

The Preacher and the KKK

The First Testing of Allan I. Lorimer



*In
Celebration of the
325th Anniversary
of
The
First Congregational Church of
Greenwich
1665 to 1990*



An Oral History of First Church

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Allan Lorimer hadn't even finished Union seminary when he came to First Church in 1927. Yet the qualities that would mark his entire ministry became clear during his seven years at the church. His compassion, social commitment, and refusal to be intimidated attracted scores of new members and won him the love and respect of the community. At Lorimer's farewell from Old Greenwich, Allan Kitchel lamented, "You, our meteor...have flashed across our horizon, and now we will be left only with the bright reflection and the memory of the glory that was ours - while you slip away to other skies."

I'm the only Congregational minister that I know that ever had a Ku Klux Klan cross burned on his front lawn in a New England town, in Old Greenwich.

I had got up in the pulpit, and I was so damned mad. My wife was a southerner, from North Carolina. She trembled down there because her father was threatened by the Ku Klux Klan... I preached a sermon saying that I thought the three most dangerous institutions to America were the American Legion, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Ku

Klux Klan and the whole thing was published.

The editor of the Greenwich Press, Howard Palmer, was a member of the church. He came up after I had preached and said, "Allan, I've just been waiting for somebody to say that. And he said that all his friends who had been officers in the war agreed.

They burned a cross right on the pastor's lawn. Yeah. When some terrible things were done for my sake which only the American Legionnaires could understand, Allan Kitchel, the president of the board of trustees, decided something had to be done. Kitchel had been a colonel in the war. He was president of Columbia Carbon Company. Binney-Smith, they called it. They make Crayola Crayons. He and Bill Cook, who was a Wall Street broker and had been a major in the infantry, got together without my knowing it.

They concocted this idea. They both had Cadillacs. The head of the American Legion in Greenwich was a Cadillac dealer. They both decided they were going to buy new Cadillacs. Bill Cook went in to see this fellow one night and Allan Kitchel went in the next. They said they were in the market for new cars.

"Have we satisfied you in the past, Major Cook?" "Indeed you have. It's been perfect." "Is this the kind..." "It's just what I want." "We'll take it off the floor for you and give you so much on yours." Bill Cook said, "I have only one trouble. I don't know whether I can trust you or not." "Why?" "You're trying to ruin the life of a young minister over in Old Greenwich, my young minister. I think I'll go over to Stamford."

And he went to Stamford. He didn't buy the Cadillac. Allan Kitchel came in the next night. He was the best known citizen of Old Greenwich and he did the same thing.

This time the head of the American Legion called a meeting of the vigilante committee, which is statewide, Connecticut. Now this is interesting, 'cause it has a lot to do with the depression, certain social upheavals we had that went up into that Depression. That vigilante committee from Hartford sent a deputation down to this fellow, the head of the American Legion in Greenwich, to demand either my resignation or an apology from the pulpit.

It's a long story. I went down on vacation to North Carolina and I talked with the dean of the law school. The dean said, I'll give you advice from afar if you want, counsel and all that sort of thing. The professors were all with me, you know, and so are these two businessmen. I showed the dean this special delivery letter demanding an apology. He said, when they come in your study - don't make an appointment with them - he said, first thing you want to do - remember the best offense is much better than a good defense. I said, "What do I do?" "You demand an apology from the American Legion. Free speech is one of the fundamental principles of the American Constitution, and the American Legion stands on the Constitution."

Well, when I got back home, the committee visited me - about ten of them. Somebody had given me a box of corona cigars, which in those days were Cuban hand-made

cigars. I like cigars. And they came in, so the first thing I did was say, "Gentlemen, I want you all to have a cigar." I offered them this box of coronas. They all declined. I said, "Okay, I'll have one." Well, they smelled this smoke, and I was calm, as calm as I could be not knowing that Major Cook and Colonel Kitchel were in the outside room in case anything really happened.

They were sure that loyal. They weren't going to have a church run by the Ku Klux Klan or the American Legion or the Anti-Saloon League or anything else. And finally, I could see some of them sort of itching, and I said, "Wouldn't you really like a cigar?" I passed the box around a little. All but three of them took one. These fellows - if they'd come in their American Legion uniforms, it would have been all right, but this was a very serious occasion. And they had their war uniforms on. Now this was about 1930 and those who had been thin in the war had now grown fat, and those who had been fat were thin. You never saw such an overgrown-looking bunch of boy scouts.

So I put the shoe on the other foot. In the meantime I heard somebody outside the door, 'cause I heard the door clicking a little bit. I didn't know what it was, so I said that I think I need this door open for a little draft. And I went out there, and there was Colonel Kitchel and Major Cook. They came in. The Legion men asked, "Do you want this apology in writing?" I said, "I certainly do, and I won't retract any statement. There is such a thing as a suit for defamation of character." They wouldn't have gotten to first base in any court, you know. In those days we had a freedom of the pulpit. I had a number of experiences like that.

Based on an interview with Allan Lorimer July 16, 1977.

Edited by Andrea Karls & The Rev. Dr. David L. Fountain