

The Original BlackKlansman

Tyler : This episode contains discussions of racism, white supremacy, and racial violence.

Theo Wilson: *[00:13:35]* This was more of a military operation to me, I had to gather intel, because white supremacy, as a Black man in America, poses an existential threat to me. The original impetus was let me figure out how big this thing is because I can't afford not to know.

Noel: This is Theo Wilson.

Theo Wilson: I am a spoken word poet, a community activist, and a performer.

[Ambi sounds of Alt-right rally]

Theo Wilson: *[00:14:01]* During the Obama administration, we didn't know if Trump could win but we saw the rise of what would become the Alt-right. They weren't even called at first, but we saw the rise of the Alt-right happening, and I just kind of knew that a white supremacist movement was in the making in the resurgence because of what was being said to me. The boldness of how it was being said, and the ubiquitous nature of the kind of information that they were spewing at me.

Noel: In 2017, Wilson gave a [TEDx Talk](#) in which he told the story of his journey as an undercover white supremacist who went by the name of Lucius25 in online communities.

Wilson_TEDx: I remember being called highly colorful racial slurs by those who use the anonymity of the internet as a Klan hood. And some of them were pretty creative, actually, but others were pretty wounding...

Tyler: Because of the way he infiltrated Alt-right groups, Theo Wilson became known as “The New Black Klansman.”

Theo Wilson: [00:28:11] I find it interesting that all three Black Klansmen, I mean, I've been considered among them, did their thing in Colorado.

[Clip from [BlackKKKlansman](#)]

Tyler: Spike Lee’s 2018 movie *BlackKKKlansman*, which won an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay, was based on the life of Detective Ron Stallworth, who infiltrated the KKK in Colorado Springs in the 1970s by using a fellow detective who was white as a body double.

Noel: But what a lot of people don't know, is that there was another Black activist who infiltrated the Denver KKK in the 1920s who may have been the original Black Klansman. His name was Dr. Joseph Westbrook.

[Theme Post]

Tyler: From History Colorado Studios, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On this episode, the life and times of Dr. Joseph Westbrook, a light-skinned black man who used his ability to pass for white to infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan. It was at a time in the early 20th Century when the Klan had become a part of everyday life in Colorado, from average white citizens all the way to the governor's office.

Tyler: We'll talk to experts to understand why the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s gained so much political power in the state of Colorado.

Noel: And how they managed to appeal to so many middle and upper middle class white protestants outside of the South.

[Fade out Music]

Bob Goldberg: The Ku Klux Klan was a national movement in the 1920s. It's estimated that between 5 and 6 million men and women joined the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was powerful politically as well as numerically in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Texas, California and in Colorado.

Tyler: This is Bob Goldberg, Professor of History at the University of Utah, and the author of the book *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado*.

Noel: He says the Second Klan of the 1920's was much different than what most people think of when they hear that name.

Tyler: Most people associate the Klan with lynchings, hangings and racial terror in the South. But that, says Goldberg, was mostly the first Klan, which emerged after the Civil War.

Bob Goldberg cont'd: What was key here also is that the Klan is always seen as a southern organization, a rural movement and a violent organization. In fact, in the 1920s, there were more Klansmen in the state of Maine than there were in the state of South Carolina.

Linda Gordon: The second Klan, officially was an extension of the first, but was really an entirely separate organization.

Tyler: This is Linda Gordon. She's a professor of History at New York University. In her book *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political*

Tradition she argues that the QUOTE “Invisible Empire” as it was known, was not perceived as an extreme organization by many at the time.

Noel: In a way, she says, it was a mainstream American movement.

Tyler: The KKK of the 1920s wasn’t secret because it didn’t have to be.

Noel: Local chapters of the KKK could often be found advertising in daily papers and in the phone book.

Bob Goldberg: It depended on where you were. When the Klan was in power, the Klan was very public. So in Denver the Klan staged a variety of events: Car races, wrestling matches, giant picnics, which invited, they invited everyone to come to. The Klan often paraded with the mask up so that people could see their identity. The other thing was, as one person told me, in regard to Cañon City, “We all knew who were members of the Klan because on Monday morning they put out the Klan sheets to dry in the, on their clotheslines.” So the Klan, depending on where you were, was either quiet and secret or out in the open.

Sam Bock: You know, you could clip out your application from the newspaper. The Klan was very bold about recruiting members. Everyone knew who was in the Klan. They would publish articles under their own names in local newspapers, opinion pieces about why you should join the Klan and espousing a lot of their racist and anti Catholic views.

Noel: This is Sam Bock, a public historian and exhibit developer at History Colorado.

Sam: I think the other thing that is impossible to overstate and that's essential to understanding the Klan in the 20s is that it wasn't a monolith, even as much as John Galen Locke had centralized control over much of the Klan in Colorado, the animosities that motivated people to

join the Klan in Pueblo were not the same as the ones that motivated people to join the Klan in Grand Junction, in Denver, in Cañon City. The genius of the Klan, and I use that word very consciously, because the Klan is odious and awful. But they had a genius for understanding what would drive people to membership and what divided people in each community.

Tyler: The Klan of the 1920s, which in Colorado was led by a man named John Galen Locke, used recruiters, known as 'Klan Kleagles' who were instructed to go into a community and lay low for a couple of weeks.

Noel: Their mission was to identify the social issues causing anxiety and concern among white protestants, and then to sell the Klan as the solution to those problems.

Bob: So the Klan was anti-immigrant. The Klan was a law and order organization. The Klan was a 100% American organization. The Klan was a militant Protestant organization. It was anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic. It supported white supremacy, and also again, anti-immigrant.

[music]

Tyler: At the time in Colorado, there was a lot of hostility toward the largely Catholic Mexican and Latin American immigrant laborers who came to Colorado to work in the sugar beet fields. And that hatred also spread to the Mexican Americans and Hispanos who'd called Colorado home long before The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made the territory part of the United States in 1848.

Noel: Between 1880 and into the 1920's, the U.S. also saw an unprecedented number of European immigrants coming out West in search of jobs and a better life.

Linda Gordon: The key thing about that immigration is that very few of those people were white Protestants. They were largely Catholics from southern or eastern Europe, Jews from Russia and other eastern European countries. Some Greek and Roman Orthodox people, a few, a very small number of Muslims.

Sam Bock: And so, one thing that helped drive Klan membership was just contact with people who pray different, look different, spoke differently than yourself. And I think the fear of the 'Other' was really what helped push the Klan to prominence in Colorado and around the country.

Noel: And aside from the large numbers of Catholics and non-white immigrants, the city of Denver was gaining a significant Jewish population that lived along West Colfax.

Bob: And the Klan was particularly incensed by the fact that this was a, if you will, a "European village" where Yiddish was spoken and not American. It was not Americanized. They refused to Americanize. So they were very upset about what other Denverites called "Little Jerusalem" and the Klan called "Jew Town."

Sam: Jews started moving out from that enclave and buying homes and, you know, sort of becoming more visible around Denver and it was scary to the folks in Denver who were the WASPy folks, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who were used to controlling the levers of power by default.

Bob: [00:26:57] They were accused on the one hand of being bomb throwers and radicals Marxists. And on the other hand, of being extreme capitalists who were unfair in their business practices. They were accused of commercializing the Sabbath. They were accused of using Hollywood movies to destroy the morals of the white Protestant population. They were said to be in charge of prostitution and gambling and liquor trade in Denver.

Noel: It's also important to highlight the degree to which Prohibition helped the Klan to establish a strong foothold in Colorado.

Sam Bock: Colorado goes dry in 1916, and the real truth of it was that those who were bootlegging, creating home brew, you know, were mostly Italian and Mexican-American immigrants, right? They were Catholic. They were, you know, tied to, immigrant roots in a very direct way that enabled the Klan to take a look at them and very simply say, "Oh, you're from somewhere else, you don't hold American values, you don't care about crime in this community because you're really not of it. So we are the people of this community. We are going to make sure that it's safe. We're going to take the law into our own hands," and appeal to people based on this sort of law and order message, which throughout time in American history, has always been racially coded.

Noel: According to Linda Gordon, the Ku Klux Klan was sold to many people as a harmless social club.

Linda: The Ku Klux Klan was presented to them as just another fraternal organization. A fraternal organization that then used, and this would be the second largest point I'd make about its appeal, that presented itself as the only true defender of both patriotism and Christianity. One of the Klan's slogans that they like to use: "If Jesus was alive today, he would be a Klansman."

Noel: Klansmen didn't think Catholics were true Christians. And many believed in a large-scale Catholic conspiracy theory.

Linda: The Klan argued that the reason so many Italian and Irish Catholic and other Catholic immigrants had come to the United States is not because they were poor and looking for a better life, not because they were persecuted, but because the Pope ordered them to come.

And that once they came to the United States, they were to act like moles in an espionage story. They would sort of not reveal their true intentions, but one, at some point the Pope would give that signal that now was the time for a coup against the United States, which would transform the United States into the "United States of Catholic America."

Noel: Klan leaders realized that their movement could be much more powerful if they used non-violent means, such as elections, propaganda and conspiracies.

Tyler: In Colorado, this approach worked really well for them.

Noel: And it showed at the ballot box.

Bob: Politically, it elected the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, the lower house of the state legislature and two U.S. senators.

Noel: That Governor was Clarence Morley, who served between 1927 and 1929.

Tyler: And he wasn't the only one. Members of the Klan served at every level of government in Colorado during the 1920s. Here's Nicki Gonzales..

Nicki Gonzales: I am a professor of history at Regis University, where I also serve as Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion, and I am the Colorado State historian.

Noel: Nicki was also part of the Community Advisory Group that History Colorado that convened to determine how to release and publicize two KKK membership ledgers that have been kept in the History Colorado collections since 1946.

Tyler: The ledgers contain around 30,000 entries across more than 1,300 pages.

Noel: Dated from 1924 to 1926, they record the names and personal information, mostly of men who joined the Klan in the metropolitan Denver area.

Shaun Boyd: And so the books have technically been "available" since 1990. But I mean, they were in a case. They'd been in a display case almost that entire time.

Tyler: Shaun Boyd is the curator of archives at History Colorado. She and Sam Bock were both part of the team that worked on making the ledgers more readily available to the public. Bob Goldberg was one of the few scholars who was able to look at the ledgers before they were released. And he couldn't name names or out anyone listed in the books. He was only allowed to analyze the data for research on his book.

Noel: But even after the ledgers were released to the public in 1990, and then put on microfilm in 1996, says Boyd, few bothered to look through them.

Shaun Boyd: And so the microfilm has been available for researchers, but no one wants to look through 1,400 pages of names that aren't in alphabetical order.

Tyler: Then in 2020, History Colorado got a grant from the Colorado Historical Records Advisory Board to scan the ledgers and use optical character recognition to make them searchable.

Noel: And many in Colorado, and Denver in particular, suddenly found the names of family members and government officials.

Shaun Boyd: There's a ton of people that worked for the Denver tramway or worked for other transportation-related businesses. Also, banking had a lot of representation in government. So both state government, city government, police, those kinds of things.

Noel: Even though Bob Goldberg was only allowed to use statistical data from the ledgers at the time he wrote his book, the release of the searchable ledger database confirmed his analysis that showed that the majority of the Klan members listed in the ledgers were middle class and upper-middle class white people in Denver.

Tyler: And though that might not necessarily be surprising, it's a good historical reminder to those who tend to write off racism in the US as something that's limited to rural and working class white communities.

Bob Goldberg: What I found when I looked at the Klan membership was the people missing from the Klan and Klan ranks were people who were unemployed or in the unskilled category of work. The people who are overrepresented were professionals, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, engineers and otherwise. Otherwise, besides the elite, elite missing and the very poor missing. It was a cross-section of the Denver population.

Shaun Boyd: This is more like a businessman's Klan, you know, it's guys in suits. So the other thing that I think is important to remember about this whole ledger aspect is there was an equally large organization of women that were in the Klan. None of them are on this list. This is all men.

Linda Gordon: There were about 1.5 million women Klanspeople and they actually had a lot of influence and power. They were, first of all, a backbone of a lot of the fundraising activities of the Klan. They organized, women organized a lot of sort of Klannish groups for children. You could even see pictures of them with their little tiny, even like toddlers in these Klan robes.

Tyler: As part of their efforts to gain legitimacy in the 1920s, the second Klan hired a professional PR firm.

Linda Gordon: It was a very sophisticated system of propaganda. Quite a few radio stations. They established a film company. They had 150 different print publications. This is really how they built themselves. They showed "Birth of a Nation" widely.

Howie Movshovitz: *The Birth of a Nation's* a 1915 film by D.W. Griffith. Its ostensible subject is the Civil War and Reconstruction

Tyler: This is Howie Movshovitz. He's a film critic and a professor at CU-Denver.

Howie Movshovitz: *The Birth of a Nation* gave white supremacy its vocabulary. And it gave it the image of chaotic, lustful Black men pursuing white women and pursuing innocent southerners.

Noel: Bob Goldberg says the second Klan very deliberately planned their REBIRTH around *Birth of a Nation*:

Bob Goldberg: *The Birth of a Nation* was a very much of a recruiting device and lever, so the Klan initially created itself in Atlanta, Georgia, to coincide with the premiere of *Birth of a Nation*.

Tyler: Nicki Gonzales:

Nicki Gonzales: It told the story of the Civil War in the reconstruction years from the perspective of Southerners, white southerners. And it is an extremely racist depiction of African-Americans in the South. It tells the origin of the Ku Klux Klan, you know, how it evolved

and how southerners got the idea to create this Klan, which would be kind of like the defender of white supremacy in the South.

Tyler: The film was a huge commercial success, and it was the first movie ever screened at the White House.

Noel: President Woodrow Wilson was a fan. After seeing it, he allegedly said: "It's like writing history with lightning."

Tyler: Howie Movshovitz considers the film a seminal work of American melodrama.

Howie Movshovitz: Melodrama, boiled down, contains three primary elements: it contains innocence, suffering, and moralizing. And what that means is that the reader or the viewer sees an innocent person suffer unjustly. And what that does is it drives the heart to understand that this is wrong and to moralize about how it can be fixed.

Tyler: And he considers most American blockbusters to be melodramas. Think *Rocky* or *Rambo*, or any Marvel movie. They're all melodramas, says Movshovitz.

Howie Movshovitz: Melodrama doesn't take in the brain, it takes in the heart.

Linda Gordon: We have a tendency sometimes to think that emotions are just quote unquote "natural," that people respond, everyone in their own way, emotionally to things. But the fact is that emotions can be constructed. The Klan's construction of fear was a really good example of that.

Noel: At the time it premiered, America was a rapidly industrializing, multicultural nation full of immigrants from around the world, many of whom were beginning to form unions to challenge the power of white industrialists.

Tyler: It was just the myth that white America needed and wanted at the time.

Cara Caddoo: The reason that the Klan does grow very rapidly during this period is because of the prevalence of people that were very receptive to the messages that *Birth of a Nation* was promoting.

Noel: That's Cara Caddoo.

Cara Caddoo: I teach at Indiana University, Bloomington. I am an historian and I also teach classes on media. The person who kind of helped to organize the second Klan was kind of like a failed methodist minister.

Tyler: The minister she's referring to is William Joseph Simmons, who would go on to found and lead the Klan of the 1920s.

Cara Caddoo: He got into this car accident, and he's kind of like laid up in bed and then *Birth of a Nation*. And he's really, really inspired by the film. He's already read the book *The Clansman*, which the film is based off of by Thomas Dixon. And he begins to sketch out his idea of this new fraternal organization and then gets a bunch of other guys together. And they go and have this kind of inauguration ceremony at Stone Mountain. And they burn a cross, just like in the movie, and they adopt these costumes: the white pointy hat and the white, the white robes and really try to depict themselves as being a continuation of that first Klan. But the first Klan didn't wear anything like that at all.

Noel: And, says Bob Goldberg, the Klan often made a big membership push in communities where the film was showing.

Bob Goldberg: Often you knew the Klan was coming to a community because *Birth of a Nation* would show in the movie theaters, in the small towns and cities, and repeatedly, the Klan used *Birth of a Nation* as a recruiting device and also as a donation device, where the Klan would show that movie and that would stoke interest in the Klan.

Tyler: Part of the reason for the movie's success was its use of parallel editing and close-ups, which were considered innovative for the time, though Griffith wasn't the first to use them.

Here's Howie Movshovitz.

Howie Movshovitz: The end of the film is so thrilling that even when you find the terms of the melodrama disgusting, you think, "Wow, you know, aren't these, look at these guys in their white hoods and white gowns, riding in orderly precision and saving everybody who needs to be saved. That's how melodrama works. It's very difficult for human beings to wrap their heads around the notion that something can be brilliant and repulsive at the same time.

Noel: Linda Gordon

Linda Gordon: Its whole purpose was to make people terrified of African-Americans; and it had just ugly scenes of rioting, African-American people going after, allegedly going after white women.

– **PROMO:** To learn more about the stories you hear on *Lost Highways*, check out History Colorado's eight museums around the state. Like the El Pueblo History Museum in Pueblo, which features a series of exhibits, events, and more, related to the borderlands of southern Colorado. From a place of meeting between Indigenous tribes, to a physical border between nations, from the boundary between mountains and plains to everyday convergences of cultural and ethnic borders, this exhibit illuminates the site's specific geopolitical border history as well

as the region's historic and ongoing borders of cultures, ethnicities, landscapes, industries, religions, and identities.

Noel: Because of its dehumanizing portrayal of Black people, the backlash to *Birth of a Nation* was almost immediate.

Howie Movshovitz: It didn't come into the world without protest. You know, a lot of people, you know, a lot of people saw right through it. But it still, you know, convinced people, as Griffith believed, that it was a depiction of actuality.

Cara Caddoo: And a lot of, the reason that the NAACP grew so many branch organizations actually were founded directly out of the desire to protest this film. The Black press plays a really, really big role in the protests. And, you know, within two years, you basically have the first mass Black protest movement of the 20th century. The protests happened in more than 60 cities in the United States. And, and it involves just like a really diverse range of people. There are ministers involved, there's gangsters, housewives, school children, all sorts of people who are participating.

Tyler: Police officers would sometimes help sell tickets for *Birth of a Nation*, or that they would guard theaters where the movie was showing to try and intimidate protestors.

Terri Gentry: By the time "Birth of a Nation" was produced, we already saw some of this stuff already in place in Colorado, and it just exacerbated what was already happening. It affirmed, I guess. It affirmed for folks their thinking about what they were doing was right. But it was already here.

Noel: This is Terri Gentry who you heard from in our previous episode this season about Preston Porter Jr.'s Lynching in Limon, Colorado.

Terri Gentry: I'm a volunteer docent at the Black American West Museum and Heritage Center in Denver, Colorado.

Tyler: Because keeping records of his activities could've put his life in danger, most of what we know about Dr. Joseph Westbrook has been passed down orally.

Terri Gentry: So Dr. Westbrook and his wife Mildred were the godparents of my grandmother and great aunt, the McClain twins, as we call them. So my grandmother talked extensively about Dr. Westbrook because she considered him an uncle.

Noel: Born in Hernando, Mississippi in 1871, he was close friends with Terri Gentry's great grandfather, Dr. Thomas Ernest McClain, and they both graduated from Medical School around the same time in the early 1900s.

Noel: Like exodusters before him who came to the West looking to stake claims under the homestead act, and to escape the legacy of slavery in the South, Dr. Westbrook came to Colorado looking to establish himself in a part of the country that seemed to promise less segregation, less discrimination, and less violence.

Terri Gentry: There was so much stuff going on in the South with the idea of starting a medical practice or a dental practice. There were so many restrictions, and I think they were concerned about some of the bad behavior that was happening. They would be considered uppity and those kind of things, facing lynching and facing violence for their career decisions.

Tyler: And like many other Black people in Denver at the time, Westbrook decided to make his home in the Five Points neighborhood.

Noel: At the time of the rise of the second KKK in the 1920s, Five points was incredibly diverse.

Terri Gentry: So it became a working class neighborhood, but continued to be a multiethnic neighborhood. Indigenous people, people of Mexican ancestry had a pretty good population, African-American, Swedish, other European populations, Japanese, Chinese, just from all over the planet in the neighborhood. But mostly working class.

Tyler: But in the years that followed, it started to become more of a Black neighborhood.

Nicki Gonzales: It had become mostly African-American and it was thriving. There were businesses. Everything you needed was, every need you had was serviced within the community and that was, you know, self-sufficiency but also out of necessity because of, you know, the discrimination against African-Americans outside of that community that prevented them from accessing certain services. And so it was a thriving community, very culturally vibrant. *[Fade in clip of Duke Ellington : Pie Eye's Blues]* And, you know, it had some jazz clubs that were very popular with all people. And yeah, it was a very beautiful community.

Terri Gentry: My goodness, it was such a wonderful place to be for music. And a lot of musicians in the neighborhood also traveled the country celebrating their music. George Morrison was a cornerstone of that history. Mr. Hobbes. And right now we have, we still have Purnell Steen and we have Charlie Burrell that were part of that history. Mr. Burrell played with George Morrison and he also played for Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton and

Count Basie and Cab Calloway and all of these other artists that came from around the country to celebrate jazz in our community and we were called “Harlem of the West.”

[Fade out Duke Ellington]

Terri Gentry: And Harlem of the West was the name because it was. It was not the same size as Harlem, New York, but I would say that it had the same caliber of artists and musicians and business owners, entrepreneurs, ideology spaces. It was just an incredible place.

Noel: Terri’s connection to the Five Points neighborhood goes back generations.

Terri Gentry: I feel like my grandparents had, with all the challenges they experienced in other other areas, I know some of the challenges and trauma that they experienced outside of the neighborhood. They were, they loved their lives and they were happy with their connections with their neighbors and the people in the community. It was so, such a strong community. And everybody kept each other lifted up and helped. Make sure that the neighborhood was in good shape.

[Music continues]

Tyler: And Dr. Westbrook was able to look out for the neighborhood in a way that few others could.

Terri Gentry: So Dr. Westbrook’s grandmother was enslaved and mother was enslaved. And from what we understand, the slaveholder is the reason why Dr. Westbrook became very, very fair skinned. And so that’s, that was the catalyst for getting him into the Ku Klux Klan. But I have a picture of him in the Boulé in 1921 with these other men, and from what I understand, he had

by that time infiltrated. And my grandmother said that the stress of that life, he kept a shotgun loaded in his home and his office, just in case.

Noel: We asked Terri about the origins of the word 'Boulé.'

Terri Gentry: So the Boulé for me means 'the meeting'. That's what they do, is, they're a collection of men from different professions. And they come together and they have meetings and they work in a service capacity to make sure that they are doing things to better their community, uplift their community. But also, in the case of Dr. Westbrook, they were wrapping protection around him so that he could move forward with this risky venture. And they're standing right beside him.

[Music]

Terri Gentry: They had to be extremely careful that no one knew wherever neighborhood or whatever community they lived in, just to make sure that he wasn't facing serious injury or death.

Tyler: Nicki Gonzales:

Nicki Gonzales: He decides that he's going to infiltrate the Klan. And he does so with the intention of gathering information, intelligence for the African-American community so that he can let them know when, where and how you know the next cross burning would happen.

Noel: Dr. Westbrook went to meetings and was able to pass among the other middle-, and upper-middle class businessmen and professionals.

Terri Gentry: For example, if there was going to be an event or something with Black folks or whatever and the Klan was going to come try to disrupt it, they might be able to change the location of the event. They might be able to just postpone it, or do something so that they couldn't come disrupt it. He was very determined to be a leader for our human rights and civil rights, and making sure our community was safe.

Nicki Gonzales: And so, there's some activism going on at the grassroots level around African-Americans rights. So he comes to Denver in 1907, and he serves actually as an officer on Denver's interracial commission. He's also a member of the YMCA Board of Directors and a member of the NAACP Chapter in Denver, and he's a delegate also to the Republican National Convention. And so he's very well respected. He's, you know, a political and social elite.

Terri Gentry: He was a supporter of Shorter AME Church. He was an active, active member of Shorter AME Church. And he did so many things. I just, all the things that I see. I wonder if he ever had time to sleep. You know, he was so busy. My grandmother said one time he was in a meeting and the Grand Wizard said, "We hear there's going to be an 'N' word try to infiltrate our group. But I don't care how blue the eyes, how blond the hair, I can tell an 'N' word anywhere. And when we catch him, we're going to castrate him and hang him up for public display. And he was sitting there in the meeting looking at the man when he said that and they never found out it was him. She said, she said that you could see the stress of that life on his face. And she's sure that all of those experiences that he had to go through were really taking a toll on his life.

[Music]

Nicki Gonzales: He dies fairly early. He dies in 1938, I think it is, of a heart attack, after giving a speech. And, you know, a lot of people attribute that to the stress that he experienced having, you know, being a Black man in the KKK, in these meetings.

Tyler: The Klan of the 1920s started to implode around 1925, and it had receded back into the shadows of American politics by the 1930s.

Noel: At least some of the reasons for its demise were monetary.

Tyler: The cost of a Klan membership in Colorado was US\$10, which at the time was a considerable amount of money. Here's Linda Gordon:

Linda Gordon: When the Klan did decline, it was because its members were getting really sick and tired of just being soaked for money. I have seen letters when people say: "I feel like all the Klan ever does is ask me for more money."

Noel: To make matters worse, the Klan's charismatic leaders were being accused of corruption, alcohol consumption, and of using money from their members to finance their lavish lifestyles.

Tyler: And in Colorado Klan collapsed shortly after Grand Dragon John Galen Locke was arrested in 1925 for kidnapping and perjury.

Noel: There were some attempts to block the Klan's influence throughout Colorado. State Senators, some churches, and newspapers like the Catholic Register frequently voiced their concern. But Bob Goldberg says that the only town that effectively resisted the Klan was Colorado Springs.

Bob Goldberg: And it resisted the Klan because of its, the opposition that it created. Let me tell you, in contrast, opposition to the Klan in Denver, Colorado, was primarily a minority resistance

that is Catholics and Jews and African-Americans, and that had little sway with the vast white Protestant majority in Denver. But in Colorado Springs, you had the newspapers, Protestant ministers, leading officials all come out publicly against the Klan, which was a key difference.

Tyler: But just because the Klan itself collapsed as an organization didn't mean that its values suddenly disappeared. Here's Terri Gentry:

Terr Gentry: So just because their structural system was no longer in place, the people that supported and that ran it, were still out there, and they were still conducting bad behavior. They're still out there. And there are still people that are going to do everything they possibly can to make sure that you are contained and controlled. And that never stopped.

Noel: It's also important to remember that the second Klan wasn't focused solely on anti-Black activities. Part of the reason the Klan's message resonated with so many white, middle-class Coloradans at the time had to do with the fact that it allowed white Protestants to channel their much broader racist and anti-Catholic sentiments toward the Mexican American and Latino population.

Tyler: Here's Nicki Gonzales again.

Nicki Gonzales: I think the discrimination and racism toward the Latino population is both religious, so it's both because they were Catholic, but I think it's even more so because they're brown, and this is the time of eugenics. So classifying the different races was in vogue with some of the elite classes, and Mexicans, and even, you know, attitudes towards people south of the American border were that they were a different breed. They were a different class of people. They were inferior to white people.

Tyler: In the 1920s, eugenics was considered a state-of-the-art science. Loosely speaking, it's the practice of trying to determine and ensure genetic superiority based on hereditary traits.

Noel: And many universities and colleges required students to study eugenics.

Nicki Gonzales: And you see it also in politics. Even Teddy Roosevelt was a strong eugenicist, and he preached, you know, 'white suicide,' We are. He called it "race suicide" if white women don't start having babies more frequently, you know, we're going to be, they are going to be sort of outnumbered by all of these other races.

Noel: And the legacy of the Klan's bigotry continued on without them.

Terri Gentry: We've been fighting for our right in every aspect to vote, to live, to breathe, to move around, to be part of our community and the society. We still have to do that. That hasn't stopped.

Nicki Gonzales: Even my dad, he couldn't swim in certain pools, except on Sundays right before they drained them and cleaned them. And he grew up in Globeville. And yeah, yeah. So Globeville, and so he and his brothers would jump the fence at night and swim for free. You know, so yeah. This is who Denver is.

Terri Gentry: My dad was on the Denver Police Department and some of the mess that he had to deal with, trying to climb the ladder and his experience. One of the first experiences that he had when he went on the police department is he gave a white man a ticket and they called him in, with the man sitting there and told him: "Don't you ever pull a white person over and give him a ticket again," and tore up the ticket in his face. And then, when he was aspiring to be the chief of police, he made it to division chief and he aspired to be the chief of police and was told that

we already had a Black mayor. We already had a Black district attorney. And we Black fire chief, that's too much power in a Black man's hands. So they wouldn't give him that position when he should've.

Tyler: Even as people of color made their way into government and law enforcement in Colorado in the 1960s and 70s, institutionalized racism made it difficult for them to advance, and often challenged their allegiances.

Terri Gentry: We had the Black Panther organization in the 60s. That was a tough situation for many Black police officers, because they were caught in the middle of the police department wanting to enforce practices and policies against them. And you have the Black police officers kind of caught in the middle of understanding what they're fighting for, but their boss is telling them that they have to enforce certain practices.

Noel: Here's Ron Stallworth, the subject of Spike Lee's *BlacKKKlansman* in an interview I did with him back in 2015 remembering the conflicts he felt as the first Black detective to serve in the Colorado Springs Police Department in the 1970s.

Ron Stallworth: So here I am, face to face or literally a few feet away from Stokely Carmichael, one of the principal players of that time period when I was in my youth and I'm hearing him giving this usual talk like he gave back in those days, you know, literally seven years earlier. And at one point he was talking about, "We're going to have to pick up the gun. There's going to be a race war. And as Black people, we need to pick up the gun and be prepared to kill whitey and everything else." And the crowd started yelling "Right on!" and throwing up the Black Power fist. And I found myself caught up in it, and I jumped up out of my chair along with everyone else yelling "Right on!" you know, you know, giving the Black Power fist. And then it dawned on me,

What the hell are you doing? You're a police officer. You're supposed to be monitoring this stuff, not participating in it.

Tyler: Like Dr. Westbrook, Stallworth was eventually able to use his position of power to benefit the Black community, but it wasn't without struggle or risk.

Ron Stallworth: And I saw this ad in the classifieds is a Ku Klux Klan for information, and then there was a P.O. box. I had the bright idea to respond to the ad. I wrote a little note identifying myself as a white man who hated the direction the country was going in. Sound familiar? But I said I didn't like the direction our country was going in and that we needed to take it back. And I used the N-word a couple of times and we needed to reclaim our country.

Noel: Here's Theo Wilson again.

Theo Wilson: All three of us have had to figure out the best thing to do for our people, given the tools that we had to do it with. But we face different challenges due to the world that we lived in, and the world that we live in matters because it affects the expression of the same demon, you see what I'm saying? If that's the expression of it, right? Joseph Westbrook, what he went through, was literally Stapleton as mayor, you feel me? Like the chief of police is actually a Klansman. 'The Invisible Empire' is completely naked, and out front. Ron Stallworth dealt with a situation where they were kind of banished to the backwoods a little bit, but still very active and still very hateful and willing to do things. But they weren't exactly in the brunt naked seat of power like they was.

Tyler: Talking about the Klan's widespread presence in Colorado has at times been a taboo subject, and publicizing the ledgers has taken more than a century.

Noel: Bob Goldberg has seen a resurgence of interest in his book *Hooded Empire* since the George Floyd protests of 2020. And while he does think that the influence of the Klan in Colorado is a shameful chapter in our state's history, he doesn't think of it as an aberration or an anomaly. Here he is giving a talk about the KKK ledgers at History Colorado in 2021.

Bob Goldberg: Here, a minority seized power, while white Protestant majority either supported the Klan or acquiesced as bystanders and tolerated hooded authority and hooded aggressiveness.

Tyler: And here he is in our interview with him.

Bob: We usually deride these populists with a small 'p.' These populists, these people who join these right wing groups as deranged, or extreme, or abnormal, or psychologically unbalanced. But what those ledgers revealed was that the people who joined the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s in Denver were your next-door neighbor. Between 1/5 and 1/4 of the white Protestant male population in Denver, joined the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. They are not the sick people, or the deviants that we'd like to. We'd love to believe that these people are just crazy. But they're hardly crazy at all.

Tyler: And it's that idea that's been forcing many Americans to grapple with the foundational values of this country in ways that haven't previously been mainstream.

Noel: As part of this reckoning with the past, Denver recently renamed the neighborhood formerly known as Stapleton - which used to be named after Denver mayor Benjamin Staptleton, who was a Ku Klux Klan member.

Tyler: The name change was part of a years-long campaign. And in August of 2020, the neighborhood officially became known as “Central Park.”

Bob Goldberg: I believe that when you name a neighborhood after someone, or an airport after someone or you erect a statue, that person has got to exemplify the key virtues of the society. Those things we aspire to, those things we teach our children. And if those people don't aspire and represent those values, then we need to rethink how we honor and how we memorialize people and events.

Noel: Terri Gentry would like to see neighborhoods, streets and memorials dedicated to Black leaders like Dr. Joseph Westbrook.

Terri Gentry: But if we are, folks need to know the foundation that he put in place to make sure that human rights and equal rights and civil rights and women's rights and all of these things were on his plate. All that he was, he's always been a champion for justice. And in 200 years, we've got to figure out a way to make sure that people still say his name.

[Music]

Noel: Though the Ku Klux Klan's relevance as an organization has largely faded in America, white supremacy culture has not. Here's Sam Bock again talking about the Klan of the 1920s and today's white supremacist groups:

Sam Bock: We have Proud Boys marching on the Capital, espousing many of the same views. If you want to join racists, you know, anti-government, whatever organization online, it's not exactly difficult to find out where those things go. And, you know, they recruit online...

Noel: Theo Wilson didn't have to pass as white or use a body double to infiltrate the Klan. But what he found ONLINE was no less disturbing.

Theo Wilson: Well, my generation, they found a new place where they could hide behind avatars online and still come together. Because the way the computer was programmed, they was going to be lumped together regardless through echo chambers and algorithms. So in November of 2016, shortly after Trump got elected, I released a video on my page that I have made private since then, called "Warning to the Alt-right" detailing what I knew about them, what I learned, and what could possibly happen if, you know, they gained momentum. I, literally in that video predicted Charlottesville, which didn't happen until nine months later. So, I warned my community.

Tyler: Like Dr. Westbrook and Ron Stallworth before him, Theo Wilson is part of a tradition of Black men who've taken extraordinary measures to keep their communities safe.

Noel: Wilson got to meet Ron Stallworth in 2018.

Theo Wilson: It was me and Ron Stallworth at the premiere of *BlacKKKlansman* and he is someone who I admire, because I feel like what he did took a lot more courage than what I did, you know? I didn't feel like I was in danger because of what I did until 'The Talk' came out. Like I remember, it got a million views the first day and I was thrilled and terrified, at the exact same time.

Tyler: Wilson divides the types of commenters on his videos he received on his videos into two groups.

Theo Wilson: There was the camp of people who were absolutely vitriol-filled, hate mongers, right. Then there were guys who had perspectives, that were the honest conclusions of the environments that they lived in. They were honest. One of these guys is here to be incendiary. The other one is here to be inquisitive. Right... and that was the guy I was interested in having a conversation with. De-radicalization through conversation is one strategy, but it's not the only one. It is a strategy where I am best armed. I'm built to have interpersonal relations, conversations that are difficult and fruitful. But there's other consequences if we don't have those.

Noel: Nicki Gonzales:

Nicki Gonzales: In this moment of racial reckoning, as people like to call it, that we are in right now, if we can't even come to grips with our own, with the history of our own city and the roots of so many of the institutions and practices. I mean, you can't understand even the map of Denver looking at this very segregated housing that exists in Denver without, you know, understanding the racism that has kind of characterized our history.

Theo Wilson: I have been deeply interested in pre-Civil War America. Deeply interested. And a lot of the harshness of tone and rhetoric is similar to when it was back then. So the greatest good that could come from it, was that we all start having these conversations and grow the courage to have them hopefully face to face. So I think that what's most important is that, like, we see each other's humanity before it's too late.

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Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

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Noel: Our Assistant Producer is Maria Jose Maddox, who wrote this episode. And Luke Perkins is our intern.

Tyler: Special thanks to our transcribers for this season, Clint Carlson, Barry Levene, Ivy Martinez, and Angie Neslin. If you'd like to see a transcript of any of our episodes, either as a matter of accessibility, or because you'd like to use *Lost Highways* in your classroom, you can find them at historycolorado.org/losthighways.

Noel: Tyler Hill, my co-host, composed the music for this episode. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

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Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.