



ERA OF CHANGE, SHAME

1920 - 1929

The decade of the 1920s was a grand period in Indianapolis history — for the buildings. For people it was less gracious, especially if you were black or Catholic or if you spoke with a foreign accent. This was the decade of the Ku Klux Klan. But first, the buildings.

Around the Circle, older buildings vanished as a new generation took their place — the Guarantee (1922) and Test (1925) on the southwest quadrant, and the Columbia Club (1924-25) on the northeast quadrant.

To entice the American Legion to pick Indianapolis as its national headquarters, the city agreed to build a war memorial and office building. It set about preparing a five-block site between Pennsylvania and Meridian streets, with Central Library and the U.S. Courthouse serving as bookends to the north and south.

Many of today's landmarks were completed between 1926 and 1929. Among them: the Scottish Rite Cathedral, the Indiana Theatre, the Madame Walker Building and several buildings at the state fairgrounds. Three city high schools also were built in the 1920s — Shortridge, Crispus Attucks and Cathedral's former home on North Meridian Street.

Farther out, Butler University moved to its current campus from Irvington, and Jordan Hall and Hinkle Fieldhouse were built in 1928.

The Gothic-style Tabernacle Presbyterian Church (1923) was built at 34th Street and Central Avenue, and St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church (1929) went up at 42nd and Central.

But history is more about people than buildings, and people are generally less grand than the landmarks they erect. Indiana in the 1920s also saw a boom in membership in the Ku Klux Klan.

In the aftermath of a world war, people remained suspicious of anything foreign. Indianapolis, a city that prided itself on being 100 percent American, may have been ripe for the Klan's warped message. Certainly the city was unlucky that the Klan's most potent messenger of the time chose to make Indianapolis his home base.

D. C. Stephenson, a salesman from Oklahoma, arrived in Evansville and quickly became involved in the growing Klan movement in Indiana. He re-located to Indianapolis in 1922 and was named Grand Dragon of Indiana and 22 other states.

In the May primary of 1924, the KKK emerged as the dominant party, and on

May 24, an estimated 25,000 Klansmen, women and children gathered at the State Fairgrounds. Later the same day, Klan members assembled at 14th Street and Capitol Avenue for a parade. Most of the marchers wore masks, while some wore hoods and robes. The marchers numbered some 6,500, according to news reports of the time, while a crowd of 75,000 to 100,000 lined the streets and filled the windows of buildings along the march route.

For much of the 1920s the Klan would be the dominant force in Indianapolis politics. Candidates openly supported by the Klan won the mayor's office, the City Council and the Board of School Commissioners in 1925. Klan-supported candidates also controlled the state legislature and governor's office.

The Klan's power began to decline after Stephenson was convicted of murder in 1925, and several Klan members were forced out of office by a series of scandals.

Into this unwelcome atmosphere, blacks from the South continued to migrate. During the 1920s the African-American population in the city grew from 34,678 to 43,967. But hardening segregation kept most of them within a few neighborhoods that lay to the north and west of Downtown.

When middle-class blacks sought better housing outside these areas, they ran into a number of roadblocks. In 1926, the City Council adopted an ordinance requiring blacks to first get the permission of white residents before moving onto a block. It was declared unconstitutional, but efforts to restrict housing choices for blacks continued.

In the midst of this repression, Indiana Avenue blossomed as a town within a town, a place where black residents ran their own groceries, bakeries, hardware and clothing stores. There were professional offices next to hole-in-the-wall dance clubs, and jazz joints where many of the great musicians of that era came to play. The Madame Walker Theatre opened in 1927 on Indiana Avenue at North and West streets. Named for Madame C.J. Walker, who had built her fortune selling cosmetics made for black women, the Walker Building and its Coffee Pot restaurant became the centerpiece of life on the Avenue.

Also in 1927, Attucks High School opened as the segregated school for blacks. Despite the unfairness of its purpose, segregation produced a concentration of talent at Attucks that became legendary in the black community long after the barriers had fallen. Although not as grand architecturally as some of the other buildings of the 1920s, Attucks has come to be regarded by many as one of the most historically significant landmarks in the city.

Opposite page: The Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Civil War veterans, held several reunions in Indianapolis, such as this one in September 1920.