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# THE ROANOKE TIMES

ROANOKE, VIRGINIA

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## '896 yearbook lists Claudius Lee, who became an esteemed professor, as the founding leader of the campus KKK 'Grand old man,' or the Tech KKK's 'Father of Terror'



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Claudius Lee, shown here in an undated photograph, was a late-19th-century student at what is now Virginia Tech. He taught engineering at Tech for half a century.

Some question whether Lee, who has a dorm named for him, should remain a campus icon. Others contend that he played no part in the white supremacy group.

By IAN ZACK  
THE ROANOKE TIMES

BLACKSBURG — For half a century, Claudius Lee was a revered Virginia Tech professor, a dapper, bow-tie-wearing "grand old man" whose name now adorns a student dormitory.

But the polite engineering teacher with the trim mustache and twinkling blue eyes may have had another side: In the brittle, yellowed pages of an 1896 Tech yearbook, Lee the student is listed as the "Father of Terror" — the founding leader of the campus Ku Klux Klan.

The discovery of Lee's possible connection to the white supremacy group, made last month by students doing research for a course on the school's history taught by professor Peter

Wallenstein, has some black students questioning his fitness as an honored university icon.

"The students I've talked to are appalled at the fact that this building was named in his honor," said Tech senior Gerri Johns, chairwoman of the Black Organizations Council. "It's not a very welcoming statement to our community."

Confronting the ghosts of the past can be a touchy issue for any university in the former Confederacy, and Tech officials are taking it very seriously.

"It is regretful that this did happen, if in fact there was an affiliation with the KKK," Tech President Paul Torgersen said. "I'm only disappointed that, at the time the building was dedicated after him, this was not known."

"Even [in 1896], what the KKK stood for was common knowledge," Torgersen said. He promised a thorough investigation. "Even if it was a joke, it was a very bad joke."

In the 101-year-old black and gray

annual, "The Bugle," a page is reserved for every student organization, including the Thesplan Club, German Club and Knights of the Ruby Lamp.

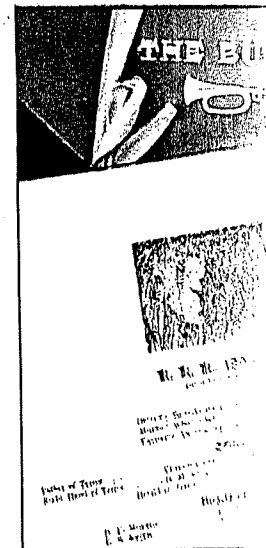
The "K.K.K. — 1895-96" appears on page 101. Beneath a drawing of a sheet-covered skeleton, the group's objective is listed as: "To right the unrighteous." Its favorite pastime: "(Midnight) field sports."

Lee, who was yearbook editor that year, is not the only prominent student counted as an officer of the 11-member group. The "Right Hand of Terror" was one O.M. Stull, credited with penning the "Hoki, Hoki, Hoki, Hy! Tech, Tech VPI" yell that led to the school's nickname, the Hokies.

"These are core icons of the school. They are ground zero 100 years ago," Wallenstein said. "It's kind of ugly," if true.

But was the group real or is the yearbook page just a prank among young

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COURTESY VIRGINIA TECH LIBRARY  
The 1896 issue of the yearbook "The Bugle" lists Claudius Lee among the officers of the KKK. Lee edited the 1896 issue.

## EVIL

white men at a Southern school, then known as Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute?

The Klan, founded in 1866 in Tennessee by Civil War veterans, quickly spread throughout the South, becoming a secret terrorist organization bent on keeping blacks from gaining political power during Reconstruction. Historians say the Klan disbanded by the early 1870s, not to be revived again until 1915, when it broadened its activities to target blacks, Jews, Roman Catholics and foreigners.

"To the best of my knowledge, there's no Klan activity and there's no Klan in that era," said John Kneebone, a historian of the Klan in Virginia who lives in Richmond. "There's certainly a lot of violence."

Designating members as "Angels of Terror" is in keeping with Klan symbolism, which sometimes refers to ghosts of Confederate dead, Kneebone said. But identifying members by name is "very un-Klanlike."

"My sense would be it is tied to the racism in that era, and it is unlikely it was something other than a local organization and probably not active," said Kneebone, an official of the Library of Virginia. "Frankly, take any white Virginian in that era, scratch the surface, and you might find racism."

But people who knew Lee and Stull say they weren't racists.

Lee, a Culpeper native who died in 1962 at the age of 90, was an honor student who once served as an indentured apprentice to a gunsmith. After teaching electrical engineering at Tech for fifty years, he was called Tech's "grand old man" in an obituary and a dormitory took his name in 1968.

"He was a very prominent professor. He was very popular with his students," said 93-year-old D. Lyle Kinnear, a Class of '27 Hokie and former Tech professor who knew Lee.

Kinnear, who wrote a com-

remembers Lee for exhorting students not to rely too much on their slide rules and to "never pick up an electric wire without seeing what was on the other end of it."

Kinnear does not believe Lee was ever a Klansman.

"He had nothing to do with that. No doubt but that is a parody of something," Kinnear said. "I can't guarantee it, but that would be completely out of character. It was not characteristic for Lee to demean a Negro."

Harry Temple, an 86-year-old Tech alumnus who also knew Lee, agreed.

*I think someone uncovering that thing is just trying to kick up some dust, and I think we should just forget about that foolishness.'*

**HARRY TEMPLE**  
TECH ALUMNUS WHO KNEW LEE

In the 1890s, "There was still a lot of War Between the States furor in the country, and I'm sure some of those kids had sympathy for the Klan, but I don't remember them ever doing anything about it," said Temple, who has written a multivolume history of Tech's Corps of Cadets. "I never ran across any KKK infiltration at [Tech], and I've been through every piece of paper in the archives."

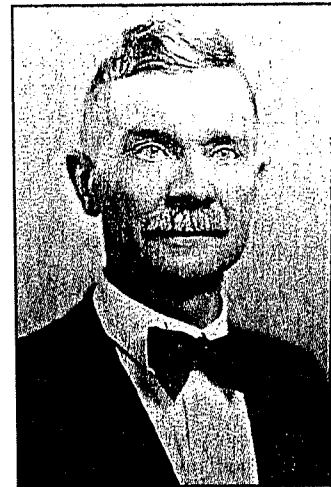
"I think someone uncovering that thing is just trying to kick up some dust, and I think we should just forget about that foolishness," Temple said.

Oscar Meade Stull, who died in 1964, won \$5 for writing the college yell as part of a campus contest. After college, he taught for a spell and became president and later chairman of the board of Liberty Limestone in Buchanan.

"I never saw any evidence of that prejudice or anything," said



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grandson, "My gut feeling is he may have felt that way, but I believe he may have gotten over it."

Tech would not be alone among Virginia universities for having revered forefathers who espoused views on race that would now be considered extreme. But the Klan, among all emblems of racism, retains a power all its own, much greater than words on a dusty page.

"I honestly cringed when I opened the yearbook and it was there," said Cordel Faulk, a black

Virginia Tech dedicated Lee Hall in 1968. "The students I've talked to are appalled at the fact that this building was named in his honor," said Tech senior Gerri Johns, chairwoman of the Black Organizations Council. Lee, shown in an undated portrait, has been connected to the former campus KKK by a group of students doing research for a history course.

"The university has a decision to make: Is it going to create an environment that is comfortable with diversity, or honor people who are going to offend blacks, Jews, Catholics and Asians?" asked Faulk, 21, of Virginia Beach.

Some white students don't have the same gut reaction.

"It's entirely justified for them to be angry about it," said Geoffrey Buescher, who is in Wallenstein's class. "Honestly, I'm not as worked up about it as [Faulk] is, but he's black and I'm white."

Assuming that it is the Klan we know of, "It doesn't speak well to have a dorm named after him," Buescher said. "At the same time, he did a lot of other stuff for the university."

Wallenstein, who recently published a 125-year history of Tech, said many questions probably will remain unanswered.

"There's a lot we don't know about the political and social climate of that time," he said. "It's

not entirely clear that [Klan] group should be written off as an aberration."

The most beneficial response from the university, to Wallenstein's mind, would be to use the revelation and Tech's 125th anniversary to make a symbolic statement about the school's current view of diversity. Two ideas: establishing a black studies degree program and granting an honorary degree to Irving Peddrew, who in 1953 became the first black undergraduate admitted to Tech. Peddrew, who was not allowed to eat or live on campus, left after his third year.

Wallenstein, however, doesn't think Lee and Stull should be banned from the Tech pantheon.

"If you start with Claudius Lee," he said, "you wouldn't have to look very far to find other names to be removed, as well."

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