Call it a death parade.

A white-draped car floated quietly down the warm streets of Copan, Oklahoma. Inside the vehicle, a man held a fiery cross. Behind the car marched fifteen white-robed members of the Ku Klux Klan, their presence sending a clear message—a message that appeared on signs declaring “America for Americans.” Upon reaching the Copan Undertaking Parlor, the column of Kluxers silently entered the front door of the establishment.

A flowery aroma filled the parlor where the dead man lay, his casket surrounded with arrangements from his Masonic affiliations, the Copan High School and many others. The eye-grabbing centerpiece was a large floral pillow sent by his brethren of the Invisible Empire, the KKK; they boasted 20,000 members in Oklahoma at the time.

The Klan had a habit of interrupting ordinary affairs; intrusion was their modus operandi. Although the funeral service for Sheets was already underway, the hooded mourners “filed by the coffin, silently dropping a red rose on the heap of floral offerings.”

The booming town of Copan featured four hotels to house oil laborers, a pool hall, a lumberyard and a grocery store where fights tended to break out. As a longtime member of the Copan School District Board and devoted husband to Millicent and father to daughter Alice, Sheets served his community and family but shied away from political office, though he did serve on the Washington County Council of Defense. The Kleagles, the Klan’s recruiting unit, aggressively pursued the leaders of Oklahoma wartime councils.

In addition to black gold, he had interests in farm and timber tracts, and owned an insurance agency for The Northern Assurance Company Limited of London, specializing in coverage for fire, tornado, automobiles and sprinkler leakage. His local influence grew with his holdings. The Bank of Copan opened its doors in 1910, and, by 1915, Sheets was its president exercising on prisoners turned over by local law enforcement.

Ninety-year-old Perlie Moreland knew the Sheets family well. Her parents arrived via covered wagon in Copan in 1905. Ultimately moving next door to the Sheets, she became fast friends with Millicent and Alice after Joe passed.

“Mr. Sheets was involved with the Klan — always heard about that,” she comments.

She eased out of the over-stuffed chair in her family room to retrieve a three-ring notebook brimming with clips and photos from the now-defunct Copan Leader newspaper. Plastic sleeves protect the dogged and yellowed pages with their bold-faced headlines and grainy images. Perlie has turned the screen of an old television set into a pasteboard for Scotch-taped photos of her grand- and great-grandchildren. Atop the old TV, a new flat-screen model balances.

Returning to her favorite chair, struggling with hip pain, Perlie settles in and opens the binder, the cover of which displays a photo of the former Bank of Copan, now a knitting supply store. Putting on her plastic framed glasses she needs only for reading, she begins turning the proud pages. A self-described “old, white-haired gal, getting shorter all the time,” Perlie spins stories of Copan and Joe Sheets, who kept a Klan robe in a remote closet. Yet the Copan that Joe knew had changed.

Perlie catalogues old buildings with her camera to save at least their memories for posterity. The structures—neglected and disfigured, like an old town dog—succumb with regularity: Perlie’s portraits reflect a Copan out of time. Two jointed glasses she needs only for reading, she begins turning the proud pages. A self-described “old, white-haired gal, getting shorter all the time,” Perlie spins stories of Copan and Joe Sheets, who kept a Klan robe in a remote closet. Yet the Copan that Joe knew had changed.

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