

The WPA Life Histories Collection

[Reminiscences: Ku Klux]

W11047

Project 1885-1

Folklore

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Edited by:

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#### REMINISCENCES: KU KLUX

Mrs. Sallie Matthews who died at the age of 82 was a heroine of the Ku Klux days in Union County. Her home was in Pacolet during her latter days. Mrs. Matthews was a native of Fairfield County, but came to Union to live with her sister, Mrs. F.H. Counts, and attended the old Union Female Academy or Seminary. She was 14 years old at this time. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. George S. Hinnant lived near Winnsboro, and when Sherman started on his march from the mountains to the sea, he passed by their home. His handsomely uniformed cavalry carried away all of the Hinnants, Provisions, stock and cattle, and left them only one horse and some parched corn. Mrs. Matthews' father and two brothers were away serving in the Confederate army.

In the old Counts home (then on South Street and now torn away) robes and masks for the Ku Klux Klan were made and stored away in the garret. Mrs. Matthews was familiar with much of the activities of the robed organization, but she was bound by oath not to reveal any of the secrets of the Klan, and these she kept inviolate until a year or so ago when she related the story to

her nephew, Mr. Charles B. Counts, of Union. She said shortly before her death that the only reason she told this was to let it be preserved for posterity.

"I was in an old out-house with aunt 'Em' who was ironing when I overheard the following conversation. My sister's woodshed joined the laundry. Old 'Rackin' George, as we called him, was in there cutting wood. Another Negro, whose name I did not know, came in there and told 'Rackin' George about plans that the Union soldiers and the Negroes were making to set a torch to Union that night at twelve o'clock. I went to the door of the ironing house and listened to their plans, for 'Rackin' George was one of the band who was to aid the Union men. Then I ran into the house and told my sister what I had heard. She told me that Mr. D.C. Gist who lived 14 miles below Union was the Ku Klux courier, and that he should be notified of these plans.

"Just about dark I went to the stables of Mr. William A. Nicholson and saddled his pony which I had often ridden and started out for Mr. Gist's home. I went through the dense Gage wood where the Gage mineral spring was, and by the Harris saw mill which was to the rear of the Episcopal church, to keep from meeting people. (All this wood is gone, the mill is gone and the land out up into streets which are thickly housed now.) By this secluded route I reached the country road without meeting anyone. I left the village far behind and I realized that in my haste and excitement I was riding bareback. But I went on as fast as the pony could carry me. Mr. Gist, known to us as Mr. Dave, lived not far from the old mansion of Gov. William H. Gist. When I reached his home I alighted from my pony and called: 'Mr. Dave! Mr. Dave!' He came out horrified to hear the voice of a girl in the early night. When he found out who I was, he carried me into the house and said, 'Sallie Hinnant, whatever possessed you to run away from Mrs. Counts' at this late hour?' I told him of the plans being formed by the Union soldiers and the disloyal Negroes to burn Union at midnight by setting torch lights to all the buildings along Main Street.

"Mr. Dave C. Gist immediately dispatched messages to all the Ku Klux in the county and they were assembled along Main Street before twelve o'clock that night. They were armed to the teeth and robed in the white regalia of their organization; and they could also be seen not only on Main Street, but on every side street.

"Midnight came, with everything quiet throughout the entire village. One o'clock came and everything was still quiet throughout the sleeping village. The plan to set fire to the village of Union had been nipped in the bud!"

Mrs. Sallie Hinnant Matthews is buried in the Pacolet Mills graveyard.

Source: Private scrapbook of Miss Mary Emma Foster, E. Main Street, Union, S.C. Interviewer: Caldwell Sims, Union, S.C.

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