

The Klan Unmasked

With a New Introduction by David Pilgrim
and a New Author's Note

STETSON KENNEDY



THE KLAN UNMASKED



Strom Kennedy after being released by Capitol police following his unsuccessful attempt in 1956 to impress the House Un-American Activities Committee in his evidence against the Ku Klux Klan. Photo courtesy AP/Wide World.

THE KLAN UNMASKED

Stetson Kennedy

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To
all those who ever have or ever will stand up to and
struggle against the
Ku Klux Klan
and the bigotry for which it stands;
and also to
all those who shared with me the risk, anxiety,
deprivation, and work which went into this
investigation and book.

Americans of many races, creeds, and faiths are joined in the continuing struggle against Ku Kluxery recorded in these pages. In the preparation of this book, however, special contributions have been made by my fellow anti-Klan agent "Bob" who has risked his life many times, Edith Ogden and my son Leman who lived through the investigations, Patricia Hemberow who believed in the material enough to put it in order, and Marika Halstrom who made possible the writing.

Sutton Kennedy.

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The author in his uniform of the Columbian brownshirts, terrorists, sometimes called the "juvenile delinquents of the KKK."

KKK BOOK STANDS UP TO CLAIM OF FAISFHOOO

By Charlie Parton

Originally published in the *Times-Union*, Sunday, January 29, 2006

At ninety-three, his health failing, most of his old friends and lovers long gone, Stetson Kennedy occasionally complains that he has lived too long.

But it could be argued he has lived just long enough. Long enough to have passed from pariah to hero, from obscurity to fame.

Once "the most hated man in North Florida," to quote what a Florida professor told the *St. Petersburg Times*, Kennedy has become one of the most honored. Like a figure out of the folklore he once studied and wrote about, his legend has grown, partly because he neglected to set the record absolutely straight.

But on the eve of yet another tribute, the January 30, 2006, gala fundraiser for the Stetson Kennedy Foundation, there was a shadow over Beluthahatchee, the little lakeside cabin in northern St. Johns County where Kennedy has lived since 1972.

On January 9, 2006, journalist Stephen J. Dubner and economist Steven D. Levitt, authors of the best-selling book *Freakonomics*, wrote a column about Kennedy in the *New York Times Magazine*. The authors, who lionized Kennedy in their book, now attacked him. Under the headline "Hoodwinked," they questioned whether Kennedy had ever personally infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan, an experience he wrote about in his book *7½ Million Unwashed*.

"The hero of the Klan story was Stetson Kennedy, a lifelong human-rights agitator who is best-known for having infiltrated the Klan in the 1940s in order to expose its shadowy secrets," they wrote on their Web site, freakonomics.com. "As it turns out, however, Stetson Kennedy's own history is pretty shadowy."

COMPARING DOCUMENTS

Sometimes in *The Klan Unmasked*, DeLoach Kennedy describes events that actually occurred and, apparently credulously, turn them for dramatic purpose.

The following is from *The Klan Unmasked*, concerning an account of the events of February 15, 1947, when Kennedy attended a trial of three officials of Columbian Inc., partly as a potential witness but also as a reporter for PM, a newspaper covering the trial:

I sat there calmly in the Columbian witness-room and sat down. The room was packed with brown-skinned, Columbian students and John Kluser and wind-bat sympathizers.

For a moment they were too thoughtful to say anything.

"Of all the goddam niggers!" Jett finally exploded, and he whole back let out a howl and surrounded me. The deputy who was supposed to hold him in line just came against the wall and chewed on his spitpick. . . .

. . . They asked if the man hitting cars was and men got to the 564 man.

"Would you let your daughter marry a nigger?"

"When my two niggers die, they want to get married, I don't think it's anybody's business what color they are."

"Great Gospel," exclaimed Jett, turning to the deputy. "Did you hear that?"

"People here lynched in Georgia for saying less," the deputy swore. . . .

. . . "I think anybody who associates with niggers is trash," a burly new Columbian had just said to his school.

"I think anybody who associates with Columbians is trash!" I countered.

At that, the big boy reached into his pocket and jerked out a large switchblade knife. Out of the corner of my

eye I could see the deputy was not going to budge. The Columbian let out a roar and lunged at me, the knife aimed at my throat. Just as I was about to duck, he let out a scream of anguish, dropped the knife and bent over and grabbed his ankle. Ira Jett had given him a powerful kick in the shins.

"God damn you, Perkins or Kennedy or whatever your name is," Jett yelled. "I hate your guts as much as anybody. But I don't want our boys to get in trouble by cutting your throat on the fifth floor of the courthouse."

From a story published February 16, 1947, in the newspaper *PM* of the same account that never mentions the attempt on his life:

In a courtroom corridor, Kennedy found himself surrounded by a group of Columbians he knew from the days when he was a member under an assumed name, gathering material for his book.

"Would you let your daughter marry a Negro?" demanded one.

"I regard it as an individual right for anyone to marry whoever he pleases," Kennedy replied.

"Would you entertain a nigger at your home?"

"I would. I choose my friends on the basis of character and not complexion."

"People have been lynched in Georgia for saying less than that," muttered one of the Columbians.

They go on to say that their column is based on an examination of a few thousand pages of documents in various archives. These included Kennedy's personal correspondence, draft articles, memos, and unpublished interviews.

The primary repository of Kennedy's papers is the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a branch of New York City's public library system in Harlem.

There, on four reels of microfilm, are photocopies of the documents Kennedy was compiling in the 1940s as he researched

and investigated various reactionary hate groups, among them the Ku Klux Klan and the Columbians, a neo-Nazi group that came to brief prominence in Atlanta in 1946–47.

Times Union Findings

The *Times Union* spent the week of January 23, 2006, examining the microfilmed Stetson Kennedy Collection at the Schomburg Center and came to the following conclusions:

As Dunner and Levin contended, *The Klan Unmasked* is not a straightforward work of nonfiction. Although all of the events described in the narrative are supported by documents in the collection, a few have been embellished and quite a few have been given a slant or different context. A number of incidents described firsthand by Kennedy in the book were actually witnessed by someone else or came from third-party accounts.

For his part, Kennedy admitted that he used not only his own experiences but also others' in *The Klan Unmasked*, intermingling them in a single narrative to make his story more compelling. He said he has always been open about this fact—others might disagree on this point—but that he regrets he didn't write an introduction for the 1990 edition that would have made his method clearer.

Although Kennedy did not apologize for the way it was written, he said, "I wish to God I'd gone on and elaborated [in 1990]."

As for why he wrote it the way he wrote it, he said his main goal was to get it published and read.

"I wanted to show what was happening at the time," he said. "Who gives a damn how it's written? It is the one and only document of the working Klan. . . . Everything that the Klan does in that book, they did in life. The book is a document of our times."

Some of the most dramatic incidents in *The Klan Unmasked*, such as the murder of a black cab driver by a Klansman, were not personally witnessed by Kennedy.

"Racial jammed on the brakes, but there was a sickening thud and the car passed over the Negro's body," Kennedy wrote. "I turned away sick. Without looking, I knew he was dead. . . ."

"I felt completely frustrated. I had seen a murder committed, and yet there was no one to whom I could turn. . . . For the first time in my life, I had a real insight into how it must feel to be a Negro in a part of the country where there is no authority to whom one can appeal for justice."

Kennedy definitely went undercover and risked his life in 1946. There is ample documentation, including newspaper clippings, that he helped infiltrate the Columbians in 1946 and stood witness at their trial.

Kennedy omitted from his book that he was one of three people who infiltrated the Columbians and then testified against them. He leaves the impression that he was the only one.

Kennedy probably attended some Klan meetings undercover. The column in the *New York Times Magazine* supports this by quoting from an interview by historian Ben Green with former Georgia Assistant Attorney General Dan Duke, now deceased. Although Duke is quoted to downplay the significance of Kennedy's contributions, the authors included his statement that Kennedy "got inside some meetings." Their implication that Kennedy had little interaction with Duke is contradicted by a number of documents, including newspaper clippings and a letter from Duke to Kennedy addressed "Dear Steve."

Peggy Bulger, who wrote a doctoral dissertation about Kennedy (published in 1992), said Duke laughed about the way *The Klan Unmasked* was written. But he added that Kennedy "didn't do it all, but he did plenty," she said.

In a letter to Kennedy dated July 27, 1946, Georgia governor Ellis Arnall wrote, "You have my permission to quote me as making the following observation: 'Documentary evidence uncovered by Stetson Kennedy has facilitated Georgia's prosecution of the Ku Klux Klan.'"

Kennedy originally thought *The Klan Unmasked* would be published in 1948. But the political climate had changed, and he

couldn't find a publisher. He now says he rewrote it as a thriller in an effort to get a publisher. But it would not be published until 1951 in France. The only American publication was by a tiny press that carried it as *I Rode with the Ku Klux Klan*.

Kennedy said he made almost nothing off the book in the '50s.

"My royalties counted in the hundreds," he said. "I don't recommend Klar busting as a career."

As Bulger, now director of the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress, noted, the book that was finally published was unlike anything else Kennedy has ever written. The style was pure Mickey Spillane, complete with hard-boiled prose and a tough, fearless protagonist who, when he isn't romancing some lovely lady, is risking his life to take down sleazy, vicious organizations. The two main differences are that Spillane hero Mike Hammer wades into every fight, and his fights are with Commies. Kennedy's hero, himself, carries a gun but avoids violence at every opportunity and works to undermine Nazis and their ilk.

"I don't think he ever thought the book would be considered a hit," Bulger said. "He just made himself into the main character so it would tell a better story."

HIS LEGEND GROWS

By 1954, Kennedy had been through a lot. He had discovered he was no longer publishable. He had moved back to Florida to live in an abandoned bus by a manmade lake on family property in St. Johns County. He had run a quixotic, write-in race for governor and his pal Woody Guthrie, who liked to sleep in a hammock next to Kennedy's bus, wrote him campaign songs. He moved to Europe in 1952 and stayed until 1960, getting one more book, *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.*, published in France. When he came back to America, he stopped writing books. He worked for more than two decades for Jacksonville's antipoverty agency.

By 1990, he was retired and largely forgotten. But the issue

of *The Klan Unmasked* in 1990 made his reputation anew and caused his legend to grow.

Bulger, who began interviewing Kennedy in the late 1980s, said Kennedy was open with her about his method in writing *The Klan Unmasked*. Kennedy told Bulger that his goal was to expose the Klan to ridicule, and he chose an approach that would help sell the book and at the same time protect the identity of his undercover man.

Civil rights activist Harry Moore and his wife, Harriette, were killed in a 1981 bombing in their home in Mims, just north of Titusville. Stetson Kennedy is involved with the investigation. Times Union file file this a source noted.

And Kennedy did make a gesture toward setting the record straight. He included a brief note opposite the table of contents thanking various people including "my fellow anti-Klan agent 'Bob' who has risked his life many times."

Was that gesture enough?

"Probably not," Bulger said. "Maybe he should have been much more up-front," she admitted.

But she insisted that what Kennedy did is not the same as what James Frey, the author of the best seller *A Million Little Pieces*, did. Frey's account of his drug addiction has been widely discredited, and his biggest supporter, Oprah Winfrey, told Frey during an appearance on her show that she felt duped.

According to Bulger, Frey was trying to make money, while Kennedy was trying to make the Klan seem both dangerous and ridiculous.

"What he did was use folklore to expose the Klan," she said.

Author Studs Terkel, outraged at the *New York Times* satelazine take, wrote to it:

"With half a dozen Stetson Kennedys, we can transform our society into one of truth, grace, and beauty. . . . The thing is, Stetson did what he set out to do. . . . He did get help. He should have been much more up front. But he certainly doesn't deserve this treatment."

Kennedy said he has been hurt by the *New York Times*

magazine article—not by its revelations about the book, which he insisted are old news, but by its implication that he hadn't really infiltrated and exposed the Klan in the 1940s.

"I'm the one who was breaking it in the press," he said. "I'm the one who was testifying in court. I'm the one who had a price on his head."

Still, he said that the support of people like Bulger and Tuckel has reminded him of how much has changed over his long life. "Once," he remembered, "I was anathema."

Now he has been widely honored. And in honoring him what he finds important is that people are paying tribute to the things he stood for.

"You can't embrace me without embracing my values: fair play and opportunity for everybody."

SUPERMAN BUSTS THE KKK

I welcome the opportunity to talk about one of my favorite writers and civil rights activists, Stetson "Scott" Kennedy. In the 1930s he was Director of Folklore, Oral History, and Ethnic Studies for the Florida Federal Writers' Project. One of his colleagues was Zora Neale Hurston, the famed novelist and anthropologist. During the 1940s the United States was fighting Nazism in World War II, but because of a back injury, Kennedy was unable to join the military. He satiated his desire to fight injustice by infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan, a domestic Nazi-like terrorist organization. He joined the Georgia Klan at the behest of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, he would later come to not trust these law enforcement personnel. The information that he uncovered was reported in his books, *Southern Exposure* (1946) and *The Klan Unmasked* (originally published as *I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan* in 1954). In these books, he used eyewitness data to undermine the racial terrorists who used violence to enforce local Jim Crow laws and customs.

In *The Klan Unmasked*, Kennedy described a heroic tale where he, posing as a racist encyclopedia salesman, named John S. Perkins, infiltrated a Klan organization in Atlanta, Georgia. Risking his life, he donned the Klan hood and robe, burned crosses, gave racist speeches, and clandestinely collected information about Klan activities. He rose to the position of Cavalier, a person expected to exercise force or violence—the equivalent of a Mafia strongman. His wrist was slit with a pocket knife, and he swore a blood oath: "Klansman, do you solemnly swear by God and the Devil never to betray secrets entrusted to you as a Klansman of the Klan?" Thankfully, Kennedy violated this oath.

The Klan Unmasked contained what one would expect—

information about secret Klan rituals and activities—but its other value lay in the connection that Kennedy made between the Klan and the values held by “mainstream” citizens. Klansmen saw themselves as God-fearing, law-abiding lovers of patriotism. In their minds they were the true Americans, and many White Americans sympathized with their goals if not their methods. Klan members and allies included politicians, business leaders, journalists, ministers, and police officers. Klan supporters crossed political party lines and included the infamous Tammany family political machine, Democrats who rode Klan support to national prominence, and Republican business leaders who used the Klan to bust unions, one head at a time. In contemporary America, the Klan is seen by most people as an embarrassing relic of the country’s racist past. But in the 1940s and 1950s, there were many Americans who openly supported the Klan’s objectives. For example, Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi, chair of the House Un-American Activities Committee, opposed investigating the Klan because, “After all, the KKK is an old American institution.” His colleague, Congressman John S. Wood of Georgia, added, “The threats and intimidation of the Klan are an old American custom, like illegal whiskey making.”

Kennedy sent the evidence he gathered to prosecutors, politicians, journalists, human rights organizations, and anyone else who he thought might disseminate the information. This was risky. He had no foolproof way to know whether or not the recipient of the damning information was a Klan sympathizer. Kennedy found an ally in Andrew Russell Pearson, a popular muckraking journalist and radio host known professionally as Drew Pearson. For a time in the 1940s, Pearson read the minutes from Klan meetings on his national radio show. This was devastating to the Klan. The minutes included the names of prominent citizens who had attended Klan meetings and rallies. Among the list of names were both pillars of the community who did not mind being identified with the KKK and those who were embarrassed to have their names publicly linked to Klan activities. In part as a result of this public attention, Klan

membership started to decrease. Kennedy also contacted Robert Maxwell, the producer of the *Adventures of Superman* radio show, and pitched the storyline of Superman versus the Ku Klux Klan. It was not a hard sell. World War II had ended, and the fictional Superman had defeated Hitler, Mussolini, Hirohito, and their followers. The Man of Steel needed new foes. The writers created "Clan of the Fiery Cross," a series where Superman battled the Klan. Kennedy and the show's producers recognized that the Klan thrived on secrecy. By revealing everything from local Klan gossip to the Klan's organizational structure and code words, the program stripped the Klan of its air of mystery and hurt Klan recruiting and membership.

"Doc" Green, a Grand Dragon in the Atlanta, Georgia, Klan, was furious that the KKK's secrets were being shared and trivialized on a national radio show. He ranted. He threatened a local boycott of Pep cereal—sponsor of the *Adventures of Superman*. And, not surprisingly, he placed a bounty on the "unknown rat." Kennedy traveled with a Smith & Weston .32 automatic in a shoulder holster.

Why would Kennedy, bred into an aristocratic southern Southern family, turn his face away from the southern Southern racial caste system? The answer may have much to do with his ancestry, which includes a Confederate Army officer, and John Baterson Stenson, the founder of the hat empire and the man for whom Stenson University is named. His family also included "Buddy," an uncle who had been a Klan official, a "Great Titan," the head of a congressional district. Thus, Kennedy's lifelong fight against racism and racist groups may have been fueled by notions of family redemption. More likely, however, his willingness to risk his life and social standing was motivated by his relationship with a woman known only as "Flo."

When Kennedy was a little boy, it was common for wealthy southern families to have black maids. Flo was not only a maid to the Kennedys but, in his Kennedy's words, "almost like a mother" to him. Flo violated Jim Crow etiquette by questioning a white bus driver who refused to give her correct change. For the

crime of "talking back to a white person" she was tied to a tree, beaten, and raped by a gang of Klansmen. This tragic and horrific incident showed the young Kennedy that the Klan, though they claimed to be Christian patriots, were really criminals capable of great savagery.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that Kennedy had a great many detractors and critics. In some instances, the criticism was born of pro-Klan sympathies; however, there is a criticism that is not so easy to dismiss. In the last decade, a number of writers, most prominently Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt, the authors of *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (2008), have criticized Kennedy. Their book includes a chapter called, "How Is the Ku Klux Klan Like a Group of Real-Estate Agents?" That chapter chronicles the heroism of Kennedy. However, a year later they questioned if Kennedy's writings, especially *The Klan Unmasked*, were more fictional than real. What changed their appraisal of Kennedy? The answer: Ben Green.

In 1992, Ben Green began conducting research for a book about Harry T. Moore and Charlotte Vada Simms Moore, two civil rights workers murdered by White supremacists. Initially, Kennedy collaborated with the project. Green wanted to use some of the information that Kennedy uncovered during his infiltration of the Klan. He went to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York (which has many of Kennedy's papers). Apparently, this is when the problems started. Green claimed, after months of reading Kennedy's field notes, that he was unable to substantiate many of the claims in *The Klan Unmasked*. He even insinuated that Kennedy had fabricated his true role. In recent years Kennedy, now in his nineties, has been fighting to salvage his reputation and protect his legacy. He acknowledged that some accounts in his books were actually derived from the actions of co-infiltrators or others sympathetic with undermining the Klan. Though I recognize the importance of integrity in a person's work, I am nevertheless not especially troubled if *Southern Exposure* or *The Klan Unmasked* includes

accounts from others afraid to speak for themselves. Nor can I be bothered that Kennedy embellished his role. Infiltrating the Klan was an act of great courage, and the information in the books and on the radio shows led to the arrests of some klansmen, the deniling of domestic terrorist acts, and the unpopularity of the Klan organization. That is good enough for me.

—David Pilgrim, Curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia

July 2009

STETSON'S SIDE OF THE STORY

As noted in the introduction to this edition, *The Klan Unmasked* has seen its share of controversy. As the reader will see in the acknowledgements, there is a note of appreciation to my fellow undercover agent "Bob," for risking his life in gathering some of the information in this book.

"Bob" begged me to leave him out of it, for fear of his own life and the safety of his family. During the writing, I was safe in Paris, while he was still living in the Klan's Imperial City, Atlanta. So in the first part of the book, I did indeed take the literary license of incorporating some of his reports with my own.

I did so with a clear conscience, after having spent so many years infiltrating, exposing, and prosecuting the Klan and a score or more of its kindred terrorist groups, at the constant risk of being discovered and killed. It never even occurred to me that someday someone would come along and try to make something of it. After all it was my use that Grand Dragon Samuel Green offered "\$1,000 per pound for IOB Atlanta." And it was *we* that a Columbian/Klansman attacked with a switchblade in the witness room of the Fulton County Superior Court in Atlanta.

I could go on—and I have in other places, citing chapter and verse of the written evidence for the truth of this account—and rest comfortably in the fact that my detractors don't even attempt to refute this record. I am still grateful to Bob, who was a hero, and his stories are true, too.

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