

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Now your doctorate. If, if I understand right from, uh, from Gordon, right. Was in the history of blacks in grand Rapids. Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([00:11](#)):

What did you do? Um, the basic thing was to, um, discover a history that was there of a small community and then a community that bulged, uh, uh, after the second world war. So, uh, what I attempted to do was, um, track down documents and locate a community and try to explain, explain its evolution, uh, as a community in the city. And I began that project. Uh, not that wasn't my intent, but that's the turned out to be, um, uh, what I did. So I began that project by writing on a civil rights case that took place here, uh, in the 1920s that set Michigan, uh, really Michigan history. And I'm very proud of that. And since, uh, because it was by the Michigan bar association, uh, voted the 22nd legal milestone in state history. And the case was a typical of the 1920s, uh, uh, under the auspices of the NAACP African Americans were pushing for, um, uh, to, uh, establish precedent, to fight against Jim Crow.

Speaker 2 ([01:28](#)):

And, uh, the case was, um, in Michigan, in the 1880s, uh, the statute read that you could not bar anybody from going into public accommodations and everybody was entitled. However, culturally, uh, black people were still segregated. So, uh, an African American dentist went to the local theater here in town, the Keith theater, he, um, um, asked for a ticket, uh, on the main floor. Uh, he was, uh, sold the ticket, but it was in the balcony. Uh, and he proceeded to go back to the theater again with some friends, uh, the same thing occurred. Uh, they documented, uh, and then it was brought to brought to brought to trial, uh, in local court, uh, in 19, uh, 25. And it wound its way to the Michigan Supreme court in 1927. The case was entitled Keith versus a I'm sorry, a Bowden versus the grand Rapids operating corporation.

Speaker 2 ([02:34](#)):

Uh, the grand Rapids operating of course corporation was the holding company for the RKO key theaters. And it was a national chain. And, uh, the case was eventually the Supreme court ruled that it, um, th th the theater did in fact discriminate, uh, that it set the final precedent that, um, um, formalized Jim Crow, uh, would not be, uh, in. So it was an important case taking place here in the 1920s. Uh, so that's how I began this project of writing about African-Americans as well, that if this is here, then there has to be a lot more else here. So that's, that's what I did

Speaker 1 ([03:14](#)):

Now. Gordon Olson said at the turn of the century, do we need to do anything

Speaker 2 ([03:18](#)):

Cool demo?

Speaker 1 ([03:21](#)):

Yeah, it's coming, Flippa thighs a little better with Phil, but you know, it's going to take a couple more years before he reads my mind. Exactly. So I'm sorry to, but would you go back and tell what was, what was the tenor of the twenties?

Speaker 2 (03:35):

Okay, well, the 1920s, um, was, uh, just, uh, uh, simply wide open. You have to remember world war II ended in 1918. There was a great influenza, uh, attack that happened in 1919 and the 1920s, uh, appear to just be wild opening. I mean, women's dresses were shorter. There was the flappers, and you have the rise of the communist party, uh, in the United States beginning around 19, 19, 1920, uh, on the right. We had the Klu Klux Klan. And so these, these kind of forces of, uh, uh, anti-liberal, um, uh, attacks both from the right and the left are coming. And, uh, it's, it's just exploding and it's exploding, uh, on both sides in the United States as a new kind of cultural order comes in. Um, you begin to see the push for, um, uh, birth control methods, uh, by Margaret Sanger. I mean, and so it's a chaotic time challenging times. And if we put the 1920s in a context, and then we see the scopes case, uh, asking fundamental questions about, uh, religion and science and all of these values are conflicting, uh, both the United States and Europe and elsewhere. Uh, these are, uh, conflicting times, uh, there are hot explosive times in the United States. It turned out to be a good, but it could have been otherwise and Europe, it also, it Rose a new fascist regimes Rose up both in Spain, in Germany and so forth and the ugly.

Speaker 1 (05:14):

And in grand Rapids, you go from a population of African Americans at the turn of the century,

Speaker 2 (05:21):

About 600, about 600 set [inaudible] at 2000. And most of those people come between the first and second, but the first world war they come in, I say about, uh, from 1914 to 1925, the population, uh, really, um, dis uh, grows threefold. And that's a shock for everyone in grand Rapids. I mean, that's a shock because they, they were used as this very tiny black community, but now you have more visible people and people who are now coming from the regions of the deep South Georgia, Virginia, and so forth.

Speaker 1 (05:59):

And what was the net? What was the result? I mean, you were still in the city was 130, 140,000. So, so the African American population was kind of very small, less under the radar,

Speaker 2 (06:13):

But not under the radar culturally. Um, you have to understand that a city like grand Rapids, uh, the national news came here all the time. Uh, it gives us, or, uh, gives us this or of itself that it's a Podunk town, but really the national news had always come here. A significant debate about anti-slavery took place here. Uh, people like Frederick Douglas had taken place. This was hotbed, uh, both, uh, abolitionist, sentiments, and anti, uh, abolitionist sentiments. So grand Rapids, uh, was on the train route and it was, uh, a major city and stop off in grand Rapids. Uh, and, uh, it had been involved in sending people, uh, to teach black southerners after the end of the civil war. Uh, so it was, it was a hub of a sword. And so there's a sentiment going on going on here. And there's a small growing black community here. And then that community suddenly jumps. And so culturally black people, I write this in a, I'd say, you know, for a town with so small, you think reading the newspaper that black people were everywhere. I mean, everything that a black person did, I mean, uh, Josephine weathers got drunk. It got on the paper, you know, and you thought, well, this is a small black community gets more attention than it's numbers warrants. So culturally, it was significant in the back of his head, then that's true. All over the Midwest.

Speaker 1 ([07:43](#)):

And what, what forms, I mean, you talked about dr. Bowden,

Speaker 2 ([07:48](#)):

Uh, Bolden, B O L D E N. Bolden like buddy Bolden. Yes, that's right. Oh, no relation.

Speaker 1 ([07:58](#)):

Um, there, there, there is a man. Yeah, that's right.

Speaker 2 ([08:02](#)):

I grew up in a neighborhood where buddy boating grew up. I'm from new Orleans.

Speaker 1 ([08:07](#)):

So, you know, all the buddy Bolden stores, many of them, yeah. A couple of miles outside of town, he blow on a Hill and you could hear him. That's right. He was, he was, he was really that's right. Oh, no. He was a real, what about, what about the idea of you had dr. Bolden and, and being relegated to the, uh, uh, the balcony, right? What were the other forms of, uh,

Speaker 2 ([08:32](#)):

Racism in the community? What was, what was, well, if you went to a restaurant, for example, uh, people would serve you and at the end of the dinner, um, they would break the dishes or glasses in front of you. So giving you the message. Well, you shouldn't come back. Um, those were kinds of forms, or for instance, a prominent black entertainers came to town all the time, uh, from menstrual shows to then vaudeville shows. And, uh, there's, uh, a striking article that I discovered in the newspaper, the cab Calloway late twenties comes grand Rapids. He performs, uh, audit Ramona park, uh, on reeds Lake. And all of the black people have to meet cab at the, at the back of the restaurant where he played, cause they can't go into the show. So those are all kinds of, uh, uh, ways that discrimination took place on a small local level.

Speaker 2 ([09:25](#)):

Uh, grand Rapids was in this area was conflicted because at once it was abolitionists, that is that many people fought on behalf of the civil war. There were many people who were from new England and New York who advocated against slavery and, and sent money to, uh, black Southern schools. And yet at home though, local black community felt like it was always sort of mistreated it wasn't given its due and no one was fighting for justice on, on the level at home. And so you would often hear black people riding in the paper and this small group of middle class folks writing in the paper saying, you know, wait a minute, you can't have it both ways either you're going to have democracy or you not. And so they continue to fight for, for, for democracy at home. And they, they raise all of these issues in the newspaper.

Speaker 1 ([10:17](#)):

I have a friend and I was with him yesterday. We were playing at a church service. We were playing Dixieland music in a church service now, and we were talking on the way in, and he made the comment that he grew up in the, in the area, in the forties that it was worth the L a black man's life to be caught on the West side of the river. Yeah,

Speaker 2 ([10:40](#)):

Well that that's that's of course that was a changing phenomenon. Um, black people, uh, and whites. Um, let me say, um, when worked together, live together into marry together in grand Rapids at the turn of the century, and there just enough documentation there, people lived all around each other. It was class-based immigrant base, poor, poor people. Um, as the twenties proceeds, the, there is a growing, growing and hardening of, uh, uh, racial tensions, because whether we like it or not at the, at the, at, uh, at a certain class level, the economy is getting tighter and tighter for the ordinary people. And who do you pit yourself against them? You know, you look at this guy and he says, well, he's black, I'm white. I have more privilege. I should be better than he is. I should have more standing than he, he or she.

Speaker 2 ([11:36](#)):

Um, that's and that's how it went. So by the 1940s, of course, uh, these hard, um, ethnic relationships, uh, had now developed and hardened after the great depression, uh, after everybody's scurrying for, um, scarce goods, uh, and competing one another. Um, I think that, um, I think it would be a bit overstated that you would one would risk on the West side for their lives. But, um, but I think that, uh, I think that there was serious, um, uh, talent is a people, uh, where you should be, you should be on the wet, uh, the black West side, uh, or you should be on, uh, the Polish and Dutch West side. So, um, there were, there were some tourist challenges here by the forties, but by the forties, also, the rise of the black community is now quite clear and everyone's threatened, um, because in the 1940s grand Rapids is this late, late forties, particularly this booming black community. Uh, it jumps from being a, let's say 1% in 1942, if you imagine 8% by 1960s, that's a real rise of deep. Uh, so that everybody's feeling jittery.

Speaker 3 ([12:50](#)):

Sorry about that. What about this organization of the Klan?

Speaker 2 ([12:56](#)):

Uh, the Klan, um, is been around Michigan from the late 19th century. Um, the Klan reflected, uh, you know, Michigan. We often think of regions as so separate, um, Michigan, um, brought in white southerners as well, uh, uh, from Kentucky and Appalachia as Detroit grows into industrial center at the turn of the century and beyond, um, there is a competition always with poor people who are trying to till land, uh, worrying about whether ex-slaves will come up and, and, and sort of outgrow them and make more profits to them. Uh, so there was always these tantalizing things about the clam. Uh, the Klan in the 1920 sees a resurgence, it's originally a terrorist group in the South. Uh, Nathan Bedford, it's a terrorist group, same as what they would do in Guatemala, the, um, these, um, uh, terrorizing agrarian people. So the Klan then reformulates itself and to kind of this urban Midwestern organization, it begins in of all places, uh, the resurgence in the 1920s, Marion, Indiana, and it doesn't begin.

Speaker 2 ([14:09](#)):

And, um, um, my home state of Louisiana is Marion Indiana, which sees the resurgence of the client. Uh, and it ha the Klan reflects, uh, it's already, uh, this, uh, xenophobia about immigrants, about Catholics, about the state of Protestantism in the United States, whether we losing control and the ordinary Midwestern life. And so Marion, Indiana to grand Rapids, uh, or to any other Midwestern town is not that far off. These great changes that I described early in the 1920s are affecting everybody. And this fear and the need for joining an organization, of course, uh, it builds you up. I mean, you could compare and not to exactly, but Marcus Garvey certainly has the, the, um, the universal Negro improvement

association in New York. I mean, black people are joining this great organization. So the Klan is providing the structure for people to find a connection in a rapidly changing modern world, uh, feeling dislocated, uh, from, um, Dorothy's not going back to the farm in Kansas anymore. I mean, that's over, I mean, you think about the turn of the century, that really is over and more than people are increasingly into these small towns, urban, but nevertheless, urban and of being dislocated.

Speaker 1 ([15:33](#)):

What about the Klan in grand Rapids? I think you made mention in particular of a certain year book, but I want to hear the story where, where do you first find the Klan?

Speaker 2 ([15:42](#)):

Well, the first time I discovered the Klan is when I was writing about the civil rights claim case that took place in the 1920s. And I wanted to see the picture of this guy, IMiD Bolden, a African American man who graduated from high school here, and I'm flipping through and with a friend. And, uh, they point out says, Hey,

Speaker 1 ([16:02](#)):

Did you see that picture? Go back? Okay.

Speaker 2 ([16:04](#)):

I flip back and there's these very clean cut, distinguished young men, a part of the KKK club. Now, those, those, those initials KKK had already had Y currency long before, long before 1919. So everybody knew what that meant, and they were, um, uh, hardworking, honest Protestant. It's almost the young Ariens. They're perfect. Um, perfect, uh, young men clean cut, and it signaled to me that wow, the KKK had not had influenced the high school level. Uh, it was influencing, uh, the local level and local local politics in the end attempts. So there were articles from Holland to grand Haven of cross burnings, and you begin to sense that, wow, Marion, Indiana is not the only place grand Rapids people are feeling this dislocation, and this is where they can come to organize all of the things they're feeling.

Speaker 1 ([17:08](#)):

What do you know about the Klan in this community? What, what, how did it grow? How did it die?

Speaker 2 ([17:13](#)):

Well, um, the K I N is always around Michigan. How, uh, how Michigan, for example, is the biggest place that the Klan has been. Uh, and the Klan has always been around because it feels, you know, it's easy to hate. I mean, that's the easiest thing to do, and it's easy to have a fall guy to organize yourself around. I mean, that's just universal P M I'm a Calvinist. It's sort of people find themselves and wanting somebody to put the blame on. Uh, and in Michigan, uh, the Klan had been here as early as, uh, 18, uh, 68, uh, after the civil war, you see people organizing these, uh, Klan. Now, there is nobody, they would go around and attack like there are in the South, but they're already organizing themselves. It dies out because the economies, uh, stables out for a little while. Um, the long depression comes along.

Speaker 2 ([18:09](#)):

Nobody's interested in organizing, but suddenly it arises again, as soon as the Wars ended and it rises at the very time that it's Chicago, Detroit, um, and other bigger cities, Indianapolis are seeing this influx of

black southerners who have gotten jobs and these factories areas, uh, and there's a control. Now you have to put this into context. 1917 is a great ride in East st. Louis of catastrophic ride, uh, over labor, over labor issues between blacks and Italians and so forth. There's a whole group of small group of black workers who move here from East st. Louis to work in the plastic, mines the owners recruit them to fire the Italian workers, uh, because they're attempting to unionize. Uh, there is a 1919, there's the, the riots going on in Chicago, all over the country. The great urban unrest, 1921, Tulsa.

Speaker 4 ([19:09](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 2 ([19:11](#)):

Is this at the level of ordinary people tension about the economy already there? I mean, once war ends, it's normally a recession dips down and here the Klan comes in and says the problem here in grand Rapids, as in Marion, as in Springfield is these black people are coming from the South. And if we don't control this, we're not going to have a white people's country anymore. And that's what happened in grand Rapids as well. That the interesting thing that the dynamic of grand Rapids, why it didn't grow as much is one, the largest ethnic group was Polish. The second group was Dutch in Protestant, and they had no interest in any kind of organization like that because they were anti masonry. And so the Klan would seem like another masonry, and they were still immigrants themselves and their strong Calvinist bent, um, prevented that.

Speaker 2 ([20:12](#)):

So two, two religious kinds of factors played in the Catholicism and this Dutch Calvinism of this region said, well, we won't have much to do it, but it wasn't the temp wasn't like, they didn't attempt to organize. They, they put on quite a show here in the 1920s, uh, as, uh, Gordon has probably already described, they put a quiet show on, but nobody bid for it. They wrote about it in the newspaper. Uh, they attempt to organize, they attempt to get people galvanized, um, but the same forces that kept grand Rapids, labor issues at Bay, the churches also keep the client at Bay.

Speaker 1 ([20:54](#)):

And this really is an anti union state. That's correct. It's not, not Island.

Speaker 2 ([21:00](#)):

That's correct. That's correct.

Speaker 1 ([21:02](#)):

That's an interesting association. Yeah. Now the Klan, uh, they'll never gone, uh, has a resurgence. Yes. And again, and again and again, what about the, what about the want to do one thing about going back, but one good thing going forward, the role of birth of a nation and the book that Klansman in. So can, can you comment on that

Speaker 2 ([21:26](#)):

19? Oh yes. 1915. Um, when, um, DW Griffith's movie comes out birth of a nation, it causes, causes black people as far as Lewiston, Maine to be beat up tormented, um, and also protests. Um, Thomas Dixon's, uh, and, and what, um, Woodrow Wilson's endorsement, uh, as a historian, he also writes this

kind of history. Um, uh, uh, scandalizes, uh, most ordinary people who knew nothing about history, just like the day they see this movie, um, they are enraged. They go out and beat up the first black person they see in grand Rapids. There wasn't so many incidents of being beaten up, but there are incidents of torment and hostility. And where we know this is that black people were writing in the paper protesting this description of the Klan as some hit Rorick organization. But then again, to the ordinary populace, you know, you remember this movie as you well know, is the first action issue we have in American history. And it plays is, Hey, Roy. I mean, you have people riding in and you have these vultures lecherous people coming in. So it plays to the popular psyche that unless we control these, uh, um, rapacious black men, uh, we will not have the kind of America where we can grow in.

Speaker 1 ([22:50](#)):

And you've got the president of the United States endorses. This, this is pretty much the way it was.

Speaker 2 ([22:54](#)):

That's right. He's the, he's a Virginian. And he's also the one who's segregates, Washington at the he's the president during the time of the Washington monument. And there's a segregated audience. I mean, I mean, that's sort of the Lincoln Memorial and there's a segregated audience at that moment. And he, he segregates Washington DC when black people and doves had voted for him

Speaker 1 ([23:15](#)):

The second coming of the Klan here, while the second large coming into the Klan, uh, when was that

Speaker 2 ([23:23](#)):

The client comes into in, in grand Rapids and between 19, 19 and 1925, you see this resurgence here, uh, and all around the area, you see a resurgence of Klan. And again, as I described earlier, it is in this context that things are changing and changing rapidly and dramatically.

Speaker 1 ([23:42](#)):

I guess what I need you to say is the third coming of the Clinton, the third coming of the is again, you

Speaker 2 ([23:46](#)):

Know, you, when you watch the rebirth of Klans, it's also what I would use this academic jargon, a liminal state when things are not sure when the ground is shaking. Uh, and you're not either, either in or out, you see this resurgence of the Klan again, uh, the late eighties, uh, David Duke, uh, the re uh, burst of sort of rebirth of the Klan, uh, around Michigan. Again, a time when there's economic difficulties, uh, religious challenges, um, the world is changing. The factories have bottomed out, and we are looking for, again, someone to blame. So about every 40 years we have these or even 20 year patterns, these resurgence of these kinds of institutions.

Speaker 1 ([24:37](#)):

What about the Klan today?

Speaker 2 ([24:40](#)):

Well, the client today is still still around us. Um, people still find need to join. They're far more sophisticated, uh, mean websites, uh, uh, far more, uh, recruiting. They're going back to the image of

the KKK club, like 19, 19, where good civic organization. We don't mean anybody, any harm. We just want a segregated world. Um, so we always have to be attentive to what they're doing even today, the Southern poverty law center, uh, uh, reports on Klan activities and other kinds of hate group activities around the country. And they are still with us. Uh, they don't die away. I wish they would, but I mean, people find reason for these kinds of organizations. Gordon's trying to get in here for a minute,

Speaker 1 ([25:27](#)):

If we can, do you want to, do you want to, or,

Speaker 2 ([25:33](#)):

Uh, the Klan, um, I'll give you a demonstration with the Klan meet. Uh, the last time they came to grand Rapids, I mean, they are free to come under the constitution, but some of my students at Calvin and I want to put them in there because I think they did the best thing. Um, wait until the Klan gave their thing. When they moved off, they came and brought, uh, um, uh, brooms and with water and swept off the halls of the steps of the halls of justice. I think in this town, uh, the clam means just what they stand for hatred. I mean, we are a pretty ethnically diverse city. Um, we have a lot of problems, like all of urban America, but not that kind of problem. And so for a city like grand Rapids, I think, uh, it violates, uh, religious principles, which a city like this lives by, and just you, you, you main principles. And so I think that the Klan just, uh, uh, is, um, people won't tolerate that. And I think that's been the history of grand Rapids when I said those churches participated early on saying not, not here. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.