klan were often attributed to Edward Young Clarke. She was a vital aspect of the rise of the Klan in the 1920s yet was uncredited for her work in advertising and hatred across America. In the past two decades, however, the acknowledgment and inclusion of Mary Elizabeth Tyler have significantly increased. However, the past and persistent omission are very much a product of external sources. Within the KKK, Tyler was acknowledged as the powerbroker and leader. Multiple figures, both in leadership and in everyday rank, acknowledged her power in various ways. Despite being left out, Mary Elizabeth Tyler is one of the most well-known, if not the most, female leaders of the Klan and the first female leader in this era of female leadership within the Klan.

Tyler was not the only female leader within the KKK or the WKKK to enrich themselves through illegal means. Daisy Douglas Barr would eventually lead the WKKK, serving as the Imperial Empress of the organization as well as the chief recruitment officer. These positions allowed her access to one of the primary methods by which much of the Klan leadership made their fortunes—the extensive revenue streams collected from recruits through recruitment fees and membership dues. All of the Klan leadership gained wealth through these fees and dues, however, the extent to which Douglas Barr did through the female members in the Women of the

²² Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

Ku Klux Klan was extensive as her control over the recruitment efforts of the WKKK stretched across the entirety of the American Midwest region. Among Douglas Barr's contemporaries, Mary Elizabeth Tyler was the only female leader with comparable power and scope of influence



over Klan recruitment. She was so integral to the success of the Klan and to the leadership of the organization that she was hand-selected by D.C. Stephenson, one of the main leaders of the Klan, to lead the WKKK. Douglas Barr was subject to multiple lawsuits and personal attacks in the American media, both within and outside the Klan, as a result of her direct profiteering of the organization. In the wake of the external and internal pressure,



Douglas Barr would eventually be forced out of her lucrative leadership role and from the Klan itself, leaving a power vacuum that would be filled by the male leadership taking over her position in the Klan's profit hierarchy. Robbie Gill Comer, who is less well known than the two but still deeply relevant to the history of the Klan, served as the Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. She was so integral to the order and operations of both the WKKK and KKK that her signature is at the end of the WKKK Constitution and the other founding documents of the organization.

Under her leadership of the WKKK, the organization gained a headquarters, and she built factory operations to handle the production of Klan paraphernalia. All of which amassed a fortune comparable to her male and female contemporaries.

Control over the systems of manufacturing Klan goods and merchandise was the second way in which much of the Klan leadership built their fortune. And since the Women of the Ku Klux Klan were organized in almost the exact same power pyramid hierarchy as the KKK, much of the profits of these merchandise sales went and stayed at the top, lining the pockets of the leadership, particularly the pockets of Gill Comer who controlled the factory productions for the WKKK. Similarly to Tyler and Douglas Barr, Robbie Gill Comer was accused and eventually brought to court as a result of her alleged misconduct; however, like her contemporaries, these charges were part of the greater power struggle to remove women from key positions of power within the Klan. Gill Comer was charged with corruption in the way she achieved her position, using that position to promote her husband into Klan leadership, and along with him, defrauding Klan members and embezzling the Ku Klux Klan general fund.

America is the Klan: The Popularity of White Supremacy in the 1920s

The emergence and staying power of the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, can be viewed through the perspective that the organization was a violent and hate-filled cultural backlash to the decadence of the 1920s. The Roaring Twenties was a time of great social and economic change within the United States, one that saw high rates of immigration and the increasing visibility of a non-white popular culture through the popularity of Jazz Culture and the Harlem Renaissance. A not insignificant portion of the population viewed this change as an attack on white America, which is the type of mentality targeted by the Kleagle recruiters. Social, political, and economic aspirations were filtered through the lens of white supremacy to appeal to potential new recruits; however, these would ultimately be the promotion of the social,

political, and economic goals of the KKK.²³ The Klan, at its very core, was a self-serving organization, and the tools and methods of recruitment were no different. Even the financial motivations for continuous recruitment were self-serving, as Kleagles were paid through both commission and a multi-level marketing system. Even the promotion of white supremacy and “100% Americanness” was simply an avenue for the spread of the Klan’s political agenda.

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan were recruited based on the idea that it was part of the duty of white Protestant women to protect their communities from the threats posed by African Americans and immigrants. Economic and social terror were hallmarks of the WKKK. The organization engaged in economic boycotts, whisper campaigns, and career intimidation as their primary tools of white supremacy. They targeted Catholic and Jewish school teachers and businesses in the Midwest and African American communities in the American South. The idea that certain groups of people were threats to the sexual purity of white women, the future of Protestant children, and the very blood of America was a core tenet of the KKK.

These racist and xenophobic sentiments were not politically or socially taboo. These beliefs were in direct response to the perceptions of the erosion of white power and dominance in the workforce, politics, and general society. The success of the Ku Klux Klan and the prevalence of white supremacist ideology across the country is proof of the popularity of these narratives. The ubiquity of the KKK in the 1920s was simply one extreme expression of these dominant and popular political beliefs. Unlike other forms of white supremacy within the decade, the Klan asserted white identity through violent and terroristic means. And they were allowed to do so

²³ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

with very minimal pushback from the American public, generally no government intervention, and only very few cases of legal accountability and repercussions.

The second iteration of the KKK existed in an era where racial violence and lynchings were not only commonplace occurrences but also community events. The Klan did not create



white supremacy; instead, the organization made the public spectacle of it profitable. Klan rallies, lynchings, and mass cross-burnings were public occasions and community events. Mass parades of Klansmen became a hallmark of the organization; both as a recruitment and intimidation tactic. One such parade took place on Pennsylvania Avenue,

in full view of the White House in 1926. These were not private, at-home expressions of political ideology. For being a supposed secret organization, the goals of the Klan were not so secret as their actions were a public assertion of white power. Not only were the activities of the KKK done in prominent locations, but the very members of the KKK were prominent figures as well. The Klan was a community organization in which local leaders, influential figures, and people of power were members. Six known governors and one Supreme Court Justice, in addition to multiple United States Presidents, have been accused of being members of the Klan.²⁴ The first film ever screened at the White House was *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the very film credited with reviving the Ku Klux Klan.²⁵ This was not a quiet allegiance or even silent tolerance of white supremacy, this was a very open and dominant support for the ideals of the Klan.

²⁴ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

²⁵ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

“In a Rich Man’s World!”: Women as the Klan’s Financial Power Brokers

White supremacy was a tool of not only social advancement within white, Protestant society but also financial advancement for select leaders. These leaders utilized not only white supremacy to gain wealth but also an interpretation of femininity based on white supremacy. Specifically, they used the exploitation of preexisting patriarchal beliefs and the marketing of nativist sentiment as a form of womanhood and womanly duty to recruit women into the WKKK. This particular subset of white women utilized the WKKK and the KKK as a way to elevate their economic status through both legitimate and illegitimate means. This was done through the high salaries of their executive positions and the financial misappropriation of Klan organization funds. The Klan was ultimately a business and these women approached it as such; so much of their leadership is a demonstration of their business acumen and financial savvy. Not only did women like Douglas Barr, Gill Comer, and Tyler enrich themselves off the selling of Klan-branded hatred, but they also enriched themselves by stealing from the Klan itself.

For these women, the Ku Klux Klan served as a pulpit not only for their hateful, racist, xenophobic, nativist ideologies and beliefs but also as a pulpit from which to spread messages of gender advancement. Throughout the sermons and speeches given by Daisy Douglass Barr and Robbie Gill Comer was the clear and consistent message that women were equal to men; more specifically, that women were equal soldiers in the fight for white supremacy and that women were equally equipped to advance the agenda for white people in the United States. This assertion of gender equality under white supremacy is clearly stated within Linda Gordon’s *The Second Coming of the KKK*. Gordon asserted, “WKKKers not only rejected that definition of their work but soon rejected even the label ‘auxiliary’ and began to identify as full-fledged

Klanspeople, full partners in the Invisible Empire.”²⁶ This particular twist was integral to not only their public personas but also how they recruited and propagated the benefits of the KKK and WKKK. They promoted the Klan as a way to not only achieve advancement as a white person but also as a woman in America. Not only was their messaging a white supremacist form of gender equality, but their lives served as the realization of these messages. They built business and wealth in a time in which most women were not doing so, not only that, but Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer were all leaders within their own right, with the power, politics, and social status that came with it.

The personal lives of Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer were a direct contrast to the messages of temperance, family values, and the expectations the Klan had for their female members. These women were explicitly not homemakers, rather they were key stakeholders in the business of white supremacy. And the way they went about conducting that business was rife with corruption and hypocrisy. This was one of the many ways the Ku Klux Klan and their male contemporaries justified each of their expulsions from the Klan and their leadership positions. The departure of these key female figures from the organization is entirely unique, as these women were publicly and socially crucified and villainized in ways that their male counterparts were not. An example of this would be the *Muncie Post-Democrat* dubbing Douglas Barr as the “prize gold digger of the Klan.”²⁷ These women were essentially maligned by the public in both anti-Klan news media and Klan-affiliated sources. One could make the argument that much of the controversy regarding these women’s financial and social misconduct was generated to

²⁶ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018, page 151.

²⁷ Dale, George R. “Daisy Kept the Nightly Money” *Muncie Post-Democrat*, June 6, 1924

remove female leaders from the Klan. Once women like Daisy Douglass Barr, Mary Elizabeth Tyler, and Robbie Gill Comer were removed from their positions, women in Klan leadership essentially ended. Like the Women of the Ku Klux Klan as an offshoot auxiliary organization, women in leadership roles in the larger KKK movement were a phenomenon of the 1920s and the second iteration of the Klan.²⁸

While these women are part of the larger trend of female involvement in extremist political organizations and American domestic terrorism movements, their lives and leadership roles are unique and quite exceptional due not only to the extent of their power and how they wielded it both inside and outside the Ku Klux Klan but also are an exception in the way these female leaders profited off their involvement in the KKK. The monetization of terror by women is incredibly fascinating, especially when their ideology was racist, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and nativist and so incredibly intertwined with the messaging of a white supremacist interpretation of female equality. This can be seen within WKK recruitment materials, which stated, “White, Gentile, Protestant native-born women of America, imbued with the high ideals of patriotism and love of home, school, and country, recognize in the new order the agency wherewith they may make secure the emancipation for which they have been struggling from the beginning of time, and which the last few years have begun to realize...”²⁹ This passage was lifted from *The Truth About the Women of the Ku Klux Klan* and it demonstrates very clearly the ways these women saw themselves in not only America but in the white supremacist movement. As for the leaders of the Klan, women like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and

²⁸ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

²⁹ Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Truth About the Charges Made Against the Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan*, Parke-Harper Publishing Co., 1923

Robbie Gill Comer were trailblazers, only that the trails they blazed were on crosses and in the United States's first terrorist organization.

PART I: Hatred's Supply & Demand: Profiting Off of the Klan's Pyramid of Hate

Section One addresses one of the primary ways in which the female leaders of the Klan were able to build their wealth and their business enterprises. One of the methodologies of self-enrichment for the leaders of the KKK and WKKK was tied to the membership directly. In order to be a part of the Ku Klux Klan, potential recruits paid an initiation fee, and then once they were integrated into the organization, membership dues were also required. Because of the organizational structure of both the KKK and WKKK, much of this money was filtered upwards to the leadership. A handful of leaders, including but not limited to Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer, were able to greatly benefit from this. So much so that the term greatly benefits is an understatement given the levels of wealth they were able to generate from recruitment and membership dues alone.

Section Two is centered around how these women were able to use the wealth garnered from their salaries paid by the KKK, as well as the revenue from the recruitment and membership, to buy up factories and means of production of Klan materials. These women were directly in charge and in control of key aspects of Klan business, from newspapers and printing presses to clothing manufacturing plants. Because they owned and operated these Klan-affiliated enterprises, these women were able to set the price of the materials they were selling. This resulted in the surcharging of Klan materials, such as white robes, ceremonial materials, and Klan periodicals. This scheme served as an additional revenue stream for these women and further serves as an example of not only their greed but also how the Ku Klux Klan was an institution of white supremacy in America as well as a business enterprise.

SECTION I: Sisterhood, Supremacy, and the Multi-Level Marketing Scheme

"A pyramid scheme is like a house of cards - it only stands as long as new recruits keep joining, and once that flow stops, the whole structure collapses." - New York State Attorney General

Money and profits have been and continue to be central to the very operation and organization of the Ku Klux Klan, even persisting in the modern KKK. The spread of the Klan's ideology across the American Midwest in the 1920s is not only a testament to the infectious and pervasive nature of the KKK's hatred but also to their leaders' greed. The Klan built domestic terrorism into a business, turned violence and division into products, and catered to hatred and nativism to build their numbers. It is part of the American ethos to capitalize and profit off of anything, hatred is no exception. This mindset was omnipresent throughout the 1920s and within Klan leadership.³⁰ The profits that flowed into and out of the KKK and WKKK within this decade are immeasurable, both due to the scale of the profits and the wealth of key individuals, but also due to the intentional financial irregularities that were pervasive at the top of the KKK's profit pyramid.³¹ Much of this wealth was gained through new members and recruits into the organization; fresh blood very quickly translated into fresh profits. Recruitment was so highly prioritized not only to advance the ideology of the Klan but to increase the profits of its leaders. This economic reality as impressed onto all Klan leaders, both in the KKK and WKKK. It

³⁰ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

³¹ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

influenced not only the way these leaders conducted the business of the Klan but the formation of the Klan itself.

Multiplying the Klan's numbers was one of the most important aspects of the Second Ku Klux Klan; it was the driving force for the involvement of the Southern Publicity Association and many of the key female leaders. The recruitment efforts of the WKKK and the KKK were an integral part of the strategy of the leadership because of the financial incentives for new members. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan have been retroactively credited as a more organized organization than the Klan. In a short period of time, the WKKK saw increased membership rates that rivaled the KKK's recruitment numbers.³² At the height of its popularity, there were thirty-six WKKK chapters across the fifty states. This level of membership and national appeal required a concerted effort by Klan leadership to increase membership. The Klan did not stay an underground organization but gained mainstream recognition and national appeal, partially as a result of the financial gains the leaders saw. New recruits for the KKK meant new sources of revenue for the KKK's leaders. These types of financial incentives cannot be ignored in the face of the heinousness of the ideology. The racist ideology of the Klan is what allowed female leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Daisy Douglas Barr to squeeze profit out of the spread of hatred.

One of the methods of enrichment employed by the women at the top of the KKK and WKKK leadership was through membership dues. To call this crucial aspect of the organization lucrative would be an understatement; this was the bedrock upon which much of the Klan leadership, including Edward Young Clarke, Hiram Wesley Evans, and D.C. Stephenson, built

³² Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

their fortunes.³³ Multiple high-level figures within the Klan and its subsets utilized membership dues and similar fees to profit off of racist beliefs and nativist ideology, demonstrating that using domestic terrorism for personal enrichment did not fall along gendered lines. This type of enrichment can be seen in the fortunes of almost the entirety of Klan leadership, with only one or two notable exceptions. This type of shady business practices and profiteering were commonplace at the top, casting a shadow over what truly incentivized their involvement and commitment to the Klan.

Membership dues and the fees incurred by Klan members are such an integral part of the very structure of the Klan that it is enumerated in the constitution of both the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, as well as manuals, booklets, and other Klan literary materials. These fees are a throughline between each phase of the KKK; however, in the 1920s, the nature of the organization's fee structure was unique due to William Joseph Simmons and his commitment to the Klan cause.³⁴ Simmons, as a true believer, was fiercely dedicated to the expansion of the Klan and its ideology. Distinctly different from his contemporaries in Klan leadership, profiting off the Klan was more of a byproduct of his larger goal of the cultural dominance of the KKK over American life and politics.³⁵ This is not to say that Simmons did not equally profit off the Klan; he very much did so. However, he did not profit at the same levels as his contemporaries and the Klan leadership that followed. While Simmons lived lavishly as a result of his position in the Klan, his commitment to the ideology allowed women like Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Daisy Douglas Barr to not only ascend the ranks in Klan leadership but also

³³ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

³⁴ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

³⁵ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

profit in ways that Simmons did not; so much so that their respective fortunes rivaled and even surpassed his own.

The Economy of Fear: The Financial Allure of the “Invisible Empire”

In order to promote the Ku Klux Klan, Simmons engaged the services of the Southern Publicity Association, which was owned and operated in equal partnership with Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke. After years of failing to gain mainstream support and success in promoting the Klan, the specific terms of the contract between Simmons’ Ku Klux Klan and the Southern Publicity Association allowed for Tyler and Clarke to take a substantial cut of the initiation fee of all members nationally; in addition to business fees and executive salaries for both Tyler and Clarke. The initiation fee to become a Klan member was \$10 or \$291.44 today, and 80% went to Tyler and Clarke personally, not to the Southern Publicity Association.³⁶ Within the first six months of the partnership between the KKK and the Southern Publicity Association, membership increased by 85,000 people due to the work of Tyler and Clarke. Mary Elizabeth Tyler's share of that would be over \$9.9 million in 2025.

She was so integral to the popularization of the Klan that she was once called “the woman behind the throne,” with many within and outside of the Klan believing her and Clarke to be the real leaders of the KKK.³⁷ The Southern Publicity Association gained revenue by taking portions of the other fees and dues from Klan members. Clarke and Tyler created the Kleagle System within the Klan, essentially creating recruiters and spokespersons for the KKK. Each of

³⁶ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

³⁷ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Accessed September 29, 2024

them was assigned a specific territory within the state in which the Klan operated. For every member recruited by the specific Kleagle, that Kleagle would gain a cut of the membership dues. The more people recruited into the Klan, the higher the commission and the more profits made.

The KKK and WKKK recruitment tactics that proved the most effective way were through bloc recruitment, in which Kleagles target individuals already involved in other political organizations, such as the Anti-Saloon League or the United Daughters of the Confederacy.³⁸ Other notable places targeted by Klan recruiters were fraternities, lodges, and Protestant churches. Effective Kleagles utilized preexisting ties and connections with similar organizations to recruit; this system allowed an individual Klan recruit to target a large group of potential new members rather than recruit one-on-one.³⁹ These groups additionally proved to be an ideal place for recruitment as members involved in these groups were typically already politically active and civically engaged. The skills these women gained from previous political activities were easily transferred over and applied to their work in the Klan.

As a greater incentive for these organizations and religious orders, the Kleagle would offer the leader of the group or the Protestant minister free membership to get access to the rest of the organizations. The deferment of Klan dues for one person in order to get an entire congregation's dues is simple math for these recruiters. In fact, key figures and leaders within local communities were investigated and targeted by the Klan recruiters; people of influence and credibility were sought out by the Klan in order to give the organization a larger share of a local community's cultural cache. Daisy Douglas Barr, in particular, once claimed that "all the best

³⁸ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

³⁹ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

people” were in the KKK⁴⁰; this was done to ensure the local cultural dominance of the organization, ensuring that the social pressure would result in new recruits into the movement. “If all the best people in a community belonged, as Daisy [Douglas] Barr had said, what could be so wrong with the Ku Klux Klan?”⁴¹ With tactics such as these and profits in the millions, it is no wonder that Klan membership soared in such a short period of time.

Terror’s MLM: “Recruit, Maintain Control, and Safeguard”

The Kleagle System was a binary commission structure, which served to motivate active and continuous new recruitment into the Klan.⁴² New chapters and new members in as many states as possible were diligently incentivized by the Southern Publicity Association. While Simmons was more than happy with the sudden increase in membership, the financial gains made off of these new members were more than enough motivation for Tyler and Clarke to spread this hateful message as far as they possibly could. These two were so diligent in this work that they were very quickly given official positions in the Klan leadership and established themselves as irreplaceable figures within the Klan. Enrichment through commission and dues was so commonplace and so opportune for profit that one of the reforms enacted to create transparency and eliminate corruption was to change the pay system for recruiters⁴³; instead of commission rates for kleagles, they would be paid through salaries and flat fees. However, the

⁴⁰ Egan, Timothy. *A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan’s Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them*. Penguin Random House 2023.

⁴¹ Egan, Timothy. *A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan’s Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them*. Penguin Random House 2023.

⁴² Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

⁴³ Alexander, Charles C. “Kleagles and Cash: The Ku Klux Klan as a Business Organization, 1915-1930.” *The Business History Review* 39, no. 3 (1965): 348–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3112145>.

self-enrichment was so great that these reforms were quickly and militantly abandoned.⁴⁴

Increasing membership and increasing profits were the primary motivations and functions of the Klan in the early 1920s. Recruitment was so highly incentivized and so integral to the KKK's early actions that in the early days of the second Ku Klux Klan, active recruitment was the only major action taken by the organization.⁴⁵ The monetary and financial investment in the Ku Klux Klan's success incentivized their continued involvement and fervent commitment to the principles of white supremacy.

The leadership at the top of the Klan's organizational structure earned the most profits, essentially creating a multi-level marketing system of operation. The Klan operated like a pyramid scheme. In this system, the expansion of the Klan was a financial imperative. Clarke and Tyler are credited with the establishment of the leadership hierarchy and the kleagle system within the Klan, initially for the system of payments upward toward Klan leadership; however, the establishment of the hierarchy paved the way for both their involvement and dominance over the KKK. Not only did they create the kleagle system, but they also created recruitment drives and other tactics that are still in use in the modern KKK. The dominance of Tyler and Clarke on Klan leadership was a true demonstration of the way money translated to power in the Klan. Because the Klan was always a business acting as a terrorist organization, the people who controlled the money controlled the Klan. The influence of their partnership was so powerful that they forced William Joseph Simmons out of the Klan altogether and established a new leader in 1922, Hiram Wesley Evans, who was more amenable to the needs and expectations of the

⁴⁴ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

⁴⁵ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

Southern Publicity Association. Essentially committing a coup d'état to ensure and protect their power and vested financial interests in the Klan. Even before he was forced out of the Klan, Tyler's financial power was so great that she, alongside Clarke, was considered to be truly in control of the Klan, with many believing Simmons to be a mascot or a figurehead.⁴⁶ This exemplifies that even those in the KKK believe that whoever controls the purse strings controls the Klan.

This was the context in which the Women of the Ku Klux Klan was created. The WKKK was born out of a desire to expand Klan ideology to women, particularly the wives, mothers, and sisters of the Klan members, and due to the financial implications of adding additional members of Klan households as customers and consumers of Klan materials. The monetary incentives are equally as important as the hatred that was driving the spread of the Klan. Expansion into women would be a whole new market for not only dues associated with membership, but a new market for Klan literature, paraphernalia, and women's exclusive goods and services. This culture of recruitment inadvertently, or more nefariously intentionally, created a culture of othering. Not only the othering of non-white, non-protestant American-born men and women but also the othering of other non-Klan affiliated white people.⁴⁷ Klan kleagles portrayed involvement in the KKK as the truest commitment to the United States, calling their membership in the Klan "citizenship". This type of culture and self-identification, in combination with the blatant self-interest of the financial incentives, allowed for the Klan to spread like wildfire.

⁴⁶ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Accessed September 29, 2024

⁴⁷ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

The true motivations of these women's involvement in the Klan are practically irrelevant; the fact of the matter is that these female leaders directly and explicitly profited off of their femininity, their whiteness, and their contributions to the cause of white supremacy. This is clearly seen in the language of the KKK and WKKK. Within the 1924 Annual Klonvocation, one of the event's main speaking engagements was a speech titled "American Women"⁴⁸.

We, women of America, love you, men of America. We will mother your children, share your sorrows, multiply your joys, and assist you to prosper in the ways of this world's good. In return, we expect you to recognize our power for good over your lives, and in the nation... We pledge our power of motherhood to America... Our knees can be the altars of patriotism to them.

This form of recruitment for the Women of the Ku Klux Klan was centered around the idea of women's equality. The idea of family values and raising children in a better, whiter, Protestant America was central to the messaging against Jews, Catholics, African Americans, and immigrants. Their assertions for female equality were a direct service to the white supremacy project of the KKK; these women were promoting and profiting off the idea that women were equal soldiers in the moral crusade of preserving white America.

Banking on Supremacy: The Corporate Consolidation of the Klan

The wealth gained by Mary Elizabeth Tyler was so substantial that it is not implausible to suggest financial gain was a motive in her support for the creation of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. As one of the "Big Three", Tyler was a fervent supporter of the WKKK, not as a subset of the Klan but as a separate organization.⁴⁹ It is difficult to separate the potential financial

⁴⁸ Baker, Kelly. "Mother Knows Best: The Politics of White Christian Motherhood - Kelly J Baker." Kelly J Baker, July 19, 2018. <https://www.kellyjbaker.com/mother-knows-best-white-christian-motherhood/>.

⁴⁹ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

motivations from the creation of the WKKK. The expansion of the monetization of hate into a new demographic market had serious financial upsides for Tyler. If hate and terrorism were a business, and she actively made one, then increasing the consumer base is simply good business practice. Including women in the Klan as due-paying members would increase not only her own bottom line but also her influence and power over a specific portion of the American public directly. Her financial and political ambitions are too intertwined with the spread of the Klan that it is tough to separate and ascertain the specific motivation for her support and the eventual creation of the Women of the KKK.

Similar to Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr profited immensely through membership dues and recruitment commissions. Not only did she serve as the Imperial Empress (leader) of the Indiana Women's Ku Klux Klan, but Douglas Barr also served as the Chief WKKK recruiter for seven states, including Indiana. These roles allowed Barr the distinct privilege of being able to take a percentage of the profits from almost every aspect of the recruitment process.⁵⁰ As a consequence of her leadership, she had a finger in every Klan pie. Her commission rates in general guaranteed her one dollar for each woman recruited; however, within the state of Indiana specifically, she was earning an alleged four dollars for every recruit in the state. Today, these profits would amount to \$70.99 for each recruit Douglas Barr brought into the organization. It is important to note that Indiana had one of the highest, if not the highest, numbers of active Women of the Ku Klux Klan members. As Chief Recruiter for Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, and Minnesota, it was in Douglas Barr's direct financial interest to rapidly increase the number of active members, especially in those

⁵⁰ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

states where she turned the most profit. Effectively placing her in charge of the business operations of mass marketing hatred and nativism to white, protestant women across the country.⁵¹ Self-enrichment is just as powerful a motivator as ideology. This is proven by the interconnected nature of Douglas Barr's tenure in Klan leadership.

In addition to her positions of power and influence in the WKKK, Douglas Barr was an ordained minister in the Quaker faith. Similarly to her work in the Klan, her commitment to the cause allowed her to ascend the ranks of leadership, becoming the most famous and well-known female evangelical leader in the state of Indiana. This offered her another platform to recruit members into the WKKK and spread the gospel of white supremacy. She was invited to speak at public events, church gatherings, and evangelical revivals⁵², all of which she used as a platform to gather more recruits and increase her own wealth in the process. Her religious teachings were intertwined with the ideology of white supremacy and the KKK. The connections between religion, particularly Quakerism, and involvement in the Klan were a continuous phenomenon within the 1920s as there were overlapping political and social interests; similarly to the WCTU. "The life history of Daisy [Douglas] Barr illustrates the combination of religious evangelism with zeal for combating moral corruption and alcohol that led into the women's Klan in the 1920s"⁵³ Religion and political engagement in the Klan served as a pipeline for a particular subset of white, Protestant middle-class women; Douglas Barr understood this better than almost every other leader in the WKKK. She was a deeply talented recruiter for the Klan, with hundreds

⁵¹ MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁵² Mullins, Paul. "The Hooded Order in the Pulpit: Klan Membership in 1920's Indianapolis Churches." *Archaeology and Material Culture*, February 4, 2022. <https://paulmullins.com/the-hooded-order-in-the-pulpit-klan-membership-in-1920s-indianapolis-churches/>.

⁵³ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009., Page 215

of people attending her public speaking events and her religious sermons.⁵⁴ She was particularly adept at understanding and utilizing the connections between religious zealotry and the Klan's particular brand of feminism and patriotic duty to gain new members and profit off their dues. Not even religion was too sacred not to monetize, as these engagements were a breeding ground for potential sources of revenue.⁵⁵

Her levels of self-enrichment truly held no bounds, and her financial motivations were so suspect that even fellow WKKK members grew suspicious of her wealth and how it might have corrupted her commitment to the cause. Douglas Barr's fortune is alleged to have been staggering, so much so that it was the focal point of a lawsuit brought by fellow Klanswoman Mary Benadum. The wealth she amassed was so vast that it caused Klan infighting; however, it also can be suggested that this lawsuit was an attempt to grab and undermine the power Douglass Barr had within the Klan. Mary Benadum's motivations for holding Douglas Barr "accountable" are just so suspect and intertwined with potential financial gains that it is challenging to ascertain her true motivations for bringing about this suit. Within the 1924 lawsuit, Ms. Benadum accused Daisy Douglas Barr of not only grossly profiting off of the Klan but having taken more than her share allegedly, as Chief WKKK Recruiter, Douglas Barr was only paying out her own commission and not those of lower ranked recruiters.⁵⁶ All of that in addition to surcharging fellow Klanswomen for Klan paraphernalia. This was such a common practice for Douglas Barr

⁵⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

⁵⁵ Mullins, Paul. "The Hooded Order in the Pulpit: Klan Membership in 1920's Indianapolis Churches." *Archaeology and Material Culture*, February 4, 2022. <https://paulmullins.com/the-hooded-order-in-the-pulpit-klan-membership-in-1920s-indianapolis-churches/>.

⁵⁶ Janney, Jay J., Terry L Amburgey, and Della Stanley-Green. "Situational Influences on How Daisy Douglas Barr Turned From Quaker Minister to Ku Klux Klan Empress." *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2022, no. 1 (July 6, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2022.17435abstract>.

that she purportedly refused to truly induct a member into the WKKK unless that potential member bought Klan regalia and paraphernalia from her.⁵⁷ These schemes earned Douglas Barr tens of thousands of dollars over a few short years, and in 2025, her yearly personal revenue would be in the millions, if not tens of millions. It is notable that this particular subset of women were engaged in this type of multi-level marketing scheme and were grossly enriching themselves off of an ideology that combined feminism and white supremacy. Much of the Klan's rhetoric is built on the idea that women are in need of protection and that the virtue of white women was under constant attack, with the literature and imagery often portraying white women as something to be preyed on.⁵⁸ Yet, despite this, female leaders like Tyler and Douglas Barr pandering and profiting off of this ideology is nothing less than predatory.

Additionally, the WKKK further provided Tyler and the other female leaders another tool to sway and influence the politics of the women of America. After the passage of the 19th Amendment, millions of white women became a voting demographic. Klan-affiliated candidates, through the WKKK, were afforded a distribution system as well as a large subset of the population that would theoretically be more inclined to vote in certain ways for specific candidates based on Klan membership as well as the Klan-approved materials. Due to the expansive nature of the Klan's media network of propaganda and Klan-owned and sympathetic newspapers, many men and women believed that their involvement in the Klan was assisting in the mission to "save" and "restore" America. Recruiters actively portrayed the Klan as an organization with the simple goal of restoring white America and uplifting "100% American

⁵⁷ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

⁵⁸Alexander, Charles C. "Kleagles and Cash: The Ku Klux Klan as a Business Organization, 1915-1930." *The Business History Review* 39, no. 3 (1965): 348–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3112145>.

values”; however, the ideology and the methodologies surrounding this were nothing less than violent. The WKKK was a tool for the Klan to expand their efforts and reach across gender lines, and the financial and political power amassed by these few female leaders was a byproduct of the spread of hatred and xenophobia. The Klan was most definitely the outlet through which these women expressed their prejudice and violent beliefs, however, it was also the tool that allowed them to hoard power and wealth, even for the limited time that they had it. Tyler and Douglas Barr, as well as Robbie Gill Comer, used the Klan as a ladder to serve their own ambitions.

These women were using the beliefs of their need for protection as a recruiting tool to gain wealth and power, subverting and undermining the very stereotypes and ideology that they were preaching to gain new recruits. Recruiters for the WKKK utilized the fear and prejudice within white Protestant women to leverage their involvement in the Klan.⁵⁹ One of the main reasons white women joined the WKKK was due to their fears regarding the safety and security of white women in America, believing that African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants were an active threat to not only white women but the white family unit. Many women in the 1920s believed that joining the WKKK was an extension of their womanly civic duty; this was their expression of femininity and patriotism. These white women were recruited based on this white morality, this combination of white feminism and white supremacy was the basis for WKKK ideology.⁶⁰ The involvement of white women in the WKKK and the KKK was their proactive support of the American white supremacist movement; not only did these women cosign the violence of white supremacy, but they actively contributed to it. Some women, such

⁵⁹ MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁶⁰ MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

as Douglas Barr and Tyler, deliberately perpetuated these beliefs to profit from them. The WKKK and women as a whole were uniquely excellent at promoting and spreading the Klan's ideology; they used speeches, public engagement, and a vast array of tools to gain not only sympathy for the Klan cause but also actual members with cash to spend on the Klan.⁶¹ The WKKK was presented as an avenue for female political engagement and civic involvement, which it was. However, it also served as the avenue for the WKKK's leaders to stockpile cash and power.

The Price of Membership: The Cost of White Supremacy and Monetary Gains of Hatred

One of the ways the financial dealings of the Klan are known and documented is a consequence of the lawsuits and investigations of the Klan and how money was collected within the organization. Tyler was investigated and named in lawsuits by multiple individuals and organizations, one of the most notable of which was the 1921 Investigation of the KKK by the United States House of Representatives Committee on Rules. As a result of reporting by the *New York World* through their exposé of the KKK, Congress suspected that the Klan was actively violating federal and state business taxes.⁶² The investigation of the way money flowed throughout the Klan and Tyler's role in the Klan's organizational chart was crucial for Congress to determine how much money, if any, the Klan owed in back taxes. It is difficult to underscore the importance of the federal acknowledgment of female power within a terrorist organization. This pseudo-feminist byproduct of female Klan leadership is at the core of the complexities of

⁶¹ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

⁶² "Ku Klux Klan Wars on Catholics, Jews; Reap Rich Returns" – "Nationwide Investigation of Secret Order Shows It Gains Great Power by Winning Officials as Members – Fortune is Collected in Initiation Dues", *The New York World*, September 6, 1921

Mary Elizabeth Tyler's life. Investigation into Tyler specifically as a member of the "Big Three" legitimized and recognized the financial power of the Klan and Tyler's place at the top of the KKK pyramid.⁶³ The significance of membership dues and fees was the foundation through which the Klan was able to turn hatred and bigotry into a commodity. This is the clearest example of the way these women used ideology as a product to build wealth and accrue power. So much so that people inside and outside the Klan's ecosystem attempted to take it away.

The fact that both Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Daisy Douglas Barr were involved in some kind of legal dispute over the distribution of membership dues is, in its own way, an acknowledgment of their power from within and outside the Ku Klux Klan. It also is an acknowledgment of the power these women accrued through these financial revenue streams. The fact that these women were the target of lawsuits is indicative of the fact that they had power, and people within the Klan were attempting to take that power away from them. These women were in important positions with monetary influence that people within the organization attempted to covet, demonstrating that at its heart the Ku Klux Klan was a financial organization. Leaders in addition to Tyler and Barr were involved in the Klan for more than ideological reasons; almost all of the Klan's leadership's motivations are suspect. Tyler's Southern Publicity Association was the center point of her financial power and authority. It was the medium through which she was able to accumulate wealth and influence. Within the Klan, money translated to power, and Mary Elizabeth Tyler had a lot of money. Barr's WKKK leadership and her financial power went hand in hand; she was able to leverage her leadership to gain wealth while her

⁶³ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Accessed September 29, 2024

financial influence allowed her to have said leadership. This underscored the interconnectedness of money, power and leadership in the second Ku Klux Klan.

In the decades preceding the passage of the 19th Amendment, popular forms of women's political activism were petitioning and membership in women's organizations, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). This style of campaigning, organization, and recruitment had been a mainstay for female political activism and engagement. As the female leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan were involved in these organizations before their work in the Klan, many of the same tactics and skills spilled over into the recruitment efforts for the Klan.⁶⁴ However, unlike organizations like the WCTU, women like Daisy Douglas Barr were able to profit immensely from their recruitment numbers.⁶⁵ Their success and involvement in the Klan are tainted with their potential motivations of greed, which is the very foundation of their eventual expulsion from the Klan. It is also significant that the male leaders who similarly profited from the same membership dues and commissions did not face nearly the same level of backlash.⁶⁶ While Edward Young Clarke was named in the same lawsuits and investigated by Congress in the 1921 KKK Hearings, internal Klan dialogue and public sentiment were not nearly as outraged towards his profiteering as it was towards Tyler's.

The number of lawsuits and court cases in which women were involved additionally signifies a grasp for power away from female leaders. This does not imply that men like Clarke or Simmons were not similarly involved in different forms of legal action and investigations into

⁶⁴ MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁶⁵ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

⁶⁶ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

their financials, however, those actions are practically incomparable to the legal action faced by the women in the organization's leadership.⁶⁷ In conjunction with the legal troubles of Tyler and Barr, they contended with a concerted and targeted media campaign against them. There were political cartoons, parodies, and poems, and in the case of Mary Elizabeth Tyler, even salacious stories regarding her sex life. All throughout the country, national newspapers were publishing details about her private life to discredit her as an effective leader of the Klan and as a woman acting within the values of the KKK. Daisy Douglas Barr was satirized as "Duckie" Barr by multiple Indiana newspapers; presenting her as a fallen Quaker who sold out to the Klan was done to similarly discredit her work in the Klan.⁶⁸

The financial power of female leaders is an unexplored facet of women's involvement in the Klan. This is partially due to the fact that women's involvement in terrorist organizations such as the KKK has historically been diminished. However, another contributing factor to their expungement from the historical canon was that their omission was a consequence of their loss of financial power and control over the Klan. The very establishment of a hierarchy within the Klan, through the flow of commission fees and membership dues, afforded these women a ladder for them to climb. Their power and influence within the Klan were not symbolic nor was it metaphorical; these women were not merely arbiters of soft power. They were financial titans and power brokers in their own right. In the case of Tyler, she was a literal kingmaker in both William Joseph Simmons and Hiram Wesley Evans.⁶⁹ These women were active participants in

⁶⁷ United Press, ["Women of Klan Sue for \\$100,000: Charge Organizer Owes for Person's Naturalized"](#) *Indianapolis Times*. Indianapolis, Indiana. June 2, 1924

⁶⁸ Dale, George R. ["Ducky Daisy Barr Shoots Off Her Mouth: Kokomo Koo Koos Kluck Evangelist Like All the Rest of His Hate Squad Are Hard At Work Stirring Up Marion"](#) *The Muncie Post-Democrat*, Muncie Indiana. December 7, 1923

⁶⁹ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

the power struggle for leadership of the KKK and WKKK; the fact that they fought back against it demonstrates a concerted effort to maintain the power offered by the Klan rather than blind devotion to the cause. The scrutiny over the widespread profiteering of the Klan can be interpreted, in part, as an attempt to grab power away from the women leadership of the KKK and WKKK; after the eventual expulsion of Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Daisy Douglas Barr, the leadership of the KKK becomes more male-dominated and the WKKK never gained the same membership and cultural power as it did in the 1920s.

SECTION II: How Surcharging Klan Merchandise Made 100% American Profits

"It is easier to con a man than to convince him he has been conned." - Mark Twain

The hatred of the Ku Klux Klan may have been bottomless, but so was the greed of their leadership. Within the organization, ideology and profit went hand in hand. The white hoods of the Klan are an iconic American image of hatred and bigotry, but for leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer, they were symbols of the almighty dollar. These women utilized their network of KKK and WKKK recruits as the consumer base to sell the social markers of Klan involvement. This was essentially forcing members to buy materials, goods, and services to publicly and socially signify association with the Klan, thus demonstrating a form of economic coercion as a hallmark of their leadership. Inclusion in the Klan allowed for access into the domestic terrorist organization, but it also resulted in forced and continued participation in the Klan's consumer culture. This public association with the Klan was a crucial part of membership as the KKK and the WKKK were organized with a hyper fixation on the culture of white supremacy. Physical representations of that, such as the white hoods, banners, and ritual materials, were necessary for the solidification of the culture of white supremacy cultivated by the Klan. And it was the products on which those female leaders built their wealth; they created monopolies of the production, promotion, and purchasing of symbols of hate.

The Klan leadership utilized numerous avenues to build wealth at the expense of the KKK's rank-and-file members, one method being merchandise and paraphernalia. Klan leadership intentionally created multiple ways to monetize and monopolize revenue streams through the organization's very structure, which allowed for a direct consumer base and an

upward flow of profits. This, in turn, was reinforced by the surrounding media ecosystem created by the Klan through Klan-sponsored businesses, newspaper presses, and those sympathetic to the cause of white supremacy. The concentration of power inevitably leads to the concentration of wealth. A small handful of people were not only in control of vast fortunes of money but also in control of the dominant expression of white supremacy in the country. Terrorism was the source of wealth and business for the leaders of the Klan. However, not only did significant sums of money rest at the top, in the pockets of only a handful of members of the organization's leadership, but much of the corruption and financial irregularities rested there as well. Misconduct permeated all aspects of the Klan's money-making operations; there were no exceptions to this.

Hoods of Wrath: Merchandise, Paraphernalia, and Financial Corruption

The pyramid scheme structure of the Ku Klux Klan, instituted by the Southern Publicity Association, was the foundation on which the financial structures and institutions were built. The consolidation and monetization would not have been possible without the organizational infrastructure previously established, at least not to the extent and scale that it existed in the 1920s. Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke intentionally or unintentionally laid the groundwork for the means by which fortunes were created, theirs included. Tyler and Young Clarke became immensely wealthy off of both the membership dues and recruitment fees, as well as the selling of overpriced merchandise to what was essentially a captive consumer base. The layers and the seamlessness of this money-making operation placed doubt on their commitment to the cause of white supremacy. These two created an iteration of the Ku Klux

Klan that saw threats everywhere across the country, and everywhere there was a threat, there was a chance to make a quick buck.

According to testimony gathered in the 1921 KKK Hearings in front of the House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, the origins of the profiteering can be traced back to the very conception of the Klan under the Southern Publicity Association. “Q. When did he [Clarke] first begin to manufacture these robes? –A. Shortly after the chartering of the institution, in 1915.”⁷⁰ While a majority of the business and financial-related questions in the Congressional Hearing were centered around and directed towards Edward Young Clarke, it is essential to note that Mary Elizabeth Tyler was a partner of equals in each of his separate business ventures related to the Klan. Not only that, if this testimony is to be believed, the duo had a vested financial interest in the Klan beyond the wealth they would eventually receive in commissions. This is an unfortunate example of the ingenuity and creativity of American capitalism, very much following the era’s hyper-consumerist culture and capitalist society. This proves that everything in America can be capitalized and sold for profit, including domestic terrorism and white supremacy. The leaders of the Klan were living proof of the immense profitability of this; the levels of wealth this very small group of people amassed were staggering.

The KKK operated as a large-scale corporation with vested interests in multiple businesses. Many of the leaders of both the KKK and WKKK were in control of the business operations that provided key goods and services to the lower-ranked members of the Klan. Despite the capitalist nature of the inner workings of the Klan, the organization was still a hate-based secret society; therefore, businesses were unable to advertise and promote their products in

⁷⁰ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Page 29, Accessed September 29, 2024

traditional ways. Despite the need for secrecy, many Klan-affiliated businesses were still able to advertise in mainstream media; however, they could not be as open or as blatant within their connections with the Klan.⁷¹ Instead of announcing their corporate origins, these businesses were required to be covert with their association while still indicating the connection, such as taking out newspaper advertisements with multiple uses of the letter “K” or using the phrase “100% American” as a dog whistle indicator that a member of the Klan owned the business.⁷² However, actual merchandise associated with the KKK, such as the white robes and materials for the rituals and ceremonies, were manufactured through processes owned by the leadership. These types of indicators allowed the Klan to operate in public spheres. Which is quite antithetical to the very nature of a secret organization, which the Klan very much was.⁷³ The capitalism of the Klan forced the leaders to make so much of it a public spectacle. How could the leaders profit without an ever-growing consumer base?

The standardization of the Klan itself extended not only to the organizational structures of leadership and recruitment but also to the standardization of materials and paraphernalia. The creation of a KKK uniform served multiple functions. The primary purpose was to create a symbol of terror, a collective identity for the victims of the Klan to fear, in addition to serving as an internal unifying force. This very much reinforced the ideology and self-image of the Klan as a moral army of white Protestant Americans crusading to take their country back. The second function was to turn every aspect of the Klan uniform into an economic good, a product to be

⁷¹ Kinville, John E. *The Grey Eagles of Chippewa Falls: A Hidden History of a Women's Ku Klux Klan in Wisconsin*. Arcadia Publishing, 2020.

⁷² Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

⁷³ Chalmers, David Mark. *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*. Franklin Watts, 1981.

bought, sold, and produced. Not only did the leaders of the Klan create this standardized uniform, but they also owned and operated the means of production by which every aspect of that uniform was produced. The white hooded robes, one of the most iconic symbols of American terror, were created with such specificity and attention to detail that it was impossible for housewives to create their own versions from their personal sewing machines. This was done intentionally to force members of the Klan to purchase merchandise in order to participate in the activities of the KKK.⁷⁴ This was far from the only instance in which the leaders of the Klan strong-armed lower-ranked members of the organization into purchasing from the KKK, which in itself is a testament to the power and control these leaders had over their members and recruits. Particularly leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer, who, due to the extensive nature of their network of Klan recruits, amassed fortunes off this.

Hoodwinked: The Politics of Production and Profit in the KKK

These women wielded hard financial power within their own rights. As leaders of the Klan, they were actively engaging in forms of financial coercion and exerting levels of financial control in spaces of white supremacy and in service to the Ku Klux Klan. This was exemplified in the accusations leveled against Robbie Gill Comer, which were published in the national press. "... It is set out that Mrs. Comer had defrauded the order by directly paying large sums in various amounts from \$2000 to \$10,00 to her hand as imperial council, claiming that these sums were advanced for the cost of robes, furnished and manufactured by Mr. Comer in his robe

⁷⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

factory.”⁷⁵ The types of white-collar crimes that these women were engaging in were public knowledge; that was how brazen they were in this money-making scheme. Robbie Gill Comer was accused of leveraging her leadership within the WKKK to hand her husband a position within the larger national organization. Having both of the couples in power in the WKKK and KKK, respectively, allowed Gill Comer to be in the prime position to rip off her fellow Klanswomen. While the factory was owned by her husband, by all contemporary accounts, she was the driving force behind its purchase and was the primary beneficiary for the wealth that it brought in, at least according to the lawsuits filed by various Klanswomen.⁷⁶

Robbie Gill Comer was at the forefront of not only these business ventures but also leadership within the Klan. This entire scheme reinforces once again that these women were not passive observers within their positions of power; instead, these women, alongside their male contemporaries, were actors, collaborators, and accessories to national domestic terrorism organizations. There are many instances of not only her financial corruption but dominance in the WKKK. Her power and corruption were the basis of these lawsuits, which were part of the larger power struggle in the Klan. “For 1925, these accounts showed that the WKKK took in an impressive \$321,809.03 in income from dues and sales and spent all but \$18,000. Much of that money, according to the plaintiffs, went to the Comers, who amassed a fortune through the sale of WKKK robes, helmets, regalia, and supplies. Further, Judge Comer sold a factory that manufactured WKKK robes, valued at \$23,000 to the WKKK for a \$72,000 a profit of

⁷⁵ “Woman Leader of the Klan Faces Fraud Charge - Husband Also Accused of Misappropriating Funds of Order” *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, Birmingham, Alabama, Aug 30, 1935

⁷⁶ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

\$49,000...”⁷⁷ Similarly to Gill Comer, Daisy Douglas Barr was brought to civil court over her blatant profiteering off robes and Klan paraphernalia. The publication of the court details of her financial fraud can be interpreted as more of a power grab rather than an attempt at accountability. “... Accounting by Mrs. Barr on profits of from \$54,000 to \$67,000 on robes for the organization purchased in violation to the contract is also asked...”⁷⁸ Adjusting for inflation that would amount to \$1,003,171.58 to \$1,244,675.85 in profits off of merchandise alone. These schemes were incredibly lucrative for these women, they made the modern-day equivalent of millions of dollars.

The standardization of the Klan also allowed for the consolidation of the means of production, essentially creating a monopoly for the production of Klan materials. The Klan was unified, both in the mutual goal of a white America for white Americans and in shared profits. The context of the Klan’s manufacturing monopoly and the different businesses that reinforced this capitalist mindset of the Klan begs the question of the true motivations of the reintroduction and standardization of the Klan regalia. Was it done to strengthen the identity of this covert army of white protestant Americans? Or was it done with the explicit intention of capitalizing on a potential consumer base? The fact that there is no clear definitive answer demonstrates how interconnected this widespread, standardized profiteering was with this widespread, standardized terror. Because the production process was so heavily consolidated and monopolized, the leaders in control of the production could set the prices. Edward Young Clarke⁷⁹, Mary Elizabeth

⁷⁷ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009. Page 122

⁷⁸ “Women of the Klan Sue for \$100,000 - Charge Organizer Owes for Person’s Naturalized” *Indianapolis Times*, Volume 36, Number 20, Indianapolis, Marion County, 2 June 1924

⁷⁹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Accessed September 29, 2024

Tyler⁸⁰, Daisy Douglas Barr⁸¹, and Robbie Gill Comer⁸² were all accused in an American court of law of surcharging and price gouging fellow Klan members.

This is one example of the numerous financial crimes and irregularities within Klan leadership, and this is a direct result of the hierarchical structure of the organization created by Young Clarke and Tyler. For within the Klan, the flow of money was the flow of power. If white supremacy was the only incentive for involvement in the KKK, then why were the institutions and structures within the organization so well suited to generating profit? And then why was that profit sequestered in the private bank accounts of the leaders, rather than reinvested in the operations of the Klan? If these leaders were so dedicated to the advancement of white protestants and white supremacy as a movement, then why was corruption so rampant within their own ranks? The reality of the political involvement of not only the female leaders but the entirety of the Klan's leadership created questions regarding their motivations and intentionality.

These leaders were not stealing and profiting off of those on the Klan's enemies list; Clarke, Tyler, Gill Comer, and Douglas Barr were building their wealth and fortunes off of the money they stole and finessed from fellow Klan members. Like a serpent eating its own tail, these kinds of financial crimes and misconduct would be the basis for the internal infighting within the Klan and one of the pillars of the Second Ku Klux Klan's downfall. These leaders would eventually be held to account by the very Klansmen and Klanswomen they stole from.

⁸⁰ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

⁸¹ "Women of the Klan Sue for \$100,000 - Charge Organizer Owes for Person's Naturalized" *Indianapolis Times*, Volume 36, Number 20, Indianapolis, Marion County, 2 June 1924

⁸² "Arkansas Officials of Klan Are Sued" *The Cordele Dispatch and Daily Sentinel* (Cordele, Georgia), August 31, 1925

These charges would eventually be the primary accusations in lawsuits brought against the leadership and used to justify their removal and expulsion from the Klan.

The involvement and the power wielded by these women in the capitalist project of the Klan meant that they built fortunes off of surcharging the physical symbols of white supremacy. Their leadership was marked by an intimacy with both profit and white supremacy. Both of these contradict each other within the expectations of the Klan but also were an expression of the sentiment of the decade.⁸³ This was the creation of a consumer culture for terror and white supremacy. The 1920s saw the emergence of the origins of American consumer culture; that exaltation of capital and profit was a throughline throughout all of American society within the era. And the Klan was no exception; in fact, the KKK is an excellent case study of the application of the principles of Roaring Twenties capitalism. The Klan is a microcosm of the creation of markets, supply and demand, and corporate competition. In this instance, the leaders of the Klan turned terror into a commodity, and they built fortunes off of it. The funds that were generated as a result of these money-making schemes were not reinvested within the KKK or the WKKK, instead, they were pocketed by their leaders. Rather than funding Klan activity, the money from these products and businesses funded the extravagant and exorbitant lives of the Klan leaders.

⁸³ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

The Klan was in control of multiple newspapers, editorials, and periodicals in the 1920s,

Realm of..... No.....
 NAME.....
 ADDRESS.....
 SHIP TO.....
 ARTICLE.....
ROBE MEASURE

1 TO 2		
3 TO 4		
3 TO 5		
3 TO 6		
7 MEASURE AROUND CHEST		
SIZE COLLAR WORN		
SIZE HAT WORN		

To the Imperial Wizard, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,
 Atlanta, Ga.
 I hereby make requisition for.....
 Robe and Helmet which will be for my own use only so long as
 I am in good standing in my local Klan. If ever my connection
 with the Order is for any cause severed, I will deliver above named
 article to Exalted Cyclops of my Klan without delay. I agree
 that the above article shall ever be the property of the Knights
 of the Ku Klux Klan, (Inc.).
 Signed:.....
 Member.
 Date....., 19.....
 I hereby certify that the person signed above is a member
 in good standing of Klan No....., Realm
 of....., Knights of
 the Ku Klux Klan.
 Signed,.....
 Kligrapp of Klan No....., Realm of.....
 Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.
 Date....., 19.....

with members of the leadership being the founders
 and operators of these businesses. Mary Elizabeth
 Tyler, in addition to her work in advertisements in
 the Southern Publicity Association, owned and
 operated the Klan newspaper, *Searchlight*. Within
 these newspapers, Klan businesses were allowed to
 advertise as openly and as constantly as they would
 like if those businesses were willing to pay the
 advertisement fees.⁸⁴ This same freedom was
 extended to Klan-sympathetic newspapers, such as
The Fiery Cross and *The Good Citizen*, both of
 which were owned by Alma Bridwell White.⁸⁵ This
 was an additional layer of profit for the leaders of
 the Klan, and it was another way the pyramid
 scheme structure of the Klan proved profitable. The
 circulation of the Klan's print media, both directly
 and indirectly affiliated, was in the millions. Each
 copy not only included article after article

reinforcing the white supremacist narrative of the KKK but also included mail-order forms for

⁸⁴ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

⁸⁵ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

the numerous Klan business ventures. This included everything from the white robes that served as the symbol of the Klan to aesthetic displays of Klan affiliation such as rings and hats to actual Klan membership forms to fill out.⁸⁶ These newspapers were the receptacle by which white supremacy and the reach of the Klan spread. Not only were these newspapers the mouthpieces of white supremacy, they were serious financial assets and monetized as such.

The Power of Propaganda: The Profiteering of the Fourth Estate

What was the overarching agenda of these Klan-affiliated news organizations: was it to spread the appeal and the message of the KKK, or was it an orchestrated campaign to squeeze profits from members of the Klan? Media manipulation was used to not only reinforce the ideals of white supremacy through the spread of hateful conspiracy theories and Klan ideology but also to reinforce the capitalist nature of the Klan. The promotion and advertising of goods rather than ideology was an important service that the newspaper served. The level of contribution to the overall Klan cannot be understated. The media infrastructure was an integral part of the Klan as a terror organization and within the individual personal fortunes of the Klan leadership. This was a significant portion of the Klan's financial empire established by female leaders such as Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Alma Bridwell White. "Corollary evidence that the Klan is systematically cultivating such militant bigotry among its members is found in the contents of its semi-official publication, the *Searchlight*, of Atlanta, the pages of which literally drip with venomous and frequently baseless attacks on the Catholics and Jews."⁸⁷ The ability to control Klan media and

⁸⁶ Figure 1.6 Klan regalia order forms (blank) [ca. 192-].

⁸⁷ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Page 7, Accessed September 29, 2024

power over mass communication within the Ku Klux Klan is an immense source of power. So much so that Congress is holding hearings over concerns regarding the type of content leaders like Tyler are spreading to the American public. It is a testament to the hard power that these female leaders possessed in their leadership capacity. Newspapers were the dominant form of mass communication in the 1920s, and through newspapers, these women were in control of the flow of information. In addition to the political power and influence that arose from control over these businesses, the financial benefits were immense for these women.

Due to the scope and popularity of the Klan, there were chapters in almost every state in the country. The Southern Publicity Association expanded the reach of the KKK well beyond the South into the American Midwest and the West Coast. This meant that consumers of Klan goods were spread across the country and in order to service all members of the organization, the KKK and WKKK were heavily reliant on the United States mail service, not only as the method to deliver Klan-affiliated information and the goods but also as the primary tool of communication between lower-ranked members and Klan leadership. Mail-order services were the bedrock of all Klan-owned businesses. These mail orders underscored the importance of the newspapers to the Klan; they were the primary method of communication to the lower-ranked members. This was more than a means of spreading propaganda, it was what the business was built off of. Newspapers were the advertising medium as well as the business itself. The United States government justified its investigation of the Ku Klux Klan's financial activities due to the organization's reliance and constant usage of the United States Postal Service.⁸⁸ The Postal

⁸⁸ "Ku Klux Wizard Welcomes Full Federal Probe - Warns Followers To Be Prepared For Further Attacks on Order - Asserts His Faith in Clarke and Mrs. Tyler - Says Character Charges Are Being Investigated-Statement To Follow" *Americus Times-Recorder*., September 23, 1921, State Edition

Service was a tool for the Klan to spread its ideology nationwide, in addition to the methodology by which the Klan received money for their advertised goods and services. The Klan's profits were so vast, and its business operations were so tied to postage, that it warranted a legitimate investigation into whether the Klan was engaging in different types of mail fraud.

The Price is Right: The Monopolization of Klan Production and Profits

All of these factors worked together in tandem to create a very well-oiled, successful, money-making machine. Recruitment laid the foundation for a pyramid scheme structure, and that structure allowed for business consolidation and the creation of monopolies within the Klan. The surrounding media infrastructure served to reinforce these institutions as well as advertise and promote the goods and services being sold. At every level, the leadership of the Klan was making enormous sums of money. The lack of outside competition allowed for price gouging to take place, meaning that at every level, the leadership of the Klan was overcharging their membership to increase their bottom line. Leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Robbie Gill Comer were in charge and owned the means of production for the Klan regalia for the KKK and WKKK, respectively; however, Daisy Douglas Barr received a significant percentage of all sales to her WKKK recruits. How much these leaders profited is a matter of public record as it was part of the line of questioning in the Congressional Hearings. "... and that is not even counting the sale of their robes, which Mr. Clarke admits cost \$1.25 to manufacture and which he compels every klansman to buy and pay \$6.50 for: the price was \$7.50 until just lately. The robes range in price up to the Grand Goblin's robes. It depends on how it is and the regalia required."⁸⁹ In

⁸⁹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Page 18, Accessed September 29, 2024

1921, when this testimony was given in front of Congress, these were significant sums of money. \$1.25 in 1921 would be worth \$22.04 as of 2025, meaning leaders such as Clarke, Tyler, and Gill Comer were making an estimated profit of \$110.20 for every robe sold.

This type of leadership and organization was almost the perfect configuration for corruption and financial fraud; the levels of profiteering off this one pyramid scheme are astounding. So much so that the Klan's leadership was practically incentivized to cheat their members and recruits out of as much money as possible. The Klan as a business was so profitable it generated an estimated income of \$25 million annually.⁹⁰ When the institutions of the Klan were set up in such a way that corruption was pervasive and almost all members of the leadership were taking full advantage of the lack of accountability and the ability to satiate their greed, many Klan members believed that the KKK was tainting and degrading the noble cause of white supremacy. Financial scandals would be one of the pillars by which the second iteration of the Klan saw its own destruction; it would also be one of the markers of the end of the phenomenon of female leadership with the Ku Klux Klan and the end of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan as an organization. Part of the ideology and creed of the Klan was that the crusade of a white America was a just and noble cause; the idea that the leaders in the war for the soul of America were profiting so heavily off of fellow soldiers in this crusade was perceived as hypocritical and antithetical to the very foundational principle of the Klan.

The wave of financial scandals and the American public's awareness of the high levels of fraud in the KKK, in addition to the fact that the female leaders of the Klan were so closely tied

⁹⁰ Fryer, Roland G., Levitt, Steven D., Hatred and Profits: Under the Hood of the Ku Klux Klan*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 127, Issue 4, November 2012, Pages 1883–1925, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjs028>

to the irregularities, misconduct, and corruption, resulted in the expulsion of all women from the ranks of leadership. News exposés, articles and certain newspapers were dedicated to exposing the crimes of the Klan, both their violent actions across the country but also their financial crimes against their own Klan members. The latter of which was tinged with such hypocrisy that it partially led to the end of the second Klan, but also the WKKK. The WKKK as an organization is only present within the second iteration of the Klan; that type of female leadership and women-led and operated organization based on white supremacy did not exist in the subsequent iterations, nor would any female engagement in the Klan be comparable to the power and structure women had in the 1920s.

Both the larger Ku Klux Klan and the auxiliary Women of the Ku Klux Klan operated separate and multiple factories, which were owned and operated by certain members of the Klan leadership, particularly Daisy Douglas Barr and Robbie Gill Comer. The latter was so heavily invested in the manufacturing aspect of the WKKK's business operations that she facilitated both the purchase of the WKKK headquarters and factory, financial activities that would later be investigated in a court of law due to the high levels of monetary irregularities and alleged corruption. Under oath, leaders admit how lucrative this source of revenue was for them. "[W]e were to turn over all robe orders... was to manufacture the robes at a certain price per robe, regardless of what price we might get for the robe... Q. This, then, is one of the principal sources of revenue for the order? —A. It is one."⁹¹ The fact that the leaders of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan were engaging in similar schemes of financial fraud and price gouging demonstrates that this was a widespread issue within leadership and that these white-collar crimes did not exist

⁹¹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Page 30, Accessed September 29, 2024

along gender lines. In fact, female leaders were some of the most proactive participants in these types of financial crimes. This can be seen in the actions taken by the former of the pair in her role in Klan leadership. There is evidence and documentation that Daisy Douglas Barr refused to initiate and recruit women into the WKKK if they were unwilling to purchase regalia from her.⁹² This is a testament to not only the greed of the leaders of the Klan but also an example of the ways they leveraged their positions of power to extort funds from lower-ranked members. Instances such as these further demonstrate the way the ideology of white supremacy and the allure of profit were intertwined motivations for the Klan's leadership. If the spread of the ideology and creed of the Ku Klux Klan were the primary and sole motivating factor for these leaders, then these businesses, these restrictions, and the fees would be nonexistent. Yet the ubiquity of money and expenses very much implies that the Klan was more than racism, xenophobia, and nativism.

Forced Klan-sumerism: Terror as a Business Enterprise

Reactionary politics was how the Klan sold and marketed KKK-branded terror. The expansion of the targets of the Klan not only served to widen the appeal to potential recruits, but it also widened the scope of what could be commodified and monetized.⁹³ Terror was the product, and every aspect of its spread across the country was associated with dollar bills, all of which saturated the top of the KKK's power pyramid. Female leaders, such as Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglass Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer, as part of this corrupt leadership, benefitted

⁹² "Klan Row Ends in Slander Suit - Daisy Douglas Barr is Made Defendant" *Indianapolis Times*, Volume 35, Number 200, Indianapolis, Marion County, 3 January 1924

⁹³ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

heavily from this type of profiteering. The fact that each of these women, as a result of their positions of power, was able to be a beneficiary of this corruption and these schemes is a testament to their influence within the organization. They each received a piece of the proverbial pie, something that would not have been possible had their power been in name only. These women were active participants in the financial fraud that the Klan was engaged in and, therefore, were actively involved in the business of white supremacy. To be a shareholder in the business of the KKK is to be a stakeholder in the violence and devastation the KKK wrought.

These women profited and enriched themselves not only at the expense of their fellow Klan members but also at the expense of the country. A byproduct of the promotion of the goods and services of the Klan is the active promotion and spread of images and symbols of white supremacy and domestic terrorism. These women were producing and overcharging other white Protestant Americans with physical symbols and markers of Klan ideology, an ideology that was more than openly hostile to anyone who was not a white, Protestant American born. They put a price tag on the ability to terrorize local communities of color, and leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer became obscenely wealthy off of it. The Ku Klux Klan was a business to them, and the direct result of their success in that business was the terror, discrimination, and intimidation of marginalized peoples across the country. The fact of the matter is that this was terrorists scamming and profiteering off of other terrorists; the numerous and creative means by which these women scammed their way into wealth did nothing to hinder the spread of the ideas and directives of the white supremacy; instead, it contributed to the spread of it.

Not only was the Klan's organizational structure so conducive and perfect for the extraction of profit, but it was also highly effective at the spread of its message. The KKK, as well as the WKKK, did not exist in this country in a vacuum; their messaging was a part of the

larger American political society. While the Klan was an extremist organization and actively engaged in the domestic terrorism of American citizens, much of the beliefs and conspiracies that influenced those actions permeated the mainstream American consciousness. Not every person subscribed to a Klan-affiliated or Klan-sympathetic newspaper or periodical was filling out the white hood mail order forms. The fact that enough people were active and continuous readers of that type of content is a testament to the effectiveness of the Klan's advertising abilities. While not every white Protestant in the American South and Midwest was donning a white hood at night, a significant portion of the country adopted the beliefs parroted by the Klan regarding immigrants, Jews, Catholics, and African Americans.

The consumer culture of the Klan and the commodification of the symbols of the KKK's ideology resulted in the ubiquity of white supremacy; not only did these symbols reinforce the identity of those within the Klan, but they advanced the greater cause of white supremacy outside of the Klan. The leadership of the KKK integrated the principles of American consumer culture into the activities of the organization, and the product that people were consuming was terror and hatred. The female leaders were incredibly successful at this, not only in the volumes of sheer profit they gleaned from these financial schemes but also in the advancement of aims and ideals of the Klan's white supremacist project. Every dollar that went into the pockets of these leaders was financial proof of the success and tangibility of American white supremacy and the influence of the Klan on the pocketbooks of white, Protestant American citizens. When the symbols of hatred become standardized, the ideology behind those symbols spreads. It is the consequence of the marriage of capitalism and the Klan. While the money flowed upward into the pockets of leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer, the ideology and doctrine of hatred seeped outward.

PART II: Death of a Nation: How Scandal Brought Down the Second Ku Klux Klan

Section Three will cover the different ways in which the female leaders of the KKK and WKKK spent their wealth. Their often gross displays of excess not only signify their success within their career fields but are physical manifestations of the success of white supremacy across the country. These women spent blood money on personal items, clothing, cars, and even mansions. In addition to detailing the different ways they spent their ill-gotten gains, the section also covers the numerous reactions to these displays of wealth.

Section Four revolves around how these women were held accountable for their actions, which were diametrically opposed to not only the message they were promoting but also the very creed of the Klan itself. Lawsuits and infighting led to much of the public information about not only the personal finances of the individual leaders but also the internal financial workings of the Klan. Many fellow Klanswomen not only sought compensation for the schemes and swindles the organization was subject to as a result of the leadership but also attempted to take power and control away from these women, engaging in publicly reported civil suits. In addition to detailing the concerted effort of the national press to expose the financial corruption and moral hypocrisy of the leaders of the Klan. The hypocrisy of the Klan leaders was circulated widely and greatly contributed to the personal downfall of Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer. These factors contributed to the decline and eventual destruction of the Second Ku Klux Klan as the public scandals, financial and sexual misconduct, and mounting public opposition all served to be deeply embarrassing and detrimental for the organization's reputation.

SECTION III: Invested in Hatred: How the Klanswomen Spent Their Ill-Gotten Gains

“With a little spending money, money to burn, Money that you did not necessarily earn

Rainy days seem to wind up sunny, Long as you got a little spending money.”

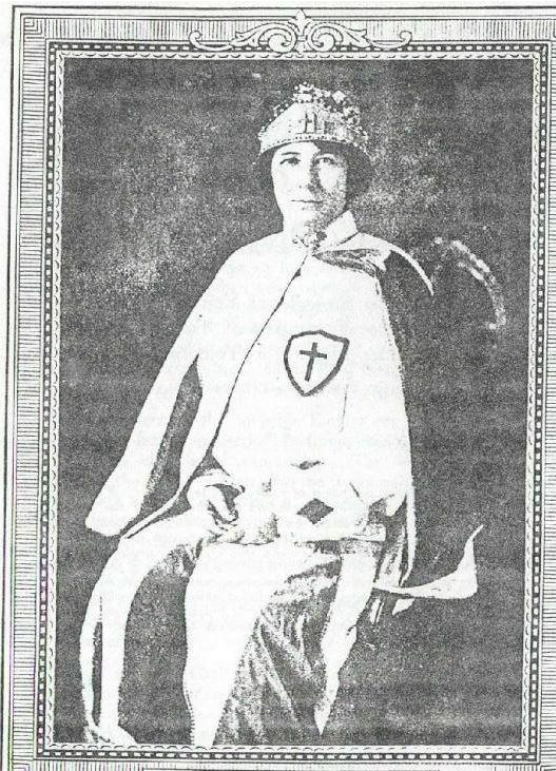
– Jimmy Buffet, “Spending Money”

The Ku Klux Klan was a business whose bottom line was directly affected by the spread of terrorism and hatred across the country. Leaders amassed vast amounts of wealth as part of their involvement in the KKK and WKKK through both legitimate and illegitimate means. Through scamming, surcharging, and pillaging their fellow Klan members, leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer became millionaires. The logical question after much discussion of how they gained their fortunes is: What did they do with their money?

Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer each had several newspapers and periodicals dedicated to exposing the hypocrisy of their messaging and displaying the gluttony of their wealth, which directly contradicted the messaging of the Klan and the WKKK. The fact that it was women who were engaging in these vast displays of wealth served as a form of morbid public fascination. Especially since these women were engaging with such luxury on the dime of the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, these organizations used terrorism to propagate their message of family values and a better America, yet their leaders were engaging in disgusting levels of excess. These women were terrorists who used their positions in service to white supremacy yet their monetization and greed undermined it.

The Devil Wears Prada: Parading the Trophies of White Supremacy

One of the most egregious examples of the gross displays of wealth from the leadership of the Klan and WKKK was the diamond-encrusted crown owned by Robbie Gill Comer. Initially purchased by Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans, this crown cost a reported \$30,000, which would amount to \$553,692.98 today. The revelation of the true cost of the crown resulted



in outrage among the Klanswomen as many originally believed the crown to have only cost \$750.⁹⁴ The leaders of the Ku Klux Klan were quite literally crowning themselves. A line of thinking Judge Thomson, who was the judge in the *Ku Klux Klan v. John F. Strayer et al.*, agreed with; within his ruling, he displayed no sympathy for the Klan and its leaders.⁹⁵ Condemning not only their hand in the spread of white supremacy, lynching, and race riots across the country but also condemning their financial and white-collar crimes. The extremes of their fraud and misconduct against members of their own

organization are staggering, with Gill Comer personally demonstrating how truly lucrative the KKK was not only as a business but as a personal revenue source.

A recurring theme among these leaders was how they spent their wealth, which was their investments in property and real estate. One of the prime examples of this would be Mary

⁹⁴Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009. Page 122

⁹⁵ Kratz, Jessie. "Evidence Exposed a Crumbling Klan: KKK V. John F. Strayer Et. Al." Pieces of History, August 23, 2016. <https://prologue.archives.gov/evidence-exposed-crumbling-klan-kkk-v-john-f-strayer/>.

Elizabeth Tyler's Atlanta property on Howell Mill Road, which was a 14-acre property. This property at the time was seen as opulent, so much so that multiple pages of the 1921 KKK Hearing in front of the House of Representatives Committee on Rules were dedicated to this one asset. This property was fully intended for personal use, this was not intended for Klan or communal use; rather, this was fully meant to be Tyler's home base. Robbie Gill Comer used her wealth to buy property on West 18th Street in Little Rock, Arkansas, which would eventually become the WKKK Headquarters. This was a sixteen-room mansion that neighbored her husband's law practice, which further cemented her control over the organization.⁹⁶ In addition to the unnecessary expenses, Klan funded travel and vacations, and the fleet of automobiles these leaders owned.

They also had ownership over radio stations, newspapers, production facilities, and even the headquarters of the Klan. The leadership of the KKK and WKKK basically owned the Klan. These are not only key pieces of organizational infrastructure and institutions within themselves, but they are also sources of legitimate and vast revenue streams. Not only were these women using their wealth to buy property and business ventures, but they were also using their wealth to buy power and influence within the Klan. Each of these key pieces of business increased both their earnings and their control over the Klan, serving as a feedback loop to increase their hard power. All of these expenses were in addition to the cars and the other luxuries purchased and owned by the leadership. They did not use their wealth to reinvest in the Klan or the white supremacist project they were so fervently committed to, instead, they used their wealth to reinvest in themselves and their own power.

⁹⁶Jjobe. "Comer, Robbie Gill." Encyclopedia of Arkansas, December 17, 2024. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/robbie-gill-comer-15664/>.

The Kulture of Prosperity: How America's Consumer Culture Shaped the Klan

It could be argued that leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer merely engaged in the decadence and excess of the decade. The 1920s were a decade marked with excess and extravagance, with much of the upper class reaping the rewards of the introduction of an American consumer culture. The Klan as a business was flourishing across the nation, and the leaders were rightfully celebrating not only their success as business leaders but also their success as white people. The 1920s was also a pinnacle of white supremacy. The Klan did more than contribute; the Klan engineered the expression and form of white supremacy within the decade, and these leaders made and spent millions as a result.

What made these displays of wealth so hypocritical for the base of the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is that much of the hatred against African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants was based on the woes of the middle class. This was a decade of mass immigration and the Harlem Renaissance; within that national context, the Klan's actions could be seen as a reassertion or a perpetuation of white supremacy across the country. Marginalized communities have historically been the scapegoats during times of social uncertainty or financial crisis, and the 1920s served as almost the perfect example of this political phenomenon. The proverbial "they" are taking jobs and opportunities from white America and changing the face and the priorities of the country while "they" are at it. It is difficult to make the argument that "they" are part of this grand economic cabal with the sole purpose of making things financially difficult for white Protestants in America when the leaders of the resistance against this conspiracy are flaunting vast sums of money. Leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer were not simply comfortable in their economic positions or

situated firmly in the upper middle class. They had mansions, luxury cars, and even crowns; these are not middle-class expenses, these are markers of wealth and prosperity. Not only was this extravagance essentially showboating moral hypocrisy, but it was also a direct violation of the creed of the Second Ku Klux Klan. A creed that some of these leaders, like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, helped create. “...The purpose and object of said corporation is to be purely benevolent and eleemosynary, and there shall be no capital or profit, or gain to the members thereof...”⁹⁷ For not only were these leaders profiting off an organization that meant to crusade for the soul of the nation and for the betterment of the white, Protestant American race, leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer were stealing from it. This ideological discord strikes at the root of not only the credibility of the leadership but the credibility of the Klan itself.

From the second iteration of the Klan and onward, the organization began its operations as a business enterprise, including national headquarters, a centralized power structure, upward organization of money flows, and products and means of production as revenue sources. Because the operations of the Ku Klux Klan were so intricately tied with the monetary aspect of the organization, one could argue that the collapse of the second iteration of the KKK was partially due to the nationwide economic depression. The economic prosperity in which the KKK and WKKK saw their rise could be partially attributed to the economic surplus in American households, who were then able to afford the recruitment fees, membership dues, and the overpriced Klan materials; in addition to the other money-making schemes the leaders used to squeeze as much money out of the ranks as possible.

⁹⁷ Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *Kloran, or White Book*, The Ku Klux Press, 1916

The KKK's political power and expression of white supremacy were so heavily tied to American consumer culture. The most popular form of political white supremacy was paywalled for a majority of Americans. The exchange of money is central to much of the Klan's operations, from recruitment to membership dues to paraphernalia, to even Klan culture. The health of the American economy and the economic depression did nothing to depress the white supremacist sentiment that had permeated much of the country. Yet there is a correlation between the rise and fall of the second iteration of the KKK with the Roaring Twenties and the advent of the Great Depression. Was the economic success of the Klan tied to the economic success of the country? If the leaders and their profiteering were emblematic of the capitalist attitudes of the 1920s, was the sudden decline of the Klan and the downfall of their leaders emblematic of the crash of the American economy and the failure of capitalism in the United States?

Death of a Klansman: The Print Media Critics of Klanish Financial Irregularities

"Follow the money" is a cliché of American journalism, and it was the tactic employed by many anti-Klan publications as part of their exposés of the financial irregularities surrounding the activities of the Klan. In addition to exposing the ubiquity of violence of the KKK, contemporary newspapers also sought to expose the hypocrisy of the leaders of the Klan by exposing their wealth. These were disgusting displays of wealth: cars, crowns, and acres of prime real estate, all of which were bought with blood money. These women were not shy about flaunting their power, and similarly, they were not shy about flaunting their wealth. They engaged in brazen and brash forms of conspicuous consumption. All their cars, property, and cash were a testament not only to the national spread of the Ku Klux Klan across the country but also to the success of the white supremacist project. These were the rewards they reaped from the

violence and terror of the KKK and WKKK. These are physical markers of their success in the marketing and propagation of white supremacy. These displays were intended to be noticed, for they were indicators of the victory of the Klan; however, in taking that victory lap, these women drew the attention and ire of the American public, the American press, and the United States federal government.

For those within the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, the American press' continuous reporting was more than an exposé of the financial mismanagement and misappropriation by the leaders, it also served as an exposé of their hypocrisy. Resulting in eroding support inside and outside the organizations. Not only was the revelation that there were serious financial gains behind the crusade and the patriotic duty of the KKK and WKKK, but the revelation that the arbiters of white, feminine, Protestant virtue were stealing from the organization was a shocking one. This internal dissonance led to infighting among leaders and other Klan members jockeying for power and the money revealed through the press. All of these eventually contributed to the end of the Second Ku Klux Klan and the disbanding of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1930s.

“Show Me the Money!”: The Revelations of the Schemes of Supremacy

Their lives of extravagance and businesses of white supremacy were all paid for through Klan-related sources of revenue. Through the salaries and commissions gained by these leaders for their recruitment efforts as well as the money earned as a result of the pyramid scheme structure of the Klan. In addition to the revenue and money gained through sales of merchandise and paraphernalia from their factories and the commission rates of those items. These sources of revenue were the legal ones; despite the financial peculiarities of the surcharging scheme, all of

those methods of self-enrichment were legal. There were also illegal methods on which these leaders built their fortunes. There is evidence that both Daisy Douglas Barr and Robbie Gill Comer embezzled from the Klan. Gill Comer's time in leadership ended as a result of the revelations and subsequent publication of her theft and embezzlement from the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1925, it was first exposed that she had covertly spent an estimated \$70,000 on "unsanctioned and personal items."⁹⁸ For reference as to the scale of her theft, \$70,000 would amount to \$1,291,950.29 in 2025. Even Mary Elizabeth Tyler, through the Southern Publicity Association, improperly enriched herself through loans that Edward Young Clarke took out from the Klan and never repaid.⁹⁹ These women were supplementing an already extravagant income through illegal means, engaging in white-collar financial crimes against the Ku Klux Klan.

These women were in such positions of power and privilege within both the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan that they were brazen in their theft and embezzlement. Acting in such a manner that indicated that they feared no recourse or accountability for their actions. Almost justifiably so, Mary Elizabeth Tyler was considered one of the "Big Three" and had been referred to as the "power behind the throne"¹⁰⁰. Daisy Douglas Barr was so integral to the KKK and the WKKK that she was referred to as "The State" by fellow Klansmembers¹⁰¹. Robbie Gill Comer's signature was at the bottom of the founding documents of both the KKK

⁹⁸ Kratz, Jessie. "Evidence Exposed a Crumbling Klan: KKK V. John F. Strayer Et. Al." Pieces of History, August 23, 2016. <https://prologue.archives.gov/evidence-exposed-crumbling-klan-kkk-v-john-f-strayer/>.

⁹⁹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, *Ku Klux Klan. Hearings Before the Committee on Rules, House of Representatives*, Accessed September 29, 2024

¹⁰⁰ "No Tax is Paid U.S. on Big Collections of Klan, Is Charge - Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler, "Woman Behind Throne," Fromer King Kleagle tells Investigating Committee" *Atlanta Tri-weekly Journal.*, October 13, 1921, Image 1 <https://gahistoricnewspapers.usg.edu/sn890713/1921-10-13/ed-1/seq-1/#words=Elizabeth+Tyler>

¹⁰¹ "Klan Row Ends in Slander Suit - Daisy Douglas Barr Is Made Defendant" *Indianapolis Times*, Volume 35, Number 200, Indianapolis, Marion County, 3 January 1924

and WKKK, was even one of two signers of the original Constitution and Laws of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁰² These women were socially and influentially positioned to be essentially untouchable in the Klan, with both their influence and their economic power serving to protect their positions. These women had a vested financial interest in the KKK and WKKK, and they leveraged that financial interest into positions that allowed them to further steal from the Klan. One such lawsuit referred to these actions as “fleecing the organization”¹⁰³; an apt and appropriate description of what these women did to their own organizations.

These schemes were all revealed in part due to the numerous lawsuits and legal dramas in which the leadership of the Klan was caught. Misappropriation of Klan funds was the most common accusation and charge of these leaders because that is what they did. These women were so tied to the financial irregularities of the KKK and WKKK that it was the center of investigations from the federal government through the Department of Justice and the House of Representatives, it was the core allegation within the numerous lawsuits brought against these women, and it was the crux of the joint effort by key figures within the American press to bring down the Klan.¹⁰⁴ These women purposely mishandled and misappropriated funds within the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan to improperly and illegally enrich themselves in addition to the legal forms of enrichment they were already engaging in. “Charges of waste,

¹⁰² Women of the Ku Klux Klan, *Constitution of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan : accepted and adopted June 2nd, 1923 at Washington, D.C*, Parke-Harper Publishing Co.1923

¹⁰³Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

¹⁰⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

extravagance and fraudulent misappropriation of funds are brought against Mrs. Robbie Gill Comer, imperial commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan...”¹⁰⁵

These reports were not only of interest to the general public but also to the federal government, which for years harbored concerns regarding whether or not the Klan was properly paying its taxes. These displays of wealth similarly triggered questions regarding the financial standing of the Klan itself; with multiple civil suits being filed, Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer were the defendants. Fellow Klan members, along with the federal government and the general public, read the details of the leaders' fortunes and wealth and concluded that financial irregularities were occurring. It was the publication of these details and the extravagance by which these leaders lived on the Klan's dime that brought down the KKK. The fact that “*Dismissal of Clarke and Tyler Demanded*” was a headline in a national newspaper in September 1923 is a testament to this fact.¹⁰⁶

Corruption, extravagance, and greed were so rampant within the leadership ranks of the Klan that they destroyed the organization. This iteration of the Klan had the potential to survive longer than it did. The white supremacist projects of the KKK and WKKK were largely successful due to the normalization of violence against people of color and the adoption of much of the Klan's ideology. Many key figures throughout every level of federal, state, and local governments were members of the Klan. In addition to powerful and socially relevant figures within its ranks, the KKK also had its own media ecosystem. Newspapers, music production,

¹⁰⁵ “K.K.K. Amazons Stage Civil War - Charge Misappropriation of Funds by “Higher Ups” *The Producers News* (Plentywood, Mont.), September 4, 1925 Library of Congress

¹⁰⁶ “Atlanta police in Ku Klux Grip Events Reveal - Records Involving ‘Imperial Kleagle’ Concealed, Then Disappear at Headquarters” *Americus Times-recorder.*, September 24, 1921, Image 4

radio stations, and even movies owned and operated by members of the Klan were intended for other members of the Klan.

The KKK was incredibly effective in the 1920s, so much so that the only thing that destroyed the organization was itself. There was so much money to be made through terrorism, bigotry, and prejudice that it caused a title wave of infighting within the leaders of the organization, all kinds of financial corruption that would eventually balloon into national scandals, and general acts of hypocrisy that would serve to discredit not only the leaders of the Klan but the organization itself. The types of financial schemes that Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer routinely engaged in throughout their leadership tenure in the Klan were emblematic of the larger leadership within the organization. These women were not the only ones profiting so egregiously from the Ku Klux Klan, nor were they the only ones within the leadership to live their extravagance and excess so brazenly. However, the brazen nature of the organization as a whole is exactly what made it a target within the American press and the federal government. There was so much money within the Klan that everyone wanted a piece of the proverbial pie, including the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). To flaunt their wealth so openly was tantamount to the flaunting of white supremacy. These demonstrations of excess showed the American public how this very small number of people were able to profit so greatly from their investments in hatred, prejudice, and white supremacy, which was an outrage to many people for markedly different reasons.

SECTION IV: Klan in the Court Room: The Fall of the Business of Hate

“I think all good reporting is the same thing - the best attainable version of the truth.”

— Carl Bernstein, All the President's Men

There is no better example of the hypocrisy of the leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan than Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer. These three women exemplify the moral and sexual hypocrisy, financial scandals, and abuses of power that made up the leadership of the KKK and WKKK. These types of scandals were heavily reported in the American national press, and it was those types of articles that brought down the Klan, rather than the reporting of the widespread death, violence, and lynchings that the Klan was responsible for across the nation. The national press was crucial for the downfall and destruction of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s; for national media was the primary way in which the public and other lower ranked Klansmembers learned about the financial and moral corruption that Klan leaders were engaged in. Court details, accusations, and financial misconduct were hallmarks of how these newspapers reported on the activities of the Klan, in addition to the publication of horrific details of how the Klan engaged in extrajudicial violence and killings.

Infighting greatly contributed to the eventual dissolution of the Second Klan. Those among the ranks of the Klan leadership were publicly jockeying for power and control over the flow of money within the organization. Often, the American press and the court system are used as tools in this internal civil war and power struggle. Attempted power plays were hallmarks of both the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, with Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer all subject to and active participants in these types of

power struggles. However, toward the end of the prominence of the Klan, these types of leadership infighting were becoming increasingly more visible, especially within the general public. Every day, Americans were becoming more and more aware of the corruption at the top of the Klan, which in turn eroded support for the organization and fueled the Klan's critics and enemies. The information and scandals that leaked out to the public provided ammunition against the organization and led to legal consequences for the various leaders engaged in financial misconduct and other white-collar crimes. Oftentimes, these lawsuits in which fellow Klan members were suing each other for various crimes and accusations were the only times in which members of the KKK saw the inside of a courtroom.

Standing in the Way of Supremacy: How Newspapers Brought Down the KKK

There was a concerted effort within the American national media to report and expose the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. This unofficial and uncoordinated coalition of anti-Klan forces within the press was made up of Jewish, Catholic, and Black press who saw, rightfully so, the KKK as an active threat against their survival in the United States in addition to the white newspapers who were simply offended by white supremacy. Some of the initial anti-Klan reporting was done by the *New York World*; it was their exposé to the activities and crimes, both in terms of domestic terrorism and white-collar crimes, that sparked the first wave of national widespread dissent against this effort of white supremacy. This effort by the *New York World* was so effective it resulted in over a dozen newspapers following the misconduct of the leaders of the Klan.



"The Answer"

Public Ledger, Philadelphia [n.d.]
as reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1921
Cartoonist: Charles Henry "Bill" Sykes

These public criticisms of the Klan were not just contained in the publication of articles and reports detailing the corruption of the leaders. There was also a widespread lampooning of the KKK and WKKK through the use of political cartoons. *The Public Ledger*, for instance, was a white newspaper based in Philadelphia. At one point, it was the city's most widely circulated print newspaper that published a political cartoon in which the newspaper explicitly called the Klan a terrorist organization and satirized the Klan's bastardization of patriotism.



"Their Christmas Tree"

Judge, Dec. 16, 1922
as reprinted in *The Afro-American*, Baltimore, Dec. 29, 1922

While both white and black newspapers engaged in political cartoons as a way to discredit the KKK, the Black press was explicit about the violence that the Klan engaged in that generally was not present in the political cartoons of the white press. This is clearly seen in the tone and tenor of the cartoons published by *The Afro-African*, in which the Klan is not only portrayed in a negative light, but the black and brown people who had been victimized by the Klan are center stage as well. There is a publication of violence that is generally not present in other portrayals of the Klan. In the criticism

of the Klan within the white press, the Klan is the center of the critique. Within the Black press, often the subjects that are centered are the communities that have been brutalized by the Klan.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) not only disseminated the reporting done by the *New York World*, but they actively encouraged black journalists and the black press to write a similar exposé on the activities of the Klan. The NAACP's cornerstone mission was to publicize the severity and the ubiquity of lynchings across the nation. The Ku Klux Klan and its actions, particularly in the American South, were so heavily tied to these extrajudicial killings of Black Americans that it made it impossible for the Klan not to be a target of the NAACP. There was an organized effort by African American institutions to serve as an active opposition to the Klan; the NAACP directed all local offices and chapters to collect information regarding the activities of the KKK to the larger national organization so it could be disseminated to the black press. "The Association [NAACP], during 1921, continued its fight against the Ku Klux Klan. This fight has been carried on mainly through publicity..."¹⁰⁷ Black newspapers especially highlighted the severity and the frequency of Klan violence against African Americans. However, the NAACP saw the utility in the publication and dissemination of the financial misconduct and general hypocrisy of the leaders of the Klan as a tactic to discredit and bring down the organization. This is explicitly stated in the NAACP Annual Report from 1921, in which the NAACP publicly called for the publication of the KKK's financial records in the wake of all the financial scandals.

¹⁰⁷ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Twelfth Annual Report of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People For the Year 1921*, January 1922. https://books.google.com/books?id=SRo_AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA64#v=onepage&q&f=false

Black newspapers such as *The Afro-American* helped cultivate this culture among the Black press of anti-Klan sentiment, braving the violence and the terror that their reporting begot. Jewish and Catholic newspapers, such as the *Indiana Jewish Chronicle* and the *Indiana Catholic & Record*, faced similar violent circumstances in response to their reporting and negative coverage of the Klan. To report the truth of the violence of the Klan's domestic terrorism and white supremacy was a dangerous task. Not only were the victims of the Klan's violence actively attempting to shine a light on their activities, but white Protestant-owned newspapers were similarly engaged in these efforts. One notable newspaper was the *Indianapolis Times*, which exposed the connections and involvement of the Klan in local and state politics, specifically exposing the political and financial ties between the Governor of Indiana, Ed Jackson, and D.C. Stephenson, the Grand Dragon of the KKK.¹⁰⁸ This coverage of the Ku Klux Klan's political corruption earned the paper a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 1928.¹⁰⁹ With multiple instances of newspaper owners or editors simply being disgusted with not only the Ku Klux Klan as an organization but the very idea of white supremacy in the United States. In direct response to this coverage, local Klansmen engaged in intimidation efforts, and the Klanswomen associated with the Women of the Ku Klux Klan led mass boycotts of those establishments.

The fact that reporting on the financial crimes and misconduct of the Klan was so effective a tool in the organization's downfall in the 1920s is so demonstrative of how the KKK was destroyed by its own greed, hubris, and avarice. The outrage and public backlash were in response to the publication of the Klan's crimes against fellow white people, not the years of

¹⁰⁸ "History of Crusade Waged by The Times Against Corruption in State Government" *The Indianapolis Times*, Indianapolis, Indiana, Tue, May 8, 1928, Page 1

¹⁰⁹ Devadasan, Neil. "Newspaper Pulitzer Prizes." Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, March 5, 2025. <https://indyencyclopedia.org/newspaper-pulitzer-prizes/> .

articles and periodicals dedicated to Klan violence against people of color. That fact exemplifies the white supremacist America in which the Klan operated. It also speaks to how the American public perceived the victims of the Klan and the normalization of violence against people of color. It was only violence and crimes against white people that caused enough outrage to lead to “accountability”. However, it could be argued that the leaders of the KKK and WKKK, like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer, were never truly held accountable for their crimes against the country. The lawsuits and public shaming were centered around their mismanagement of funds and corruption within the Klan rather than how they actively contributed to violence. Their crimes in the eyes of white America were the ineffective way in which they carried out the white supremacist project.

Justice for Whom?: The Uneven Application of the Law in White Supremacist America

These were widespread efforts to not only stop the spread of the Ku Klux Klan across America but to stop the spread of white supremacy. Despite the hard and dangerous work of the members of the press and the brazenness of the Klan in their actions of domestic terror, often the only accountability for leadership in the Klan was obtained by Klan members themselves. The most successful lawsuits and legal action regarding the Klan was not prosecution of the widespread extrajudicial killings, violent intimidation, and economic coercion of Jewish, Catholic, and Black Americans; rather, it was centered around the prosecution of said leaders for misconduct and corruption regarding Klan funds. Even the 1922 Congressional Hearing was centered largely on the financial matters of the Klan, rather than the organization as a harbinger of terror and white supremacy. That in itself demonstrates not only the reality of what life was like for marginalized communities in America and the priorities of the United States federal

government, but it also demonstrates the pervasiveness of white supremacy in the country. Only white men and women, who themselves were members of the Klan, were the ones to receive some justice in this decade regarding the actions of the Klan.

Throughout this iteration of the KKK, it is not surprising that only Klan members were able to receive justice in a court of law if one can call it that. This is especially true in certain communities, where notable offices, positions of power, and people of high social standing were all members of the Klan. As Daisy Douglas Barr once said, “Only the best people are in the Klan”.¹¹⁰ That meant police officers, prosecutors, judges, district attorneys, and truly anyone of note within the communities in which the Klan operated. Justice is often challenging to find when the arbiters of justice are members of the Ku Klux Klan. Conflicts of interest, corruption, and white supremacy ran rampant within local governments and their communities. Almost ensured that members of the Klan would never be held accountable for their actions and the way they terrorized communities of color.

Not only does it make sense that people of color, Catholics, and Jews were not able to turn to their government representatives and local law enforcement for protection, but it is also the reason why newspaper owners, editors, and writers were consistently put in dangerous situations with no protection from their police forces. All of these figures and organizations were engaging in a form of activism against white supremacy and the Klan, and doing so put not only their own lives at risk but also their entire families as well.¹¹¹ Every article and every political cartoon that depicted the KKK in a negative light was tantamount to risking death and attacks

¹¹⁰ Egan, Timothy. *A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan's Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them*. Penguin Random House 2023.

¹¹¹ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

from men in white hoods. Despite the violence of the situation, the Klan's intimidation tactics were fruitless as many news organizations published reports of a wide array of Klan activities. Making public the activities of a secret organization, particularly one that was violent and as corrupt as the KKK, was often the only form of resistance and recourse. The Ku Klux Klan was equal parts a terrorist organization and a business enterprise; therefore, the publication of detailed reports that contained allegations of white-collar crimes and embezzlement was both an act of corporate espionage and political activism. And that type of activism from an entire host of people and organizations eventually brought down the second iteration of the Klan.

Financial corruption and moral hypocrisy are the most effective in terms of public outrage and internal accountability. This is partially the result of the normalization of not only the violence of the Klan but also the white supremacist reality of the United States. Violence towards people of color and marginalized communities, regardless if it was Klan action, was more than tolerated; it was codified into state and federal laws. The actions of the Ku Klux Klan were simply the violent expression of the white supremacist thoughts that permeated the country, and this was an era of so much violence. In the 1920s, the United States was inherently a white supremacist state. Therefore, the means to maintain white supremacy would be so commonplace that it would not cause outrage. When violence happens every day and there is a lynching every weekend, it does not illicit the same anger and outrage as millions of dollars of waste and profiteering.

In Bed with the Klan: How Tyler & Clarke's Hypocrisy Led to Their Expulsion

Mary Elizabeth Tyler was responsible for so much of the formation of the Second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan. Even went so far as owning certain institutions within the Klan,

such as the Searchlight publication, fifty-fifty ownership in the Southern Publicity Association, and ownership over various other businesses, such as radio stations, manufacturing facilities, etc. Yet, despite being an institution within herself, Tyler ended her tenure in the Klan in disgrace. So much so that Tyler was forced to leave the United States itself in an attempt to escape accountability and arrest under the Mann Act, or the White-Slave Traffic Act of 1910 in 1923.¹¹² Her absence from Klan leadership marked the rise of Hiram Wesley Evans within the Klan, with her departure solidifying his victory in the power struggle for the direction of the KKK.

One of the pillars that marked her downfall within the Klan was the wave of financial scandals and corruption charges that engulfed her and her contemporaries, particularly Edward Young Clarke and William Joseph Simmons. “The Big Three” were the subjects of multiple lawsuits and federal investigations regarding the Klan funds, with these three leaders facing numerous accusations of financial malpractice, manipulation, and mismanagement.¹¹³ These investigations and court cases focused particularly on Clarke and Tyler as the main beneficiaries of the widespread corruption and abuses of power, as these two, through their different business ventures and the Southern Publicity Association, had made millions of dollars off the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan's business and source of income was a truly profitable one. This was very much the case in the 1921 KKK Hearings in front of the House of Representatives on the financial particulars regarding Clarke and Tyler’s various investments in the Klan.

A similar focus was placed on Clarke and Tyler in the *G.L. Williams v. W.J. Simmons, E.Y. Clarke, Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler* case, in which it was, Committee on Rules in which a majority

¹¹²Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009.

¹¹³ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

of the testimony is Congress attempting to understand acknowledged that Clarke and Tyler held a majority of the financial assets and controlled the Klan's coffers in a way that Simmons simply did not. G.L. William's suit was seeking \$3256 in damages, which in 2025 would amount to \$61,167.25.¹¹⁴ However, while both the Klan and "The Big Three" could easily afford that, what was truly damaging about the lawsuit was the reporting in the national media, particularly the stories about the financial corruption not only within the Klan itself but also within those three leaders. Simmons, Clarke, and Tyler become synonymous with the KKK's financial corruption and misconduct in the last years of their involvement. Certain newspapers, such as the *Americus Times-Recorder* and the *Atlanta Tri-Weekly Journal*, targeted their articles and publications on Mary Elizabeth Tyler's role in these financial scandals.

So much of the rhetoric and ideology the Klan used to reinforce its messages of white supremacy were centered around proper Protestant family values and white female sexual purity.¹¹⁵ This rhetoric was shared and amplified by both Edward Young Clarke and Mary Elizabeth Tyler through the Southern Publicity Association. This is why it was so shocking and appalling for the ordinary members of the Klan when it was revealed that both Clarke and Tyler were not only engaged in an affair but attempted to pay off the Atlanta police force when they were caught in a sexually compromising position with alcohol.¹¹⁶ Violating the laws of the state of Georgia regarding sexual promiscuity, marriage desertion, and Prohibition in addition to the violations of the creed of the Klan. Both Clarke and Tyler were married, with the former being

¹¹⁴"Suit Again Ku Klux Klan Officers for Commissions" *The Daily Times-Enterprise*, June 16, 1922, Image 7

¹¹⁵ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Editorial And Feature Page. *Americus Times-Recorder*., September 21, 1921, Home Edition, Page PAGE TWO, Image 2

charged with desertion and abandonment by his wife. In 1919, the couple was raided by the police force of Atlanta in their shared hotel room. During the raid, the couple attempted to use false identities to distance themselves from their crimes. The pair subsequently attempted to engage in bribery and corruption to avoid arrest and get their charges dropped. This was a futile attempt to sweep the entire situation under the rug as these actions were widely reported within the national press. While the event took place in 1919, it was not widely known until reporting done by the *New York World* and the *Columbus Enquirer-Sun* in 1921.¹¹⁷ It was a revelation to the American public that leaders of the Ku Klux Klan could so easily buy off law enforcement, with multiple articles stating in some form that the Atlanta police department was in the pocket of the Klan. These types of actions were more than the propagation of white supremacy and the political aims of the KKK; this type of corruption was centered around escaping accountability for crimes so contradictory to the Klan's message. This incident was one of the main sex scandals of the Ku Klux Klan and contributed to the changing perceptions of the leadership of the Klan.

Actions such as these are demonstrative of the brazen ways in which the various leaders engaged in contradictory, hypocritical, and illegal activities in their personal lives while promoting and profiting off of a specific image of white, Protestant America. Not only did Tyler directly violate the charter of the Klan, but she also attempted to use her position of power and the money she made off the Klan to escape accountability. Not only did Tyler routinely place herself above the law through her involvement in the KKK, but she, through actions such as these, placed herself above her commitment to the Klan. This revelation, in combination with the

¹¹⁷ Editorial And Feature Page. *Americus Times-Recorder*., September 21, 1921, Home Edition, Page PAGE TWO, Image 2

publication of her profiteering, contributed to the destruction of her reputation inside and outside the Klan. For if one of the founders of the second iteration of the KKK cannot be trusted to uphold its values and principles in private, how was she to be trusted with anything?

The Tyler-Clarke affair was certainly an open secret within the leadership and upper echelons of the Ku Klux Klan, but it was relatively unknown among the general public.¹¹⁸ This contributed to the growing discontent among rank-and-file Klan members, including both Tyler and Clarke, who had used their economic power and influence to change the leadership of the Klan from William Joseph Simmons to Hiram Wesley Evans in 1922. It was a rather shocking discovery to see that the pair had enacted a de facto coup d'etat within the KKK and were engaging in sexual debauchery and the moral failings of alcohol. Temperance was one of the core values of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that Tyler helped create.¹¹⁹ For her to be caught in a sexually compromising position as a married woman with a married man who was not her husband, with alcohol present, is so fundamentally contradictory to the ideology she helped create. Her actions and her life serve as a direct challenge and contradiction to the sexual and gender expectations that the KKK promoted. These are complete taboos within not only the dominant beliefs regarding sexuality at the time but also the Klan's stance on sexual purity and family values. Simply calling this hypocrisy would be an understatement. This again creates questions regarding Mary Elizabeth Tyler's motivations for her role in the Klan. Did she really believe in the Klan's ideology? Or was it simply an ideology that allowed her the most profit and power? Were talking points such as Temperance or family values central to her own

¹¹⁸ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018.

¹¹⁹ Laackman, Dale W. *Selling Hate: Marketing the Ku Klux Klan*. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

belief system as a person to introduce these things into the Klan's ideology? Or were they the best talking points to increase recruitment, which increased her profit margins?

In response to the revelation of their affair and their dramatic encounter with Atlanta law enforcement, many within the Klan demanded the resignations of both Clarke and Tyler.¹²⁰ The fallout and backlash towards the pair was immense, particularly towards Tyler. While Clarke was criticized and lampooned within the national newspapers for being a deserter while promoting family and Protestant values, Tyler did bear the brunt of much of the national criticism, much of which was unnecessarily sexist. However, despite the gendered tenor of the national reporting of both the Atlanta incident and the Tyler-Clarke affair, it remains true that Mary Elizabeth Tyler is merely an example of the moral hypocrisy of the leaders. She is demonstrative of how the leaders of the KKK promote and profit off of an ideology that they do not practice in private.

Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke were the most tame examples of sexual misconduct among the leadership ranks of the Klan, they were simply the first in a wave of public sexual wrongdoings. The most notable Klan sex scandal shocked the nation and turned the tide on the positive public perception of the Klan. In 1925, Ku Klux Klan leader, D.C. Stephenson, was convicted of the abduction, rape, and murder of Klanswomen, Madge Oberholtzer.¹²¹ This case was the final straw for the Klan in Indiana. Despite the egregiousness of the crime, it is notable that violence against a white woman received prosecution and conviction, but the hundreds of instances of racial violence and lynchings that the Klan engaged

¹²⁰ "Atlanta Police in Ku Klux Grip Events Reveal - Records Involving 'Imperial Kleagle' Concealed, Then Disappear at Headquarters" *Americus Times-recorder.*, September 24, 1921, Image 4

¹²¹ Harcourt, Felix. *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

in went largely unreported and unpunished. The fact that the Tyler-Clarke affair and the rape of Madge Oberholtzer were nationally reported crimes and scandals did irreparable harm and damage to how everyday Americans conceptualized the Klan. These are crimes that directly violate the core tenet of the Klan: the protection of the purity of white womanhood. That is the nucleus of the founding mythos of the KKK, and this is public evidence of three of the organization's leaders' disregard and contempt of those principles. As a direct result, the Klan lost essentially all political power as many key figures were charged and indicted for their involvement in the KKK and lost tens of thousands of members of the KKK and WKKK. The publication of the Tyler-Clarke affair may have been the first domino to fall, but *Stephenson V. State* was the nail in the coffin for the second iteration of the KKK.

Crowning Achievements: Daisy Douglas Barr's Embezzlement from the Klan

Daisy Douglas Barr was so intertwined with the very identity of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan and even the Ku Klux Klan itself that she was given the moniker "The State" to denote her power and influence within both organizations.¹²² Like Tyler, Douglas Barr was an institution in itself. Almost single-handedly expanded the reach and the influence of the Klan across the Midwest, in states where she was the chief recruiter. However, despite her hand in increasing membership numbers in the WKKK, she left both the Klan's leadership and the organization as a whole in disgrace. She may have been the Imperial Empress, but not even "The State" could withstand the scrutiny of the financial scandals under which Douglas Barr was buried. She was eventually replaced in 1926 after years of internal power struggles for control

¹²² "Klan Row Ends in Slander Suit - Daisy Douglas Barr is Made Defendant" *Indianapolis Times*, Volume 35, Number 200, Indianapolis, Marion County, 3 January 1924

over the WKKK, lawsuits regarding her financial misconduct, and pressure from anti-Klan forces within the American press.

Her financial corruption was so vast that it resulted in a judge, Chancellor Martineau of the Pulaski County chancery court, ordering an audit over the entirety of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan to determine the levels of financial irregularity and misappropriation Douglas Barr engaged in.¹²³ Thus, putting the WKKK, and even the KKK, in a precarious position as details of the financial structure of the organization were ordered to be made public. Thus, Douglas Barr was a liability to the Klan. Her legal troubles were more than just with individual Klanswomen who sought to not only hold her accountable for her white-collar crimes against the Klan but who also sought to exploit her financial corruption in an attempt to take power away from her; she also was sued by the Women of the Ku Klux Klan as an organization. This was the extent of her corruption, abuses of power, and financial misconduct.

In 1924, Mary Benadum, a fellow Klanswoman, sued Daisy Douglas Barr for a reported \$50,000, which in 2025 would amount to \$922,821.64. Her lawsuit was because Douglas Barr had unfairly enriched herself off her involvement in the WKKK. Specifically mentioning that Douglas Barr "had amassed a fortune off the dues of Klansmen" in addition to the lawsuit containing details about the economic coercion of fellow Klanswomen through the use of Klan regalia.¹²⁴ It was also detailed within the lawsuit that Douglas Barr had used her title as Imperial Empress as leverage to amass an additional source of revenue. Further cementing the levels of financial corruption and misconduct. However, this lawsuit was simply the culmination, or even

¹²³ "Audit is Ordered for Books of Klan - Judge Grants Request As To Funds; Dissolved Injunction As to Management" *The Montgomery Advertiser*. (Montgomery, AL), Oct. 4 1925.

¹²⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018, page 151.

continuation, of a long-running internal power struggle within the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. Mary Benadum was a rival attempting to seize power away from Daisy Douglas Barr and undermine her authority by exposing her financial crimes to not only the general public but also to their fellow Klan members.¹²⁵

Within the national press, there were multiple newspapers and magazines specifically focused on reporting the details of her financial scandals to the public. The most notable of which was the Muncie Post-Democrat. The newspaper's editor, George R. Dale, was particularly focused on Douglas Barr and exposing her corruption, nicknaming her “Ducky Barr” or “Ducky Douglas Barr” in most news articles covering her crimes. At one point even referred to her as “Kokomo Koo Koos Kluck Evangelist”, referencing both the fact that Douglas Barr was an ordained minister and a former Quaker.¹²⁶ While she was the center of much of Dale’s coverage, his newspaper attacked and lampooned the entirety of the Klan.

This reporting came at much personal risk to George Dale personally, who had endured violence, threats, and intimidation from the Klan, with one instance where Klan members shot into his car and the front of his house.¹²⁷ This type of violence and attempted media suppression was not uncommon, it was rather ubiquitous. The Klan was a domestic terrorist organization that used violence against not only Jews, Catholics, African Americans, and immigrants, but also anyone and any organization that attempted to criticize their white supremacist project. While

¹²⁵ MacLean, Nancy K. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹²⁶ “Ducky Daisy Barr Shoots Off Her Mouth - Kokomo Koo Koos Kluck Evangelist Like All The Rest And His Hate Squad Are Hard at Work Stirring Up Marion” *Muncie Post-Democrat*, Muncie, Delaware County, 7 December 1923

¹²⁷ Taylor, Stephen J. “Delaware County – Hoosier State Chronicles: Indiana’s Digital Newspaper Program.” Hoosier State Chronicles: Indiana’s Digital Newspaper Program, November 17, 2015. <https://blog.newspapers.library.in.gov/tag/delaware-county/>.

there is no evidence that any one of these women directly ordered this type of violence, they were still more than complicit in it. Not only by virtue of their membership with the Klan, but by their direct role in the spread of the KKK and WKKK across the country, and with the organization, white supremacy spread alongside it.

Nepotism of Burning Crosses: The Abuses of Power of Robbie Gill Comer

Robbie Gill Comer's tenure at the helm of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan lasted from 1924 to its eventual downfall in the early 1930s, with her scandals greatly contributing to its destruction. She was crucial to its inception and domination over American culture as well as its downfall. Not only was she accused and brought to court over accusations of corruption, embezzlement, and financial fraud, but he was also accused of serious abuses of power. Charges of nepotism and favoritism plagued her entire tenure as leader of the WKKK, particularly related to her husband, James Comer. Fellow Klanswomen have alleged that Gill Comer used her power and influence within the Women of the Ku Klux Klan to leverage her husband into a leadership role within the organization. Not only that, but the two of them use their power to further embezzle from the Klan. In one instance, James Comer's businesses received \$18,000 of Klan funds from his wife.¹²⁸ When other members of the WKKK attempted to hold her accountable or even complained about these abuses of power, she had them not only removed from their position within Klan leadership, but Gill Comer also expelled them from the Klan itself. It is actions such as these that made Gill Comer the subject of multiple lawsuits regarding her actions serving as Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.

¹²⁸ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009. Page 122

Removing high-level members of the WKKK in an attempt to escape accountability for her actions is an incredible abuse of her power and position. It also demonstrates a lack of commitment to the cause of the Klan and white supremacy. It has no benefit to the white supremacist project that the Klan was engaged in to pick off and remove high-ranking members for something so small as basic dissent against the leader. And even then, that dissent was centered around the individual actions of the leader rather than the cause itself. Demonstrating only one of how leaders like Gill Comer placed power and influence above their charge as leaders of the Klan and the crusade for white supremacy across the country. It was actively detrimental to the operations of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan and entirely commonplace. She was hardly the first and only member of Klan leadership to engage in such actions, however, this was entirely blatant and the basis of legal action against her, which is unique.

Not only did Gill Comer remove key figures within the WKKK's leadership, but she also added figures within the Klan's leadership pyramid. Most notably her husband, James Comer, who served as the Exalted Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan. The disregard she demonstrated for the leadership of the Klan is astounding; rather than choosing or keeping people who would be the best at propagating the Klan's hateful message, she removed her critics and included her family. It was alleged that Gill Comer was not only directly responsible for her husband's promotion within the Klan but had actively manipulated her influence and conducted an internal campaign of intimidation to get him the role. In addition to the blatant nepotism the Comer couple engaged in, Gill Comer's contemporaries were further disgruntled by the increasing power and control a man was having over a women-led organization. This is entirely notable because both she and her husband were mentioned in lawsuits not only regarding these charges of nepotism but also as

co-conspirators for defrauding and embezzling the Klan. These claims were clearly articulated within *A.B. Cloud, Et. Al. v. Robbie Gill Comer Et. Al.*¹²⁹

Within the Alice Cloud lawsuit, not only do they enumerate their fears of her potential abuses of power and retaliatory action against those who stand against both Gill Comer and her husband, but they also detail the levels of embezzlement the couple engaged in. “The plaintiffs document how in seven months the Comers squandered \$70,000 of WKKK funds, equipping WKKK headquarters with goldfish, songbirds, police dogs, flowers, and a piano and purchasing for their personal use a \$5,000 luxury sedan.”¹³⁰ The automobile alone costs \$92,282.16 in 2025.

How Robbie Gill Comer came to be the Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is a source of scandal. Not only that, it served as the basis for the lawsuit brought about by Alice Cloud, the First Vice President of the WKKK. According to the WKKK’s own doctrine, the organization's hierarchical structure would dictate that Alice Cloud would have become the Imperial Commander after the resignation of Lulu Markswell rather than Robbie Gill Comer, superseding the order of power within the WKKK. However, Gill Comer violated the organizational hierarchy of the Klan by becoming the Imperial Commander, and in that role, she pillaged and pilfered the Klan’s coffers. Stealing over a million dollars in today's money from the Klan, in addition to the other financially suspect schemes she used to enrich herself. She engaged in a number of white-collar crimes to build her fortune, and these financial crimes were eventually revealed to both the public and her fellow Klanswomen. Alice Cloud’s argument against Gill Comer was not just that she acted with corruption and financial mismanagement

¹²⁹ “Audit is Ordered for Books of the Klan - Judge Grants Request as to Funds; Dissolve Injunction as to Management” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, October 4, 1925

¹³⁰ Blee, Kathleen M. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Uni. of California Press, 2009. Page 122

within her role, but her very position with the WKKK was illegitimate and gotten through corruption.

The questions surrounding her legitimacy as the leader of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, in addition to her numerous abuses of power and financial misappropriation of Klan funds, are almost directly tied to the death of the organization itself. Her actions as a leader directly affected the legitimacy of the organization itself. Each time a scandal involving one of the leaders was published in the press, it negatively affected the credibility of the WKKK as not only a proponent of white supremacy but also as an organization suitable for women's involvement. The WKKK and the KKK disappeared relatively at the same time; however, unlike the WKKK, the Ku Klux Klan is revived for a Third Iteration.

Civil War: How Infighting Destroyed the White Supremacist Movement from Within

Klan infighting played a significant role in the downfall of both the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. If these types of power struggles and infighting could have been handled internally, within the organization's ranks, it would not have been the public spectacle it was. Instead, the conflicts between leaders of the Klan bled out into the American press, which contributed to the Klan's declining prestige, authority, and credibility. The only reason why so much of the internal finances of both the organization itself and the individual leaders is known is that the Klan kept suing each other. The person who controlled the Klan controlled the money, and it seems a significant portion of the Klan's leadership would be willing to metaphorically burn down the organization for the ability to control that money. It would be akin to shooting oneself in the foot as the leadership was so corrupt, so power and money hungry, that they were willing to share publicly the secrets and the intimate details of their secret domestic terrorist

organization to win certain power struggles and create power vacuums within leadership. This jockeying for power was ultimately what brought down this iteration of the white supremacist project in the United States.

To claim that conflicts over money weakened the unity and the strength of the Klan is an understatement. Money was central to all the lawsuits, accusations, and infighting. There was no greater issue within the leadership of the Klan. The ideological differences did not hold a candle to the uproar and controversies money and revenue caused. These disagreements were two-pronged. Some within the leadership ranks utilized the court system and engaged in power struggles to stop the financial bleeding caused by embezzlement and other forms of financial fraud, while others entered these power contests with a desire to take over and control the flow of revenue. The day-to-day operations of the Klan took a backseat to these conflicts. A fact that was made painfully aware to the rank-and-file members who were learning of the sordid details within the national press.

Those news articles were publicly embarrassing to the larger, national organization of the Klan. Instead of being perceived as the vanguards of white identity and true American values, the Ku Klux Klan was beginning to be associated with the financial scandals, sexual misconduct, and outright crimes of the leaders of the Klan. It took a better part of a decade to bring down the Ku Klux Klan, and in the end, the Klan destroyed itself. National awareness of the seedy nature of the KKK and WKKK did more than erode public support and even basic tolerance for the Klan; those publications obliterated how the Klan was perceived in the minds of everyday Americans. The Klan was associated with too much scandal and too many bad actors that it was almost impossible for the organization to emerge with more than a tattered reputation.

The same ambition and personal enterprise that spread prejudice and hateful ideology across the country like wildfire was what led to personality conflicts, infighting, and outright greed. The almost meteoric rise and ascendency of the Ku Klux Klan in the early part of the 1920s was almost as swift and as sudden as the collapse of the organization. Leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer are directly responsible for the spread of white supremacist thought throughout the nation, but they also bear some responsibility for the destruction of the Klan. The same conditions that made the Klan so profitable also allowed these women to commit fraud and theft without repercussions for years. The very structure of the organization allowed them to escape accountability and recourse because of the consolidation of power at the top. It took public exposure and the embarrassment it caused the larger organization to fully remove these women from their positions of power. The same capitalistic enterprise that built up the KKK and WKKK was the same mentality that led to not only the downfall of the organization but the destruction of their livelihoods and reputations as well.

Klandestine Affairs & Graceful Terror: The Role of Women in White Supremacy

"Women are the real architects of society." - Cher

The second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s saw the largest involvement of women in the organization in its history. It was marked by one of the organization's main leaders being a woman and the creation of an auxiliary organization, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. Women have been integral to this movement since its inception and were integral to the collapse of the Ku Klux Klan. Women were incredibly effective recruiters, organizers, and general messengers for the Klan and white supremacy as a whole, so much so that a chapter of the WKKK existed in every state. The Klan provided white, middle-class women an avenue for a very specific form of political engagement. This political engagement further provided excessive wealth and political power for a very limited subset of women. Women such as Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer were administrators of power as a result of their KKK involvement. The fact that multiple of their contemporaries attempted to take their power, positions, and profits away from them is a testament to their importance to the Klan.

In this era of white supremacy and domestic terrorism, women were equal partners in power in the Klan. From 1915 to the mid-1930s, women were in control of propaganda arms, means of production, and the purse strings of the movement. This form of equality within the ranks of leadership is particularly unique to the second KKK, as it does not appear in the iterations prior to or after. "Each in her own way, [Mary] Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy [Douglas] Barr... rupture some commonsense expectations about the 1920s Klan and other conservative movements. Perhaps most striking was their entrepreneurship, which involved both ambition and

skill, both principle and profit.”¹³¹ It cannot be emphasized enough that these women were so much more than empty figureheads or simple pencil pushers. Not only did they actively participate in the activities of the Klan, but they also engaged in a particular business acumen and commerce generation that outright contributed to the popularity of the Klan. The combination of the Ku Klux Klan and capitalism helped to advance not only the goals of white supremacy but also the individual political agenda and personal bank accounts of these women.

However, because their personal profit was so brazen and incredibly publicized within the national media, these women became targets of inter-organizational power struggles, government investigations, and anti-Klan critics and activists. The Klan buried itself under the crushing weight of financial scandals, sexual misconduct, and social controversies. Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer all served as examples of how the leadership of the KKK and the WKKK facilitated their own downfall. They treated the organization as a business with hatred and terrorism as their product. The different avenues of how leaders like Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer were able to monetize domestic terrorism were highly profitable for the Klan and highly scandalous for the rest of the country.

Success in Supremacy: The Ingenuity of the Klan’s Female Leadership

These women might have been titans of industry in their own right, but their industry was that of hatred, bigotry, and terror. Leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglass Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer are testaments to both the greed of the Klan and the violent extremes of female political engagement. Within their leadership, these women were able to achieve more

¹³¹ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018, page 147.

than financial independence, they created financial prosperity. “In this respect, they probably differed from rank-and-file Klanswomen. Experience organizing large events, state-of-the-art in managing money, unafraid to attract publicity, they [Tyler, Douglas Barr] were thoroughly modern women. Nor did they disguise their work in sentimental, Victorian versions of femininity. Tyler’s life itself challenged the sexual double standard; Barr, while properly married, rejected female domesticity.”¹³² Through business acumen and the proper utilization of their positions in power, they were in control of financial monopolies, pyramid schemes, and means of production, leading to them making millions of dollars as a direct result of their involvement in the KKK.

In addition to the large-scale gains Tyler, Douglas Barr, and Gill Comer made, these women were able to excel in a male-dominated organization through a deeply conservative and exclusionary ideology. Utilizing their femininity and whiteness as leverage for their success within the organization. Once successful, these women were open and upfront about the power and influence they cultivated. They were not background characters in the schemes of white supremacy, they were candid about their power and the type of monetary compensation they believed they deserved for their work advancing the aims of the Klan. These women were all deeply talented recruiters for the Klan, personally adding dozens of new members to the KKK and WKKK.

Tyler, through the Southern Publicity Association, was able to create a narrative of white supremacy that appealed to mass America and mass consumerism. She widened the previous scope of the Klan to include Jews, Catholics, and immigrants in addition to African Americans,

¹³²Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018

broadening the appeal of the KKK past the American South and into the Midwestern region. Recruiters like Douglas Barr and Gill Comer were able to combine the new messaging created by Tyler with a particular brand of female political engagement to appeal to white, protestant middle-class women. Applying the logic of white supremacy to the idea of motherhood and the protection of the community. Membership in the Klan was seen as the proper thing to do as a good Christian white American woman, as the messaging was particularly effective in tying nationalism, morality, and religion with supremacist ideology. The KKK and WKKK were specifically interpreted to be seen as an adherence to both traditional gender roles and white institutions.

The ideology of white supremacy in combination with the protection and vanguard of white, Protestant American family values was not only an appealing message for a significant number of men and women across the country, but it was also an image of propaganda that was highly profitable for the leader of the Klan. This was the explicit and egregious monetization of the spectacles of white supremacy. These were more than housewives and mothers engaging in the political and social activities of their white, Protestant communities. These women were authority figures within their own right with hard economic power and influence, rather than the soft power relegated to the culture of the Klan that is typically associated with Klanswomen. While it is true that the Ku Klux Klan and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan engaged in domestic terrorism in different ways, leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer were equally, if not more so, engaged in the same levels of profiteering and financial misconduct at their male counterparts.

Death Becomes Her: The Downfall of the Female Leaders of the KKK

However, while it is true that at the height of each of these women's respective power, they enjoyed the life of leadership and power within the Klan, once the revelations of their financial misconduct and moral hypocrisy appeared in the national press, each of them was essentially forced out of the Klan.

The combination of the *New York World's* KKK exposé, the federal investigations by the Department of Justice and the House of Representatives, and reports of her affair with Edward Young Clarke led to Mary Elizabeth Tyler's excommunication from the Klan, an organization she held to create and expand through the Southern Publicity Association. Tyler was an essential member of the organization's leadership as a member of the "Big Three". She was one of the founding members of the second iteration of the Klan, yet she left the organization in disgrace. That fact is a testament to the level of infighting and tension that existed within the leadership ranks. Yet even her almost invaluable position and all the wealth it generated were not enough to save her from the internal and external pressure to remove herself from the KKK. The revelations of the financial and sexual misconduct that she was engaged in allowed her contemporaries to essentially force her out of the Klan. Many people were attempting to take away the control she had over Klan funds and her position of influence inside the organization. Within the Klan, a power struggle for control over the organization began, which eventually resulted in Tyler's removal from the Klan in 1923. In the wake of her abrupt departure, the power and the money shifted solely to Hiram Wesley Evans. Outside the organization, federal investigations and lawsuits were burdening her individually and as a representative of the KKK.

The culmination of these scandals was so personally catastrophic to her life and reputation that Tyler needed to leave the United States to escape charges under the White-Slave

Traffic Act of 1910, known as the Mann Act. The ambiguous nature of the law allowed its application to include sexual immorality, which Tyler engaged in as a result of her affair with the married Edward Young Clarke, despite the consensual nature of their relationship. She eventually returned to the United States and died a year after her expulsion from the Klan. At the time of her death at 43 in 1924, her fortune was an estimated \$500,000, which is equivalent to \$9,288,625.73 today.¹³³

Daisy Douglas Barr was the leader of the Indiana Chapter of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, the chief recruiter for the organization, and known as “the State”. She was a central figure in the day-to-day operation of both the Indiana chapter and the national organization of the WKKK. In fact, she was handpicked by Klan leader D.C. Stephenson for the position. “So influential was the Indiana WKKK under her leadership that she almost succeeded in moving its national headquarters to Indianapolis.”¹³⁴ Her tenure in the Ku Klux Klan ended after the loss of a power struggle between her and fellow Klanswoman Mary Benadum. The climate of this was a lawsuit between the two women, in which Mary Benadum accused Daisy Douglas Barr of serious misconduct and financial misdeeds within her leadership. These accusations centered around the recruitment dues, membership fees, and the overcharging of fellow Klansmembers for their robes and Klan paraphernalia. She was eventually removed from her position within the Klan and effectively kicked out of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in 1926. She died twelve

¹³³ Bernstein, Patricia. “Four Remarkable Women, a Blog Series by Patricia Bernstein – PART TWO: Elizabeth Tyler — History Through Fiction.” History Through Fiction, April 26, 2023. <https://www.historythroughfiction.com/blog/four-remarkable-women-part-2>.

¹³⁴ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. National Geographic Books, 2018, page 141.

years later in a violent head-on car crash. Her estate was worth \$27,500 at the time of her death, which is equivalent to \$628,485.79 today.¹³⁵

Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, Robbie Gill Comer, was instrumental in the founding of the organization. Overcoming challenges to both her personal ascension in the Klan as well as her leadership, she was able to expand the WKKK nationally and build a fortune while doing so. The key aspects of the very operations of the WKKK can be attributed to her, such as the national headquarters of the organization, which she personally oversaw the purchase and development of, as well as the ownership of the production of Klan merchandise and paraphernalia. Both of which are tinged with accusations of her corruption and mismanagement. Because she was so intertwined with the everyday undertaking of the WKKK, almost every aspect of the organization was affected by her monetization and profiteering. Under her leadership, she used the WKKK as a business enterprise.

Robbie Gill Comer was incredibly successful in her joint pursuit of white supremacy and personal profit. However, key aspects of this success precipitated the decline in her reputation and leadership in the organization. So much of her power and her money is intertwined with her corruption. Fortunes were made at the expense of the very Klanswomen she was charged with leading. These range from taking advantage of the pyramid scheme of the Klan to profit off of rank-and-file members, coercing the purchase of overpriced Klan materials and paraphernalia, and monopolizing the ownership of the means of production of said materials, to installing her own husband in positions of power to increase their joint wealth and power. For Gill Comer, the publication of these scandals, the numerous court cases that arose from them, and the death of

¹³⁵ "Personal Estate of Mrs. Daisy Barr" *The Daily Reporter* Greenfield, Indiana Mon, Apr 11, 1938 Page 1

her husband, James Comer, in 1935 all coincided with the decline of the WKKK and the larger national Klan. She facilitated the sale of the WKKK headquarters and eventually moved to California, where she died in 1963.

These women are representative of the way they betrayed both the Klan and white supremacy to satisfy their greed and ambition. These women capitalized on terror and bigotry to excess. They lived lavishly, purchasing mansion properties, cars, clothes, and even a diamond-encrusted crown with their earnings from the Klan. The actions of leaders like Mary Elizabeth Tyler, Daisy Douglas Barr, and Robbie Gill Comer demonstrate that these weren't actions of simply business mismanagement. These were intentional and premeditated financial crimes. These women did not accidentally make large sums of money as a byproduct of their involvement in the Klan. Every aspect of their political engagement in the KKK was either monetized or utilized as a tool to gain more influence to be able to make more money. No aspect of Klan life or leadership did not involve some type of money-making venture. The millions of dollars these women made off the KKK simply was not enough to satiate their greed as these women engaged in years' worth of financial profiteering, embezzlement, and abuses of power to line their own pockets and improve their positions of power. Which inevitably leads to questions about their motivations for involvement in the Ku Klux Klan. Was the moral crusade for the soul and future of white, Protestant America simply a get-rich-quick scheme?

Regardless of the answer to the dozens of unanswered questions regarding their intentions, the fact of the matter is that they engaged in the terrorization and brutalization of marginalized communities across the country for the better part of two decades. Not only were these women active participants in white supremacy, but they openly and brazenly profited from it. Their individual charges of financial corruption fly in the face of how they contributed to the

corruption of the United States political environment. Their financial and career success is directly linked to the success and spread of white supremacy across the country. Their achievements translated to the gains of the Ku Klux Klan. Every recruit that fed into their bottom line and rounded out the Klan's pyramid scheme was still a recruit for the KKK or WKKK. Every white hood or Klan crest that these women overcharged their own members for was another hood and symbol used to terrorize communities.

GLOSSARY

Kleagle: An officer of the Ku Klux Klan; main role is to recruit new members into the KKK

King Kleagle: Appointed leaders, regional manager of members and official affairs

Imperial Commander of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan: Leader of the national organization of the Women of the KKK

Imperial Empress of the Ku Klux Klan: Leader of the state organization of the WKKK

Imperial Wizard: The national leader of the Ku Klux Klan

Also known as “Grand Wizard” under the first iteration of the Klan (1865-1872)

Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan: Highest ranking Klansmen in each state

Klonvocation: Meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, occurs annually

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