



Northern suburbs have history of Klan rallies, burning crosses

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The burning cross casts a long shadow over the racial landscape of American history.

Like the noose, it symbolizes a weapon in the arsenal of racial oppression that aimed to instill fear and terror. Like the noose, which has made widespread appearances around the country in recent months, it carries an aura of violence with which it was closely entwined in the past.

And while the reappearance of the symbols has been unaccompanied by an upsurge in racial violence, the strong feelings they generate have yet to recede.

"Cross-burnings and nooses - we're going back in history," said John Thorp, an anthropologist who runs the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Michigan.

He sees a dark chapter of the American past whenever these incidents occur, one of lynchings and racial violence associated with the Ku Klux Klan.

"The Klan, to promote white supremacy, adopted a whole series of rituals, cross-burning being one of them. Lynching was a particularly potent form of terrorist activity, to intimidate. Those images are still potent as symbols today. Most people don't know the detailed history of it, though African-Americans are much more aware of it," Thorp said.

The preferred symbol of a hooded mob that called itself the Invisible Empire, cross-burnings have been a source of controversy and anguish in Westchester on many occasions in the past.

Following a revival of the KKK in the 1920s after a long dormancy, cross-burnings were a regular feature of life in the region. Many of the earlier cross-burnings in the Klan era targeted Catholic institutions: St. John's Cemetery in Yonkers and St. Patrick's Church in Armonk, where a new chapel was being built, were targeted by racial arsonists in the mid-1920s. The Maryknoll Seminary in Ossining was vandalized with paint bearing the KKK insignia in 1925.

Vast gatherings of Klansmen and women were held at a farm three miles outside of Peekskill in the town of Cortlandt from the mid-1920s into the 1930s. Press accounts from the period indicate

that as many as 10,000 to 20,000 Klan sympathizers from all over New York state attended, with large crosses, 20 feet tall, lit aflame as part of the events.

One rally in 1928 ended in a near-riot when about 80 Klansmen in full regalia drove to Verplanck, a largely Irish Catholic community, and were met with a torrent of bottles, eggs, rocks and fists. In 1936, the Cortlandt Town Board passed a law against cross-burnings, in reaction to the lobbying by a Catholic priest from Verplanck.

Most of the cross-burnings were targeted at groups, but the menacing spectacle could be glaringly specific. In 1930, a cross was burned on the front lawn of Errold Collymore, a dentist from Barbados who broke the color barrier in White Plains by buying a house in a white neighborhood. Relatives of Collymore, who died in 1970, recounted how he went out to document the burning cross in his pajamas, a camera in one hand, a rifle in the other.

Resurgence of symbols of racism