

Naming Fanning Elementary School

Understanding the Legacy of William E. Fanning

BREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Naming Fanning Elementary School: Understanding the Legacy of William E. Fanning

Introduction

Revisionism is not new to scholarly research, especially where research about the past is concerned. Most historians will acknowledge that recorded history is simply an interpretation of a

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past event based on the available sources and often influenced by the historian's worldview and bias. Of course, historians work tirelessly to segregate personal bias from historical research but we acknowledge here that this effort can at times prove difficult. To that point, historians will balance research efforts with the widest breath of source material available; seeking sources that addresses all points and perspectives of the research topic. The task, often time consuming and laborious, requires absolute acceptance that the very next source discovery may in fact alter already made interpretations of the past.

The collective memory developed within any society is deeply influenced by each person's recollection of the past and when amalgamated, becomes the accepted social narrative. For the most part, this process works well, that is until a past event is viewed exclusively through a contemporary lens, inserting a whole other level of bias into the interpretation; a bias that is out of context to the event and therefore and quite often inappropriately judgmental in nature. We believe this is the condition that exists today within the heightened interest in monument removal, school renaming, and the general concern that historical reference should reflect 21st century moral standards. Sadly, the legacy of many historic figures falls short of modern standards but oversimplifying their memory to a single view or trying to erase difficult parts of history from our collective memory could also be counterproductive. We can help our future generations develop "Habits of Mind" by engaging the Common Core standards already in place; specifically, helping students develop the "ability to question and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning of an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises."¹ It is from this premise that our research on the legacy of William E. Fanning was conducted.

Over the course of several weeks numerous archives, peer-reviewed articles, museum collections, scholarly books, primary sources including family members and friends as well as popular websites that are not scholarly based, were accessed. We consulted with Stan Oftelie, a well-established expert about Ku Klux Klan activity in Orange County as well as Michael Rodriguez, the petitioner, to ensure we assessed the research inquiry from the broadest perspective. Our research focused on the allegation that William E. Fanning was a member of the Ku Klux Klan sometime during the 1920s and that the Ku Klux Klan was a racist organization during that period. While we conducted an exhaustive review of the available literature and resources, we do not claim to have reviewed the entire literature base on this subject. Other sources, not yet available or accessed may in fact alter this interpretation. We are however confident that the research provides substantial support for the conclusions drawn.

Research Questions

- 1. Was William E. Fanning a member of the Ku Klux Klan?**
- 2. Why was an elementary school named after William E. Fanning?**

¹ Orange County Department of Education / Office of Academic Content. 2017, "Common Core Habits of Mind," Accessed November 27, 2017 <http://new.ocde.us/CommonCoreCA/Pages/Habits-of-Mind.aspx>

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3. *Is there evidence to substantiate William E. Fanning was a racist?*
4. *Was there a Ku Klux Klan presence in Brea during the first half of the 20th century?*
5. *What kind of organization was the Ku Klux Klan during the first half of the 20th century?*

Was William E. Fanning a member of the Ku Klux Klan?

The evidence that petitioner Michael Rodriguez cites for his claim is a list of names which is part of the Anaheim Heritage Museum's collection. The list, which is two separate lists, (one five pages, the other 22 pages with page 15 missing) is not part of a specific collection but rather part of the Heritage Museum's research materials. Jane Newell, Heritage Services Manager has assured us there is no provenance for the list and it was already part of the Museum's collection before she joined the Museum more than 20 years ago. She suspects it was given to the Heritage Museum, many years ago, by the City Attorney's office but again she cannot be sure. Both lists are typewritten on legal size notepad and the top copy of the shorter list has a handwritten heading of "Ku Klux Klan file." There is also a typewritten heading "List of Orange County Members KKK." Again, it is critically important to note that there is no provenance for the list and there is no specific reference to it in any part of the Museum's collections or archives. In other words, we do not know who created the list or when it was created or what it represents. There is considerable speculation surrounding the list because "a list" is referenced in several other works; most notably the 1979 Doctoral dissertation of Christopher Cocoltchos.² Mr. Cocoltchos includes a citation for a list maintained at the Library of Congress. We submitted two formal inquiries to the Library of Congress and were advised there is no record of a list of Orange County KKK Members from the 1920s. It is possible such a list exists but is catalogued within a collection and without the specifics of the collection would be impossible to locate. The source Mr. Cocoltchos listed in his bibliography, "Anaheim Klan Papers" is not the name of an actual collection at the Library of Congress.³ Again, the list maintained at the Anaheim Heritage Museum, which is referred to in Michael Rodriguez's petition, has no provenance and cannot be substantiated.

Regardless and returning to Mr. Rodriguez's source, there are 200 names recorded on the first list and 1242 names on the second; Mr. Fanning's name appears in the second list.⁴ There are two names listed from Brea in the first list and 106 listed from Brea and Olinda in the second list. It should also be noted some entries do not have some details including city, address or occupation so it is possible more entries could belong in Brea. The two lists differ from each other in that the first lists the name, city, and address while the second lists the name, occupation, address, and city. There are no other details on the lists regarding ownership. Again, we have no provenance for the list

² Cocoltchos, Christopher Nickolas. *The Invisible Government and the Viable Community: The Ku Klux Klan in Orange County, California During the 1920s.* 1979 PhD Dissertation. <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/1453350> (accessed November 19, 2017).

³ *Ibid*, p. 732.

⁴ *Ku Klux Klan Research Collection. Anaheim Heritage Museum, Anaheim, California.*

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(there is no date or author). These points considered we can only verify that William E. Fanning is included in the list of names.

Why was Fanning Elementary named after William E. Fanning?

On May 14, 1968, at the regular meeting of the Brea Olinda Board of Education, Board Member Mr. Piantoni made a motion, seconded by Mr. O'Malley, to name the new elementary school that was to be constructed in the northeast section of Brea, the William E. Fanning Elementary School in honor of the former Superintendent.⁵ The motion was passed.

On May 15, 1968, the Orange County Register announced the decision indicating "the Brea Olinda Unified School District trustees bypassed its system of naming schools by area and streets"⁶ by agreeing unanimously to name the new school after William E. Fanning. Leo Piantoni, former student and Board Member who made the motion was quoted to say, "This is not unusual to name a former superintendent to this honor."⁷ It should also be noted that Vincent Jaster's name was also considered for the new school though the board decided to reconsider Jaster later if another new school was built.

Is there evidence to support the claim that William E. Fanning was a racist?

Mr. Rodriguez also cites the series of articles that appeared in the online magazine, *The OC Weekly*. Written by Gustavo Arellano, the series covers dozens of historical figures from Orange County who were alleged to be members of the Ku Klux Klan during the early part of the 20th century. The series was begun on February 15, 2011 and ran through 2012; each article chronicling a different group of alleged Klan members or active Klan cities.⁸ In the opening piece, Mr. Arellano references "the list" maintained at the Anaheim Heritage Museum; a copy given to him by Mr. Luis Fernandez, a historian, professor, and Executive Director of the Dominguez Adobe Museum.⁹ Mr. Arellano also indicates "The provenance of the list is unknown, no one knows for sure who compiled it or even when, but it does list the names, addresses, and occupations for hundreds of men." It is interesting to note however that Mr. Arellano continues the list "was instrumental in defeating the Klan, an incident long celebrated by orange-crate historians. Most of the names are that of regular ol'working-class Whites- but not all of them."¹⁰ This declarative statement is troublesome in that it is substantiated by a list already indicated to lack provenance.

⁵ Brea-Olinda School Board, *Board of Education Regular Meeting Minutes May 14, 1968*. On file at Brea-Olinda School Board Office, Brea, Ca.

⁶ *Brea Star Progress*, "School to be Named After Bill Fanning." May 15, 1968.

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Arellano, Gustavo. "Announcing the Which OC Pioneers were KKK Members Series." *The OC Weekly Magazine*. <http://www.ocweekly.com/news/announcing-the-which-oc-pioneers-were-kkk-members-series-6444018> (accessed December 12, 2017)

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*

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While we have not had direct contact with Mr. Arellano, based on the content of the series, it is reasonable to suggest his principle argument is; *many Orange County pioneers were racists and enacted prejudicial policies and exhibited behaviors that discriminated against several classes of minorities; most specifically African-American's and Mexican-Americans.* The OC Weekly May 2, 2011 article focuses on Charles McClure, Brea's first Police Chief. In the article Mr. Arellano lays the groundwork for his thesis when he indicates:

Anaheim's Klan was more obsessed with temperance than minorities; Fullerton's Klukkers were mostly obsessed with booting out Mexicans from the city limits. But for a bit of the old Klan, the guys who hated blacks and wanted nothing to do with them, you'd have to travel up to Brea, the county's only verified city that was a sundown town, that peculiar Southern institution that forbade African- Americans from staying within a city's limits after sunset--or else.

The man in charge of enforcing the "or else" provision in Brea's early days was its first chief of police, Charles McClure, a Klan member long after the Orange County District Attorney's office discouraged public employees (if not outright banned; need to remember) from joining the Invisible Empire.¹¹

Though Brea is referenced as a "sundown town" by several residents during the period, there is no ordinance on record establishing it as such. Mr. Arellano's claim that the "sundown town" distinction was verified cannot be substantiated. It is critically important to note that the subject of "sundown towns" speaks to a general nativist proclivity during the period and while many towns throughout the country are alleged to have adopted policies forbidding African Americans from residing or even being within town borders after dark, these policies were rarely formalized into ordinances.¹² Again, there is no ordinance in Brea's records establishing it as a "sundown town."¹³

The July 11, 2011 article focuses on William E. Fanning and the naming of Fanning Elementary School. In it Mr. Arellano indicates:

The legacy of school segregation in Orange County really needs no introduction 'round these parts. But what still needs to get examined is the political allegiances of the architects of such policies--beyond the mere racism that existed in Orange County before the 1950s, and toward the Coast to Coast territory of bona fide conspiracies. Many educators during the 1920s

¹¹ Arellano, Gustavo. "Profiles in OC, Pioneers who were Klan Members: Charles McClure Brea's First Police Chief." *The OC Weekly Magazine* <http://www.ocweekly.com/news/profiles-in-oc-pioneers-who-were-klan-members-charles-mcclure-breas-first-police-chief-6472328> (Accessed December 14, 2017)

¹² Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017.

¹³ Brea City Ordinance. *City of Brea Website/City Clerk Public*. <http://weblink.cityofbrea.net/WebLink/Browse.aspx?isTimeout=1&dbid=0> (accessed November 14-30, 2017).

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*belonged to the Ku Klux Klan and took the KKK's philosophy of white supremacy to heart by creating Mexican-only schools with subpar education. Of course, those stories don't get into the history books--and here we are. We already talked about Roy Horton, the 'SanTana rustee' who wanted to fire school employees who weren't Klan. And then there's a titan of OC education who's name I won't reveal until I end this series, which probably won't be for three more years, *inshallah*. But today, the educator we'll focus on is William E. Fanning of Brea.¹⁴*

Mr. Arellano continues:

*Brea's schools were never segregated because there was no need to. The city, of course, was a sundown town, where African-American families couldn't legally live. Mexicans were okay, but they all feared the racial animus in town. As former California, Supreme Court Judge Cruz Reynoso recalled in a 2002 interview, his family was one of two Mexican families in Brea during the 1930s. Two, in a county that even then had a sizable Mexican community. They got the hell out while they could--and with a Klucker like Fanning at the head of education, who could blame them? Tellingly, Brea named William E. Fanning Elementary school after the *pendejo*--what a town!¹⁵*

The February 15, 2011 and July 11, 2011 OC Weekly articles appear to be the substantiating evidence used by Mr. Rodriguez and the underlying motivation for the petition filed with the Brea-Olinda School Board. The tenor of these articles makes clear Mr. Arellano's concern and passion for the topic, however his lack of credible or substantiated evidence is problematic for his thesis. Further, Mr. Rodriguez's reliance on this content as the justification for the petition filed against the Brea-Olinda School District is equally problematic. Neither Mr. Arellano nor Mr. Rodriguez include scholarly or peer-reviewed sources. This reduces the articles and petition's credibility to the rank of editorial commentary.

Was there a Ku Klux Klan presence in Brea during the first half of the 20th century?

The simple answer is yes; however, it should be noted that little about the Ku Klux Klan of the early 20th Century was simple. While the basic tenet of Ku Klux Klan ideology was the assumption and in fact naturalness of white supremacy, even in the racially charged Southwest,

¹⁴ Arellano, Gustavo. "Profiles in OC, Pioneers who were Klan Members: William E. Fanning School Pioneer, Namesake of Fanning Elementary." *The OC Weekly Magazine* <http://www.ocweekly.com/news/profiles-in-oc-pioneers-who-were-klan-members-william-e-fanning-brea-schools-pioneer-namesake-of-fanning-elementary-6456127> (Accessed November 14, 2017).

¹⁵ *Ibid*

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there was considerable selectivity in the application of Klan racial proscriptions.¹⁶ The distinction between rhetoric and action was often confounded by regional, and quite often local variations in the Klan's movement. While national Klan leadership tried to steer members in targeted bigotry, there was a clear tendency of local klaverns to emphasize their own concerns; in California, the Klan's focus was predominately directed to anti-Japanese, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic activities.¹⁷ This is not to indicate there were no racially charged activities by Klansmen in Southern California, but rather to emphasize they were generally the exception and not the rule.

A review of the Brea Progress newspaper published between 1917 and 1930 did not yield any articles specific to Mr. Fanning and Ku Klux Klan activities. There were a handful of articles that referenced Klan activities in other cities; predominately Anaheim. There was one article from May 1924 that referenced an incident where eight hooded Klansmen entered a church service being held in Craig Hall in Brea. The men walked up one aisle and down another without speaking to anyone. One of the Klansmen left a check, found by Reverend Tratt, for \$25.00. The check was signed by a local Anaheim merchant.¹⁸ Klan activity was mentioned in several Oral Histories recorded in the 1980's at CalState Fullerton but none relay specific incidents of violence, prejudice or bigotry by Mr. Fanning or anyone. These references can be found in the Oral History by; Karl Fanning, Catherine Seiler, Vincent Jaster, Dyer Bennett, and Ralph Barnes.¹⁹ It should be noted that Karl Fanning remembers his family attending a Klan rally in Anaheim when he was a child because "they were curious."²⁰ Mr. Fanning continues "My dad was not a Ku-Klux Klan member and didn't support the idea at all. He was totally, completely opposed to the effort of that group, but they were active in this area."²¹

It should be noted that other cities in Orange County did have a more developed Klan presence early in the 20th century; specifically, Anaheim. The 1975 book *The Activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Anaheim, California 1923-1925*, Melching indicates that after the Klan became established in Los Angeles in 1921, it spread to surrounding areas including Brea.²² Though the nativist hysteria that had permeated American society had begun to die down by 1923, that was not

¹⁶ Pegram, Thomas R. *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's*. Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publishing, 2011.

¹⁷ Baker, Kelly J. "robes, fiery crosses, and the american flag: the materiality of the 1920s' klan's christianity, patriotism, and intolerance." *Material Religion* 7, no. 3 (November 2011): 312-343. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed November 22, 2017).

¹⁸ Anaheim Gazette. "KK Visits Church" May 24, 1923.

¹⁹ California State University, Fullerton Oral History Project. *Ralphs Barnes, Vincent Jaster, Karl Fanning, Dyer Bennett, Catherine Seiler*. 1982. On File at the Brea Museum & Historical Society and The Lawrence deGraaf Center for Public and Oral History (COPH,) Fullerton, CA.

²⁰ Ibid, *Karl H. Fanning*, p. 77.

²¹ Ibid, p. 78.

²² Melching, Richard. "The Activities of the Ku Klux Klan In Anaheim, California 1923-1925." *Southern California Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1974): 175-96. doi:10.2307/41170523.

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the case in Anaheim, thus the organization spread quickly and concentrated its efforts in political spheres.²³

Interpretation of the Research

The Ku Klux Klan as a research topic is extremely large and complex. As indicated previously, we have conducted exhaustive research but understand there will continue to be new interpretations on the subject; especially considering the current social trend toward monument removal and revisionism. Regardless, we found no credible or substantiated evidence to support the claim that William E. Fanning was a racist. Further, we found no credible evidence to support the claim that William E. Fanning, as an alleged member of the Ku Klux Klan, behaved in a manner that could be considered discriminatory, prejudicial, or racist during his career at the Brea-Olinda School District. Finally, we found no credible evidence to indicate William E. Fanning, over the course of his very long life and residence in Brea, ever displayed questionable behavior toward any individual or group of people. Instead we found numerous sources that claimed Mr. Fanning was a self-less, compassionate, and dedicated educator.²⁴

Summary of Mr. Fanning's work history as Brea Olinda Educator/Principal

Mr. Fanning is credited with, over the course of a 28-year career with the Brea-Olinda School District (1914-1942), the introduction many new programs and policies including manual training, music, sewing, drawing, cooking, and physical education.²⁵ He is also credited with forming the district's first orchestra. Mr. Fanning was also City Electrician between 1920 and 1930 as well as Superintendent of the district.²⁶

Summary of Mr. Fanning's work history after retirement

When Mr. Fanning retired, after 28 years of service to the Brea-Olinda School District, he did not retire from civic activity. He was an avid horticulturist and organized a local garden club for school children. He was President of the Lions Club and a director of the Oilfield National Bank. He was also a co-founder of the city's civil service program and a member of the board at the Brea Christian Church.²⁷ In 1942 he worked for eight years as a US Mail Carrier. In 1950, he worked ten years as a bookkeeper for the Virgil Kiger Decomposed Granite Company.²⁸ The city of Brea designated September 28, 1976 as William E. Fanning Day.²⁹

We found no evidence in newspaper articles or personal recollections to indicate that Mr. Fanning was in any way racially motivated.

²³ Ibid, p. 175

²⁴ Wolfe, Paul. "Fanning Tells School Experiences in Brea." *Brea Progress* February 19, 1937.

²⁵ McDowell, Richard. "First School Head Still Active Here." *Brea Progress*. September 24, 1966.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Gaede, Susan. "William Fanning: He gave so much and asked for nothing." *Brea News Times*. October 17, 1979

²⁹ Ibid

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Conclusion

While there is considerable evidence of a Ku Klux Klan presence in Orange County during the early part of the 20th Century, our research was focused on Mr. William E. Fanning and his alleged involvement in the organization. Further, our research also substantiates that the behaviors demonstrated by Ku Klux Klan members could be interpreted as admirable in some regards to racially charged in others, we found no point of intersection between the Ku Klux Klan and William E. Fanning directly. Based on our interpretation of the data, we find no credible evidence to support the petitioner's allegations. The Brea Historical Society remains completely unbiased in this matter and as such we draw no conclusions or offer any recommendations based on the data outside of the interpretations. The Brea-Olinda School Board remains the sole authority in what action, if any, should be taken regarding the naming of William E. Fanning Elementary School.

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