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Simkins' own words dishonorable

BY THOMAS D. RUSSELL

Friday, July 2, 2010

Col. Charles W. Stockell, a D-Day veteran, argues in his June 18 letter to the editor that the Reconstruction-era Klan was a righteous, justified response to the "actions and policies of the dishonorable Yankee forces of Reconstruction." The Klan's goal, he claims, was "to save Southern women and children from financial destruction and starvation." Belonging to the Klan during Reconstruction was, Col. Stockell asserts, "honorable and worthy."

Col. Stockell responded to Diane Knich's June 2 Post and Courier story about a University of Texas dormitory named for William Stewart Simkins. My historical paper started a controversy about the dorm.

Rev. Joseph A. Darby took issue in these pages with Col. Stockell's view of the Klan. Rev. Darby argues that KKK founder Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, a hero to Col. Stockell, was a "racist butcher, not an honorable and worthy man." Rev. Darby notes that the Klan's "primary tactic was what we call terrorism today."

Who's right? Was there a good Klan? Prof. Simkins' own words provide the answer.

In 1916, Simkins published "Why the Ku Klux" in the Texas alumni magazine. Originally a speech, the document is Simkins's Florida Klan autobiography.

Nowhere does Simkins suggest that his goal was financial protection of women and children. Simkins writes that "to meet this saturnalia of crime and insolence; to suppress this volcano on which our women and children were nightly sleeping . . . arose the 'Invisible Empire.'" Saturnalia, an ancient Roman festival, temporarily reversed the roles of master and slave. Simkins clung to the racial subordination and deference of slavery days.

The threat of sexual competition was a big concern for Simkins. He claimed "white women could not appear on the streets without escort."

Simkins admitted violence -- always against freed slaves. A white woman claimed "she had been insulted by a negro." Simkins "seized a barrel stave lying near the hotel door and whipped that darkey down the street." Simkins was a masked night-rider. "The immediate effect upon the negro was wonderful, the flitting to and fro of masked horses and faces struck terror to the race."

He lured African-American state Sen. Robert Meacham to his office with plans to beat him with a stick; fortunately, Sen. Meacham sensed danger and escaped.

Simkins and fellow Klansmen robbed a train of rifles intended for the militia. He wrote: "I'm not ashamed to confess my share in this train robbing incident." Congressional testimony revealed that night-riding Klansmen terrorized freed blacks with the stolen rifles.

In Madison County, one of several under Simkins's command, Klansmen murdered 25 people during a three-year period. An Edgefield, S.C., historian recently wrote to me: "I encourage you to consider the context of your Confederate soldier who witnessed untold horrors of war, followed by total defeat and occupation of his homeland by enemy soldiers who, by force of bayonets, turned the economic and social structure upside down."

I considered this thoughtful question and compared Simkins with his peers. In January 1861, Simkins and three other Citadel cadets fired upon the Star of the West as the vessel attempted to restock Fort Sumter. Two of the men died during the war. The third, George Edward Haynsworth, returned to Sumter after the war and lived honorably as a lawyer and magistrate.

After the war, Simkins chose a life of dishonor. The historical evidence does not support Col. Stockell's vision of the Reconstruction-era Klan. Rev. Darby better understands the historical record. Simkins was a criminal and a terrorist. He and his fellow Klansmen were murderers unable to accept social and political change that empowered freed slaves. "Honorable and worthy" men do not wear masks and operate at night.

Thomas D. Russell, J.D., Ph.D., is a professor of law at the University of Denver. As an historian, his scholarly work has focused on slavery and the desegregation and integration of American universities.