

I rode with the Ku Klux Klan

by [Stetson Kennedy](#) (Author)

Hamilton & Co; Panther edition, 222 pages, 1958.

The New York Times

From:

U.S.

Stetson Kennedy Dies at 94; Infiltrated Ku Klux Klan

By **THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

AUG. 28, 2011



MIAMI (AP) — Stetson Kennedy, who infiltrated the [Ku Klux Klan](#) six decades ago and exposed its secrets but was criticized for possibly exaggerating his exploits, died on Saturday. He was 94. His death, in hospice care near St. Augustine, Fla., was announced on his [Web site](#).

In the 1940s, Mr. Kennedy used the “Superman” radio show to expose and ridicule the Klan’s rituals. In the 1950s he wrote [“I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan,”](#) which was later renamed “The Klan Unmasked.”

Peggy Bulger, the director of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, was a friend of Mr. Kennedy and did her doctoral thesis on his work as a folklorist. “Exposing their folklore — all their secret handshakes, passwords and how silly they were, dressing up in white sheets” — was one of the strongest blows to the Klan, she said in a 2007 interview with The Associated Press.

Mr. Kennedy [began his crusades](#) against what he called “homegrown racial terrorists” during World War II after he was deemed unworthy for military service because of a back injury. “All my friends were in service, and they were being shot at in a big way. They were fighting racism whether they knew it or not,” Mr. Kennedy said. “At least I could see if I could do something about the racist terrorists in our backyard.” Mr. Kennedy infiltrated the Klan by using the name of a deceased uncle, who had been a member, as a way to gain trust and membership. But the Klan did not know that Mr. Kennedy was giving its secrets to the outside world, including the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the Anti-Defamation League and Drew Pearson, a columnist for The Washington Post.

Using evidence taken from a top Klan official's wastebasket, Mr. Kennedy enabled the Internal Revenue Service to press for the collection of an outstanding \$685,000 tax lien from the Klan in 1944. He also helped draft the brief used by the State of Georgia to revoke the Klan's national corporate charter in 1947.

Mr. Kennedy said he always feared exposure and remained scared throughout his life.

In the late 1940s, Mr. Kennedy took his fight to a national stage. While working as a consultant to the "Superman" radio show, he provided information on the Klan's rituals and secret code words to producers. The resulting episodes were titled "[Clan of the Fiery Cross.](#)"

Mr. Kennedy testified before a federal grand jury in Miami about the Klan's chain of command in the 1951 bombing death of Harry T. Moore, a Florida leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and about bombings aimed at black, Catholic and Jewish centers in Miami.



Stetson Kennedy, in 2003, with a World War I rifle that belonged to his friend Woody Guthrie.

He also presented evidence in federal court about other Klan bombings and about violence aimed at preventing blacks from voting in the 1944 and 1946 elections.

Late in life, Mr. Kennedy faced accusations that some of his writings about the Klan were fabricated or exaggerated. Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt, co-authors of the book “Freakonomics,” alleged that Mr. Kennedy misrepresented portions of “I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan,” as did Ben Green, a Tallahassee author who wrote about the civil rights era.

“He’s done some very admirable things,” Mr. Green once said. “He stood up against the Klan at a time when that was an unpopular position.

“The problem, and the saddest part of all this, is that what he actually did was apparently not enough for him,” he continued. “So Stetson has felt compelled to exaggerate and embellish what he actually did, and in some cases, make up or take credit for things he didn’t do.”

Mr. Kennedy acknowledged that some of the material in his writings had come from another man who also infiltrated the Klan but did not want his name used. He said he wove his and the other man’s experiences into a narrative to make them more compelling.

“It was hardly a cover-up,” Mr. Kennedy said. “I’ve been doing this for too many decades to owe anybody much of an apology.”

“It sort of hurt my feelings,” he added.

William Stetson Kennedy was born on Oct. 5, 1916, in Jacksonville, Fla., and was related on his mother’s side to John B. Stetson, the hat manufacturer. As a young man, he was a friend of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “The Yearling.” He later supervised Zora Neale Hurston when they were both collecting folklore in the Florida Writers Project during the Depression.

Mr. Kennedy continued working on books and speeches into his 90s. He married in 2006 for a seventh time, to Sandra Parks, an author and bookstore owner in St. Augustine.

“The truth of the matter is, I never aspired to be a writer — writing was a means to the end,” Mr. Kennedy once said. “I can’t recommend it. There’s no money in it.”

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/us/29kenedy.html>