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**The South:**

# **The Cedartown Story:**

## **The Ku Klux Klan & Labor in “The New South”**

■ *Lyn Wells*

This article is about one small Georgia town. It is also about me and my people and who will speak for us.

This is the story of a Ku Klux Klan reign of terror, resulting in the murders of two Mexican workers and a citizenry gripped with fear. What happened in Cedartown, Georgia, is set in the context of a rapid gallop to the right in the American political landscape. Both the KKK and the town's establishment, each for its own motives, appeal to whites' frustrations and fears of economic insecurity.

Cedartown contains many sad tales of public apathy as well as stories of decent folks who genuinely oppose terrorism and bigotry but who are baffled about what to do. With some work, however, the Cedartown story may yet have a happy ending as people begin to realize common human interests, the need for inclusiveness, the essential meaning of democracy, and the power which can reside in a fight for common solutions.

### **A Look Back**

You get to Cedartown before you get to the mountains. Nestled in northwest Georgia's rolling hills, the town is not unlike

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thousands of towns in today's "New South." Until 1970, Cedartown was pretty prosperous, with a strong industrial base that included many small and medium-sized factories and a healthy retail trade on Main Street. Unlike most Georgia and Carolina towns, Polk County's mills and shops were largely unionized—a proud tradition in the area. About 15% of Polk County is black, slightly less than average for the Piedmont South.

As Cedartown prospered, only a few became wealthy, but at least most folks were progressing. Then in 1979 the 100-year-old textile plant shut down, leaving the town of 8,500 without 600 better-paying union jobs. Shops began to close on Main Street. Everything began to go down hill.

In 1981, the Ku Klux Klan moved in. This was not the Klan of the 1960s, though it retained every frightening feature of old. Named "the New Order Knights of the Ku Klux Klan," after Hitler's "New Order," its leaders dismissed the fight for segregation as a hopeless reform. Edward Fields—long-time editor of *The Thunderbolt*, America's largest-circulation openly anti-Semitic, racist newspaper—built his own Klan faction, dutifully committed to a revolution. Only a pure "White Republic" will do—no more "putting blacks back in their place," rather "there's no place here for blacks."

One afternoon in 1980 a black high school student in nearby Rome, Georgia, pets with a white girl at the back of a school bus. The KKK screams "RAPE!" and begins to hold massive rallies demanding that school officials expel the black youth. Robed Klansmen stage bold daylight visits to Pepperell High School, where both students and teachers are terrified. Crosses are burned at the boy's home, where he lives with his elderly grandmother.

After a juvenile trial which found the young man innocent, Rome school officials quietly move him to neighboring Rockmart. The Klan quickly finds out and moves the center of its activity. Huge nighttime rallies with fiery cross-burning ceremonies are repeated until finally they succeed—the young man quits school altogether.

But that was only the beginning. In 1980 Zartic Foods, a Cedartown frozen meat packaging plant with barbaric working conditions and low pay, hires nearly 100 Mexican immigrants, mostly for the third-shift cleanup.

James "Buddy" Wells, a white Zartic employee, suffers an on-the-job injury to his back and files a workmen's compensation claim. Zartic fires him, and Wells goes to Fields' Klan for help. Klan leaders instruct the white Zartic workers to establish the American Workers Union and within a few weeks, it seems like



Billy Downs

the whole world has turned upside down. The "union" wants all "illegal aliens" to be immediately fired and deported.

Signs go up outside the trailer park where the company has housed the majority of Mexicans: "Mexican Border Stops Here." Mexicans' cars are rammed from behind by Klansmen in pick-up trucks. A Mexican walking to Mass early one Sunday morning is stopped and threatened with death if he's seen again on the road—he decides to stop attending church. Nights are filled with terror as Mexican trailers and homes are shot into. No one is arrested.

Things escalate and Ramero Lopez, a Zartic employee, is murdered in cold blood. The homes of Mexican witnesses to the murder are fired upon, and they flee back to Mexico. The jury refuses to believe the testimony of the lone white witness, Tyrus Cazzort, who had accompanied the killers that night and later turned them in, telling his mother, "I've got to do something, I just can't stomach this."

The American Workers Union calls a strike against Zartic Foods in the summer of 1981. Robed Klansmen picket the plant, intermixed with the majority of the company's white workers. Several black Zartic workers even join the line. The strikers' signs demand "better pay," "decent working conditions," and "deport the Wetbacks." Klan leader Ed Fields tells them that "the white

working class is losing power in this country" and that America is being driven into the ground by "Jew bankers" in New York.

The Cedartown story goes on. Another Mexican, Casiano Zamudio, is murdered and his killer is also acquitted. Tyrus Cazzort is isolated amongst the town's whites for being a "race traitor" and dies in a house fire determined to be arson. Tim Carey, an 18-year-old black youth, is beaten with brass knuckles on Main Street by robed Klansmen.

Who joins the Klan? Mostly blue-collar whites, people who have nothing but their ability to work and maybe own some land, a house or a car. The white Zartic workers who joined the Klan were probably not much more racist in their upbringing and habits than those whites in Cedartown who didn't join. The disease of bigotry is deep. There is an alarmingly natural ease by which genuine frustrations are diverted into a populist brand of racism.

Striking for a union, deporting Mexicans and joining the Klan seemed to be the thing that might give them a brighter future. In a profound sense, these white people became radicalized—and Edward Fields was there to give an analysis of why they lacked political and economic power.

### **Who Will Stand Up?**

I used to wonder how Hitler could have come to power in Germany. How could he get such a hold on people? Why didn't people stop the Nazis? After working in Cedartown for the last two years, the answers come more easily.

The folks who run Cedartown—its business and civic leaders—genuinely regret the "nasty little problem" that Polk County's Klan resurgence has become. The mayor, county commissioners and other political leaders are not Klansmen; they are typical "New South" fellows, most of whom would not even consider joining the invisible empire—it's too "low class." Cedartown's civic leaders are overwhelmingly conservative, support the President and probably feel indebted to Jerry Falwell for trying to get America "back to its basic values." Most are traditional Democrats, although there is a steady defection to the Republicans. There is a functioning Businessmen's Branch of the John Birch Society in the area—which, until recently, was part of the late Larry McDonald's Congressional district.

To Cedartown's establishment, the Klan is a headache. Why? Because it gets blacks and Mexicans all riled up; because "bad publicity" surrounding the Klan upsurge has, evidently, kept two manufacturing plants from locating in Cedartown; and because

it disrupts the social peace upon which the smooth running of the status quo is built. These men are running a racist town and probably share many of the Klan's thoughts on the "decline of America," morality and affirmative action, but their disdain for "rednecks" and "white trash" about equals their prejudice against people of color and Jews.

These men set policy and direction for Cedartown. There have been no arrests for the scores of harassing acts committed against Mexicans. One year after the Carey beating, 23-year-old Klansman Randall Wiley Smith was arrested. Arrests were made in the two murder cases of Mexicans, but despite eyewitnesses in each instance, prosecutions ended with "not guilty" verdicts from local juries. While most white southern cops are not in the Klan today, there are strong indications that a handful of city police and county Sheriff's personnel are Klan members or associates.

An outcry from Cedartown's religious community took four long years to emerge. For a long period, only a lone Catholic priest spoke out. The overwhelmingly white ministerial association declined his mild suggestion that a documentary film on the Klan be shown at their meeting.

Even black community leadership was, at first, slow to respond to the Klan's growth. The fact that the Klan's first two murder victims were Mexicans may account for part of its slowness. Black community leaders are understandably hesitant to be the first—not surprising when you consider that they are often the only ones—to speak out.

So the Klan carved out a base in Cedartown, Georgia, as it has in scores of other Georgia, Carolina and Alabama small towns and suburbs. There was no ready-made opposition to the Klan in Cedartown; no ready-made force of working people (nor their unions) who saw the need to stand up to its bullying and division of the workforce; no ready-made force of "decent" uptown folks who saw the Klan as anything more than a joke or a skeleton in their closet to be ignored.

### **Seeds that Can Grow**

There is promise and hope, though.

In early 1984, the National Anti-Klan Network began quietly meeting with Mexican victims to pursue legal action against organized racial terrorism. After the second murder acquittal, it turned out that there were a number of local whites, mostly Zartic workers, who had befriended the Mexicans and were dedicated to obtaining some semblance of justice.

Then the 1984 beating of Tim Carey on Main Street drew an angry reaction from the black community and its NAACP leadership. A mass meeting drew 200 people, and a liaison committee was established with the National Anti-Klan Network to draw on its experience as the principal national clearinghouse for counter-hate organizing.

From this relationship a new, and for Cedartown a daring, endeavor emerged. Calling itself the Polk County Multi-Racial Coalition, blacks and a handful of whites embarked on a mission to stop the tide. Slowly, the Coalition has drawn in more whites and one native-born Chicano.

Its first public event was a movie showing of "The Klan: A Legacy of Hate," which drew an audience of 60, half black and half white. Next, a non-partisan Candidate's Forum was called by the Coalition, where those running for public office could be questioned by the community. It was the first time that anyone in Cedartown could remember such a forum, and the questioning of the candidates for Sheriff revealed discernable differences between them. The next week in the primary election, the incumbent Sheriff lost to a new, more modern-thinking candidate.

The Polk County Multi-Racial Coalition then launched a campaign for "Community Oneness." A declaration decrying hatred and bigotry and proclaiming a belief in the "oneness of all humanity as the divine creation of One God" was circulated, giving the silent majority a vehicle to express their anti-hate feelings. The campaign was launched in 1985 on Good Friday, with a church service attended by much of the town's establishment.

By the end, about one in every eight Cedartown citizens signed the declaration. This included blue-collar whites. When given the opportunity to join the campaign by signing their names, at least a quarter demanded to know "why wasn't this done sooner?" Another 25% were scared, but signed their names. Another 25% wanted to sign but were too scared. A solid 25% were pro-Klan.

The Polk County Multi-Racial Coalition lasted only one year. There is no question, though, that the KKK has gotten the message. Knock on wood, it has not held a single public rally or roadblock in Polk County since this work began.

### **We Begin to Compete with the Klan**

The most important part of this story—and the one I feel will most affect its outcome—has to do with who will win the allegiance of white labor? We have made a good beginning.

There are a couple of misconceptions I would like to clear up.



Melinda Zamudio, with a portrait of her husband, Casiano Zamudio, one of two Mexican immigrants murdered during the Ku Klux Klan reign of terror in Cedartown. Despite eyewitness testimony, the men charged with the murders were acquitted by Polk County juries.

First, it's wrong to think that the Klan has been a consistent opponent of unions. It is true that the hooded order unleashed its terror against the CIO organizing drives of the 1930s. But so long as the organization of craft and trade unions did not unsettle the existence of the South's social contract with white labor, the Klan has never minded posing as a "friend of labor." This is critical to remember. In the 1920s annual Labor Day Parades, sponsored by the Georgia AFL, allowed participation of a robed Klan contingent.

I'd like to correct another common error. The modern resurgence of organized white hate groups has *not* been financed by wealthy individuals, corporations or banks. It is critical to conceive of this native fascist movement as a genuine insurgency. Its wellsprings are the growing white underclass. While its leadership is generally college-educated and there is a sprinkling of lawyers, businessmen and some professionals, it is basically a blue-collar movement. Later, it may be embraced by the establishment, but it is not their creation nor their "tool." If it was inimical to their interests, clearly they would stamp it out. But it is not "theirs."

Knowing this, we were not entirely surprised when the Klan pulled off a strike at Zartic Foods. Today's nazification of the KKK and the growing popularity of fascist organizations such as the Liberty Lobby, its Populist Party front, and the Posse Comitatus, all feature populism as their main mass appeal. This means rhetoric (and some action) which is anti-bank and anti-government, and it means rhetoric (and some action) which is pro-ordinary folks (white).

We decided that we had to begin competing for the Klan's base amongst white laboring people of Polk County—particularly at Zartic. To compete for whites in the Klan and under its immediate influence, it is impossible to simply make an anti-Klan appeal. So we started from the other end.

About a week into the 1981 strike, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) entered the scene. They told the Zartic workers that if they wanted a real union, UFCW would take them—provided the KKK pulled out. The union officials told whites, "We are against the Klan. But we don't care what you do on off time." Thus, while disbanding its "union," the Klan kept its membership and following. Union activists, for example, attended the Klan support rally for the white man who was acquitted of killing Casiano Zamudio, their fellow Zartic worker.

Following the pattern of a "normal" southern union drive, an election was held, the union won by one vote, the company

contested the election, the union organizers had to leave, and the whole thing was put "on hold" for two years. While waiting for a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decision, there was a steady and demoralizing stream of firings of pro-union leaders in the plant. During the strike, 114 employees were fired en masse and the Board ordered their rehiring. But the later firings were more clever—one-by-one—and the NLRB refused to hear any of them.

In June of 1984, a staff member of the National Anti-Klan Network asked the permission of the union's business agent to revitalize the union organizing committee at Zartic. The idea was to rebuild the committee on a truly multi-racial basis and to steal the Klan's main base in Cedartown.

Gathering what was left of the old committee, we made it absolutely clear who we were, but made our effort of assistance with no strings attached. Our offer was accepted, just as the Klan's had been.

We moved a volunteer organizer to Cedartown who began work at Zartic. Articles were gathered for an Organizing Committee newsletter, the *Zartic Workers VOICE*. From the beginning, we emphasized that only by including black, Mexican, Vietnamese and white could there even be a union at Zartic. Although nearly all-white, Committee members agreed.

By October 1984 the fourth issue of the union newsletter carried an article by a former Klanswoman, who wrote: "A major obstacle to winning a union at Zartic has been the divisions between different groups of workers—differences that the company has been very quick to exploit. The Union wishes to unite all the workers by showing the things that we have in common rather than the differences between us."

Slowly but surely, through talk and more talk, and by showing a genuine commitment to the plight of white labor in Cedartown, it was possible to show that the only way to curb competition from Mexican labor was to organize them. Eventually, this gave way to an openness. Mexicans were no longer objects of hate, but human beings and fellow workers.

Following the Union Committee Christmas party, word spread that "Immigration" was going to make a raid at Zartic. The company warned Mexicans to stay out of work that Friday and to even stay off the streets and away from their own homes. The Union Committee issued a leaflet declaring its solidarity with the Mexicans and counselling them on their legal rights. Union whites offered their homes as refuge for illegal Mexican workers.

There's a lot more to tell and there will be more. Today, the union



... KKK Grand Dragon Edward Fields.

drive is still "on hold," still waiting for a decision by Reagan's NLRB. But on Labor Day 1985, the Union Committee held a public picnic. The core of the union has changed to better reflect the make-up of the plant. The Committee not only prepared a great bar-b-que but arranged for security "in case the Klan came." Despite surveillance by Zartic's personnel manager, Mexicans came and ate with whites and blacks. A man who had, only a month before, harassed an interracial couple, broke bread with the victims of his attack. The NAACP spoke and was followed by a white worker who educated those gathered about Reagan's new tax plan. I talked about the Klan and the history of the southern, white social contract and where it had gotten us.

### The End and the Beginning

The Klan has established beachheads like Cedartown across the South. There is a "white movement" out there. It exists and the Klan has entered it. The Klan hopes to direct its consolidation and plan its response to the worsening conditions of ordinary white Americans. These folks are not a "blank slate" whose blackboard is just waiting to get written on. They've got their own ideas—some very good and some very bad. The question is, will whites

like us enter this world and give the Klan a good run for its money?

To do this, it is just plain wrong to think that you can be "color blind." That traditional trade union approach may have worked in the 30s and perhaps a little in the 60s—but it won't work now. Unions can no longer unite workers of all races and nationalities by ignoring the differences between them, treating all as simply "workers" with private lives and ethnic subcultures which they leave behind them when at the workplace and in the union hall. Race and nationality are part of who people are, and the gulf between races is larger than it has been in decades. Every worker's racial culture and heritage—including whites—must be respected if racism and racial misunderstanding are to be pulled out at their roots. The "color line"—and the intense labor competition which inevitably accompanies it—must be recognized. Race *must* be discussed.

Critical in this context is the need to develop the self-conscious organization of *white* labor to fight on behalf of its own interests. Educational work must be developed which uncovers the history of white labor and the state it finds itself in today. Political strategies must be initiated which seize from the right wing such broad social issues as economic growth, taxes, crime, patriotism, the family and declining morality. We must challenge the Klan on its own terrain.

With its present small staff, the National Anti-Klan Network cannot possibly challenge each Klan stronghold. But a model of work has been established—a roadmap which may be utilized by church, union or civic groups in countless other counties and towns in the southland. Our side's message rarely reaches places like Cedartown these days, and when it does it almost never reaches out directly to whites, appealing to their best human instincts and their genuine interests. Cedartown's story has not come to an end, but the conclusion looks promising. ■