

NIGHT-RIDING REFORMERS

THE REGENERATION OF OKLAHOMA SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE FROM STANLEY FROST

The Outlook sent Stanley Frost to Oklahoma to study the amazing political conflict which has taken place in that State. The forces at odds in this State may have a far-reaching influence upon National politics. An introductory article by him on the Oklahoma situation appeared last week. Stanley Frost's next article carries the suggestive title "**Behind the White Hoods**"

THE first stage in the regeneration of Oklahoma is over. The revolt against visible corruption and official despotism has won. J. C. Walton has been impeached on charges which, in addition to telling of the pitiful, picayune graft so common in American politics, remind one of the ancient struggles of the British Parliament against the Stuart kings. Walton seems sure to go, but whether he is convicted or not all that remains of this phase of the fight is merely to mop up the political trenches.

This is no small job, to be sure. It has been years since American politics have revealed such a mess. Even while the Walton affair held public attention the papers of Oklahoma were full of stories of other official misdeeds. A penitentiary warden was under indictment; legislators were accused of graft; bribery was hinted at; judges were attacked; literally hundreds were charged with minor peculations; the very air whispered reports of connivance with bootleggers, dope-peddlers, and more violent criminals; the Walton exposé itself has ramifications involving scores in varied crime. Probably most of these will escape, but the dirt will at least be swept behind the door.

As the dust settles it becomes easier to see into the causes and motives behind the recent struggle, and to the student of modern politics these are even more important than the immediate issues. There are involved many of those factors which are problems in other States—the farmer-labor movement, the trades union in politics, the enforcement of prohibition, even the Fundamentalist movement in religion. But above and beyond all is the Ku Klux Klan, with its appeal to the narrowest instincts of a reawakening Americanism along the lines of racial and Protestant supremacy. Without an understanding of these motives and causes the Oklahoma crisis must seem a meaningless factional disturbance.

The situation is particularly important because of the intention of Klan

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leaders to use the record here as the basis for an intense campaign to recruit members of the better sort, particularly in the North. That campaign is only awaiting the final disgrace of Walton to be set in motion, and may have been begun before this is printed. And it is no longer possible to blink the fact that the Klan is already an immense power and that it may easily become the dominant force in politics.

The Klan issue has not been settled in Oklahoma. It existed before Walton seized upon it, and it will survive his fall. It is quite possible that if he had been a different man, had kept his own record clean and had been able to hold the issue to moral grounds instead of playing cheap politics with it, he might have become a National figure, with a Senatorship—even the Presidency—in reach, as he had hoped. But that egg is broken and the anti-Klan movement in the State is for the present leaderless, its members having been forced by Walton to join the Klan in fighting for fundamental liberty.

It may as well be admitted that, on the surface at least, the Klan record can be made to appeal to many good, sincere, and patriotic men who are now seeking leadership toward the recovery of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of socially responsible individualism. In Oklahoma the Klan can prove by its enemies themselves that it has been on the side of public safety, of enforcement of law (at least of most laws), of the suppression of graft and connivance with crime. It has opposed from the beginning the Governor whom the whole State now sees as a dangerous public enemy. Although it had the power to meet his illegal attacks with force of arms and was goaded by him in every possible way toward violence, it held its members under strict control and averted what might have been a serious civil war. Finally, it has been the center and the backbone of the fight to restore constitutional government and has carried that fight to a triumphant—and legal—conclusion.

This is a compelling record. But it is not all the record, and it must not be forgotten for a moment that the secrecy which is one of the Klan's chief weapons puts it in a position to escape or confuse judgment on its sins and failures, while claiming more than its share of credit. Nor does this record touch, except at a few points, the fundamental purposes and methods of the Klan. Later I hope to be able to report adequately on these, for there have been important changes in the

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organization since the exposures of two years ago. The present articles, however, can deal only with Oklahoma.

Lawlessness is nothing new there. It was about the last Territory to be opened to settlement, and the traditional lawlessness and easy tolerance of lawbreaking which mark frontier life have only partly died out. In addition, the population is mixed and much of it vicious. A large part of the State was taken from the old Indian Reservation, and such whites as had lived there had been renegades, many of them criminals, whose very presence in the Territory was in violation of law and often an attempt to escape it. This degenerate breed hampers and often defeats every effort of the State toward progress.

As a State Oklahoma is only sixteen years old. The conflicting elements in her population caused serious trouble and lacks in her Constitution which have not yet been entirely cleared up. There has not been time for the growth of civic solidarity or much State pride. Her schools are within six of the bottom of the list and her general literacy—and consequently the possibility of education through the press in political morality—is low. Add great discrepancies between the poverty of the farmers and the wealth of the oil boomers, a mixture of Indians with moral standards quite different from those of white men, dissatisfaction as a result of recent hard times, the rough element drawn to the oil fields, and a great preoccupation with material development, and you have the rough outline of conditions with which decency and progress must contend.

Thus political morals are necessarily low. In the southeast corner of the State they are about as bad as may be. In the north they rise greatly and there has grown up among the better classes a sort of civic idealism. This, however, has been confused by self-interests and prejudices and has been expressed largely in material things: new hotels, better pavements and roads, better water works, and, with some, better schools. Ordinary law enforcement has come behind these; there has been almost no thought, even, for good government in the larger sense.

Moreover, there is no leisure class which might take leadership in civic affairs, and the better people generally consider political activity rather disgraceful. It has been perfectly hopeless for them as well, since no man of even moderately decent standards could compete with the professional

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liars and spoilsmen.

With few exceptions, the latter had control of the governments—State, county, and local. Politics was almost entirely a matter of spoliation enriched by corrupt catering to financial interests. A political campaign was most likely to succeed if based on impossible promises to class or special interests, combined with a play upon prejudices and a discreet connivance with the criminal elements.

The simpler kinds of reform had been making progress, however, steadily if not rapidly. Corruption was less and less open, crime more and more furtive. W. E. Disney, who leads the fight against Walton in the Legislature, tells of his own experience as a prosecuting attorney in Muskogee. He, by the way, is a descendant of the Kansas fighters of the fifties.

Ten years ago, he told me, bootlegging in particular was so open that even to talk of prosecution was a joke. When finally some thirty members of the gang were jailed, they made huge mirth. They organized a "jail-birds' union" and issued membership cards certifying that the "bearer is a jail-bird in good and regular standing and as such is entitled to free board and keep in any jail in Oklahoma." One member recently held a State office, but on the whole the campaign succeeded, and Muskogee is now a clean county.

Other counties and towns did as well, but some did not. Tulsa was one of the latter, and her story may be taken as typical of conditions in many parts of the State. Two years ago Tulsa was under almost absolute control of the criminals. Bootlegging and dope-peddling flourished unabashed. Highway robbery—called "hijacking"—was a common means of livelihood. Hardly a night passed without it, and on one celebrated evening a gang took possession of one of the main roads and for hours systematically winnowed the traffic. Murder was common. No decent woman and few men left shelter at night. Officers seldom attempted to interfere; those who did were shot down with impunity, and in the few cases where the criminals were caught and convicted they were usually promptly pardoned.

As has been the case so often in this country, where legal means failed to curb crime illegal means were taken up. The reformers became night-riders. Vigilante law had been sporadic in the State, now it became organized. There is no question that the Klan played a large part in this—how large a part will be discussed.

later; but there is also no doubt from the stories of a dozen of the best-informed men in Tulsa that night-riding had been going on before the Klan appeared, that it was not wholly chargeable to the Klan at any time, and that many reputable and solid citizens took part in it. From other parts of the State come stories that peace officers themselves, finding their legal efforts nullified by the pardon mill in the Capitol, were among the Vigilantes.

The methods used were direct, brutal, and effective. Around Tulsa men armed themselves, went out in autos in a deliberate attempt to lure the "hijackers," and then shot to kill. They suffered some casualties, but within a few months "hijacking" became so highly hazardous an occupation that it ceased. With bootleggers, dope-peddlers, and caterers to sexual vice the method was less defensible. Men suspected of these things were caught abroad or taken from their homes, sometimes, though not always, given rump trials, and soundly whipped—the kind of rawhiding from which it takes the strongest man weeks to recover. The traffics were not entirely stamped out, but they were reduced to more or less normal dimensions, and the worst gangsters were driven away.

"In actual results," one judge commented, "the thing worked pretty well. I don't defend it, of course, but from what I've seen I should say that the night-riders averaged nearer justice than the courts do."

The most important result of the night-riding, however, at least in Tulsa, was the destruction of the *political* power of the gangs. There has been a reform movement in Tulsa for years, but it was not until the night-riders subdued the criminals that it carried any office. In the spring of 1922, however, the city government was at last cleaned up, and last January a sound county government was put in. Both are also solidly "Klux."

From that time on night-riding practically ceased. It had been dwindling for months. Recent investigations have shown that in the later stages it had degenerated into private vengeance and punishment for very minor offenses, but these outrages were seldom known; the burden of proof in the then state of public opinion was upon the victim, and they had almost no effect on either public sentiment or the political situation at that time. So far as known, there were only two cases after January 1—a very minor affair in a distant corner of

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the county and a severe whipping in Tulsa itself, which was the immediate cause of the imposition of martial law.

Because of its results this case deserves a little mention. The victim, Nate Hantaman, was accused of peddling dope. He was stripped and beaten, and it was charged that he was mutilated. On the testimony of the doctor who attended him this is not true and he was able to walk home two hours after the whipping. The case was much like scores of others, but it was skillfully press-agented and aroused a very considerable indignation. Incidentally, Hantaman has since been arrested on a charge of bank robbery, and his wife, whose tears to the Governor brought the soldiers to Tulsa, is under Federal indictment for selling opiates.

This, then, was the situation at Tulsa early last August: night-riding had almost stopped, reform administrations were in power, and the citizens had once more turned the enforcement of the law over to them. An isolated outrage brought the most drastic action possible under American laws from Governor Walton. Let us turn for a moment to look at his record.

He is one of the "mixer" type of politicians, and a good one. He is of medium size, round-faced, with a weak mouth and a personality which he makes engaging by a chameleon-like adaptability. If he has character of his own, it has not been made manifest. He is a good speaker, too ignorant to be far-sighted, too adaptable to be trustworthy. I found no one who would now accept his most solemn promises. He is vain; he is also of a temperament which finds comfort in being surrounded constantly by gun-fighters, and his most frequent companions are policemen.

Walton was for one term Mayor of Oklahoma City, and he is the kind of a man who, given a little success, would surely run for Governor, though his election in the beginning seemed hopeless. His only support at first was from labor, no great power in the State. Presently two alliances were made; the first with the Socialists, a body of some 60,000, of whom perhaps 5,000 or 6,000 are convinced Socialists and the rest "protest voters." The other was with the Farmer-Labor workers, who had recently come into the State and were organizing the discontent among the farmers with the poverty-stricken and unblessed element in the southeastern corner—the old Indian reservation—

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as a nucleus. These combined and held a convention, which nominated him to run in the Democratic primaries, and all these elements went into those primaries in a deliberate attempt to force him on the party.

Opposed to him were Bob Wilson, for many years State School Superintendent, and Judge Owen, a lawyer with a fine record. Wilson was the avowed candidate of the Klan; Owen had the Catholic support. Walton in his campaign made the usual reckless promises; on the same day in the same town he promised farmers that he would get them \$3 wheat and labor that he would reduce the loaf to five cents! But with all this, and in spite of the division of the opposition, Walton could not have won, local politicians agree, but for one complication.

This was that there had been initiated and was to come up at the same election a bill to forbid the Catholic parish schools. Wilson, the Klan man, was making a strong run and the Catholics were badly scared.

"If that bill and Wilson had both won," I was told by one of the men who took part in the maneuvering for the Catholic vote, "the Catholics would just naturally have had to leave the State. It was a matter of life and death with them. We tried to make them see that Owen could win if they'd stand by him, but the Klan was circulating nasty stories about him and they didn't dare. So on the last day they swung to Walton—about 60,000 votes. That gave him the nomination, and the worst thing that can be charged against the Klan in this State is that they brought about conditions which made Walton possible."

In the actual election some 75,000 decent Democrats bolted Walton—partly under Klan influence—according to the same authority. But his campaign of promises and the farmers' hardships were enough to make up the deficit and, besides, to give him the biggest majority in the State's history. "It took three years drought to give us a man like that," is the way another politician analyzed the action of the farmer vote.

Walton's record as Governor need not be repeated—it has been told in the story of his impeachment.

A movement for his impeachment had already started when, in August, he launched his attack on the Klan by declaring martial law in Tulsa. His avowed object was to use military courts to stop the whippings and ferret out the night-riders. He very justly charged that these were not

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likely to be prosecuted by the local authorities.

Apart from the fact, already told, that the whippings had almost stopped, so that there was no immediate need of drastic action, he had found an excellent issue. There was already much public indignation against the Klan, and more was speedily aroused as the result of the investigations he ordered. The issue was a moral one, but if there is a man in the State who believes that Walton was actuated by any other motive than political expediency—or worse—I failed to find him. “If you ever go on the assumption that that man could have a conscientious motive for anything, you’ll get off the track,” a dozen men said.

Various reasons for his action were given. Some people offered wild rumors, the fact that Walton had been refused membership by the Klan; the fact that Tulsa had voted against him; the suspicion of a desire to “shake down” the rich oil men there; even a story of a secret agreement during the campaign with the classes proscribed by the Klan—all these were alleged. Klan members point out as significant the fact that Hantaman, over whose whipping the fight started, is a Jew.

All these explanations seem to me needlessly involved. Walton is a politician, he hoped to become Senator, possibly President; but he was losing ground, and naturally reached out for the most popular issue he could find. That happened to be the Klan. The reasons why it was so good an issue will be taken up in the next article.