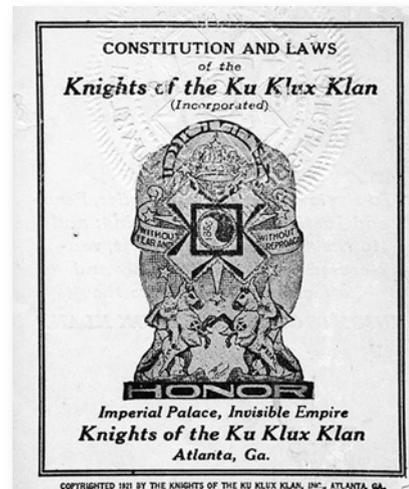
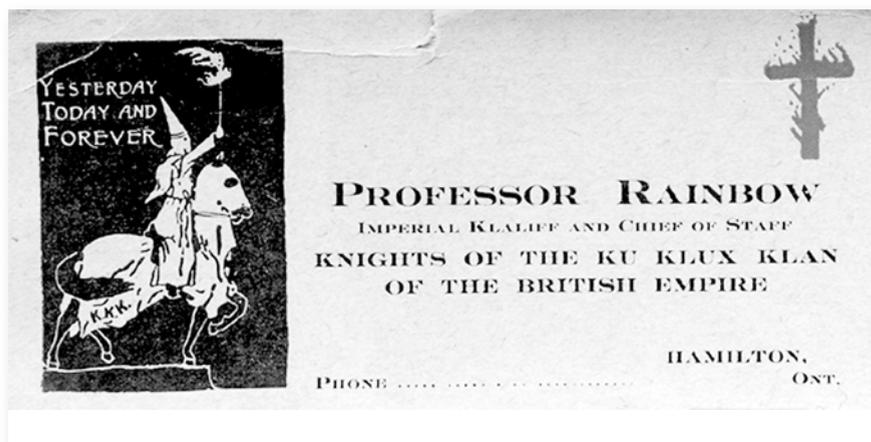


# Kook, 'Krook' or Klansman?

George Matheson makes a surprising discovery in his attic and traces the history of how it ended up there

All images from author's collection



LEFT: Rainbow's Calling Card. RIGHT: Front Page of KKK Constitution Book (1924).]

**W**hite hoods, burning crosses, tar-and-feathering — all are associated with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and its notorious American history as a violent, racist organization.

So imagine the surprise and dismay on finding, up in the attic of our home, this KKK business card, complete with prototypic images of a Klansman and a burning cross, which belonged to a “Professor Rainbow, Imperial Klaliff” who resided in Hamilton, Ontario — my hometown.

And, along with it was a small leather-bound KKK membership book (dated 1922) embossed with the same name “Rainbow” at a Wilmington, Delaware address and containing a copy of

the *Constitution and Laws of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*.

My family, as far as I know, wasn't racist; so, how had this ended up in our attic and who was “Professor Rainbow?”

The quest for answers was convoluted and confusing at times; akin to trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing and no idea what the final picture was to look like.

A tattered ledger, also found in the attic, filled with notes, lengthy handwritten poems and news clippings, was the source of a few essential pieces — including the fellow's full name: Upton T. Rainbow.

Such an uncommon name appears only once in Canadian censuses — as being of English

birth and a lodger in St John's Ward, Toronto in 1891. Over 40 years later, Upton T. Rainbow reappears in the 1935 Hamilton Directory where he is listed as a salesman and living with a Mrs. Rainbow. Again he shows up in the 1945 Hamilton Voters List as retired. But there is no sign of him in the decades in-between to describe his life or explain the KKK connection.

Delving into his English roots uncovered his birth on 3 February 1867 in Shipston-On-Stour, a small working village in south Worcestershire. His parents, John Rainbow, a tanner's labourer, and Jane Upton, had married on 25 July 25 1841 and had six children, Upton being the second youngest. The whole

family shows up in the 1871 Census but, by 1881, only the father, Upton and his younger sister Martha, are recorded. Death records report that his mother died on 4 January 1878. It's likely that John couldn't care for a family of six and the older children either entered a trade or went into domestic service. The 14 year old Upton worked as a grocer's porter (a delivery boy.) In March 1888, at age 21 and alone, he sailed on the transatlantic steamship Sardinian, from Liverpool to Montreal, with his final destination being Toronto.

But his stay in Canada appears to have been brief; the prospect of wealth in America having drawn him, like thousands of others, across the border.

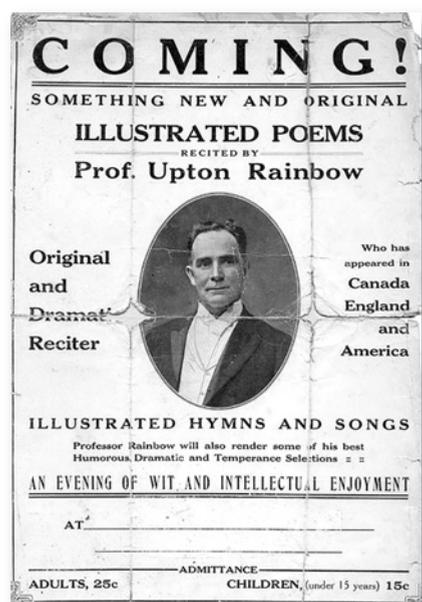
US records for 1900 show him as a "picture agent," married and living in Monroe County, Ohio. A newspaper clipping from the January 22, 1911 edition of the *Washington Post*, reports Upton "plunging headlong into a culvert, falling about 30 feet," and identifies him as an assistant deputy head of the *Modern Woodmen of America*, a fraternal benefit society that sold life insurance and annuities. Later, US business directories list him in Baltimore (1913), Wilmington Delaware (1917 and 1921), and Dayton Ohio (1925).

Curiously, the 1919 Wilmington Directory lists a "Nellie Rainbow" as the widow of Upton. However, a tangential search uncovered a West Virginia Death Notice of 27 September 1927 for Nellie Rainbow (dob 1864), then identified as the "spouse of Upton T Rainbow." Considered dead in 1919, he was very much alive and

married to Nellie in 1927. Strangely, the Marriage Register for London, Ontario records that, on 7 December 1925, he married Elsie Christine Edminson, an immigrant from Liverpool. She lived with Upton in Hamilton until her death in 1948.

Who was this man who moved about so often, beginning in England, immigrating to Canada, living and working in the US, and ending up in Hamilton, Ontario?

Rainbow was a 'talker' — a smooth talker — it would seem. In his tattered ledger he notes that, even as a young lad of 10 in England, he won first prize in an elocution competition.



Poster for Rainbow's story-telling presentation.

So, by day, he used this skill to peddle insurance on commission for *the Woodsmen* while, by night, he was "Professor Rainbow — Elocutionist, Monologist and Dramatic Reciter." (In those days, prior to the growth of movies, storytellers were a popular form of evening entertainment.) The audiences

for whom he performed were mostly religious and fraternal organizations and, according to his notes included: "Chapels, Churches, Opera Houses, Town Halls, Asylums ... The Masons, The Ancient Order of Foresters, Order of the Golden Seal... (even) The Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes." While these presentations would have provided extra income, they also delivered contacts useful to his insurance business.

As these jigsaw pieces came together, the skeleton of a life took form, but there was little by which to understand the man, and nothing so far about the Klansman.

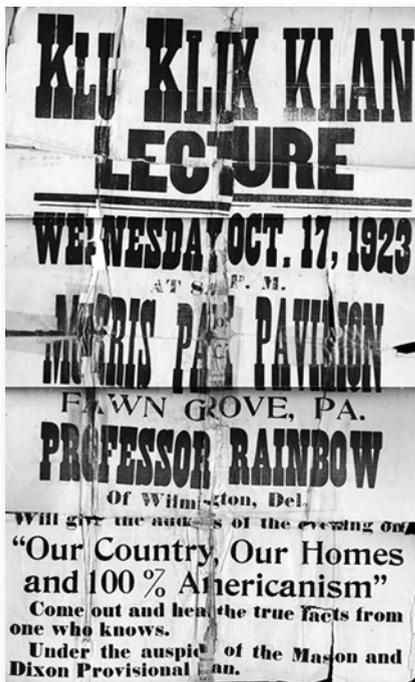
## The Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan was formed in the southern United States by white supremacists seeking to limit the political and social advances made by the newly emancipated Blacks during the Civil War and Reconstruction. However, after five violent years in which whites were often targeted, the arrest and conviction of over 1,000 Klansmen by the federal government in 1870-1871 brought the organization to a swift end.

However, in 1915, the motion picture *The Birth of a Nation* was released. The film depicting hooded Klansmen protecting southern womanhood from hordes of freed slaves and Yankee predators, enjoyed an enthusiastic reception. One of its fans, William Joseph Simmons, a failed Methodist minister, sometime preacher, teacher and garter salesman, was an incorrigible joiner of fraternal orders, one of which was the *Woodsmen*, for which he sold memberships in Atlanta, Georgia. In

November 1915, Simmons and a band of friends announced the resurrection of the Klan by burning a cross on a mountain outside Atlanta. While Simmons encountered difficulties in making a living selling memberships in his Klan organization, a clever public relations man, Edward Young Clarke and his partner Elizabeth Tyler, came up with a way to make it exceedingly profitable.

Employing effective publicity (including cross-burnings and hooded rides), enthusiastic salesmanship and appeals to issues of race and religion, the new Klan spread quickly across the United States. In less than one year there were 1,100 organizers in the field selling memberships.



KKK lecture poster, 1923.

By 1923, with the market flooded in the US, Clarke and Young cast their eyes on Ontario as an attractive territory for expansion-minded Klansmen. And here Rainbow appears again. A



The Hamilton Herald headline of February 25, 1927.

dilapidated poster for a public lecture in 1923 casts Rainbow as one of these early entrepreneurs.

Soon, a Toronto office was opened modelled on the American version with its own Imperial Wizard, Imperial Klaliff and Imperial Kligrapp. But dissension amongst the leadership over money quickly developed and J.H. Hawkins, the Imperial Klaliff, set up a rival Klan organization called the *Ku Klux Klan of the British Empire*. From newspapers at the time, it is evident that both organizations campaigned for membership including demonstrations and cross-burnings but, as the *Welland Tribune-Telegraph* put it at the time, the Klan's main goal was to promote "a scheme to sell cotton nightgowns to boobs." While the general membership may have been sincere in their motives, the leadership came from the ranks of travelling salesmen, confidence artists, and opportunists generally. And Rainbow was one of these.

On February 25, 1927, *The Hamilton Herald* headline ran: "Former Imperial Wizard of the KKK Here Guilty of Theft." Rainbow had collected fees for membership in the British

Empire Klan but refused to hand them over, claiming that he deserved the commission (\$5.50/member) and needed the money "to live." He was convicted and sent to the city jail. Interestingly, when asked by the magistrate of what he was a 'professor,' Rainbow replied: "Of elocution."

Around this time, 'hooligan activities' were bringing negative attention to the Klan leading one newspaper to declare it "a public nuisance." And having failed to establish itself in Ontario, it was, by the late 1920s, quickly on the decline. As for Rainbow, he was "banished from the Klan" (although he claimed to have resigned) and he returned to peddling insurance. In 1950, he died virtually penniless and my grandfather, his Baptist minister, was left the task of burying him and disposing of his chattels.

Nothing of Rainbow, the supposed "Klansman," remained after his death except for the few books and papers — where else for my grandfather to put them other than in the attic. ✚

GEORGE MATHESON is a regular contributor to *Family Chronicle* and *Internet Genealogy Magazines*.