

## TWO YORK COUNTY WOMEN IN KU KLUX KLAN

Women as members of the Ku Klux Klan in the Reconstruction era? It doesn't seem possible but there were two York County women who were full-fledged sworn members. One was the daughter of a Klansman, the other a wife. They were Willie Williams and Lucy Zipporah Smith.

Willie Williams (she was actually named William Williams by her grandmother Hand) was the daughter of S. Henry Williams who was ferryman at Wrights Ferry across the Catawba river at the present site of Buster Boyd Bridge.

Born in 1861, Willie was only 10 or 11 years when a series of events set the stage for her membership in the Klan.

First, standing on her front porch, Willie witnessed the burning of three barns by blacks following the lynching of Charlie Good, a black, by Klan members. Charlie was a blacksmith and the Ku Kluxers found that he marked the shoes that he put on horses and mules so that they could be identified as they traveled over the country.

Years later she told A. M. Grist, editor of the Yorkville Enquirer, that when she attended Clay Hill school she knew her father and uncle were members of the Klan but did not know that some of the "big boys" in her school were Klan members.

One night there was a knock at the Williams' house. Several men wearing masks and black robes asked her father to take them across the river (this would put them on the Mecklenburg County side and thus out of reach of the law). She said they talked like they had "buttons in their mouths." One asked for a glass of water and Willie recognized him as one of the "big boys" of her school, Tom McCallum.

Next day in school she worried about what she knew. After she came home she told her mother. Her mother told her father and after discussion called in three more Klansmen, Bob Hand, Uncle Ed Brandon and Ardrick Partlow. They talked it over and decided the only thing to do was to have Willie take the Klan oath. She did and said she told no one what she knew until long after her father's death in 1890.

Col. Lewis Merrell headed the Federal occupation troops in Yorkville. Periodically he issued orders to arrest various Klan members (figures run as high as 480 actually being arrested). Someone told them that Colonel Merrill had a warrant for Henry Williams. Willie watched as her father "took all his uniforms, red trimmings and all, ripped them up and then ripped a bed and put all of the pieces of the uniform inside and turned the mattress over so they would never be found."

Henry Williams then went across to North Carolina where Merrell's warrant would have no effect and became a tobacco peddler for a time. Then he returned and went to Columbia accompanied by his family for his trial. After a few days he was dismissed. Ferry traffic was down. Williams got a job at B. T. Wheeler's buggy shop in Yorkville. Willie's mother and her three daughters worked a farm. Willie was proud to say that they made a profit on their cotton crops.

Willie, who never married, later worked as a seamstress or sales woman for a number of Yorkville merchants. A staunch Presbyterian she taught Sunday School for many years.

While Willie was the Klan's youngest member, Lucy Smith, born in 1848, also took the Klan fraternal oath. Lucy was married to Darwin G. "Dock" Howell, a Klansman. Also interviewed by Grist, she freely spoke of making robes and masks for the Kluxers and taking care of them but when he pressed for more details she was unwilling to answer beyond the statement, "Well, I

just don't know about that." The two later fled to Alabama where they spent two years before returning to York County.