

# Deconstructing the Rural Kansas Stereotype: The Story of Bradford, Wabaunsee County, a Lost Biracial Community, 1890-1941

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Fall 2017



*The students of the District 27 one-room schoolhouse in Bradford, Kansas – 1938*  
*SOURCE: Wabaunsee County Historical Society Archives*

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Bradford, located in Section 23 of Wilmington Township, Wabaunsee County, Kansas, was a small community that tells a unique story of racial coexistence and rural population decline. Black and white residents both called the area home and coexisted in relative peace — taking classes at the same school, worshipping at the same church, shopping at the same businesses, and being buried in the same cemetery. In the 1890s and early 1900s, the community was bustling, but in the decades following, it witnessed closures and consolidations due in part to the increasing use and availability of the automobile. This study is mostly based on interviews with a local historian and publicly available historical society, library, and newspaper archives.

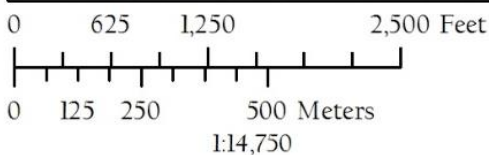
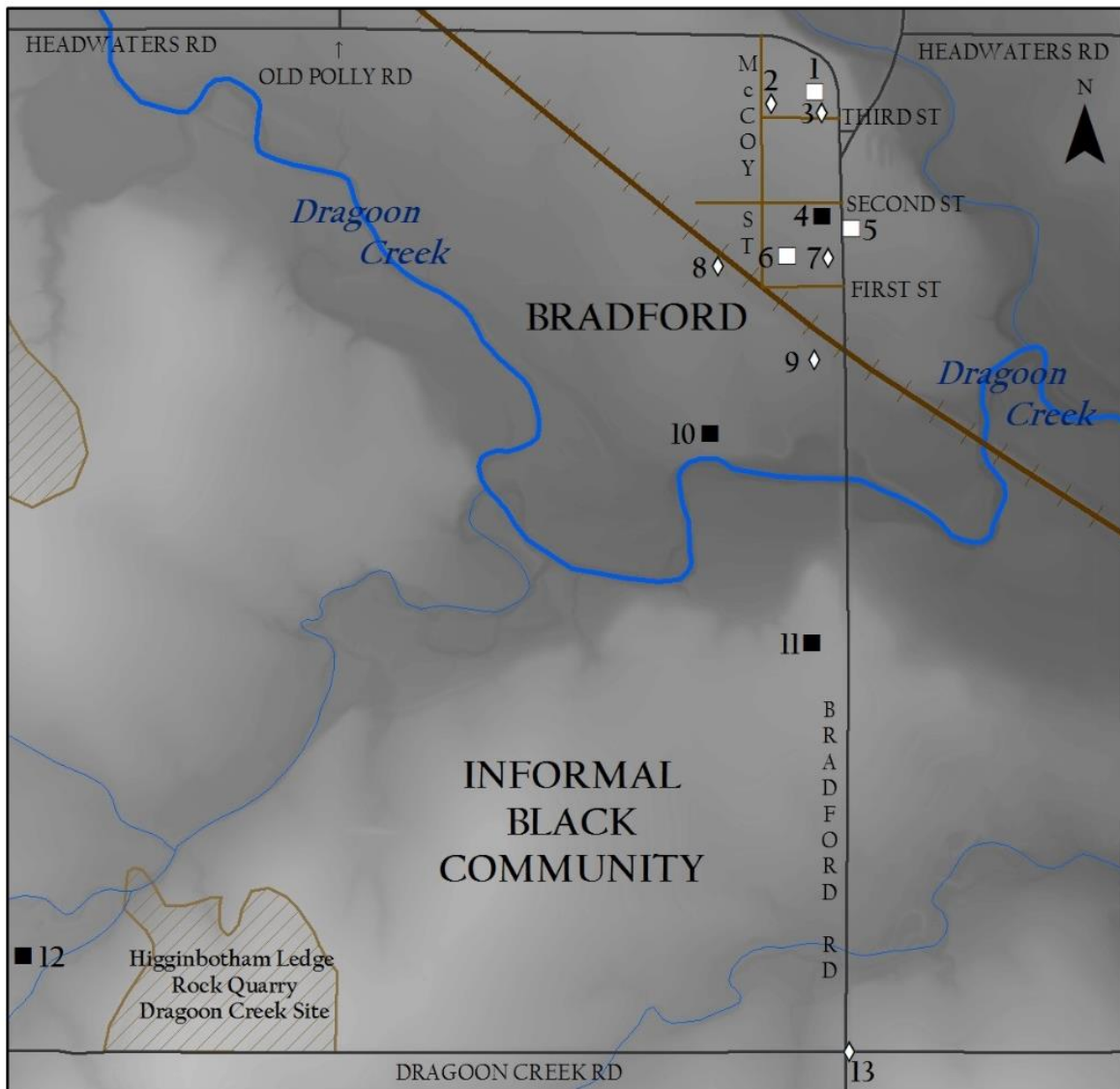
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**CONTENT WARNING: This work includes images, stories, and terms that some readers may find distressing. Topics include the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and racial discrimination. Pejorative terms for racial and ethnic minorities, including the “N-word,” are used in an historical context.**

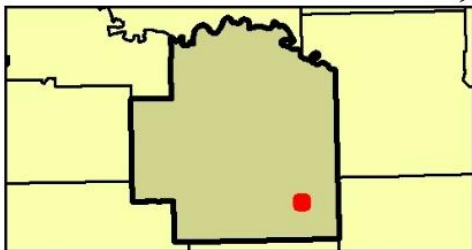
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# Landmarks around Bradford, Wabaunsee County, Kansas



### Location within Wabaunsee County



### LANDMARKS

1. Garage
2. District 27 One-Room Schoolhouse
3. M.E. Church
4. House (unknown status) and the Bradford sign
5. House (owned by R.A. Kraus in 1973)
6. Lone chimney
7. George Ford's Store and Post Office
8. Stockyards
9. Rail Depot
10. Farm buildings (owned by Simon Griffith in 1885)
11. Immenschuh Farm
12. Higginbotham House
13. District 27 One-Room Schoolhouse (original location)

### Landmarks

- Occupied or Likely Occupied
- Abandoned, but Still Standing
- ◇ No Longer Standing
- Bradford Streets (no longer exist)
- Modern Roads
- MAB Railway (1880-1972)
- Streams
- ▨ Quarry
- High Elevation: 1345 ft./410 m.
- Low Elevation: 1131 ft./345 m.

Map by Karl Bauer, January 2018

Data sources: ESRI, KSHS, WCHS, KDOT, USCB, Benetta Foster, primary research

## INTRODUCTION

Picture yourself walking down the dusty main street of a small town, somewhere on the vast untamed prairies of the Great Plains, circa 1890, anywhere from Manitoba to the Mexican border. Who are the people you are surrounded by? Are they recent immigrants from Scandinavia or Germany? Are they people from the East who took advantage of the free land offered by the Homestead Act of 1862? Either way, they are certainly all white, right? For some communities, including Bradford, in Wabaunsee County, Kansas, this was not the case.

For the most part, white settlers were indeed the first to break the sod of the prairies, but this is not the rule. There is an old and deeply held stereotype that the middle section of the United States is, or at least, was devoid of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, and that the people there are all closed-minded, bigoted, and not open to “outsiders.” For example, based on my time living in North Dakota, when I would explain to someone who had never been there that the rural Great Plains has a history of unique ethnic diversity, they would often superciliously reply, asking “What, you have both Germans *AND* Norwegians?” It is precisely for this reason that it comes as a surprise when these people learn the first mosque building in the United States was a “small, half-basement” sod structure near Ross, North Dakota, constructed in 1929 by Lebanese pioneers.<sup>1</sup> They are equally surprised to hear there was once a thriving colony of freed black slaves in Nicodemus, a small town on the High Plains of western Kansas.<sup>2</sup> Both examples tell stories of different ethnic groups coexisting with their neighbors in relative peace in areas where conventional knowledge would state the opposite. While these communities have, more or less, had their stories told, Bradford, Kansas, a community with both substantial black and white populations, has not. This work aims to change that.

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman 1983, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Nicodemus National Historic Site.

Bradford never had a population in excess of 100 people and was never officially incorporated.<sup>3</sup> It does, however, provide a unique story — one both of racism and a lack thereof. Bradford’s black and white residents worshipped at the same church, were taught in the same one-room schoolhouse, shopped in the same stores, and are buried in the same cemetery — somewhat progressive for the 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan had a ubiquitous presence in Wabaunsee County and attempted lynchings of a black man in Alma, the county seat, gained international press attention.<sup>5</sup>

Bradford not only tells a story of race, but of a societal and economic shift that has been radically transforming rural America, especially the Great Plains, over the past century — rural population decline. It is a story that is not unique to Bradford and it has led to the demise of about 9,000 other “lost Kansas communities.”<sup>6</sup> Since the years leading up to World War I, which some scholars call “the golden age of the Great Plains small town,” small towns and isolated rural areas across the Great Plains have witnessed their populations slowly drop, their businesses close, and their schools consolidate. Some towns, like Bradford, have been completely abandoned. The reasons for this decline include the mechanization of agriculture, the rise of the automobile, the “Too-Much Mistake,” and a variety of other factors, outlined and discussed later. Today, the once thriving community of Bradford sits abandoned, and only a sign (Figure 1) and a few abandoned buildings give clues to the location of the fascinating town that once existed.

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<sup>3</sup> Polk 1900, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with Benetta Foster, November 2017, local historian, Eskridge, Kansas.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Morgan J. Morgan, December 2017, Professor, Department of History, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas and *Ottawa Journal*. 10 July 1899.

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with Morgan J. Morgan, December 2017, Professor, Department of History, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.



Figure 1: The old sign marking the location of Bradford. Photo taken from Bradford Road. Photo by author, November 2017.

The information in this paper is based on publicly available data furnished by the Wabaunsee County Historical Society, the Kansas State Historical Society, Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Libraries, the U.S. Census Bureau, various media outlets, newspapers.com, ancestry.com, and the Chapman Center for Rural Studies at Kansas State University. Additional information was gathered from interviews with Benetta Foster, a local historian in Eskridge, Kansas, as well as residents in southeastern Wabaunsee County and northern Lyon County, Kansas, in November and December 2017. Far more information on Bradford is available than what is published in this work and will likely be published at a later date.



## BEFORE THERE WAS A BRADFORD

Bradford was built in the early 1890s, but its history stretches back much further.

Bradford is on the eastern edge of the Flint Hills, a region characterized by its Permian limestone hills and the tallgrass prairie. The region contains very few trees, and the few trees that do exist are found along streams. Bradford, due to its location between two branches of Dragoon Creek (Figure 2), would likely have been a mixture of deciduous trees, shrubs, and grasses when white settlers first arrived.<sup>7</sup> Socolofsky and Self classify southeastern Wabaunsee County, where Bradford is located, as a “mosaic of bluestem prairie and oak-hickory forest.”<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2: Trees lining Dragoon Creek. Photo taken from the Bradford Road bridge, what used to be the south side of Bradford. Photo by author, October 2017.

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<sup>7</sup> Gillen and Davy 1885, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Socolofsky and Self 1988, p. 5.

The land that makes up Wabaunsee County today is the homeland of the Kaw, or Kansa People.<sup>9</sup> As white settlement expanded westward across the United States, eastern tribes were displaced, and were moved to Kansas, among other places. In 1846, reservations in and near what is now Wabaunsee County included the Kansa, Shawnee, and Sac and Fox of Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> An 1857 map shows the Pottawatomie Reservation was nearby, as well, located partially in northern Wabaunsee (then Richardson) County.<sup>11</sup> The only known written story relating to interactions with indigenous peoples in the Bradford area comes from Matt Thomson's 1901 *Early History of Wabaunsee County*. The story tells of settlers, four Thomson boys, sharing their food with an American Indian couple in 1857 (Figure 3). Weeks later, the boys were treated to venison in appreciation of their kindness.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3: The Indian visitors that the Thomson boys fed and were later treated to venison by.  
SOURCE: Thomson 1901, no page number.

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<sup>9</sup> Socolofsky and Self 1988, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Socolofsky and Self 1988, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> MacLean and Lawrence 1857.

<sup>12</sup> Thomson 1901, p. 114-115.

The first substantial white population came to southeastern Wabaunsee County as a result of the Santa Fe Trail, which passed about six miles south of Bradford (Figure 4).<sup>13</sup> The Santa Fe Trail served as an overland route from Independence, Missouri, to the Mexican state of Nuevo México, and carried travelers and merchants from its establishment in 1828 until the introduction of the railroad in 1880. Wilmington, one of the early communities of Wabaunsee County, started as a campsite along the Santa Fe Trail where it met Fort Leavenworth Military Road. Wilmington's post office opened on May 21, 1857.<sup>14</sup> The community grew to include a one-room schoolhouse (Figure 5), a blacksmith, a wagon shop, a hotel, two stores, and as many as 30 houses.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the Santa Fe Trail, Fort Leavenworth Military Road and Fort Riley Military Road passed near Bradford, as well.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 4: Red granite Santa Fe Trail marker in front of the Wilmington, Kansas one-room schoolhouse. Photo by author, December 2017.

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<sup>13</sup> Franzwa 1989, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Baughman 1961, p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> Historical marker in front of the one-room schoolhouse, Wilmington, Kansas.

<sup>16</sup> "1855 map of Richardson (Wabaunsee) County, Kansas" 1855 and "Richardson County and Wabaunsee County, Kansas, survey 1855-1856; 1866; 1927," p. 28.





Figure 5: The one-room schoolhouse in Wilmington, Kansas. Photo by author, December 2017.

Wilmington was bypassed by the railroad in favor of Harveyville, and as the relative speed and convenience of rail travel quickly gained favor over travel by foot or animal power on the Santa Fe Trail, the community lost its main link to the rest of the world, as well as its economic driver. The community dwindled, and by October 31, 1906, the post office closed. The one-room schoolhouse would remain open until 1950. Today, Wilmington consists of the closed school, a Church of Christ (built 1870), a cemetery, and a few houses.

The further decline of Wilmington and the growth of nearby Harveyville, and eventually, Bradford, is the direct result of the construction of the Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway. Once it was constructed, businesses moved north to the newer and quickly expanding town of Harveyville. The railway was built to accommodate the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad's increasing need for coal. The railway connected the coal fields of Burlingame to the

company's main line in Manhattan in a northwest-southeast direction.<sup>17</sup> When the railway reached Alma on July 5, 1880, it was met with immense celebration.<sup>18</sup>

### **BIRTH OF A TOWN**

The Bradford area consisted of small farms up to the arrival of the Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway. After the railway arrived in the 1880s, a stop was needed between Eskridge and Harveyville. It has been said that an influential Bradford farmer, Charles C. Gardner (also spelled Gardiner in other sources), was “instrumental” in the opening of Bradford Station in 1889 and the post office in 1890.<sup>19</sup> In 1902, Gardner was elected director of the Kansas State Historical Society.<sup>20</sup>

It is not an exaggeration to say Bradford is a product of the Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway. The town was even named after the railway's first engineer, Sam Bradford.<sup>21</sup> After the opening of the station in 1889, Bradford grew rapidly. One year later, a post office was established. An 1891 article in the Topeka State Journal described Bradford as a “prosperous town.”<sup>22</sup> By September 1892, the Methodist Episcopal church opened (Figure 6).<sup>23</sup> Several other businesses, including mills, a creamery, a blacksmith shop, and as many as three general stores opened as the community rapidly expanded.<sup>24</sup> A one-room schoolhouse had been operating near Bradford since February 17, 1860 (demonstrating that even the earliest of settlers

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<sup>17</sup> Wabaunseeecomuseum 2016.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Business Directory and History of Wabaunsee County 1907, p. 102-103.

<sup>20</sup> *Alma Enterprise*. 5 December 1902.

<sup>21</sup> *Harveyville Monitor*. 10 May 1906.

<sup>22</sup> *Topeka State Journal*. 22 November 1891.

<sup>23</sup> *Eskridge Independent*. 24 September 1942 and *Alma Signal*. 1 October 1892.

<sup>24</sup> Foster 1991b.

valued educating their children),<sup>25</sup> but by 1900, it was moved into town to accommodate the shift in center of population (Figure 7).<sup>26</sup>



Figure 6: Bradford's Methodist Episcopal Church. SOURCE: Thomson 1901, no page number



Figure 7: District 27 one-room schoolhouse in Bradford, c. 1938. SOURCE: Wabaunsee County Historical Society, donated by Hazel Kemp.

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<sup>25</sup> Thomson 1901, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Kinzy.

## THE ROLE OF RACE

Perhaps the feature that sets Bradford most apart from other small communities in Kansas and the Great Plains is its substantial black community. Bradford's black population consisted of freed slaves and their descendants who came from across the American South, and Bradford was likely not the first destination on their journey west. There are three likely ways the former slaves arrived in Bradford, including the area's role on the Underground Railroad, the downfall of black colonies in the area, the arrival of the railroad, and cheap land.

The first theory regarding the arrival of the former slaves surrounds the Underground Railroad. Nearby Harveyville and the Old Wabaunsee community were both "stations" on one of the westernmost branches of the Underground Railroad, carrying slaves to freedom in the North.<sup>27</sup> The slaves would secretly travel at night and seek refuge in people's homes as they traveled north, possibly through Manhattan.<sup>28</sup> The slaves were at risk of being caught and being returned to their masters, and those harboring the fugitive slaves were at risk of legal troubles, as harboring fugitive slaves was a felony. Old Wabaunsee is noted for its role in the "Bleeding Kansas" era of Kansas territorial history, as it was founded by staunch abolitionists from Connecticut who went to great efforts to have Kansas admitted to the Union as a free state. It is possible that after the Civil War, when slavery was abolished, some of the newly freed slaves returned to Wabaunsee County and built a new life there.

Colonies, or communities of people who shared a similar characteristic, were established across Kansas and the Great Plains as settlement moved westward. Said characteristic could be religion, politics, homeland, ethnicity, race, or some combination. Most colonies were agrarian in nature and most folded within a few years of their founding. The colonies of the Great Plains

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<sup>27</sup> Kansas State University College of Education 2016. 6:52.

<sup>28</sup> Hermes 2015.



included several settled by recently freed slaves from the American South, or Exodusters. Nicodemus, Kansas, in Graham County, was founded in 1877 and is probably the most famous Exoduster colony. The Exoduster settlers of Nicodemus were freed slaves from Kentucky. Nicodemus is the only remaining settlement of its type, as the community still maintains a small population of the descendants of the original Exodusters and hosts reunions. Several of the original buildings, including an African Methodist Episcopal church, are now part of Nicodemus National Historic Site.<sup>29</sup> Kim Thomas, the mayor of nearby Stockton, is the first black woman to be mayor of a city in Kansas and is a descendant of the original Nicodemus settlers.<sup>30</sup> Veryl Switzer, a former football player with the Kansas State Wildcats, Green Bay Packers, Calgary Stampeders, and Montreal Alouettes, is also a descendant of the original Nicodemus settlers, and he continues to farm nearby.<sup>31</sup>

Nicodemus was not the only Exoduster colony in Kansas, and several others were scattered across the state, including one in Wabaunsee County. The colony was established in 1879 during the Great Exodus to Kansas, and settlers purchased 40-acre lots for \$2.65 an acre.<sup>32</sup> The failure of this colony leads to the second theory of how the former slaves arrived in Bradford. They may have dispersed and sought cheap land elsewhere, and the rocky soils of Bradford would have fit the bill.

The third theory surrounds the arrival of the railroad and the availability of cheap land. As the Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway was constructed, labor would have been needed, and it is possible some of the workers were black. They may have become familiar with

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<sup>29</sup> Nicodemus National Historic Site.

<sup>30</sup> *Community Voice* 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Conversation with a tour guide, Nicodemus National Historic Site, December 2017, Nicodemus, Kansas.

<sup>32</sup> Biles 2010.

the Bradford area and knew cheap land was available, and they were likely attracted to the idea of being landowners.

While reasons surrounding the arrival of former slaves in Bradford are not exactly known, what is known is many settled in an informal community just south of the town, and not in the town itself.<sup>33</sup> The area south of town is rocky, hilly, and riddled with streams — not an area well-suited for agriculture. The settlers worked 20-, 40-, and 60-acre farms and often had a cow, horse, and a couple pigs.<sup>34</sup> They also lived partly off the carp they caught in the nearby streams.<sup>35</sup> The black settlers would have lived there and not in town because the land was especially cheap and they were especially poor, not necessarily because they were segregated from the predominantly white town.<sup>36</sup> There are stories of the settlers being so poor that they resorted to switching who owned the title of the land year by year, based on who among them had enough money to pay the taxes.<sup>37</sup> They clearly relied on each other and had an incredibly trusting and interdependent relationship.

The black settlers would have likely experienced racism. Stories from across Wabaunsee County tell of active Ku Klux Klan chapters throughout the 1920s, an attempted lynching in Alma in 1899, and a sign leading into Harveyville reading “No Niggers After Dark,” which was not taken down until the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> The Ku Klux Klan in Wabaunsee County was, according to local documents, mostly concerned about the growing influence of the Roman Catholic population there.<sup>39</sup> There is no evidence to suggest the Klan committed any murders, or other

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<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Benetta Foster, local historian, Eskridge, Kansas, November 2017.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Conversation with long-time resident, Harveyville, Kansas.

<sup>39</sup> *Alma Signal*. 6 December 1923, Conversation with Benetta Foster, local historian, Eskridge, Kansas, November 2017 and Clark 1985.

serious crimes, but there is evidence to suggest the local Klans burned crosses (an expression of moral outrage against “certain people”) near Bradford and that the black settlers were frightened.<sup>40</sup> The Klan was never in Bradford,<sup>41</sup> possibly because of the lack of Catholics there, but it was active in most other communities across the county, including nearby Eskridge, Harveyville, Alta Vista, and Alma. There were Klan parades and meetings held in each of these communities at some point, and in some communities, the Klan could claim about half of the adult white male population. The Klan in Alta Vista has been more extensively studied, and a former exalted cyclops, Raymond S. “Bat” Nelson (Figure 8), was interviewed as



Figure 8: Bat Nelson, exalted cyclops of the Alta Vista Ku Klux Klan, as an older man. He had lost the original hood, but the robes are original. SOURCE: Clark 1985.

<sup>40</sup> Parsons 1977 and *Alma Signal*. 14 August 1924.

<sup>41</sup> Conversation with Benetta Foster, local historian, Eskridge, Kansas, November 2017.

part of an article. He is quoted as saying the burning crosses were “quite beautiful” and “could be seen for miles.”<sup>42</sup> He claimed to be “proud” of his time with the Klan and the “wonderful things” it did for the community (donating to Protestant churches and helping widows).<sup>43</sup> Nelson died in 2002 and worked as Alta Vista’s barber for most of his life.<sup>44</sup> He also served as a local historian, keeping scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and photographs of town events. They are on public display at the public library in Alma.

Although the Klan was active in Wabaunsee County, the most notorious race-related incident there stems from an attempted lynching in Alma that occurred over 20 years before the Klan arrived — a black man was nearly lynched in Alma, the county seat. It began with the robbery and murder of two white men, Harry Tandy and Calvin Burger, in McFarland (northern Wabaunsee County) on June 28, 1899. Matt Thomson called it “the most revolting crime ever committed in Wabaunsee County” in his 1901 *Early History of Wabaunsee County*.<sup>45</sup> The townsfolk noticed Tandy and Burger “playing cards with two young colored men.”<sup>46</sup> The next morning, Tandy was found half submerged in Mill Creek, barely alive. He was waving his hands and muttering incoherently. He died within hours.<sup>47</sup> Upon investigation, it was found that his skull was crushed from behind the ear. Burger was not found until July 8. His skull was also crushed, and he was discovered in a heavily decomposed state.<sup>48</sup> The “colored” men were James Render (aka “Denver Kid”) and Dick Williams (aka “Trilby” and “Snowball”) (Figure 9). They traveled to Topeka by freight train and were arrested there after pawning Tandy’s gold watch.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Clark 1985.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Salina Journal*. 13 October 2002.

<sup>45</sup> Thomson 1901, p. 151

<sup>46</sup> Thomson 1901, p. 152.

<sup>47</sup> *Alma Signal*. 15 July 1899. and *Topeka State Journal*. 6 July 1899.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

<sup>49</sup> *Topeka State Journal*. 6 July 1899.



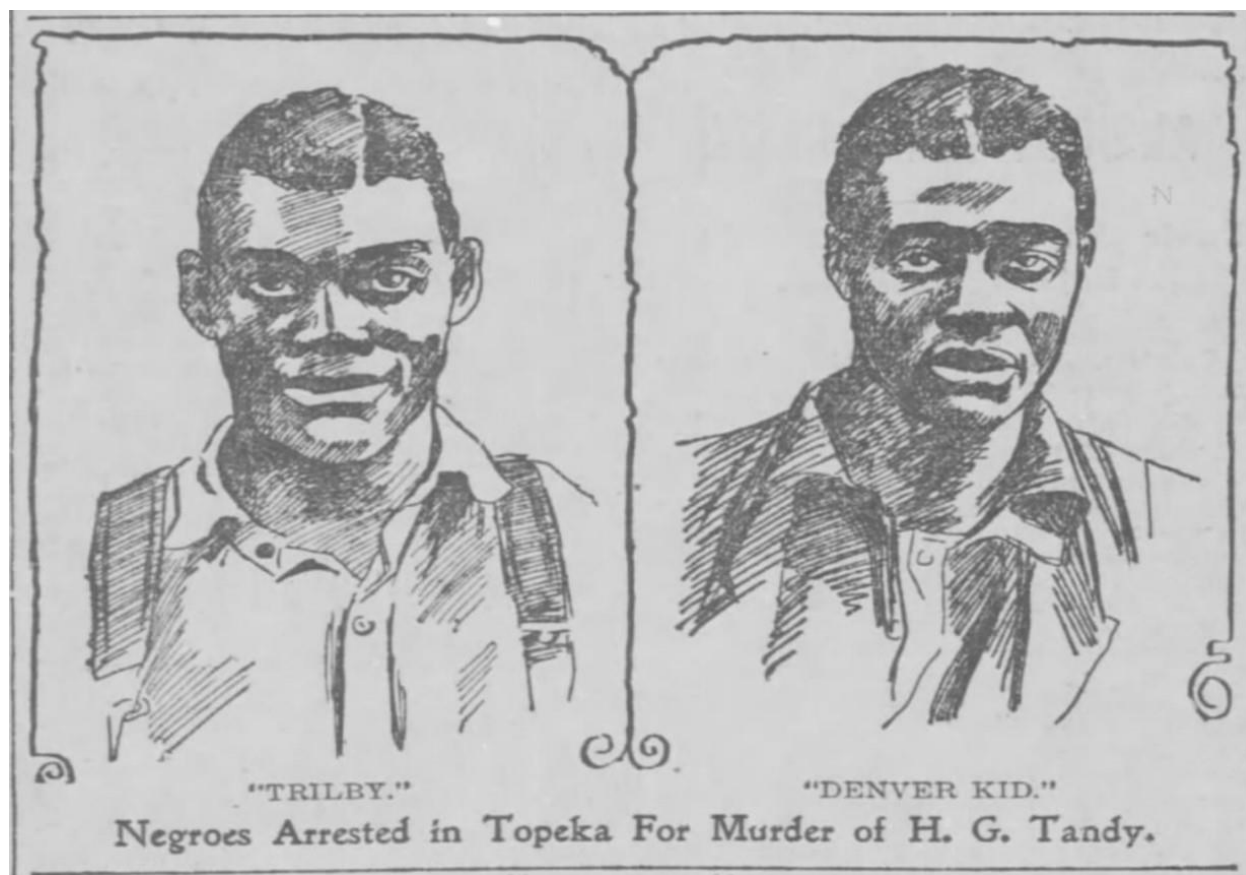


Figure 9: Render (left) and Williams (right) after their arrest in Topeka. SOURCE: *Topeka State Journal* 6 July 1899.

Law enforcement brought Render and Williams to Alma shortly after their arrest and booked them in the Alma Jail. After news broke that the second victim was found, “frenzied excitement” swarmed the people of Alma.<sup>50</sup> A mob of 250 townsfolk chanted “kill him, hang him” as the sheriff brought Dick Williams to the county jail on July 9.<sup>51</sup> Some of them tried to lasso him away. According to the *Topeka State Journal*, after Williams was in the jail, “a tall man bearing a sledgehammer, surrounded by 20 resolute men advanced on the jail, overpowered the sheriff and city marshal, broke in the door, and fastened a noose about his [Williams’] neck.

<sup>50</sup> *Topeka State Journal*. 10 July 1899.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*

With a yell, they started down the street dragging the handcuffed and shackled prisoner.”<sup>52</sup> The mob drug Williams to the main street, threw the end of the rope “over the cross-arm of a telephone pole,” and they pulled.<sup>53</sup> Williams’ body swung “without movement” for six minutes until the marshal ran to the scene and cut the rope. The mob believed he was dead, and they allowed the marshal to take him back to jail.<sup>54</sup> He was still living, however, but was in poor health. Physicians were summoned to resuscitate him, and he regained consciousness. Another lynching attempt was made 20 minutes later by “cowboys on ponies, but it was resisted.”<sup>55</sup> The pair lived to tell their version of the story at trial, where they were convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.<sup>56</sup> Three other “Negroes” were arrested in connection to the murders but were released on lack of evidence.<sup>57</sup>

Although the presence of the Ku Klux Klan, the attempted lynching attempt in Alma, and the sign in Harveyville paint a picture of a racist environment in Wabaunsee County, the opposite is also true. While the Ku Klux Klan was indeed present, it did not commit any murders or serious crimes, unlike in other parts of the country.<sup>58</sup> Wabaunsee County’s Klan chapters were described as being milder than others.<sup>59</sup> Even though the organization was powerful, substantial opposition existed and some former members expressed regret over their time in the Klan, one former member calling the \$10 membership fee “one of the biggest wastes of \$10 I’ve ever seen.”<sup>60</sup> An article in the *Alma Enterprise* went so far as to call the Klan “Unamerican.”<sup>61</sup> Even

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*. 10 July 1899.

<sup>55</sup> *Topeka State Journal*. 10 July 1899.

<sup>56</sup> Thomson 1901, p. 153.

<sup>57</sup> *Alma Enterprise*. 4 August 1899.

<sup>58</sup> Parsons 1977

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Alma Enterprise*. 26 May 1922.

during the attempted lynching, there is evidence of anti-racism as Alma law enforcement was adamant in making sure their prisoners would stand trial and face a jury of their peers. There is more additional evidence, however, of an environment expressing comradery between the black and white settlers. Emancipation Day gatherings were an annual celebration that often included a picnic, a band, and speeches from regional dignitaries.<sup>62</sup> Large crowds, including both black and white people, were in attendance, and everyone is said to have enjoyed themselves.<sup>63</sup> Eskridge, and several other Wabaunsee County communities held Emancipation Day celebrations, and the one in Eskridge would likely have hosted Bradford residents. Bradford itself was a diverse, and probably accepting community, as everyone attended the same school (Figures 10 and 11), worshipped at the same church, shopped in the same stores, and was buried in the same cemetery.



Figure 10: The Spring 1929 class at the District 27 one-room schoolhouse in Bradford. Some of the children are identified, including Elsie Shaw, Billy Ford, two Scott children, four DePriest children, two Prescott children, two Robbins children, two McKnight children, and \_\_\_ Smith. SOURCE: Kansas State Historical Society

<sup>62</sup> *Alma Enterprise*. 6 August 1920.

<sup>63</sup> *Alma Enterprise*. 8 August 1885.



Figure 11: The 1938 class at the District 27 one-room schoolhouse in Bradford. The group includes Newton Bailey, Wyatt Bailey, Marie Bailey, Ruth Bailey, Zelma Scott, Wilra Jean Gross, Florence Kinzy, and Gladys Kinzy (no particular order). Source: Wabaunsee County Historical Society, donated by Hazel Kemp.

## DECLINE

Bradford, along with thousands of other communities across Kansas, the Great Plains, and beyond, fell victim to rural population decline. Rural population decline has affected different communities in different ways, but general causes include the increasing size of farms, the “Too-Much Mistake”, the increasing use of the automobile, and a variety of other interconnected factors. Increasing farm size relates to increasing efficiency resulting from mechanization of agriculture — fewer workers are needed per acre, so fewer employment opportunities are available, causing people to move away. The “too-much” mistake is a term



devised by Elwyn B. Robinson, the author of the *History of North Dakota*, a 1966 chronology of the state's history still used as the authoritative source of history in that state. In a 1958 speech titled "The Themes of North Dakota History," he laid out six themes that shaped the way North Dakota became what it was in 1958, and explained the "Too-Much Mistake" as "[early settlers were] trying to do too much too fast with too little."<sup>64</sup> Too many towns were built, too many miles of rail were laid, and expectations were too high for these towns that inevitably failed. The 160-acre farms imposed by the Homestead Act of 1862 and the corn-based style of agriculture that worked to the east did not work in the dry west, and population decline was bound to follow.<sup>65</sup> Although the idea was written with regard to North Dakota, it applies to all of the Great Plains.

The cause of Bradford's demise is mostly related to the increasing use of the automobile. Bradford began to lose population in the 1910s, just before World War I, a period termed "the golden age of the Great Plains small town."<sup>66</sup> The period just before World War I was the population and economic activity peak for most of the smallest towns of the Great Plains. Before World War I, the story of small towns is one of openings, economic and population booms, and prosperity. After World War I, it is generally a story of decline and closings. Bradford was no exception.

It was during this "golden age" when the automobile became a staple in the average rural household. In 1911, 85,000 automobiles were estimated to be on American farms, and by 1920, that number had skyrocketed to 2,146,512.<sup>67</sup> This was met with a shift in spatial and conceptual

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<sup>64</sup> Robinson 1966, p. vii.

<sup>65</sup> Shortridge 2005, p. 530.

<sup>66</sup> Conversation with Morgan J. Morgan, December 2017, Professor, Department of History, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, citing Fleming 2002.

<sup>67</sup> Berger 1979, p. 51.

thinking: “Communities came to be thought of in terms of time more than geographical space.”<sup>68</sup>

Farm families migrated into towns and had the newfound ability to commute to the fields.<sup>69</sup>

Farmers and those in the smallest towns suddenly had the ability to shop in larger communities, where stores offered greater selection and lower prices.<sup>70</sup> Families also moved into larger towns because of the availability of high schools, so their children could attend them.

The availability of greater selection in larger cities is what an article in *The Eskridge Independent* cited following the closure of Mrs. Kopp’s (formerly the Ford’s) combined post office and general store on December 31, 1941 (Figure 12)<sup>71</sup> “Because it takes only a few minutes longer to drive to a larger center,”<sup>72</sup> the remaining Bradford residents could travel to Eskridge, Harveyville, or beyond to buy their wares, attracted by lower prices and better selection that smaller, more rural stores could not compete with.

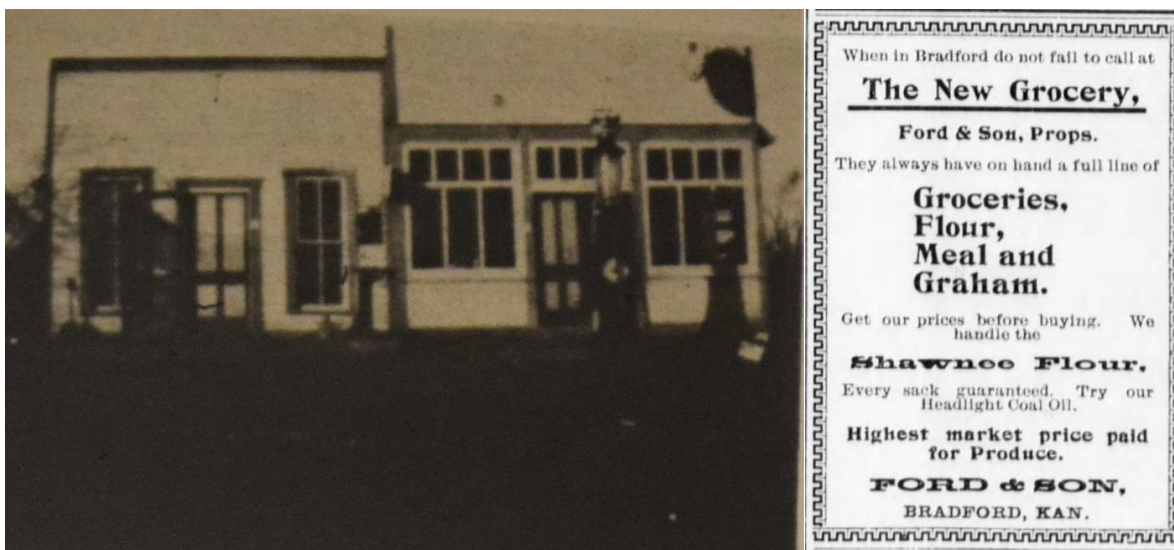


Figure 12: Left: George Ford’s Store as it would have appeared in the early 1900s. Groceries and the post office were on the left side, while dry goods were to the right. SOURCE: Foster 1991b. Right: an advertisement for the store. SOURCE: *Alma Enterprise* 19 May 1899.

<sup>68</sup> Berger 1979, p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Berger 1979, p. 80-81.

<sup>70</sup> Berger 1979, p. 98-99 and *Eskridge Independent*. 8 January 1942.

<sup>71</sup> *Eskridge Independent*. 8 January 1942.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

As services, such as the post office and general store closed, there was less incentive to live in Bradford and residents and the remaining services followed. The church closed in the mid-1940s<sup>73</sup> and the school closed and was merged with Eskridge in 1950.<sup>74</sup> School closures have been cited as the final nail in the coffin of small, rural communities, since schools serve not only as an educational institution, but as an expression of a community's identity and a source of community pride.<sup>75</sup> Not much would have remained in Bradford after its closure. The Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway ceased operation on April 3, 1972 (Figure 13).<sup>76</sup> One of the few remaining houses in Bradford originally belonged to Ferdinand Trowbridge, the first postmaster, a general store proprietor, and early landowner.<sup>77</sup> The house was moved by truck to northern Lyon County, where it has undergone extensive renovations and additions (Figure 14). As of June 2018, two empty houses (Figure 15), some outbuildings, a chimney (Figure 16) and some foundations are all that remain of the unique community that once was. All that tells of the town's location is a faded, old sign (Figure 1) along the now-lonesome main street (Figure 17).



Figure 13: “Old Polly,” the locomotive that traversed the Manhattan, Alma, and Burlingame Railway, pulling out of Harveyville (left) and Eskridge (right) for the last time, in 1972. SOURCE: Wabaunsee County Historical Society.

<sup>73</sup> Foster 1991a.

<sup>74</sup> Kinzy and Historical marker in front of the one-room schoolhouse, Wilmington, Kansas.

<sup>75</sup> Schneller 2012, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Foster 1991a.

<sup>77</sup> Conversation with Benetta Foster, local historian, Eskridge, Kansas, November 2017.





Figure 14: Top: The Trowbridge undergoing renovations, late 1990s-early 2000s. Courtesy of Edward Boyce. Bottom: The house as it appears today in northern Lyon County. Photo taken on private property with permission. Photo by author, November 2017.





Figure 15: An abandoned house in Bradford, believed to belong to R.A. Kraus. Photo taken from Bradford Road. Photo by author, December 2017

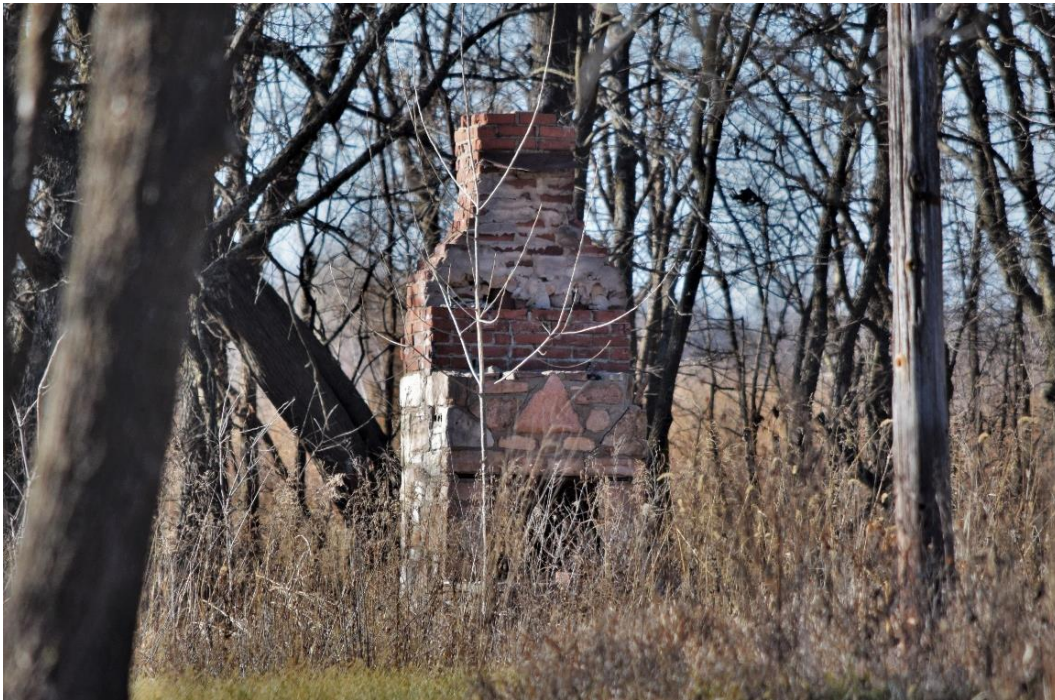


Figure 16: A chimney in the woods in Bradford, indicating the location of a former building. Photo taken from Bradford Road using a telephoto lens. Photo by author, December 2017.





Figure 17: Looking south on Bradford Road, the old main street, from what used to be the north side of town. Photo by author, November 2017.

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