Speaker 1:

What symbols do you see proudly displayed at the top of Skinner Butte? The United States flag flapping above your head and the University of Oregon's Big O on the hillside. These symbols announce core parts of Eugene's identity to everyone in the city below. But these are not the only symbols that people have placed here to announce their allegiances, values, and even threats to the community. Zachary Stocks, executive director of Oregon Black Pioneers, explains how the KKK used the Butte to amplify their presence in Eugene in the early 1900s.

Zachary Stocks:

In the 1920s, Oregon had the largest Ku Klux Klan membership per capita of any state in the nation. One out of every 25 to 30 people in Oregon, during 1923, were card carrying members of the Ku Klux Klan. Interestingly, because Oregon's black population in the 1920s was so small, the black community was not the largest target for Oregon's Klan. It was actually Catholics. But the Klan intimidated, threatened, and did commit acts of violence against Catholics, Latinos, black people, Jewish people, and others who were unsympathetic to the Klan's messaging. The Klan went out of their way to demonstrate the size of their local Klavern and the popularity of their messaging through demonstrations on Skinner Butte. Obviously such a prominent landmark in town, the visibility of large letters, KKK spelled out on this Butte, would've been a clear sign to people that this is a Klan town.

And that if you are someone that doesn't believe in what the Klan stands for, or that you might be a target of harassment from the Klan, you'd probably be better off not coming here. And so from the period when the Oregon Ku Klux Klan was at its highest from say, 1921 through about 1924, Eugene was absolutely one of its most prominent locations.

Speaker 1:

In 1936, a 24-foot high wooden cross outlined and Red Neon was erected at the top of Skinner Butte, beginning a decades long controversy. While the cross and the ones that replaced it over the next 60 years were not explicitly connected to the KKK, many people associated the symbol with the crosses burned on Skinner Butte by the Klan in the 1920s. Eric Richardson, lifelong resident of Eugene and past president of Eugene's Chapter of the NAACP, relates his memories of the cross on the Butte.

Eric Richardson:

I understand when I was in sixth grade, I would see every night the cross lit up on Skinner's Butte Hill. It wasn't on fire, but it was electricity. And the cross was lit up. It was burning every night. And when I looked up there, it was a reminder of the Ku Klux Klan in 1982 through the year it was taken down, there were those who would argue that that symbol had nothing to do with the Klan. When we know that on that spot, the Klan burned crosses, and then later on an electrified cross was put up there. And so it's inevitable that the victims of racial crime and violence would make that association. And so it's great that in the '90s we were able to say, "Okay, this is something that we're sensitive to, and move the cross."

Speaker 1:

After decades of controversy, including several lawsuits going all the way to the Supreme Court, the city removed the cross in 1998. Community groups erected the flagpole and overlook as a Veteran's Memorial in its place. Learn more about Oregon's black history by visiting the Oregon Black Pioneers and the Eugene Chapter of the NAACP's websites. This project was created by the Shelton McMurphey Johnson House Museum and was made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities.