

Chapter 1

MOVIE NIGHT

The Gayety Burlesque on Yonge Street offered the Sporting Widows Ladies' Band to entertain Toronto audiences in September 1915. Up the street, Loews Theatre featured high-class vaudeville acts starring the McDonald Trio, Jack Taylor, Hallan & Hayes, Cook & Stevens and more. The Hippodrome at City Hall Square had three shows daily with "unique and complete photo-plays and feature film attractions." But over at the prestige-laden Royal Alexandra Theatre on King Street, something completely different was on offer. The display ads blared:

*Eighth Wonder of the World, Took 8 Months to Produce.
18,000 People. 3,000 Horses. Cost \$560,000. The Basil
Corporation Presents D.W. Griffith's The BIRTH of a
NATION. The Most Stupendous Dramatic Spectacle the Brain
of Man has yet Visioned and Revealed. Night Prices 50c to
\$1.50. All Matinees 50c to \$1.00.*

The ideas and images of the Ku Klux Klan came to Canada in September 1915 through the new medium of silent film. For the next decade, the spectacle of *The Birth of A Nation* nurtured an organization dedicated to white racial supremacy, the suppression of Black people, Jews, Catholics, Asians, Chinese, eastern Europeans and just about anybody who looked, sounded or seemed different from the white Protestant majority in Canada

and the United States. The trend continued throughout the century that followed, with exploitation of new media of all kinds (film, radio, television, Internet) coming to define how hate was projected, narrated, organized and delivered by the Ku Klux Klan — an organization foreign to Canada but one that found fertile soil to take root.

But in 1915, only a year into the national trauma of the First World War, with its slaughter and sorrows, apprehensive Canadians welcomed the diversion offered by the new moving picture coming out of the United States. *The Birth of A Nation* opened in theatres across the country that fall, drawing crowds everywhere. And everywhere the advertising meticulously prepared by Hollywood publicity teams lauded the “Eighth Wonder of the World.”

The reception at the Royal Alexandra in Toronto was repeated at Vancouver’s Main Street Avenue Theatre and Montreal’s theatres during that looming fall of 1915.¹ Crowds lined up around the block to buy tickets. There were continuous showings for weeks on end. The film’s artistic and technical innovations animated discussions in the street and filled columns of newsprint.

“The features of the first part are the battle scenes, especially that showing the dash of the Confederate troops for the trenches of the Federals, which might suggest the trench warfare in Flanders during the present war,” critic Edwin Parkhurst wrote in the *Globe* the day after the film opened in Toronto.² “So great has been the success of this attraction that it is not always possible to accommodate the crowds,” marvelled Parkhurst. “A line of intending purchasers of seats is at the box office throughout each day.”³

White Canadians in particular couldn’t get enough of the story depicting the aftermath of the Confederate states’ defeat. The United States Civil War continued to be a living presence a half-century after the conflict that killed more than six hundred thousand Americans and devastated the life and economy of the southern states. Reunions of American Civil War veterans, including those from the Confederacy, were regularly reported in the Canadian media, particularly around the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s end in 1915.⁴ The Confederacy had had many Canadian supporters in the 1860s, and their children and grandchildren flocked to see *The Birth of A Nation*.

In Toronto, local police magistrate Colonel George Denison, never shy about seeking publicity for his life and adventures, attended the 1916 reunion of the United Confederate Veterans association in Birmingham, Alabama. The *Globe* newspaper was happy to provide a platform for his southern travels.⁵ Denison had a personal link with Confederate officers who had operated undercover in Canada during the Civil War.⁶

The Royal Alexandra's manager, long-time Toronto entertainment entrepreneur Lawrence (Lol) Solmon, saw the crowds, saw the opportunity and paid the next scheduled act to stay away so he could extend the movie's run into the autumn. Lol didn't like moving pictures himself and rarely booked them into the up-scale Royal Alex, but he knew good business when he saw it.

What was the attraction? There was the novelty of a full-length motion picture that ran more than two hours, a bold innovation at the time. There was the drama of the images that showed Atlanta, Georgia, burning at the hands of the northern Union Army, the escape of refugees from the city and the assassination of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln by a Confederate sympathizer barely a month after the end of the war in April 1865. Flaming fiery crosses ignited the screen even though they had never been a feature of the real Klan in the 1860s.

The movie told the story of defeated Confederates who terrorized newly freed Black people throughout the southern United States, riding into their communities at night dressed in white robes and hoods. They sought, so the myth went, "revenge" for the defeated Confederacy.

In fact, the violent terror unleashed by white paramilitary groups came in response to progress made by Black people in the years following the war. In the devastated southern states just after the war, Black former slaves were turned out of the plantations and left with little means to pursue new lives built on their status as free citizens. Remarkably, they took full advantage of all opportunities and managed to make significant gains within a short period — pursuing education, starting businesses, voting, running for and being elected to public office. The displaced white southern elites — plantation owners, political leaders, merchants — bitterly resented all these signs of progress, as the recently enslaved population asserted its humanity and began to take its place as full participants in society.

They also resented the “carpetbaggers” who swooped in to take advantage of political and commercial confusion. The despised carpetbaggers were northern opportunists who flooded the south looking to make fortunes by buying or leasing once-prosperous cotton plantations and other distressed businesses. They were so-called because they were believed to have thrown their few belongings into luggage made from cheap carpet material and headed south at the news of the Confederacy’s defeat.

The so-called “scalawags” were seen as even worse — traitors to the Confederacy. They were generally white southerners who supported the Republican Party — the party that emancipated the slaves — thereby depriving the south of its cheap labour and the basis for its prosperous cotton-based economy, not much of which was left after the war.

Criminality of all kinds flourished in the absence of effective law enforcement. The occupying Union armies were focused on dismembering any last forms of organized resistance with little effort made to police the peace. The white southern population resented the occupying northern soldiers and a suddenly free Black population that only a few months before had been slaves of the Confederacy.

The rise of democratically elected Black officials in new state and local governments threatened the old white authority structures. In late 1865, bands of demobilized Confederate soldiers joined together to terrorize the newly enfranchised Black population and thus maintain white control over them, using a combination of violent threats and actual acts of violence. They called themselves the Ku Klux Klan for reasons that remained obscure — Greek myths, Scottish rites, British Israelism,⁷ all these and more served over time as explanations for the peculiar name.

For more than two years in Kentucky (where the Klan had been started) and neighbouring states, the Klan inflicted its brand of criminal brutality on Black citizens, scalawags, carpetbaggers and anybody else in their way. Finally, even some southern whites complained that things had gone “too far” under the Klan’s reign of terror. Responding to calls for restraint from the white population, Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former Confederate general and the Klan’s first grand wizard, formally disbanded the group in 1868. However, remnants continued to operate for years across the south, and a half-century later the Ku Klux Klan and its imitators provided the inspiration for *The Birth of A Nation*.

The movie thrilled Canadians who had little to celebrate and much to mourn as the reality of sacrifice grew more bitter heading into the wartime winter of 1915–16. The country was still absorbing news of the heavy losses its soldiers had taken in the spring of 1915 at Ypres, Belgium, when the Germans unleashed poison chlorine gas on the Canadians. Despite terrible casualties, they had held the line. The bloody battle of Festubert had followed. And now, the 2nd Canadian Division had just arrived in France for what promised to be a grim and deadly winter in the trenches.

Diversions from the war news were popular. And so popular was *The Birth of A Nation* that a second run opened at Yonge Street's Massey Hall on Christmas Day of 1915 "with a matinee and then twice daily."⁸ The same thing happened in Vancouver and at theatres across the country.

The almost exclusively white crowds went wild. "The music and the gradual development of the play stimulated great interest in the audience which found an outlet in spontaneous applause at every appearance of the rescuing Ku Klux Klan riders towards the latter end of play," intoned the admiring Edwin Parkhurst, whose specialty was, admittedly, classical music.⁹

White Torontonians were not alone in their enthusiasm. Return engagements were booked in cities and small towns across the country. In New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, for example, the Roseland Theatre brought the show back on an annual basis. The British-born Parkhurst never failed to remind his readers that "this is an exact replica of the production now playing at the Liberty Theatre in New York, where it is in its seven hundred performances."

The film's second run continued into January 1916 in Toronto and across North America. It returned in March 1917 as the Royal Alex's Lol Solmon acceded to popular demand by booking yet another engagement "of that greatest of all Griffith's spectacles."¹⁰ The film came back again in late December 1917, the fifth time in Toronto and this time at Massey Hall with predictions that the film would "go on forever."¹¹

And so it seemed. *The Birth of A Nation* was indeed the entertainment phenomenon of the era. The film was the work of American movie maker David Wark Griffith. He had started in the embryonic American west coast film industry early in the century as a bit player and writer, eventually moving on to technical production and directing. *The Birth of A Nation* was his breakthrough movie.

Griffith took as the inspiration for his new film a book and play called *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, a white southerner who harboured a nostalgic hankering for his romanticized image of the old way of life in an idealized south. Dixon's father had been a member of the original Ku Klux Klan immediately after the Civil War, and the organization featured prominently in his book and play. As a young child, Dixon witnessed the lynching of a Black man by the Klan, and his memory of this event found its way into *The Clansman*.¹² The book had a receptive audience, as did the play that followed based on the same story.

The stage play toured America in 1905 and 1906, raising racial tensions with its depiction of threatened white womanhood, valiant Klansmen riding to the rescue and restoration of natural (i.e., white-controlled) order. The play's scheduled appearance in Atlanta in October 1906 came in the wake of September race riots sparked by the rumoured rapes of white women in and around the city. More than a dozen Black people were killed in the ensuing violence. The play was seen as a further incitement to racial unrest, and the performance was postponed until later in the year.

The Hollywood opening of the film version of *The Birth of A Nation* at Clune's Auditorium in early February 1915 was accompanied by all the lurid publicity the burgeoning film industry could muster. The New York opening at the Liberty Theatre a few weeks later involved a similar spectacle.¹³ Ushers were dressed as Confederate soldiers, usherettes as southern belles. Actors decked out in white robes and hoods stood silent guard on horseback outside the theatre.

In the settled environment of Los Angeles, the night riders of Hollywood cut a theatrical swath that gave the film a profile for future sales. This was noteworthy at the time, but Hollywood being Hollywood, industry attention soon moved on to the next novelty and sensation. The Atlanta opening of the film ten months later however — in the heart of the Old Confederacy — was a whole different story.

A decade after *The Clansman* played in Atlanta, racial tensions in Georgia lingered and had even sharpened. By the time the film version opened in Atlanta in 1915, it had been shown in dozens of cities across the Old Confederacy, pumping awareness and white pride in its wake.¹⁴

The arrival of the film inspired William Simmons of Atlanta, a born salesman and inveterate joiner of fraternal organizations, to act on his dream of creating a twentieth-century version of the Klan. Like Dixon, Simmons presented as a tall, clean-shaven, two-hundred-pound example of viral Methodist manhood. He was born in rural Alabama in 1880. His father, like Dixon's father, had been a member of the original Ku Klux Klan. Unlike his father, who was a physician, Simmons aspired to a military career, and he joined the First Alabama Volunteer Infantry at the outset of the ten-week Spanish-American War in the spring of 1898. He never rose above the rank of private in the brief conflict, which saw limited fighting in Cuba and the Philippines as the Spanish Empire collapsed. In later years, his military service provided a valued selling point, but Simmons found he simply couldn't abide the military life.

Over the next decade, Simmons became a history teacher, then a garter salesman and then a travelling Methodist minister following a circuit through rural Alabama. Reuben Maury, a future Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist, described Simmons as a Methodist meeting shouter "and what-not besides."¹⁵ In these few words, Maury captured the essence of fundamentalist Methodist ministries that encouraged participants to shout out during services ("Praise the Lord!" "Hallelujah!" "Amen") and engage in the "jerks" (convulsions of stamping, clapping, moaning, trembling and crying as evidence of religious ecstasy).

Simmons found he had a talent for organizing fraternal organizations. He saw social merit in these organizations, which brought (mostly) men together in groups to share common ideas and goals. The early twentieth century in the United States saw a proliferation of such groups, much like the Rotarians, Kinsmen and Civitans of later eras. They included the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, the Masons, the Knights Templar, the Heralds of Liberty and the Woodsmen of the World. Simmons was a member of them all, and more. By the time he moved to Atlanta, before the First World War, Simmons was a paid organizer with the Woodsmen of the World with the honorary title of "Colonel" in the organization. He would carry the rank with him for the rest of his life notwithstanding his modest career as a private in the First Alabama Infantry.

Recovering from a serious car accident in 1911, Simmons had time to

think about the regalia, the ceremonies and the opportunities that a revived Ku Klux Klan would provide for an accomplished fraternal organizer like himself. The caustic Maury again:

*Simmons dreamed of a mighty and militant lodge which should in some manner repeat and outdo the noble deeds of the Ku Klux Klan of 1866, organized by southern white men to blackjack the carpet-bagger into decency and frighten foul Yankee notions of equality out of the head of the negro.*¹⁶

Simmons put together a business plan. He acquired a Georgia state charter and began recruiting in the Atlanta area. His efforts piggybacked on the advance publicity for *The Birth of A Nation*. Riders dressed in Klan uniforms rode horses through Atlanta streets to advertise the film's opening. Advertisements in local papers announced the return of "The World's Greatest Secret Social Patriotic Fraternal Beneficiary Order."¹⁷ The ad carried a sketch drawn by Simmons of a hooded horseman brandishing a flaming torch. "A High Class order for men of intelligence and character," promised the advertising copy.

Meanwhile, the thirty-five-year-old Simmons began fleshing out the myth and the rituals that would animate "future members." The swearing-in ceremony relied on bibles, flags, flames and an oath:

I swear that I will most zealously and valiantly shield and preserve, by any and all justifiable means and methods, the sacred constitutional rights and privileges of free public schools, free speech, free press, separation of church and state, liberty, white supremacy, just laws and the pursuit of happiness, against any encroachment, of any nature, by any person or persons, political party or parties, religious sect or people, native, naturalized, or foreign of any race, color, creed, lineage, or tongue whatsoever.

Reuben Maury summed it up as follows:

*Bound by this oath a Klansman could hate the negroes if he lived down south, the Catholics in all the cities, the foreigners in the industrial towns, the I.W.W. [the Industrial Workers of the World union — the so-called Wobblies] in the West, the Jews in New York and the bootleggers and harlots of whom he was not a personal friend anywhere.*¹⁸

It was indeed an all-round, spare none declaration of dyspepsia and prejudice that served its intended purpose of attracting Protestants predisposed to hate somebody — Catholics, Jews, unions, Blacks, Asians.

On the margins of the film's opening, Simmons organized a cross burning on Stone Mountain, a landmark of the Confederacy overlooking downtown Atlanta, to mark the launch of his new organization. The fiery cross, a minor aspect of the original Klan's existence, became fixed in the public mind as a symbol of the group. It also became a very real tool in the new group's arsenal of terror. In the years immediately after *The Birth of A Nation* was shown in Atlanta, the revived Ku Klux Klan burned down five Black churches in the state of Georgia alone.

Out of legitimate concern for racial peace, a handful of American states and cities banned *The Birth of A Nation*. The newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the fight against the film. The NAACP's predecessor group, the Niagara Movement, had its founding meeting at Fort Erie, Ontario, near Niagara Falls in 1905. The delegates had travelled across the border after they were refused meeting space in Buffalo, New York. In the years since, with leadership drawn from the Black community and support from progressive whites, the NAACP became the institutional voice of Black America. Without a national organization like the NAACP to speak on its behalf at the time, the Black community in Canada relied on local groups, organizations and prominent individuals to fight for fair and equitable treatment.

The Birth of a Nation arrived in a Canada where, like in the United States, racism, bigotry and prejudice were ingrained and widespread. Schools in Ontario and Nova Scotia were divided along racial lines. So-called "coon bands" of white musicians in Black face were considered popular entertainment. Itinerant Black minstrel troupes were a favourite. Touring Black

baseball teams drew large crowds. As historian Robin Winks recounts, Black people were barred from the Boy Scouts and the YMCA in Windsor, Ontario, although in Toronto they were free to join both. In many small towns, Black people were welcome in community orchestras, but in Owen Sound, Ontario, they were not; they created their own separate orchestra.

The greatest fear of Canada's white legislators was not Black immigration from Africa or the Caribbean, but from the United States. Reports began circulating in 1910 that Black settlers from the American south were looking to move onto free land in the Canadian west. Conservative Member of Parliament William Thoburn from the eastern Ontario riding of Lanark North warned of the inevitable influx of thousands of Black Americans if even a few hundred were allowed to take up land. "Would it not be preferable to preserve for the sons of Canada the lands they propose to give to n-----s?" he asked the House of Commons.¹⁹ In the end, Privy Council Order 1911-1324 was promulgated by the federal cabinet in August 1911 under the authority of the 1910 *Immigration Act*. The administrative order barred from Canada "any immigrants belonging to the Negro race, which is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada."²⁰

This kind of targeted racism was not an exception. Venerable Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, expelled fifteen Black medical students in 1918 after "military hospital soldiers and patients in the community objected to receiving care from Black students."²¹ In Edmonton in 1924, the city commissioner tried to ban Black residents from all parks and swimming pools, only to have the ban overturned by city council. In Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1915, all restaurants and theatres were closed to Black patrons. In some places, Black citizens held public office freely, while in others they were told not to even run for public office. Barbers in Saint John, Edmonton and Victoria refused to cut Black customers' hair, but in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal they did. In Halifax, Black military veterans were buried in segregated plots in Camp Hill Cemetery. The Palace Theatre in Windsor, Ontario, placed Black customers in a segregated section dubbed the "Crows Nest."²² In short, Canadian racism was rife and ubiquitous though inconsistently applied.

British justice — and Canada's elite saw the country as an integral part of Britain's empire — supposedly protected the rights of all. The British

Empire had outlawed slavery in 1835 after two centuries of promoting and protecting the institution of trade in human beings. Therefore, this group argued that if flaws in Canadian society led to discrimination, they were the exception rather than the rule, notwithstanding that mostly white, mostly English-speaking figures held virtually all positions of power. Successful citizens from minority groups were held up as models of integration and evidence of the benign governance of British/Canadian institutions.

The arrival of *The Birth of A Nation* provoked resistance and action from Canada's Black communities scattered across the country. A few weeks after the film arrived in Toronto in 1915, a small group of Black demonstrators complained about the film's negative portrayal of Black people.²³ They lobbied the Premier of Ontario and members of the provincial legislature against allowing the film, but these efforts failed. In Ottawa, the film was shown at the Central Canada Exhibition in mid-September 1915, but the *Ottawa Citizen* was quick to denounce the screening since its intent was clearly to "excite prejudice against, if not hatred of, the negro race."²⁴ In June 1918, when the film was about to make its fourth run in Calgary, a delegation of Black residents asked the city to ban it. "The delegates argue that the play holds the Negro up to ridicule," reported a local newspaper. The city did nothing, nor did the Alberta cinema censors.²⁵

The Ontario film censor board also refused to ban the film because, said chief censor George Armstrong, the film had "no objectionable features from the national standpoint." In the board's view, the film was all about "one period of history in the United States, with which period neither England nor Canada had any part." The censor's lack of historical awareness raised no fuss at all from the wider white community. The film continued to pull crowds into the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto.

The story was different in Montreal and points east. Montreal was historically sensitive to issues of language, race and religion, with its cosmopolitan mix of francophones, anglophones, immigrants and refugees from around the world. With a Black population drawn mostly from the United States and the Caribbean, a film expressing racist views could not be ignored, particularly in a city where Black residents could legally be denied access to theatres.²⁶ The city's Black population had institutions and organizations in place to protect its interests, including churches and unions.

The Birth of A Nation was scheduled to open at the Princess Theatre on Ste-Catherine Street in late September 1915. A meeting organized by the primarily Black Union Congregational Church passed a resolution on September 23 condemning D.W. Griffith and his film. The same night, a fire broke out at the Princess Theatre. The roof was destroyed along with the top gallery and theatrical sets. Police speculated this was a case of arson by someone opposed to showing the film.²⁷ Faulty wiring was the more prosaic explanation for the fire.²⁸ Without access to the burned-out Princess, the film was shown at the nearby Orpheum and St. Denis theatres. It attracted the same crowds as in other cities in the face of clear disapproval of local Black leaders.

Farther east, opposition from the Black community had more impact. Nova Scotia had a significant Black population, including descendants of United Empire Loyalist refugees who had escaped slavery, and workers drawn from the West Indies to jobs in factories and coal mines. In wartime Halifax, a film that could raise tensions between races was seen as a distinct threat to public order and the war effort. A local coalition of Black and white residents argued successfully that showing *The Birth of A Nation* "was not in the best interests of the coloured citizens, nor of the citizens in general." This was a position that satisfied the legitimate grievances of the Black community, comforted authorities concerned about local disturbances and acknowledged the need to support the war effort.

The ban came at a critical moment in race relations in Nova Scotia. The Canadian military had grudgingly consented to create a long-sought battalion of Black volunteers, the No. 2 Construction Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The battalion was the only segregated unit in the army, and went part way to blunting the resentment amongst Black volunteers who were turned away from most military recruitment stations. But rather than engage in combat, the battalion's members served as a labour force to dig trenches, bury the dead and cut trees. The Nova Scotia film censor's decision to bar showings of *The Birth of A Nation* in the province was seen as helping reduce race tensions in the province.²⁹

The reaction to the film was sharply different in neighbouring New Brunswick, which also had a Black population that included many descendants of Black Loyalists. It was the same province where a war-time