

Excerpt from “Ghost Town—Almost: The Depression Hits a Negro Town” by Isabel M. Thompson and Louise T. Clarke (September 1935)

By eighteen-eighty, there were five hundred inhabitants in Nicodemus, which boasted a bank, two hotels, a newspaper, drug store, a number of "general stores," and several other business houses. An area of twelve square miles was being cultivated.

... [T]he state-wide political influence of the town flourished. Ed McKabe, a Negro land agent, took the first census, was later elected county clerk, and was finally sent to the capital to be the first Negro State Auditor of Kansas. The founding of Nicodemus seems well worthwhile when one learns that more Negroes have been elected to county offices in Graham County than in all of the other one-hundred four Kansas counties combined. Some of these men were: John DePrad, a pioneer who was county clerk; J. R. Hawkins, court clerk; J. E. Porter, court clerk; G. W. Jones, county clerk and district attorney; Dan Hickman, chairman of the board of county commissioners; W. L. Sayers, county attorney; John Q. Sayers, county attorney. The two Sayers brothers are now practicing attorneys in Hill City.

In 1928, the farmers of Nicodemus were cultivating from fifty to one thousand acres each. When the seasons were favorable, the lands frequently yielded more value in wheat than the actual sale value of the land.

Everyone knows what happened to business in 1929, and what subsequently happened to the farmer's prices. Almost all of the young people left Nicodemus during the financial upheaval. Further, Nature has given a freak side-show of weather conditions in Western Kansas. Droughts of 1932, 1933, and 1934 were followed by destructive dust storms in the late winter and early spring of 1935. Entire families deserted this unproductive region.

SOURCE: Isabel Thompson and Louise T. Clarke, “Ghost Town—Almost: The Depression Hits a Negro Town,” *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life* 13 (September 1935): 277. Reprinted at <http://newdeal.feri.org/opp/opp35277.htm>. Last Accessed December 5, 2008.