

The Pulitzer and the Klan

**Horace Carter, the Pulitzer Prize, and How a Weekly
Editor stood up to the Klan – and Won**

*“Any man can have kids. It’s what you do with
your life outside your family that counts.”*
– *W. Horace Carter*

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A line of 29 cars snaked down Highway 701 East to Railroad Street in Tabor City, North Carolina, through the business district, and along the “dusty, unpaved streets” to “the bottom” where the black citizens lived, surrounding it like a lariat. The lead car bore a two-foot high brightly-glowing red cross above its radiator; the letters “KKK” scrawled on its windshield. The dome lights of the cars, mostly bearing South Carolina plates, burned luridly in the dark and warm of that July 22 evening in 1950, illuminating the occupants, 100 armed men all cloaked in the white robes and hoods of the Ku Klux Klan.¹

There was no violence that first night, no cross burnings, no voices raised in anger or protest. Stunned residents lined the streets in silence. A butcher from a meat market clattered down the steps of his grocery, wiping his bloody hands on his apron. “What’s going on?” he asked a knot of Tabor City residents watching the spectacle in disbelief. Jewish businessman Albert Schilds stood aghast in the doorway of his department store. A drunk, mouth hanging open, leaned for support against a utility pole. Three black women tried to melt into the crowd. Standing by the curb, Police Chief L. R. Watson “seemed petrified” at the spectacle of Klansmen prowling the streets of his town. The Tabor City police force consisted of just two men and if the Klansmen attempted violence, they would have met little resistance.²

W. Horace Carter, 29, editor, owner, and founder of the *Tabor City Tribune*, had been tipped off by his barber earlier in the day that something was going to happen that evening. When he heard the wail of a siren, he looked outside his rented home for the telltale smoke from a fire. Seeing none, he jammed his rumpled felt hat on his head (“I wanted to be a ‘real’ newspaperman”), and headed toward the “uptown” of Tabor City.³

¹ W. Horace Carter, *Virus of Fear*, 10-11 (Tabor City, North Carolina: Atlantic Publishing Co., 1991).

² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

If a twist of fate had not sent him to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and journalism, he would have been in China as a Christian missionary rather than Tabor City.⁴ And yet, another crusade, a mission of a different kind, was driving down the unpaved streets of Tabor City. Gradually the caravan of cars unwound and disappeared toward South Carolina, red taillights gradually swallowed by the night.⁵

Carter picked up one of the flyers scattered by the Klansmen. “Beware of association with the niggers, Jews and Catholics in this community. God didn’t mean for all men to be equal . . . We are organizing all over your state and particularly in this community.” It was signed by Grand Dragon Thomas L. Hamilton of the Association of Carolina Klans.⁶

Dismayed, troubled, and yet determined, Carter walked home, recalling in his memoirs:

My duty as the only newspaperman in Tabor City stared me squarely in the face. I could not compromise my conscience. I must fight the Klansmen with all the power that my tiny press could muster. That meant that I too would be the victim of their wrath. I was no hero, but the die was cast and I would have to respond. I must fight this KKK resurrection . . . The blueprint of what the future might hold for me . . . flicked through my busy mind as I slowly walked home.⁷

It is the purpose of this article to discuss the choices Horace Carter faced, the actions he took, often alone, isolated and unaided, and the results his editorials engendered during the Ku Klux Klan’s resurgence in southeast North Carolina during 1950-1952. His efforts culminated with the imprisonment of 62 Klansmen, two-thirds the number police estimated had driven slowly through Tabor City that first night, and the bestowal of the Pulitzer Prize for Meritorious Public Service on Carter and the *Tribune*.

⁴ He might have been dead in China. “Mao killed all the missionaries after he came to power,” Carter recalled. Interview with W. Horace Carter, tape recording, 27 September 2002.

⁵ *Virus of Fear*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Carter was part of a Southern tradition of liberalism, a philosophy that surfaced at times of trial. At the time Carter was fighting the Klan, Raleigh's *News and Observer* was completing its transformation from a segregationist publication under long-time owner Josephus Daniels, a newspaper that had helped spur the disenfranchisement of blacks in the late 19th Century, into a liberal bulwark in the state under Daniels' son, Jonathan. Other journalists contemporary with Carter – Ralph McGill, and Hodding Carter, both Pulitzer Prize winners – had their own battles either with the Klan, or other demons from the South's history.

Carter also enjoyed a circle of family that helped support him, especially his wife, and a few in the wider North Carolina newspaper fraternity. His own father, though, disagreed with his opposition to the KKK at first.⁸ Charles Kuralt and the *News and Observer* of Raleigh eventually rallied to his cause. Willard Cole, a long-time friend at the nearby semi-weekly *Whiteville News Reporter*, supported him in his clashes with the Ku Klux Klan, and actually shared in the Pulitzer.

Out of the chaos

The Ku Klux Klan was born in the chaos of the postbellum South, “during the restless days when time was out of joint . . . and the social order was battered and turned upside down,” according to David M. Chalmers in his history of the clandestine organization.⁹ With carpetbaggers and scalawags in power in the South, the economy shattered, cash worthless, agriculture practically ruined, land redistribution threatened (and carried out on a small scale), properties sold to settle back taxes, and many children and women orphaned and widowed, restoring pride and a respect for the traditional white leaders required drastic action in the minds of hundreds of thousands of Southerners.

⁸ W. Horace Carter. Speech, Campbell University, Buies Creek, North Carolina. March 16, 2000.

⁹ David M. Chalmers. *Hooded Americanism: the History of the Ku Klux Klan*. 2, (New York and London: New Viewpoints, 1981).

Like a mold that is not quite eradicated, the bleach-sheeted Klan was revived in the wake of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. It died back, only to be rejuvenated again just after World War II, led by Dr. Samuel Green, an Atlanta, Georgia, obstetrician. His unexpected death in 1949 took away the Invisible Empire's only national leader and led to the organization's further, perhaps final fragmentation.¹⁰ Into that vacuum in the Carolinas, for a time, would step Leesville, South Carolina, grocer Thomas L. Hamilton, self-styled Grand Dragon of the KKK. And W. Horace Carter.

Convictions

Carter's convictions came from the first "liberal" he ever met, Dr. Frank Porter Graham, president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). "He had a lot to do with it," Carter remembered.¹¹

He believed in equality of the religions and equality of the races. And not many people did then . . . Not many people believed in sitting down and eating with a black man, for instance. But he got it across to me very tactfully and over a lot of different conversations that they were entitled to all the privileges the rest of us were entitled to. And I think that's what I was thinking of when I saw those 29 cars go down the street.¹²

Carter was editor of *The Tar Heel* at UNC-CH. Dr. Graham had an open door policy for students, invited them to his office and home, and was seen frequently around campus talking to students. On Sunday nights, Carter recalled, he would often have members of the newspaper staff to his home for dinner.¹³ Carter's friendship with and respect for Graham sparked a defining moment in his journalistic life.¹⁴ During World War II, Dr. Graham, a friend and confidant of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, served on the War Labor Board in the nation's capital, while

¹⁰ Ibid., 6-7

¹¹ Interview with W. Horace Carter, tape recording, Tabor City, North Carolina, 27 September 2002.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Carter interview.

¹⁴ W. Horace Carter, *Only in America: An Autobiography of a Weekly Newspaperman and Business Success*, 88 (Tabor City, North Carolina: Atlantic Publishing Co., 2001).

remaining as university president. There was grumbling from other university administrators and the board of trustees about this arrangement.

Adopting the practice he would later use to great effect in Tabor City, Carter wrote a stinging editorial excoriating opponents of Dr. Graham. Though it was a “small student publication paid for largely by fees collected as part of the quarterly tuition,” its editorial resonated far beyond Chapel Hill. “I wasn’t smart enough to write diplomatically. I still am not,” Carter admitted, describing his blunt language. Carter’s fulminations infuriated State Senator John Umstead, who telephoned Carter and demanded he meet him at the journalism school “right now!” His nerves “like a bowl of Jell-O® on a merry-go-round,” Carter headed across campus to Bynum Hall to meet with the senator. When he arrived, he was met at the top of the steps by the dean of the journalism school, O.J. “Skipper” Coffin. Coffin told him of a similar call he had just received from Umstead. His words would galvanize Carter: “I don’t give a damn whether you are right or wrong, but don’t you give in to him. You stick by what you wrote and what you really believe, regardless of what he threatens,” Coffin instructed Carter in an “almost dictatorial tone.”¹⁵

A few minutes later, Sen. Umstead arrived and met with Carter alone. “His face red with rage,” he demanded to know Carter’s sources; Carter refused, but he let the senator know they were authoritative.¹⁶ Sen. Umstead gave him a “raking over the coals,” and then “made me get in the car and go to Raleigh” to meet his brother, William Umstead, former Congressman, Democratic state chairman, and future U.S. senator and governor.¹⁷ Despite the pressure, Carter remained steadfast and adamantly declined to divulge his sources or back away from his editorial position. Five days later, Carter received a letter from President Roosevelt praising his convictions; he printed it on the

¹⁵ Ibid., 88-89.

¹⁶ Ibid, 90.

¹⁷ Carter interview.

front page of *The Tar Heel*.¹⁸ Eventually, Dr. Graham retained both positions. In his memoirs, Carter summed up the effect this episode had on his nascent career: “For more than half a century, I have lived by the same premise concerning controversial subjects when my business, home, and even my life and my family were threatened by someone who disagreed with my position(s) . . . I started my whole crusading career right there . . . I’ve never seen it as being heroic. I’ve always seen it as just another way to tell what was going on in the community.”¹⁹

Into print

The days between the Klan parade, and his earliest opportunity to respond in print, the next Wednesday’s edition of the *Tabor City Tribune*, were worrisome to Carter. As he recollected later:

Was it worth sacrificing our happiness, shattering the tranquil life of running a little weekly newspaper in a small town and taking part in Red Cross Drives, church covered-dish suppers, and the Annual Yam Festival promotion just because I believed in a principle? Was it worth the risk that the print shop might be burned, our home dynamited? I could be dragged from our house with the frantic screams of my family ringing in my ears. I might suffer a brutal lashing by a band of masked hoodlums or even death if I dared to oppose them. Is it the time to stand up for principles even before I am fully aware of what this Klan proposes?²⁰

Convinced in his own mind and supported by his wife, Carter sat down at the used \$15 Royal typewriter he still owns to compose the first salvo in his crusade against the Klan. It was then typeset on an old Linotype and printed on a sheet-fed Whitlock printing press for his 1,500 subscribers. The editorial appeared on the front page, as would all but one Klan editorial over the next two years. It was a conscious decision, Carter explained.²¹

¹⁸ *Only in America*, 90-91.

¹⁹ Carter interview.

²⁰ *Virus of Fear*, 17.

²¹ Carter interview.

I knew it would be read on the front page . . . and I made the decision to publish all future KKK editorials on the front page regardless of the length of the campaign. I had a feeling then that there was no quick fix. This would be a long, hard-fought struggle. Neither the Klan nor the newspaper would just roll over and play dead.²²

He admitted in his memoirs that it was “no great literary masterpiece,” but he had a particular audience in mind, one that the Klan would prey on. As he told his wife, Tabor City residents were “hardworking, fifth and sixth generation Americans . . . but many of the adults never saw the inside of a schoolhouse. Few of the rural farmers here got past grammar school and there [was] a racial tension that could play right into the hands of the Klan.” North Carolinians and other southerners had been taught in “high schools for generations in history” that the Klan was heroic. Yankees descended from the North to prey on the defeated South, “took over the governments and taxed (southerners) beyond reasonable limits.”²³ Carter found it “hard to counteract” that ingrained mindset and erroneous reading of history.²⁴

In Tabor City in the early Fifties, there were “no racial problems to speak of,” Carter commented. “The Negroes were poorer than most whites and there had always been some injustices,” it being the rural South. Nonetheless, “the little town remained peaceful and quiet. There was no clamor for change, no animosity, no confrontations,” Carter recollected many years later.²⁵ Despite that, “the man on the street” sided with the Klan, Carter thought.²⁶ Within a few months of that first motorcade, “unofficial estimates” put KKK membership in Columbus County, North Carolina, and Horry County, South Carolina, both in the *Tribune*’s coverage area, at 5,000 (or more) out of a population of 75,000. “That meant that one out of every fifteen people I met on the street owned a robe and hood. It might also apply to those I sat next to in church.”

²² *Virus of Fear*, 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 14-15, 18.

²⁴ Carter interview.

²⁵ *Virus of Fear*, 25

²⁶ Carter interview.

Carter also anguished over the possibility that “people resent being told what to do by a newspaper.”²⁷

Three houses in a nearby county were burned, presumably by the Klan. A pregnant black woman was severely beaten. A mechanic was hauled out of his bed in the middle of the night and flogged, presumably because he had a drinking problem. Others received threatening letters warning them to change their behavior, or else. A Jewish businessman, distraught by threats, closed his department store and left town with his family. Others were enticed from their homes in the middle of the night on a pretext: a favorite ploy was to knock at the door and ask for assistance with a car breakdown. The litany of outrages continued like a drumbeat. Carter is convinced many more attacks went unreported, especially by blacks, and others were delayed sometimes weeks while victims anguished over possible reprisals.²⁸

His readers did not believe him when he wrote that lawlessness would follow the Klan’s organization. “You couldn’t organize a gang of troublemakers and appease them by holding meetings and talking about the price of tobacco,” Carter wrote ruefully decades later. “They would want to use those sheets and hoods for the bedevilment of others.”²⁹ The KKK very soon began its mission of mayhem.

On January 15, 1951, Klansmen invaded the home of a black couple in rural Tabor City. As the husband escaped unseen through the back door, Klansmen pumped five shots into an attic where they thought he was hiding. They then dragged his wife outside, whipped her mercilessly, carved a cross into her scalp with a razor, and clubbed her with a butt of a rifle. All the time she begged for her life, while her daughter cowered nearby. The same evening, a disabled World War II veteran and his crippled uncle, both white, were severely beaten in their own home. Both

²⁷ *Virus of Fear*, 20.

²⁸ Carter interview

²⁹ *Only in America*, 198.

incidents involved 40-50 Klansmen. No one was ever caught, no reason was ever given, though Carter suspected it involved judgments on their moral conduct. “An ominous silence crept over the community,” Carter recalled, and “the virus of fear was spreading.”³⁰ Carter reported the beatings vividly, hoping to convince the “so-called good people” of the true essence of the Klan. “Not even the pastor in the Tabor City Baptist Church, where I taught a Sunday school class, would publicly criticize the Klan floggings,” Carter wrote, surmising that some Klansmen were parishioners.³¹

Blacks felt they could not trust the police and local government officials – and with reason. The sheriff of Horry County was part of the organization, in Carter’s estimation, and police departments in the area were suffused with Klan members. The threats and harassments built, one upon the other, to a crescendo that never seemed to resolve itself. Twice, on the street, Carter was approached by different men, much larger and stronger than he. They berated him and his newspapers and made rude remarks about him and his family, trying to pick a fight. Wisely, Carter shrugged them off.³²

The Klan put pressure on Carter’s advertisers. One of the largest, C. C. Sells, did abandon the *Tribune* for some time, staying away even after the whole controversy was over. None of the advertisers actually came out and admitted they were cutting back on their advertising because of intimidation, but Carter knew it was happening. Some would tell him they did not want to buy an ad a particular week, one that Carter had been expecting. Grand Dragon Hamilton told Carter plainly in one of their two face-to-face meetings in the *Tribune* office that he would put him out of business by organizing a boycott. Support from home was vital, too. Carter’s wife Lucille told

³⁰ Ibid., 198-199.

³¹ Carter interview.

³² Ibid.

him, as she had before and would later: “Well, we came with nothing. Let’s leave with nothing. Let’s beat them.”³³

In addition to its traditional racial and religious hatreds, the Klan cloaked itself in a false morality, Carter believed. This veneer of morality won the Klan converts and sympathizers. Stripped of its violence, the organization seemed to represent many American virtues. The Klan sent threatening letters to those it believed fell short of their standards of morality and decency, all without proof, although with some evidence, Carter admitted. Men who cheated on their wives, unmarried couples who lived together, a man who would not allow his wife to attend the church of her choice, families who did not seem to be providing for their children properly, several individuals who spoke against the Church of Christ, a man who, habitually, found himself arrested for public drunkenness and who, therefore, did not seem to be supporting his family properly; all received warnings, threats, or visits from the Klan. Many law-abiding citizens, according to Carter, thought some of these goals, far from being deplorable, were in fact admirable. With his editorials, Carter tried to draw attention to the hypocrisy of their stands, and the vigilante nature of the justice they were meting out.

Shacking up with somebody else’s wife, or living together when you’re not married: at that time, that was about as sinful as you could get. And in the Klan came and flogged these people and beat them and told them if they ever turned notice of their flogging over to the sheriff, they’d be back . . . We knew that the Klan couldn’t go in there and punish them into changing their lives. So, generally, those people were abusing their wives and (were) alcoholics that couldn’t look after their families, people who obviously deserved some kind of reprimands, some kind of punishment. Well, we fought them anyway just on the basis that if you don’t go by the law, you don’t even have a country. We’re through if we don’t go by the law.³⁴

³³ Carter interview.

³⁴ Ibid.

The editorials

The Tabor City community learned immediately where Carter and the weekly *Tribune* stood, just four days after the Klan motorcade, in that first editorial headlined, “No Excuse for KKK.”

In this democratic country, there’s no place for an organization of the caliber of the Ku Klux Klan . . . Any organization that has to work outside the law is unfit for recognition in a country of free men. Saturday’s episode, although without violence, is deplorable, a black eye to our area and an admission that our law enforcement is inadequate.

Sanctioning of their methods of operation is practically as bad as if you rode in their midst. It takes all the law-abiding people as a unit to discourage and combat a Ku Klux Klan that is totally without law. The Klan, despite its Americanism plea, is the personification of Fascism and Nazism. It is just such outside-the-law operations that lead to dictatorships through fear and insecurity.

The Klan bases its power on fear and hate of one’s fellow man and not through love, understanding and the principles upon which God would have us live together. We have some racial problems in this country. That cannot be denied. However, we do not have open warfare which we will have if the primitive methods of the KKK are applied . . . They are endeavoring to force their domination upon those whom they consider worth of punishment. It is not for a band of hoodlums to decide whether you or I need chastising.³⁵

Carter wrote that “punishment must be kept within the law; if that is not adequate then we . . . have the power to enlarge upon (those laws) should we deem the present ones inadequate.”³⁶ Carter further noted that:

The racial issue in the South has been overstressed. There is little tangible evidence of any struggle between races. There’s no basis to a federal government forcing us to mingle together. A law of this nature would get no further than the record, and you know it would not and could not be enforced.³⁷

³⁵ *Tabor City Tribune*, July 26, 1950, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Given his later career, and his consistently articulated opinions, Carter was clearly speaking to his “back country” readers, mostly white, who were troubled by the rumblings over civil rights. In this sense, Carter’s campaign against the KKK can be seen as part of the first threads in the rich tapestry of the Civil Rights movement that would soon engulf the South.

Drawing on the intensity of his religious faith, Carter predicted:

Any non-segregation that ever comes about in the South will have to be a natural movement, through many generations of people, through education and *the practice of God’s teaching*.³⁸

God and ungodly. Segregation and non-segregation. Hate and love. Natural movement and federal government force. All terminology balanced in a ying and yang of racial relations, in an editorial that, on the surface, seems almost haphazardly and simply written, but which is, upon further investigation, seen to be richly textured, subtle, and imbued with religious fervor. Religious terminology can be seen also as an attempt by a very sophisticated writer who chose to write in the homely language of a rural, “country weekly” as a way to connect with a populace that was, at the time, deeply and fervently religious, as well as unsophisticated. His religious terms and imagery were touchstones and reassuring ones. His readers were deeply worried about the “mingling of the races” and some saw in the KKK a way to beat back, as the group did during Reconstruction, the racial tsunami that was threatening to batter their way of life to pieces.

This editorial was also important, not just because it was the first, but because it came immediately, at the earliest possible opportunity after the Klan’s appearance in Tabor City. This editorial defined the fight to come, put Carter and *The Tribune* forthrightly against the Klan. The religious and ethical aspect is evident; Carter clearly regarded this as a “crusade” – his word –

³⁸ Ibid. Italics added.

and a religious imperative. In at least half a dozen instances Carter knew of – and he believed there were many others unreported – Klansmen entered churches in the midst of worship services and walked up and down the aisles menacingly. The one arena where townsfolk were gathered together once or twice a week presented an opportunity to those with the conviction, like Carter, to oppose the Klan on moral and religious grounds. The preaching the ministers failed to do had to be accomplished in Carter’s secular arena. Through intimidation or even agreement (at least one minister was eventually indicted for Klan activities), the churches fell silent while Carter did not. To Carter, the Klan represented the power of Darkness (again, fascism and Nazism), and he was going to join the battle with Light, even if he was its sole defender. To oppose the Klan was righteous, Carter was convinced, and he was appalled that the Klan wrapped its efforts in bedsheets of faith.³⁹ In his penultimate paragraph, Carter wrote:

America was founded by persons seeking a country of religious freedom where they could worship God in their own way without fear. Would you have us to resort to a nation of people wishing there was another America to discover so we could leave this one?⁴⁰

And, finally, in a deeply-felt denouement, Carter returned to his bedrock values and the overarching theme of his campaign.

With the Klan’s frequent reference to Jesus, God and religion, they are being highly sacrilegious because their very being is in contrast to God and the BIBLE. If you had the names of those persons appearing here Saturday night and if you had church attendance slips for those persons, it’s our opinion that not five percent of them entered any church of any denomination on Sunday morning.⁴¹

From the instant that first issue with the anti-Klan editorial hit the street, Carter felt the pressure in Tabor City rising against him. Business leaders, worried about the effect on their bottom line, objected. One advertiser in *The Tribune* urged him to “pull in your horns” before

³⁹ Carter interview.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

“it’s too late.” Another friend and businessman warned him, “They’ll beat you to a pulp or burn you out.” His three closest friends and fishing buddies opposed his stance. “It’s hard when your best friends don’t want to back you up,” he remarked.⁴²

The next morning, the Klan made its first direct and ominous contact with Carter, a note stuck under his car’s windshield wiper. That audacious and brazen action, done while his family slept a few feet away, chilled the young editor: he could have had his “house set afire or blown . . . up” like one in Horry County a few weeks earlier that killed three people, a possible “Klan reprisal.” Two other handwritten notes awaited him under the front door of his newspaper office. “More than ever I was fearful for my family’s safety. These vipers were certainly creating an atmosphere of fear . . . a virus,” he recalled in his memoirs.⁴³

On August 2, 1950, the second week of his crusade against the Klan, most of the bottom fourth of the front page was given over to an open letter from Carter to his readers about the week’s Ku Klux Klan activities. He squelched one rumor, started by a local boy, “a liar first class . . . (with a) chance of still becoming . . . a mediocre citizen,” claiming that Carter was in fact the “headman” of the Klan. Another rumor suggested “many” blacks were talking of abandoning Tabor City in the wake of the Klan’s appearance. Carter exhorted them not to “let this band of hoodlums scare” them.⁴⁴ Some farmers were fearful of bringing their tobacco to Tabor City to sell, and Carter tried to alleviate their concerns.

Another key feature of Carter’s *Tribune* during this period was instituted the next week: He began publishing letters to the editor on the Klan controversy, providing a forum for opposing views. The first one was from a “Klan friend at heart,” who wrote praising the clandestine organization as a “profit to the community and Nation” and criticizing it only for

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Virus of Fear*, 23.

⁴⁴ *Tabor City Tribune*, August 2, 1950, 1.

“getting too far behind with their work.” The writer, John Hardee, disapproved of Carter’s editorials and open letter.⁴⁵ Carter’s tactic subliminally buttressed his campaign, confirming that the “other side” was so harmless it did not matter that it received publicity. With one notable exception, the letters to the editor, all virtually verbatim, were published on the traditional, inside editorial page.

In November, Carter responded in an editorial to Klan tirades at one of their periodic evening cross-burning mass meetings. The great plumes of smoke and fire and sparks rising in the night sky as white horses pawed and trotted around the burning cross were macabre spectacles – and to Carter, pagan ones. Carter attended them, not in secret, but certainly inconspicuously, to take notes and observe. He was always accompanied by his brother-in-law and a printer and was, to the best of his knowledge, never recognized in the dark.

Disarmingly in the editorial, he ticked off the areas where the *Tribune* and the Klan agreed: that Communism in the U.S. should be “nipped in the bud,” that police in Horry County needed to be investigated, that he believed in the Constitution and the BIBLE, that Alger Hiss, a prominent state department official and New Dealer, accused of being a communist in the 1930s, was a traitor, and that the U.N. charter was “not all that it should be.”⁴⁶

Then, he enumerated where they parted ways. He denied that Klansmen, “on the whole,” were God-fearing and Christian – and this was something his readers were not hearing from the pulpits. He wrote that “no race should be condemned” as a group, but that individuals might be good or bad. The Klan had singled out Jews as Communists; Carter disagreed.

To say that a Jewish sect, composing 9,000,000 people in the United States, is communistic and evil, is condemning a block (sic) without regard to individuals. Perhaps there are (sic) a great number of these persons who are Communists. But the ratio of Communist Jews to

⁴⁵ *Tabor City Tribune*, August 9, 1950, 1.

⁴⁶ *Tabor City Tribune*, November 15, 1950, 1.

the ratio of Communists of any other race is no greater.⁴⁷

He disputed that the newspapers were controlled. He denied that churches and schools were being led toward communism. In fact, he drew the parallel that the only other secret organization he knew, other than the Communist Party, was the KKK. “If the Ku Klux Klan is good and pure, if it is made up of good people, and if they do not work outside the law as stated at the meeting, then why doesn’t it charter its organization like all other groups and not hide its membership and carry on its activities in the dead of night in this mystic fashion?” He concluded the editorial by urging any KKK member to write a letter to the editor, even offering to withhold the writer’s name if he or she so requested.⁴⁸ Carter was very adroit at the subtle and tricky art of audiencing long before it even had a name. He knew who his readers were, their prejudices, their limitations, and their “hot button” issues. He stayed just ahead of them, pulling them along at a pace that was just enough to move them ahead, but not too rapidly to destroy his credibility or have them balk. As counterpoint, he ran his front page editorial next to the banner story on the KKK meeting.

An anonymous KKK mimeographed broadside against Horry County sheriff Ernest Sasser, intimating charges of embezzlement and graft, stirred Carter to a February 7, 1951, editorial. Admitting he had “no complimentary remarks to make in regard” to the sheriff, Carter, showing the even-handed fairness that even his opponents would have to recognize, asked for proof.⁴⁹

Carter worried, in May of 1951, that the subversive influence of the KKK was contributing to a breakdown in government. The KKK, he opined:

Choosing not to voice their sentiments in open and truly American

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Tabor City Tribune*, February 7, 1951, 1.

ways, this organization instead chooses to hide in the blackness of night. To carry on its cowardly deeds in a backhanded, illegal, crafty manner indicative of a big city in the days of prohibition.⁵⁰

He wondered why the KKK could not “shed their cloaks of secretness” and “carry their sentiments” to the polls in what has “long been the American way. He claimed to have never known a church member, Mason, American Legion member, or a Rotarian who hid his affiliation. In a ringing final phrase, Carter asserted that the “disgruntled” Klan members were taking a “fanatical pride” in doing their vile work of subverting the American system.⁵¹

It is among just such groups the eventual internal growth of antagonism toward our government and our way of life is springing up. It is through just such groups that freedom of every kind may perish and Americans could find themselves being ruled through fear.⁵²

All but one of the editorials, plus one “open letter” from the editor to readers, were on the front page. Except for a handful of stories, dozens of stories relating to Klan activities, cross-burnings, floggings, and indictments were also on the front page.

The atmosphere

In late January 1951, he received a worrisome telephone call from an anonymous doctor in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The caller claimed to have overheard a KKK official making arrangements with a gunman in Tampa, Florida, for a mob-style “hit” on Carter. Carter was told the hit man would know his whereabouts and had photographs of his house. Moments after he hung up, the night policeman in Tabor City called on Carter, relating a similar telephone call. A few days later, the man who rented a back room at the Carter home asked whether he was going

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Carter interview.

to have some work done on the house, because he had seen someone in a car with out-of-state plates taking numerous photographs of the house.⁵³

Carter's wife was terrified. The town board assigned a policeman to watch his house for a week. Carter was convinced the Klan never would have dared "kill me or any other editor who is fighting them," because that would "bring down the newspapers everywhere."⁵⁴ "It would have made a hell of a lot better story if I'd gotten killed," Carter claimed.⁵⁵ Carter received more than 1,000 death threats over a three-year period, but still he kept at it.⁵⁶

I don't know (why) I stuck with it other than the fact that I didn't have anything and I was trying to make a living. and one thing's for sure, people were reading the damn paper. It was getting on people's tables. I don't know whether that's the way to get them to read it or not, but I sure had the readership.⁵⁷

Carter was convinced he was also protected from floggings and other physical abuse, simply because he had a newspaper. The *Tribune* was both his sword and his shield, and it had a high profile that made it unwise to assault him. He also believed allowing letters to the editor helped defuse some of the Klansmen's anger; they knew they could have their views publicized in the *Tribune* as well. He received considerable help and publicity from others in the journalism field. His friend and former *Tar Heel* editor, Charles Kuralt, who later enjoyed great professional success and fame with CBS News, broadcast weekly from the area on the Klan for six months for a Charlotte radio station, reporting on the situation. Eventually, Jake Jenkins and the *News and Observer* of Raleigh "got on our bandwagon," and ran stories on the resurgent Klan.

Hodding Carter, the Mississippi journalist opposing the Klan, kept a loaded gun in every room of

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Carter speech.

⁵⁷ Carter interview.

his house in case someone burst in. Horace Carter was never either that paranoid or prepared. “I had an automatic shotgun. And I told the sheriff about it, (and that) I’d leave some of them in the yard,” dead or wounded, if they had tried to break in.⁵⁸

Unraveling

In the fall of 1951, things began to unravel for the Invisible Empire. A common law husband and wife were dragged from their bed in the middle of the night near Tabor City in North Carolina and taken across the border into South Carolina where they were severely beaten. Kidnapping and transportation across state lines were the legal contexts the FBI needed to get involved.⁵⁹ Carter said that he did not “ever waver” from his opposition to the Klan and its rebirth, and would not have, but that “if it hadn’t been for J. Edgar Hoover, they (the Klan) would be in charge now.” The FBI chief “sent about 32 FBI agents down here and said, ‘don’t come back till you’ve got them in jail.’” The FBI eventually infiltrated the Klan and finally indicted nearly three-dozen Klansmen in the first batch. Within 30 days, both the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation and South Carolina Law Enforcement charged others. “I think they saw (that) the tide had turned,” Carter said.⁶⁰

Authorities kept the assault against the common law couple secret for four months, until federal agents and the recently elected sheriff of Columbus County, Hugh Nance, arrested ten Klansmen for the crime. They were charged under the Lindbergh Law, making their crime a capital offense, although the ultimate penalty was not sought. The arrest of those 10 men made national headlines; Hoover himself announced the arrests in the early morning hours. The floodgates were opened, and nearly two years of often solitary crusading were coming to an end. Amazingly, to Carter, ministers suddenly commenced preaching against the Klan, mayors began

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Only in America*, 278.

⁶⁰ Carter interview.

voicing opposition, and police chiefs lamented the wickedness of the organization. Carter accepted the turn of events with equanimity, and without editorial comment.

Sometimes it takes one or two “plain folks” to do the right thing in the midst of madness to effectuate change. For several years, the few Klan incidents that had been brought before a grand jury or a judge were dismissed for want of evidence or witnesses willing to testify. Then, in the swampland town of Nakina, twelve miles from Tabor City, along the Waccamaw River, farmer Dan Ward stood up to the Klan. On Christmas Day, 1951, three neighbors, one armed, all KKK members, visited Ward and told him to get rid of one of his black sharecropping tenants, “if you want to live.” Ward and his wife took the matter to authorities. Two other residents, who had been approached to assist in “running this nigger out of Nakina,” testified against the trio. They were convicted by a jury and sentenced to two years on a road gang. Carter termed it a ‘turning point in the Klan movement,’ because finally a “local court” dared to “oppose the vigilantes, something (he) had never expected to happen.”⁶¹

Eventually, Imperial Wizard Hamilton, who had by 1952 promoted himself from Grand Dragon, would face indictment, trial, and conviction. By then, with 254 indictments in hand (yielding, ultimately, 62 convictions) and with its leadership crushed, indicted, or jailed, the Klan ceased to exist for all practical purposes in Horry and Columbus counties. Many Klansmen turned state’s evidence to save themselves. A federal judge, Don Gilliam, after examining the financial books, stated in open court that “I think (Hamilton) is more interested in the money he is making . . . than he is in the floggings.” According to Carter, in his memoirs, Klan sympathizers realized “the KKK movement was a money game that enriched some of its

⁶¹ *Only in America*, 270-271.

leaders.” Believing in the power of redemption, Carter testified on Hamilton’s behalf at a parole hearing, and Hamilton was released early from his four-year sentence, and simply disappeared.⁶²

When the first indictments were announced, Carter put the credit where he felt it belonged: “Thank God, there is still law, courts and justice in Columbus County.”⁶³

They have yet to be proven guilty. But they will have that opportunity, unlike those many persons brutally beaten by nightriders in Columbus during the several months that violence headlined the news from this area . . . Our biggest hope is that those individuals who have taken part in the other floggings also feel the strong arm of the law reaching out for them, wherever they are. We want to see each of them ferreted out from behind the mask of cowardness to face the world and pay for (their) crimes.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Sometimes a man and a time come together, serendipitously, perhaps, but perhaps there are other forces in the universe that propel them together. Horace Carter would call that force God. Good men and women, preachers and policemen, sat on their hands when evil came walking the streets of Tabor City. But Carter was fired with the liberalism of Frank Porter Graham and the “liberal” – all though he disdains that word, now, which he remarked upon with approbation then – education” he received at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the missionary zeal of his Baptist background. And there was his mother, her quiet tolerance a counterweight to the pointed racism of his father. All Carter had was his pulpit, an old Whitlock handfed press, and the resolution that under other circumstances would have sent Carter to missionary work in China. Instead, he spread the gospel in southeastern North Carolina. “You

⁶² Carter interview.

⁶³ *Tabor City Tribune*, February 20, 1952, 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

sometimes wonder what hand God (has) in your future,” Carter remarked. Would he do it again? “It’s what every weekly editor would have done in the same circumstances.”⁶⁵

Perhaps the final and supreme endorsement of his crusade came from the citizens of Tabor City, most of whom had kept their heads down and their opinions to themselves while Carter campaigned against the Klan. They overwhelmingly elected him mayor in the spring of 1953, scarcely six weeks after the *Tribune* won the Pulitzer. Carter had done his job newspaperman’s job well, cajoling, berating, exhorting, and leading his small community through the crucible of the Klan challenge. That he had not destroyed his credibility and his support in the process was a significant accomplishment.

Past amidst the present

Horace Carter has outlived nearly everyone on either side of the Klan controversy. Hamilton disappeared after being released from prison after serving half of his four-year sentence. Carter’s first wife died in 1982 of cancer. Willard Cole, with whom he shared the Pulitzer, died within a decade of his greatest triumph. Only two of the over 260 men indicted are still living in the area. One would admit to having been a Klansmen, Carter observed, but not the other.⁶⁶

The streets are paved now, but there are empty buildings, vacated factories sprinkled around Tabor City. At the edge of town, a ramshackle storefront flies the Confederate battle flag, while offering souvenirs to what tourists may happen upon the town. Appended to the crisply modern *Tabor City Tribune* building is a small, two-room Horace Carter museum dedicated to

⁶⁵ Carter interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

his career. Across the street is a large factory, matched by one next to the museum. From a nest egg of \$4,700 left from his service in the U.S. Navy, Carter's corporation has grown into the 25th largest private business in North Carolina, with 2001 revenues of \$150 million.⁶⁷

A rattly Chevrolet pick-up truck drives by, a large Confederate battle flag waving in the slipstream, an empty gun rack lashed to the rear window. The streets may be paved now, but the attitudes that gave the Klan fertile ground to till may still be a dusty road like Railroad Street leading to the bottom where the people of the southeast corner of North Carolina come face to face with the ghosts of a past they have yet to totally repudiate.

⁶⁷ Ibid.