

Interview with Mrs. John Frisk

Marquette, Michigan

April 16, 1981

START OF INTERVIEW

Howard Brown (HB): This is an interview with Mrs. John Frisk of Magnetic Street, Marquette Michigan. By Howard Brown of Marquette, Michigan of Mrs. Frisk's recollection of the Ku Klux Klan in Marquette County.

HB: You mentioned the other day when you were teaching school that you had brought up the subject of the Ku Klux Klan in class and you had some interesting things to say about that, when was this and what happened?

Mrs. John Frisk (MJF): I was teaching in Michigamme, the seventh and eighth grade, Junior High at that time and during the class we came to the part about the Ku Klux Klan and the definition as I remember it was that they were a group of conservative white people who were organizing against the Catholics, Jews, and Negroes. And one of my students said, well why is it called the KKK? I said they were nicknames because at that time a negro was called a kun [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] and a Jew was called a kayak [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] and a Catholic instead of starting with a C they started with a K so it would rhyme, so they called them the Ku Klux Klan.

HB: Then there was another question that you were asked about the white robes, would you tell us about that?

MJF: They were wearing the typical white robes that you see, even today with the long white sheets, I would say, I would call them sheets and on the back of those sheets was written 100% American and then they also wore the hood, the tall mask hood.

HB: Didn't one of the children ask why they were wearing them?

MJF: One of the children asked me why they had to wear those robes and I said well I suppose it's because they didn't want to be identified.

HB: When you were studying them at that time were you studying the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War or were you studying the new movement after WWI.

MJF: I think we were studying the reconstruction period and the Ku Klux Klan died down to where it wasn't very active until 1915 when some minister, I think his name was Reverend Simpson, brought it up again. It emerged and it grew to be to the number of 5000 I think as I remember it. But between that period, 1915 to 1923 at the time that I saw them, after I was married, at that point they were a million strong.

HB: When was the first time you saw them here in Marquette County?

MJF: As far as I can remember it was 1923, three years after I was married.

HB: And would you describe the meeting and where it took place and what it looked like?

MJF: They read plays, at quite a large open field between Marquette and Negaunee. They've gathered there oh, at sunset or somewhere around that time and we went, we had to go past there at ____ to go to my home and I saw a minister with a Bible in his hands, it was open I imagine he was reading it. He was leading, they would parade around that field and he was reading it and then behind him would be, I think it was two, carrying cross as I remember it and I saw them burn it, and I heard them, an awful lot of noise whether they were speaking or singing or humming or moaning I don't know but they were making an awful lot of noise I was in the car so I couldn't make it out.

HB: Was there a large number there?

MJF: It appears to be, because the field is big, I would estimate around 50. Now that is definitely, you know I didn't count them, but it appeared to be that many.

HB: Did you see any other meeting of the Klan or hear about them during that time?

MJF: No I can't recall of any that were directly associated. I can't think of any.

HB: Were there any cross burnings or anything like that?

MJF: Not in Marquette county. There were at the time in the cities that I read about it there was a lot of that but not directly in Marquette.

HB: Who would you say, have you any ideas on the subject of who belonged to the Klan of the people here in this county?

MJF: Well from the list of registered people they had to register and they had their own list.

HB: You don't have to tell me names just what, social classes or whatever.

MJF: But I saw the list and the names that I saw on the list were our most conservative people in Marquette.

HB: Were there any religious groups that seemed to support the Klan here as in other places or if the religious groups didn't support them were they predominantly from any one group?

MJF: I think they were predominantly, I know the list that I saw they were predominantly from one denomination but I don't know how many others were I think they hushed it up so quick I don't know if any others were involved or not.

HB: Would you say what denomination most of them were?

MJF: Well the ones that I saw were Methodist.

HB: Was there any political involvement that there were obvious Klan candidates or obvious activity in the Klan in supporting people?

MJF: Well if you wanted to separate the Klan philosophy from our affluent people, they were identical. I don't think you could separate them really and our elected officers here were definitely the affluent people.

HB: Was there any opposition say to catholic business men or catholic candidates or Jewish businessmen or candidates that you were aware of?

MJF: There was an awful lot of prejudice against the catholic schools here, verbal attacks that I heard myself.

HB: Were they active in opposing political candidates?

MJF: I wasn't too interested in politics at the time but I do know that a Catholic running for an office should know better because he never won.

HB: In the time that you recollect, do you recollect a general feeling toward the Klan? Were they feared, were they despised, what was the feeling of the people in general?

MJF: I have to be honest with you now and tell you, I couldn't understand how anybody who went to school as far as the eighth grade didn't know who the Ku Klux Klan were, but every one of my friends, and I love them and I like them and it isn't their fault, but they belonged to that particular denomination. Neither one of them will admit that they know who the Ku Klux Klan was and I said, that's impossible if you were educated in the public schools you know, but not one will admit it that I know of, not any of my friends and I have a lot of fine protestant friends. I don't know if they were hiding it or didn't really know about it, she, one of my friends, asked me to explain and I said I kind of hate to because I'm afraid I'll hurt your feelings.

HB: So it seems in your estimation it's just been kind of a cover up of the Klan in the area.

MJF: It's if either they didn't want to admit it or... they must have known, perhaps are ashamed of themselves too you know.

HB: Is there any other incident or reflection on the Klan that you would like to share in all that you...

MJF: I think I have always been very skeptical perhaps that's a very narrow view, but I've been very very skeptical during an election time about believing too much of the rhetoric from that class because they are the ones that are running all the time.

HB: Okay. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW