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“We Want No Hatchet-Wielding Amazons:” The Feminism, Racism, and Nativism of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan

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**Introduction**

In January 2017, Carolyn Bryant Donham, the white woman for whom Emmett Till was beaten and murdered, admitted the accusations of his lasciviousness were false. Emmett Till was fourteen years old when he was murdered in August 1955 in Mississippi. This murder was not unique; for centuries the lynching of black men has been “justified” by their real or imagined sexual advances or relationships with white women. This phenomenon begs the question, how did white women react in these situations? Apart from their existence as objects to be defended within traditional gender schemes, do they play a more active role in the destruction of black men by white men? White women’s role is surely not confined to the realm of physical violence perpetrated on their behalf. According to The New York Times, fifty-three percent of American white women voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Donald Trump has publicly advocated for “birtherism,” which gained popularity prior to and during the Obama Administration and, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, is a “modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built.”1 President Trump has a record of discriminating against African Americans within his real estate empire, and has slandered Mexican-Americans as rapists, despite being a perpetrator of sexual harassment himself. Therefore one can posit that white women assume some active role in political white supremacy. To examine the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is to choose a radically conservative and white supremacist sample from all available right-wing organizations, but the women of the Klan are considered to be “regular” citizens--they are loving mothers and wives,

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concerned for others’ wellbeing. To begin to examine how white women wield political power, it seems necessary to ask, why did white women join the Ku Klux Klan? Furthermore, why did they create their own distinct group, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan? In part, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan served as a political and social vehicle through which white women could cooperate in order to enforce Anglo-Protestant values upon American society. Depending upon the context, this cooperation manifested itself as political activism, boycotts and economic warfare, or social reform. The members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan of Colorado were white, middle-class Protestants, whose exercise of their economic, political, and social influence were meant to inflict conformity upon their communities and “other” groups in the United States. The group itself presented political and social opportunity for ambitious conservative women to ally against period-specific cultural enemies, at once a forward-thinking feminist endeavor, and a retrograde-oppressive political organization.²

There are crucial distinctions to be made between the Ku Klux Klan of the post-Civil War and Reconstruction era, and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. The first Ku Klux Klan was created in reaction to the emancipation of American slaves, their enfranchisement, and northern Republican occupation of the southern United States. The membership was constituted of ex-Confederate officers and soldiers, and their activities were largely limited to acts of terrorism: night-riding, lynching, and the destruction of black men and white Republicans. This Klan died out by the early 1870s after the Enforcement Acts of 1871, which were intended to sharply curtail the Klan’s existence, and their violent terrorism throughout the south. The Ku Klux Klan was revived in 1915, and while it was a reactionary movement like its predecessor, it assumed a

completely new face. The second Klan presented itself as a loyal defender of the Constitution of the United States of America, and adopted the post-World War I nativist slogan, “100% American.” According to Linda Gordon, historian of the second Klan, an estimated one to ten million Americans were members of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s (reliable figures are unavailable), out of an American population of about one hundred million, and the outcome of the 1924 presidential election hinged upon the votes of Klan members.\(^3\) And, unlike the first Ku Klux Klan, a majority of male members to the second Klan did not serve in any American war. The second Ku Klux Klan was a widely popular political organization, unconfined to the south—in fact, it was strongest in the midwest—whose mission statement was loyalty to the United States and its federal government. This is radically different from the anti-Fed, reactionary terrorist group that was the original Ku Klux Klan. One of the most significant departures from the first Klan is the second Klan’s support of women’s political and social equality. The second Klan was built and commercialized by a woman named Elizabeth Tyler, whose public relations firm had previously worked for the Anti-Saloon League and the American Red Cross. One of the most striking differences between the first and second Klans is its incorporation of women as active participants; where previously they were pure, virtuous objects to be protected by any means necessary, now they became equals in the activities of white supremacy.\(^4\)

The historiography of the second Ku Klux Klan largely revolves around the question of membership. Most of the efforts have been concentrated on disproving popular beliefs about the second Ku Klux Klan—that it was a rural, working-class movement. Robert A. Goldberg, in his


extensive sociological survey of members of the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado, has effectively proven the middle-class, professional composition of its membership. Goldberg is also instrumental in the discussion of the domination of the Colorado state government by Klan members. Robert Hunt has demonstrated the connection between the success of the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado and the presence of fundamental, evangelical Christianity within the state. Kenneth Jackson argued for the urban face, rather than the rural small-town conception of the Klan in his study of membership in Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Knoxville, Memphis, and Portland. Kathleen Blee has defended the active role of Indiana women against claims that they were sucked into the Klan by their husbands. Historians Linda Gordon and Betty Jo Brenner have argued for the social fashionability of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s as an explanation for the participation of middle-class women. This, however, seems much too short-sighted and frivolous to suitably explain membership to and activities of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.5

A political and social history of the 1910s and 1920s is necessary to begin a study of the popularity and success of the second Ku Klux Klan. At the turn of the century, hundreds of thousands of eastern and southern European immigrants entered the United States, in flight from religious persecution and economic destitution. Through the twenties, an internal Great Migration of African Americans from the southern United States occurred, as they moved in search of jobs in the industrial north and slightly more hospitable social conditions. The first

World War brought the right to vote in national elections to American women, yet American politics in the post-war era was remarkably hardened toward civil liberties. The Alien Act, the Alien Enemies Act, the Espionage Act, the Sedition Act, the Selective Service Act, and the Trading with the Enemy Act placed limits upon the First Amendment and gave allowance to the federal government to jail, fine, and punish any speech, act, or person deemed contrary to the war effort. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act established immigration quotas for those arriving from eastern and southern Europe, and several attempts were made to further restrict the civil liberties of those who arrived. The fear of impending Communism (or, Bolshevism) sparked paranoia toward European foreigners and labor strikers in the United States, which has been deemed the “Red Scare” by scholars of American history. Finally, American culture was undergoing a transformation during this period, which garnered a political reaction vis-a-vis the Prohibition Amendment. Mass entertainment, which included Jazz, Hollywood, and dance halls were increasingly popular in the 1920s. The demographic, political, and social transformations of the 1910s and 1920s were undoubtedly the cause of the reactionary Ku Klux Klan, who, being predominantly white, middle-class Protestants, detested change and the possibility of new authorities. In response to cultural and political disturbances, they organized around their shared culture and backgrounds to wield cooperative political power in order to sequester the rise of unfamiliar behaviors and ethnic groups.

The following sections examine the Women of the Ku Klux Klan of Colorado and Bishop Alma White (evangelical leader and Klan sympathizer) and their commitments to anti-Semitism, anti-Catholic, racist and nativist behavior, and progressive social reform, all within an incongruous duality of feminism and other-hatred. The analysis will take the form of three
lenses--the women of the Klan’s religious ideologies, their activities in the suppression of other races and immigrants, and their penchant for social welfare and reform.
Christianity, Bishop Alma White, and the Women of the Ku Klux Klan

Understanding the religious convictions of Alma Bridwell White, Klan supporter and the first female bishop of the United States, and the members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, can help shed light upon their attraction to a highly conservative organization. The purpose of this section is to explore the anti-Catholicism of the Klan and its female sympathizers based on their religious and political justifications. The anti-Catholicism of the Klan may very well amount to a centuries-old animosity between Protestants and Catholics. Or, the anti-Catholicism of the 1920s Klan could have flourished in an age of political paranoia, an era in which predominantly Catholic and Jewish immigrants were treated with skepticism and hostility. European immigrants were not only regarded as cultural outsiders, unwilling to assimilate, but as apostles of bolshevism, anarchism, and the political dominance of the papacy, making the anti-Catholicism of the Ku Klux Klan murky and entangled with xenophobic and political anxiety.

Bishop Alma White’s bildungsroman autobiography, and her sweeping involvement with established Protestantism, allows her later feminist white supremacy to become explainable. Alma’s experience with existent established religions predates her feminism and her realization that women held an inferior status in American society. The examination of Alma’s public religious life leads one to the conclusion that her energetic force and leadership in this feminist-white-supremacist movement—the marriage of two ideologies which may seem logically incongruent—are held together by the scapegoating of non-white, non-Protestant Americans as misogynists. However, one wonders whether Alma White would have backed the Ku Klux Klan had they not been public supporters of the political and social equality of white women.
Alma Bridwell White’s devotional profession and experiences with organized religion led to her feminist commitments when she realized the expectations and limits imposed on her because of her gender. Alma became attracted to Christian ministry after her long sought-after evangelical conversion as a teenager. With the knowledge that the Methodists prohibited women’s involvement in sermons, it seemed to her that the straightest path to a religious profession was through Christian missionary work. In her autobiography, Story of My Life, Alma writes, “no provision has ever been made for women to preach in either of the two great branches of Methodism, and how and here could I begin? was the question. I knew that the Methodist missionary boards send women to foreign lands to work among the heathen, and I determined to prepare to go if they would accept me.” While she may be attributing more religious conviction to her pre-teen self than actually existed, Alma was undoubtedly drawn to Christian leadership and was prepared to operate within the available means—even if it meant traveling to foreign lands—to involve herself in Methodist programs. 

The neighborhood preacher of Alma’s Kentuckian childhood, Brother Godbey, suggested that she marry a minister for its allotment of proximity to Christian service. She wrote, “he told me that I should be a Methodist preacher’s wife, and this would give me a wide field for Christian work. He did not intimate that I might be called to preach.” As a teenager, Alma was already confined in her aspirations by her sex, and the adults around her provided little-to-no consolation. Later in her life, Alma would be praised for her independence and rejection of male supremacy, and it seems that she has interjected this narrative into the contemplation of her past,

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7 Ibid., 264.
which was primarily intended for her devotees. Nevertheless, it is unsurprising that a rural preacher in the 1870s would have been mossbacked toward the paramountcy of marriage and the impossibility of ministerial opportunities for women.

When Alma was eighteen years old, the Bridwell family moved to the town of Millersburg, Kentucky for its proximity to a women’s college where Alma and her sisters were enrolled. In her autobiography, Alma relates her discomfort with the materialism and moral fickleness she perceived in the citizens of Millersburg. She felt uncomfortable surrounded by fashionable raiments in church services, and the lack of conservatism among her peers at the women’s college, who, in Alma’s eyes, were obsessed with men and sex. Intermingled with this retrospection of her graceless adolescence is a complaint that the “young people, brought up in rural districts, know but little of the devices of the enemy to destroy souls where blazing lights, painted faces, chalked eyebrows, the tempting cabarets, the tango, and the playhouses in our great cities allure to ruin…The young people in large cities have but little aim or purpose in life. Their brains have had a setting that hinders them from progressive social and religious activities.” Although this passage was written in her forties at the cusp of a cultural shift toward nightlife and mass entertainment, Alma’s opposition to mainstream American culture seems to stem from her discomfort as a heavily religious, farm-raised teenager in a bustling town. She would carry this opposition through the rest of her life, remaining a critic of the moral corruption she perceived in the emerging lifestyles of the twentieth century.8

Alma received her teacher’s license from the women’s college in Millersburg, but remained dissatisfied with her life as a Kentucky schoolteacher. Her aunt visited the Bridwells,

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requesting a daughter to accompany her back to Bannack, Montana. Although she was not the first choice of all the Bridwell daughters, Alma left Kentucky to cross the Rockies and start a new life as a schoolteacher in Montana. It was in this period that she met her future husband, Kent White, while he was completing an appointment to preach at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Bannack. The two maintained correspondence while Kent attended the University of Denver for ministerial training, and Alma worked as a schoolteacher in Dillon, Montana. The pair eventually united in Colorado and married at the Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church in Denver in 1887.9

Alma began an exploration of her desire to preach in the first few years of her marriage. Kent initially allowed her to conduct a few sermons in his pulpit in Erie, Colorado. In November 1893, an evangelist revival was initiated on Kent’s Erie circuit, which operated for ten unsuccessful days without any religious conversions. In a moment of desperation, Kent allowed Alma to conduct her first formal altar service, which “resulted in five persons seeking salvation and thirteen others praying for the experience of sanctification.” In the spring of 1894, Alma began holding her own meetings in Erie without the permission of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Alma also tended to sermonize on the doctrine of holiness—the belief in a “second blessing” or sanctification, in which a person is cleansed of willful sin—which stood in opposition to traditional Methodism. For the next three years, Alma and Kent accepted joint invitations to hold revival camps throughout the Front Range of Colorado.10

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Alma met swift opposition from the Methodist Episcopal Church, which found her to be an injurious disruption to the administrative status quo. According to Susie Cunningham Stanley, the premier biographer of Alma White, “Methodist clergy opposed Alma’s preaching on three counts: her success as an evangelist, her preaching of holiness, and her sex.” Alma suspected that Kent’s eventual discharge from the Erie circuit was on account of her active participation during his sermons. In 1896, the Whites established a private mission in their home in Denver, naming it the Pentecostal Home Mission—a Front Range cynosure for “fundamentalist ecstasy and hallelujah-shouting.” The Church was unrelated to the sect of Pentecostalism—Alma used “Pentecost” in the name of her church in reference to the creation of the first Christian church, in which women had a significant and participatory role. The mission published the Pentecostal Mission Herald, and established a training school for its staff, paid for by donations from its converts in the Denver area. Alma “calculated that she had conducted three thousand services between 1896 and 1900” in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho.

Kent and Alma’s marriage was peppered with personal animosities, which grew intractable with Kent’s captious disapproval of Alma’s desire for sermon leadership and to inspire religious conversions. As Alma gained notoriety, Kent publicly challenged Alma’s interpretation of scripture and frequently threatened to leave her and their two sons. To Alma’s dismay, Kent opened his own Methodist mission despite their previously fractious relationship with the Methodist Church, most likely to gain favor with the Methodist leaders in Colorado. In 1901, despite resounding disapproval from Kent and her own mother, Alma formally established

the Pentecostal Union Church in Denver. Alma abdicated from the Methodist Church and was ordained in the Pentecostal Union Church in 1902. Describing her emancipation from the Methodists, she wrote, “For years, as a preacher of the Gospel, I had suffered humiliating handicaps on account of my sex, but this achievement broke my chains in a measure and liberated me, placing diamonds in my crown of rejoicing.” The Pentecostal Mission Church earned the moniker “Pillar of Fire” subsequent to its union with the Burning Bush Church based in Illinois. By 1906, Alma was leading revivals in Illinois, Texas, Connecticut, California, and England.¹³

After a venomous split with the Burning Bush Church in 1908, Alma received eighty acres of farmland near Bound Brook, New Jersey, which had been donated by a widowed follower. Alma called the acreage “Zarephath” after a city named in the Old Testament, transferred the church headquarters from Denver to New Jersey, and grew it into a semi-communal cooperative for followers of the Pillar of Fire Church. Alma established accredited Pillar of Fire educational institutions: Alma White College in Zarephath in 1921 and Belleview, which encompassed a high school, elementary school, seminary, and college in Westminster, Colorado in 1920.¹⁴

Despite Kent’s forthright agitation at his wife’s greater reputation—he complained of his “passing notice” in the press and the appellative “Mrs. Alma White’s husband”—the terminal stage of their marriage resulted from his acceptance and practice of glossolalia (speaking in tongues). To Alma this represented an inconsistency in principle, because the couple, as well as

¹³ Susie Cunningham Stanley, Feminist Pillar of Fire, 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.
the Pillar of Fire Church, was ultimately grounded in a variant of Methodism, which rejected glossolalia. When Kent pressed Alma to incorporate glossolalia into the practices of the Pillar of Fire Church, she “opposed the doctrine aggressively” and publicly rejected pentecostalism in the church’s editorial. In 1909, Kent withdrew his membership from the Pillar of Fire Church and left Alma, returning to his mother’s home in West Virginia.15

The earliest evidence of a relationship between Alma White, the Pillar of Fire Church, and the Ku Klux Klan, is a letter mailed to the office of the Denver Catholic Register in 1922. An issue of Good Citizen, a publication established by Alma in 1913, was sent to the paper’s headquarters with the following inscription: “The Romanist is the worst of all, but he and the nigger and the I.W.W., the Jew and every other bad citizen must get out.—K.K.K.” In May 1923, the Ku Klux Klan visited the Pillar of Fire Church in Bound Brook, New Jersey to recruit fresh members. Although it is unclear as to whether or not this recruitment was successful, Alma White’s biographer Susie Cunningham Stanley writes that “women Pillar of Fire members became members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.” In that same year, Alma addressed a crowd of approximately 1,000 Klan members and sympathizers in Longmont, Colorado, and partook in a national Klan gathering in St. Louis. Stanley asserts that “The Pillar of Fire was the only religious group to publicly endorse the Ku Klux Klan,” and that throughout the twenties, Alma allowed the Colorado Klan to utilize her auditorium in Denver.16

In the 1920s, Bishop Alma White allied with the Ku Klux Klan in an relationship of mutual aggrandizement. Despite her popularity, her endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan appears to


be a strategy for legitimization on her part. Alma published three books dedicated to the Ku Klux Klan, all which serve to validate its cause with a conservative interpretation of Scripture. She devotes most of The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy to the explanation of the Klan’s hatred for the nefarious Roman Catholic Church. Alma’s Protestant convictions are reflected in her condemnation of Catholic ritual, penning that it is “wholly materialistic, dealing with the perishable things of the world. Her worship of bones, old relics, and other material substances which she avers have been connected with holy and ancient places, is proof of this.” While it is not a new concept, the belief in the idolatrous nature of the Catholic Church is born from Alma’s literal reading of the Bible: “The custom of burning candles comes from paganism; there is nothing in regard to the burning of candles taught in the New Testament.” She begins her criticism of the Catholic Church on an interpretational basis—Alma degrades their status as Christians by insisting upon their dishonesty to the Christian religion.\(^\text{17}\)

Alma interlaces a history of the United States with the menace of the Roman Catholic Church, consummated with a warning of the downfall of American democracy. Alma writes a religious conception of the history of the United States: “In the wisdom of God, America was discovered near the beginning of the sixteenth century, to be a refuge for those who were persecuted for righteousness’ sake—those who were willing to die in behalf of religious liberty and political freedom…then Rome came across the great sea with her un-American hordes, to sweep away Protestantism as with a flood…she grows bolder in her assaults upon our institutions, in her efforts to make this country subserve the purposes of the Vatican.”\(^\text{18}\) In one

\(^{17}\) Alma Bridwell White, *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy* (New Jersey: Pillar of Fire Church, 1925), 7-11.

swift passage, Alma ties Catholicism with the “hordes” of European immigrants entering the United States at the turn of the century, which both pose a religious and political threat as voters whose ignorant loyalties lie with Rome. The brave Protestants are victimized by the Roman Catholic Church which, analogous with European immigration, attempts to destroy purely Anglo-American institutions and civility. In her eyes, there is not a distinction between religion and politics, and she often makes reference to “Rome’s religio-political system.”

Alma conceptualizes an “Old World” versus “New World” historical and political model, where the Old World is cast in shadows and the New World—the most comfortable home of the Protestants—basks in the light of libertine institutions. She writes that “the old regime built on ignorance, superstition, and tyranny would make dupes and slaves of the masses. The clergy claim the right to dominate the consciences of men and usurp the powers of earth, heaven, and hell.” This is yet another familiar criticism of Catholicism; the administration of the Catholic Church deliberately and selfishly holds the tools for rational thought and self-actualization, owning a monopoly on spiritual enlightenment and relationship with God. And, this willful religious subjugation of “the masses” can be easily extended to the American political realm, which makes enemies of the state out of Roman Catholics. According to Alma, “The one great object of Rome has been to crush Protestantism, hence she has ever been the enemy of free speech and a free press.” In this argument, Protestantism is aligned with enlightenment and constitutional democracies, whereas Rome is a dictatorship, disallowing its followers

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19 Ibid., 99.
20 Ibid., 62.
independence of thought. The dominance of Catholicism is a threat to the United States because it is backward, in opposition to modern democracy and constitutionalism.

After the abstract-political menace of the Church, Alma makes the Catholic threat tangible to the citizens of the United States by arraigning the “Roman Catholic police” who “patrolled the streets of our cities and towns in almost every nook and corner of the United States…” The administration of the Catholic Church also benefits from the extractive labor of innocents: “The red-hatted cardinals in this country live in luxury and ease from off the head-earned savings of their slaves—many of whom are women behind convent walls.” Alma has carefully aligned the oppression of women with the structure of the Catholic Church, and in particular, the existence of those women who take oaths of celibacy in their devotion to their god. This is where her genuine disdain of the restriction of female mobility shines through, and where it is appropriate to examine and distinguish between her work for the Klan and her personal beliefs.

With the threat of the Catholic Church demarcated on a biblical and political basis, Alma presents the emancipator of Christianity—the Ku Klux Klan; “God has raised up this great patriotic organization to unmask popery.” Undeniably supportive of the Ku Klux Klan as a representative and protector of the Protestant faith and the health of the United States, Alma extols the organization: “We hail the K.K.K. in the great movement that is now on foot, as the army divinely appointed to set the forces in operation to rescue Americanism and save our Protestant institutions from the designs of the ‘Scarlet Mother.’” This demonstrates the

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22 Ibid., 19.
23 Ibid., 17.
rhetorical mingling of the enemies of the Ku Klux Klan with perfidious internationalism, and the further marriage of the United States with Protestantism.

Alma, armed with encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible and her ability to justify any claim with Scripture, can even defend the infamous hooded robes donned by members of the Klan. “Some good Protestants wonder why the K.K.K. wears the mask. If they would study the pages of Holy Writ they would become enlightened…Gideon could not have accomplished his work in sight of his enemies.” Here she refers to the biblical personage who destroyed false idols under the cover of night. The Klan and its Protestant constituents represent a Davidic fighter of injustice—the suppressed, righteous force. In this fallacious argument, the success and security of the Klan’s mission is the justification for the concealment of identities—not the hypocritical attachment to ritual, or even an inkling of chagrin at the association with a historically terror-oriented group.25

Alma professed the inherent equality of women based upon Scripture, as did Sarah Grimke (famed abolitionist and feminist), Phoebe Palmer (co-founder of the Wesleyan/Holiness movement), and several other female religious leaders. A feminist hermeneutic is shown in Alma’s testimonial that “There is but little hope for the human race until woman takes the place accorded her by the Creator, as shown in Gen. 1:28.” Alma lauded the realization of suffrage, declaring “the triumph of the Cross in the liberation of women who…had worn the chains of oppression” among the “crowning events in our national history.” She supported the Equal Rights Amendment on social and religious grounds, proclaiming that “Those who would discriminate between the sexes and rob women of their God-given rights are aliens to the cause

25 Ibid., 56.
and without knowledge of God’s plan for the redemption of the world.” Alma’s feminism would permeate her political, social, and religious ideologies and justify the intellectual attacks impressed upon her enemies.26

Christianity is at the ideological center of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, as it is with the men’s group. The first text in the Constitution of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, printed before the preamble, are four paragraphs entitled “Ku Klux Kreed.” The first paragraph reads, “We, the Order of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, reverently acknowledge the majesty and supremacy of Almighty God and recognize His goodness and providence through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.” The second article of the constitution, in which the “objects and purposes” of the organization are stated, it is written that “the objects of this Order shall be to unite white female persons, native-born Gentile citizens of the United States of America…” First and foremost, the Women of Ku Klux Klan is exclusively a Christian American group.27

A membership application card to the Women of the Ku Klux Klan from Limon, Colorado, asks several questions of the applicant: name, address, husband’s name and “business,” applicant’s maiden name, her place of birth, her religion, and the religion of her parents and her husband. The next set of questions enquire about the length of time the applicant has resided in the particular city or community, the number of children she has, where they attend school, and a signature of endorsement from an existent member. The bottom of the application card, in capital type, asks, “Can you be depended upon?” The order of these questions closely reflects the order of values of the Ku Klux Klan. A member needed to be a


native born Protestant. The religion of the applicant was not sufficient information; the organization demanded to know the probable religion of her upbringing, and that of her spouse.\(^{28}\)

Although the official Klan materials merely require members to be of the Christian faith, and do not explicitly disqualify Catholics, this is to be assumed based upon unofficial Klan materials. In *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*, Bishop Alma White mentions who is accepted into the Klan and who is to be excluded. She writes, “A Roman Catholic is not admitted, because his church has condemned separation of church and state and is against freedom of the press and free speech, which are the chief tenets of the order.”\(^{29}\) The Klan’s anti-Catholicism is tied up in its nationalism, for its constitution asserts that the members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan must “owe no allegiance of any nature or degree to any foreign government, nation, institution, sect, ruler, person or people…”\(^{30}\) The Klan will argue that Catholics are loyal to the Pope first and foremost, and this is why they pose a threat to the United States, and are therefore enemies of the Klan.

Despite the fixed American tradition of anti-Catholicism, the Klan’s gripes against Catholics are situated in a particular context, perfectly fitting into the paranoid political and social moment in the United States. In the 1920s, Catholicism could be synonymous with the perceived backwardness of immigrants, especially Italians, who were also popularly tied to anarchism. The anti-Catholicism of the Klan is almost entirely confined to the political realm. The threat to the American government and institutions with which the Catholic church was charged was actually code for the unacceptability of a foreign-born, voting population. In a


\(^{29}\) Alma Bridwell White, *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*, 132.

pamphlet entitled “Rome and the White House” an unnamed Klan sympathizer details the
“menace of Rome” as a political threat to the government of the United States and contends that
“the papal system is political, first, last and all the time.” The explication of the threat of Roman
Catholicism to western institutions quickly deteriorates into a xenophobic diatribe against
immigrants. In reference to the Roman Catholic Church, the pamphlet reads, “In the middle of
the last century she began the concentration of her ignorant masses from abroad into our cities,
where she could easily control their votes.” The Ku Klux Klan identified the authority of Rome
embodied in the political machine, Tammany Hall, in New York City. In a fear-mongering
petition, the pamphlet warns the reader of “the fangs of the Tammany tiger to crush the liberties
of our land and will lead in the last result to Romish control of education, of the press and of our
courts and to the persecution of Protestantism and to bloody internecine war.”

A letter from the Major Kleagle of the state of Colorado “to all Excellent Commanders,
Kligrapps, and Klanswomen” incites the support of the Colorado senators, Rice W. Means and
Lawrence V. Phipps in their “stand against The Italian Debt Settlement which will mean a great
victory for the Roman Catholics if it is carried.” This letter demonstrates the political activation
of the women of the Klan, who were encouraged to contact their representatives and remain
aware of legislation. The letter also attests to the Klan’s conflation of international politics and
Christianity, and the propensity for attaching religion to nationalism—Italy is a Roman Catholic
nation, while the United States is Protestant, and because the two are opposed theologically, they
are opposed diplomatically as well.

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32 D. A. Withrow, Letter to all Excellent Commanders, Kligrapps, and Klanswomen, April 19, 1926.
Historically, the Ku Klux Klan and their supporters have been overwhelmingly Protestant. In the 1960s, Richard Hofstadter wrote that “anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan,” which, if true, has spanned four centuries. The membership and sympathy of women to the Ku Klux Klan, in terms of religious motivations, is a fallacious relationship. By examining Klan materials, it is evident that xenophobia masquerades as anti-Catholicism, a historically powerful symbol in the United States. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan are more likely than not to be especially interested and engaged in American politics, so it is more probable in this historical context that their membership was based on the perceived need to check foreign, un-American influence in the United States than it was warranted by purely sectarian concerns.

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Race and Immigration

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan perceive people of other races and nations as a threat to their perceived Anglo-Protestant status quo of the United States. The Klan, and Bishop Alma White, extol white supremacy in the United States and reject foreign cultures that do not align with their vision of Anglo-Protestantism. For them, the differences in culture, language, and religion presented by foreign immigrants lead to the degradation of their beloved brand of American culture. Alma’s literature, and the political and economic devices employed by the Women of the Ku Klux Klan of Colorado, demonstrate their active and zealous participation in the persecution of Jewish Americans, Americans of color, and soon-to-be American emigrants.

The Ku Klux Klan is most notorious for its antagonism toward African Americans, although the Colorado Klan of the twenties operated primarily through political and economic means rather than the practices of night-riding and violent lynching. The second Klan also espoused a slightly different, defined-in-the-positive ideology from the original Reconstruction Klan—rather than being anti-black, they spoke of themselves as pro-white. Although this slight rhetorical shift may seem insignificant to prove the second Klan’s mitigated violent racism, in fact, the lynching of African Americans in the western and northern United States was unpopular and infrequent. Racial violence was most often perpetrated in the context of labor tensions in the industrial North, and Latino-Americans and Asian Americans were the main target of race-motivated assaults in the Western United States.34

The Klan of the twenties avoided the extremist racial attitudes of its progenitor in the nineteenth century and instead espoused creationism, a doctrine which alleges the biological disparity of races, insofar as different races do not share a common ancestor. Anti-blackness via creationism is reflected in the constitution of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan; the second paragraph of the entire body of text reads, “We avow the distinction between the races of mankind as decreed by the Creator, and we shall ever be true to the maintenance of White Supremacy and strenuously oppose any compromise thereof.” The “distinction” between the races, therefore, is inaugurated by God, not by human beings. The end of the paragraph gives away more of the Klan’s ideology than does the first part—in the beginning it maintains a mere demarcation, but that “distinction” immediately becomes a relation of inferiors and superiors. The final words of the paragraph are harrowing—it is unclear what the constitution and its authors threaten in their opposition to claims of racial equality, but they promise that the Women of the Ku Klux Klan will support the ideals of white supremacy with directed action. This text assumes a much lighter tone than a blatant threat of violence, yet the terms of white supremacy remain open, and the cracks in the “compromise of white supremacy” are large enough that any kind of perceived resistance or support for racial equality in American society could fall through.35

The only other mention of anti-black sentiment in the constitution of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is similarly surreptitious. In Article XIX, a list of “Offenses and penalties,” the fifth offense to the women's Klan is to be “responsible for the pollution of Caucasian blood through miscegenation, or the commission of any act unworthy of a Klanswoman.” While this

passage fails to make a clear reference to African Americans, it is most probably insinuated, for the great majority of lynchings of black men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were vindicated on the claim of a sexual or romantic relationship with a white woman. These white women were certainly harassed, but swinging at the end of a rope was a fate most often reserved for black men. By making interracial relationships illegal and socially reprehensible, proponents of white supremacy (which effectively means black inferiority) were partially successful in limiting social cohesion between the two races, and allowed for institutionalized discrimination against the children of these marriages and relationships. The final part of the fifth offense to the women’s Klan is a catch-all for behavior that female Klan leaders disapproved of, but it was probably within the context of socialization and fraternization with anyone who was not white.\textsuperscript{36}

In The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, Alma White also uses the strategy of claiming that it is God—signifying the ultimate and unchanging authority—which has dictated the inferiority of the black race. She writes that “the Klan stands for the supremacy of the white race, which is perfectly legitimate and in accordance with the teachings of Holy Writ...Ham, one of the sons of Noah, brought the curse of subordination upon himself, and who is able to change the edicts of the Almighty? For the best interests of all concerned, the black race should occupy the place intended for it by the Creator. It is within the rights of civilization for the white race to hold supremacy; and it is no injustice to the colored man.” Alma believes herself to be the worldly authority on the social implications of the Bible, and thinks that black people should not feel slighted or intentionally oppressed because their subordination was in the hands of the “Creator,” meaning that racial injustice is nonexistent. It is outrageously hypocritical of someone who uses

\textsuperscript{36} Women of the Ku Klux Klan, “Constitution and laws of the women of the Ku Klux Klan,” 57.
the same literature to argue for the political and social emancipation of women to tell an entire race of Americans to accept their inferior position in society. Bishop Alma White was adept at manipulating Scripture to fit any agenda, whether it be socially progressive or calling for institutionalized American racism. It makes sense to twenty-first century historians that someone born in Kentucky in the midst of the Civil War would hold ingrained beliefs about the inferiority of an entire race of people, but the logical incongruity is too great to allow us to think of Alma White as a committed rationalist ideologue, rather than a manipulative wielder of Scripture.\footnote{Alma Bridwell White, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy}, 135.}

Alma’s racism not only manifests in a belief that the black race should accept its natural inferiority—they should be grateful. Writing now as a historian rather than a theologian-social critic, Alma writes, “the white men of this country poured out their blood to liberate the colored people from the chains of slavery, and the sacrifice should be appreciated.” “The sacrifice” of the Civil War implies it was a noble, rightful cause, yet the elation and victory of this wrong-that-has-been-righted is immediately checked by her disdain for the enfranchisement of black men. She continues, “the black man was given the ballot sixty years in advance of women. He had a voice in making the laws of the and, while white women remained in political bondage.” This passage illuminates Alma’s deeper complexes about the social liberation of women and her subsequent resentment of black people. She often speaks of “women’s chains”—she even started a publication with this name—and so it would seem that she believes slavery of any kind to be a great injustice. Yet, she seems to have been angered that she spent over half of her life disenfranchised, while black men were tenuously granted the right to vote. Perhaps this is the root of her racism—an indoctrination of the inferiority of black people, coupled with her own
stunted political and social equality, which festered into a malicious grudge. It is possible that this is the same emotion buttressing female participation in the Ku Klux Klan—that white female supremacy is necessary so as not to be on the very bottom of the American political hierarchy.38

Linda Gordon, a historian of the second Ku Klux Klan, claims that Alma White thought that the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States should be repealed, based upon Alma’s biblical argument for the social, and therefore political, inferiority of African Americans. An article based on one of Alma’s sermons, entitled “America—the White Man’s Heritage,” published in 1929 in an issue of her Denver-based publication, called Good Citizen, reads: “Whatever wrong may have been perpetrated against the Negro race by bringing black men to this country…the argument will not hold that they should share equal social or political rights with the white men…” This is based upon the aforementioned argument of the curse of Noah upon Ham. Gordon jumps to the conclusion of Alma’s advocation of the repeal of the Fifteenth Amendment, something Alma never mentioned in her published sermons. Albeit, it is notable that Alma references the great horror of the African slave trade, and she perhaps flirts with an African colonization ideology, but based upon the Old Testament, does not adhere to a “separate but equal” policy.39

Alma’s white supremacy and anti-blackness extends past social and political issues, into economic ambits. In her autobiography, she laments the cultivation of tobacco in the countryside surrounding Millersburg, Kentucky, for both its corruption of morals via addictive behaviors and the destruction of the blue-grass fields. However, she acknowledges the necessity of tobacco

39 Linda Gordon, The Second Coming of the KKK, 121.
cultivation as a lucrative operation in an industry-deficient state. Alma writes, “The country was rolling in wealth, but the spirit of true philanthropy was almost unknown. The rich were becoming richer and the poor white people were greatly oppressed. There were so many colored people that the white man who had to earn wages for a living could find scarcely anything to do.” This lamentation has familiar components—despair at the social inequalities of the late nineteenth century based upon capitalistic favors, and the labor competition between black and white Americans, the latter an instigator of several riots in the early twentieth century. The fact that Alma assumes that white people deserve more work opportunities than black people proves her white supremacy extends to all areas, and while she seems to disavow slavery in all of its forms, it is unclear how exactly she expects black people to survive in the United States as free citizens and laborers.\footnote{Alma Bridwell White, \textit{The Story of My Life}, 274.}

Despite her virulent racism and white supremacy, Alma worked and socialized with African American preachers. Alma White’s biographer, Susie Cunningham Stanley, asserts that Wesleyan/Holiness meetings were one of the few places where black and white Christians worshipped together, whereas “most other churches honored legal or informal Jim Crow policies that resulted in strict segregation.”\footnote{Susie Cunningham Stanley, \textit{Feminist Pillar of Fire}, 29.} During a revival held in Longmont, Colorado, an African American colleague, Rebecca Grant, encouraged and verbally supported Alma during her sermons. While on a visit to her Californian missionaries in 1907, Alma sat down to dinner with William Seymour, a popular African American Wesleyan/Holiness preacher based in Los Angeles. While she privately offered snide remarks about his “unkempt appearance,” the sharing
of a table and a meal demonstrates Alma’s flexibility, or at the very least, tolerance, and perhaps
the importance of her religious profession over her racial prejudices. Alma was also acquainted
with Amanda Smith, a black evangelist preacher with a positive reputation among revival groups
in the west. Smith was primarily occupied with children’s issues, and opened an orphanage for
African American children in 1899 in Harvey, Illinois, for which Alma accused her of being
distracted, and disdainfully remarked upon Smith “spending all her time raising money” for the
children’s cause. Thus Alma’s tolerance is checked by her frequent snobbish attitudes towards
colleagues of color, and while her racism is supported by her interpretations of Scripture, her
personal life was geared toward expediency and self promotion rather than her racial dogmas.42

Despite the positive spin with which the women’s Klan present their views on race, white
supremacy inherently signifies the inferiority of all other races. In their official materials, the
women’s Klan frowns upon the consociation of white and black Americans, and Bishop Alma
White bolsters the inherent inequalities of the races with Scriptural evidence. However, in the
midst of her argumentation, Alma concedes the underlying reasons for her racism, which may be
applicable to the Women of the Ku Klux Klan of Colorado. It would seem that the political
enfranchisement of black men prior to that of white women was an open wound, even after the
ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. The women’s Klan’s racism was particularly focused
upon socialization, which was common in the midst of the Jim Crow era. Yet, anti-blackness is
not the centerpiece of the second Klan, because the Ku Klux Klan is a reactionary group and the
experience of the 1920s was not steeped in racial upheaval and racial-social change as much as it
was in immigration issues and xenophobia.

42 Susie Cunningham Stanley, Feminist Pillar of Fire, 38.
There is not much to be found in the way of anti-Semitic literature bearing an official Ku Klux Klan seal in the archives of Denver, Colorado. This could be because of the actual integration of Jews in the Denver area in the 1920s, or the disposal of anti-Semitic literature in the personal files of Klan administrator Laurena Senter after the 1940s. Therefore, the anti-Semitism of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is mostly centered around economic competition and paranoia. There existed a significant Jewish population in Denver, and the women’s Klan instigated economic warfare on Jewish businesses. In a letter to the Imperial Commander of the Denver women’s Klan, Laurena Senter, dated June 9, 1925, an anonymous Klanswoman suggested the boycott of two businesses run by Jews. The unnamed woman writes, “Dear Mrs. Senter: Please remind our ladies that the Sun Drug Company with several drug stores in the city and Neusteter Clothing Company have both publicly announced that they did not want ‘one cent of Klan trade.’ Both are run by Jews. I mention this fact as when I am on my lunch hour downtown I have seen several of our ladies eating lunch at the fountains in these drug store, especially at 17th and Curtis and have also seen others either going in or coming out of Neustetters. Faithfully yours, Klanswoman #8716.” The letter indicates that the business owners were the initial reactors to the Klan, and not the other way around; nonetheless, it demonstrates the institutionalized, urban anti-Semitism of the women’s Klan. It proves the awareness they had of their power as consumers, and their operation as an active and feminine (without any male input) boycott group. Klanswoman #8716 mentions her “lunch hour,” which signifies her work-life, presumably in an office in Denver. If we accept that this was written by a Klanswoman, this letter tells us about the emerging work-life of the women in Denver in the 1920s, and their power and independence within their female-only Klan. Husbands go unmentioned; it proves the
vitality and self-motivation of economic warfare waged upon Jewish people by the women of the Klan.\textsuperscript{43}

Although she does blame Jewish people for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Alma White’s anti-Semitism is based primarily in social and societal concerns. Alma describes Jews as unable to successfully assimilate into American society, writing in The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, “He is indigestible, inflexible, unbreakable, as was proved in the case of Jonah in the stomach of the great fish.” Here, Alma makes reference to the story of Jonah, an Old Testament prophet, who, on his way to warn the city of Nineveh of God’s incoming wrath, is swallowed by a whale, only to be spat up three days later. Thus, Alma’s first concern with the presence of Jewish people in American society is the inability to digest them into her own, and the Klan’s, conception of the United States—their main fault is their failure to become white Anglo-Saxon Protestants.\textsuperscript{44}

Alma continues to gripe that Jews are in a partnership with the Roman Catholic Church in order to destroy and convert the present institutions of the United States. She writes, “the money-grasping Jew…would be pleased to see the civil structure broken down, and in this way get rid of his responsibility for crucifying his Messiah and bringing the curse upon his race…the sons of Abraham have therefore become a strong ally to the papacy; they have nothing in common in religion, but they are one in their political propaganda against American institutions and principles.” Alma does as she is prone to do, situating Jews in their villainous, biblical context. It is unclear why Jews would be pleased to see the American “civil structure” broken, because in this same argument, they certainly benefit from the capitalist economic structure of

\textsuperscript{43} “Please Remind Our Ladies,” June 9, 1925, Letter. From Denver Public Library.

\textsuperscript{44} Alma Bridwell White, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy}, 45.
the United States. Although it goes unmentioned in The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, a common epithet was that of eastern European Jews spreading communism to the United States. This passage shows Alma’s, and the Klan’s, vague rationale for the threat posed by Jewish people upon the United States, and serves to prove their overarching fear of otherness. In the political context of the twenties, claiming destruction of institution and culture was the most effective path to evidence an adversary.45

Alma substantiates her belief in the political partnership of Roman Catholics and Jews in the archetype of foreign and wayward moral politics—New York City. She writes that “the City and State of New York furnish a splendid example of the coalition of Jews and Catholics, who are there holding the reins of government backed up by the notorious Tammany Hall.” 46 The identification of the successful political machination of Tammany Hall was not altogether mischaracterized, which lends a touch of credibility to Alma’s perceptions of the politics of New York City. She holds the fear that this kind of political conspiracy will spread across the United States, given the influx of Roman Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Europe. To the conservative-minded members of the Klan, these “other” groups of people represent a threat to national cohesion and the functioning of the institutions and government of the United States. She writes that “while no true Christian has anything against the Jew, it must be admitted that his alliance with the papacy is a dangerous menace to our flag and country. The Jew is insoluble and indigestible; and when he grows in numbers and power till he becomes a menace to Christianity and the whole moral fabric, drastic measures will have to be taken to counteract his destructive


46 Ibid., 51.
work…” Alma’s distrust of Jews is not founded in religion—it is thoroughly connected to the issue of race and immigration, and the fear of societal dominance of non-Protestants. Her contrivance of the conspiracy between Jews and Roman Catholics is befuddling and simply a vehicle for political fear-mongering, because her real issue seems to be non-white, non-Protestant influence upon the United States.  

Similar to her belief about the ungratefulness of African Americans, Alma thinks that Jews should be grateful for the warm welcome they have received in the United States, and that their alliance with Roman Catholics is a betrayal against Protestant Americans. She writes that Jews “have never been treated so well in any other country as in the United States, but they have abused their privileges and turned traitors to their Protestant friends who have opened the doors of opportunity to them.” In this polemic, and in the Klan’s conception of the history of the United States, Protestants have done much for Jews and African Americans, and both groups should be grateful. In return, however, Jews have only aided the destruction of the previously-untouched stability of Protestant-American society, which comes in the form of societal secularization. Repeating a familiar libel of Jewish people, Alma writes that they have scaled the financial ladder to a position of dominance: “the Jews have not only succeeded in largely controlling the finances of the country, but in aiding the Roman hierarchy they have determined to crush out the Protestant religion by breaking down the Christian Sabbath, dubbing the Bible a sectarian book and prohibiting it from being read in the public schools.” Alma seems to be perceiving the influx of different nationalities and religions which contributes to the blend and expansion of American society to incorporate other kinds of people, but is easily enough

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attributed to Jewish people and their political and economic domination of the United States. The Klan and its sympathizers frequently argue for the placement of the Bible in public schools, while simultaneously defending the separation of church and state. This logical inconsistency could not possibly have been lost on the intellectuals of the Klan, and so it would seem that their agenda really is the promotion of a Protestant-dominated nation where the Bible is not only a religious text, but a guide to human reality in a modern democracy.48

Alma’s conception of the Jew as a disruption to the “moral fabric” of American society is partially based on her belief in their oppression of women, and erosion of the culture of modesty as it existed prior to mass entertainment. In conjunction with Jews’ financial prowess, Alma cites the motion-picture industry as the beginning of the degradation of “Protestant values.” She writes, “The great Jewish syndicates, the rulers and promoters of the motion picture industry, are striking death-blows to the morals of society and to American tradition and principles.” Alma has previously mentioned the vice of cinema. This abstracted cultural threat is further shored when Alma attributes the oppression of women to the proprietors of the popular arts industry. “The Jews, controlled by their ancient laws and customs, have but little respect for Gentile womanhood…Hundreds of thousands of white Gentile American women are under Jewish ‘bosses’ in the ‘movies,’ dance halls, sweat-shops, department store and innumerable other places, including the white-slave dens, where the iron rod of the Hebrew is wielded.” Thus the dissolution of a dominant Anglo-Protestant culture is supplemented by the multitudinous

oppression of white women—in realms of American labor as well as the emerging dance and film cultures.49

Despite her anti-Semitism, Alma White is a Zionist. The paragraph in The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy which admits her conviction encapsulates all of her views of Jewish people. “The unrepentant Hebrew is everywhere among us today as the strong ally of Roman Catholicism… He must use the vast wealth that he has accumulated in Gentile countries, to reconstruct and occupy the land of his fathers. The aliens who have held that land for many centuries he must dispossess by the practice of the same individual thrift and industry which he has displayed in other lands… He must go back—a remnant at least—to the place where he crucified Christ, and there repent of his crime; and the sooner he does this the better for all concerned.” In just a few sentences, Alma condenses all of her negative beliefs about Jews—their love of money and their prowess at earning it, their political partnership with the Pope, and their responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. However, it is unsurprising that she would be Zionist, given her worries of the inability of Jewish people to fully integrate into the American system, or, probably, submit to the Protestant domination of the economic, political, and social realms of American society. Alma’s Zionism makes a propensity for African colonialism all the more probable—she seems to envision a United States of America solely comprised of Anglo-Protestants, where people of other races and religions have no place.50

The political activism of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, and their resistance to immigration, is easily seen in a letter from the Colorado Major Kleagle (a Klan organizer in

49 Alma Bridwell White, The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, 53.

50 Ibid., 50.
charge of one or more states) from 1926. It exhorts the Women of the Ku Klux Klan of Colorado to contact Colorado senators Rice W. Means and Lawrence V. Phipps and urge them to support a piece of legislation which they call “the registration Resolution for the Registration of all Aliens in the United States.” According to the Jewish Daily Bulletin, this bill was introduced in the House by Congressman James Benjamin Aswell of Louisiana. The components of the bill include the registration of immigrants at their entry to the United States, a subsequent, annual registration of the immigrant, and a fee ($10 for the first registration, $5 for each renewal). The immigrated person would be required to inform their district’s post office if they chose to move, and would need to “exhibit his certificate of identification to any agent of the Department of Justice or of the Department of Labor, to any state, territorial or local police or peace officer and to any other officer designated by the President.” The bill also required any proprietor of hotels, lodging and boarding houses, and employer who knew, or had “reasonable cause to believe” that a person was an immigrant, to report this fact to their post office or district authorities. Failure of an immigrant to register would be penalized with a fine of up to $5,000 or imprisonment up to two years, at the end of which the unregistered immigrant would be “taken into custody and deported.” The politically active female Klan members find solace in the restriction of personal movement of foreign immigrants, and desire them to pay (on top of taxes) to be American citizens. While the Klan bemoans the inability of European immigrants to assimilate and adopt Anglo-Protestant cultural values and manners, they attempted to ensure that they remained legally distinct from the native-born population.


Bishop Alma White writes about immigration as inseparable from Roman Catholicism. She writes, “Our religious and political foes are not only within our gates, but are coming by the hundreds of thousands from the chaos and ruin of old European and Asiatic countries to un-Americanize and destroy our nation, and to make it serve the purposes of the Pope in his aspirations for world supremacy.”\textsuperscript{53} It is clear that to her the threat of immigration is the threat of political domination. It is notable that Alma still does not observe much distinction between the religious and political, for her belief is that the Pope is at once a ecclesiastical and civil leader. Alma’s xenophobia is manifest, although it is tucked neatly within her greater fear of papal supremacy. In another passage which further exemplifies her worries that European immigration will sway the nation in favor of the Roman Catholic Church and bring destruction upon existent institutions—her favorites to cite are free speech and a free press—Alma’s prejudice against immigrants is visible. She complains of the Vatican, which has “brought her multitudes from the lower strata of European society to our shores, and uses them as occasion demands in her opposition to our laws and in the persecution of Protestants.” Alma’s anti-Catholicism and nativism are closely linked, and in her mind there exists a vicious circle; the Roman Catholic Church sends masses of Europeans to the States, where they attain votes in favor of the very same Church. The Klan’s attitude toward immigration is quite similar to its hostile deportment toward Catholics (as they are one in the same—the main target in the reduction of immigration quotas of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 was Italians, who are predominantly Roman Catholic).\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{53} Alma Bridwell White, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy}, 26.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 74-75.
The Women of the Ku Klux Klan’s anti-Catholicism, xenophobia, and racism are all born from a desire to assert control of values upon local and national communities. Their ideal community is one that reflects Anglo-Protestant habit, and any group in the United States which does not exert or immediately adopt this mode are blamed for a degradation of American culture. In this fear of otherness, the power available to the women of the Klan is visible. As a conservative force of normative Americanism, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan flex political muscle, and wield the vision of women as moral agents in society.

Progressivism and Social Welfare

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan served as a community welfare organization in which white Protestant American women could regroup with likeminded people and attempt to make their community, which was undergoing an “emerging culture of pleasure,” along with political and demographic transformations, reflect their Anglo-Protestant values. In many ways they resemble the Progressives, active a few decades prior; they championed prohibition, women’s political, social, and economic equality in the public sphere, the protection of the nuclear family, and Anglo-American culture. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan can be understood as a continuation of the Progressive movement—also a middle class Protestant affair—further warped by the
nativist political culture that accompanied the Red Scare after World War I. Overall, the overlapping tendencies of the Progressives and the Ku Klux Klan not only demonstrate the social anxieties of Klan members, but also the larger shared desire of the conservative middle class to control other citizens’ personal lives.55

The prohibition of the sale and consumption of alcohol was a social measure supported by the Progressives and carried forward by the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. The consumption of alcohol climbed steeply at the dawn of the twentieth century. Michael McGerr, a historian of the Progressive era, claims that “Americans had drunk 590 million gallons of beer and other malt liquor in 1885; in 1900, the figure reached 1.2 billion gallons,” and that in the “twenty years from 1880 to 1900, the number of retail liquor establishments had nearly doubled, from 150,000 to 250,000.” McGerr attributes this astronomical rise in alcohol consumption to changes in American work-life at the turn of the century. A shortened workweek, increased productivity, and relatively higher wages meant that increasingly less time was spent at work, and there was more money available for entertainment and leisure activities.56

The turn-of-the-century Progressives and the members of the Ku Klux Klan may have had shared agendas because of their similar socioeconomic statuses. Michael McGerr argues that the Progressives’ campaigns against the primary “social evils”—alcohol consumption, prostitution, and divorce—“appealed more to the middle class than to others. Hoping to promote progressive values and practices, ministers, settlement workers, white-collar workers, and small-business man played prominent roles in the campaigns to reshape adult behavior.”57

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56 Ibid., 84-85.
57 Ibid., 85.
Goldberg’s socioeconomic analysis demonstrates that among the leaders of the Denver Klan, “the most frequently occurring occupations were small businessman, clergymen, lawyer, manager of a firm, and physician.” Goldberg divided his sample of Denver Klansmen into “early joiners” and “late joiners,” the former joining the Klan before 1922; the latter, 1925. Among the non-leadership early joiners the most “numerous occupations were: manager of a firm (54), small businessman (42), salesman (23), lawyer (17), office clerk (17), and physician (16).” The “late joiners” group was comparable, and only included the “laborer (37), driver (25), and mechanic (20).” Therefore both the Progressives and the second Ku Klux Klan were composed of educated, middle-class professionals.⁵⁸

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan and Bishop Alma White employed the rhetoric of social welfare and progressive reform throughout their public and private literature. The first constitutional mission in the “Objects and Purposes” of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan is to “protect the weak, the innocent, and the defenseless from the indignities, wrongs, and outrages of the lawless, the violent and the brutal: to relieve the injured and the oppressed; to succor the suffering and unfortunate, especially widows and orphans.”⁵⁹ The women of the Klan thus present themselves to one another as righteous defenders of the weakest and most vulnerable members of American society. In The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, Alma White declares that like true religion, “good politics upholds the principles of democracy and the welfare of the masses, who are not to be kept in ignorance and in a helpless, dependent condition to serve the purposes


of a favored few in church and state.” Alma is mostly referring to her belief in the intellectual subjugation wrought by the Roman Catholic Church, but her mention of “the welfare of the masses” points to an awareness and remembrance of the effective rhetorical tools of the Progressives. Toward the end of her panegyric for the Klan, Alma writes of the United States, “there is no place for the plotting ecclesiastic, the corrupt machine boss, the bootlegger, the wifebeater, and those who have sworn to make America subserve the purposes of a foreign potentate.” She touches on familiar Progressive agendas: temperance, and the protection and safety of women, but she continues to harp on her repeated paranoias of the politically conniving Roman Catholic, and the collusion of foreign agendas in the United States.

Temperance was briefly successful as a social reform of the Progressives in the early twentieth century. Accompanied by the rise in the consumption of alcohol among Americans, the saloon seemed a birthplace of vices detrimental to families and society at large—inebriated men were more likely to solicit prostitution, gamble, and behave violently toward wives and children, which could lead to divorce. McGerr classifies this identification and abhorrence of instruments of social deterioration as a desire for the “regulation of adult behavior.” The Anti-Saloon League became a powerful platform of reformers, but wisely focused on the saloon, rather than the consumption of alcohol altogether, as “the ultimate symbol of public vice.”

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan was also an apostle of Prohibition. Their constitution and public materials often make reference to their loyalty to the Constitution of the United States of America, which after 1920, would include the Eighteenth Amendment. The “Ku Klux Kreed,”

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60 Alma Bridwell White, *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*, 38.
61 Ibid., 135.
included in Constitution of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, states that the women of the Klan’s duty lies in “Recognizing our relation to the Government of the United States of America, the supremacy of its Constitution, the Union of States thereunder, and the Constitutional Laws thereof, we shall ever be devoted to the sublime principles of a pure Americanism, and valiant in the defense of its ideals and institutions.” Sociologist Kathleen Blee has identified a significant overlap between members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan and membership to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Lulu Markwell, the appointed national leader of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922, had previously served as the president and lecturer of the Arkansas WCTU chapter. Myrtle Cook, a Klanswoman and president of the WCTU of Vinton, Iowa, was assassinated for her records of suspected local bootleggers. So it would seem that temperance and a desire to control the drinking and social habits of Americans was prevalent among female Klan members, and is a shared agenda with the Progressives of a few decades prior. However, it is unsurprising that women who would join an organized temperance group would be attracted to other women’s organizations as well.

Bishop Alma White was also an advocate of Prohibition for its promise of positive social impacts and curtailment of public vice. In The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, Alma declares that the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution was “a great blow to tyranny” and “indirectly broke chains that had enslaved women for ages.” She shares the same opinion of alcohol as the Progressives—that it carried injurious effects to women and made oppressors out of men. In a warning against its repeal or modification, Alma writes that “unscrupulous

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politicians would modify the Volstead Enforcement Act and bring back the saloon with all of its attendant evils…these men would bring back the horrible nightmare of the liquor curse that has heretofore brought such desolation. They would fill the alms-houses, the lunatic asylums, the penitentiaries, and enslave women and children.” Alma White, too, holds the Progressive opinion that alcohol is a cause and symbol of social and moral enfeeblement.65

The curtailment of prostitution was a Progressive movement which found sympathy in Colorado. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the consequences of venereal disease began to be studied and revealed, and were widely attributed to prostitution. Dr. Prince Morrow, a popular expert physician, declared in 1908 that venereal diseases “are directly antagonistic to all that the family stands for as a social institution…” Progressive platforms equated prostitution with the dismantling of prized institutions, such as marriage and the nuclear family, and was therefore something to be eliminated.66

In February 1913, the Denver Chief of Police ordered the official eviction of women from the red-light district on Market Street. After fifty-five years of operation, “a mandatory mass exodus” occurred when the Mayor, Henry J. Arnold, and the Fire and Police Board came to an agreement about what should be done about Denver’s pervasive “social evil.” Over three hundred women were forced out of their homes and brothels in the middle of winter, in the process of ridding central Denver of its red-light district. A tentative calculation of Denver’s “working girls” places “more than 1,000 women…in Denver’s tenderloin at one time or another” between 1870 and 1910. Prostitution had been made illegal in the Queen City of the West since

66 Michael McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 85.
1859, but the “vice district” had remained operational as long as it earned the city treasury money, in the form of fines and bails paid for the arrest of prostitutes and madams. The removal of hundreds of prostitutes from their homes on Market Street did little to end the sex industry in Denver; it merely became dispersed across the city. It is unclear exactly what prompted the raid of Denver’s red-light district in 1913, other than the desire to remove such women from view, and the request of a grand jury and several city officials for its dissolution. Perhaps, as more public schools were built at the turn of the century, and the realization by the upper- and middle-classes of Denver that their town was a “chaos of a city that was overrun with vice,” the adoption of Progressive social reform was adopted, even if it was coercive and ultimately ineffective. The forced removal of Denver’s prostitutes from Market Street in 1913 demonstrates the western reach of the Progressive movement, and the acceptance of attempts at social reform by Coloradans.67

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan seemingly operated as a venue for charity and philanthropy for its membership. Several letters between the Imperial Commander of the Denver women’s Klan, Laurena Senter, and other Klan members or separate humanitarian organizations, reveal the women’s Klan’s activism in social welfare and community aid. A letter dated from May 25, 1926, from the Woman’s Benefit Association, thanks Laurena Senter and the “ladies” for the money donated to reunite a woman and her child. Ada Bruce, the sender of the letter, also returned a check for $15.84; the attempt to reunite the family failed on account of apparent miscommunication and lies. Another letter from one Mr. Olson from Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver, dated November 30, 1925, thanks Laurena Senter “for the nice Thanksgiving

dinner and also the clothing which was received by my family. This act of kindness was more greatly appreciated because of the fact that I was unable to provide for or be with my family on this annual occasion.” In February 1931, a letter was sent from the Denver chapter of the American Red Cross to Laurena Senter, the head of the Colorado Cycle Club, which had become the new, unofficial chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado after their demise in the state Senate. The letter reads, “On behalf of the Denver Chapter of the American Red Cross, I wish to thank, through you, the member of the Colorado Cycle Club, Denver Chapter No. 1, for their generous contribution of $25.00 for the Drouth Relief Fund.” Several other letters to Laurena Senter and the women of the Denver Klan are sent in appreciation for flowers sent to funerals, charity baskets assembled for “the needy,” and musical instruments donated to girls’ schools.68

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan’s operation as an avenue for charity to the community of Denver placed a special emphasis on the health and security of families—at the heart of which were women and children. Bishop Alma White does not fit as neatly into this progressive value of charity; although the Pillar of Fire Church occasionally operated as a clothing drive in Denver, she criticized colleagues who spent time creating and managing orphanages.69

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan publicly supported labor reform, but possibly only as a means of frustrating “Bolshevist” appropriation of the United States’ government and economic system. “Closer Relationship between Capital and American Labor” is typed on a card bearing the doctrines of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, while the next listed goal reads, “Preventing unwarranted Strikes by Foreign Labor Agitators.” There is no reference to the poor working

68 See Ada Bruce to Laurena Senter, May 25, 1926; G. L. Olson to Laurena Senter, November 30, 1925, G. K. Dustin to Laurena Senter, February 17, 1931.

69 Susie Cunningham Stanley, Feminist Pillar of Fire, 38.
conditions of industrial Americans—something that was a focus of the Progressives and muckrakers of the early twentieth century—and so the Klan’s desire to reform labor seems in direct response to the Red Scare, rather than the awareness of low protection and safe working conditions for laborers.70

At the turn of the century, the Progressive movement ushered in labor reform: the elimination of child labor, and limits on workdays for women, railroad workers, bakers, sailors, and miners. Progressive reforms demanded cleaner and safer working conditions, and pay equality. Yet unions like the American Federal of Labor were unfriendly to immigrants and black Americans, because they allegedly drove wages down and were willing to work as strikebreakers against union-protected industries. Samuel Gompers, the founder and president of the AFL, “strongly supported immigration restriction in the 1900s and 1910s.”71

The Ku Klux Klan and the Progressives also shared a common platform in the political activation of women via suffrage, and the extension of benefits to women that were already enjoyed by men. Boulder-based Klan newspaper, The Rocky Mountain American, published an article about the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, whose objective was “to encourage and assist all Protestant women in the study of practical politics and the use of the ballot in the advancement of the best interests of our God-given nation.”72 The Klan advocated for the political participation of women who might support their conservative platforms. This extension of women’s participation in American public life was also endorsed by the Progressives. Michael

70 Women of the Ku Klux Klan, “Form 150-J.F.H.” Women in the Ku Klux Klan Collection, University of Mississippi Libraries.

71 Michael McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 130-138.

McGerr writes, “like the traveling lecturer and professional reformer, the progressives accepted a new role for women outside traditional domesticity.” Alma White is easily classified as a “traveling lecturer,” and as a woman, she actively occupied a non-traditional public role. While the Women of the Ku Klux Klan do not explicitly encourage female exploration of professionalism and publicity, they do not explicitly discourage it, either.73

In the second issue of the The Rocky Mountain American, the newspaper declares the Colorado Klan’s support of “the Women’s Wage Bill.” The article is congratulatory of Klan sympathizer Governor Clarence Morley’s “progressive views,” which are manifested in his support of several progressive, reformist “administration bills.” The article writes that the Women’s Wage Bill “has both an industrial and social aspect of forward looking character and aims to restore equilibrium to a situation thrown out of balance by the incursion of women into more active position in industrialism and at the same time recognizes the necessity for safeguarding these women in business in a position of independence and security which removes the social menace which so many reformers see in this new departure of womenkind into other fields than the domestic hearth.” This article clearly demonstrates the Klan’s public support for the entrance of women into the American workforce, and supports increasing women’s wages as a form of protection for them and for labor. They are presented as being at odds with social reformers, who saw their entrance into the workforce as a new means to take advantage of women and to devalue labor, which was also their reason for opposing immigrant workers. The article admits as much: “a wage that will secure to her similar recompense for similar labor at once defeats the trend which is to substitute cheaper women employment for the employment of

73 Michael McGerr, A Fierce Discontent, 83.
men by which the general status of men’s wage has been seriously disturbed.” In the Klan’s view, then, the equality of wages across the genders would be wholly beneficial for American labor. It is evident from this article that the Colorado Klan supports the emergence of women into public life, for rather than insisting that women stay home and do not compete with men, they incite the United States government to solve the inequality with wage adjustments. This denotes the Klan’s Progressive value system, rather than the expected regressive-conservative convictions about gender.74

In The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy, Alma White uses her authority as a fundamentalist feminist to lend her acclamation to the Ku Klux Klan as a co-advocate for her personal agenda--American women’s social, political, and economic equality. She writes, “if woman’s new place in religion and politics is not to make the world better, then the Bible scheme of redemption is a failure and the story of creation in the Book of Genesis a myth…we are looking to the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to champion the cause of women and to protect her rights.” Alma is speaking rhetorically, as it would be absurd for her or her followers to seriously consider the falsehood of the Bible. Alma’s conception of womanhood, much like the Progressives’ at the tail end of the Victorian era’s gendered moralism, is to make the world a better place. Ultimately, The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy is a defense and promotion of the Klan, and as a feminist, Alma ended the book with a simultaneous promise and demand of the Klan to support women’s equality in American society. However, the entire book fails to mention the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, which was officially established in Little Rock, Arkansas, two years before The Ku Klux Klan in

Prophecy was published. This puts Alma’s politically-active and organized feminism into doubt, or opens the possibility of an unknown personal qualm with the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.\footnote{Alma Bridwell White, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy}, 136.}

The Women of the Ku Klux Klan and the Progressives hold similar desires for social reform, which, in the end, amounts to a desire for society to reflect their personal values. It is possible that the values of these two groups—temperance, nucleic family life, sexual monogamy, and gender equality—are largely aligned because both attracted evangelical Protestants. Michael McGerr has asserted that “the Progressives were inspired by an emotional, evangelical Protestantism,” and the Klan is widely known to be exclusive to Protestants.\footnote{Michael McGerr, \textit{A Fierce Discontent}, 84.} Thus the Ku Klux Klan and the Progressives shared such strains of reformism because they were comprised of the same culture—middle-class, American Protestants. In reference to the Ku Klux Klan, Bishop Alma White wrote that “their program must be carried out if the country is saved from moral, social, and political ruin.” It is then easier to conclude that the Klan carried on the reformist mantle of the Progressives, but its message was adjusted to fit the post-war xenophobia, internal migrations, and cultural upheaval in the United States.\footnote{Alma Bridwell White, \textit{The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy}, 118.}
Conclusion

It is ironic that the members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, far from being passive riders on the values and agencies of men, were active participants and perpetrators of reactionist white supremacy, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, nativism, and xenophobia. As a historically oppressed gender, one would expect women to be understanding of the plights of marginalized groups. However, it may be that the Women of the Ku Klux Klan represented political opportunity and social equality to conservative women. It was a social group for women who occupied both domestic and public space to coordinate over radically conservative and exclusivist ideologies. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan was founded on feminist ideals, and exuded as much agency as did the men’s group, thus providing a hateful-activist group for women where perhaps one did not exist before.

Klanswomen’s beliefs aligned perfectly with both the politically paranoid atmosphere and left-over progressivism of the 1920s. The anti-Catholicism of the Klan was not so much a religious qualm as it was political and nativist in its roots. The anti-Semitism was connected to a fear of Jewish economic domination, whether it be within the American capitalist system, or through the indoctrination of Bolshevism. The Klan frequently categorized its religious and racial opponents as harmful to the democracy of the United States, which was an effective tool given the political atmosphere of the twenties. Women created their own brand of the Ku Klux Klan, focused around traditional arenas of feminine concern--most notably, the value of the family and the forced imposition of morality and modesty, and an intolerance for the neglect of Anglo-Protestant social norms. The Women of the Ku Klux Klan were active and organized, and
found their own justifications for popular anti-immigrant and racist values. Furthermore, the
Women of the Ku Klux Klan operated independently from the men’s group, and defended the
expansion of women from the domestic to the public sphere. Bishop Alma White is a perfect
example of women’s agency in the seemingly incongruous feminist and white supremacist
movements that were also embodied in the Women of the Ku Klux Klan.
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