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# Virgil Lee Griffin, Klan Leader, Dies at 64

*Douglas Martin*

5-6 minutes

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Virgil Lee Griffin, who was an 18-year-old pumping gas when he joined the [Ku Klux Klan](#) and rose to become a prominent leader, particularly in the bloody clash between the Klan and leftist union organizers in Greensboro, N.C., in 1979, died Feb. 11 in Gastonia, N.C. He was 64.

His death was announced by Woodlawn Funeral Home in Mount Holly, N.C., where Mr. Griffin lived. It gave no cause of death, but Mr. Griffin was known to have had two heart attacks and other health problems.

On Nov. 3, 1979, members of the Communist Workers Party, which was organizing textile workers in North Carolina, staged a "Death to the Klan" rally. Klansmen and members of the American Nazi Party held a counterdemonstration.

The Klansmen and the Nazis drove a caravan of cars through the throng of leftist demonstrators. Everybody seemed to agree that the leftists began hitting the cars, but accounts of what happened next differed widely. The leftists contended that the Klansmen and the Nazis left their cars and opened fire with shotguns, rifles and pistols. Five leftists were killed and 10 injured.

The Klansmen and Nazis contended that they reacted in self-defense to having their cars attacked. They said the leftists fired the first shot. Mr. Griffin said the shots that hit the demonstrators were not aimed at them.

“Maybe God guided the bullets,” he said.

In 1980, six Klansmen and Nazis, not including Mr. Griffin, were acquitted of murder charges in North Carolina state court. In 1984, Mr. Griffin was among nine acquitted in federal court on charges of violating the leftists’ civil rights.

Mr. Griffin was jubilant. “No matter what the communists say,” he said, “the K.K.K. is here to stay.”



*Virgil Lee Griffin in 1981. Associated Press*

What came to be called the Greensboro Massacre was recorded by four camera crews. The images were shown nationally, and critics of the not-guilty verdicts have since used them to try to press their case that the Klansmen and Nazis were guilty. The juries, however,

said they saw nothing but confusion. The case was further complicated by the actions of informants for both the local police and the F.B.I. who had infiltrated the Klan.

In 2005, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission held hearings in Greensboro to try to examine the events of 1979. In response to a question about race, Mr. Griffin said that he had grown up picking cotton and played with blacks as a child. He then worked at a gas station as what he called “a halfway mechanic.” He said black customers would ask for him first. A member of the commission asked if they knew he was in the Klan.

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered. “As much as I’m on TV, I’m sure everyone of them knew I was in the Klan. They knew what I was. And I knew they was in the N.A.A.C.P. What they do is their business.”

His reason for joining the Klan, he told the commission, was that he did not believe in mixing the races, particularly in marriage. “I’ll work around them,” he said, “but when I go home, I go home.”

Over the years, Mr. Griffin moved from the leadership of one splinter of the Klan to another. In 1979, he was identified in The New York Times as grand dragon of the North Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. He later founded the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and has most recently been identified as the imperial wizard of the Cleveland Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. He was known for organizing many marches.

For most of the last three decades, the Klan has lost both prominence and viciousness, according to the Anti-Defamation League and other anti-hate groups. But its opposition to illegal [immigration](#) has helped draw new sympathizers, and Mr. Griffin

tried to be a leader in that effort.

“Shoot one, and let them know we are sealing our borders,” he said in an interview with [WCNC.com](http://WCNC.com) of Charlotte, N.C.

Mr. Griffin is survived by his wife, Linda; his sisters, Geraldine Peebles and Janie Weant; his daughters, Linda Dellinger and Shirley Williams; his sons, John and James; 14 grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren.

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