

History: The Black Legion, Where Vets and the Klan Met

By [GPD](#) on November 28, 2012



Black Legion regalia included this high powered rifle and a leather-bladed bludgeon used to beat their victims.



Charles Poole, an organizer for the Works Progress Administration, was murdered by the Black Legion after they accused him of beating his wife.

The murder that brought down the Black Legion

The gang that killed Poole was part of the Black Legion, and the triggerman was Dayton Dean, an employee of the Detroit Public Lighting Department and, by all accounts, a man who simply lived for violence. As such, Dean fit the profile of the Black Legion, whose propensity for violence, as one contemporary observed, made the Ku Klux Klan look like a cream puff.

The Black Legion was founded in the mid-1920s as the Black Guards, a security force for the officers of the Ohio Ku Klux Klan. A Michigan regiment was established in 1931, with Arthur Lupp of Highland Park as its major general. Organized along military lines, the Michigan Legion had five brigades, 16 regiments, 64 battalions, and 256 companies. Although its members boasted that there were one million legionaires in Michigan, it probably had only between 20,000 and 30,000 members in the state in the 1930s, one third of whom lived in Detroit.

The legion had various fronts to cover its activities, such as the Wayne County Rifle and Pistol Club, whose members frequented a downtown Detroit sporting goods store with a backroom firing range. It also had a political front as well, the Wolverine Republican Club. The legion's political objectives were broad and, at the same time, narrowly specific. As one of its promotional pieces stated, "we will fight political Romanism [the Catholic Church], Judaism, Communism, and all 'isms' which our forefathers came to this country to avoid."



Poole's widow, Rebecca, and their 16-month-old daughter, Mary Lou.

Some legionaires, more inclined toward outright violence for the sake of violence, went further in their plots to rid America of those they called undesirables than fearmongering and night riding. It was alleged, for instance, that Major General Lupp had explored ways to inject typhoid germs into milk and cheese delivered to specific undesirable neighborhoods in Detroit. The fact that Lupp was an inspector for the Detroit Department of Public Health lent some credence to this story, in the minds of many who heard it.

Labor and civil rights lawyer Maurice Sugar, who believed he was targeted for death by the legion, claimed that his investigations had uncovered a plot by the legion to release cyanide gas in synagogues during Hanukkah in 1935, although no official investigation supported the allegations. There was clear evidence, however, that Sugar's 1935 campaigns for a seat on Detroit Recorder's Court and on the city's Common Council were targeted by legionaires for a series of dirty tricks and outright sabotage.

Some politicians supported the legion's efforts to preserve the American System against foreign influence and often spoke before the Wolverine Republican Club, whose members circulated petitions and conducted get-out-the-vote campaigns for their favorite candidates. Too often,

however, the legion's political activities tended to violent acts of retaliation against those candidates running against a legion favorite.

Running through the literature and rhetoric of the Black Legion was the fear of an international Communist takeover of the United States. Legionnaires were ordered by their superiors to be prepared to take over federal government buildings with arms at what they called "zero hour," the date and time that communists would rise up throughout the United States and launch their attack on the country. In truth, however, the legion was led by unsophisticated men, "petty men," as one researcher has noted, who were most interested in the "pettiness of personal reform."

Thus, the legion saw as its enemies not only blacks, Jews, and Catholics, but also welfare workers and recipients and labor union organizers. Homer Martin, the first president of the United Automobile Workers union, believed beyond any question that legionnaires had infiltrated his union for the express purpose of providing inside information to the automobile manufacturers and that many black knights were members of the "Dawn Patrol," the private security force that guarded many Detroit auto plants.

The legion also provided a job service for its members. Many joined the organization during the economically unsettled 1930s with the understanding that legionnaires would look out for their own in terms of jobs and promotions. It was alleged that the Packard and Hudson automobile plants were controlled by the legion and that members would enjoy in those shops 'special privileges' as a result. It is worth noting, in this regard, that later investigations of the legion revealed that none of its known members were unemployed and that many of them had positions in the public services.

By and large, the typical Black Legionnaire was a lower-class, Anglo-Saxon male, poorly educated with few industrial skills, and were Southerners transplanted to the Detroit area during the heyday of the city's industrial growth during the 1920s. Why did they join? They believed that the American System was being undermined and their obligation was to counteract that trend

They were also frustrated by the uncertainty generated by the economic problems of the 1930s and they felt alienated in a large metropolitan area and within a huge industrial complex. In general, they were beset by the feeling that, although their ancestral roots in America stretched back to the nation's earliest years, they were being left behind; they believed foreigners were competing for jobs they considered their own, that Jews and Catholics were supplanting Protestants among the nation's influential political and economic leaders, and that racial integration was leading America to social anarchy.



Michigan's Black Legion had its roots in the Ohio Ku Klux Klan, right.

In the Black Legion, members found a sense of security and a sense of superiority. For those of a more violent bent, the group quenched their thirst for adventure and, in some cases, personal injury and murder. Most especially, the legion provided easy answers to the complex questions that plagued Americans during the dark days of the Great Depression. As its oath of allegiance proclaimed, "the native-born white people of America are menaced on every hand from above and below. If America is in the melting pot, the white people of America are neither the aristocratic scum on top nor the dregs of society on the bottom which is composed of anarchists and Communists and all cults and creeds believing in social equality. ... We regard as enemies to ourselves and our country all aliens, Negroes, Jews and cults and creeds believing in racial equality or owing allegiance to any foreign potentates. These we will fight without fear or favor as long as one foe of American liberty is left alive."

The murder of Charles Poole broke open the secrecy surrounding the Black legion. This young man, an organizer for the Works Progress Administration, left behind a wife and children whose plight was highlighted in newspaper articles and photographs and raised public support for a trial and a thorough investigation.

Opposition to the Legion was spearheaded by the Detroit Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, representatives of 311 churches, and labor union, farm and fraternal groups in Michigan. Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea pledged to bring Poole's murders to the bar of justice, a pledge he kept despite accusations by some of those he prosecuted that he had joined the legion himself. Eleven of the 12 men he tried in the Poole murder case were convicted, nine by a jury on Sept. 29, 1936, and two in a bench trial.



Black Legion members reputedly enjoyed “special privileges” at some auto factories, like The Hudson Motor Car Co. plant on Connors north of Jefferson.

The Poole murder case, as The Detroit News put it, shattered the “romantic air” that had surrounded the legion. “Hooey may look like romance and adventure in the moonlight,” stated The News, “but it always looks like hooey when you bring it out in the daylight.”

In the end, 11 members of the legion were given life sentences for the Poole murder and others that were revealed during the trial and a subsequent grand jury investigation. Thirty-seven other members were sentenced to prison terms.

The Black Legion was dead. Its reputation, however, remained and reached all the way to Hollywood. One of Humphrey Bogart’s least-known movies was entitled “The Black Legion,” in which Bogart plays a factory mechanic whose expected promotion to foreman is instead given to a foreign-born worker. Bogart first joins, then stands up to the legion. Watch for it on late-night television or ask for it at your favorite video store; it is rare and worthwhile, and its roots are here in Michigan.



Legion members are returned to their cells following guilty verdicts for 11 of 12 charged in the Poole murder. 1. Lowell Rushing; 2. Herschell Gill, the only man acquitted; 3. Edgar Baldwin; 4. Paul Richards; 5. Ervin D. Lee; 6. John Bannerman; 7. Virgil Morrow; 8. John S. Vincent; 9. Urban Lipps; 10. Thomas R. Craig; 11. Albert Stevens; 12. Harvey Davis, alleged to be a colonel in the legion.

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