

Bayfield/Ignacio News

Klan evidence is uncovered in Bayfield

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In a previous life, the loft above Akers Garage in Bayfield served as the secret meeting place for the Pine River Valley Ku Klux Klan.

At other times, the 3,000-square-foot upper floor of 225 Mill St. had been the town's roller-skating rink, first movie theater, dance hall and high school gymnasium.

Most recently, Jeff Bryson and his brother Bob have spent 11 months and \$100,000 converting the former Klan meeting room and all purpose community building into four apartments.

Located above the Brysons' Sunlake Windows Inc. workshop, where they make insulated windows of their own design, the apartment project was a way for the brothers to keep valued employees working for the firm during the slow winter months.

They hadn't foreseen that it also would provide a wealth of information on the local Klan in the 1930s and an encounter with thousands of angry bees.

While installing skylights in the 12-foot high ceilings, Jeff Bryson discovered a locked wooden box in a crawlspace. For a fleeting moment, Bryson had visions of finding a large cache of money in the box.

"I thought, 'This is it, my treasure of Sierra Madre,'" he said. Instead, Bryson had uncovered a history of treasure.

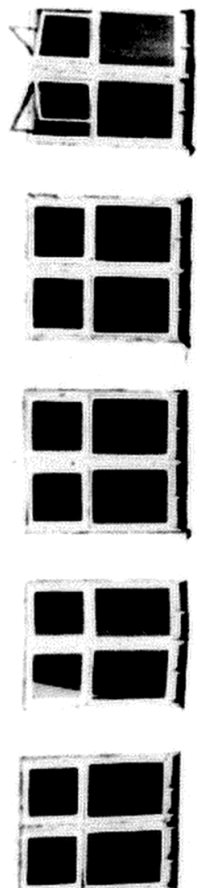
In the box were signature cards identifying Klan members, a collection of pointed white hoods, letters, characterizing members for public drunkenness, minutes of Klan meetings, forms for ordering robes from Klan headquarters in Atlanta, and assorted Klan trinkets and insignia.

"I was pretty excited when I found the box," Bryson said. "It was news to me there even had been a Klan in Bayfield. And the Klan was such a secretive society, there just aren't any records like this available."

According to Bryson, the records indicated that a member of the Akers family was the secretary of the Bayfield Klan during the 1920s and 30s and meetings were held in the loft above the garage.

Although he declined to identify past Klan members, Bryson said he recognized several names and it is possible a few still are living in Bayfield.

He also has donated the collection to the Fort Lewis College Center of Southwest Studies, which has restricted



ONE-TIME DANCE HALL, movie theater, gymnasium and Ku Klux Klan meeting hall has been converted into apartments.

its access because the records refer to area residents or their descendants.

If Bryson was excited by his discovery, the FIC center is even more thrilled to be the caretaker of the find.

It's just an amazing collection," history professor Duane Smith said. "We saw Bayfield was a center of Klan activity in the '30s, but there had never been any records."

"You just don't find Klan records, people don't talk about it. This is the first concrete information," Bryson's next discovery in the old meeting hall/loft/gymnasium, however, wouldn't have been appreciated by anyone.

"The most incredible thing I found in the building was a 50-year-old bee hive," he said. "It was 8 feet tall, 14 inches wide and 6 inches deep. There was no way I could work near it."

Bryson said he attempted to get local beekeeper Vernon Cullman to move the hive, but was turned down because of the danger in handling angry bees in winter.

"I tried everything," Bryson says, shaking his head with disbelief at how hard the job proved. "I tried putting them to sleep with carbon dioxide gas. I



KLAN KANDLEES BELIEVED to have been used in cross-burning ceremonies. Other Klan artifacts discovered in a converted Bayfield loft included membership cards and forms for ordering robes.

used fire extinguishers, but that only killed the top layer. Nothing worked until Bryson tried a more direct approach.

Wearing borrowed protective clothing, Bryson says he first pulled all the windows out of the building, lowering the temperature to below zero.

Next, he attacked the hive with a crowbar, ripping off huge chunks to expose the bees to the frigid air.



KU KLUX KLAN hood found by Jeff Bryson along with a box of Klan records from the 1920s while he was remodeling the loft above the Akers Garage in Bayfield.

year-old building was a labor of love for Bryson. Previously, Bryson had restored two other 100-year-old buildings, including the old Durango Community Hospital, in which he and his family now live.

"You work on them from scratch and it's hard not to have a personal feeling about it," he said. "No one had ever seen the potential of the upstairs. That was considered the lemon part of the building."

Herald photos by Joel Millman