

White Supremacy on Parade

THE FIGHT TO STOP THE BIRTH OF A NATION IN THE TWIN CITIES

Drew M. Ross

ON THE FINAL DAY of the 1917 St. Paul Winter Carnival, 300 cars decorated with white plumes and flags drove east along a snow-rutted University Avenue. The procession

moved from Minneapolis to St. Paul through deep snow in below-zero temperatures. This auto parade, held on February 2, was a promotional event for the Minneapolis Auto Show, and it was touted as one of the longest such parades in the country's history.

Guns were mounted on some of the cars, and the crisp air cracked with their "continual cannonading." At the front of the parade, a 20-piece band on a flatbed truck followed the conductor, who stood nine feet tall in a white robe and pointy hood. As the

from which he leaped to safety.

Ku Klux Klan Who Will Invade St. Paul



"White Hopes" to Be Auto Show Feature

drawn by a touring car, calling attention to the Minneapolis 1917 Auto Show, which opens next Saturday. This organization expects to be active during the coming week in boosting the show and will be one of the features of the automobile

Fifteenth streets. The start will be made at 1 p. m., and after being joined by the division that will assemble on Lyndale avenue at Parkway boulevard, will proceed east on Hennepin, Nicollet and Marquette avenues. All divisions will form in line at the foot of Hennepin

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parade ended, 800 cheering marchers, most clad in Ku Klux Klan costumes, swarmed downtown St. Paul.¹

The auto show was a regular event. Auto manufacturers staged annual promotional shows in cities and towns across the nation, showcasing new models with the latest technological advances. Held at the National Mazda Light Building at Broadway and Central Avenues, the 1917 Minneapolis show admitted more than 155,000 visitors over eight days. It began on the last day of the Winter Carnival, and the parade was, ostensibly, a way of crashing a bigger party to gain publicity.²

The 1917 auto show's campaign mimicked the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)'s messaging. The week before the show, promoters held rallies in Minneapolis with 300 people doing "some 'night riding' in broad daylight." The promoters seemed intent on inverting themes of the Winter Carnival, adopting the KKK's black-and-white colors, which were antithetical to the Winter Carnival's colorful costumes. They countered the Winter Carnival's motto—Make It a Hotter One—with Let's Make It a Colder One. And in an additional racial touch, promoters called themselves the White Hopes, a reference to any white man who would challenge Jack Johnson, the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion (1908–15).³

The newspapers printed pictures of dozens of men and women in their robes, faces exposed, smiling. Walter R. Wilmot, the auto show's event manager, offered the hood-and-robe costumes for \$1.15 apiece, or package deals of 10 placards for cars and 10 Klan suits for \$17.50; AUTO SHOW was printed across the shoulders of each robe. A week before the show, Wilmot

had sold more than 1,000 robes, leading him to project sales of 5,000.⁴

The auto show's promotional events had buy-in from the highest levels of business and law enforcement. L. F. Blyler, one of the organizers, encouraged the support of Minneapolis businessowners. They decorated Nicollet Avenue window displays in Klan colors. Chief of Police Lewis Harthill gave his sanction and joined the parade. And H. W. Pence, the president of the Minneapolis Automobile Trade Association, bought a costume.⁵

Members of the local African American community knew exactly where the auto show's parade theme, costumes, and colors had come from. Just 16 months earlier, they had vigorously opposed screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*, a movie that celebrated a vigilante horde of Klan members wearing those same costumes and brutally attacking Black people. At that time, promoters and apologists had asked the protestors what harm could come from a movie. With the parade, they now had an answer: white supremacy openly promoted in public places.⁶

Today, the 1917 Minneapolis Auto Show Parade has largely been forgotten, and it is difficult to assess its cause and impact at the time. A formal association with the Klan is unlikely, because the Klan was restarted in Georgia in 1915, and there is no evidence that it spread to Minnesota until the early 1920s. Some parade participants clearly considered it all to be a lark. How does this parade, with hundreds of Minnesotans imitating the Ku Klux Klan, relate to other events, such as the racially restrictive covenants created in the Twin Cities from 1910 onward, or the Duluth lynchings of 1920? The auto show parade happened within a larger context, and it was part of the smoke from a larger fire.⁷

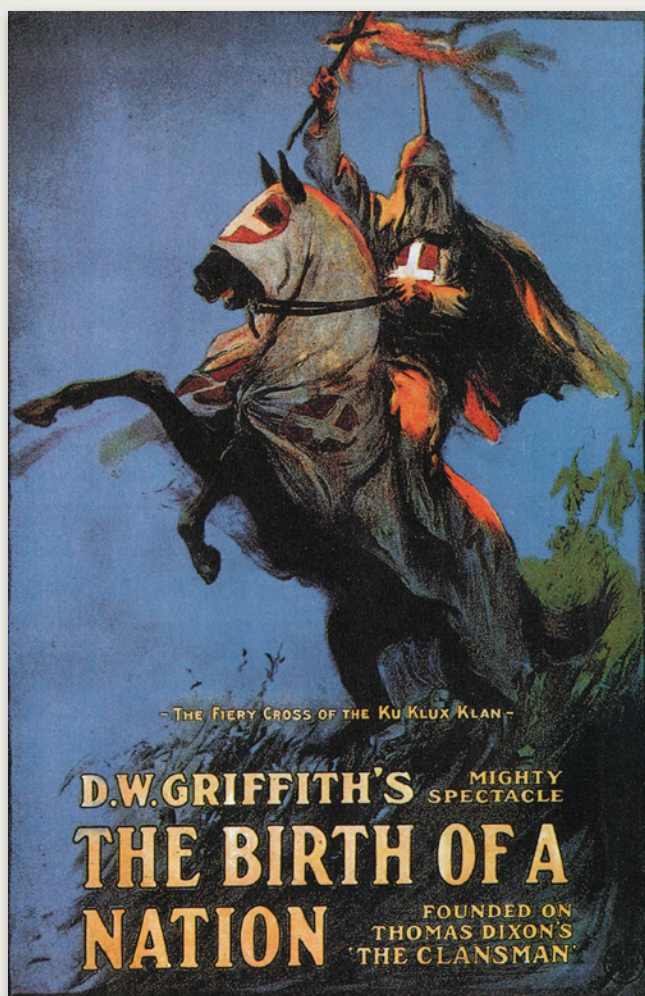
THE MOVIE THAT INSPIRED THE PARADE

The parade's costumes point directly to the movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which had been featured in theaters and headlines for more than a year. Readers of the local African American newspapers, *The Appeal* (St. Paul) and the *Twin City Star* (Minneapolis), had been watching the oncoming storm. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked to persuade the National Board of Censorship to reverse its approval of the film after its release in February 1915. When that failed, the NAACP developed a city-by-city strategy, and Black communities across the nation protested the film. In the Twin Cities, the African American community united and organized in the local chapters of the NAACP in alliance with various women's groups (Black and white) to stop any showing of the movie.⁸

But *The Birth of a Nation* was a juggernaut, an innovative blockbuster of the silent movie era. D. W. Griffith, the director, had a knack for large-scale choreography and intense battle scenes—the movie's ads made exaggerated claims of 18,000 actors, 5,000 scenes, and 3,000 horses. He added a musical score for an orchestra, a first in the United States, which included martial music, patriotic songs, and folk tunes to amplify the viewers' emotional experience. Running more than three hours, *The Birth of a Nation* was the longest film ever made. Previously, most movies were short comedies that lasted up to 15 minutes on one reel. The uncut version of this movie had 12 reels. The film's technological spectacle generated an excitement that blinded many viewers to the shift in how it portrayed African Americans.⁹

The movie was based on a popular novel, *The Clansman* (1905), a southern story of racial revenge written

FACING: "Auto 'Clansmen' Ready for Raid," Minneapolis Morning Tribune, February 2, 1917.



SHUBERT THEATRE

Commencing Next Sunday!

TWICE DAILY

FOR INDEFINITE RUN

Messrs. Elliott & Sherman

PRESENT

TWICE DAILY

The World's Mightiest Spectacle

D. W. GRIFFITH'S

New in its
2nd YEAR
Liberty Theatre
NEW YORK

300 TIMES
Tremont Theatre
BOSTON

300 TIMES
Illinois Theatre
CHICAGO

17 WEEKS
Mexican Opera House
LOS ANGELES

11 WEEKS
Davidson Theatre
MILWAUKEE



COST
\$750,000.00
TO PRODUCE

EMPLOYING
18,000 PEOPLE
3,000 HORSES

8 Solid Months
IN THE MAKING

3 HOURS
OF EDUCATIONAL
THRILLS

WAR
As It Actually Is

Enhanced by a Symphony Orchestra of 40

SALE OF SEATS OPENS THURSDAY, 9 A. M.

PRICES

EVENINGS, Parquet \$1.50 & \$2	Balcony \$1.50, \$1.00 & 75c	2nd Bal. 50c	<small>Not Reserved</small>
MATINEES, " All \$1	" \$1.00, 75c & 50c	" 25c	"

HIGHLY IMPORTANT *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*
will never be presented in any but
the highest class theatres and at prices customarily charged in such play houses.

LEFT: Movie poster, 1915. RIGHT: Advertisement printed in the American Jewish World, October 29, 1915.

by Thomas Dixon Jr. Previously, most films that portrayed African Americans were comedies or farces, spreading racial stereotypes from the antebellum southern perspective across the nation. In addition, theaters regularly presented vaudeville and minstrel shows that pushed outlandish caricatures. *The Birth of a Nation* maintained those racist clichés and, further, insinuated evil intentions as well. The movie implied that African Americans were “unfit for citizenship,” wrote *The Appeal*’s editor, John Quincy Adams. Even worse, the film presented them in ways that excited racist “hostility” against them and spread the “worst elements of the South.”¹⁰

Set in the time of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the story fictionalized the rise and fall of African Americans

who moved from slavery to freedom, were accused of overreach, and were then beaten into submission. Part I told the story of the Civil War, though



Editor John Quincy Adams of
The Appeal, about 1922.

the film “outrageously exaggerated” historical events, according to *The Appeal*. Part II was “harder to speak [of] whole-heartedly,” wrote one reviewer, because the “racial feeling” was obvious. It projected a false narrative about the post-Civil War Black population holding the white population in submission. The Klan, outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1871, was resurrected in the film to save the old order.¹¹

Today, the movie would be classified as an action film. The hero is “the avenging Ku Klux Klan,” a reviewer said, “riding to right the wrong and rescuing the perishing”—that is, the supposed fallen and oppressed white people. The KKK swarms in, live trumpets blaring and kettle drums rolling, as thousands of white-

robed men on horseback sweep over the hills to save the day. Audiences erupted with excitement. It was “like great bursts of visible music in form, motion[,] rhythm[,] and relentless and uncontrollable force,” said one reviewer. It “never fails to get an audience so excited that the theater is [in] an uproar,” wrote another.¹²

“Violent is the adjective” to describe it, said the reviewer in the *Duluth Herald*. Despite the violence, he said, the film’s “effects in a city like Duluth will probably be negligible,” because “[t]he race question is not an aggravated problem in Duluth.” Yet, he noted that the audience cheered when the Klansmen gathered to shoot down Black people, they applauded with approval when the “little Colonel” refused to shake hands with “the mulatto, Lynch,” and they were thrilled by the fight of one white man against six Black men.¹³

THE FIGHT IN MINNEAPOLIS: USING THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Because the US Supreme Court decided in 1915 that films were commerce, not art, movies were not protected as free speech by the First Amendment. In Minnesota, “producers” (as the newspapers called them) licensed films in each community, and local governments could censor any film, deciding which scenes could be shown. The Elliot Sherman Film Company had obtained exclusive rights to distribute *The Birth of a Nation* in 16 states, including Minnesota, which was said to be the largest deal of its kind.¹⁴

The film arrived in St. Paul and Minneapolis in October 1915 and played in towns throughout the state in 1916. Most of Minnesota’s African Americans lived in the Twin Cities, and that is where they fought the film. The Minneapolis and St. Paul

branches of the NAACP, formed in 1913, received advice on a range of opposition tactics from the national NAACP office. A tactic that worked in one city didn’t necessarily work in another. The Minneapolis and St. Paul chapters sought to ally with local officials and ban the film or, as a last resort, to remove the worst scenes.¹⁵

Even before the movie arrived, Minneapolis mayor Wallace G. Nye banned the film in April 1915 and threatened to revoke the license of any theater that showed it. A. G. Bainbridge Jr., who leased the Shubert Theater of Minneapolis, applied for a license in October (later claiming he had not heard of the ban), and the city council granted it.¹⁶

In a showdown on October 23, Nye again stated he would block the film if the Shubert began playing it October 31, as the producers planned. On October 27, Bainbridge hosted a private showing for hundreds of politicians and civic groups. He invited the mayor, aldermen and other city officials, ministers, lawyers, doctors, welfare workers, women’s clubs—and 25 prominent African Americans. Nye appointed a jury of 50 people among



Minneapolis mayor Wallace G. Nye, 1916.

the attendees, including 20 African Americans, to advise him on whether the film should be shown. They ran the movie uncut. The jury advised the mayor to ban the film.¹⁷

After this screening, Nye banned the film and Bainbridge contested his authority to do so in Hennepin County District Court. The courtroom had standing room only, because nearly 200 African American men and women arrived early to support the mayor. Employing a legal maneuver used in other cities by lawyers



The Shubert Theater in Minneapolis, about 1912.

associated with Griffith, the theater's attorney persuaded a judge to issue a temporary injunction against Nye's order while the matter was in court.¹⁸

Despite Nye's ban, the film opened as scheduled on October 31. Nine days later, the judge concluded that the city charter gave the mayor the authority to revoke any license issued by the city council. Bainbridge appealed the decision to the state's highest court, and the court allowed the film to continue to play until the appeal was decided. On November 19, the Minnesota Supreme Court upheld the lower court's decision. In supporting the mayor's ban, the justices mentioned that the film "has justified lawless citizens in their attempt to organize themselves into bands to avenge real or fancied wrongs."¹⁹

The mayor argued, as did mayors in other states, that the picture might "endanger public morals by inciting race prejudice." Now, after 11 days of shows, 21 showings, and 30,000 viewers, the Shubert Theater countered that there was no misbehavior and police were not needed. The *Twin City Star* had believed Nye's promise to do all in his power to prevent the movie. "We hold Mr. Nye to his campaign pledges," Charles S. Smith, the editor, wrote, "and believe he will not give us cause to regret his action." But that was not to be.²⁰

With his authority confirmed, the mayor unexpectedly retreated from his previous decision. "It is too big a problem for one man to decide," he said. By the end of the week he had abdicated his authority to a new censorship committee led by Karl DeLaittre, a former president of the city council with a background in lumber and banking. The censorship committee, serving in an advisory role, consisted of 16 organizations, each with five representatives, including Catholic and Jewish organizations, the YMCA and YWCA, several



Charles S. Smith, editor of the *Twin City Star*, about 1917.

women's groups, union and trade groups, parent and teacher groups, and commerce. The committee had no African American members.²¹

Days later, an African American delegation appeared in the mayor's office. Members reiterated the negative impacts of the film and asked for a principled stand by the mayor. They reminded him that most people had supported his revocation of the theater's license. They pointed out that he, in his successful legal defense, had used correspondence with them and other African American organizations in making his case. Yet, unexpectedly, he was now leaving this decision to public opinion. At the very least, the delegation requested representation on the censorship committee. The mayor said he had been accused of acting like a czar, and to avoid that, he wanted a public decision.²²

Next, the delegation lobbied DeLaittre, who admitted that the mayor had discussed the inclusion of African Americans, but the censorship committee had not decided to accept them. In fact, "the matter was not considered, just mentioned," he said. He saw no harm in the film. The delegation again pressed the mayor for representation, but now he ignored them.²³

Of the censorship committee's 97 members, 61 voted to allow showing the uncut version of *The Birth of a Nation*. Upon their recommendation, Nye lifted the ban. "The censors were as representative a body of citizens as could be found," the mayor told the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, claiming that their decision reflected the general opinion. They approved of various aspects of the film at high rates: artistic (93 votes), historic (87), moral (80), and racial (73).²⁴

The mayor's betrayal stung the African American community. "The mayor used his Negro friends and 'The Birth of a Nation' as a means to an end," wrote *Twin City Star* editor Smith. An editor from the *Minneapolis Advocate*, a new African American semimonthly, said the mayor was "fooling" them. A letter to the *Twin City Star* from Mrs. M. O. Cannon, representing the Minneapolis Sunday Forum, a cultural society, charged that the mayor "utterly and openly disregarded the wishes as well as the welfare" of the city's African American women and children. They felt the wound deeply.²⁵

In the midst of this fight, on November 14, 1915, Booker T. Washington, a leader of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, died. The local Black community knew him well, and many agreed with his call for patience, accommodation, and self-help. Community members planned a memorial service on November 28. Initially, Mayor Nye had been invited to speak. But after he allowed the film to play, they rescinded their invitation. They were done with him.²⁶

THE FIGHT IN ST. PAUL: WRITING A NEW ORDINANCE

The fight in St. Paul was configured differently because city officials lacked the legal authority to stop the film. Mayor Winn Powers was

outspokenly in favor of the movie. He would consider banning it if given the authority to do so, he said, but “censorship is very irritating to our sense of personal liberty.” The NAACP was aware that their defense of decency could offend people’s ideals regarding free speech.²⁷

The NAACP had one strong ally on the St. Paul City Council, Henry McColl, who publicly and repeatedly vowed to stop the film. A former state representative and senator, McColl had become the city’s commissioner of public safety (police, health, and fire departments) in 1914. (At that time, each councilmember was responsible for a specific aspect of city administration.) McColl had met with a Black delegation that opposed the film, and they had left with him a proposed ordinance, which he introduced. “I have accurate facts,” he said. “It is a wonderful picture,” but it “does promote race hatred.” McColl had support from at least one other councilmember.²⁸

The producers of the film in St. Paul, owners of a local theater, contracted with the city to show the film at the St. Paul Auditorium, a public facility. They faced pressure from other theater owners, who objected to their use of the auditorium because it

violated a noncompete understanding among theater owners. Others pointed out that a public facility was being used to malign citizens who paid to support it.²⁹

Because censorship was decided locally, the producers held a private, complimentary showing at the auditorium on October 19, with an estimated 1,000 viewers, including 100 African Americans. During the intermission, Harry A. Sherman, the film’s regional distributor, came on stage to talk about the film’s virtues and sought to impress the audience with the film’s production costs. As Sherman left, Jose H. Sherwood stood and called out, “Mr. Sherman—come back.” Sherwood, grand master of Minnesota’s Prince Hall (African American) Freemasons, was known locally for his civil rights work.³⁰

After repeated calls, Sherman did return. “You are not speaking the truth,” Sherwood said, and he related what the local Black community knew about violent protests and attacks on Blacks after showings in other cities. The audience grew agitated; nonetheless, Sherwood continued to relate the harm from these types of films. After clarifying the issue, Sherwood sat down, and Sherman left the stage.³¹

The next day, “after a strenuous fight,” according to the *St. Paul Daily News*, the city council granted the film’s producers a license for a three-week run at the auditorium. The city retained the right to revoke the license. The movie began its run that Saturday, October 23. Meanwhile, the *Pioneer Press* began printing a daily set of letters to the editor supporting and opposing the film.³²

When the city council reconvened on Monday, October 25, Valdo D. Turner, president of the St. Paul NAACP, led a group of 100 African Americans to city hall. They presented to the city council a petition,



Major Jose H. Sherwood, 1918. Sherwood commanded the Sixteenth Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard, formed in 1917 to defend the home front during World War I. The Sixteenth was the only battalion to enlist men of color.

said to represent the sentiments of 5,000 local African Americans, charging that the movie “was disrupting peaceful relations” between Black and white people. They “indicated that race hatred and riot were being kindled.” This claim was one of the most salient, as several cities had experienced violence. William T. Francis, a prominent African American attorney, referenced an incident at the intersection of Dale and University in St. Paul that was blamed on the film. The city council scheduled a public hearing for the next day and passed a resolution putting the producers on notice for review of the license.³³

The *Pioneer Press* reported that the Black population of the two cities “is leaving no stone unturned to have the permit removed.” The next day 500 people filed into the city council chamber. While the majority was African Americans, the group included “sympathizers who do not belong to their race.” And although the producers had appealed to moviegoers to attend and speak in favor of the film, they also asked for and received an extra day to prepare for the meeting. While the council’s decision would



City councilman Henry McColl, 1919.

be postponed, its members allowed people to speak. The crowd hissed at speakers, especially Sherman, the distributor, and cheered others. The intensity of the issue was obvious. Two people scuffled in the hall after the meeting.³⁴

The next day, Wednesday, October 27, was St. Paul's big showdown. More than 800 people attended this meeting. More white people attended than before, noted the newspapers, but African Americans were in the majority.³⁵

At this public hearing, Brown S. Smith, an African American attorney from Minneapolis, spoke for nearly an hour in what the *Pioneer Press* called "a masterful appeal." His speech generated a rare acknowledgment from that newspaper's opinion page, which praised him and his presentation. One point being publicly debated was whether African Americans had made much progress since the Civil War. "By the force of his unique personality and the wonderful eloquence of his address," along with the use of humor to soften his sarcasm, Smith won over many of his opponents. Smith brought "the impartial hearer" to understand that "here was the sincere appeal of a race of men and women with the same pride in accomplishment, the same depth of feeling, the same earnest desire to progress, that the white race possesses." Smith refuted a popular belief, which the movie exploited, "that education and enlightenment are bad for his race." *The Appeal* and the *Twin City Star* both reprinted this editorial; it was a prized recognition of a community leader.³⁶

The St. Paul City Council may have been, like Minneapolis mayor Nye, navigating a course between the popularity of the film and the organized opposition. Both sides in St. Paul threatened legal action against the council upon its decision. The *Pioneer Press* observed, "The city

council finds itself in a dilemma," with no easy way to extricate itself. If the council revoked the license that it had already issued, then why was it issued in the first place? The newspaper concluded, "the councilman's life is not a happy one."³⁷

Faced with increasing pressure to reverse course, councilmembers tried a compromise: they ordered the removal of the two most inflammatory scenes. The producers resisted the measure but agreed before the meeting ended. The editor of the *Pioneer Press* declared the argument "exhausted" and stopped publishing letters of support and opposition. *The Appeal* made special note of "some splendid letters" to the editor "by both colored and white people." Brown Smith's oration may have clinched the partial victory.³⁸

The movie continued to play through the following two weeks, apparently without the two scenes. Opponents who monitored the show, however, reported that the scenes were included on Sunday and Monday, November 7 and 8. With that, the city council voted unanimously to revoke the theater's license, thus removing the movie from its screen. Five days of the licensed run remained. Even that small victory faded when opponents learned the revocation wasn't effective until it was presented in writing, and the city printed such documents on Saturday mornings. This meant the film couldn't be stopped until Saturday, November 13, its last scheduled day. The film thus had a full run, some of it uncensored.³⁹

Meanwhile, the ordinance had been in the process of approval. Attorney Francis wrote the proposed ordinance: St. Paul would prohibit a film that would "tend to incite riot or create race or religious prejudice, or purports to represent any hanging, lynching, burning, or placing in a

position of ignominy any human being, the same being incited by or inducive to race or religious hatred." The enforcement of censorship was assigned to the commissioner of public safety.⁴⁰

Councilmember Henry McColl carried the ordinance through the city council process and "bore the brunt" of newspaper criticism. Critics charged that the ban was written narrowly for one film, and it gave too much power to one person: the commissioner. The measure was approved on November 2, but it wouldn't be enforceable for two more weeks, and by that time the council had revoked the license. The city did use the ordinance 15 years later to prohibit screenings of the same film in December 1930, though it apparently became entangled in the courts again.⁴¹

Throughout the protest, the African American community and its allies lobbied for support citywide. Well-known women, Black and white, took the lead. Amanda Lyles, an African American activist and entrepreneur, attended the private showing of the movie as a special representative of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which was focused on movie ratings. Nellie Francis addressed the Women's Welfare League, the most prominent white women's club in St. Paul, asking for its members' support; the league unanimously passed a resolution opposing the film. Mattie Hicks, president of the Minnesota Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and Sophie Kenyon, a white woman and vice president of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association, spoke at public meetings.⁴²

This work by women's groups, Black and white, was a tactic promoted by the national NAACP. It illustrates a difference between Minneapolis and St. Paul communities on this issue. In Minneapolis, these groups—the building blocks of a

successful protest—appear to have been on the first jury Nye appointed that persuaded him to ban the film, but Karl DeLaittre's censorship committee apparently silenced opposition groups like these. In St. Paul, however, the opposition from women's groups held more sway.⁴³

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROTESTS

Like the Minneapolis mayor, the St. Paul City Council completely reversed its decision, although in the opposite direction. Nye went from banning to allowing the film, and the council went from allowing the film to banning it. Both Nye and McColl were criticized for overreach. Nye gave up his legal authority to ban *The Birth of a Nation*, while McColl developed an ordinance that would give him such power. Nye stands out nationally as the only mayor to repeal his own ban. In St. Paul, the revocation of the license on the last day of the run almost perfectly sums up the experience of many NAACP chapters. It was a difficult fight from the beginning. Yet while the Goliath won, David gained something: overall these battles helped the NAACP to grow and gain a national identity.⁴⁴

Across the North, the fight against the film educated and encouraged white people to take action. Locally, it was “a great pleasure to find that so many friends among the whites were with us,” wrote Adams of *The Appeal*, “and were not afraid or ashamed to say so.” He highlighted “the helpful, inspiring editorial” in the *Pioneer Press* of Thursday, October 25, that recognized Brown Smith. For that alone, “our fight would have been preeminently successful.” We “do not intend to have our rights utterly ignored or ruthlessly trod upon without protest.” In conclusion, Adams repeated his mantra: “It pays to agitate.”⁴⁵

MAKING SENSE OF THE PARADE

In February 1917, 16 months after *The Birth of a Nation* protests had ended, the Minneapolis Auto Show held its movie-themed parade. Hundreds of people dressed up in costumes that the film had tied to violence. They laughingly flaunted their approval of the KKK—be it tacit or naive—in broad daylight, apparently because a movie had portrayed evil in a gallant heroic role. “Under the cloak of patriotism,” McColl had said, the movie “promotes prejudice.”⁴⁶

In documents filed as part of Bainbridge's supreme court appeal in the Minneapolis case, several Black leaders argued that the impacts of prejudice were real, as the effect of the movie “is depressing upon a mature mind,” and it “inspires” in the young and unthinking minds a “particular hatred and contempt” for Black people. When they sat in the audience, “they heard frequent disparaging remarks,” and “these remarks grew more frequent on the streets.” In one instance, a crowd of young white men taunted a Black man, calling him Gus—the name of the movie's villain, “the most brutal and inhuman character ever thrown upon the screen.” The scene demonstrates how the movie was, said Rev. J. P. Sims, “very humiliating to the colored people.”⁴⁷

In 1915, the film's supporters had asked protestors for evidence that the movie harmed African Americans and their community. The parade served as an answer. Yet the African American newspapers appear not to have written about it. Perhaps this was because this parade wasn't the first time Minnesotans had paraded in Klan robes. At least twice before the auto show, a “cavalcade of women” dressed in Ku Klux Klan costumes rode horses in parades. The leader of this group was Elizabeth Vincent, the daughter of the

University of Minnesota's president, George E. Vincent. In the Red Cross Christmas Seal Parade on December 11, 1915, she led eight “Minneapolis society girls” on horseback, and their white costumes could be seen far up the street. The next year, on December 2, 1916, in the opening parade of the Minneapolis Health and Happiness Week, she led a group of 50 young women. The *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* described them as the highlight of a large parade of 2,000 marchers. The sun made “a brilliant spectacle of the flowing white robes of the girls from the YWCA mounted on horses wearing the Red Cross like the Ku Klux Klan.”⁴⁸

The following month, January 1917, the Minneapolis Auto Show costumes went on sale. The Minneapolis parade appears to have originated with the local organizers. Similar events did not occur in Chicago, Detroit, or New York. Walter R. Wilmot, the longtime manager of the Minneapolis Auto Show, was well known for producing industry shows with a carnival-like atmosphere. Either he or someone in his organization modeled the parade closely on all things Klan: the colors, the costumes, and the language. At this point in time, 1916–17, the auto show parade and the repeated use of KKK themes in parades were unique nationally. Was this a specific local reaction inspired by the movie?⁴⁹

And what was the local perspective on the Klan of the 1860s? A single intriguing clue suggests there may have been existing support. In 1903, a short announcement in local papers reported: “The Ku Klux Klan gave a sleighing party Saturday evening. After a drive around the lakes and to St. Paul, the club was entertained at 1500 Franklin avenue, where a program of music and speeches followed supper.” This sleigh ride took place after the publication of the first

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"Ku Klux Klan is Coming! Girl Night Riders in This Raid, Too," from the Minneapolis Morning Tribune, January 25, 1917.

book of Thomas Dixon's trilogy, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902)—and before the second, *The Clansman* (1905). Had this local club formed after the first book? Was there a subculture of the Klan in the Twin Cities all along, and now the post-movie environment allowed its members to parade in the open? How can we understand the 1917 parade's eruption of enthusiasm? It seems reasonable to say the parade enticed citizens to don Klan costumes that mimicked the movie—knowingly and maliciously or unknowingly and naively—regardless of the Klan's

intent. Perhaps it was the only time some of them participated.⁵⁰

And perhaps some of them helped in the next step. In the decade after *The Birth of a Nation's* release, the Klan expanded throughout the nation. Its leaders hired recruiters, who used the film to draw new members. Klan membership spread quickly through other fraternal orders, such as the Masons and the Shriners. During this period, the KKK realigned its platform to include other prejudices: antisemitism, anti-Catholicism, and the suppression of immigration. In the early 1920s,

Minnesota's new Klan chapters put on the state's first known Klan-endorsed parades. The Klan infiltrated the Minneapolis police force, the Hennepin County sheriff's department, the state police, and the state highway department. Klansmen burned crosses near Robbinsdale during ceremonies for new members. Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle and Nancy M. Vaillancourt, authors of a 2010 article (and for Hatle, a book in 2013) about the Minnesota Klan, note that its members were convinced that "the values of the white Protestant past" were "the only true American way of life." The Klan reached the height of its activity in Minnesota about 1923, although official activities extended until 1930.⁵¹

"The feeling against the colored people is growing," said Rev. Stephen L. Theobald, pastor of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, after seeing the movie in 1915. He was right, as a series of developments shows: the installation of racial covenants that restricted home ownership (starting in Minneapolis in 1910), efforts to pass a law that prohibited mixed-race marriages (1913), the parades (1915–17), the Duluth lynchings (1920), the Klan activities and cross burnings (the 1920s), a proposal to segregate a playground (1922), and at least two efforts to book the movie in 1921 and 1930. Thomas Dixon Jr., author of *The Clansman*, claimed in 1915 that *The Birth of a Nation* was "transforming the entire [white] population of the North and West into sympathetic Southern voters." Two years later, the Minneapolis Auto Show Parade demonstrated the movie's success.⁵² □

Notes

1. "Ku Klux Will Invade St. Paul in 500 Autos to Give Parade Today," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Feb. 2, 1917, p. 8; "Record Breaker 1917 Auto Show to Start Today," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Feb. 3, 1917, p. 1.

2. "Auto Show Is Big Success," *Askov American*, Feb. 15, 1917, p. 2.

3. "Ku Klux Colors Officially Adopted for Auto Show," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Jan. 31, 1917, p. 3; "Ku Klux Klan Who Will Invade St. Paul," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1917, p. 4.

4. "Nightriders to Ride in Broad Daylight," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1917, p. 9; "White Hopes to Be Auto Show Feature," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1917, p. 4. The \$1.15 charge in 1915 is equal to about \$30 in 2023.

5. "Loop Decorations for Autos Urged," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1917, p. 1; "Nightriders to Ride in Broad Daylight."

6. The costumes provide clear evidence that the parade was inspired by the movie. The literary source of the movie (Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* [New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1905]) invented a uniformity for its fictionalized Klan costumes, including a spiked helmet. But historian Katherine Lennard notes that mass production for the film "suggest[s] the ways that the logistical challenges of costuming large groups faced on Griffith's film set also affected the new Klan as well." Instead of the helmet, the new Klan adopted the "cones of stiffened buckram, similar to those worn by background actors in the film." The auto show parade costumes featured these same cones. See Katherine Lennard, "Old Purpose, 'New Body': *The Birth of a Nation* and the Revival of the Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (2015): 616–20.

7. On the restarting of the Klan, see Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017). On covenants, see Kirsten Delegard, "Racial Housing Covenants in the Twin Cities," and Tina Burnside, "Duluth Lynchings"—both MNopedia.org.

8. "Disapproves of 'Clansman' Play," *Twin City Star*, Mar. 12, 1915, p. 1.

9. *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1915, p. 6; "Negro Problem Treated in 'Birth of a Nation' at Lyceum," *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 10, 1916, p. 15.

10. Richard W. Waterman, "The Dark Side of the Farce: Racism in Early Cinema, 1894–1915," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 9, no. 4 (2021): 4, 784–806; "Race Prejudice," *The Appeal*, June 5, 1915, p. 2.

11. "The Birth of a Nation," *The Appeal*, Oct. 23, 1915, p. 2; "The Birth of a Nation Is Seen at Private Showing at Shubert," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1915, p. 3.

12. "Shubert: 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1915, p. 6; *Duluth Herald*, Sept. 3, 1915, p. 19.

13. "The Birth of a Nation," *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 15, 1915, p. 5.

14. *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Comm'n of Ohio*, 236 US 230 (1915); *American Jewish World*, Nov. 26, 1915, p. 251. The Supreme Court decision was overturned in 1952.

15. *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, May 17, 1916, p. 4; *Redwood Gazette*, May 10, 1916, p. 10; *New Ulm*

Review, Mar. 8, 1916, p. 10 (also Mankato); *Morris Tribune*, May 19, 1916, p. 2; Warren Sheaf, Jan. 5, 1916, p. 6 (Crookston), and June 28, 1916, p. 1; *Der Nordstern*, Feb. 24, 1916, p. 8 (St. Cloud); *Little Falls Herald*, Apr. 14, 1916, p. 1; *Princeton Union*, June 1, 1916, p. 6; *Willmar Tribune*, June 14, 1916, p. 6; Nickieann Fleener-Marzec, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: Controversy, Suppression, and the First Amendment as It Applies to Filmic Expression, 1915–1973* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 94.

16. "Bainbridge Tells of Strife Over 'Birth of a Nation' Film," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1915, p. 11; "Discrimination Is Charged by Film's Attorney," *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 4, 1915, p. 1. Whether the police department conveyed the mayor's intent to ban the producer's license to show the film would become a distraction and prolong the hearing.

17. "Shubert Plans to Give 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1915, p. 8; Shubert Theater advertisement, *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1915, p. 11; "1,000 Invited Censors See 'Birth of Nation,'" *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 28, 1915, p. 5; "'The Birth of a Nation' Is Seen at Private Showing at Shubert," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1915, p. 3; Fleener-Marzec, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 105. The *Minneapolis Journal* reported that members of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War veterans' organization, also lobbied Nye against the film (Oct. 28, p. 11).

18. "'Birth of Nation' Decision Delayed for Several Days," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 3, 1915, p. 10; "'Birth of Nation' Hearing Continued," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1915, p. 7; Gerald G. Huesken Jr., "The Fight to Ban *The Birth of a Nation* in Lancaster, Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 89, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 102–28. "Griffith or his representatives would then turn to the courts and obtain an injunction that permitted audiences virtually everywhere to watch the film": Stephen Weinberger, "The Birth of a Nation and the Making of the NAACP," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 1 (2011): 88. "The rule," wrote the Minnesota Supreme Court, is that a temporary injunction "should be granted even if the judge hearing the motion is in doubt, both as to the law involved and the facts set up." The appellant's brief begins with an "Assignment of Error," saying, "The court erred in denying the plaintiff's motion for a temporary injunction": Appellant's Brief, Minnesota Supreme Court case #19664. When Judge John H. Steele denied the motion for a temporary injunction, Bainbridge got one from District Judge W. C. Leary: see "Decision Monday in 'Birth of Nation' Case," *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 6, 1915, p. 6.

19. "Any license issued by authority of the city council may be revoked by the mayor or city council at any time": Minneapolis City Charter, chap. 4, subchap. 16; Minnesota Special Laws 1881, chap. 76, subchap. 4 (1915); "Supreme Court Rules on Minneapolis Executive's 'Birth of a Nation' Order," *Duluth Herald*, Nov. 19, 1915, p. 15;

"'Birth of a Nation' Decision Given Nye by Supreme Court," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1915, p. 22.

Bainbridge was listed as the plaintiff in the lawsuit. The Minnesota Supreme Court ruled only on the mayor's authority, not on the content of the film, though the justices enumerated Nye's objections: the film had scenes that "were untrue to history and prejudiced the public mind as to the real nature of historical events." And further, the film "tended to inculcate in the public mind a distrust of public officials and law and has justified lawless citizens in their attempt to organize themselves into bands to avenge real or fancied wrongs with the avowed purpose to override public authority and take into their own hands the punishment of officers in such manner as they should decide, irrespective of courts, public officers and the government itself": *A. G. Bainbridge, Jr. v. City of Minneapolis and Others*, November 19, 1915, Nos. 19664, *Minnesota Reports: Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Minnesota, October 15–December 31, 1915*, vol. 131, p. 195–200, babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.35112102625375&view=1up&seq=15.

20. "'Birth of Nation' Decision Delayed for Several Days"; "Bainbridge Tells of Strife Over 'Birth of a Nation' Film," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1915, p. 11; "Supreme Court Last Hope of Film Show Unless Nye Relents," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 9, 1915, p. 11; "A Damnable Photo-Play," *Twin City Star*, Oct. 16, 1915, p. 4.

21. "New Life Lease for 'Birth of a Nation' Seen," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1915, p. 1; "Verdict in 'Birth of the Nation' to Be Rendered Tonight," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1915, p. 11; "The Interview with the Mayor," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, p. 2.

22. "The Interview with the Mayor." The African American delegation appears to have included Rev. Stovall, attorney Brown S. Smith, editor S. Smith, Mrs. M. O. Cannon, Mrs. Grace Blackwell, R. C. Marshall, and Thomas Perkins; many other Black people lobbied the mayor as well. Minneapolis attorneys R. W. Morris and Brown S. Smith along with Deputy Assistant Sheriff John Allison visited the mayor (*Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, p. 2), and the committee from the Minneapolis Sunday Forum, a women's group, was noted ("New Life Lease for 'Birth of a Nation' Seen").

Similar scenes played out in countless communities across the nation that had enough Black citizens to mobilize a protest. In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the mayor faced the same question of what consisted of a fair referendum. "Will the wishes of sixty blacks prevail?" asked the film adherents. "Will Lancaster people let one man do the thinking for the community?" They, too, called the mayor a czar. In Lancaster, the mayor stood unmoved and the judge also delayed decision, though in that case it was in favor of blocking the film: see Huesken, "The Fight to Ban," 102–28.

23. "The Interview with the Mayor."
24. "Censors O.K. Birth of Nation; Nye Lifts Ban," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1915, p. 1.
25. "A Means to an End," "Editor Montgomery," and "Mayor Disregarded Negro Women," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, p. 2, 4.
26. William D. Green, *Nellie Francis: Fighting for Racial Justice and Women's Equality in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 41, 57; "Mayor's Invitation Revoked," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, p. 2.
27. "'Birth of Nation' License Granted," *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 20, 1915, p. 1; Weinberger, "The Birth of a Nation and the Making of the NAACP," 79. Mayor Winn Powers supported an ordinance that created a board to monitor performances "in a systematic manner."
28. "McColl May Bar 'Birth of a Nation,'" *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 14, 1915, p. 1.
29. "McColl May Bar 'Birth of a Nation'; 'Against Film Showing: Citizen Protests Particularly Against Use of Auditorium,'" Letter to the Editor, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 20, 1915, p. 10. The St. Paul producers were Joseph Friedman, Charles Friedman, and George Granstrom of the Strand Theater.
30. "Jose H. Sherwood," *The Appeal*, Sept. 24, 1910, p. 11; Peter J. DeCarlo, "Loyalty Within Racism: The Segregated Sixteenth Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard During World War I," *Minnesota History* 65, no. 6 (Summer 2017): 213.
31. "'Birth of a Nation' Attacked by Negro at Private Showing," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 20, 1915, p. 6; "'Birth of a Nation' License Granted"; "Jose H. Sherwood: A Defender of His Race," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, p. 4.
- There may have been more in this exchange; interracial antipathy accompanied the spread of the film. The *American Jewish World* pointed out, "One thing . . . in favor of the 'Birth of a Nation,' it does not try to libel the Jew": Nov. 19, 1915, p. 233. An opinion piece in *The Appeal* noted that Jews were making money by denigrating Black people: "Jewish capitalists are exploiting the photo-play all over the country": "Many Jewish Enemies," *The Appeal*, Aug. 28, 1915, p. 2. And Sherman was Jewish.
32. "'Birth of a Nation' License Granted."
33. "'Birth of a Nation' Protest Renewed," *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 25, 1915, p. 1. The newspaper reported Turner's claim that the petition represented 5,000 Blacks in St. Paul. The combined African American population of St. Paul and Minneapolis in 1910 was 5,736. The St. Paul newspapers make it clear the two NAACP chapters were working together.
34. "'Birth of Nation' May Be a Court Case," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 26, 1915, p. 5. The attendance figure of 500 is from "'Birth of Nation' Action Postponed," *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 25, 1915, p. 1. R. L. Robinson, a Black man, spoke in favor of the film and received "a storm of hisses." It was rumored that he was employed by the film's producers. Later, in the hall, he was involved in the scuffle: "'Birth of Nation' Action Postponed."
35. "'Birth of Nation' Won't Be Stopped," *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 27, 1915, p. 1.
36. "A Champion Worth While," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 28, 1915, p. 8, reprinted in *The Appeal*, Oct. 30, 1915, p. 2, and *Twin City Star*, Nov. 27, 1915, p. 1.
37. "Will Be Damned Either Way," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 27, 1915, p. 8.
38. "Editorial Note," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 28, 1915, p. 8; "Anent 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *The Appeal*, Oct. 30, 1915, p. 2. The scenes that were eliminated: the freedman Gus (played by a white actor in blackface) pursues Flora Cameron, a young white woman, and she jumps off a cliff to her death; Lieutenant Governor Lynch, an African American, proposes to Elsie Stonemason, the daughter of a prominent white politician.
39. "'Birth of Nation' License Revoked," *St. Paul Daily News*, Nov. 9, 1915, p. 1; "'Birth of Nation' Ends Career Here Tonight," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Nov. 10, 1915, p. 2; "It Pays to Agitate," *The Appeal*, Nov. 13, 1915, p. 2.
40. "Jose H. Sherwood: A Defender of His Race."
41. *The Appeal*, Nov. 6, 1915, p. 4; "Asks Special Laws to Stop Movie Play," *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 15, 1915, p. 1.
- Black educator and author Arthur C. McWatt wrote that the city council "laid it over," suggesting they didn't pass the ban immediately. See Arthur C. McWatt, *Crusaders for Justice: A Chronicle of Protests by Agitators, Advocates, and Activists in Their Struggle for Civil and Human Rights in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1802 through 1985* (St. Paul, MN: NAACP, 2009), 41.
- Regarding the 1930 screening bans, author Nickieann Fleener-Marzec cites a January 2, 1931, press release, "St. Paul NAACP Procures Ban on Showing of 'Birth of a Nation,'" in the NAACP Archives, File C302: see Fleener-Marzec, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 249. Author Earl Spangler cites the NAACP's Twenty-Second Annual Report (1931): see Earl Spangler, *The Negro in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Co., 1961), 19. For the court cases, see Dave Kenney, *Twin Cities Picture Show: A Century of Movie-going* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2007), 83.
42. *The Appeal*, Nov. 6, 1915, p. 3. See Green, *Nellie Francis*, chapter 11, for more details.
43. A memo from the national NAACP advised local chapters to recruit allies: "The [film] can probably only be stopped by executive order of the Mayor whom you may be able to interest by united appeals from colored and white civic and welfare organizations, secret societies, women's clubs, etc. We urge you to be watchful and to leave no stone unturned in an effort to suppress this picture": quoted in Fleener-Marzec, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 213–14.
44. "Mayor Not an Autocrat," *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 6, 1915, p. 4; "Better Think That Over," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 16, 1915, p. 6.
45. "The Birth of a Nation," *The Appeal*, Oct. 30, 1915, p. 3; "Anent 'The Birth of a Nation.'"
46. "Council to Judge 'Birth of Nation,'" *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 16, 1915, p. 1.
47. "Paper Book" containing sworn affidavits of testimony by Brown S. Smith, William R. Morris, and Gale P. Hilyer, p. 74–75, case no. 19664, Minnesota Supreme Court Case Files, General Index, and Briefs of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals, Minnesota State Archives, MNHS; "'Birth of Nation' License Granted." Sims was pastor at St. James Methodist Church.
48. "Red Cross Parade Draws Hundreds of Holiday Shoppers," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Dec. 12, 1915, p. 11; "Society Girls as Ku Klux Klan Feature Mid-Week Motion Picture Film," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1915, p. 11; "Big Parade to Open Health and Happiness Week in Minneapolis," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Dec. 1, 1916, p. 4; "Disease Chained by Health Is Led Captive in City," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Dec. 2, 1916, p. 1.
- The African American newspapers were weeklies, and some issues are missing, leaving the record incomplete. The auto show parade was mentioned in at least two reports of general newspapers; nothing exceptional was noted: "Auto Sirens Toot Derision to Cold; Parade a Success," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 3, 1917, p. 3; "Many Autos Parade Despite Intense Cold," *St. Paul Daily News*, Feb. 3, 1917.
49. Gerald N. Sandvick, "The Birth of Powdered Flight in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 46–59.
50. *Minneapolis Journal*, Feb. 6, 1903, p. 12.
51. David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1981), 149; Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle, *The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2013), 73–75, 81, 83, 119, 155; Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle and Nancy M. Vaillancourt, "One Flag, One School, One Language: Minnesota's Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s," *Minnesota History* 61, no. 8 (Winter 2009–10): 361.
- Earle Brown was the sheriff of Hennepin County and known as the founder of the Minnesota Highway Patrol. He held the membership number 4 in the Minnesota Klan. Charles Babcock, a close associate of Brown's, was state highway commissioner from 1917 to 1933; his department was known to hire Klan members. In 1922, the Minneapolis City Council learned that some members of the police department were KKK members. Mayor George Leach forbade Klan membership, and the city council requested an investigation by the chief of police.
52. "'Birth of Nation' License Granted"; Spangler, *The Negro in Minnesota*, 72, 91 (marriages), 117 (playground segregation); Thomas Dixon Jr. quoted in Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 26.

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