Klan members jeered by motorists

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WINSTED — About 10 Ku Klux Klan members wearing white hoods and carrying a banner demonstrated in East End Park for an hour yesterday afternoon, prompting a mostly angry reaction from passing motorists.

"People were driving by, beeping their horns and yelling obscenities," said Linda Bollenbach, a clerk at the nearby Verdi antique shop on Main Street.

She said she noticed the Klan rally at about noon, when several customers came in visibly shaken by the sight of the hooded men and women outside.

"They are a distasteful group," Bollenbach said. "You don't like to think of it being in your town. It gives you a sick-to-your-stomach kind of feeling."

Johanna Parrott, who works at Getting Off clothing store, said the Klan demonstration was "disgusting." She said some of her customers hesitated to park in front of the store because of it. "One woman said she was afraid they were going to come up to her car," Parrott said.

Demonstrators were handing out pamphlets titled "Introduction to the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan" and copies of The Klansman newspaper to pedestrians and drivers who were stopped at the traffic light near the park.

The pamphlet described the origin of the group and what its symbolic outfits and rituals mean. The newspaper had articles about the riots in Los Angeles, photographs of burning crosses and a cartoon showing two men hanging from a tree branch.

Bristol resident William Dodge, a Klan grand dragon, said yesterday's demonstration was part of a statewide recruitment campaign.

According to Dodge, Klan members in Winsted said local residents were interested in their views, so they decided to hand out some leaflets.

He said there are also a few members in Torrington, but neither town has an organized group. Dodge would not say how many members the Klan has in Connecticut.

Dodge contended that the Klan does not hate other races. "We're a pro-white organization," he said. "Civil rights has gone 180 degrees. . . . We don't particularly believe there's justice for whites or blacks in this country."

Winsted police officer Joe Forster, who along with Acting Chief Anthony Paige kept an eye on the demonstration, said the Klan members have a right to assemble in public.

"There's nothing we can do, it's not illegal to hand out pamphlets," Forster said. "Much as I do not like the KKK, I have spent 25 years in the police department protecting people's rights — this is America and we still have a few more rights than other countries."

Community Lawyer Charlene LaVoie said she also noticed the demonstrators from her office window across the street, but decided not to join a small group of students who were protesting against them.

"They have a First Amendment right to stand in a public place and espouse their political views," she said, "but I wouldn't give their views credence by going down there."