

# Hooded Americanism on Long Island

by Charles F. Howlett, Molloy College

In 1960, my late mother, Christine Neet Howlett, told me a very disturbing story. She felt compelled to express her feelings in light of the candidacy of John F. Kennedy for President. She began by telling me that she was proud that a Roman Catholic was running. But her words were mixed with caution and fear. Thirty-six years earlier things were much different on Long Island where she lived and in many other parts of the U.S. My mother died in 2004 so she is no longer able to tell her story. But for me, a historian and teacher, her words still resonate. Prejudice and discrimination remain part of American society. Hopefully, some day this nation will fulfill its stated goal as a true democracy. Until then, the story of the daughter of an Irish immigrant should not be forgotten.

In 1924, Alfred E. Smith, the popular governor of New York, a Roman Catholic, and a wet (opponent of the 18th Amendment prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages) bitterly contended for the Democratic Party nomination as President of the United States. At the time, my mother, the daughter of an Irish female domestic from County Clare, was only five-years-old. But she remembered well how the Ku Klux Klan attempted to intimidate and harass her father, Charles Neet. The family lived in the Village of Babylon. Charles Neet was a blacksmith by trade who also worked for the village department of public works. Known for his outspoken support for Smith, many villagers of the Protestant faith did not take too kindly to his campaigning on behalf of Smith. The village had some Catholics and a smattering of African Americans. Politically, the village was composed primarily of Republicans who boasted the virtues of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism (WASP). They were annoyed that as a village employee Charles Neet would even dare to publicly proclaim his support for Smith. Along the south shore of Long Island a number of Klan groups were active in local politics. Babylon was no exception.

It was an early June night, a Sunday night my mother recollected, after a large caravan of Klansmen were returning from Patchogue after one of their meetings that some members decided to turn off Merrick Road (Montauk Highway) in the Village of Babylon and headed straight for John Street, near the Long Island Railroad tracks where my mother's rented house stood (Charles Neet never believed in owning a house and instead rented a number of homes during his lifetime in Babylon as the family grew to ten children). In any case, about seven o'clock at night my mother peer out the window and began screaming and crying. There before her eyes was a brightly lit cross going up in flames. My grandfather, alerted to her screams, quickly ran out the door in search of the villains. They

quickly sped away. As he approached the road he picked up a scrawled note warning him to keep his mouth shut and his political views to himself. He did not, of course. But this was my mother's first introduction to the nature of intolerance in 1920s America.

## KLAN PARADE A MILE LONG.

### Men and Women Take Part in Bay Shore Demonstration.

BAY SHORE, L. I., Nov. 7.—Five hundred men and 200 women marched in a Ku Klux Klan parade a mile long here tonight, fulfilling a promise made by Major E. D. Smith, State Klege, on May 26 that he would lead a procession of the organization here "despite Walker, Hylan or Governor Smith." A year ago Knights of Columbus adherents broke up a Klan meeting and a similar demonstration was expected tonight. The parade went off quietly, however.

Major Smith, mounted on a horse, led the parade. Behind him came fifteen riders, one of whom carried an American flag while another carried a six-foot cross lit with red light bulbs supplied by a storage battery on the saddle. One band in Klan uniforms and four others were in the parade. About 200 men wore robes and masks. Three hundred automobiles followed the procession, and there were 5,000 automobiles containing spectators lined up in the streets.

The parade is taken as a sign of the growing power of the Klan in Suffolk County. Arthur Meyers, the Klan candidate, polled a big vote for Assemblyman, and Frank Rogers, elected Supervisor of Islip township, is accredited as a Klan candidate.

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The decade of the twenties was certainly filled with paradoxes: growing prosperity matched by religious and racial intolerance. The old rural values of Protestant America were now under attack by the development of an urban-industrial society. The 1920 Election Census signified that for the first time in U.S. history more Americans voted in cities than on farms. The famous John T. Scopes Trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, from which the play and later movie, "Inherit the Wind," was produced epitomized the rural nation's suspicions toward modern America. Intolerance, generated by World War I's super-patriotism, earmarked the birth of America's entrance into the twentieth century; it would not die easily as my mother's family found out that scary night in September of 1924.

As the child of an Irish immigrant my mother's story highlights the nature of religious intolerance in the field of politics. When a college student in the mid-1960s I was drawn to Oscar Handlin's wonderful little biography Al Smith and his America, largely a result of my mother's story about her own childhood experience. In this book Handlin notes that in post-World War I America "intolerance...spread with disquieting speed. In the mood of disillusion and apparent betrayal engendered by the unsuccessful peace (Treaty of Versailles, 1919), many America longed to believe that somehow the fault had not been in themselves but in external force." The National Origins Act of 1924 symbolized the growing belief that "International ties of every sort were dangerous; there was a hidden threat in the connections of Catholics and Jews with the outer world." Total conformity and 100 per cent Americanism, rather than strength in diversity, evoked a different form of patriotism than the one my grandfather supported and championed by Al Smith. Contrary to contemporary popular opinion, Catholics and Jews posed a greater threat in the 1920s than African-Americans. The 1896 case *Plessey v. Ferguson* provided segregationists with legal fortification in the realm of racial oppression. However, with the rebirth of the Klan after World War I it afforded this group no comfort respecting Catholics and Jews, who were free to engage in politics.

As Handlin points out, "the millions of adherents of the Roman Church" represented the greatest danger to the health and stability of the nation: "Their doctrines and rituals, like their hostility to Prohibition, were a danger to the old America. It was necessary to prepare lest they insidiously assume control of the

whole nation." To the Klan, a Catholic, let alone an Irish Catholic, occupying the White House was analogous to the Black Death sweeping across the South's Bible Belt.

The 1924 Democratic Convention was held at Madison Square Garden in New York City that June. By 1924, the Klan had gained considerable national prominence. Locally, and particularly on Long Island, it was even more formidable. In David Chalmers' *Hooded Americanism* he points out that as early as 1923 the Klan was "flourishing on Long Island. Its centers of strength were in Freeport and Bay Shore. In Nassau and Suffolk Counties, largely rural and still undeveloped with small villages scattered about "...the Klan burned its fiery crosses, drew thousands to its rallies, and participated actively in community affairs.



**Long Island Klan Rally**

At Lynbrook firemen's tournament, the Klan's female auxiliary carried off the prize as the most popular organization in Nassau County, and the next year the Klan donated the trophy at Huntington. The island witnessed Klan weddings, christenings, church visits, and special services." Most alarming to my grandfather and his family was that in the Fall elections in Suffolk County "contests in Islip, Brookhaven, Oyster Bay, and particularly in Babylon, the Klan-endorsed candidates swept the day." My mother mentioned to me that my grandfather was so upset when the head of the upstate Klan legions Major E.D.

Smith, on horseback, led a mile-long victory parade through neighboring Bay Shore. A Democrat and a wet, Charles Neet would not be silenced even though the Klan faction managed to take control of the Suffolk County Republican Committee.

At the start of 1924 it was reported that nearly one out of seven people residing in Suffolk had joined the Klan. But that did not deter my mother's father from hopping a train to Hicksville where during Memorial Day festivities, he joined other Knights of Columbus paraders in fist fights in their efforts to remove a Klan wreath from the memorial in town. As my mother recounted, "Pop Neet was proud of his religion and what he believed America stood for."

### **Cross Burnings**

Despite the cross burning in front of my grandfather's rented house he continued to support Al Smith. There was no other cross burning but he continued receiving threatening notes which the village authorities ignored. He threw them away. The convention itself, according to Handlin, pitted "the fanaticism of the Klan, of Prohibition, and of fundamentalism" on one side, and the forces of "hope of an America that still meant liberty and equality of opportunity." The leading candidate, William G. McAdoo of California, refused to take sides. Although Smith attempted to seize the moment, his chances were slim. Yet, he decided to stay in the race to punish McAdoo for his silence. The convention was a long and hard fought battle; finally on the 103rd ballot, John W. Davis, who later argued the South's position before

the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*, received the unenthusiastic nomination. Of course, he lost to Calvin Coolidge.

Four years later Smith captured the democratic nomination. In the Village of Babylon Charles Neet campaigned tirelessly for Smith. By this time the Klan was nearly dead, a victim of its own internal corruption and moral denigration. My grandfather did not receive any threats this time despite continuing anti-Catholic feelings. During the 1928 presidential election, as Handlin and Chalmers observe, the Catholic Church was attacked and many fundamentalist groups "spread the tale of the papist plot to conquer America at the ballot box." Smith did try valiantly to show that Catholics faced no conflict of loyalties between their religious beliefs and their political loyalties. My grandfather and other Catholics in Babylon sought to do the same thing.

### **From Al Smith to JFK**

As the Horatio Alger of Irish-American politics, Smith kept asking "If Americans were not really willing to accept an Irish Catholic as fully their equal, where then did he belong?" The answer finally came in 1960 when an Irish Catholic democrat from Massachusetts John F. Kennedy, defeated Richard M. Nixon for the White House. Sadly, my grandfather was not present to bear witness; he died in 1946 eight months before I was born. However, his daughter was finally able to expunge that horrible night in 1924 when her vote helped elect America's first Irish Catholic president.