ERACISM: A dark decade of KLAN activity aimed at local Latinos

By Jefferson Dodge and Joel Dyer

Photo courtesy of History Colorado (Scan #10039383)
Statewide Klan rally held near Boulder.

Editor’s note: In Part 2 of our continuing “Eracism” series on the history of Latinos in Boulder County, being conducted in partnership with the Boulder County Latino History Project, we explore the role of the Ku Klux Klan.

The sometimes troubling story of how Latinos have been treated in Boulder County over the past century reached a low point in the 1920s, when an environment of racism and mistrust was fueled by the Ku Klux Klan.

The rise of the Klan in Colorado in the early 1920s has been documented in newspaper accounts over the years. Clippings compiled as part of the Boulder County Latino History Project, led by retired University of Colorado history professor Marjorie McIntosh, paint a sordid picture of the KKK's activities in Boulder County.

While the KKK is perhaps most widely known nationally for its racism against African Americans, the Klan also promoted discrimination against Jews, Catholics and immigrants, including Latinos.

A chapter of the Latino History Project book being drafted by McIntosh notes, “In the Boulder area, KKK venom was directed at Latinos: They were brown-skinned, Catholic, and assumed to be immigrants to this country (sometimes wrongly). Many Americans in the early 21st century think that the Klan was active only in the southern part of the United States, focusing its hatred and violence — including lynchings — on African-Americans. So it may come as a shock to realize how powerful the organization was in Colorado and Boulder County, and to learn that its attacks were targeted at Latinos.”

After the first Klavern was formed in Denver in 1921, the Daily Camera reported on July 15, 1922, that Denver Klan members, traveling in about 50 cars, took 200 Boulderites to a secret ceremony five miles north of the city to “an abandoned road east of Twelfth,” and initiated them into the group that would become the state’s third Klavern, which reportedly grew to between 300 and 500 members.

“The Camera’s informant stated that a flash light [photo] was taken of the group and was to be turned over to the paper for publication,” the newspaper reported. “This has not been done. A few members, unmasked, were required to turn their backs while the photo was being taken. A white cross was used in the ceremony.”

The following November, KKK members made headlines again after making their first public appearance in Boulder: paying a visit to a Salvation Army meeting and dropping 50 half dollars into the Salvation Army kettle.
“Believing in the tenets of the Christian religion as we do and backed by a desire to express 100 per cent Americanism in assisting those agencies engaged in uplifting work of a truly Christian character, we are making this donation to assist you in your local activities,” Klan members wrote in a letter presented at the time of the gift.

“Twenty-five dollars is a great deal of money to the Salvation Army at any time, especially at this time of the year,” Capt. John Z. Davis, who provided the Camera with the letter, told the newspaper, adding that any time the Klan wished to repeat the gesture, they would be welcomed.

A Camera article also described the scene the following month when about 300 Klan members paraded along Pearl Street in downtown Boulder in a caravan of 63 cars, led by a float. The cars had their license plates partially painted over to prevent the tracing of their identities, the paper reported. Masked men on the float, most of whom were believed to be from Denver, threw folded circulars bearing the group’s views to people on the street. According to those leaflets, “We stand for free speech, free press, free public schools and separation of church and state” as well as “the purity of womanhood and are pledged to protect and defend the sanctity of the home.

“We are anti-nothing,” the circulars continued, “save those principles which are un-Christian and un-American. Watch us grow in Boulder.”

The KKK also pledged to defend Christian beliefs, abide by U.S. laws and protect “the flower of white American womanhood.”

At one point, eight Klansmen reportedly interrupted a men’s Bible class in a Boulder Presbyterian Church, marching to the altar with candles and chanting, “Who took the Bibles out of public school? We’re going to put them back.”

In 1924, the Klan sent cards to Boulder County residents with a list of Klan-friendly candidates to vote for in the upcoming election. A June 9, 1925, headline in the KKK’s own newspaper, the Rocky Mountain American, proclaimed, “Mammoth Klan Parade in Longmont Followed by Initiating Big Class.” The event reportedly featured Klan members from all over northern Colorado and a huge flaming cross in “the large open space south of the city.”

The Klan’s newspaper carried ads from businesses friendly to their cause, bearing slogans like “Klothing Karefully Kleaned” and “Klean Klassy Kars.”

Some in Boulder publicly opposed the Klan.

Daily Camera Editor L.C. Paddock referred to the group as the “Komic Kapers Klub,” and when Klansman and U.S. Senate candidate W. Rice Means asked to participate in the kickoff for a football game between the University of Colorado and the University of Utah, CU officials replied, “Mr. Means can kick-off anywhere he wants, except in Boulder.” When CU President George Norlin was ordered by the Klan-controlled governor to rid the university of its Jewish and Catholic faculty, he refused, and CU lost state funding as a result.

Rocky Mountain American/Carnegie Branch Library
There was a pattern of Klan takeover being duplicated along the Front Range, emanating from Denver.

According to a 1926 account, there were 100 to 200 KKK members in Lafayette, a group that included a majority of city council, school board members, most teachers, the mayor and other city officials. (The city’s first two members were reportedly a dentist and a manager with the Public Service Co., and the first meeting was held at the “J” barn near Isabelle Road north of town.)

According to an April 10, 1971, story by Jim Gregory in the Longmont Times-Call, there was a cross burning in Erie in April 1924 as a protest against local mines hiring “foreigners” instead of local citizens. At that time, Latinos constituted a significant percentage of the mine workers. In the Latino History Project book chapter dealing with the
KKK, McIntosh writes that Sally Martinez, “who was living with her parents at the Columbine Mine camp in Serene, three miles east of Lafayette, recalled that the Klan erected crosses there too.”

Crosses were being burned in Louisville and on the lawns of known Catholics in Boulder, according to media reports, and a 53-foot-high cross that was burned on Flagstaff Mountain in May 1924 was visible to towns in East County. Newspapers reported that the Klan also managed to gain power in the town of Lyons and the city of Longmont. About 50 KKK members participated in what was believed to be the first Klan funeral in the state, for the KKK-affiliated mayor of Lyons. And in December 1924, an unknown Klan member erected an eight-foot red cross on the Longmont Christmas tree at Fourth and Main. Longmont was home to Klavern No. 2.

In April 1925, the KKK’s Progressive Economic Party took control of the Longmont City Council and replaced several city officials, prompting a paid advertisement in the local paper protesting the Klan and its “continued stirring of ill feeling among our citizens, the creation of hatred and distrust, the development of destructive factional antagonisms … Citizens are threatened. A campaign of persecution has been started.”

The KKK-controlled city council went on to push through the controversial and expensive construction of the Chimney Rock dam, which was only partially completed when Klan members were ousted in the 1927 election — and work on the dam was discontinued.

The KKK takeover in Boulder County was a mirror of what was going on around the state, which reportedly had more than 50,000 members at its peak. According to newspaper accounts, the Denver Klavern was responsible for naming a KKK-friendly mayor, city attorney, police chief, public safety manager, district court judge, district grand jury and many police officers. Led by Grand Dragon John Galen Locke, the Klan was credited with electing not only Gov. Clarence Morley in 1925, but state legislators who held a majority in the House and nearly a majority in the Senate, the secretary of state and two U.S. senators.

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Evidence of the KKK’s antagonism against immigrants, including Latinos, is widely documented.

According to an April 19, 1982, article in the *Colorado Daily*, Denver Klavern No. 1 issued warnings like “insane, feeble-minded and diseased undesirable aliens are being freely admitted to this country.”

“There is no evidence from Boulder County that the Klan carried out lynchings,” McIntosh writes, “but it did try to terrorize those whom it opposed, particularly Latinos who were acting too independently — who did not accept the natural and God-given authority of the whites above them. At least occasionally the Klan used some degree of violence against Latinos or their homes. If it could not chase them out of the county, it could at least remind them that they were to remain subservient to whites.”

By the late 1920s, the influence of the Klan in Boulder County seems to have subsided, and yet its influence lingered.

“In Longmont, Fred W. Flanders ran successfully for mayor in 1927 on an anti-Klan platform; when Klan members attended to march through the downtown later that year, he stopped them,” McIntosh writes. “But the local chapter continued to meet for some time longer. Tony Gomez said that his dad, who was living in Longmont in the 1930s, told him that the town was ‘KKK all the way.’” An incident in Lafayette further indicates that the Klan’s racism against Latinos lingered into the 1930s. A community-wide effort to build a public swimming pool — a construction project in which Mexican-Americans participated — was reportedly thwarted after the pool was completed in 1934 when a sign was posted at the entrance saying: “We reserve the right to eject any and all persons without cause. White trade only.” McIntosh writes that Latinos were outraged, and while they challenged the move in court unsuccessfully, the pool was never used, and it was eventually filled in with dirt to make room for a softball field.

*Rocky Mountain American/Carnegie Branch Library*
Another cartoon from the *Rocky Mountain American* showing the KKK’s views on U.S. immigration policy.

The Bob L. Burger Recreation Center now sits on that property and, according to McIntosh, “Sharon Stetson, the first Latina City Council member in Lafayette, described her satisfaction in helping to choose tiles for the swimming pool in the new building, on the very site from which Mexicans had been excluded more than 50 years before.”

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In the end, Latinos may have played a role in turning away the KKK in Boulder County.

“Oli Duncan, a local historian of Longmont, said that sometime in the 1920s, there was a showdown in Longmont between the Klan and a group of Mexican men,” McIntosh writes. “The Klan’s rallies were on the southeast corner
of Third Avenue and Martin, which was then an open field. At one nighttime meeting, dozens of armed Hispanic men appeared. They warned the Klan that if any harm was done to any one of them, all of them would respond. The spokesperson for the group was José Hilario Cortez, the informal head of Longmont’s Hispanic community, a person to whom Latinos turned for advice and help.”

According to newspaper reports, the KKK printed its own obituary when it folded its doors in Boulder: “Boulder Klavern No. 3 officially died at the stroke of midnight, Thursday, July 23, 1925.”

And while this chapter in the often racist treatment of Latinos in Boulder County would close, unfortunately the story is not yet finished.

Respond: letters@boulderweekly.com