

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ku Klux Klan in Salem, Ohio

Personal Experience

O. H. 1235

JOHN C. LITTY, SR.

Interviewed

by

William D. Jenkins, Jr.

on

January 11, 1989

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ku Klux Klan in Salem, Ohio

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN C. LITTY, SR.

INTERVIEWER: William D. Jenkins, Jr.

SUBJECT: Parades, rallies, City Council, Salem, Ohio

DATE: January 11, 1989

J: This is an interview with John Litty, Sr., for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Ku Klux Klan by William Jenkins at 485 East Fourth Street, Salem, Ohio on January 11, 1989.

Mr. Litty, when were you born, and where were you born?

L: I was born April 1, 1895 in Vessel, New York.

J: What were the names of your parents?

L: My father was Herman Peter Litty. My mother was Cordelia Rebecca Litty.

J: What was her maiden name?

L: Her maiden name was Finney.

J: Was she related to Charles Finney?

L: Some relation. I don't know exactly what. Her father was a Doctor Finney. A medical man.

J: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

L: I had three brothers and three sisters.

J: When did you come to Salem, Ohio?

L: When I was two years old. I don't remember that, but I've lived here since I was two years old.

J: Since you were two years old. So in 1897 you came to Salem. Why did your parents come to Salem, do you know?

L: I think just because they had relatives there. He was very poor. He was a small time Methodist preacher. He had to get a job in a shop. He came here and worked in Evans Factory.

J: Did he, at all, preach anymore, or did he give that up?

L: As a lay minister in the Friends Church, he wasn't the regular preacher but he always sat up in the pulpit with him. He would preach in the small towns around here like Winona and Beloit now and then when they needed a minister. He was not an ordained preacher.

J: So he became a Quaker then when he moved here?

L: Yes. He apparently joined the Friends Church here, yes.

J: Did your mother also attend the Quaker church?

L: Oh, yes. We all did.

J: You all did. So you were brought up as a Quaker?

L: Yes.

J: Do you remember what it was like in Salem around 1900? How it was to live in this community?

L: Well I can remember the War we had and the automobiles or airplanes and telephones around here. We had no inside plumbing in those days. We had the backhouse in the backyard and the coalhouse at the back of the backyard. I don't know just what I want to tell you. I can remember it.

J: Did you attend Salem schools?

L: Yes. I attended grade schools in Salem.

J: The grade schools?

L: Yes. That's as far as I went. I never went to high school.

J: You went through eight grades then?

L: Through seventh.

J: Through seventh grade. What was the school like at that time? What was the school? Was there one schoolhouse?

L: Oh, no. They had three or four schoolhouses in Salem. Brick houses. In fact, one of them out in Prospect is still in use. What we call the McKinley School is now. It's not used as a schoolhouse anymore but they use it for headquarters for the School Board and for supplies. There was Columbia Street, Prospect, McKinley and Fourth Street. There was four schools there. Fourth Street was right across from me here. Where this building...

J: Was that the one? No, that is not the one you attended. You attended the one where the Board of Education is.

L: I went to Columbia Street first, then I went to the Board of Education. The McKinley School, they called it.

J: How many students were there in your school? Well, I'd say, in your class?

L: Probably twenty-five.

J: Do you remember the teachers?

L: Some of them.

J: Were they all male or female or...

L: They were all female in those days, except the superintendent of schools. He was...Professor Johnson was the superintendent. All my teachers were always female.

J: So you went to grade school for seven years. What did you do after that?

L: I went to work in the Pottery here, when I was fifteen years old.

J: What did you do in the Pottery?

L: I learned to decorate dishes they called them lining. I put the goldwork on them. I did that for about fifteen years.

J: Until you were about thirty years old.

L: It's hard for me to recall what dates...

J: What did you do then?

L: Then I got in the real estate business. The Capels are still in the real estate business here. I did that for another fifteen years or so, or eighteen. I think eighteen years. Then after that I became an owner of a title insurance company down in a little county down the street.

J: How did you come to get into the real estate business?

L: I had a brother-in-law in Indiana that was in it and I went out there and worked with him awhile then came back to Salem and went in with this other fellow who was an old friend of mine who was already established. I suppose that if it hadn't been for my brother-in-law being in it I would have never got in it. I don't know. That's how I got out of the Pottery.

J: Okay, in terms of Salem in the 1915, 1920 era, do you remember any of the efforts to pass the prohibition law?

L: I can remember, yes. My father, of course, was a very religious man. He was a member of the so called Prohibition Party. They never elected anybody, but I can remember them having speakers here, now and then.

J: So he was a member of that party and voted for their candidate for president?

L: Oh, yes. Whoever the candidate was, there was a Mr. Poling, I think, was candidate for governor. Benedor Poling?

J: I don't know.

L: Daniel kind of rings in my mind. Poling. I remember they had him here to speak a couple times.

J: Did the Quakers, in general, support passing prohibition? Were they very strong?

L: Oh, yes. Entirely dry as they called them. The wets and drys.

J: So the Quakers in Salem really were very strongly in supporting of and passing the Prohibition Law.

L: Very much so.

J: Did you ever work in any of the campaigns to get that passed or did the local Quaker church work in that?

L: No, I didn't take any part in politics in those days. I did later on. I got mixed up in it.

J: There were some other issues that were being brought up at this time, which will relate into the Klan, eventually, as I lead down to those questions. Things like the Sunday Blue Laws. Were people around here upset about...

L: I don't recall much about that. Those were the laws where they couldn't have stores open on Sunday or something like that?

J: Right.

L: Yes. I know everything was closed in my day except for football games and baseball games.

J: Except for football and baseball. So Salem pretty well closed down on Sunday back in 1920.

L: Yes.

J: Do you recall anything about the Ku Klux Klan coming into Salem in the early 1920's?

L: Yes. After the war, they started to come in active all over the southern part of the country pretty much. Of course they had been active back in Civil War days but I don't recall that, of course. But we started hearing about them...The first thing I knew about anything in Salem was that there was an American Legion meeting one night and one of the fellows said that there was a rumor that they had an organization in Salem now. Actually, he was a member of it but he didn't say that. Then they started having meetings and trying to recruit Protestents and American War Protestents. Anybody except a Catholic, or a Jew, or a black man.

J: The American Legion, were you at that meeting?

L: It was at that meeting where this man said he heard that there was a rumor of a Klan being organized in Salem. I found out later that he was a pretty active member of it himself. And he was one of the fellows that was recruiting. It wasn't really discussed openly in the American Legion meeting though.

J: The Klan came in kind of secretly without really revealing itself?

L: Yes. I had one young fellow, who was a member of the Klan, and he told me they had these names and they wore their sheets and things. He told me that whoever the Klegle was in charge of that meeting, used a revolver

for a gavel at the meetings. So they were pretty radical. It's lucky that somebody didn't get killed. A lot of those fellows were carrying guns around.

J: Do you know who the local Klegle was?

L: No. At the time I knew who some of the members were, but I don't know whether I ought to mention them or not.

J: That's interesting. Mr. Litty, from your general knowledge, you say you knew some of the Klan members. Could you tell me what types of people joined the Klan in Salem?

L: Well, of course, it was a mixture. There were some very good people that belonged to it. I know that they were...Anti-Catholicism was pretty powerful in those days. There used to be the newspaper spread around the houses called The Appeal to Reason, which told us all kinds of terrible things about the Catholics which weren't true, I'm sure. They had at some of these public meetings and I know I took my sister and some of her friends--I had a car--up to Alliance to see one of their big parades one night and they surrounded me. "Are you a Protestant?" and so forth, "Are you an American born?" I was. I was an ex-soldier, of course. Then they wanted to know if I was a member, and why I wasn't a member. I don't remember how I got out of that. I never could get very sympathetic to it to tell the truth. I was in the Army with some damn good Catholics. I helped carry one fellow back after he passed out and he owed me his own--A very good man.

J: So you feel like one of the major causes of the Klan in this area was prejudice against Catholics?

L: Catholics, Negroes, and foreign born.

J: Were there many foreign born in Salem in 1920? Had there been, particularly, from say southern and eastern Europe?

L: We had Italians and Romanians and Germans here, Saxons. There were quite a few in Salem.

J: Where did those people work do you know?

L: They worked mostly in Deming factories. We had some good factories. Buckeye Engine Company, which later became Bliss or Bond, which became American Standard. And Deming, which is still here, but different people own it. There was a big coke company. And the Hunt Machine Company. They worked in those factories. They were good factories. My father worked in Deming's

factory for thirty, forty, or fifty years.

J: Why do you think, at that particular time, people were becoming so upset about Catholics, foreign born? Was there a particular reason?

L: The only thing I can think of was that it was kind of an aftermath of World War I. The excitement of that. These fellows got out there, they were no longer in the Army or anything like that or never had been. The excitement of night riding and burning crosses. They'd burn crosses in somebody's front yard and things like that, prominent Catholic. Down in Leetonia, I wasn't there, of course, but I heard about them burning a cross in a priest's front yard, you know.

J: So they were known around here for burning crosses in front of Catholic houses?

L: Oh, yes.

J: To warn the Catholics?

L: Just to stir up trouble I guess.

J: Do you know, did they ever attack, physically, a Catholic or things of that sort?

L: No, I was kind of surprised that something like that did not happen. I had a friend, I can't think of his name but he was a prominent Catholic, a fellow about my age and I remember they stuck a cross in his front yard and set it on fire and John goes out and kicked it over. I was just a little surprised that somebody didn't take a shot at him or throw something at him. He got away with it. He kicked the cross over to put it out, I guess. It was pretty wild for a while there.

They'd have these meetings on these big farms. They'd rent a farm somewhere, south of Salem or sometimes north of Salem. One night, another lad and I were going to Lisbon, we had dates down there with a couple girls in Lisbon, ten miles south of here. We got out there south of town somewhere and there was a big Klan meeting. Traffic was all tied up. My friend was driving. One of these fellows with a mask on, you know, a hood, come over and he was near us. Wally hollered out at him, "Listen, I got to get this load of Whiskey into Pittsburgh tonight. Is there any chance of getting through here?" The fellow came over and raised his hood and said, "Just unload it right here." We both knew the guy, I won't name him now, but it surprised me that he would show his face. Of course, we didn't have any whiskey. Another interesting story for me was I had an old aunt and her husband was a

Civil War veteran. We called her... Well, it doesn't matter, the name slipped my mind. In East Liverpool, then another night, there was a big Klan meeting somewhere north of Salem. I didn't go, but most everybody went to see the parades. They were all out there watching the Klan parade and this big cross burning and so forth. They weren't members but everybody went to see them.

J: Were they sympathetic or just interested in the parade?

L: More just interested. I don't think they were sympathetic. Not as far as I know, none of my family ever joined them. Around ten o'clock in the evening, I was the only one at home and the phone rang. Old Aunt Molly from East Liverpool was on the phone. She said she had to wait for some scheduled street car back to East Liverpool. She had to wait for a half an hour or an hour or something like that and she wondered if my mother was there and she could come down and keep her company. Of course, my mother was out watching the parade. I said, "No, but you stay there and I'll come down and get you." I said, "She's out but when she'll be back, we'll take you down north so you won't have to sit on the street." So I went down to pick her up and here, old Aunt Molly was a Kluxman. She had this robe rolled up under her arm. She started preaching to me. "Are you a member, don't you belong?" She had been out here to the Klan parade. She didn't have any transportation and she had to go on the street car. She must have been pretty sincere about it.

J: Some pretty good people joined the Klan. What types of job or work or position did these people hold? Were there doctors or lawyers? What types of...you said some pretty good people from good background...

L: I couldn't say that I knew of any doctors or lawyers who were members. There probably were. Most of them were people in business or worked in the shops. They were good people, they weren't all radicals.

J: People who owned some of the local small businesses?

L: I think so. I couldn't name them.

J: Hard working people who generally had pretty good reputation in the community?

L: This fellow that mentioned it first to me at the Legion meeting, he became a very active member. He was a good man. He was a printer, though, by trade. He worked for the Salem News. He wasn't a radical, normally, but apparently... A lot of people would tell you radical, anti-Catholic in those days.

J: Did the Klan get involved in politics locally, do you know? Did they support people for office or hold parades on behalf...

L: They held parades now and then. There was a Dr. Kondrad who was a dentist here in town, who became an active Klansman, and he started going around and raiding saloons and things like that. He went in some place in Youngstown one night and somebody killed him over there. When Dr. Kondrad's funeral was arranged here in town, there was Klansmen on every corner in Salem in robes directing traffic. They had a whole lot of them all around town here. They were a real big thing of the Kluxmen.

J: Did you ever meet this Dr. Kondrad?

L: Oh, I knew who he was. I don't think I...He was an older man then, than I was.

J: Say, around 1923, did the Klan support someone for Mayor or City Council?

L: I don't know of any person who was in politics that they actively supported. They probably did but they didn't get up and shout for...

J: So you didn't see any campaign, so to speak, by the Klan?

L: No.

J: Because, for example, up in Youngstown, in that area, they entered politics and they elected a Mayor in Youngstown, Warren, Niles, Struthers, in 1923, as well as most of the City Councilmen in those cities, as well.

L: We didn't have that. They were not quite that active in Salem. I think when things like, when they had Dr. Kondrad's funeral was held, I think a lot of these fellows in robes were probably from Youngstown or out of town that came here.

J: Yes, I picked up his name in the Youngstown Vindicator when he was killed.

L: Dr. Kondrad?

J: Yes. And he was a well-known, as you suggested, raider on stills and there seems to be a connection between the Prohibition Movement and the Klan Movement. That's another question, which I had for you. Were the Catho-

lics or immigrants in town, seen as violaters of the prohibition law? Were those areas that were suspected of having stills or...

L: No, I don't think so. I don't know particularly why there was that connection with the Klan and the stills. The Catholics weren't any more law offenders than the Protestents, I don't think.

J: Are there any other things that you remember about the Klan?

L: My sister and some of her friends wanted to go to a parade in Alliance and I took them up in my car. We were watching this parade and there was a fellow that I knew real well, Grover Stall, I don't know if you wanted me to mention his name or not. Grover had failed to report when he was drafted into the Army and the Army came here and dragged him in by his heels to get him into the service. Well, we were watching this parade and here was a car coming a long with an American flag on the hood and here was Grover Stall with his big fat ass on the American flag waving to fans.

J: So he was all for America but he had avoided the...

L: Yes, he used to be a good friend of mine. We both worked at the same place. He was a nice enough fellow and everything but he had no business sitting on the American flag. Then, that same night, some of these fellows come and surrounded me and started asking me questions. "Are you a Protestant, are you American born..." And you know. "Why don't you belong?" I got out of it someway without getting beat up. There were about four or five girls.

J: Do you know what caused the Klan to loose its reception in this area?

L: Well, it started, you know, going back in Civil War days. As I say, I think it was just hysteria after the World War I.

J: The hysteria just kind of petered out?

L: It petered out eventually, yes. I don't think it was more than two or three years that they had these big shows around here. They put up a big cross on some farm and they had probably several hundred sheets.

J: Were there any churches directly associated with the Klan or appeared to be directly associated more than others? Preachers?

L: There was one preacher, his name was Harmon, a very

good friend of mine, he was an ex-soldier. We called him Jud Harmon because we had a governor called Jud Harmon. Jud Harmon, anyway, was the minister of the Trinity Lutheran Church. It was a good church here in town, Protestant. This was in the paper, as I recall, I don't remember just when but one night, the Klansmen, several in their robes, marched into the church and presented them with an American flag. Jud accepted it. I figured Jud wasn't antagonistic to them. They must have known it. He was a nice fellow. He was a big, powerful fellow. He was a football player, a college athlete. He was the only one, as far as I know, that ever publicly thanked him for giving him a flag.

J: You say you fought in World War I, were you drafted or did you enlist? What was your experience?

L: We organized a home-town platoon here in Salem when the war broke out. I joined that. I got on...I was wounded, in fact I lost a leg over there. I don't like to talk too much about the experience. My one brother, and my sister; the three of us were in the service at the same time.

J: You mentioned before, that during the war, you had met some Catholics and had a pretty good experience with at least one friend of yours who was Catholic, and you helped to save. Was your attitude different about Catholics before the war? Were you somewhat suspicious of Catholics or did you feel very comfortable and the war just...

L: I don't recall that I ever felt uncomfortable. My Catholic friends were my friends, just the same as everybody else. I played with kids when I was small...

J: Was there a big Catholic population in Salem in 1910, 1920?

L: There must have been. They've always had a good church here. Yes.

J: What church, in particular, did they...Or did they have several churches?

L: They only had one here in Salem. They still have one. Saint Paul. Salem isn't as big as Youngstown.

J: Do you recall who the priest was back then?

L: I don't recall who was here when. One of them was named Fr. Heneran. I don't remember him very well. There was a Fr. Casey. I knew some of them but I forgot their names. I don't recall them anymore. Fr. Heneran was a pioneer in the radio business. Televi-

sion wasn't even heard of in those days. When I came back from the Army, we heard radio but we called it wireless to lend it. I knew about telegraphs. Western Union, they had wires everywhere. Then they invented this wireless Marconi so they could send electrical currents without wires. We called it wireless in those days. My mother had a good friend, I think Fr. Heneran was the Catholic priest at that time. I think he was the fellow. He had a tower there that and was a pioneer in radio business and he became a friend of hers. She told me about Fr. Heneran would call her up once in a while when he had a program on and she could get on the phone and listen to him. Well, all I was used to was dots and dashes. I had worked as a messenger boy. That's what I thought wireless was. She called me to the phone one day and Fr. Heneran had called her and all eyes. I didn't hear any dots or dashes, all I heard was an orchestra. She said, "Well, that's it." That's how I found out you could transmit voices of people on the radio.

J: And you were amazed?

L: I sure was.

J: Once the Klan had left Salem, or died out, were there anymore problems between, say, Catholic and Protestant in this city?

L: Not that I recall at all. The only problem I ever had was they had a Catholic school there. I had to go by it on my way to school and the Catholic kids would come and bomb us with snowballs. So we usually got so that we'd go around the block, half a dozen of us though, at one time. That was just fun.

J: That wasn't because they were Catholic and you were Protestant, it was just...

L: They were in a crowd in front of their schoolhouse. No there was nothing. There was nothing there at all. I don't recall any anti-Catholicism. I do recall this paper that they used to throw around the house. Who did it, I don't know. They called it, The Appeal To Reason. It told things that Catholics were supposed to take oath to kill people and things like that. Very radical, lack of equality. It never affected me very much.

J: They would put it on your doorstep, leave it on your doorstep for you to read.

L: Yes.

J: I'd like to thank you for you time in doing this inter-
view.

L: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW