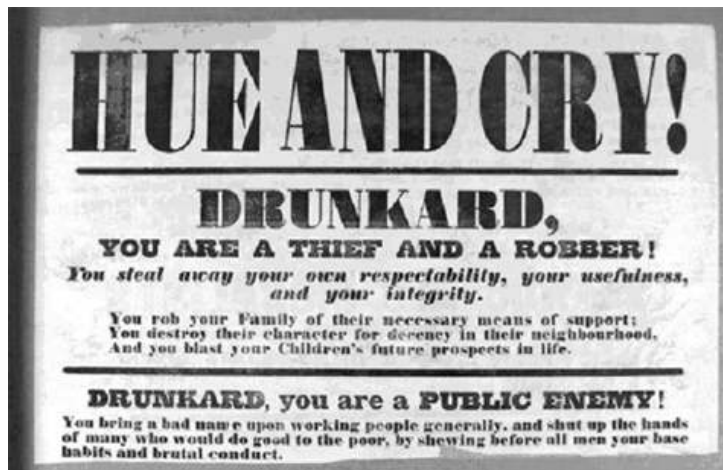


Temperance, Traditionalism, and the Ku Klux Klan in Syosset-Woodbury

by Tom Montalbano

Americans have not always welcomed change, particularly in places like 19th Century Syosset-Woodbury, where generations of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants had put down solid, deep roots by the mid 1800's. Following is a story that may shock some present-day Syosset-Woodbury residents. However, it is a chapter that must be included in any complete history of our community.

More Than One Path to Self-Righteousness



The Temperance Movement, an effort to shame all God-fearing Christians into abstaining from alcoholic beverages, had built a stronghold in Syosset-Woodbury in the years prior to the Civil War, an era when drunkenness, spousal abuse, and suicide were rampant among local farmers and tradesmen. By the late 1850's, the Woodbury Methodist Church on Jericho Turnpike regularly hosted Temperance "oath" meetings and,

within a decade, Woodbury's own Temperance Society was in full force. The Society pledged to eradicate alcohol consumption and the evil it wreaked, and to make Woodbury what followers termed a "cold water place."

During the same period, a severe famine in Ireland forced thousands of desperate (mostly Catholic) Irish to emigrate to the United States, where many found work either pulling crops on Long Island farms or laying track for the expanding Long Island Rail Road, usually at wages well below those paid to "American" workers. Rejected by the mostly Protestant citizens of Syosset-Woodbury due to their reputed fondness for whiskey and their "misguided faith," Irish Catholics soon inherited a reputation as low-class drunkards who were determined to desecrate the Christian church.

To counteract the Irish Catholic "threat," self-proclaimed patriots in Syosset-Woodbury, including many members of the Woodbury Temperance Society, began to subscribe to the philosophies of the *Order of United American Mechanics*, a fraternity of laborers¹ whose implicit goal was to prevent Catholics from overrunning the local workforce and gaining influence over local schools and politics. The O.U.A.M. welcomed only "white male citizens, born in the United States, who professed belief in a supreme being, supported the separation of church and state, and were not engaged in the liquor trade." The O.U.A.M. quickly gained support from the "Tee-Totalers" of the local Temperance movement, as both clubs shared the beliefs that alcohol had no place in Syosset-Woodbury society and that the Godless, booze-loving Catholics who had invaded their territory were the cause of all the community's problems.

¹ In the 1800's, the term "mechanic" denoted any worker or craftsman

So deep-rooted were the convictions of Syosset-Woodbury's Tee-Totalers and O.U.A.M. members that, when John R. DeVine, a Catholic who ran a general store and saloon at the corner of Jackson Avenue and Convent Road, took over as the hamlet's postmaster in 1896, dozens flocked to Town Hall in Oyster Bay to argue that women and children should not be subjected to the unpleasantness of having to pass through DeVine's saloon to collect their mail. The protesters ultimately forced DeVine, one of the rare Irish Catholics who had risen to some prominence in the community, to construct a partition between the saloon and the section of his store used for the post office.

The Temperance Movement and the O.U.A.M. persisted on a national level for several decades, finally achieving an important victory in 1919 with the passage of the 18th Amendment, commonly known as the "National Prohibition Act," which banned the production,



transport, and sale of alcohol in the United States. With their primary goal achieved, these groups shifted their attention to persecuting those who *ignored* the new law. This included the owner of Spreer's Hotel in downtown Syosset, who continued to operate his saloon as a "speakeasy" after Prohibition took effect, as well as the numerous New York City multimillionaires who had recently built lavish estates in Syosset-Woodbury and who would stop at nothing to keep the liquor flowing at their extravagant parties. These aristocratic newcomers' thirst for the finest wines and spirits sometimes forced them to form alliances with "characters of questionable integrity," better known among Prohibitionists as "Italians."

A New Common Enemy

As economic woes and the threat of fascism engulfed Italy after World War I, scores of non-English-speaking Italian immigrants arrived at Ellis Island. As some made their way to Syosset-Woodbury, once again the locals feared that their traditional American customs and values would be challenged. In a panic, American-born citizens (and even Irish Catholics!) of Syosset-Woodbury dubbed the Italians "lawless" and "untrustworthy," charging that the doctrines and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as its hostility toward Prohibition, were a danger to old America. Conveniently, they blamed the post-Prohibition spike in crime and corruption on "the fascist Italian immigrants" and feared that chaos would soon make its way to the Syosset-Woodbury countryside.

Guided by terror and nudged by their religious leaders, Temperance supporters, O.U.A.M. members, and other traditionalist groups launched a “witch hunt” that targeted newly-arrived Italians such as Gaspare Puccio, who dared to open a barber shop on Jackson Avenue in 1912. To compound his problems, Puccio ran his shop out of the Spreers Hotel, a known speakeasy! If not for his willingness to allow the fledgling Syosset Fire Company No. 1 to use his telephone, Gaspare Puccio and his family would likely have been run out of town altogether. Puccio’s experience convinced another Italian immigrant, Thomas Langione, to change his name to the more Anglo-sounding “Langon” before opening a restaurant in Syosset in the 1920’s.



Gaspare Puccio & Family

Although treating Irish, Jewish, and African-American minorities with blatant disrespect was common and, by and large, acceptable in Syosset-Woodbury during this period (local newspapers consistently identified African-Americans by name, followed by “negro”), Tee-Totalers and O.U.A.M. members generally did not consider these individuals as grave a threat as the Roman Catholic “messengers of Satan.” Like the Irish immigrants before them, however, Syosset-Woodbury’s early Italians persisted in their efforts to overcome societal prejudice and soon established a presence in the business community, the fire department, and other areas previously off-limits. Those who still found the Italians’ existence detrimental to the upholding of traditional American values began searching for a larger, more powerful force to help bring order back to the community. In the nick of time, a hero arose.

The Rise of the Second KKK



The original Ku Klux Klan had been founded after the Civil War as an effort to obstruct attempts at assimilating freed slaves into white society. The *second* KKK, revived in 1915, was essentially an extreme militant wing of the Temperance and *Nativist* movements, the latter of which was vehemently opposed to immigration from anywhere in the world and dedicated to the preservation of traditional American principles. The resurrected Klan, run primarily by unscrupulous businessmen and marketing agents, garnered initial support in the Syosset-Woodbury community by pledging to uphold the law of Prohibition using *any means necessary*.

Unsurprisingly, the Second KKK was also anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, anti-African American, and anti-immigrant. This ideology appealed to a massive audience and enabled the organization to carry out a successful and profitable scheme that sold hatred and intolerance at a time when there was tremendous demand.

The Klan's formula was rudimentary. Essentially, an organizer, or "Kleagle," would enter a region, collect initiation fees from hundreds of new members, and sell them as many KKK robes, bibles, badges, and other items as possible. For his efforts, the Kleagle kept half the profits and sent the rest to state or national Klan officials. Once he had established sufficient enrollment in an area, the Kleagle would organize a huge rally, which typically included a cross-burning and the ceremonial presentation of a Bible to a local Protestant minister. He would then board the Long Island Rail Road with the money and leave the locals to hash out the guidelines of their newly formed KKK chapter.

Such was the case on Long Island, where KKK rallies began to attract audiences in the thousands by the early 1920's. These rallies featured speakers dressed in full KKK regalia who delivered impassioned sermons of hatred toward Catholics, Jews, and Negroes while promising "to enforce prohibition and to champion traditional morality." Within a few years, the KKK had enlisted 20,000 to 25,000 men and women - roughly one out of seven



Long Islanders - many of them culled from organizations such as the Woodbury Temperance Society and the O.U.A.M. Hundreds at a time took part in initiation ceremonies conducted in open fields as nearby as Oyster Bay and Hicksville. These events typically concluded with a ceremonial cross-burning while Nassau County Police directed traffic around the rally grounds.

Remarkably, KKK membership in the Syosset-Woodbury area was not limited to farmers, common laborers, and the uneducated. Some of the community's most prominent early 20th Century citizens openly supported or participated in the organization. While this may seem shocking nowadays, membership in the KKK during the early to mid 1920's was generally considered patriotic and commendable -- no more scandalous than participating in any fraternal organization that exists today. In fact, many residents praised the KKK for its outstanding community spirit and generosity. In January of 1926, a large crowd gathered in the auditorium of the newly erected Syosset School on Split Rock Road to witness the presentation of a large bible and two crisp new American flags by the Ku Klux Klan and the Junior Order United American Mechanics. According to a local newspaper article, addresses by KKK speakers were "well received by the audience," which included the president and members of the Syosset School Board.

Throughout the 1920's, the Klan also marched in Long Island parades, sponsored firefighting competitions, and became a fixture at churches, where their guest speakers consistently boosted Sunday service attendance.



Based on available historical documents, the “new” Ku Klux Klan that infiltrated Syosset-Woodbury in the 1920’s did not resort to the violent tactics associated with Klan chapters in the Deep South. Specifically, there are no known lynchings or other racially charged murders recorded in Syosset-Woodbury during this period. Instead, the local KKK spread its philosophy through intimidation. By 1924, fire departments across the Island were pleading with KKK chapters to refrain from conducting cross-burnings during the dry

summer season, as they were sparking massive brush fires.

The following year, tensions between the KKK and those they scorned reached a peak when the Klan staged a public relations stunt that involved placing a wreath around the Hicksville war monument during the hamlet’s Memorial Day Parade. Nassau and Suffolk chapters of the Knights of Columbus, among other Catholic organizations, enlisted local Catholics to make a massive showing and remove the wreath -- by force, if necessary. Ultimately, violent fist fights broke out and several were injured, including taxi driver Paddy O’Hagan of Syosset, who had purchased a brand new straw hat to attend the event. By the end of the day, O’Hagan’s hat was in pieces, as was the Klan’s perceived reputation as a respectable, upstanding community organization.

Beginning of The End

The 1925 Memorial Day clash may have been a turning point for the KKK in our area, for as swiftly as it had spread, support for the Klan began to wane among groups that had previously been spellbound by its rhetoric. Even the Reverend Lloyd F. Worley, much admired pastor of the Woodbury Methodist Church and a devout prohibitionist, began to openly question whether the KKK “cultivated the true Christian spirit.” Rev. Worley, who oversaw the congregation that had given birth to the Woodbury Temperance Society, cited the experience of his brother, a former Klan member who had become disenchanted with the organization after witnessing a tar-and-feather attack.

In 1926, when anti-Klan candidates won election in several Long Island towns, the *New York Times* observed that “Long Island seems to be recovering from its belief in the Ku Klux Klan,” editorializing that “good sense has returned.” By the end of the 1920’s, riddled with internal scandals and scarred by a rape/murder conviction against one of its national leaders, the KKK rapidly began to crash and burn. The Prohibition law the Klan had vowed to uphold had, essentially, failed, and had triggered an unprecedented wave of crime and corruption. Some of Syosset-Woodbury’s most respected citizens operated their own home distilleries without any apparent pressure from the law, and drunkenness was on the increase as America headed toward the devastating Great Depression. The Ku Klux Klan’s moment in the Syosset-Woodbury spotlight had come to an unceremonious end.

In 1933, the United States Congress repealed the National Prohibition Act. One dark era had come to pass. Another was about to begin.