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**Abstract:** Reports that in May 1867, ex-Confederate general and guerrilla leader Nathan Bedford Forrest became the first Grand Wizard of the recently formed Ku Klux Klan. Origins of the group; How the name Ku Klux Klan was decided upon; Details of Forrest's testimony before Congress in 1871.

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**1867****One Hundred and Twenty-five Years Ago****[The First Grand Wizard](#)**

- In May, while officially still in the insurance business, the ex-Confederate general and guerrilla leader Nathan Bedford Forrest took his place as the first Grand Wizard in the recently formed "KuKlux Klan."

At the end of the Civil War, six young Confederate officers had returned to Pulaski, Tennessee, with little to do. The men met occasionally throughout 1866, took medieval-sounding oaths of secrecy, and made prankish night rides dressed in robes and ghostly sheets and tall, pointed hats. Pulaski was a town of around two thousand residents, nearly half of whom had been slaves before the war. After considering names like "The Jolly Six" and "Pulaski Social Club," the group settled on the redundant but memorable "KuKlux Klan," from the Greek word for circle" or "band."

"What is a 'KuKlux Klan,'" asked the Pulaski Citizen, in the first printed reference to the group, "and who is this 'Grand Cyclops'?" The paper's editor was himself privately a clan officer, and he published the date of the growing secret society's next midnight meeting for those readers brave or curious enough to attend.

During their night escapades-the high hats allowed the riders to resemble giant, talking ghosts-the members delighted in terrifying the county's black freedmen. Throughout the South, where Radical Reconstruction was being implemented, blacks were joining Union Leagues-Republican organizations that also had secret rituals-and found that they now made up the great majority in the Southern Republican party. At the same time, almost every state government in the former Confederacy, having voted against passage of the

Fourteenth Amendment, was about to be replaced by Reconstruction. The exception was Tennessee, where a Republican, William G. Brownlow, was already in power, and the state's newly enfranchised black voters promised to keep him there.

The Klan came to see itself as a defense against such blasphemies and drew up a prescript, or constitution, at a meeting in Nashville in April. As each state government was replaced with Radicals, the Invisible Empire grew throughout the South; an organization so large and deadly serious needed a proper Southern leader for its mission. Nathan Bedford Forrest was elected its first Grand Dragon, his term to begin in May.

In June the Klan held its first parade and proved something of a bewilderment even to the sympathetic Pulaski Citizen: "They conversed in dutch, hebrew, or some other language which we couldn't comprehend. No two of them dressed alike, all having on masks and some sort of fanciful costume."

As the 1868 elections approached, violence against freedmen hoping to vote became general throughout Tennessee. The attacks were most frequent, however, in the west of the state, where the Klan still had not penetrated. The organization revised its prescript the next spring to reflect its expansion; in addition to swearing to protect and defend the U. S. Constitution, Grand Wizard Forrest now oversaw an "empire" with toeholds in fourteen Southern states. "The remains of the Confederate armies," surmised the English writer Robert Somers in 1871, now "flitted before the eyes of the people in this weird and midnight shape of a 'Ku Klux Klan.'"

The Klan led riots against black suffragists in Mississippi, burned schools whipped or lynched Northern schoolteachers, who were blamed for the freedmen's new political interest, and sent out its now-familiar night armies to frighten former slaves back into prewar obedience. The Republican majorities grew smaller in Southern elections but were not reversed.

The federal government moved in to defend its Reconstruction experiment; the Klan, like the Confederate Army before it, spread its armies along too many fronts to survive intact. Nathan Bedford Forrest never explicitly acknowledged his membership or high office in the Klan, but he testified before Congress in 1871 that "this organization was got up to protect the weak, with no political intention at all. . . ." One of the original six members had said as early 1868, "If it has become a regular organization, with guerilla and 'lynch-law' attributes, then better the Ku Klux had never been heard of, and the sooner such organization is dissolved the better for the country at large-especially for the South."

Photo: The Klan brethren's murderous circle, 1871. (BROWN BROTHERS)

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By Nathan Ward

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