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destruction of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of  
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## Prologue

The Ku Klux Klan is an organization whose very mention calls to mind two very distinct images. On the one hand, there is the image of the gray-haired men accompanied by their younger apprentices who appear on television talk shows. Many are from places like Vidor, Texas, or Denham Springs, Louisiana, and all spew a venomous rhetoric of racial separation and white supremacy. They are in plain view (gratuitously, some might say of their appearance on daytime talk shows like Ricki Lake and Geraldo) and most are the subject of scorn and even derisive laughter by the on-screen audience as well as the off-screen one. Is it the twisted, long-discredited Darwinian pseudo-science that attempts to set the white race apart as a separate species that makes them so funny? Is it the garish costume complete with conical hood? Or does the source of the laughter lie in the knowledge that this group's tired philosophy and effete methods of gaining power are no longer capable of effecting an agenda? To be sure, not so long ago most people had quite a different perception of the Klan, especially those in Mississippi. During the 1960's, the Klan reemerged in a new and more violent way than it ever had before. All Mississippians, whether black or white, Jewish, Catholic or even Protestant, had reason to fear the secret group of nighttime marauders; a trepidation that has all but completely disappeared. Whatever the reason, one may be certain that the Ku Klux Klan no longer has the South, Mississippi, or the United States in a vice-grip of terror and anarchy. The process that brought the Klan down from such a position of fear and relegated it to disdain was largely a judicial one. That is, from the late 1960s to the present day there have been many trials in which members of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi have been charged with various acts of violence and terror. As those trials progressed and were highly publicized, the public became much more acutely aware of the heinous

and illegal nature of the Klan's activities as well as the hypocrisy of its ideology. Thus the ultimate demise of the Klan in Mississippi can be traced back primarily to two events: the murder of three CORE workers in Neshoba County and the murder of Vernon Dahmer. The Neshoba County murders were largely responsible for involving the federal authorities and statutes in the enforcement of civil rights in the South and the trials following the murder of Vernon Dahmer were the means by which the true nature of the Klan was exposed and its hierarchy toppled.

For a few brief moments in the last 135 years of American history, the Ku Klux Klan was among the most visible interest groups in the body politic. These moments are widely dispersed because the nature of the Klan, with its appeals to fear and reaction, is subject to sharp peaks and valleys in membership numbers as well as political clout. Determining the truth about the origins of one of America's first terrorist organizations is difficult precisely because it is unceremonious and unflattering. Often the early leaders of the Klan, once it had achieved its more sinister form of existence, attempted to dress up the founding of the Klan so as to raise its stature. As well, they attempted to use the history of the organization to cast their cause as one for the ages, an on-going and centuries-long war. In contrast, some have attempted to oversimplify the rise of the Klan by characterizing its birth as a second attempt by Southerners to win the Civil War. Yet, the reality of the rise and eventual fall of the Ku Klux Klan is fantastic enough without any added element of fiction.

Throughout the 1960s, Klan members maintained publicly that the organization was a benevolent one devoted to upholding Christian (if wholly Protestant) ideals. The source for such rhetoric may be found in the humble beginnings of the Klan. In the small town of Pulaski, Tennessee, six men returned from the Civil War and were anxious to quench the ennui of mundane life by forming a kind of fraternity.<sup>1</sup> They also decided that membership should be secret and

involve esoteric (even bizarre) titles and rituals. The name was derived from the Greek word *kyklos* (pronounced koo-kloss), to which English is indebted for the words cycle and circle. After some further tweaking, the group settled on the official name of Ku Klux Klan. The leader of the club was called the Grand Cyclops and other officers included a Lictor, a Grand Turk, and a Grand Magi. The members were known as ghouls and (mostly for entertainment) the organization began dressing in sheets and riding through town on horseback.

The rides stirred such a controversy that the group quickly expanded to neighboring towns. Through the process of this expansion, the members of the Klan discovered that their nighttime rides were particularly frightening to the black people of the area. The rides then quickly precipitated confrontations with black families in which the men castigated the people they encountered and informed them that if the family was not better-behaved in the future, the ghouls would return. They even occasionally were so puerile as to send a lone rider (fully dressed in sheets and hood) to a black home where he requested water and proceeded to appear to drink several buckets and then explain before riding off that he had not had anything to drink since Shiloh. The prank worked because concealed beneath the flowing robe was a leather bag into which the water was poured by means of a rubber tube while the Klansman pretended to be drinking.<sup>2</sup> Within months, these pranks escalated from bizarre (if nonviolent) harassment to whippings reminiscent of the past. That is, prior to the Civil War, many Southern farmers had become increasingly concerned as they were surrounded in daily life by ever-increasing numbers of black people. These farmers began to harbor deep-seated fears, even to the point of paranoia, that these black slaves would revolt. In response to those fears, citizens were often deputized for the express purpose of night patrols. As part of their duty, the men were allowed to exact punishment in the form of whippings from those they caught. The Klan soon used this tradition to its advantage

and learned its first lesson in terrorism by creating hybrids from older forms of punishment and so-called justice and using those hybrids to exact terror not only from blacks, but also whites (especially “carpetbaggers”<sup>3</sup>).

Meanwhile, the loose reconstruction of the Johnson administration was failing miserably. The new state governments were controlled by the same people who had controlled them before the war, many of whom had been Confederate soldiers and leaders. Some states were determined to re-entrench white power and prevent the equal treatment of black people under the law. The conflict came to a head when, despite President Johnson’s veto, Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts in 1867. These acts essentially resulted in a military occupation of Southern states. The military was charged with registering voters (including blacks), holding elections, and setting up governments to rule the recalcitrant former Confederacy. This move by the radical Republicans sparked a response from the Klan. A meeting was called in Nashville, Tennessee, to which each Klavern (the term for a local chapter) was to send representatives. That meeting was a watershed moment in the life of the Ku Klux Klan in that it was during that meeting about the future nature of the organization that the representatives officially adopted white supremacy as Klan doctrine. The pranks ceased altogether and real terrorism, of a sort that would be repeated in decades to come, began.

The resulting wave of violence also taught the fledgling organization that while it may desire to bring attention to itself for the purpose of recruitment, public knowledge of the criminal acts of Klansmen would also gain the attention of law enforcement agencies and state governments. A lesson that would prove ultimately valuable for the Klan in the twentieth century was catastrophic in the nineteenth. Following the increasingly frequent and violent attacks, state governments and the Union Army took measures to quell the Klan. Those measures failed at first, probably because of the Klan’s size. By the end of the 1860s, the Ku Klux Klan had an estimated

three million members and supporters. The success of the Klan at avoiding accountability for their actions, however, was short-lived. As the violence of the Klansmen increased in the late 1860s, so too did the negative press coverage. Across the nation, newspapers were brimming with horror stories of acts committed in the name of the Ku Klux Klan as well as accounts of the internal skirmishes within the Klan and the resulting violence.

All of this frenzied activity came to a head in 1871 when Congress first held hearings on the nature of the Klan and thereafter passed very tough federal anti-Klan laws. The Ku Klux Klan was no longer permitted to ride at night or wear their hoods. To give the laws teeth, Congress granted the President authority to declare martial law in areas where Southern law enforcement was either incapable or uncooperative in upholding these statutes.

The Klan sank into a speedy and steady decline. The federal statutes may have helped, but as much as anything, the Klan did it to themselves through infighting and trouble with judicial authorities. The ultimate irony is that the Klan actually hastened its own demise precisely because it was effective at accomplishing its goals. That is, many black people and white supporters of equality were either murdered or at least harassed to the point that they did not register to vote. The decline in the number of black and/or Republican voters permitted the white supremacists who ran as Democrats to regain easily the power base they had once had in the state governments. Once that power was regained, the Klan's tactics (crude as they were) were no longer necessary or useful to the white supremacists; their agenda could be accomplished in subtler, less violent, and what they hoped were more palatable ways.

The Ku Klux Klan was, for all purposes, dead until William J. Simmons resurrected the organization in 1915. Most attribute Simmons' desire to restart the Klan less to any devotion to white supremacy and more to a desire to make money. He re-instituted the Ku Klux Klan at Stone

Mountain, Georgia during the Thanksgiving holiday by busing himself and fifteen friends to the top of the mountain. Membership remained low until, following the close of World War I, Simmons contracted with two Atlanta publicists to give them eighty percent of the profits of the organization in exchange for their recruitment services. The publicists changed the course of the organization when they determined that the way to recruit more new people was to become ardently patriotic and even xenophobic. As studious marketers, Edward Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler recognized the growing trend in Americans toward isolationism and (even more so) toward the rejection of all things foreign. Domestically, that tendency translated to a heightened sense of ethnocentrism. The problem arose for these new leaders when, once ignited, the fire of racism soon blazed out of control. It was not long before members of the Ku Klux Klan were once again committing atrocious acts of violence in the name of God and country. The problem was amplified by the local law enforcement officials and judicial officers throughout the country who ignored (or worse participated in) the acts of the Klan.

Once again, the public became outraged, incensed by an expose series published in the New York World newspaper. The articles in that and other newspapers offered evidence of the Klan's immorality and the improper behavior of its members, even publishing stories on the arrest of two top officials who were caught in various states of undress in a "bawdy house" in 1919. The outrage of the public and the attention focused on the Klan by the press once again resulted in hearings by Congress. This time, though, those hearings and the resulting policies had little effect on the Ku Klux Klan. Simmons, like Nathan Bedford Forrest before him, managed to equivocate his way around every accusation and deny any connection of the Klan to illicit activities.

Perhaps in response to increased public attention, violence by Klansmen increased. And again, while blacks were the primary targets, some whites were also victims of Klan retaliation.



The Ku Klux Klan had, once again, become a vigilante distributor of “justice.” Klansmen would summarily execute blacks, Jews, and even white women who were considered “immoral.” An example of this is that an Alabama woman who was divorced and then remarried was flogged and then given only Vaseline for her wounds. This example is not intended, however, to perpetuate the notion that the Klan was a specifically Southern problem. By the 1920s, there were Klaverns in Oklahoma, California, Oregon, and many states in the Midwest. Despite its second meteoric rise, by the mid-1920s, the Klan again went into decline. The public had become outraged by incidents of violence against white people, particularly Protestant white people. The Klan was under increasing attacks from the clergy as well as the media. The critical event in the decline of the Klan was a lawsuit filed by the national organization against a local Klavern that attempted to separate. During the trial, the breakaway Klavern called witnesses to the stand who told countless stories of gruesome atrocities committed by the Ku Klux Klan. With the onset of the Great Depression and the public exposure of Klan violence, the organization went into serious national decline. The Ku Klux Klan was nearly extinguished when the Internal Revenue Service filed a lien against it for \$685,000 in back taxes and penalties.

The cycle was to repeat itself one more time following World War II. With the great influx of immigrants and the economic recovery, xenophobia was once again a social force with which to be reckoned. This time, however, increasing pressures from law enforcement agencies and escalating internal strife caused the organization to splinter into many local or statewide independent organizations. Such was the case for Sam Bowers when he created the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. Though there were Klans from Texas to Pennsylvania and throughout the Midwest, nowhere was the Klan more virulent than in the Deep South and perhaps nowhere more violent and powerful than when under Bowers’ control. There were Klan members

who occupied important positions within many communities, including judges, attorneys, ministers, and merchants. Many of those who were not in the Klan were sympathetic to it, although some were less sympathetic to the Klan than they were scared by it. At its height, fear of or sympathy with the Klan was so rampant that few dared to stand up to it and those who did often met with disastrous results or even death. The fall of the modern Klan, though slower than its rise, was equally as dramatic.

There are two events whose consequences are seminal for understanding the demise of the power structure and influence exerted by the Ku Klux Klan. The first occurred in and following June 1964 when three civil rights workers, two of whom were white, were murdered outside Philadelphia, Mississippi (in Neshoba County). Later the subject of the popular movie Mississippi Burning, the murders precipitated an avalanche of national media coverage of the state of Mississippi and elicited the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The second is the murder of Vernon Dahmer, a leader in the Mississippi branch of the Civil Rights Movement.

To understand Vernon Dahmer, one must also understand the character of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. Various writers have characterized the Mississippi version of the Civil Rights Movement as having a distinctly populist character.<sup>4</sup> That is, in Alabama and Georgia and elsewhere, leaders were able to effect increasingly great strides toward equality by using boycotts, mass demonstrations, protests, and speeches. By contrast, in Mississippi the most effective means often involved less radical modes and more gradual change. Fannie Lou Hamer, among others, believed that creating real change required that black people change themselves. They must become literate and educated; the leaders of the movement must begin to shatter the fetters of ignorance which had kept the black race down so easily for too long.<sup>5</sup> That is not to say that the philosophy of those working for equality in Mississippi was any less radical, for the notions of

black people getting an education and voting were still quite radical, but the methods chosen to effect equality in Mississippi were less radical. The main focus of the NAACP, CORE, COFO, and other organizations in Mississippi was on registering black people to vote. In order to do that, they had to pass a test and that test required that they be literate. Thus in the late 1950s and early 1960s, so-called “freedom schools” where educated black people taught the uneducated how to read and write were formed. They even instructed them on the information likely to appear on the test began to spring up all over the state.<sup>6</sup> The task was a daunting one: the tests were designed to be failed by those who took them, so the questions were detailed and extremely difficult. Preparation for such an examination often included memorizing the entire Constitution of the United States. Because of the “freedom schools,” many people became educated well enough to pass the test. Despite the economic hardships placed on both the teachers and the pupils, the schools experienced some degree of success.

The next hurdle placed before them was to acquire the requisite cash to pay the poll tax. If someone managed to get the money, he still may have to face the crowd of angry, abusive white supremacists lingering around the local courthouse. As stories of the efforts of the civil- rights workers in Mississippi began to spread, sympathizers from outside the state began to join the effort. Often these sympathizers were college students and many were white. Such was the case with the murders in Philadelphia.

The year 1964 was the same year the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi was formed, and Bowers was itching to test its power. While the men had committed lynchings, cross burnings, and church burnings throughout the early months of the year, none of these actions seemed to reflect the awesome authority of God that Bowers believed his new organization should affect. This confusion and frustration would not last long. Indeed, it likely ceased the same day

Mickey Schwerner and his wife Rita arrived in Meridian. The young Jewish (and ardently atheist) couple moved to Mississippi from New York in order to run the Freedom House for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Their primary job was to orchestrate the local voter registration drive. Of all the facets of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, the push for voting rights, and the free exercise thereof, was the effort Bowers found most distasteful. Indeed, black voters were utter anathema to the ultra-segregationist Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Simply said, “Goatee”, as Bowers nicknamed Schwerner, was just about the worst thing one could possibly be in the world of Sam Bowers: Jewish, atheist, supportive of civil rights, and from the North.<sup>7</sup> Bowers was quoted by Seth Cagin and Philip Dray as going so far as to say that Schwerner “should be taken care of.” And just as what was to be called “the long, hot summer” began, the Imperial Wizard got just what he wanted.<sup>8</sup> Bowers’ fellow Klansmen had understood the comment to be more than a wish; indeed, they took it as a command.

Mickey Schwerner went to Ohio for the first part of the summer to be trained how to operate the CORE facility. He returned on June 21 to find that Mt. Zion Baptist Church, so far the only church in rural Neshoba County willing to host CORE meetings, had been burned and the members harassed. As the Klan suspected (and perhaps as they had foreseen), Schwerner immediately went out to the area to visit with the church members. He was accompanied in a little, white station wagon by James Chaney (a local CORE worker) and Andrew “Andy” Goodman, a white worker down for the Summer from New York.

The men made several stops in the area before being stopped by a local deputy, Cecil Price. Schwerner and company were arrested and held in the Neshoba County Jail until around 10:30 p.m. when they were released on orders from the Sheriff. As they quickly made their way out of town, the flashing lights of a police car were again seen behind them. This time they must have known it

was trouble because a high-speed chase ensued. When the police car finally caught the station wagon, Price, himself a Klansman, turned Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman over to three members of the Ku Klux Klan. They were then driven to the outskirts of Philadelphia. Just before Schwerner was shot at point blank range in the chest, he was asked by one of the Klansmen, Alton Roberts, if he were, “that nigger lover.” Following Goodman’s subsequent execution, another Klansman, Jim Jordan became so excited that he climbed to the top of his vehicle and shouted, “save one for me.” He then fired several rounds into James Chaney and remarked somewhat disappointedly that, “You didn’t leave me anything but a nigger, but at least I got to kill me a nigger.”<sup>9</sup>

Well into the following afternoon, a local Choctaw tribesman discovered the station wagon and reported it to the authorities. What began as a local investigation escalated furiously as no other investigation ever had. Soon, Neshoba County, Mississippi, was flooded with state police. The state police then called upon 400 sailors from the naval base at Pascagoula to be sent to aid in the effort. The next group to join the hunt proved the most fateful for the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. The Federal Bureau of Investigation set up an office and assigned 153 agents to search for the three missing bodies. Bowers immediately used this “invasion” by the FBI as a great source of propaganda and a way to focus his recruitment efforts. Perhaps even he was surprised at how well it worked. By the fall, the White Knights could boast over 6,000 members and the organization was growing every day. William McIlhany quotes Bowers as “gleeful” that the Klansmen had, “planned and carried out the execution of a Jew.” But even as Bowers glowed privately, he publicly denied any involvement by himself or the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in the affair.<sup>10</sup>

Bowers responded to the increasing criticism from the swarming media with an angry rebuff. According to Wyn Wade in The Fiery Cross, Bowers wrote,

“We are now in the midst of the ‘long, hot summer’ of agitation which was promised to the Innocent People of Mississippi by the savage blacks and their Communist masters . . . we were NOT [Bowers’ emphasis] involved, and there was NO DISAPPEARANCE . . . we refuse to be concerned or upset about this fraud. What we are concerned about is the welfare of the citizens of the State of Mississippi . . . We are going to serve notice that we are not going to recognize the authority of any bi-racial group, NOR THE AUTHORITY OF ANY PUBLIC OFFICIAL WHO ENTERS INTO ANY AGREEMENT WITH ANY SUCH SOVIET ORGANIZATION. We Knights are working day and night to preserve law and order here in Mississippi, in the only way it can be preserved: by the strict segregation of the races, and the control of the social structure in the hands of the Christian, Anglo-Saxon White men, the only race on earth that can build and maintain just and stable governments. We are deadly serious about this business. Take heed, atheists and mongrels, we will not travel your path to a Leninist Hell, but we will buy YOU a ticket to the Eternal if you insist. Take your choice, SEGREGATION, TRANQUILITY AND JUSTICE, or, BI-RACISM, CHAOS, AND DEATH.”<sup>11</sup>

As the area became increasingly filled with “carpetbaggers,” like FBI agents and national newsmedia, members began to flock to the Klan. Bowers pitched the Philadelphia situation as a microcosm of the renewed struggle of the state and its people against the “nigger-communist,” federal authorities, and the Godless people of the media and the Academy. Then, on August 4, the biggest break yet in the case happened; the bodies were found. The FBI had been tipped that they might find the dead men in an earthen dam located on the property of known Klansman Olen Burrage and indeed, the bodies of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman were discovered there. Bowers was riding such a high that even this could not dampen his spirits, for he proclaimed that, “a jury would not dare convict a white man for killing a nigger in Mississippi.”<sup>12</sup> For a time, Bowers was right. He and several others were charged and tried for the murders of Schwerner,

Chaney, and Goodman and all of the trials ended in deadlocked juries. The trend of the Klan committing crimes and getting away with it did not begin to change until 1966 with the murder of Vernon Dahmer. Dahmer's murder was seen as somehow different from the various other crimes committed by the Klan. He was not accused of rape (an excuse that had been so often used in previous decades), he was not from the North, and he was not a demonstrator. Dahmer was, by all accounts, a Mississippian who loved Mississippi and whose family had lived in the Hattiesburg area for many generations. He was also a well-respected businessman. Charles Marsh cites that after Dahmer's murder, the local law enforcement agencies gave the FBI a great deal more cooperation in trying to quell the activities of the Klan. Prior to that time, the FBI had often "played softball"<sup>13</sup> with the Klan. Though most of the Klansmen would initially escape punishment for the murders in Neshoba County as well as the murder of Vernon Dahmer, the cooperation of the various law enforcement agencies as well as dissidents within the Klan itself began the long judicial process of trials, mistrials, and retrials that over a thirty-five-year period of time would result in the demise of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. This work will recapitulate the murder of Vernon Dahmer, summarize the life and philosophy of Sam Bowers, briefly detail the Neshoba County murders, and serve as a guide through the 1969 federal Civil Rights trial, the largest and most sweeping of the trials to involve the Klan.

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<sup>1</sup> Staff, "History of the Ku Klux Klan," a report compiled for the Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999. Much of the information regarding the history of the Ku Klux Klan that is presented hereafter was taken from that report, which is available at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 10.

<sup>3</sup> A term used after the Civil War to refer to whites who had moved South. Some brought all of their possessions with them in a carpet bag, hence the term.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>7</sup> William H. McIlhany, *Klandestine*, (New Rochelle, NY: New Arlington House, 1975), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*...67.

<sup>9</sup> Cagin and Day, *We Are Not Afraid*, 295 as quoted in Charles Marsh's *God's Long Summer*.

<sup>10</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: the KKK in America*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 340.

<sup>12</sup> McIlhany, *Klandestine*...22.

<sup>13</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*...72



## CHAPTER ONE: give him a three and a four

December 1965 was an uncomfortable time for the members of the Jones County Klavern as well as the whole of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. They had a reprieve from the Neshoba County murders, but matters were spiraling downhill as special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation continued to “invade” Mississippi. The opinion of Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard and founder of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, that “a jury would not dare convict a white man for killing a nigger in Mississippi,”<sup>1</sup> had so far held true, but the atmosphere of tolerance for hate was slowly eroding. The Klan endured increased pressure and tension when its members were arrested for murder and the victims were white. Added to that, Congress passed and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Furthermore, the House Committee on Un-American Activities had summoned Bowers to Washington, D.C. to appear and testify regarding the Klan. “Projects” were neglected and delayed; amidst all of the turmoil, Klan tasks were left incomplete. An official meeting was called by Imperial Wizard Bowers; something had to be done.

A meeting was, therefore, called so that the White Knights might discuss what to do about the situation. Bowers began the meeting, “Something has to be done about that white nigger, Dahmer.”<sup>2</sup> “White nigger” was the nickname Bowers gave to Dahmer because Dahmer was so lightly pigmented that he was often mistaken for a white man. Dennis Dahmer believes that in many ways his family’s light skin caused people to give them advantages others were not afforded. It was virtually impossible for anyone to see Vernon Dahmer and not realize that there were white people in his ancestry.<sup>3</sup> For a zealot of racial purity like Bowers, Dahmer’s skin tone

only added fuel to the fire of hate. Bowers and the group then proceeded to firm up plans to do something, without making a specific or legally damning plan of action. Cecil Sessum recalled, "I attended a special meeting which had been called by Sam Bowers . . . I asked Bowers what they intended to do with Dahmer, and he said that this was a matter which would have to be decided at the time the actual hit was made, or possibly during a dry run prior to the hit. Bowers said he was going to take the Dahmer matter into his own hands, and that Dahmer had to be stopped . . ."<sup>4</sup>

But stopped from what? What was Dahmer's crime that was so heinous that the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi felt the necessity to take the matter into his own hands and handle the project personally? The answer is that Vernon Dahmer had been a thorn in the side of the White Knights for years. At one time he was the head of the Hattiesburg chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. That position often carried with it heavy baggage. He was constantly called in the middle of the night to host visiting students who worked for the NAACP in their effort to teach people how to read and write and memorize enough information to pass the tests given to black people attempting to vote. When the sheriff or the local police arrested students who protested or sought to change these laws, Vernon Dahmer was often called away from work or sleep to bail the young people out of jail. Many times the racist presence at the Forrest County Courthouse was enough to prevent potential black voters from attempting to register. But now, pursuant to the most recent effort of the federal government to aid the Civil Rights Movement, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, it was a felony to intimidate or attempt to intimidate anyone desiring to vote or register to vote.<sup>5</sup>

Dahmer doubled efforts to encourage people to vote. Indeed, he led voter registration drives throughout the rural Kelly settlement just north of Hattiesburg and within Hattiesburg

itself. This struck at the heart of the Klan's power base. The proponents of the separation and segregation of the races held, as their most sacred ground, white-only participation in civil matters, i.e. elections. The source of political participation as a sign of racial superiority can be traced far back in western civilization. Whether it comes from the Roman notion of the 'cives' as separate from those living in the 'provincia' (e.g. the Gauls) or from the German thought of the 'buerger' as differentiated from the 'mensch', the idea of the citizen as separate from the man has most recently survived in American culture in the form of slavery and then the "Jim Crow" laws. The older, arrogant Patrician families of Rome were incensed when Claudius allowed the Gauls to become full and participating citizens in 37 A.D. and the Klan was enraged when the United States Congress attempted to do something similar in the late 1960s. To the Klan, the surest sign that their battle was beginning to necessitate desperate measures was the steadily increasing number of blacks registering to vote. Mississippi was, after all, one of the only states in the union where in many counties black people accounted for a majority.

Signs and fliers with verses and poems and slogans began to circulate in support of the Klan. Once such flier that the Ku Klux Klan members circulated widely after the Neshoba County murders read,

They number in the thousands, this courageous band,/ God go with them, the Ku Klux  
Klan./ Gallant men these, tried and true,/ dedicating their lives to protect me and you./  
Now listen, you COMMUNIST and NIGGERS and JEWS,/ Tell all your buddies to  
spread the news./ Your day of judgment will soon be nigh,/ As the Lord in his wisdom  
looks down from on high./ Will this battle be lost? Never I say,/ for the KU KLUX  
KLAN is here to stay!!!<sup>6</sup>

Now the Klan and its leaders were prepared to do more than intimidate, to do more than circulate words of hate. Yet, even many of the members of the conspiring group who had

instincts about what was eventually going to happen were not sure exactly in what they had involved themselves; they knew they had made the somewhat nebulous resolution to “handle” Vernon Dahmer, but some (in statements of remorse afterward) even seemed a bit naive as to precisely what was meant by “handle”. The exact meaning of that term would become all too clear in a matter of just a couple of weeks.

Sunday, January 9, 1966, remains stark in the memory of the surviving Dahmers. It began as any other Sunday had during those turbulent years. The family awakened, had breakfast together, and then scurried about in haste to get themselves dressed and ready for church. Dennis Dahmer, the son of Vernon Dahmer, described Sunday as a special day for the Lord, the family, and the community.<sup>7</sup> The church was the community's meeting place and because of that, Dennis explained that church and community were intertwined and even inseparable. The church had long been an integral part of the black community. During slavery, church attendance was one of the few breaks allowed in the harsh regimen of the slave. In the decades since the end of slavery, black people had often been denied their Constitutional right to assemble peaceably, especially if the purpose of that gathering was to discuss civil rights. Thus the one assembly they were still permitted, church, often became the venue for political messages. Because religion was so engrained a part of the Southern black culture, it was the only time that anyone could be certain to find most of the members of the community gathered together for a common purpose.

After church, the family always had a big dinner and then spent the rest of the day relaxing. Dennis, a twelve-year-old child at the time, was fond of playing with the children of neighboring families. “Sunday was a big play day for all the children in the area,”<sup>8</sup> Dahmer said and then explained that this was because the people in the community all worked very hard

during the week and often the children had to help with that work. Sunday was also the one day of rest for adults. Though they were comparatively well off, the Dahmer family was in many ways no different from anyone else. They too worked very hard during the week and took great solace in those Sunday rests.<sup>9</sup>

This Sunday was to be unlike any other they had ever experienced. The children scarcely comprehended the significance of what their father was doing as he stood up in church and announced that the next day, his store would begin serving as a location at which people could pay their poll taxes. Furthermore, Dahmer offered that if anyone could not pay their two-dollar poll tax, he would pay it for them.<sup>10</sup> Dahmer was able to make such an offer because the Sheriff of Forrest County had given him a poll tax receipt book. This is indicative of Dahmer's standing in the community. Dennis Dahmer stressed the point that his father was accepted by the white leaders and other people more than any other black man in Forrest County. The Sheriff also wanted to avoid confrontation and thought that by allowing people to pay their poll tax at Dahmer's store, he could preempt any sort of messy altercation with the Klan at the Courthouse.<sup>11</sup>

Dennis also explained that it was only natural that such an announcement be made at church, not just because of the cultural role the church played, but also because of the personal significance of the church to the Dahmers. The Shady Grove Baptist Church played an integral role in all of the Dahmers' lives. At the time of his murder, Vernon was the Superintendent of the Sunday school and, as Dennis remarked, "it was a rule; everyone in the house went to church on Sundays, no exceptions."<sup>12</sup>

It was not altogether unusual to have political messages and announcements delivered in church. Throughout the turbulent days of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, sermons

were often directed at or pertained to the struggle for equality. As previously stated, to understand Vernon Dahmer and his involvement in the Civil Rights movement is to understand the distinctive nature of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi. Charles M. Payne describes the Mississippi movement as one that was uniquely grassroots in its origin and its focus. It was run by local people and focused on real improvements in the lives of the community and the people . . . real change. They stressed voter registration, equal political rights, equal access to education, and other rights. They eschewed mass demonstrations and instead used door-to-door NAACP (as well as other organizations like CORE) membership drives.<sup>13</sup>

Mississippi civil rights activists could frequently be found travelling around the countryside from one broken-down house to another meeting the people, talking to them, listening to their concerns, and spreading the word that it was time for the people of Mississippi to unite to secure the rights they deserved. Perhaps Merlie Evers, wife of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers, best describes what it meant to be an activist in Mississippi during the early days of the movement. She explains that because her husband was the first field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi, it was often his duty to travel through the Mississippi countryside recruiting new members.<sup>14</sup> It was during these trips that Medgar was exposed to the clearest examples of abject poverty. People were living in what were essentially hovels. These “houses” (one would have to hesitate even using that word) were often little more than mud huts or a few planks stacked together. Many were in such poor condition that Medgar was surprised to find people actually living in them.<sup>15</sup>

As the people in the church rejoiced at the small miracle of being able to register to vote, which inched them one step closer to the so longed-for equality, there were others who became incensed and outraged. At approximately the same time that the announcement was being made

in the Shady Grove Baptist church, a local radio station was broadcasting that local activist and former NAACP chapter president Vernon Dahmer would be making his family's store available for use as a voter registration location. Dennis Dahmer described the reaction to the announcement as lacking any surprise. He said that it was well-known how active his father was in the Civil Rights Movement and nothing sticks out in his memory that would even make that day in church any different from other days. Dahmer also said that he believes that the proximity of the murder to the announcement of the Dahmer family store as a place to pay poll taxes might make for good drama, but it probably did not precipitate the actions later that day. He believes that the plans had been in the works for his father's removal for months.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, when the announcement was made, there were those nearby who were not going to tolerate Vernon Dahmer any longer. Meeting in a local diner as was their custom, Sam Bowers and several other officers in the Ku Klux Klan made the final arrangements for their nefarious activities that would take place that night and into the early morning of January 10, 1966.

In Dennis Dahmer's view, part of the heinousness of the attack lies in the consideration that none of the attackers were from Forrest County and. All were from Jones County. That is to say that many of the men who were planning to execute him did not know Vernon Dahmer. They knew only what Sam Bowers had told them. The murder of Vernon Dahmer and the attempted murder of his family was premeditated and done with malice aforethought.<sup>17</sup> So much so that one of the most damaging witnesses against Bowers in the 1998 prosecution of him for murder was Lucy Dunn. She was a surprise witness brought forth by the prosecution to testify that she heard Bowers bragging to people after the attack about what he and his boys had done to Dahmer.<sup>18</sup> Sam Bowers, who is currently being held in the Mississippi State Prison in Parchman has refused an interview and refused to answer written questions concerning the case.<sup>19</sup>

Bowers and the Klan had resolved weeks earlier to “handle” Dahmer; he had for many years been near the top of Bowers’ personal hit list. It is clear from what information is available on Sam Bowers that he had a flair for the dramatic. As a moderately successful, although basically middle class, businessman there was little excitement in Bowers’ life before his rise to power as the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Now, the supreme law-making body of the United States was lavishing attention on him by asking him to come to Washington, D.C. He mentioned several times, as has been testified to in the various trials and reported in the press, that he needed an event to make an impression before his imminent appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The announcement regarding the Dahmer store gave Bowers just the excuse for which he was looking. It presented him an opportunity to make the statement he wanted by converting the rhetoric of the Klan into action, a display that would follow him all the way to the Capitol.<sup>20</sup>

The evidence is very sketchy about the intervening time between Dahmer’s announcement and the attack. It is known that Bowers assembled his men and made the final preparations for the events that would take place late that night and early the next morning. Those preparations, according to Billy Roy Pitts, included two drives by the house late in the evening.<sup>21</sup> Dennis Dahmer agreed that several members of his family recall hearing cars come by the house late that night. They remember it because it was unusual in the Kelly community for anyone to come that way at that time of the night. And while the Dahmers had ceased the constant vigils they had at one time been forced to keep, they were still very aware of what was going on around them at all times.<sup>22</sup> That night, as always, Vernon and Ellie were sleeping with loaded guns within arm’s reach. Those loaded guns would be the difference between life and death for Ellie and the children.



At approximately 2:00 a.m. on January 10, 1966, two cars drifted with their lights off into the grassy area near the Dahmers' home. Reports since have established that one of the cars was blue and its owner reported it stolen later the next day in order to establish an alibi. Despite whatever preparations the assailants had made and despite whatever degree of professionalism they accorded themselves, the actual operation revealed that Bowers' men were merely haphazard cowards. They began by carrying bottles and jugs filled with gasoline toward the house. They had purchased the jugs in town, filled them with gasoline at one of the Klansmen's home, and then stuffed them with old rags. One car split off from the group and headed toward the family store, which was located near the house and was the home of Vernon's aunt. With the cars in position, the marauders began their assault with the jugs of "Molotov Cocktail". The plan was to give Vernon Dahmer and his family a "number three and a number four" -- Klan terms for a firebombing and a murder.<sup>23</sup>

Deducing the motivation of Sam Bowers when he ordered the attack done in such a particularly violent method is fairly simple. Bowers, not just a racist but a true student of racist and anti-Semitic philosophy, needed to destroy not just the man responsible for registering black people to vote in Forrest County, but the entire location at which this "sin" against Mississippi had been propagated. In Bowers' mind, white people were God's chosen people, and it was the work of Satan to attempt to make the inferior black man equal. Bowers' Klan even propagated the belief that black people were not human; they were a completely different species more closely linked to the ape.<sup>24</sup>

The reason the second car left the company of the first was to burn down the family-owned general store at which Dahmer and his family would soon have been registering people and even paying the two-dollar fee for them. The noise of a car horn blowing awoke Ellie

Dahmer at around 2:00 a.m. She later told reporters that she said, “Vernon, wake up, they’ve got us this time.”<sup>25</sup> That statement was poignantly prophetic.

What Mrs. Dahmer meant is that through most of the preceding years, there was always a family member standing guard and watching for just such a car to arrive. It had become clear to Vernon, particularly after Sam Bowers had ordered the murder of Medgar Evers, that he and his family must take some precautions against the same sort of attack. They began keeping nightly watches. Each family member would have certain nights when they would have to sit up watching and listening for would-be attackers. They also kept loaded guns in every room and slept with one right next to the bed. The Dahmers would turn the lights out in the front rooms at night so that they could see out, but no one could see in. They would also turn out the lights on the exterior of the house, and Vernon would turn off his headlights as he approached the house if returning home at night so that he would not be shot as Medgar Evers had been. These practices had gone on for years.<sup>26</sup> By 1966, however, the Dahmers had become lax in their precautions. The night of the attack the family did not have anyone watching.<sup>27</sup>

For most black people of the period this kind of protection was not necessary because they were more accustomed to economic pressures than physical harassment. For years, the White Citizens Councils and the Ku Klux Klan had kept track of those sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement and sought to punish them by uninstitutionalized (and hence uncontrollable) methods. Those who supported the Civil Rights movement were ostracized from white society. Most black people were tenant farmers, factory workers, or teachers. All of these occupations were subject to economic harassment. The farmers were refused the loans and credit that made it possible to purchase the necessary goods to sustain their families and their crops. The factory workers were fired and then the Klan was often able to ensure that no one else would hire them

afterward. The teachers were ostracized and often fired by local school boards, which had particularly detrimental effects on the employment possibilities for women. For them, it was often worse, because not only were they barred from teaching, but there were few opportunities for them to begin with; to lose their most prominent opportunity put the women in a very precarious economic position. It was also the case that the women often lost their jobs for the actions of their husbands and children.<sup>28</sup>

The economic racism was not always so blunt; indeed, sometimes it was even subtle. Teachers found to be sympathetic to the NAACP, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, The Coalition of Federated Organizations, or some other organization would sometimes be assigned to teach at schools where the pay was a lot lower than they had been getting or where they would have to travel long distances each morning to reach the school. Other times, department stores that had previously extended credit would no longer be willing to do so. Some might ask whether all of merchants, shop owners, school boards, superintendents, and other authorities were on the side of Sam Bowers and his henchmen. The answer is that there were certainly merchants who sat on the White Citizens Councils, but even then there were divisions. There were those who were actually racist and wanted very much to keep black people as oppressed as possible. There were also those, however, that were simply doing what they thought they had to do to keep their business. By 1966, Sam Bowers and the KKK had created such a culture of fear that even white people were usually afraid to oppose them. There were also those merchants who did not sit on the WCC's, but still ended up refusing to allow black people to shop in their stores. Often, these merchants were no more sympathetic to the KKK's cause than to the NAACP's.<sup>29</sup> They were merchants and felt pressured to do what was necessary to keep their business running. After all, it was this business that fed their families and

themselves. Most men and women were, therefore, often not in favor of changing the system.

Dennis Dahmer said that his father was angered by what he perceived as the cowardice of these people. He would argue with some of them, assuring them that they would never receive another dollar from him or his people.<sup>30</sup> The truth is that he had enough respect within the Hattiesburg community that if Vernon Dahmer encouraged his community to shop at locations that were friendly to black people and that treated them with the same courtesy as any other customer, most people would follow that recommendation and refuse to shop at those that did not.

Vernon himself was not as subject to the same kinds of economic pressures that most people were. In fact, as Dennis spoke of it, the Dahmers were almost completely insulated from economic pressure.<sup>31</sup> Vernon's family was well off for a black family. They owned a farm, a sawmill, and nearly all of the equipment needed to cultivate cotton (e.g. a tractor) and process lumber. Insulation from such pressure had always been a thorn in the side of the KKK and its followers. Dahmer was a man who defied all of the insidious stereotypes that white supremacy pedaled. He was intelligent, capable, successful, and well respected throughout the community.<sup>32</sup> It was that defiance that so angered Sam Bowers that he had placed Vernon Dahmer at the top of the hit list, which eventually spawned the January 1966 attack.

Vernon started from the bed as he smelled the smoke and heard the sounds of the glass windows shattering onto the floor. He and his wife Ellie acted quickly to wake the children. Fortuitously, most of the children were not in the house at the time. Only Dennis, Harold, and Betty were at home. The marauders began to fire their weapons into the house. Vernon then faced the reality that in order to save his family he would probably have to sacrifice himself. He began to return fire with the loaded shotgun he kept by the bed. This surprised the Klan

members and created the necessary diversion for his wife to do as he asked and get the children and herself out of the back window and away from the house. As Vernon continued to fire, reload, and fire again, the White Knights were in a panic. They were thoroughly untrained for a gun battle and responded in a thoroughly untrained, almost chaotic fashion.

The Klansmen became increasingly confused. Both cars were to have kept their headlights off throughout the raid, but the car next to the store suddenly had its lights on. Thinking that this was the Dahmers' car and not their own, the Klan members mistakenly fired on their own men.<sup>33</sup> That confusion added just the element necessary to ensure the safe escape of the Dahmer family. As Vernon continued to defend his wife and children against Bowers' men, the flames rapidly engulfed the house. Billy Roy Pitts, in one of the numerous trials subsequent to the murder, reported that he could hear screams of anguish coming from inside the house. Those screams were Vernon Dahmer suffering burns that would cover most of his body.<sup>34</sup>

As the confusion continued outside the house, the Klan members decided to leave. The undisciplined men had committed numerous errors. A neighbor of the Dahmers had seen the cars and Billy Roy Pitts had dropped his gun. The biggest mistake of all was yet to come; Sam Bowers bragged about the murder to some of his close personal friends.<sup>35</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan members piled back into their cars and rode away. Meanwhile, Ellie had reached the safety of a family member in the Kelly Settlement and the fire department had been called. Harold then borrowed his aunt's car and took the family to a nearby hospital where Vernon could be treated. The burns were severe, but the worst was that during the standoff Vernon had actually inhaled the fire. The flames scorched and seared his lungs beyond the powers of medicine to cure and almost beyond treatment. About all the doctors could do was

give him some medicine for the pain and hope that he could survive long enough for his own body to begin repairing itself. Vernon Dahmer would die five hours later in the presence of his wife and children.<sup>36</sup>

The nighttime raid on the Dahmer home was not the first such raid by the members of the Ku Klux Klan, but it would soon become the focal point of local, state, and federal law enforcement officials. And after thirty-five years, the case would also be the subject of dozens of trials and hundreds of newspaper articles. Bowers and his men had made the statement he desired before appearing before the HUAC in Washington, D.C., but Bowers could not have known the importance the night of January ninth and the morning of the tenth would have for their own lives as well as the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer* . . . 71.

<sup>2</sup> Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*. . . 235.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Dahmer, Interview with the author, 15 March, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*. . . 236.

<sup>5</sup> "Title 18, Section 241, U.S. Code, prohibits two or more persons from conspiring to injure, oppress, threaten, or intimidate any citizen in the free exercise or enjoyment of any right or privilege secure to him by the Constitution or laws of the United States – and also prohibits two or more persons from going in disguise on the highway, or on the premises of another, with intent to prevent or hinder his free exercise or enjoyment of any right so secured.

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, Don, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*...27.

<sup>7</sup> Dahmer Interview with the author . . . Much of the history of the Kelly Settlement and the Dahmer family here contained was derived from the interview with Dennis Dahmer.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Dennis made sure to mention that at times, his father had bailed people out of jail who had been arrested for one ostensible reason or another while attempting to register to vote.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Myrlie Evers-Williams, *For Us the Living*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Press), 128

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Dahmer, Interview with the author, 15 March 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Nicki Davis Maute, *The Hattiesburg American*, 12 August 1998.

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<sup>19</sup> Two letters were written to Bowers and a third included written questions that could be answered and sent back. No reply was ever received concerning any of the letters.

<sup>20</sup> James H. Downey, "Pitts Denies Making Any Deal," *The Hattiesburg American*, 1 May 1969.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Whitehead, *Attack On Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi...*234.

<sup>23</sup> Downey, "Pitts Denies Making Any Deal,"...

<sup>24</sup> Most of Bowers white-supremacist philosophy came from Thomas Dixon's books, *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*.

<sup>25</sup> James H. Downey, "Dahmer Widow Testifies at Miss. Conspiracy Trial," *The Hattiesburg American*, 30 April 1969.

<sup>26</sup> Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi...*235.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>28</sup> Dahmer, Interview with the author, 15 March 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Downey, "Pitts Denies Making Any Deal"...

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Maute, *The Hattiesburg American...*

<sup>36</sup> Dahmer, Interview with the author...



## CHAPTER TWO: Crusader of the Klan

In assessing the historical significance of the Dahmer murder and the trials that followed it, one must necessarily understand both Dahmer and Sam Bowers and the extent to which they adequately represent major participants in the struggle for civil rights in America. Because of the natural drama of such an event, it might be tempting to make caricatures out of the men. In avoiding such a mistake, a brief overview of the experiences and philosophy of Sam Bowers proves invaluable.

Perhaps because of the overriding influence of popular culture on modern thought, present day society has many stereotypes regarding how a Ku Klux Klansman or other political extremists should act. One is bombarded by Hollywood-produced images of those members of society who commit acts of savagery. The complexity of any well-grounded historical account of Samuel Holloway Bowers, jr. does not lie in the fact that he satisfies the stereotype to some degree, but the striking ways in which he does not. Perhaps the most frightening element of his story is that if he did meet the profile of the uneducated, ignorant, rural Klansman more precisely, he might never have been able to build and sustain the terrorist group that was the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Bowers' absolute insistence on secrecy and his innate intelligence, added to apathetic or ambivalent public opinion, enabled him not only to elude law enforcement for a number of years, but even made him difficult to convict once caught.

One of the common elements of the popular conception of Ku Klux Klan members is that they are uneducated and otherwise profoundly backward. This notion has its root, in this author's estimation, in the syllogism that society sets up for itself; namely, that racism is ignorant, ignorance is cured by education, and therefore all people who are educated are not racist. The logic does not quite work, though. Sam Bowers, who has been proud and even boastful of his Mississippi and overall Southern heritage, actually spent a great deal of time in New Orleans, a profoundly urban area where he attended one of the best high schools in the city and then even attended college afterward.

Sam Bowers was born in New Orleans in 1924 to Samuel H. Bowers senior, a salesman from Biloxi, and Evangeline Peyton Bowers, the daughter of a wealthy planter. For the better part of his life, Bowers has been concerned with the aristocratic nature that he perceives his family possesses. He cites that his paternal grandfather, Eaton J. Bowers, was a well-known attorney and a member of the United States Congress from the state of Mississippi. Bowers even goes so far as to claim to be descended from the first President of the Virginia House of Burgesses, the first governmental body assembled in America.<sup>1</sup> His parents divorced when Bowers was fourteen years old and he remained in the custody of his mother. Bowers recalls in an interview with Charles Marsh that his mother was very strict and brought him up to be a Southern gentleman. That meant that he was to be always polite and speak with perfect grammar and diction. She cultivated in him an appreciation and a mastery of language that would later become one of his greatest weapons.<sup>2</sup>

This heightened awareness of the role of language with all of its majestic trappings and tedious grammar did not, however, translate into formal, obedient behavior. Indeed, from early on in his school career, Bowers took great pleasure in defying the authority of his teachers. They appeared to him arbitrary and representative of illegitimate authority. They wanted to control his thoughts and actions without any reason for doing so. Bowers continued this defiant behavior into his adolescence as he attended Central High School in Jackson, Mississippi. He and his mother had moved to Jackson after her divorce from his father. There, Bowers even took pleasure in performing poorly at his schoolwork because of the power he thought it gave him. All of his teachers knew he was intelligent, as did he and his mother, and he knew his failure to perform would not be viewed as a lack of ability, but as a lack of will. About the matter, Bowers said, "The adult authorities could not stigmatize me because I succeeded in frustrating the adult world."<sup>3</sup> He succeeded so well that halfway through his senior year, Bowers was withdrawn from school (because of terrible grades) and moved to New Orleans to live with his father and attend Fortier High School. The move occurred shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and Bowers was so furious at the forced move that he responded by dropping out of high

school altogether and enlisting in the Navy.

There was something about military life that Bowers enjoyed. Perhaps it was the discipline and routine that was clearly focused on a goal. Perhaps it was the goal, the defense of the US from the “bestial Japanese”, of which he was so enamored. For whatever reason, Bowers enjoyed his life aboard the warships. He was honorably discharged in 1945 as a Machinist’s Mate First Class. Prior to his discharge, though, Bowers had the first of two religious experiences that were to forever alter his view of himself and the universe in which he lived.<sup>4</sup> The day after the Japanese surrendered to the Allies, Bowers climbed to the deck of the ship on which he was stationed. Standing there, his eyes filled with tears at the thoughts of the courageous Americans who had sacrificed their lives that he might stand there and, indeed, return home. In his estimation, the nation was fewer than 200 years old and in that time it had never faced a threat so great as that which Bowers and his fellow patriots were fighting. For the first time in his life, he felt he had a place in the world. More importantly, for the first time in his life he felt that God, with his divine plan, had a place in that plan for Sam Bowers. In consideration of such a magnificent gift from God, he uttered the prayer, “I thank you Lord. There were many better men than I who perished in this war. I don’t know why you spared my life, but I appreciate it. And for the rest of my life I’ll seek to understand the purpose of your mercy, and to live accordingly.”<sup>5</sup> Marsh argues that this event, coupled with a later religious experience, would become the basis for Bowers’ belief in his own priesthood and God-given mission to eliminate the infidels.

Having always thought of his family and heritage as that of educated aristocracy, Bowers again attempted to get an education after his discharge in 1945. He enrolled first at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and then at the University of Southern California. At both institutions, Bowers failed to graduate. There was just something about the hierarchy of academia that frustrated him to the point of failure. Bowers did not, however, eschew discipline and authority. As previously mentioned, he appreciated military diligence as something altogether necessary and directed at a specific and legitimate target. The authority of his

professors, however, seemed to him without merit or purpose and designed only to control his thoughts and actions, as Bowers told Marsh in an interview.

Soon, Bowers had returned to Mississippi to become an entrepreneur. He established several businesses during the late 1940s and all met with profound failure, until he initiated the Sambo Amusement Company. This new enterprise would not only provide Bowers with some direction and a comfortable income, but would later serve as the launching pad for the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless, the office across from the Masonite plant in Laurel had humble enough beginnings. The main function of Bowers' new enterprise was providing and maintaining vending machines in various local businesses. It was during this time that Bowers' dogma regarding race was really forged. In his spare time, he began reading books by the infamous British anti-Semitic writer Houston Chamberlain and the American racist Thomas Dixon. Of particular interest to him were *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*.<sup>6</sup> Both of these works were so influential on Bowers that they would later become standard references and even required reading for all Klansmen.

Robert Larson, Bowers' roommate, has been particularly helpful in recording the events of the intervening years from Bowers military service, academic failure to his ascendancy atop the throne of racism as the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Larson had been Bowers' roommate in California and had followed him back to Mississippi. Larson details that Bowers began to collect certain items in mass quantities. It is likely no surprise that he began to stockpile weapons and ammunition, but he also began to collect racing car information and bizarre rubber masks of famous people (both white and black). Bowers became so eccentric that he even occasionally frightened his close friends like Larson.<sup>7</sup> Several noted authors, including Marsh, mention the fact that Bowers was given to clicking the heels of his shoes together and saluting his dog with the infamous hand raised "Heil Hitler!" gesture. Indeed, these are the events that were, in a sense, the rapidly downward spiraling adolescence of a rigorous paranoia and dogma that were to mature in the coming months.

Perhaps the seminal event in the development of Bowers as crusader for segregation is

the second religious experience of his young life. Around the time he started the Sambo Amusement Company, Bowers felt his life was in a shambles. He had failed twice at college and had several business failures. He was arrested and fined for the illegal possession of alcohol. Bowers said in describing himself, “I felt totally crushed by life, and wanted to destroy everything, including myself.”<sup>8</sup> At that moment, Bowers now proclaims proudly, “The living God made himself real to me even when I did not deserve it.”<sup>9</sup> He further likens the experience to the one the Apostle Paul encountered on the road to Damascus, a significant fact because in later years Bowers would come to see himself as a modern day Paul, full of passion and righteous anger. Bowers was driving a two-lane highway one hot summer afternoon and contemplating suicide when he describes being taken away and comforted by God’s words, “Don’t be afraid; everything is all right.”<sup>10</sup> This moment of profound connection with what he perceived was the “living God” transformed his life completely. Bowers would later say, “To be saved, one must go to the point of insanity,”<sup>11</sup> and give life over completely to God. When the ecstasy of the experience began to die away three days later, he began just such a process of giving over.

Bowers describes this adjustment period during which his experience with the undenominational God would soon acquire a Baptist bent (despite his Methodist heritage).

“A boy was working with me in one of my side occupations. We supplied cigarettes to the cigarette machines around town. We would wake up early Monday mornings and make the rounds refilling the machines. This boy was always fresh from the Sunday sermon, which he always found inspiring and invigorating. In his presence, I restricted my anti-clerical venom, which I often spewed out on friends, even though I took my spirituality very seriously. We would sometimes debate certain topics, like the infallibility of Scripture, or the authorship of the New Testament books. The boy’s knowledge of the Bible, though a naïve one I thought, was very much alive to him. As a result of these discussions, I decided I needed to get more familiar with the Bible, so I purchased a King James Bible at the local Baptist bookstore. When I read the epistolary dedicatory, I realized that these guys were speaking the truth – and, of course, I’ve

always been interested in the majesty of language.”<sup>12</sup>

Bowers began a continuous and intense study of the Bible and combined its principles and teachings with his xenophobic and ethnocentric readings. The amalgamation of these three schools of philosophy produced in him a sense of his own destiny. Adopting Martin Luther’s position, he believed himself to be a member of the priesthood of the converted and, as such, a warrior for God. But what did God want him to defend? That question is best answered by examining the methods by which he came to form the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and to produce their philosophy as well as modes of operation.

Bowers was not entirely unique in his beliefs on race and religion. On March 7, 1960, Ross Barnett, then Governor of Mississippi, gave a speech entitled “Strength through Unity” (see Appendix A) to the Citizens’ Council Rally in New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>13</sup> There, as elsewhere over the following few years, Barnett extolled the virtues of joining the Citizens Councils and encouraging the existence of such a group in places where one did not already exist. More important than the details of his proposal in the speech, though, is the tone that it took. Barnett struck a very aggressive posture and admonished people that the South could no longer afford to be passive in its resistance to the communist federal authorities he saw were invading his beloved land. This type of speech and others like it struck a chord with the likes of Sam Bowers. One cannot be sure that it was this very stump speech that convinced Bowers of the necessity of the return of the Ku Klux Klan to a position of prominence, but one can be sure that the ideas embodied in Barnett’s speech are those which were sympathetic to the Klan’s cause and Barnett is representative of those in positions of power and influence who, whether or not they knew it, would eventually come to work for Bowers on “projects” (a term used by the Klan to avoid calling their activities murder and arson).<sup>14</sup> That is, whether or not Bowers was actually in contact with any of these government officials, they are certainly one of the reasons that he was able to escape justice for so long.

Sam Bowers formally created the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi on February 15, 1964 when he and two hundred other dissenters decided to break from the

Louisiana Order of the Ku Klux Klan. The new organization, Bowers was determined, would be different in nature and purpose. These he laid out in the Initiation Ceremony, Constitution, and the Executive Lecture.<sup>15</sup> The new face of the Klan was to be more silent and more sinister. The reason for this is that Bowers did not see himself as just any other citizen attempting to redress his grievances with the federal government. He saw himself as nothing short of one of God's chosen priests, so chosen to bring His will to fruition on Earth. Bowers' unusual combination of philosophy and religion produced a dogma that relied heavily on the words of religious figures and Biblical passages taken out of context like the war waged by the Prophet Elijah, the verbal doctrinal fanaticism of the Apostle Paul, and the rejection of authority embodied in Martin Luther. From Elijah, Bowers learned the correct manner in which a Holy war must be fought. He instructed his men that they must never carry out their duties deriving any sense of joy or pleasure; rather, they should approach the infidels with an air of righteous indignation. Even murder could be excused, according to Bowers, if there were no malice in the heart of the righteous priest as he fought to defend Christ.<sup>16</sup> From Paul, Bowers adopted an absolutely militant assumption that the very point from which all history evolved was the physical resurrection of the Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, Bowers said, "There is one simple, and central, Empirical Fact, of manifested human history. That Empirical Fact, of course, is the Physical Resurrection of The Galilean."<sup>17</sup> The term "The Galilean" is an interesting one to note. One of the curious problems of any militantly Christian, but simultaneously anti-Semitic philosophy is Jesus' own identity as a Jew. Bowers, in an attempt to reconcile this, insists that before Christ, the Jews were God's chosen people, but in their rejection of God's son and refusal to recognize The Truth, they had lost their way and, indeed, even become an enemy of the one, true religion.<sup>18</sup> He, therefore, always referred to Jesus Christ as "The Galilean" as a way to express the extent to which he did not accept Christ's Jewishness. The pinnacle of Bowers' philosophy rests on Martin Luther's assertion in the early days of the Reformation that anyone, through the miracle of belief, who is a believer can and ought to be considered a priest. Anyone who accepts the divinity of Christ and the miracle of the resurrection is qualified to act on behalf of God (or at

least, this is how Bowers construed Luther's message). He used this philosophy to place himself and the other White Knights at the top of an elite group of priests, ordained by God and sent on a holy mission to protect the "Sovereign Land of Mississippi"<sup>19</sup> from the invading horde of communists, which he regarded as agents of Satan. This elite priesthood was called to do more than just defend the law, and as such, they were above it. Bowers delineated this higher standard as "transmoral, transnational, and even transsocial."<sup>20</sup> In effect, he declared for himself and others absolute power to enforce God's law.

Bowers' philosophy focused primarily on the definition and application of law and in it he maintained a hierarchical view. There were four definitions of law. There was "LAW", which is the holy sovereign will of God. Then there was "Law," God's will as most perfectly perceived and implemented by man. Further down the list was "law," natural man's best efforts and then at the bottom of the pile was "legality," which he regarded as mere pharisaism.<sup>21</sup>

Arising from this theology was the "Five-tiered Crystallized Logos of Western Civilization:

1. The empirical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ
2. The Reformation
3. The Declaration of Independence
4. The Constitution of the United States
5. The Great Writs of Common Law.<sup>22</sup>

Within the framework of the Five Crystallized Logos is contained the essence of Bowers' dogma. Bowers does not simply conflate political government and theological doctrine, he absolutely melds the two. To the High Priest of White Supremacy, as Charles Marsh refers to him, there is no difference between the political organization of a nation and the part of its people in the divine plan. This kind of historical paradigm poses several unique situations. First, it means that all history is American history. The United States becomes the divinely intended ultimate form of civilization in the world, which particularly satisfies Bowers' extreme nationalism. Also, the contradiction posed by Bowers' conflation of theology and political



philosophy to the Constitution's Establishment Clause forces Bowers to qualify the Five Crystallized Logos by adding that in American society, one does persecute on the basis of religion. He insists, however, that anyone who does not wholeheartedly support the last three of the logos should be regarded as a heretic and punished accordingly.

The Logos also means that the "war" in which he and his fellow priests of God are involved is not their war. In Charles Marsh's interview with him, Bowers said the, "war of the 1960s will never be over, because it is not a war of the 60s as such, but a history-long struggle for the soul of a people, a flare-up of a larger, ongoing battle."<sup>23</sup> That is to say that Bowers' viewed all of history as a struggle between the forces of God on earth against the forces of Satan on earth. More than an attempt to simply historicize his own violence, Bowers' statement demonstrates the absolutely millennial tone his religious rhetoric often took. Armageddon was not a battle to come, but an ongoing struggle throughout the history of time and, at that moment, he was the representative of God spearheading the fight against Satan's newest incarnation, communism. The White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of the Sovereign Realm of Mississippi was God's first line of defense on earth against Satan and his minions.

Bowers' belief in the divinity of his mission certainly shaped the formation and actions of the White Knights. Bowers' logic held that if God had soldiers like himself, Satan must also. Bowers thus surmised that the communists were secretly training an African military force in Cuba (the nearest communist country and object of the contemporaneous debacle at the Bay of Pigs). In an effort to thwart the communists and frustrate Satan, his own Godly organization would thus be secret. Members were given numbers instead of names and security was paramount.<sup>24</sup> Bowers often insisted on discussing Klan business only after taking separate cars to locations deep within the forests of Jones County and then only in a whisper.<sup>25</sup>

Officially, he laid out the Klan's purpose in his executive lecture by saying,

"The world and all of the people in it are torn between two exactly opposite forces:

1. The Spiritual Force of Almighty God Championed by our Savior, Christ Jesus

2. The negative, materialistic force of destruction championed by Satan. It is necessary that each and every member truly understand the above before he can become effective in this organization. Until we all realize [sic] that we are up against a supernatural Force, against which our finite minds and emotions and abilities are, by themselves, powerless to defeat, we shall continue to suffer disappointments and defeats again and again.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, no mercy would be shown to the heretic. Bowers went on to point out the various means of harassment that the organization would use to frustrate “the enemy” in the hopes that their efforts would result in a mistake on which the White Knights could capitalize. He also set up a strict chain of command. This chain of command was eventually his undoing because it left little doubt that the murders carried out under the auspices of the Ku Klux Klan could only have been ordered by the Imperial Wizard, Sam Bowers.<sup>27</sup> This is true for both the Neshoba County murders as well as the Vernon Dahmer murder. Though Bowers was not physically present at either, the structure of the Klan left little doubt as to his involvement.

Perhaps the philosophical nature of the organization and the ways in which that philosophy was translated into action is best explained by Bowers himself. In June of 1964, Bowers gave a sermon about what he called “COFO’s nigger Communist invasion of Mississippi,” wherein he explained what his role and the role of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan was to be. Bowers said:

“This summer, within a few days, the enemy will launch his final push for victory here in Mississippi. This offensive will consist of two basic salients, which have been designed to envelop and destroy our small forces in a pincer movement of agitation, force by Federal troops, and Communist propaganda. The two basic salients are as follows, listed in one-two order as they will be used.

One. Massive street demonstrations and agitation by blacks in many areas at once, designed to provoke white militants into counterdemonstration and open, pitched street battles, resulting in civil chaos and anarchy to provide an “excuse” for:

Two. A decree from the communist authorities in charge of the national government, which will declare the state of Mississippi to be in a state of open revolt,

with a complete breakdown of law and order; and declaring martial law, followed by a massive occupation of the state by federal troops, with all known patriotic whites placed under military arrest. If this martial law is imposed, our homes and our lives and our arms will pass under the complete control of the enemy, and he will have won his victory. We will, of course, resist to the very end, but our chance of victory will undoubtedly end with the imposition of martial law in Mississippi by the Communist masters in Washington....

When the first waves of blacks hit our streets this summer, we must avoid open daylight conflict with them, if at all possible, as private citizens, or as members of this organization. We should join with the support of local police and duly constituted law enforcement agencies with volunteer, legally deputized men from our own ranks. We must absolutely avoid the appearance of a mob going into the streets to fight the blacks. Our first contact with the troops of the enemy in the streets should be as legally-deputized law enforcement officers....

In all cases, however, there must be a secondary group of our members, standing back away from the main area of conflict, armed and ready to move on very short notice, who are not under the control of anyone but our own Christian officers. This secondary group must not be used except in clear cases where law-enforcement and our own deputized, auxiliary first groups are at the point of being over-whelmed by the blacks. Only if it appears reasonably certain that control of the streets is being lost by the establishment forces of law can the secondary group be committed. Once committed, this secondary group must move swiftly and vigorously to attack the local headquarters of the enemy, destroy and disrupt his leadership and communications (both local and Washington) and any news communication equipment or agents in the area. The action of this secondary group must be very swift and very forceful with no holds barred. The attack on the enemy headquarters will relieve the pressure on the first group in the streets and as soon as this has been done, the second group must prepare to withdraw from the area. They will be replaced by another secondary group standing at ready. It must be understood that the secondary group is an extremely swift and extremely violent hit and run group. They should rarely be in action for over one-half hour, and under no circumstances for over one hour. Within two hours of their commitment, they should be many miles from the scene of action....

When the black wave hits our communities, we must remain calm and think in terms of our individual enemies rather than our mass enemy. We must roll with the mass

punch which they will deliver in the streets during the day, and we must counterattack the individuals at night...Any personal attacks on the enemy should be carefully planned to include only the leaders and prime white collaborators of the enemy forces. These attacks against these selected individual targets should, of course, be as severe as circumstances and conditions will permit. No severe attacks should be directed against the general mass of the enemy because of the danger of hurting some actually innocent person. The leaders, of course, are not innocent, and they should be our prime targets, but the innocent should be protected...

We must always remember that while law enforcement officials have a job to do, we, as Christians, have a responsibility and have taken an oath to preserve Christian civilization. May Almighty God grant that their job and our oath never come into conflict; but should they ever, it must be clearly understood that we can never yield our principles to anyone, regardless of his position. Respect for Christian ideals can not yield to respect for persons nor statutes and procedure which have been twisted by man away from its original Divine design.”<sup>28</sup>

One can clearly see in the above speech the conflation of religion and politics and the role of violence. Bowers does not recognize civil rights activists as innocent people; indeed, they are the heretics, the guilty. It is they that the secondary groups were instructed to target and it would be they who would be killed. Particularly damning is the detail that Bowers offered on exactly how various attacks would be carried out. That is to say, when the Neshoba County murders and the murder of Vernon Dahmer were committed, it became all too apparent who was involved because the Klan was always very scripted in its actions. Also made clear by the speech is the extent to which Bowers’ own twisted philosophy propelled and controlled every facet of Klan operation. He was the mastermind behind the organization’s origin, the creator of its modes of operation, and the final determinant of its targets. The White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi was God’s secret defender and the implementer of His “divinely designed” plan of racial purity, and Sam Bowers was its “high priest”.

Having such an understanding of the character of Sam Bowers clarifies the reason why what Dahmer was doing might be seen as so dangerous. Indeed, equality of the kind that afforded black people and white people equal civic participation and equal protection under the

law completely undermined Bowers' entire philosophy. He could not fathom that what he believed to be a separate species could enjoy the same privileges in society as himself and the rest of the Christian, capitalist world.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*... Marsh interviewed Bowers in 1996 and because this author could not arrange such an interview, Marsh's material is quoted heavily.

<sup>2</sup> Marsh, Charles, *God's Long Summer*...51.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 53. Charles Marsh conducted the most thorough interview recapitulation that the author could locate. Again, no reply was ever given in response to the three letters the author sent to Mr. Bowers.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wynes, *The Negro in the South*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1965), 83-102.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. The Photo of the collection of weapons, masks, ammunition, etc. that was confiscated from Bowers in the 1966 FBI raid in which Bowers and his men were arrested in appendix.

<sup>8</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*...54.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>13</sup> See appendix for reprint of the speech.

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: the FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*...154.

<sup>15</sup> See the appendix for a reprint of these works.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel H. Bowers, *Executive Lecture*, 1964, cf. Appendix.

<sup>17</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*...75.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel H. Bowers, Constitution of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of the Sovereign Land of Mississippi, cf. Appendix.

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<sup>20</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*...78.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 75. Bowers originally published his theories in "Encyclicals" throughout the 1960's, but the author was unable to locate any copies outside of the quotations given to Marsh by Bowers.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 12.

<sup>24</sup> McIlhany, *Klandestine*...McIlhany supplies a copy of Samuel H Bowers II's, *Constitution of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of the Sovereign Land of Mississippi*, which is reprinted in Appendix.

<sup>25</sup> Downey, "Pitts Tesitifies in Miss. Conspiracy Trial,"...

<sup>26</sup> Bowers, *Executive Lecture*...

<sup>27</sup> C.f. Bowers, *Executive Lecture* and *Constitution*

<sup>28</sup> Marsh, *God's Long Summer*...65-66.