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11-17-2010

“A Pattern of Hate: Galveston Case a Reminder of KKK Actions against Minorities”

On Nov. 12, 2010, three white men from New Mexico were charged with violating a federal hate-crimes law after allegedly attacking a mentally challenged Native American man named Vincent Kee. According to prosecutors, the men used a heated clothes hanger to brand a swastika on Kee's arm. As they recorded the incident with a cellphone video camera, the men wrote racist messages on Kee's body with a marker, including the words "White Power" and three letters scrawled onto his shaved head: "KKK."

By choosing to align themselves with the amalgam of organizations collectively known as the Ku Klux Klan, or KKK, the alleged perpetrators of this crime have focused renewed attention on the white supremacist group founded in 1865. And while some may only associate the group with acts committed against African-Americans, the assault of Kee is consistent with past KKK acts against other racial minorities.

The waters surrounding Galveston, Texas, were the setting for an unusual case involving the Ku Klux Klan and Vietnamese fishermen. Although it is little-remembered today, it was a case that once made national news, igniting a heated debate about race and immigration, and bringing a famed civil rights lawyer to the Texas Gulf Coast.

The Vietnamese fishermen came to Galveston in the mid-1970s, part of a wave of Vietnamese refugees who were resettled in the United States and other countries after the Vietnam War, recounts University of North Carolina law professor Andrew Chin in an online essay taken from a forthcoming book. Some of these so-called "boat people" made their way to Texas, a state with relatively few Asian Americans.

According to an Aug. 10, 1979, article in the New York Times, Vietnamese families were brought to the Galveston-area town of Seadrift in 1976 to work in a newly constructed crab processing plant that was in need of employees. Not wanting to work indoors with their wives and daughters, the males pooled their money to buy small boats for crabbing and shrimping.

As in other fishing towns where Vietnamese refugees had settled, white fishermen in the Galveston area did not appreciate having a new source of competition. Lingering tensions over the Vietnam War, a significant language barrier, economic concerns, and cultural differences caused many long-time residents to resent the presence of their new neighbors. As a result, incidents of harassment against the Vietnamese fishermen were reported as early as 1977, leading to what the Times described as an "ugly, long-simmering feud" between the two groups.

The feud boiled over on Aug. 3, 1979, when a white fisherman was shot and killed during an altercation with two Vietnamese shrimpers. In the aftermath of the killing, multiple boats belonging to Vietnamese fishermen were set on fire, and there was an attempted bombing of the crab processing plant where the Vietnamese women worked.

The two Vietnamese fishermen were found not guilty of murder on the grounds of self-defense, angering whites throughout the Galveston area who believed the men should have gone to prison. The case also drew the attention of Ku Klux Klan members, whose efforts to harass and intimidate the refugees caused many to flee Seadrift, according to an April 14, 1985, article in the Houston Chronicle.

The brother of the deceased fisherman echoed the sentiments of other white residents who spoke to the press.

"I tell you, the American people have got to know what these Vietnamese are like before the government brings in any more of them," Browder Aplin told the New York Times in 1979. "We want Americans to know how vicious these people are."

Tensions in the Gulf of Mexico continued to run high over the next two years, with more Vietnamese-owned boats being set on fire in the town of Seabrook in early 1981. There were also reports of rifle shots being fired at Vietnamese vessels.

While the white fishermen insisted they were not responsible for the acts of vandalism, they expressed their lingering frustration with the Vietnamese. Seeking help from the government, they complained that the presence of the Vietnamese shrimpers in already overcrowded Gulf waters was jeopardizing their livelihood, with a number of them having been driven out of business. They also complained that a perceived lower standard of living gave the Vietnamese an unfair economic advantage.

"The American fisherman feels he can't compete," Seabrook police chief William Kerber told the Times in 1981. "They live off rice and fish. The American fisherman can, too, but he's not going to."

Finding the government unwilling to help them, the white fishermen banded together and vowed to take action. Their leader, a Vietnam veteran named Eugene Fisher, invited members of the KKK to Seabrook to help draw attention to the issue.

On February 14, 1981, the Klan held a rally in the nearby town of Santa Fe to support the white fishermen and protest the presence of the Vietnamese. According to a Feb. 15, 1981, report by UPI, about 750 people attended the event. More than 20 of the attendees wore white robes and carried rifles and shotguns. Klan members burned a small boat bearing the words "U.S.S. Viet Cong" in effigy and instructed attendees on how to set boats on fire.

Louis Beam, leader of the Texas Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, said the group would "take matters into its own hands" if the government did not take action to remove the Vietnamese fishermen by the May 15 start of the shrimping season.

On the afternoon of March 15, 1981, hooded Klansmen circled Galveston Bay on a shrimping boat, armed with semiautomatic rifles. The boat carried a human effigy and a cannon, which the men used to fire a blank round. In view of Vietnamese fishermen and their families, the Klansmen brandished their weapons and made threatening gestures.

In response to the threats, the Vietnamese shrimpers also organized, establishing the Vietnamese Fisherman's Association, led by Nguyen Van Nam, a former member of the South Vietnamese Army. Representing the group was prominent Alabama civil rights attorney Morris Dees, who had drawn national attention for his work with the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization he co-founded in 1971.

The SPLC had established a program known as Klanwatch, which monitored the Klan's activities across the country and took legal action against KKK groups to help fight civil rights abuses. Dees was convinced that the strategy could help put an end to harassment against the Vietnamese fishermen in Seabrook, according to his 1991 memoir, "A Season for Justice."

The fishermen agreed, allowing Dees and the SPLC to file a lawsuit against the white fishermen and the Ku Klux Klan on their behalf. The suit alleged that the civil rights of the Vietnamese fishermen had been violated, and that the white fishermen were attempting to monopolize the shrimping business in Galveston Bay by shutting out the Vietnamese.

However, just before the trial began, the Vietnamese shrimpers wanted to back out. Concerned about their safety and that of their families, the men instructed Nam to tell Dees to drop the lawsuit. In a 2005 interview with the Houston Chronicle, Dees recalled that he met with the Vietnamese fishermen inside a Catholic church. He spoke to them about Martin

Luther King and the perseverance of African-Americans during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, imploring them to go through with the trial.

The men were convinced, and the trial began on May 11, 1981. For four days, a judge heard testimony from white and Vietnamese fishermen, as well as robed Klansmen and law enforcement officials. Federal marshals were present at the trial to provide protection after KKK leader Beam was alleged to have carried a pistol under his Klan robe at a pretrial deposition.

According to a May 2, 1981, story in the Houston Chronicle, Beam said he believed Dees to be "possessed by Satan," adding that "If those demons get loose, we might need five or six U.S. Marshals."

On the evening of May 14, 1981, one day before the start of the shrimping season, the judge in the case issued an injunction against the KKK and the white fishermen, preventing them from harassing the Vietnamese shrimpers.

"The Vietnamese are here and they have a right to be here," Judge Gabrielle K. McDonald told the white fisherman's group.

Along with a two-year moratorium on new shrimp boat licenses in Galveston Bay, the ruling effectively ended the dispute. Separately, the two sides negotiated an agreement in which some of the Vietnamese agreed to give up fishing in order to ease the overcrowding. The 1981 shrimping season came and went with no major incidents of harassment. The Klan, it seemed, had moved on.

In the coming years, Dees would continue his legal battles against the KKK, filing multi-million dollar lawsuits against various Klan organizations as part of a larger effort to cut-off their

financing. The strategy was generally successful, shuttering many large KKK groups across the country.

Today's Ku Klux Klan is comprised of more than 100 independent splinter groups, according to the Anti-Defamation League. However, the 2008 election of African-American Barack Obama to the US presidency has led to an upsurge in KKK membership and recruitment. The Southern Poverty Law Center and other civil rights groups are watching closely as the KKK transforms itself into a 21<sup>st</sup>-century hate group.

As the case of Vincent Kee shows, the threat of racial violence persists, and the influence of the Ku Klux Klan among those who would harm others based on their race remains strong. For nearly 150 years, whether violently assaulting a Native American man in New Mexico or harassing Vietnamese fishermen in Texas, those who carry out crimes of hatred have continued to do so in the name of the KKK.