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MEATPACKING AND IMMIGRATION: INDUSTRIAL INNOVATION AND
COMMUNITY CHANGE IN DAKOTA COUNTY, NEBRASKA, 1960-2000

by

Dustin Kipp

A THESIS

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MEATPACKING AND IMMIGRATION: INDUSTRIAL INNOVATION AND
COMMUNITY CHANGE IN DAKOTA COUNTY, NEBRASKA, 1960-2000

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University of Nebraska, 2011

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Latino immigration to the Midwest during the twentieth century has received significant attention from historians, but most have focused on the early and middle decades of the century. The later decades of the twentieth century, when a significant new wave of Latino immigration brought many new arrivals to small rural communities have received less attention. This study examines the intersection of the restructuring of the meatpacking industry and Latino immigration to rural Midwestern communities from 1960 to 2000. Dakota County, Nebraska--home to the flagship operation of Iowa Beef Packers, Inc. (IBP) from 1964 until the company was sold to Tyson, Inc. in 2001--provides a case study to explore how changes in technology and industry practices required a constant flow of low-wage laborers to produce cheap meat for American consumers and how communities changed as immigration and a settled Latino population increased.

The late twentieth century connection between immigration and the meatpacking industry was just one in a string of waves of migration from Central America, Mexico, and other regions which brought laborers to the Midwest. Latino (and other) immigrants were drawn to the Midwest throughout the twentieth century by job opportunities in agriculture, railroads, and industries. Immigrant experiences in Dakota County after 1969 shared some features with earlier waves of migration, including the importance of family, neighbors, and religious groups in easing newcomers' transition to a new home. This

study draws on a variety of sources, including oral history interviews with community members, and details the connections between the industry that attracted many new immigrants and their experiences as they settled in small towns in overwhelmingly rural areas.

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Introduction

A New Wave of Immigration to the Midwest

Dakota County, in the northeastern corner of Nebraska, had little to distinguish it from other rural Midwestern counties in 1960. It was home to just over 12,000 people, very few of whom were racial or ethnic minorities. Farming and a few light industrial operations in its biggest town, South Sioux City, anchored the local economy. In 1964, when Iowa Beef Packers, Inc. (later Iowa Beef Processors and then simply IBP) optioned land along Highway 77 between Dakota City and South Sioux City to build a beef slaughter and processing plant, community leaders welcomed the promise of 500 new jobs. Indeed, the plant eventually employed over 2,000 people and associated enterprises (trucking, by-products, and suppliers) created even more jobs.

It would have been difficult to foresee all of the consequences of the company's choice of location, however, because IBP's operations were unlike those of any previous meatpacker. In the course of the next few decades, these communities experienced significant changes as their populations grew and became more demographically diverse. By 2000 the county was home to just over 20,000 people, nearly a quarter of them Hispanic. At that time, bakeries, restaurants, and other businesses owned by recent immigrants lined Dakota Avenue, the main thoroughfare through South Sioux City. A locally-owned and operated Spanish-language newspaper, *Mundo Latino*, reported on local events alongside the *South Sioux City Star*.

Two major and related historical trends converged to create the changes in Dakota County. First was a radical transformation of the meatpacking industry during the second

half of the twentieth century, as packing plants moved out of cities like Chicago, Omaha, and St. Louis and into rural areas throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. Second, the continuing migration of Latinos to places of economic opportunity in the Midwest and Great Plains brought substantial numbers of new workers for the meatpacking industry. Some immigrants found the opportunities they were looking for in this changed packing industry. Others struggled with the hardships presented by a dangerous and demanding workplace and the difficulties of adapting to a new home.

Historians of the U.S. meatpacking industry have traced the structural changes of the industry, often in response to developments in technology and demand, from colonial times to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Jimmy M. Skaggs offers the most comprehensive look at the related endeavors of livestock raising and meatpacking in the United States up to the 1980s. Even though the changes that IBP had made were only about fifteen years old at the time, Skaggs notes a period of great prosperity for the new meatpackers that emerged after World War II and suggests the new companies utilized new technology to replace the old oligopoly of meatpacking firms that dominated the industry during the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Wilson J. Warren offers a narrower focus, centered on the Midwest where, he argues, “the industry has been most significant.” He, like Skaggs, notes the decline of the old oligopoly and the rise of the new, led by IBP, but he also examines more carefully the connections between the meatpacking industry and the economic, cultural, and environmental changes that followed when such operations moved from city to countryside. Warren devotes only a few pages of his study to the changing demographics of the workforce in meatpacking

¹ Jimmy Skaggs, *Prime Cut: Livestock Raising and Meatpacking in the United States, 1607-1983*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986).

communities, but he does suggest that the change is most directly a result of the packers' desire for low-cost labor.²

Several labor historians have also written about the meatpacking industry during the twentieth century.³ After World War II, meat production moved to less union-friendly rural areas, production methods were modernized, and the labor force became more diverse and less stable. There followed a steep decline in both the size and strength of organized labor. The connections between the decline of organized labor in meatpacking and the simultaneous drop in wages, as well as high rates of injury and high turnover are clear. Business and labor historian Roger Horowitz, much like Warren, contends that “the decisive factor behind the revolution in the meat industry was the drive by management to decrease the share of the industry’s wealth that went to production workers.”⁴ He is correct that the major meatpackers of the second half of the twentieth century, led by IBP, cut wages and benefits repeatedly, but it is difficult to see how this transformation would have happened without advances in technology and transportation. If management’s drive was the decisive factor, the old Big Four meatpackers (Swift, Armour, Wilson, and Cudahy) would have done the same thing long before. Paying production workers less for their time would not have been possible without simultaneously deskilling their work by mechanizing many tasks and dividing up the rest.

The high rate of turnover in meatpacking would likewise have been impossible if the employees had remained highly-skilled butchers who required months of training to

² Wilson J. Warren, *Tied to the Great Packing Machine: The Midwest and Meatpacking*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 67.

³ Shelton Stromquist and Marvin Bergman, *Unionizing the Jungles: Labor and Community in the Twentieth Century Meatpacking Industry*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997); Roger Horowitz, “*Negro and White, Unite and Fight!*”: *A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-1990*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁴ Horowitz, 248.

become proficient. Training workers to repeat one or two tasks thousands of times a day required significantly less investment from the company and allowed management to disregard employee complaints or concerns as long as they could keep a steady flow of new workers coming in. This is the point where the reshaping of the meatpacking industry and immigration intersect. IBP's production methods and overall business strategy would have failed in rural communities were it not for the availability of immigrant (and refugee) laborers. Likewise, immigrant laborers would not have been in those communities if not for the meatpacking plants.

These changes in industrial practice and migration are part of a broader historical literature on the wave of late-twentieth-century Latino immigration which is just beginning to develop. Two historians have identified the newest round of migration to the Midwest in the late twentieth century as part of a much longer historical trend, stretching back to railroad and agricultural laborers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though neither has written at great length about the recent arrivals. Oscar J. Martínez, in addition to framing Mexican and Mexican-American migration to the Midwest in such a broad scope, suggests that it was the same economic activities (agriculture and railroads, especially) that had previously allowed for the growth of the Mexican-origin population in the Southwest that were once again responsible for drawing migrants to the Great Plains and the Midwest. James A. Garza, taking a similar long-view approach, argues that patterns and practices established by Mexican and Mexican-American migrants during the earlier migrations profoundly shaped the experiences of those who followed later in the twentieth century and that these connections continue to shape the experiences of new immigrants. Both authors stress the importance of the long

history of migration to the formation of a regional Mexican-American identity unique to the Great Plains and Midwest.⁵

Historian Anthony Quiroz's suggestion that a bicultural identity was an essential part of Mexican Americans' "quest for public legitimacy" in Victoria, Texas, suggests one way that tightly-knit ethnic communities, whether recent immigrants or long-standing residents, can adapt to the dominant culture without giving up their own culture. This identity allowed Mexican Americans to succeed within the larger society of work, school, and politics without giving up their cultural world of family, home, neighborhood, and church.⁶ Immigrants and migrants to Dakota County acted in a similar way, adjusting to many of the expectations and challenges of their new home while relying on cultural connections within their ethnic community as resources.

Several studies by historians of earlier Mexican migration to the Midwest, especially Dennis Nodín Valdés, Zaragoza Vargas, and Jim Norris, provide some foundations upon which the study of more recent migrations can be built.⁷ Nodín Valdés and Vargas have written about the ethnic enclaves that developed in major urban areas of the Midwest, such as St. Paul and Detroit, in the early twentieth century. Norris covers the small settlements and migrant communities of agricultural laborers in rural areas

⁵ Oscar J. Martínez, *Mexican-Origin People in the United States: A Topical History*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001). James A. Garza, "The Long History of Mexican Immigration to the Rural Midwest," *Journal of the West* 45 (Fall 2006): 57-64.

⁶ Anthony Quiroz, *Claiming Citizenship: Mexican Americans in Victoria, Texas*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

⁷ Dennis Nodín Valdés, "Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940," *Great Plains Quarterly*, (1990): 110-123; Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Zaragoza Vargas, "Armies in the Fields and Factories: The Mexican Working Classes in the Midwest in the 1920s," *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos* (1991): 47-71; Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Jim Norris, *North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009).

during the same time period. All of these settled immigrant communities established churches, opened businesses, and formed mutual assistance associations. They relied on their connections to family, neighborhood, and religious community to get by in hard times and to celebrate in good times.

Anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and political scientists have undertaken much more extensive examination of Latino (and other) migration to places in the rural Midwest in the late twentieth century than have historians.⁸ Taken together, their work provides some insight into the experiences of recent immigrants and the communities they joined, such as the challenges for both new arrivals and the existing members of communities in adapting to language and cultural differences while meeting community needs for work, education, and health care. Many of these works portray the arrival and settlement of these immigrants as a new trend, however, and largely ignore the longer historical context. The demographic data bear out that there had not been settled populations of Latinos prior to the most recent influx in the specific communities that they examine, so these scholars are not wrong to suggest that there is something new about their subjects. The origins of immigrants to the United States shifted dramatically after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (the Hart-Cellers Act), away from Europe and toward Asia and Latin America. Considering past events and trends around the region--including settlements, seasonal or temporary residents, and the Bracero program, which brought many Mexican workers to the United States between 1942 and

⁸ A few edited volumes that exemplify this approach are: Douglas S. Massey, ed., *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008); Victor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández León, eds., *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration to the United States*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005); and Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway and David Griffith, eds., *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). Also see Deborah Fink, *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) which presents findings from the author's participant observation at an IBP pork packing plant in Perry, Iowa.

1964--can provide some of that missing context, however, and contribute to a more historical understanding of the most recent wave of immigration. There is a lengthy record of immigrant labor in the Midwest that shaped the experiences of recent immigrants as well as the interpretations and reactions of existing residents in these communities.

While some scholars consider the new wave migrations a significant shift away from older migration patterns--and they are correct to point out the shift in origins and destinations--there are also a number of continuities. Not only do the new migrations follow patterns similar to Mexican immigrants of the early twentieth century, they also follow broad patterns similar to those of European immigrants during that same time. For instance, new wave migrants have often settled in rural areas because of the availability of work in industrial agriculture or industries that process agricultural products because these are often low-skill jobs with few barriers to new entrants. European and Mexican immigrants alike often settled in urban areas in the early twentieth century. The availability of industrial jobs (including meatpacking) attracted immigrants to the cities. In industrial centers like Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and many others, immigrants could find employment even with limited knowledge of English and virtually no special skills. So long as they were willing to put in long, hard hours in poor conditions, work was available. And they were willing, for many of the same reasons that drove Mexicans, Mexican Americans, other Latinos, Southeast Asians, and Africans to the rural Midwest and South in the late twentieth century: namely the prospect of earning a better living for the support of their families either in the United States or back in their home countries.

The fact that many recent immigrants ended up in rural America requires some explanation. Journalist and historian Richard E. Wood's recent assessment suggests that rural America has not fared well during the last half-century. Most rural small towns saw dramatic population declines (often greater than 10 percent), family farms were replaced by much larger corporate farms which required fewer workers per acre, and many industries moved manufacturing jobs overseas.⁹ The distribution of jobs was frequently in flux. While one community lost a factory to cheaper labor and operating costs outside the United States, others were attracting the industries that did remain in operation in the U.S. as companies fled from the higher operating costs of urban centers. Some communities gained hundreds or even thousands of new jobs, but others lost out entirely. While the pattern of industrial relocation was not uniform, it involved a shift from traditional manufacturing centers in the upper Midwest and Northeast to the south and west.

One factor that mitigated rural decline was the influx of Latinos to rural America, especially from 1980 to 2000. The Latino population of rural America climbed from 1.5 million to 3.2 million during this time period as new immigrants from Mexico and Central America (as well as internal migrants from California and Texas) moved in. Most of these newcomers settled in the same rural places that were attracting new or expanding industries--economic growth was accompanied by population growth. As was the case when Latino immigrants moved to the Midwest in the early twentieth century for work in

⁹ Richard E. Wood, *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), xiii. The phenomenon of rural to urban migration was not unique to the United States. China and India, in particular, as well as many other countries saw the migration of millions of people from rural areas to urban centers during the late twentieth century.

agriculture, on the railroads, or in urban industries, immigrants of the late twentieth century followed job opportunities to new locales.

The experiences of Latino immigrants in rural areas of the U.S. during the most recent wave of immigration differed widely depending on their destination region. Persistent poverty in the rural South, for instance, presented significant challenges for newcomers due to a general lack of resources within the community. In contrast, Wood argues, “most plains states have continued to provide a relatively high level of education, healthcare, and social services.”¹⁰ This investment in people helped make it possible for newcomers to succeed, although such efforts were considerably less beneficial for individuals or families lacking legal documentation and therefore access to government services.

Undocumented workers were unable to utilize social welfare services and often avoided health care agencies and the like for fear of being deported even where those services were available. Their children, however, did attend school and benefit from educational and nutritional programs there. Although much of the political and social discussion of immigration in recent years has focused on the issue of undocumented or illegal immigrants, this focus obscures the roots of the phenomenon. Changes in business and industry which increased demand for low-wage laborers in the second half of the twentieth century were crucial in drawing immigrants--both documented and undocumented--to the United States. Recalling this portion of the story of immigration helps put the causes of immigration as well as immigrant experiences in proper context.

Despite significant changes in national and international politics and economics, Latino immigrants and migrants who in the late twentieth century moved to small towns

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

like Dakota City and South Sioux City--where ethnicity set the new arrivals apart from the majority of the population--shared many challenges and potential solutions with both the agricultural and urban industrial laborers that came to the region before them. Their strategies for surviving and thriving in these destinations were similar to those employed by earlier migrants from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In all of these cases, ethnic enclaves formed around neighborhoods, churches, businesses, and other community groups that helped new arrivals deal with the challenges associated with making a new life in an unfamiliar place.¹¹ The experiences of immigrants in Dakota County, Nebraska provide an excellent case study for explaining the many ways that late-twentieth-century immigrants can be seen as continuing the long historical trend identified by historians Oscar Martínez and James Garza with regard to Hispanic immigrants to the Midwest in particular, but also the patterns of immigration from Europe, Asia, and other places to the United States throughout the twentieth century.

Garden City, Kansas, and Lexington, Nebraska, are the most well-documented instances of this “new migration.” The case of the Dakota City plant differs from these in important ways and it is thus crucial to understanding the overall trends. Garden City and Lexington experienced very rapid influxes of immigrants and refugees in the 1980s and 1990s; the process of change in each community was condensed into a few years rather than several decades. Lexington, where IBP opened a plant in 1990, established a Community Impact Study Team which worked with researchers, policy experts, and company representatives in advance of the plant’s opening to prepare for the expected

¹¹ Frederick C. Luebke, "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," *The Western Historical Quarterly* (1977): 405-430; Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980); Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *European Immigrants in the American West*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

influx of immigrants.¹² In effect, they were able to predict and prepare for challenges such as the shortage of housing, the strain on social service agencies, and rising school enrollment.

Because IBP's Dakota City plant was one of the first to employ the company's innovative slaughter methods and the very first to produce boxed beef, it was also where the company established the pattern of operation and labor recruiting that other plants would later follow. These innovative meatpacking procedures changed the nature of the work to such an extent that a new pattern of employment based on recruiting from pools of low-wage laborers, including immigrants and refugees as well as internal migrants, developed to meet the increased demand for workers. These changes in industrial and labor practices spurred the transformation of Dakota City and South Sioux City from struggling farming communities with homogeneous populations in 1960, to growing, economically prosperous towns by the end of the twentieth century. Along with this economic change, ethnic and cultural diversity increased, which presented both challenges and opportunities for the communities.

As meatpacking operations shifted to small towns around the Midwest and Great Plains in the second half of the twentieth century, these communities were among the few able to grow during a period of sustained rural decline. This growth came with costs, however, as IBP and its imitators undercut their competitors by simultaneously speeding up production while reducing labor costs (i.e. training, safety measures, wages, and benefits). The companies' method of doing business required a constant flow of new

¹² Lourdes Gouveia and Donald D. Stull, "Dances with Cows: Beefpacking's Impact on Garden City, Kansas, and Lexington, Nebraska," in *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America*, ed. by Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway and David Griffith, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995): 85-107. See also Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

workers willing to labor in poor conditions for what was, by U.S. standards, low pay. For immigrants who came to work at the Dakota City plant as well as their families, economic and social hardships--both at work and in the larger community--were common. Some of these immigrants quickly found the challenges too difficult to bear and moved on to find other work. Those who put down roots despite the challenges relied on family, neighbors, and religious communities to help them adapt and succeed in their new homes.

A Brief Note on Sources

Names of a number of sources interviewed for this project have been changed to protect their anonymity. The following are pseudonyms:

-Emilio Diaz

-Maria Diaz

-Marco Diaz

-Angel Fernandez

-Marina Galvan

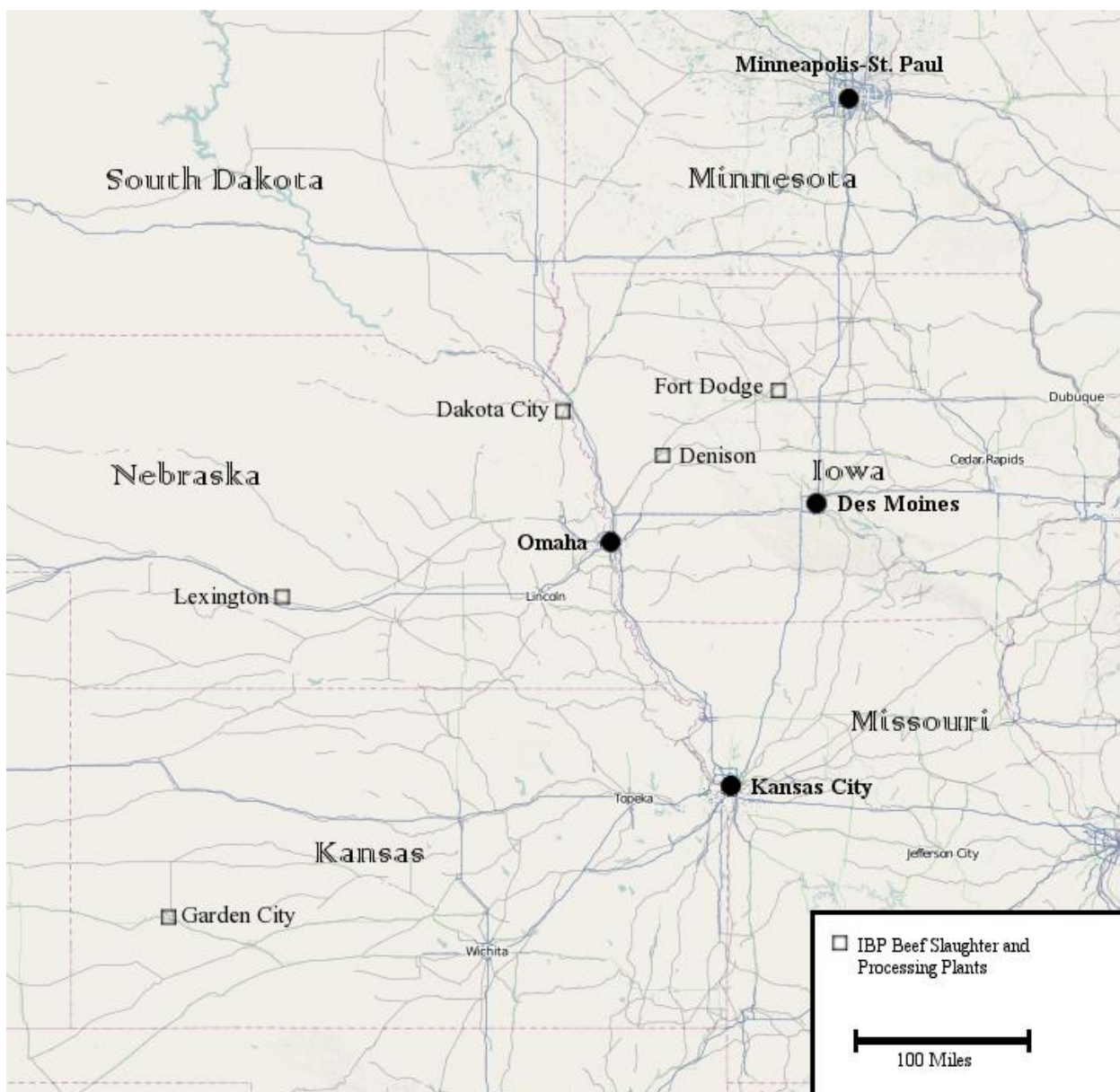
-Juan Gutierrez

-Francine Jacobs

-Duc Tran

-Paola Velasco

-José Velasco



Map 1: IBP Beef Slaughter and Processing Plants

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Map 2: South Sioux City and Dakota City

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Chapter 1

“An entire industry revolutionized”

The meatpacking industry, dominated throughout the first half of the twentieth century by a small number of large firms (frequently referred to as the Big Four--Swift, Armour, Wilson, and Cudahy)¹, changed quickly and dramatically after Currier Holman and Andrew D. Anderson teamed up to form Iowa Beef Packers in 1960. The two men were long involved with various aspects of meatpacking, from the stockyards to the boardroom, and saw opportunities to reduce inefficiencies in the packing industry and thereby out-compete their much larger and more well-established rivals. Anderson brought a keen interest in engineering and revolutionary ideas about the design and operation of meatpacking facilities, while Holman offered experience and drive in finance and administration. With investment from associates in Holman's earlier efforts at starting his own packing operation and a \$300,000 loan from the Small Business Administration, they built and opened their first beef packing plant at Denison, Iowa in 1961. They broke into the *Fortune* 500 just eight years later, with annual sales of \$534 million in 1969. IBP and a few imitators that followed their lead replaced the old oligopoly with an entirely new one.²

The entire process of turning live cattle into beef at the market had already undergone important changes by 1960. In the early days of the packing industry in the United States, farmers and ranchers fattened cattle on grass and then drove the animals to central markets. In the late nineteenth century, railroads replaced the cattle drive, though

¹ Known first as the “Big Five” packinghouses (Swift, Armour, Wilson, Morris, and Cudahy), later the “Big Four” after Morris was purchased by Armour in 1923.

² “The Youngest Giant,” *Fortune*, 15 May 1969: 293.

the animals' destinations remained largely the same. Enormous multi-story plants used gravity to move the carcass through the facility. Workers slaughtered the cattle and performed minimal processing before the carcasses (sides of beef) were shipped to destinations in all directions, again by rail.³ Shipping live animals and sides of beef was expensive and inefficient, however. Only a little more than half of a live animal consists of beef; even after removing the hide, hoofs, and entrails, sides of beef still contain a lot of bone and fat. In addition to the excess weight, shipping was detrimental to the live animals because it caused bruising and weight loss before the animals reached the plant. The sides of beef shipped out of the packing plant likewise lost weight (due to dehydration) during transportation. These were two of the areas where Currier and Holman saw possibilities for greater efficiency as they planned their new operation.

Denison, a town of about 5,000 people situated in Crawford County in western Iowa, would never have been considered a prime location for a packing plant by the traditional leaders of the industry in 1960. The choice of location of Iowa Beef Packers' first plant was one of Currier and Holman's key innovations, however. Cincinnati, Chicago, Omaha, Kansas City, and Sioux City were the centers of the meat packing industry throughout the early twentieth century. There were many smaller packing operations in small towns throughout the Midwest and Great Plains, but these did not compete with the top companies; they simply filled local or regional niches. IBP set out to take over the industry by getting out of the cities and away from the strong union presence there. Their plan revised longstanding patterns in the industry.

³ On the history of the meatpacking industry, see Jimmy Skaggs, *Prime Cut: Livestock Raising and Meatpacking in the United States, 1607-1983*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986) and Wilson J. Warren, *Tied to the Great Packing Machine: The Midwest and Meatpacking*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007).

The Denison plant employed an innovative single-story design intended just for cattle slaughter rather than the multi-storied, multi-species design common among all of the leading packing companies. In the early twentieth century, the old-line packers had mechanized some steps in the slaughter process to improve efficiency and used overhead rails to carry the suspended weight of carcasses. Anderson, the architect of IBP's slaughter and processing facilities, intended for his design to improve on this standard approach and to function much like assembly lines of the auto industry, except they would disassemble their product instead. Cattle would enter one end of the building and travel along adjustable-speed conveyors as they were processed and--crucially--cooled rapidly to prevent any shrinkage due to dehydration. Carcasses would undergo basic processing immediately after slaughter: hide, head, legs and bowels would be removed; the carcass split and then washed, weighed, and wrapped in cloth shrouds for cooling. This process took only minutes. Carcass beef would be shipped out by truck or rail after two days of cooling. Also like the auto industry, IBP's plan relied heavily on automation and fractionalizing tasks so that each worker had only one job.⁴

IBP's Denison plant was a quick success. Less than a year after production began, the company expanded with the purchase of a second beef packing plant in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in November 1961. Another purchase, this time a pork operation in Perry, Iowa, in 1963, turned out to be a brief detour from the company's focus on cattle rather than a new direction. IBP resold the Perry plant to Oscar Mayer & Company in 1965 for \$4.3 million, more than tripling its investment in two years.⁵

⁴ Jeffrey L. Rodengen, *The Legend of IBP, Inc.*, (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Write Stuff Enterprises, 2000), 28.

⁵ Rodengen, 38-39.

The company's early success was surprising to many industry observers, but not to Holman and Anderson. They had implemented innovations in the design of the physical plant, but also in the way they conducted the business of buying cattle. IBP deployed cattle buyers directly to farms throughout the surrounding countryside. Each buyer kept in contact with the Denison office through mobile radios, allowing them to follow buying instructions based on the latest market information. IBP's direct buying operations (rather than sales at terminal markets, which had been standard in the industry) were another feature that set the company apart: IBP bought about 85 percent of its cattle directly from farmers while the industry average was only 15 percent.⁶ The founders of the company were primed for expansion and their plan called for opening new locations to tap into other existing concentrations of cattle supply. Even in 1962 this strategy was clear; as Anderson told a trade journal, "The plant we have in Denison is as large as any packing house should be. Instead of increasing the size of this facility, we will build another plant in a new territory anytime we need to expand."⁷ The combination of an abundant supply of cattle and cheap, non-union labor as well as access to both road and rail transport made IBP's plant in Denison successful; these factors also provided a pattern for the company's future growth.

IBP's choice of Dakota City, Nebraska as a site for a new plant in 1965 was well-conceived. As early as 1959, 70% of Nebraska cattle were fed in the eastern third of the state, especially concentrated along the Elkhorn, Platte, and Missouri Rivers. This reflected not only the suitability of this part of the state for growing the grain used in fattening cattle, but also the proximity to important terminal markets and meatpacking

⁶ "A Triumph of Logic," *Forbes*, 15 December 1968, 50.

⁷ "Revolution in Beef Kill," *Meat Processing Sausage Manufacturing*, March/April 1962, p. 1 -- reprint, quoted in Rodengen, 38.

centers in Omaha, Nebraska, and Sioux City, Iowa.⁸ Dakota City, just south of Sioux City on the Nebraska side of the Missouri River, was a prime location to take advantage of existing cattle production as well as existing highway and railroad transportation systems to minimize costs and maximize efficiency. In addition to the existing supplies of cattle and abundant feed grain at relatively cheap prices, the Ogallala aquifer and the Missouri River provided much-needed water, which helped not only to keep grain prices low, but were also necessary to the slaughter and processing operations: modern packing plants can use upwards of 2 million gallons a day.⁹

While IBP chose to locate its meatpacking plants near existing centers of cattle production in order to be close to the supply, the company's efforts also helped the cattle industry in those areas to grow. The new, highly efficient processing operations that IBP and others set up beginning in the early 1960s had a quick and noticeable impact on cattle production. Ralph D. Johnson, an agricultural economist with the United States Department of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, cited efficient meatpacking operations as one of the top reasons that Nebraska and Iowa led growth in cattle production from 1962-1967 (sixty eight percent growth for Nebraska, fifty one percent for Iowa). As many as ninety percent of the animals slaughtered in these states in 1967 were processed in plants that were less than ten years old. These plants utilized

⁸ Robert M. Finley and Ralph D. Johnson, *Changes in the Cattle Feeding Industry in Nebraska*, (Bulletin, Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska Agricultural Extension Service, 1963).

⁹ Lourdes Gouveia, "Global Strategies and Local Linkages: The Case of the U.S. Meatpacking Industry," in *From Columbus to ConAgra: The Globalization of Agriculture and Food*, ed. by Alessandro Bonnano, Lawrence Bush, William Friedland, Lourdes Gouveia, and Enzo Mingione (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 139.

innovations in technology and plant design to process cattle more quickly and more efficiently than their predecessors.¹⁰

The proximity of the packing plants to supplies of cattle allowed for a more efficient process of getting live cattle to the slaughterhouse. Farmers and ranchers in the vicinity of these rural plants could market their livestock directly to packers rather than losing time and money sending them through buying terminals and stockyards. Previously, cattle from many producers would have been gathered at a buying terminal, loaded on railcars, and shipped to a stockyard in Chicago, Omaha, or Sioux City. Plants located closer to cattle producers, in conjunction with improved highways and increased trucking, allowed for the elimination of buying terminals and stockyards. Instead, trucks would haul live cattle from the farm, ranch, or feedlot directly to the slaughterhouse, where they would be killed and processed the same day. Cutting out the costs of terminals and stockyards allowed the producer to keep more of the price paid for their livestock while also allowing packers to pay less.¹¹

The development of the mechanically refrigerated trailer (the “reefer” in trucker parlance), along with improvements in diesel engine technology and the ever-expanding highway system broke the Big Four packers’ domination of the rail-based distribution network. Historian Shane Hamilton credits this shift in transportation technology for setting in motion the restructuring of the entire industry. “The lowly reefer truck allowed between two and three thousand small, rural meatpackers to undermine the Big Four’s monopoly power more effectively than any antitrust legislation had ever done.”

¹⁰ Ralph D. Johnson, “The Status of Cattle Feeding in the Corn Belt.” Address delivered at Columbia, MO, 16 January 1969. Typscript in Box 135 Bio/Bib Files, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

¹¹ Johnson; Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 145.

Beginning in the 1950s, trucks gave rural packers a way to bypass the old distribution network and compete with much larger companies centered in the cities. As early as 1963, 60 percent of refrigerated meat was transported by truck.¹² But without other significant changes in the way meat was processed and sold, companies like IBP would have never grown as quickly or as large as they did.

Ironically, trucking played an important role in the development of a new monopoly just as it had destroyed the old one. Long-haul trucking was central to the creation of the modern feedlot system that grew in conjunction with the new-breed packers in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, IBP and a few other leaders in the industry dominated the distribution of beef by refrigerated truck and thereby drove competitors (both large, old firms and small upstarts) out of business.¹³ The flexibility of trucks (as compared to rail) was one of its greatest benefits: it allowed the development of direct marketing from cattle producers to packers and, with the advent of boxed beef in 1969, it allowed the product to be shipped directly to loading docks at supermarkets around the country without the need for branch houses and delivery trucks associated with the rail-dominated system.¹⁴

The possibility of slaughtering cattle as close as possible to the source, therefore, could drastically improve the efficiency of the packing operation. Cattle brought from farm or ranch--or, increasingly, commercial feedlot--directly to the packing plant by truck, slaughtered the same day, and then shipped meant the live animals (the least

¹² Hamilton, 136-137; Richard J. Arnould, "Changing Patterns of Concentration in American Meatpacking, 1880-1963," *Business History Review*, 1971: 18-34, 26-27, made the same point about the way transportation changes allowed upstart rural plants to challenge the industry giants a few decades earlier without the benefit of seeing the future development of IBP and other ascendant meatpacking corporations.

¹³ Hamilton, 139.

¹⁴ Hamilton; 146, 158.

efficient way to transport them) were shipped the shortest possible distance. Initially, IBP continued to ship their output as sides of beef just like their competitors, but they saw possibilities for greater efficiency in further processing of the meat as well as slaughter.

In 1969, IBP remedied the inefficiency of shipping sides of beef by the introduction of an entirely new--but as far as Anderson and Holman were concerned, completely logical--product: boxed beef. Holman described the problem, and the solution, in 1968: "The route meat has taken from producer to table in the past has been incredibly inefficient. For no good reason, either. At times there have been 15 to 19 middlemen all doing something to the meat and taking their cut. No wonder no one makes any money. We feel it can all be done, and will be done eventually, in a single plant."¹⁵ Rather than shipping sides of beef to be cut up by a butcher in a grocery store or meat market, IBP further processed the beef at its Dakota City plant.

The company hired hundreds of new workers to staff the production line (often considered separately from the slaughter process by both management and workers) where chilled carcasses were turned into marketable meat. Workers stood next to work tables along conveyor belts that transported the product, armed with meat hooks, knives, and sharpening steels. Each employee was assigned a specific cut or series of cuts which he or she repeated thousands of times each day. They produced vacuum-packed cuts of meat, trimmed of fat and bone, that could be shipped more efficiently (not only was excess weight eliminated, but boxes stack much more neatly in a refrigerated truck or railcar than sides of beef) and sold from grocery stores with only minimal further

¹⁵ "Triumph of Logic," 51.

processing required. As Dale C. Tinstman, vice chairman of IBP's board of directors, put it in an address he delivered in 1980, "An entire industry had been revolutionized."¹⁶

New Work and New Workers

Turning carcass beef into marketable products--cuts that might appear in shops or on the dinner table--had long been the task of skilled butchers in meat markets or grocery stores. IBP eliminated the need for these skilled workers by separating the numerous steps of the process into discrete tasks. This allowed the company to essentially replace well-paid butchers with low-paid, unskilled laborers on their disassembly line in the Dakota City processing plant. In doing so, IBP reshaped a well-established system of distributing meat to customers and gained for the company a greater share of the process. It made the whole system of transforming cattle into beef more efficient, but this shift required a significant amount of unskilled labor in the rural locations in which IBP was developing its business.¹⁷

The opening of the massive new IBP plant at Dakota City in 1966 was hailed by local boosters as a boon for the economic development of the area. Prior to this new enterprise, Dakota City and South Sioux City had been farming communities with little industrial development. Some manufacturing and meat processing were concentrated across the Missouri River in the larger and more developed regional hub, Sioux City, Iowa. Initial estimates suggested the Dakota City plant would employ 500 people, a substantial gain for two communities whose combined population was just over 8,000. In addition to the jobs created by the processing operations at IBP, opportunities for

¹⁶ Dale C. Tinstman and Robert L. Peterson, *Iowa Beef Processors, Inc: An Entire Industry Revolutionized!* (Newcomen Society in North America, 1981), 10.

¹⁷ Gouveia, 129; Kathleen Stanley, "Industrial and Labor Market Transformation in the U.S. Meatpacking Industry," in *The Global Restructuring of Agro-Food Systems*, by Philip McMichael, 129-144 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 134.

investment and expansion in raising cattle, trucking, and in the processing of cattle byproducts (such as hide, hoof, hair, horn, blood, bone, and gland) also appeared promising to the surrounding communities.¹⁸

Applicants for the new jobs in the packinghouse were plentiful as meatpacking was a well-paid and respectable occupation. Although it was wage work and therefore not considered a middle class occupation, meatpacking paid enough to support a family. Some people in South Sioux City and Dakota City had previous experience in the industry, having worked in the Swift, Armour, or Cudahy packinghouses in Sioux City, Iowa, or knowing others who had.¹⁹ Other applicants were simply family farmers or the children of farmers who moved out of agriculture as that sector of the economy became increasingly mechanized and concentrated in the hands of corporate farms during the second half of the twentieth century. IBP had little trouble finding workers for the Dakota City plant, just as they had experienced little trouble in their first plant in the small town of Denison, Iowa. Their model of moving to small towns close to the supply of livestock, hiring locals, and escaping the restrictive contracts of the unions in the big cities became famous and much emulated by other meatpacking companies.²⁰

But IBP's great success in modernizing the meatpacking industry did not come without difficulties. These challenges existed in the industry prior to IBP's emergence, but were exacerbated by the company's new business model. Labor relations was the biggest issue. The high cost of labor, due in part to powerful unions, was one factor that had made the old-line packers in the big cities of the Midwest less flexible in their

¹⁸ Lance Hedquist interview with Dustin Kipp, 29 November 2010. "Have Land Option For Meat Packing Plant," *Dakota County Star*, 6 August 1964.

¹⁹ These companies belonged to what were known as the "old-line" packers. They were eventually driven to change their operations or get out of business by the revolutionary approaches of IBP and its imitators.

²⁰ Rodengen, 47-48. See also Skaggs, especially 190-197.

operations and thus limited possibilities for them to adapt to changing technologies and market conditions. Building or expanding plants in small towns allowed IBP to avoid or at least minimize the influence of unions on wages and benefits. Small towns in rural areas lacked the union organization and traditions which had been built up primarily in urban areas. A 1964 editorial in the *Dakota County Star* when IBP decided to build at Dakota City cited “a healthy labor situation void of a past history of disturbance” as one of the key attractions for the growing company. Despite a lack of strong union presence at the outset, some of their plants did organize eventually. But IBP refused to accept the master contracts that had prevailed with the Big Four in Chicago, Omaha, and other cities. The company insisted that their single-species slaughter operations, which required a less-skilled workforce, was fundamentally different from the operations of the old-line packers and therefore its workers should not be treated as if they were the same as those; skilled butchers who did work under the master contract.

When faced with a strike at their Fort Dodge, Iowa, plant in 1965, IBP negotiated with United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) officials from Chicago to maintain the company’s independence from the industry-wide wage scales and rules. With the help of Iowa Governor Harold Hughes, IBP succeeded. “We obtained language to operate our plant without the normal restrictions other packers had surrendered. We secured that right in that strike and have held it ever since,” reported Arden Walker, IBP’s vice president of industrial relations, in 1979.²¹ Instead of making a master agreement which would cover all of the company’s employees regardless of the plant in which they worked, management negotiated with union representatives at each plant separately. Using this approach, IBP isolated labor disputes in each location and

²¹ Arden Walker, interview by Hill and Knowlton, Inc, 28 August 1979, quoted in Rodengen, 44.

prevented all of their workers from taking collective action together--a move which would have strengthened the workers' negotiating position. The company kept their labor costs among the lowest in the industry throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As IBP expanded in the 1960s, it replaced the master-contract wage scales of the city with rural non-union pay rates.²²

By contrast, at the Dakota City plant in 1969, IBP's refusal to work with organized labor ran up against a strong union tradition that had spread to the plant from across the river in Sioux City, where meatpacking had long been an important industry. IBP had encouraged the formation of a small, independent union in the plant when it opened in order to prevent the UPWA--the union that had organized and won master contracts with the major meatpacking companies and challenged IBP at their Fort Dodge plant--from organizing workers in their newest operation. Despite IBP's efforts, the existence of well-established union activity in Sioux City quickly had an impact on events at the Dakota City plant. In June 1969 Dakota City IBP workers voted to scrap the original, company-approved union and to join the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America (AMCBW), which had recently merged with the declining UPWA. The Dakota City plant was incorporated into the existing local in Sioux City (#222), providing the union workers with immediate access to experienced organizers and negotiators as well as other useful resources.

The first of many labor disputes at Dakota City devolved into a strike just two months after that vote when, on August 25, 1969, 1,200 union workers walked out.²³ The union was asking for a wage increase from \$2.73/hour for slaughter employees and

²² "Great Day For Dakota County," *Dakota County Star*, 15 October 1964; Jonathan Kwitny, *Vicious Circles: The Mafia in the Marketplace*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 287.

²³ "Sheriff Vows to Keep Peace During Meat Plant Strike." *South Sioux City Star*, 28 August 1969.

\$2.12/hour for processing employees to \$3.53/hour for both categories. With their recent labor dispute at Fort Dodge in mind, IBP officials interpreted the move as an attempt by the national union to drive the upstart company out of business, but IBP offered a 30-cent pay increase nevertheless.²⁴ The union declined that offer. Distrust quickly developed between the two sides as the union saw IBP as hostile to organized labor and IBP saw the union's efforts as attacks on the company's very existence. Each side's beliefs about the motives of the other created increasing strain on relations and made a negotiated reconciliation unlikely. The dispute turned violent in October when striking workers shot two women; the one who worked at IBP was wounded and the other, unaffiliated with the company, was killed. Strikers also dynamited homes (including the sheriff's), construction equipment, and a power sub-station that supplied electricity to the plant.²⁵ In November, a picketer from Sioux City was shot by an IBP employee leaving his shift after an argument at the entrance to the plant.²⁶ Despite all the trouble at the Dakota City plant, the company's sales were \$675 million in 1969, a 26 percent increase over the previous year.²⁷

In April 1970, negotiations between union representatives and IBP executives yielded an agreement providing slight wage increases spread over the three years of the new contract. IBP was able to maintain a split in the wage scale between slaughtering and processing despite union opposition. This was significant because they were able to pay processors (the workers doing the recently deskilled jobs and also the majority of the workforce) about 60 cents an hour less than the slaughterers, who were still treated as

²⁴ "IBP Wants To Change Industry," *South Sioux City Star*, October 16, 1969; Rodengen, 60.

²⁵ "Dynamiting Is Outgrowth of Strike: Bligh," *South Sioux City Star*, 23 October 1969; "Editorial," *South Sioux City Star*, October 30, 1969.

²⁶ "State's Self-Defense Law Shooting Factor?" *South Sioux City Star*, 7 November 1969.

²⁷ Rodengen, 64.

skilled workers.²⁸ The level of violence associated with this first strike at Dakota City was not repeated in later years, but labor disputes turned into strikes or lockouts regularly, each time the existing contract was set to expire: 1973 (lockout), 1977-78 (strike), 1982 (strike), and 1986-87 (lockout, then strike).

In addition to establishing what would become a pattern of labor unrest, the 1969 strike was the first instance where IBP specifically recruited Latino workers to meet their labor needs--in this case as strikebreakers. Nebraska was a “right-to-work” state, having passed legislation following the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act which prohibited closed shops. Employees could not be required to be union members or pay union dues. This allowed IBP to continue operations with some non-union employees who chose not to participate in the strike and to recruit new workers as well to try to make up for the striking employees. The company managed to return operations to about 50 percent of pre-strike levels with this combination of non-union employees and strikebreakers. In an interview with the *South Sioux City Star* in October 1969 Arden Walker, vice president of industrial relations at IBP, discussed the continuing operations of the plant during the strike. He emphasized that most of the replacement workers that the company hired were from surrounding Nebraska towns, but also noted that some “Spanish-Americans” had come to work in the plant. These workers “are all American citizens and were screened more carefully than other employees,” he pointed out in an effort to preempt criticism of the company’s decision.²⁹

²⁸ Charles R. Perry and Delwyn H. Kegley, *Disintegration and Change: Labor Relations in the Meat Packing Industry*, (Philadelphia: Industrial Research Unit, The Wharton School, 1989), 137.

²⁹ “IBP Official: Next Move Up To Union,” *South Sioux City Star*, 16 October 1969. On the role of early twentieth century immigration policy in the shaping of American attitudes toward immigrants from Latin America, see Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

At least some of these Latino workers were recruited by IBP out of the well-established migrant labor stream that operated from South Texas to the northern Plains and the Great Lakes region. Most often, these workers engaged in contract labor for growers who were themselves operating under contract to large food-processing corporations. Laborers produced a variety of crops, including tomatoes, cucumbers, and sugar beets. This migrant labor system included mostly European immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century, but Mexican and Mexican-American laborers, especially from the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas, were increasingly prevalent from World War I onward. Like the European immigrants that had come before them, many Latino migrants sought safer, higher paying, and more permanent work in cities and towns in the Great Plains and Midwest.³⁰ As historian Marc Rodriguez contends, Tejano workers were attracted to these communities by “social, economic, and political factors,” including employment.³¹

Early newcomers to Dakota County found opportunities for settled work because of the labor dispute between the AMBCW and IBP. Many were favorably impressed by the job prospects and the pay. Some of the first recruits encouraged family members and others to join them, suggesting that work at the Dakota City plant was a good opportunity to settle down and avoid the challenges of migrant farm labor. Not all of the new recruits chose to make meatpacking a permanent occupation, however, and instead treated it as

³⁰ Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Dennis Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Zaragoza Vargas, "Armies in the Fields and Factories: The Mexican Working Classes in the Midwest in the 1920s," *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos* (1991): 47-71; Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jim Norris, *North for the Harvest: Mexican Workers, Growers, and the Sugar Beet Industry*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009).

³¹ Marc Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism and Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 6.

just another temporary job among the many they might work for varying periods throughout the year. For some, the cold winter was just too much. The family of Norma de la O--who was 6 years old when she first came to Nebraska--stayed for about eight months when they first came to Dakota City in 1969. Her father preferred migrant work to the cold. They returned, however, in 1972 and settled for good despite the weather.³²

Reactions to the company's move to recruit labor from outside the area in 1969 were mixed. For the most part, the Latino workers were isolated from the rest of the community. Most lived in housing that IBP built on the plant premises and rented to workers. They were bused into town occasionally for necessary errands, but spent little time in the community.³³ Most people in Dakota City and South Sioux City hardly saw them, let alone had any significant interaction with them, so they were ambivalent. When direct interactions did occur, they were often unremarkable. But, the interactions that Latino newcomers did remember tended to be of a positive, welcoming nature. Norma de la O, for instance, relates a story of a visit to a small local store during the family's first winter in Nebraska. She accompanied her father to translate for him, as his ability to speak and understand English was still quite limited. When she and her father walked in, the store manager, seeing that Norma's father had no coat, asked if he knew how cold it got in the area. When her father responded that he really did not know before they had arrived, the manager took off his jacket and gave it to him.³⁴

For others, especially striking workers and their families, the presence of "foreign" workers was unwelcome. Some were concerned about the possibility that outsiders, whether U.S. citizens, legal immigrants, or undocumented immigrants, might

³² Norma de la O, interview with Dustin Kipp, 6 October 2010.

³³ de la O.

³⁴ de la O.

take jobs away from locals. Others felt more strongly and expressed their shock and disdain for IBP's actions in letters to the local newspaper. One woman vowed to find out if the company was breaking any laws in bringing "Mexican people" to work in the plant.³⁵

Latino workers who arrived during this tense period in the community's history might have been tempted to move along as quickly as possible. But the bombs and shootings--shocking as they were to residents, old and new--were isolated and, whether accurately or not, the press attributed the trouble between the union and IBP to the outside influence of national union operatives, rather than local members.³⁶ The violence stopped as soon as the labor dispute was resolved and residents, though they were a bit unsettled by the events, did not consider this strike or subsequent labor disputes as particularly divisive in the community.³⁷ The immigrants who chose to settle in the area saw little reason to fear violence and regarded the community as safe, especially when compared to some of the places from which they had come, like Chicago and Los Angeles.³⁸ There is no indication that they were ever targets of violence because of their role as strikebreakers.

Many of the Latinos who were recruited by IBP when the company needed workers to keep operations running during the 1969 labor dispute (as well as subsequent strikes) became permanent employees. Some encouraged relatives and friends to join them in working at IBP, a phenomenon known as "network recruiting." The company thus attracted new employees from outside the area without having to do any actual

³⁵ Rodengen, 61; Francine Jacobs, interview with Dustin Kipp, 29 November 2010; Helen Bahr, "Letter to the Editor," *South Sioux City Star*, 18 September 1969.

³⁶ Rodengen, 62.

³⁷ Marvin Harrington, interview with Dustin Kipp, 5 November 2010. Jacobs.

³⁸ Emilio Diaz, interview with Dustin Kipp, 5 November 2010.

recruiting themselves. This process was closely linked with another trend, often referred to as “chain migration,” where small groups of migrants or immigrants attract more newcomers from their country or region of origin.³⁹ In the case of Dakota City and South Sioux City, these two processes were nearly indistinguishable. IBP and a few associated industries (such as cleaning subcontractors and byproducts processors) were initially the only employers in town looking to hire newcomers, so a new migrant was in most cases also a new recruit for the company during the 1970s.⁴⁰

The ability to speak and understand English was not required to get a job at IBP. Workers on the processing line were expected to learn how to do their one or two tasks simply by imitating what those around them were doing. In the 1970s, some reported being placed on the line within 30 minutes of being hired. They received no formal training and felt they must simply figure it out and keep up or lose their jobs.⁴¹ Lack of English-language abilities did prevent processing workers from advancing to higher-paying jobs as foremen, supervisors, or managers, but IBP could employ non-English speaking workers as long as they could learn and perform the repetitive tasks of the disassembly line.

Making Dakota County Home

³⁹ David Craig Griffith, *Jones Minimal: Low-Wage Labor in the United States*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 159-163; Philip Martin, *Immigration Reform and U.S. Agriculture*, (Oakland: University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1995), 117-121; Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, (New York: Guilford, 1998), 28; Karen Johnson-Webb, *Recruiting Hispanic Labor: Immigrants in Non-Traditional Areas*, (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2003).

⁴⁰ Lourdes Gouveia and Rogelio Saenz, “Global Forces and Latino Population Growth in the Midwest: A Regional and Subregional Analysis,” *Great Plains Research* 10, no. 2 (2004): 305-28; Kathleen Stanley, “Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Midwestern Meatpacking Industry: Industrial Restructuring and the Transformation of Rural Labor Markets,” *Policy Studies Review* 11 (Summer 1992): 106-117.

⁴¹ de la O.

One new arrival to the Siouxland (the term used by locals to describe the region, including Sioux City, Iowa as well as South Sioux City and Dakota City, Nebraska and the extreme southeast corner of South Dakota) and IBP in 1973 was Emilio Diaz. He had moved around frequently after immigrating to the United States from Mexico in 1966, spending several years first as a migrant farm laborer on the West Coast, picking crops in California, Oregon, and Washington, and then several more years as a railroad worker in Chicago. When he started a family, Emilio wanted to settle down somewhere other than a big city. He felt unsafe in his own home in Chicago; he disliked the crime and gambling that took place in his neighborhood. In short, he was looking for a safe and comfortable place where his children could have a chance at a “better life.” Emilio heard from a cousin working at the plant in Dakota City that IBP was hiring and he decided that the job opportunity was his chance to move his young family out of Chicago.⁴²

Along with his wife, Maria, and their 8-month-old son, Marco, Emilio moved from Chicago to Sioux City, Iowa, in 1973. Emilio and Maria both found work on the processing line at IBP and, while the work was difficult, they were happy to have steady employment. They were not satisfied with life in Sioux City, however. The daily drive to work was long and the community did not seem welcoming. The family moved across the Missouri River to South Sioux City, Nebraska after a couple of years. Here Emilio and Maria found the small-town atmosphere they had been hoping for; it was a safe and stable place to raise their family.⁴³

The immigrant population remained small and relatively unobtrusive during the 1970s, as far as most long-time residents were concerned. The 1970 Census listed only 88

⁴² Emilio Diaz.

⁴³ Emilio Diaz.

“Persons of Spanish Language” living in Dakota County in that year out of a population of 13,000. Emilio guessed that there were still only around 100 Latinos living in the area when he and his family arrived in 1973.⁴⁴ Most, if not all, of these were IBP employees and their families. Many Latino workers continued to live in the housing on the plant premises throughout the 1970s, maintaining a very strong link both spatially and in public perception between the immigrant population and the meatpacking company.

This housing complex (derisively called “Taco Town” by some of the locals at the time) concentrated most newcomers in about 50 units on the plant grounds, creating an ethnic enclave where neighbors made connections and maintained some of their cultural traditions. Norma de la O fondly remembers these years of her childhood. The housing was not extravagant, but it was comfortable. There were always neighbors getting together for one reason or another; they would often clear the furniture out of someone’s living room to make space for gatherings. Even religious ceremonies were conducted in these homes in the early 1970s as there were no Spanish-language church services at the time at St. Michael’s, the Catholic parish in South Sioux City. De la O attended a wedding in one of the housing units as a child; a Spanish-speaking priest came from Omaha to officiate.⁴⁵ Community religious events like this one, even though they may have taken place in a small home behind a meatpacking plant rather than in a church, helped to sustain cultural traditions while at the same time strengthening the sense of community among the recent arrivals.

⁴⁴ The Census Bureau has categorized persons now known as Latino in several different ways during the second half of the twentieth century. They were, in the 1970 Census, categorized by self-reporting of Spanish as their mother tongue. The 1980 Census replaced this with a group called “Spanish Origin.” Beginning with the 1990 Census, “Hispanic Origin, of any race” encompassed Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others. “Summary Population and Housing Characteristics,” *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1970*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971); Emilio Diaz.

⁴⁵ de la O.

The concentration of many of the new immigrants in IBP's on-site housing facilitated their cooperation and neighborly connections in accomplishing everyday tasks as well. Most of the time, kids who lived in the housing complex walked along the railroad tracks to get to school because it was the shortest route to the campus in Dakota City. During the winter, however, de la O's father would often drive children from the neighborhood to school because he had a big truck. Neighbors could also rely on one another for necessities like child care, which made adapting to the challenges of relocation easier than it would have been without any assistance. There were no formal efforts by local government agencies or community groups to assist the newly-arrived workers at this time, so cooperation amongst neighbors was one of the few resources they had.⁴⁶

For most of the Latinos who came to Dakota County in the late-1960s and 1970s, the changes were dramatic: a new climate, new jobs, and a new community. For everyone else in Dakota County, however, the existence of the newcomers barely registered most of the time. There were only three Mexican Americans in de la O's high school graduating class in 1982--the community was still overwhelmingly Anglo and working class. Latino workers from the housing complex at the processing plant began to move into Dakota City and South Sioux City in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was daunting for some, moving out of what had been a close-knit neighborhood, but after the first few families made the move others followed. Low housing prices in the area and the fact that many households had two incomes facilitated this process. IBP phased out the on-site

⁴⁶ de la O.

housing as families moved to town, repurposing the buildings for storage or other needs.⁴⁷

For the children of IBP's Latino workforce, experiences at school constituted their most regular and in-depth interactions with other members of the community. Latino children attended both the public schools in Dakota City and South Sioux City as well as St. Michael's, the elementary school of the Catholic parish. Regardless of whether they attended public or parochial schools, most reported positive experiences. De la O, who attended the public elementary school in Dakota City and then the public high school in South Sioux City (Dakota City was too small to have its own high school, so all students from that elementary school went on to South Sioux City after 8th grade), remembers school as a generally positive experience where she could spend time with her friends. Her experiences differed from the norm for Anglo children in the community, however. While her parents made an effort to be involved in her schooling by attending school functions whenever their work schedules allowed, they were usually unable to participate fully because of their lack of proficiency with the English language. As de la O entered high school in the late 1970s, she also felt a growing distance from her peers; because her family had little interaction with Anglo families in town, she had only a limited number of friends who were allowed to visit her home and she was only allowed to visit a few of theirs.⁴⁸

School was crucial to immigrant family success, however. Among the many challenges that recent immigrants to northeastern Nebraska faced in the 1970s, language was perhaps the most common and persistent barrier for first-generation immigrants.

⁴⁷ de la O; Hedquist; Emilio Diaz.

⁴⁸ de la O.

Their children learned English at school, whether they started out in Dakota County or had previously attended school in Texas or other U.S. states, as many had when their families were engaged in migrant farm labor. Adults, who were more likely to have been born and raised in Mexico and therefore have less proficiency with English, lacked access to English classes like those that would become common at community centers and through social service agencies in the 1990s. Fortunately, children could often serve as translators for their parents. At the time, this was vital to the family's ability to function in town as no services, whether from public agencies or private businesses, were available in Spanish.⁴⁹

The first Latino immigrants to Dakota County in the late 1960s and 1970s found ways to adapt to their new home through family and neighborhood cooperation. Many were happy with the job opportunity and community they had found. Although the work was difficult, wages in meatpacking (both slaughter and processing) were above the national average for food processing and other types of manufacturing in the U.S. With two income earners, wages were sufficient to support their families and allow some to become homeowners. The 1980s, however, would prove to be a period of significant change for the community. IBP's wages would stagnate and then decline (when adjusted for inflation).⁵⁰ At the same time, the processing line was sped up repeatedly, making work not only more difficult, but more dangerous as well. And in the late 1980s, in the wake of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act's legalization of 3.2 million

⁴⁹ Marco Diaz, interview with Dustin Kipp, 5 November 2010; de la O; Hedquist.

⁵⁰ Michael Ollinger, et al., "Structural Change in the Meat, Poultry, Dairy, and Grain Processing Industries," *United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), 10.

previously undocumented immigrants, there was a new wave of Latino immigration to Dakota County.

Chapter 2

On the Job: Workers' Experiences at IBP

Currier Holman, one of the founders of Iowa Beef Packers, listed the company's goals at the 1970 shareholders' meeting. He included providing value for customers, a return for investors, jobs for communities, and to "help feed a hungry world." He also claimed that, "By combining the benefits of scale with service, we can add this value at no cost to anyone."¹ These goals reflected important societal needs, but there clearly were costs--especially for communities and workers. Many of the problems faced by workers and the communities in which they lived resulted from the working conditions and the consequently high worker turnover rate in the meatpacking industry. Many workers did not last long on the production line, so IBP required a constant flow of new workers to keep their operation running. When they had exhausted the labor supply in and around Dakota County, they had to look elsewhere.

Throughout changes in the meatpacking industry and mergers and acquisitions, attitudes expressed by IBP executives toward the communities that were home to their packing and processing plants seemed to differ depending on who they were talking to. In a 1980 interview with the *Des Moines Register*, IBP chairman and chief executive officer Robert Peterson made it clear that the company had little interest in portraying itself as a community-oriented enterprise: "We do not spend a great deal of our time in civic functions. We spend it on business. Our primary role in every community we're in is to deposit the payroll. Companies that liken themselves to civic ambassadors end up not

¹ Quoted in Jeffrey L. Rodengen. *The Legend of IBP, Inc.*, (Ft. Lauderdale, Florida: Write Stuff Enterprises, 2000), 67.

serving the business purposes they're supposed to.”² In testimony before the Employment and Housing Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations in 1987, however, when IBP was being scrutinized for underreporting injuries in the Dakota City plant, Peterson conveyed a different message:

I believe that you will find that our corporation, and our parent corporation [Occidental Petroleum], have worked very hard at being both good corporate citizens and U.S. citizens, and I know of no industry that has contributed more to society. . . . We give to libraries, we've given to universities, we've given to swimming pools, we've given to hospitals. . . . We live generally in small rural communities, and we give a lot to the communities in which we live both from a work standpoint, from our individual contribution standpoint, and from a company standpoint.³

Notwithstanding such protestations, the company's record suggests that its role in communities was primarily about business. The company did occasionally make donations to local causes, but their primary contribution to the local community was providing employment and increasing economic activity in what were otherwise decaying rural areas. Jobs in IBP's slaughter and processing operations in Dakota City were not ideal, however.

Difficult working conditions at IBP's Dakota City plant were central to the very phenomenon of immigration as well as the experiences of workers. The turnover rate in the industry was responsible for creating the demand for labor that attracted immigrants; without the processing plant, the area's population would have likely declined as most other rural counties' populations did during the 1980s. But the same conditions that

² Quoted in Wayne Swanson and George Schultz. *Prime Rip*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 192-3.

³ U.S. House. Committee on Government Operations. "Underreporting of Occupational Injuries and Its Impact on Workers' Safety: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations 100th Cong., 1st sess., 6 May 1987." (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 65-66.

created turnover and made jobs available for newcomers to Dakota County also made working for IBP a burden.

The difficulty and danger associated with working in meatpacking was central to the experiences of nearly all immigrants to Dakota County in the late twentieth century. Work occupied a significant portion of their time and the physical demands and effects of their labor (i.e. soreness, numbness, pain, and exhaustion) remained even after they clocked out and went home. Immigrants' employment options were often limited by lack of formal education, job skills, and language skills. Thus the packing plant was at the same time the only chance new arrivals had for a job and also a source of new problems ranging from stress and financial difficulty to serious health conditions. Workers and government officials offer evidence of some of the costs that workers and communities paid to produce cheap meat for consumers and high profits for IBP.

Conditions in the Plant

Slaughtering animals and cutting them up into marketable products is an inherently messy and unpleasant task. On top of the nature of the task, the thin profit margin of the packing industry made speed and efficiency of paramount importance-- volume was the only way to make money.⁴ Mechanization and deskilling of the production process, as IBP began to implement in earnest in 1961, allowed the company to continue to increase speed by giving each worker responsibility for repetitive tasks while simultaneously cutting wages and benefits. The result was that workers were

⁴ The major packing companies routinely claimed profit margins around 1-2 percent throughout the second half of the twentieth century. See Ana-Maria Wahl, Steven E. Gunkel, and Thomas W. Sanchez, "Death and Disability in the Heartland: Corporate (Mis)Conduct, Regulatory Responses, and the Plight of Latino Workers in the Meatpacking Industry." *Great Plains Research* (2000), 332.

pushed to--and in many cases beyond--the limits of their physical capacity for wages that, while substantial in the 1960s and 1970s, declined thereafter.

The growth of labor unions in the early twentieth century and increasing workplace regulations over the years had helped to put an end to some of the dangerous conditions and practices that had been exposed by Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* in 1906, but the speeding up of the production line continued unabated in the late twentieth century.⁵ As IBP and its imitators reshaped the industry through increased mechanization and the deskilling of tasks, the workforce changed as well to include more people with limited education and often lacking English language skills. New workers presented new challenges as well. For many immigrants, the dangers of the workplace stood in their path to economic and social stability. The segmentation of the labor market kept Latinos and other immigrants in the lowest paying and most dangerous jobs. Their lack of transferable skills often prevented advancement to safer, higher-paying positions or jobs in other industries.⁶

Injury and illness rates in meatpacking were remarkably high during the late twentieth century. For instance, the rate was 33.6 per 100 full-time workers in 1977, putting meatpacking at over three times the average for the private sector as a whole. This rate fluctuated no more than a few points per year during the following decade. By 1992, the situation was worse. The rate for meatpacking had spiked to 44.4 incidents per 100 workers. There were many factors that affected injury rates in the industry, but

⁵ Perhaps the most important single change was the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970, which created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) under the auspices of the Department of Labor as well as the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) under the Center for Disease Control.

⁶ For discussion of segmented labor markets, see Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez, 330; Philip Martin, "The Missing Bridge: How Immigrant Networks Keep Americans out of Dirty Jobs." *Population and Environment* (1993), 543-544.

processing line speed was one of the most significant. In the early years of IBP's operations, each plant slaughtered about 150 cattle per hour, a dramatic increase from the roughly 50 per hour in old-line packing plants. By the 1990s, slaughter rates reached 400 per hour in some plants. The meatpacking industry made a significant improvement in injury rates over the next few years, however, as the rate fell back to 30.3 in 1996. Despite this significant improvement in a short period of time, meatpacking remained the most dangerous occupation in the United States and had an injury rate over four times as high as the average for all private sector industries. By 1999, the rate in meatpacking would reach its lowest level in decades at 26.7.

Table 2.1: Occupational Injury and Illness Rate per 100 Full-time Workers⁷

Year	Meatpacking	Private Sector
1977	33.6	9.3
1980	33.5	8.7
1983	31.4	7.6
1986	33.4	7.9
1992	44.4	8.9
1996	30.3	7.4
1999	26.7	6.3

The high rate of injury and illness in the meatpacking industry requires some explanation. The very nature of the work in meatpacking--including the raw materials,

⁷ All injury and illness data can be found in U.S Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Injuries and Illness in the United States by Industry*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, printed annually).

tools, and tasks--created a number of difficult circumstances. Lewie Anderson, a United Food and Commercial Workers union officer and former IBP employee, provided this overview of the working conditions in 1987:

Workers at the IBP Dakota City plant stand in a sea of blood. Others work in cold temperatures of 25 to 35 degrees with powerful fans blowing cold air down on them. Nearly all of the workers stand on treacherously slippery floors covered with animal fat buildup, which provides a situation where workers slip frequently at the IBP Dakota City plant. The working conditions are cramped. Lines of people stand side by side with approximately 48 inches of working space between them. All of the workers or nearly all of the workers at the IBP Dakota City plant wield razor-sharp knives and power tools, frantically working at a pace, trying to keep up with a relentless chain bringing production to their work station. Because of the close working conditions, because of the breakneck chain speeds, workers frequently are accidentally stabbed by their neighbors who are also trying to keep up with the chain speed and tolerate the close working conditions.⁸

Sharp knives, cold temperatures, and blood and animal fat are unavoidable features of work at meatpacking plants. When workers complained, however, they focused not on these parts of the job, but rather the fact that IBP failed to take simple steps to minimize the inherent risks and dangers.

“The floors at IBP are treacherous,” explained former employee Steve DeRaad, “[it] was covered with fat smears and was wet.”⁹ On numerous occasions, employees and union stewards would request that management increase the application of salt to the floors or distress the concrete to improve traction. In some cases, IBP agreed to apply more salt. In others, however, they denied these requests for different reasons. One

⁸ U.S. House. Committee on Government Operations. "Underreporting of Occupational Injuries and Its Impact on Workers' Safety: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations 100th Cong., 1st sess., 19 March 1987." (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 9-10. For additional descriptions and explanations of the dangers industry-wide, and what little progress was made between these descriptions in the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, see the 2004 report from Human Rights Watch: Lance Compa, *Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants*. (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004).

⁹ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 46.

common response was that they already salted the floors. Another was that providing better traction by roughing up the concrete floors would make it difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy USDA inspectors that the plant was clean enough to operate.¹⁰ Grooves or other irregularities in the floor which would aid traction would also be harder to adequately clean and sanitize than smooth floors. IBP's fear of failing to meet USDA standards (for which the plant could be shut down until the problem was corrected) and a more general desire to keep production moving made it difficult for workers, even with the help of the union, to get improvements in their working conditions.

In numerous cases, ineptitude and disregard for worker safety on the part of management and supervisors compounded the inherently dangerous physical conditions. In 1982, when a worker's hand was cut off and it went past fellow employees down the line, they were simply told to "clean it up and get back to work." When a worker got a hand caught in a belt roller on the line, nobody in the production area, including the foreman, knew where the shutoff switch was located.¹¹ In these cases, as in many others, the danger of the job was compounded by the driving focus on productivity, which often meant worker safety was compromised and even traumatic events were treated as nothing more than interruptions to the flow of production.

Steve DeRaad recalled a particular situation at the end of his shift working with a giant blender that repeatedly caused injuries but was never corrected by management. "Removing the auger was suppose [sic] to be a two-man job, but in the past few years, due to costs I would imagine, Iowa Beef has seen fit to make it a one-man job." On April 17, 1985 he slipped on the floor while trying to remove the 300-pound auger by himself

¹⁰ A few sample grievances are printed in Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 121-122.

¹¹ Marilyn Schmidt, "What Violence?" *South Sioux City Star*, August 5, 1982.

and injured his back when he slammed into a steel peg. Less than two months later, on May 30, he smashed a finger attempting to remove the same auger, again with no assistance. This second injury was caused, in part, by a faulty jack handle that DeRaad had repeatedly asked to have repaired. Even after months of complaints, no repair was made.¹²

Joseph Eck's case neatly encapsulates what went wrong at the Dakota City plant. He was 18 years old and in his third week of work at IBP in January 1985 when he was put on a new job which consisted of catching 70-pound chunks of shrink-wrapped meat off of one line and placing them in boxes before placing them on another line. The box line was broken from the day he started the job, making it difficult to keep up as the 70-pound pieces of meat continued to come down the line at the standard speed while the boxed product had to be moved down the line manually. When pieces of meat backed up at the bottom of the shrink-wrapping line, they started to fly off the bottom of the conveyor where he was supposed to catch them. Hunks of meat struck his leg repeatedly over the course of several days. Eck's foreman refused to give him a pass to see the nurse about his leg, but he was able to go during his break. The nurse gave him an Ace bandage and sent him back to work. He kept going back to the nurse, and by the end of the week she concluded that he should not return to his station. The foreman told her to send him back anyway. The plant doctor only worked on site one or two days a week and was unavailable, so Eck went back to work. He "needed to make the money," so, despite the professional opinion of the nurse and his own fear, he continued to work. Finally, "[a]

¹² Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 46.

direct hit to [his] knee by a piece of meat popped the kneecap and it was all over.” Eck was fired by the foreman that day.¹³

Eck’s injury, like most at the plant, resulted from a number of factors that were under the control of IBP. First, he was never trained for the job he was given. Second, malfunctioning and improperly maintained equipment made his job harder and more dangerous. Third, his attempts to seek treatment through the plant’s medical personnel were thwarted by a manager who valued keeping production moving above worker health and safety. Finally, the need to earn a living and fear of being fired prevented Eck from walking away while he still could.

The damage Eck suffered was not limited to the loss of his job or temporary pain. After losing his job at IBP, his doctor diagnosed trauma to a vein in his leg, which caused clots and permanent damage. He described the enduring consequences of his 3-week stint in the packing house, concluding, “Now my doctor warns me that he is worried that I am going to lose the leg. He says if the deterioration continues as it is--I no longer have much feeling in my leg, much movement, and I can’t feel it as it touches the ground--I could lose it within the next 5 years. In fact, it might not even last that long.”¹⁴ He had seven different jobs in two years after his injury, but struggled to keep any position because of the lingering medical problems of his brief employment as a packinghouse worker. IBP denied that the injury was work-related, contesting the initial decision of the Nebraska Workers’ Compensation Court which found that it was. The company also hired “a private detective to film this worker [Eck] and his girlfriend to prove to the media that he

¹³ Ibid., 38-39.

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

really was not injured at all.” The Nebraska Workers’ Compensation Court decided in Eck’s favor, affirming that his injury was work-related.¹⁵

In 1986 Celsa Peña, who was on light duty due to tendonitis, was reassigned to a job that was not supposed to aggravate his injury. The supervisor placed him at the end of conveyor belt, where he used a hook to pick pieces of meat and fat off the line. As the conveyor turned over at the end of the line, the slots in the belt opened up as it went under the table to return. When his hook got caught in one of the slots, Peña’s finger tips were cut off. Production continued while a few cleanup workers searched for the missing fingers in the pile of fat and meat on the floor. Despite the proven danger of placing workers in this particular position, IBP foremen continued to assign people to work there even after this accident.¹⁶

Some workers injured at the Dakota City plant were not employed directly by IBP. The company contracted out some portions of their operations, including the cleanup that took place overnight after the two production shifts. These workers frequently handled dangerous cleaning chemicals and had to manipulate the same machinery that production workers operated in order to get everything clean. Cleaning workers were underprepared for the tasks they took on. They had no training to operate the machines, they had no training in the safe handling of cleaning agents, and they were often poorly supervised.

Two of the most extreme cases of workplace injuries at the Dakota City plant involved these subcontracted employees. In August 1981, Rene Nuñez, a 19-year-old working for the overnight cleaning contractor, climbed into a meat blender in order to

¹⁵ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 109.

¹⁶ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 135.

clean it. The sign warning people not to enter the blender was printed in English-- Nuñez could not read it. Another worker, unaware that Nuñez was inside and also unable to read English, turned on the machine. Nuñez's legs were cut off. It took rescuers 40 minutes to get him out of the blender: he died several days later in the hospital.¹⁷ In December 1981, just a few months after Nuñez died cleaning the Dakota City plant, another cleanup worker met a similar fate. Juan Castro Hernandez, 23, was caught and mangled by machinery while trying to clean around and under a processing line. Other workers found his body several hours later; he had long since bled to death.¹⁸

Consequences of Dangerous Working Conditions

In many cases, workers' problems had only begun when they were injured at IBP. They struggled to get access to timely, appropriate medical care. Many were further injured when they were put back to work without adequate time or treatment necessary to recover. IBP had a poor record of protecting their workers from injury, but their treatment of injured employees after the fact was often equally harmful. A nurse who worked for IBP for three months in the 1980s reported being pressured by management to keep injury numbers low and being overruled by the plant Safety Director on decisions to send workers to the hospital. She "became convinced that [she] could not, in good faith as a professional Registered Nurse, do what I.B.P. wanted [her] to do."¹⁹

In October 1986, a beef lugger slipped and fell, dislocating his knee. He was placed on a stretcher and taken to the nearest nurse's station where the nurse quickly called for an ambulance to take the injured worker to the hospital. A plant supervisor

¹⁷ Ibid., 123; "Man Loses Both Legs At IBP Plant," *South Sioux City Star* 6 August 1981, A-1.

¹⁸ "Cleaning Firm Employee Killed At IBP Plant," *South Sioux City Star* 24 December 1981, B-4.

¹⁹ The nurse's affidavit for the congressional subcommittee is printed in Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 130.

made the nurse cancel the ambulance, however, because the worker had been taken to the wrong nurse's station. The dispensary nearest where he was working was not the one designated for the division in which he worked. The injured man would have to be seen by the nurse on the other side of the plant to determine if an ambulance was warranted, the supervisor insisted. While the nurse and the supervisor debated, the injured worker lay unattended on a stretcher on the floor. Eventually, two other plant supervisors happened by the nurse's station and allowed the nurse to recall the ambulance, but greater attention to protocol than to worker health prevented the timely treatment of his injury.²⁰

In cases of less acute injuries, workers needed a note from their foreman to see the nurse, even on their own time, such as during a break. DeRaad said, "It's common for foremen to say an injured worker can't see the nurse because they need people on the line."²¹ Both Peterson and David LaFleur, IBP's group vice president for beef production, admitted that the foreman, not the worker, was responsible for that decision.²² The consequences of this policy could be painful for employees. Elizabeth Pinneke developed a cyst in her right hand from the repetitive work she was doing on the line. When she asked to see the nurse, her foreman told her she "was being a baby." It took over a month for her to get medical treatment from the plant staff. Pinneke was given repeated hot wax treatments for her hand; these lessened the pain temporarily, but were ineffective in treating the cause of the pain. Later, the company doctor referred her to an orthopedic surgeon who removed the growth.²³

²⁰ United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, Packinghouse Division, *IBP Dakota City Worker Struggle*, (United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, 1987), 13-14.

²¹ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 53.

²² *Ibid.*, 94. It is unclear if there was a distinct policy change in this area, as some workers around the same time claimed that they were able to see the nurse without a note from the foreman as long as they went on their own time such as during a break or after their shift.

²³ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 59.

One reasonable solution for workers denied access to treatment by plant medical staff--to seek care from their own personal physicians outside of work hours--was discouraged by official IBP policy. Specifically, the company included in its drug and alcohol policy the following statement:

If at any point the employee requests time off for professional medical treatment, the leave of absence would be granted subject to substantiation [sic] of the treatment and as a condition of continued employment they may be subject to future periodic testing to confirm that the employee's performance is not being impaired due to drugs or alcohol. If an employee refuses to allow a screen to be utilized, the employee will be subject to discipline up to and including discharge.²⁴

IBP's explanation for this policy, according to Daniel Foley, vice president for human resources at IBP, was that it "allows [the company] to determine whether employees who suffered injury or illness necessitating a doctor's visit were in any way physically or mentally impaired."²⁵ How drug or alcohol use could have contributed to injuries like the growth of a cyst in Pinneke's hand, however, is unclear. Whatever the company's intention, the policy's effect was to discourage employees from seeking treatment. For many workers, seeking outside treatment was difficult even without this company policy due to a lack of medical insurance and limited access to health care providers. IBP offered health insurance benefits for employees only after a probationary employment period ranging from three months to a year, depending on the particular job and when the employee was hired (the length of the probationary period changed on several occasions between 1970 and 2000: three months or six months was typical). In addition to the financial barrier faced by all low-wage workers, Latino immigrants often faced additional

²⁴ The policy is reproduced in full in Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 203-204.

²⁵ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 193.

challenges in their attempts to access health care because they lacked familiarity with the health care system and because of cultural barriers such as language.²⁶

Incidents where managers at the plant demonstrated little concern for the health or safety of the workers and instead required rigid adherence to protocol or policy were common. Often the result was delayed and inadequate treatment. Such rigidity did not always apply, however, when it came to following doctors' orders after treatment. In case after case, workers were put back on the line or assigned to an alternative "light duty" task despite clear prohibitions from plant medical staff or their personal doctors. When Steve DeRaad suffered a broken finger on his right hand, his finger was put in a splint and the doctor put him on restricted duty for four months. His supervisors disregarded this recommendation. "On a number of occasions, a foreman told me to run a machine that forced me to use my right hand. I had to remove my splint to do this job," DeRaad said. Fear compelled him to do what he was told: "I thought it was wrong to make me break my medical restriction, but I was afraid of losing my job."²⁷

DeRaad summed up his understanding of the company's treatment of workers clearly: "I don't think IBP cares about health or safety at all. Its employees are not treated like people, but like things used to get a job done."²⁸ Union official Lewie Anderson suggested one rationale, in addition to the relentless focus on production speed, that might have led companies like IBP to treat workers as they did. They "have adopted medical practices in plants of returning injured workers back to the lines before they are healed. They are reluctant to give injured workers light duty work or days off . . . in order

²⁶ Joe Blankenau and Joni Boye-Beaman, "Health Care Utilization and the Status of Latinos in Rural Meat Processing Communities." *Great Plains Research* (2000), esp. 283.

²⁷ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

to avoid having to put them on the OSHA logs as lost workday cases. In many cases, these practices may border on malpractice.”²⁹ Regardless of the company’s motivation for its actions regarding health care and work, the company required a steady flow of new workers to replace those who were injured or simply unwilling to continue working under the conditions.

The low wages, unpleasantness, difficulty, and danger of work in the Dakota City plant, as well as the rest of the industry, frequently meant that new employees did not last long. Lewie Anderson argued in 1987, “This is a plant where conditions are so bad that turnover is close to 100 percent a year. There are over 2,200 ... new workers entering this plant every year. Most workers quit because the work is hard, but more importantly than that, they don’t want to be crippled and injured like so many of the other workers around them.”³⁰ In defense of IBP, CEO Robert Peterson argued that the turnover was not as serious as it might sound (2,200 out of 2,800 employees at Dakota City per year). He noted, “We don’t have 2,200 people all on 2,200 new jobs. We have maybe 500, 700, I don’t know the exact number, where the turnover is involved in those rates.”³¹ Peterson was correct. A lot of the jobs at the packing plant were much more stable than an 80-100 percent turnover rate might imply; many employees worked at the plant for years on end. Much of the turnover was in workers who just started at the plant, many of whom lasted only a few weeks or months on the production line.

Turnover at the plant had far-reaching implications. Union officials contended (especially during labor disputes) that IBP encouraged a high turnover rate because it saved them money. In Lewie Anderson’s words: “New workers, they can work for less

²⁹ Ibid., 27-28.

³⁰ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 10.

³¹ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 75.

money; they don't have to pay health insurance; they don't have to pay holidays; they don't have to pay vacation to them, because they'll probably be gone, they'll turn over. And so, there's a substantial savings for the company to generate work force turnover."³²

This was not just a union talking point, however. In testimony before the National Labor Relations Board in 1984, Arden Walker, vice president for labor relations for IBP at that time, addressed the issue of turnover in very similar terms:

We found very little correlation between turnover and profitability. An employee leaves for whatever reason. Generally, we're able to have a replacement employee, and I might add that the way fringe benefits have been negotiated or installed, they favor long-term employees. For instance, insurance, insurance, as you know, is very costly. Insurance is not available to new employees until they've worked there for a period of a year or, in some cases, six months. Vacations don't accrue until the second year. There are some economies, frankly, that result from hiring new employees.³³

In 1987, IBP officials attempted to distance themselves from this view. When asked about Walker's testimony before the NLRB, Peterson replied: "I wasn't aware of that. Mr. Walker is no longer with IBP, and I can't refute that. Our goal is not to create turnover." He did admit, when Chairman Tom Lantos of the House Subcommittee on Employment and Housing of the Committee on Government Operations pressed the issue, that IBP did receive a tax credit for training of new hires, that new hires were paid less than long-time employees, and that new hires did not receive the same range of fringe benefits that established employees received. He contended, however, that those cost savings to the company were not enough to cover the loss in productivity of new hires: "We do not make money off of our new employees."³⁴ Daniel Foley, vice president

³² Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 76.

³³ *Monfort of Colorado*. 27-CA-7244 (National Labor Relations Board, 1984).

³⁴ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 42-43.

for human resources argued that “turnover is a problem in the entire industry. It is a major cost of doing business, and it’s something that we would love to find a way to stop.”³⁵

While it is unclear how diligently the company worked in its effort to reduce turnover, some of the consequences of the high rate of turnover are obvious. For the community as a whole, it meant that people were frequently in and out of work. Often injured workers would leave the employ of IBP only to return when they had recovered or needed the income. High turnover also led the company to begin recruiting farther afield, first regionally but ultimately focusing their efforts on Mexico, California, and Texas. For internal migrants or immigrants who responded to those recruiting efforts and came to work in the packing plant, high turnover often meant trying to find a way back home or looking for another job in an unfamiliar place shortly after arrival. Within the plant itself, it meant that at any given time many of the workers were dangerously inexperienced and unfamiliar with their surroundings.³⁶

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the high turnover rate at IBP brought a constant flow of new workers to the plant at Dakota City, who described training for jobs at IBP as inadequate, typically consisting of watching videos (not always in a language the worker could understand), filling out paperwork, and then being put on the line. Other times,

³⁵ Ibid., 40.

³⁶ Norma de la O, interview by Dustin Kipp, (October 6, 2010). For more on turnover and its impact on communities, see William Kandel and Emilio A. Parrado, "Restructuring of the US Meat Processing Industry and New Hispanic Migrant Destinations." *Population and Development Review* (2005); Michael Broadway, "Economic Development Programs in the Great Plains: The Example of Nebraska." *Great Plains Research* (1991); Kathleen Stanley, "Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Midwestern Meatpacking Industry: Industrial Restructuring and the Transformation of Rural Labor Markets." *Policy Studies Review* (1992); Robert A. Robinson, *Community Development - Changes in Nebraska's and Iowa's Counties with Large Meatpacking Plant Workforces*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998); Martin E. Personick and Katherine Taylor-Shirley, "Profiles in Safety and Health: Occupational Hazards of Meatpacking," *Monthly Labor Review* (January 1989): 3-9; and Stephen J. Hedges and Dana Hawkins, "The New Jungle." *U.S. News & World Report* (September 23, 1996).

workers were moved from job to job without any training specific to the new task. One IBP employee, Joseph Eck, who worked at IBP for 3 weeks in 1985 before being injured, recounted it this way: “At the beginning of my third week, I was put on a job that I had no idea how to do. I was never trained for this job, and I was supposed to learn by doing, learn by watching the guy who has been doing this job.”³⁷

In 1987 IBP’s chief executive officer, Robert Peterson, claimed that the company provided “extensive safety training for all new workers,” including “several safety films.” He did not mention any safety training beyond these videos. Peterson also stressed that all workers “are assigned a trainer who works closely with each new employee.”³⁸ In defense of the practice of putting new hires on the production line within two days of their start, David LaFleur, IBP’s vice president for beef production, further clarified, “They’re put on the line... along with the experienced employee. They’re not asked to keep up with the pace. They’re just broken in very slowly.”³⁹ Line workers’ from Dakota City and other plants, however, contradicted this assertion. Much like Norma de la O’s parents reported of their training in 1972, new hires in the 1980s and 1990s repeatedly claimed to have been placed on the line next to someone who was supposed to train them while also keeping up with the speed of the line. In most cases, the new hire worked too slowly to complete his or her share of the work, so the trainer was in fact too busy trying to keep up to give any useful instruction. In addition, in at least some cases, the trainer

³⁷ Quote from Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 38. See also Chapter 1 of Deborah Fink, *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) for a description of the author’s experience in an IBP plant in Perry, Iowa in 1992. Her description of the application and training process mirrors very closely the experiences of workers in Dakota City, suggesting that this was common at least company-wide, if not across the industry.

³⁸ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 10 and 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

and trainee were unable to communicate verbally due to language differences. The new worker simply had to learn by watching and attempt to imitate.⁴⁰

An investigation published in 2004 suggested that these problems were not corrected, even twenty years after serious issues had been identified. Workers interviewed for the 2004 study echoed the employee complaints from the 1980s and 1990s: “They showed us a video and then told us to do what the person next to us was doing.” Further, the workers assigned to educate the newcomers complained they were not given adequate time to train new workers. Nor were they paid for this added responsibility.⁴¹

Union Efforts and Congressional Investigations

For workers in non-union plants during the 1980s, there were few options but to keep up with the demanding pace of the work or be replaced. In Dakota City, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) provided workers with a means to challenge IBP and attempt to improve their working conditions. Nebraska’s “right-to-work” law limited the union’s power somewhat, but workers were able to make changes through union grievance procedures and, when they felt it was necessary, they made IBP’s faults public. According to a study concerning health and safety regulatory enforcement efforts in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa from 1989-1998, “evidence indicates an extremely weak record of enforcement in the meatpacking industry.” However, there was a strong correlation between union presence and the number and type of inspections conducted by OSHA or analogous state agencies.⁴² The UFCW Local #222 representing workers at Dakota City played an important role in drawing attention to safety concerns

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Fink, 9-31. Also Angel Fernandez, interview with Dustin Kipp, 17 November 2010.

⁴¹ Compa, 44.

⁴² Ibid., 346.

and giving workers a way to raise concerns of their own. In one instance, the UFCW's actions in the mid-1980s brought significant violations of OSHA regulations to the attention of that agency, resulting in congressional hearings and, eventually, fines and corrective action.

In the months leading up to a 1986-87 labor dispute at the Dakota City IBP plant, the UFCW requested injury logs from the company as part of their research and preparations for upcoming contract negotiations. They received a set of injury logs listing all injuries at both dispensaries (North and South) in the plant. Later, in response to another union request the company provided a separate set of documents, their official OSHA 200 logs, which listed only a very small portion of those on the first log. The union alleged that IBP officials showed OSHA inspectors this second injury log when they came to conduct regular inspections of the plant. Because the injury rate at the Dakota City plant, according to this incomplete second set of logs, was below the average for all industries in the United States, the plant was not subject to an actual inspection. OSHA policy exempted companies from inspection if their injury logs showed below-average injury rates at this time. In 1987, the Employment and Housing Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations called hearings to listen to testimony from union officials, IBP employees, OSHA personnel, and IBP officials to determine the impact of underreporting of injuries on worker safety. The end result was that OSHA cited the Dakota City plant for more than 40 violations and proposed a \$2.6 million fine. In addition, IBP was required to sign a settlement agreement requiring them to institute

ergonomic reforms to reduce injuries.⁴³ These hearings revealed a great deal about the relationship between the company, the union, and the workers.

Lewie Anderson, a UFCW vice president and former employee at the Dakota City IBP plant, suggested that OSHA's policy of relying on employer's records of injuries to determine whether or not to inspect a plant was like "letting the fox guard the hen house."⁴⁴ He also noted the seriousness and scale of the issue of workplace injuries: "One third of all the packing house workers will suffer a serious injury or illness this year."⁴⁵ The astounding rate of injury in the meatpacking industry as a whole was one reason that OSHA's practice of exempting worksites from inspection based solely on company records came into question in this particular industry.

In his opening remarks, Congressman Joseph DioGuardi of New York noted, "Concerns have arisen that as American industry tries to compete . . . there may be an incentive to perhaps underreport so that we can be more competitive in the marketplace."⁴⁶ Many of the House members at the hearings shared the perception, whether accurate or not, that IBP may have been willfully masking the problem of injuries at the Dakota City plant. Robert Peterson's response to these concerns was simple: "I believe there were some honest mistakes."⁴⁷

Despite the criticism from the union and the overwhelming evidence of injury statistics as well as personal testimony, Peterson maintained that IBP's safety record was "the best of the best."⁴⁸ When Congressman DioGuardi suggested that somebody in the

⁴³ Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez, 352.

⁴⁴ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁷ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

plant, if not Peterson, must have been aware of the problems of underreporting and covering up injuries, Peterson shifted the blame away from the company's leadership: "That could be. It is not part of our management. It may be being espoused by some of our hourly workers."⁴⁹

The actions of IBP's leaders with regard to injuries, injury reporting, and labor relations, however, suggest otherwise. According to Lewie Anderson, "IBP has taken a position that they're not going to address the problems, the safety problems at the bargaining table either."⁵⁰ John Pendergrass, Assistant Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Department of Labor reported IBP's reaction to their investigation: "We received a complaint about recordkeeping. This was in November. In early December, we attempted to investigate that complaint. We were refused entry by IBP. We came back to get into the plant and at that point, production had stopped."⁵¹ IBP initiated a lockout on December 14, 1986. In January, armed with a subpoena, OSHA gained access to the plant to examine the records in question. Foley suggested in his testimony that IBP denied OSHA access to the plant without a warrant because of the labor negotiations that were going on at the time, suggesting that the complaint was simply a ploy by the union ahead of scheduled negotiations.⁵²

Robert Peterson declined to appear at the initial hearing in March 1987. OSHA was in the process of reviewing records at Dakota City, he stated, and "the UFCW . . .

⁴⁹ Ibid., 57. In a subsequent letter to Representative Lantos, the chairman of the subcommittee investigating IBP's underreporting of injuries, Peterson tried to pin the responsibility not only for any recordkeeping errors, but also for his inaccurate testimony, on his subordinates. The letter is printed in Ibid., 233-236.

⁵⁰ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 65.

⁵¹ Ibid., 129.

⁵² Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 57.

has sought to advance its collective bargaining and nationwide organizing strategy by involving OSHA in the UFCW's labor dispute with IBP."⁵³ Union officials pointed out that their concerns about the multiple injury logs began months before the labor dispute.⁵⁴ This does not preclude the use of the issue as a bargaining chip or for the purpose of garnering media attention, but clearly the problem of underreporting injuries did not begin with the lockout in December of 1986 or the subsequent strike in March 1987.

At the next hearing IBP officials and their lawyers did appear, under threat of subpoena from the committee.⁵⁵ In his testimony, Peterson claimed the company was doing its part: "Mr. Chairman, in the 27 years since I joined IBP as a cattle buyer, I have seen IBP grow to become the leading producer of fresh beef and pork in the country. We have attained this position because we have led the way toward efficient fresh meat production. We have also gotten to the top by treating our workers fairly and with proper regard for their health and safety."⁵⁶ He and his fellow managers blamed all reporting errors on misunderstandings, honest mistakes, and hourly workers. They expressed no sense of responsibility, nor any remorse, for the injuries or deaths that occurred in IBP's flagship operation at Dakota City.

When Peterson touted the wonderful safety equipment that IBP provided for their workers, Chairman Lantos pointed out the hypocrisy of his claims: "Well, let the record show, Mr. Peterson, that these OSHA regulations [to require the safety equipment] were fought by the industry. They were put in at the insistence of the workers, and I find it

⁵³ Peterson letter to Tom Lantos, reprinted in Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁵ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

somewhat inappropriate to listen to this great display of pride when the company you represent fought the introduction of this equipment.”⁵⁷

When former IBP employee Joseph Eck testified before the subcommittee, he concluded his remarks by saying: “I have a lot of friends who still work at the plant, and I hope that they don’t end up like me.”⁵⁸ The odds, sadly, were not on their side. While it was certainly a small minority of workers who left the employ of IBP by death or dismemberment, many workers sustained injuries that would hinder them for the rest of their lives. According to Steve DeRaad, “At the plant, we joke that IBP works you to death, until you are hauled out on a stretcher, and then they replace you. It’s not a funny joke. But it shows you IBP’s attitude.”⁵⁹

Repetitive Stress Injuries

New issues came to light in the 1980s and 1990s which added to the known dangers of work in meatpacking. In addition to the risks posed by sharp knives, slippery surfaces, and powerful machines in IBP’s meatpacking operations, workers’ repetition of individual tasks on the fast-moving processing line often led to repetitive stress injuries. New technologies and automation sometimes helped to reduce the physical strain on workers, but in other cases these improvements simply led to faster line speeds and more stress on certain muscles, tendons, and joints. The Whizard--an electric-powered knife with a rotating blade often used by line workers to trim fat from meat or make other cuts--was one such innovation that became increasingly popular from the 1970s onward. Power knives and saws allowed processing work to be done quickly and efficiently, but

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁸ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (19 March 1987), 40.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 53.

the constant vibration of the tools put excessive strain on workers' hands and wrists, causing numbness, pain, and permanent nerve damage.⁶⁰

Many IBP employees were not even aware of the existence or seriousness of cumulative trauma disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome in the mid-1980s. According to IBP's records (which were found to chronically underreport injuries of all sorts) 10 percent of employees had suffered repetitive stress injuries. William Schmitz, chief executive officer of UFCW Local #222, suspected that it was even more pervasive. The union conducted a survey in 1987 and found that most employees experienced at least some symptoms of repetitive stress injuries. The survey also found, according to Schmitz, that "Many of the people didn't know when we did this survey that the tingling in their fingers at night was the early sign of tendonitis. They didn't know why their hands were going to sleep at night. They thought that numbness and locking and tingling hands was just a condition of employment and everybody's hands did that."⁶¹ In response to a claim by Congressman Tom Lantos that more than half of IBP employees suffered from carpal tunnel syndrome, Daniel Foley, IBP's vice president for human resources, said those figures were "simply incorrect." He claimed that "under 5 percent of people might have some symptom of repetitive motion at some point." He also suggested that workers experiencing numbness, tingling, or other symptoms was like people beginning any other physical activity, like a sport. "There is going to be, especially with new workers, a

⁶⁰ Donald D. Stull and Michael J. Broadway, "Killing Them Softly: Work in Meatpacking Plants and What It Does to Workers," in *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America*, ed. by Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway, and David Griffith (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995): 61-83; Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez.

⁶¹ Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 125.

period of time where someone, in building a new muscle, using a muscle that they haven't before, will go through a period of adjustment.”⁶²

Ergonomics and cumulative trauma disorders became a contentious issue for employees, unions, regulators, and the industry in the 1990s.⁶³ In 1990 the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued a set of guidelines specifically targeting the meatpacking industry. It suggested that “Finding solutions to the problems posed by ergonomic hazards may well be the most significant workplace safety and health issue of the 1990s.” It further said that “the incidence and severity of [cumulative trauma disorders] and other workplace injuries and illnesses in this industry demand that effective programs be implemented to protect workers from these hazards.”⁶⁴ Despite the seriousness this publication seemed to convey, OSHA did not immediately develop an enforceable standard. Instead, they recommended that meatpacking companies voluntarily follow the guidelines.

Recommended guidelines proved insufficient to protect workers. In 1998, the incidence rate of repeated trauma disorders in meatpacking was 993.5 per 10,000 full time workers. The incidence rate for this type of injury for all private industry in the U.S. in the same year was just 28.5 per 10,000 workers.⁶⁵ In 1999, nearly a decade after identifying repetitive stress injuries as potentially “the most significant workplace safety and health issue of the 1990s,” OSHA proposed an official standard. IBP, the American Meat Institute (AMI), the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), and other

⁶² Committee on Government Operations, Hearings (6 May 1987), 39.

⁶³ Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez, 345.

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Health and Safety Administration, “Ergonomics Program Management Guidelines For Meatpacking Plants,” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 1.

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Injuries and Illness in the United States by Industry*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999).

businesses and trade groups opposed the proposed standard at public hearings. They then filed lawsuits to prevent its implementation after the standard became law in 2000.⁶⁶

The dangers of the workplace were an ongoing issue for all meatpacking employees throughout the late twentieth century. As safety standards improved in most industries, a few industries, like meatpacking, lagged behind. The impact of these dangers on the lives of workers cannot be overstated. IBP employees spent a significant portion of their time working in these conditions and the effects did not end when they went home after each shift. But for Latino immigrants, other challenges outside of the workplace also had significant effects on their experiences.

⁶⁶ Wahl, Gunkel, and Sanchez, 345-346.

Chapter 3

A Changing Community: Challenges and Opportunities

The restructuring that IBP pioneered in the meatpacking industry beginning in 1961 happened within the context of a global shift of industry toward low-wage areas. For many industries, this meant moving operations from the United States to countries in Latin America, Southeast Asia, India, or China. Meatpacking and other agriculture-based industries often relocated to rural areas where wages were lower relative to urban centers. Many rural communities welcomed new industry, especially as the 1980s farm crisis ravaged local economies.¹

IBP opened several new plants during the 1980s and early 1990s, including one in Garden City, Kansas, and one in Lexington, Nebraska. In each of these places, the company used labor and production patterns developed at the Dakota City plant. In Dakota City, IBP had transformed the meatpacking workforce from one paying a middle-class wage to one in which even full-time workers experienced financial hardship and sometimes had to rely on government assistance or charity to survive. Not only did the company move operations from high-wage urban areas to low-wage rural areas, its mechanization and deskilling of production operations drove labor costs down even further over the course of two decades. From the late 1980s forward, the company's strategies and the high rate of worker turnover at the plant meant that they increasingly

¹ Kathleen Stanley, "Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Midwestern Meatpacking Industry: Industrial Restructuring and the Transformation of Rural Labor Markets," *Policy Studies Review* 11 (Summer 1992): 106-117.

relied on a steady flow of new workers, Latino immigrants as well as Southeast Asian refugees, to meet their labor needs.²

For Dakota City and South Sioux City, this new wave of immigrants beginning in the late 1980s created stark challenges. Many aspects of community life were affected: churches, schools, housing, law enforcement, local business, and health care. Immigrants themselves had to adapt to their new homes, but the communities made significant changes as well to adapt to a shifting population. These changes resulted from the coordinated efforts of social service agencies and community groups, in some cases, but also from the progress made by the earlier immigrants--those who had come to work at IBP in the late 1960s and 1970s.

More New Immigrants

The immigrant population of Dakota County represented a wide variety of individual experiences. Some people moved as parts of families, others individually. Sometimes immigration split families apart and sometimes it reunited them. Some immigrants found steady employment and, therefore, were able to maintain stable and secure households; others were less successful. A few examples illustrate some of these changes and continuities in the early 1990s.

Many immigrants who arrived in the early 1990s came under circumstances similar to those characterizing the newcomers of the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, Marina Galvan moved from Mexico to California in 1990 and then, in 1993, at

² The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, among other things, facilitated a wave of immigration beginning in that year. "The number of Mexicans admitted to permanent residence rose by a factor of 14" between 1986 and 1991, according to Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey, and Rene M. Zenteno, "Mexican Immigration to the United States: Continuities and Changes," *Latin American Research Review* 36 (2001): 107-127, 122.

the urging of her sister who worked at IBP in Dakota City, she moved to South Sioux City. Marina's sister emphasized that there were not too many people in the area and that there was little crime and no gangs. Marina hoped that her young children would be safer and have better opportunities in such a place. IBP hired Marina to work at the processing plant, where she trimmed fat and removed bones from meat on the production line. The work was difficult, but she was happy to find that her new neighbors were much quieter than those she had left behind in California. The work that she did in Dakota City was not an improvement over the various low-paying, dead-end jobs she had worked in California, but the new community was much more livable than the old.³

Paola Velasco experienced common features of Mexican immigration to the United States in two different stages. First, her husband José began working at IBP in 1987, but she and their four children remained in Guadalajara, Jalisco. José sent remittances to support his wife and children and visited them once or twice a year. In 1994, Paola and the children moved north to join José. In this second stage of her immigration experience, Paola was happy to have her immediate family back together. However, at first it was difficult for her to adjust to the new surroundings. In Mexico, she was used to having many relatives--including her parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins--nearby and seeing them regularly for all sorts of occasions. In Nebraska, they had no extended family and so Paola felt disconnected from the surrounding community. Eventually, she says, her family became friends with other Mexicans as well as Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and others who lived in their neighborhood or whom they met in English classes. These new relationships served some of the same purposes that

³ Marina Galvan, interview with Dustin Kipp, 17 November 2010.

extended family had in Guadalajara--people to socialize with, primarily, but also to help them when necessary with things like child care.⁴

Juan Gutierrez moved to South Sioux City to work at IBP in 1993, leaving his wife and children behind in Guatemala. He found the work at the packing plant challenging, especially as the processing line seemed to move faster and faster. Even though he was tired and sore each day after work, he was glad that he earned enough money to support his family; this would have been much more difficult to do had he stayed in Guatemala, where there were few opportunities for employment. He considered Nebraska a beautiful and easy place to live compared to his native country.⁵

Duc Tran and his family left Vietnam in 1992 after he was released from prison. They settled in Sioux City, Iowa, as refugees and Duc was hired at IBP less than a week after his arrival. Although work at the packing plant was physically difficult, compared to life in Vietnam (where it was sometimes difficult even to feed his family and where he was imprisoned for political reasons) Duc, like Juan Gutierrez, found life in the United States was easy.⁶

It is important to note that the immigrant community was not composed entirely of families or permanent settlers as these examples might suggest. Because of the danger and difficulty of work in the meatpacking industry, many newcomers did not stay in Dakota County but moved on in search of better opportunities elsewhere. These transient workers left little record or indication of their experiences in the area, but the attitudes of immigrants and other community members suggest that most perceived a difference in

⁴ Paola Velasco, interview with Dustin Kipp, 17 November 2010.

⁵ Juan Gutierrez, interview with Dustin Kipp, 17 November 2010.

⁶ Duc Tran, interview with Dustin Kipp, 17 November 2010.

desirability between those who settled as families in northeastern Nebraska and those--often single men--who were itinerant.⁷

For the new wave of immigrants who arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s, resources provided by the existing Latino community in Dakota County, such as businesses, religious life, and opportunities for language instruction, helped in the process of successful integration into the community.⁸ It is important to keep in mind, however, the varieties of experience: immigrant assimilation and incorporation were not “straight-line” processes wherein all newcomers went through a similar pattern of challenge and change.⁹ Rather, factors such as socioeconomic status, family composition, and immigration status meant that the processes as well as the outcomes differed considerably, even amongst the immigrant population of a single community.

Individual or family immigration status was one of the most important factors shaping immigrant experience as well as perceptions amongst people in receiving communities. As historian Mae M. Ngai suggests, “During the late twentieth century, illegal immigration became perceived as the central and singularly intractable problem of immigration policy and became a lightning rod in domestic national politics generally.”¹⁰ More than just a political issue, though, immigration status could have a direct effect on

⁷ Lance Hedquist, interview with Dustin Kipp, 29 November 2010; Norma de la O, interview with Dustin Kipp, 6 October 2010; Marvin Harrington, interview with Dustin Kipp, 5 November 2010.

⁸ Lourdes Gouveia, Miguel A. Carranza, and Jasney Cogua, “The Great Plains Migration: Mexicanos and Latinos in Nebraska,” In *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*, by Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León, 23-49. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 25; Rubén G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, “Introduction--Ethnogenesis: Coming of Age in Immigrant America,” In *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*, by Rubén G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, 1-20. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁹ Marco Diaz; Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf, “The Political Incorporation of Immigrants, Then and Now,” In *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation*, by Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf, 1-30. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 10.

¹⁰ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 265.

immigrant experience and opportunities. Throughout the United States during the last decades of the twentieth century, undocumented immigrants were frequently hired for the least-desirable jobs because they were unlikely to complain about conditions or pursue compensation if injured on the job. They also earned less than their counterparts who had documentation of their immigration status.¹¹

Immigrants without documentation and their family members occupied a unique position in society: their presence was desired by some, especially for purposes of labor, but their very presence was also categorized as a violation of the law which precluded them from receiving benefits such as civil rights and social welfare accorded to other members of society. Mixed-status families (often undocumented parents and children who are U.S. citizens by birth) faced complex issues as well. While members of the family with proper legal documentation may have been entitled to certain rights and benefits, they were less likely to claim them if doing so risked exposing family members who lacked such documentation to scrutiny.

Change in Dakota County

Beginning in the early 1990s Dakota Avenue, the main thoroughfare of South Sioux City's business district, gained immigrant owned businesses year after year.¹² Establishing a business was frequently a long-term process for the families involved, many of whom had come to work at IBP in the 1970s. One advantage that immigrant families had over single immigrants was the ability to earn multiple incomes. It was

¹¹ Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "Undocumented Workers in the Labor Market: An Analysis of the Earnings of Legal and Illegal Mexican Immigrants in the United States," *Journal of Population Economics*, Special Issue on Illegal Migration (Feb., 1999): 91-116; Leo R. Chavez, *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

¹² De la O.

common for families with two earners to use one paycheck for immediate expenses while saving the second for future investment in a home or a business. This approach allowed the Diaz family to buy several houses during the 1980s when, according to Emilio, houses were “cheap.” Income from these rental properties, added to Emilio and Maria’s incomes from IBP, improved the family’s ability to save even more.¹³

In 1995, Emilio and Maria used the savings from their rental properties and their years of work at IBP to buy a combination bar and liquor store on the north end of Dakota Avenue. They quit their jobs at IBP and expanded their newly acquired business, converting it into a restaurant and bar. Their oldest son Marco--after serving in the military and completing his college education--came to work with them in the family business.¹⁴

The language barrier continued to be one of the most common challenges faced by new arrivals to Dakota County in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The growing number of immigrant-owned businesses that catered to the Spanish-speaking population in general as well as to specific needs of the Latino community (as well as the Southeast Asian community and, later, other immigrant groups as well) decreased the need for new arrivals to learn English. By the early 1990s, a grocery store, a bakery, restaurants, and other stores provided access to culturally significant goods and services that had been unavailable in the area for most of the previous two decades, and they conducted business in the consumers’ native languages. In addition to the specific benefits of these small businesses, the number of bilingual residents in the community increased in general.

Banks, medical centers, and other local institutions increasingly adapted to the changing

¹³ Emilio Diaz, interview with Dustin Kipp, 5 November 2010; Marco Diaz, interview with Dustin Kipp, 5 November 2010.

¹⁴ Emilio Diaz; Marco Diaz.

population in the community by hiring employees who could serve customers in languages other than English.¹⁵ Despite this progress, some essential services continued to require English proficiency or a translator. For instance, South Sioux City's City Hall lacked any Spanish-speaking staff in 2000, even though the Latino population made up nearly 25 percent of the community and many were unable to speak English well.¹⁶

At least two religious communities in South Sioux City, St. Michael's (the Catholic church) and the First Baptist Church, offered weekly services in Spanish by the late 1980s. St. Michael's began to offer Spanish services in 1982 and also instituted a Hispanic Committee to consider the specific needs of the Spanish-speaking and immigrant communities. Both of these religious communities served as important cultural institutions for the Latino population of the area, including those who had lived in the area for a decade or more as well as the influx of new arrivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to regular worship services, these religious communities provided opportunities for social interaction and assistance for basic needs like food and clothing. For instance, the First Baptist Church built a new church in 1989 and converted the old building into a food pantry to help struggling members of the community.¹⁷ While the addition of Spanish-language services made religious practice easier for the Latino community, it should be noted that separate clergy operating separate services also created a divide within these congregations that may have limited opportunities to foster integration and adaptation between newcomers and established residents.

¹⁵ *South Sioux City (Dakota County, Nebr.) City Directory*. (Kansas City, Missouri: R.L. Polk & Co., 1993); Harrington; Velasco.

¹⁶ Hedquist; U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2000: *Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: Nebraska* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001). Even in 2010, with the Hispanic population at roughly 45 percent, City Hall still had no Spanish-speaking staff.

¹⁷ Emilio Diaz; Marco Diaz; de la O; Galvan; Velasco; Angel Fernandez, interview with Dustin Kipp, 17 November 2010.

In another effort to adapt to the growing Latino population in the early 1990s, the cable television provider in the area began carrying Univision, the largest Spanish-language network in the United States.¹⁸ Of course, for many families struggling to pay for basic necessities, cable television was not within economic reach. Nevertheless, it is significant that the Latino population at this time became a demographic large enough to attract the interest of businesses that served the area.

Members of the growing Latino population were interested in learning English as well as having access to services in their native languages. In response to increased demand for language classes, Northeast Community College in Norfolk, Nebraska, began offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in 1991 with cooperation from South Sioux City, who provided space in City Hall and later in the public library for these classes. According to Lance Hedquist, the City Administrator of South Sioux City, the city government advocated for new immigrants to the area to learn English and the city facilitated that process when possible. The problem for many new arrivals to South Sioux City, however, was that even when ESL classes were available, it was difficult to find the time or energy after work and family responsibilities to attend classes, study, and practice new skills. These barriers were often higher for female immigrants who had more responsibilities for family and home after their regular workday.¹⁹

For new arrivals to Dakota County, the issue of language continued to be one that hindered adults. Eighty percent of those identified as “Do not speak English ‘very well’” in the 1990 Census were 18 years old or older. Young children, on the other hand, were able to learn English in school--even if they arrived in the community with limited or no

¹⁸ Hedquist.

¹⁹ Hedquist; Tran; Velasco; Fernandez. See also Gouveia, Carranza, and Cogua, 36-37.

proficiency. This process was decidedly more difficult for children the older they were upon arrival. The challenges of learning the language and attempting to fit it were enough to shape a child's perception of school. Those who arrived at an older age found their educational experiences more difficult than those who started learning English and adapting to a new peer group at a younger age.²⁰

As languages other than English became more prevalent in Dakota County and the difficulties of conducting daily business were ameliorated for many immigrants, some Anglo residents became increasingly annoyed by the growing presence of foreign languages in their community. For some, even signs or advertisements in Spanish or Vietnamese in the stores along Dakota Avenue provoked anger.²¹ In addition to the simple increase in volume of new immigrants beginning in the late 1980s, the resentment that some Anglos felt was also the product of the perception that new immigrants to the area received certain advantages, such as bilingual instruction at school, that were not provided to immigrants (or their children) in the early twentieth century. One woman who grew up during the Depression in South Sioux City, herself a child of European immigrants, recalled the difficulties of her childhood and the hard work that her parents undertook to learn English and adapt to their new home. She noted that, in contrast to her family's experience, "they hand out so many things nowadays," to new immigrants.²²

²⁰ U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990: *Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: Nebraska* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991; Velasco.

²¹ Hedquist; Francine Jacobs, interview with Dustin Kipp, 29 November 2010.

²² Jacobs. This attitude is also typical of a resurgent nativism that took root across much of the United States in the 1990s. For examples and discussion of the issues, see Roy Beck, *The Case Against Immigration: The Moral, Economic, Social, and Environmental Reasons for Reducing Immigration Back to Traditional Levels* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster* (New York: Random House, 1995); Patrick Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil our Country and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002); Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Wayne Lutton and John Tanton, *The Immigration*

Community organizations, government agencies, and community members did begin to recognize and address some of the needs of the immigrant community in the late 1980s. At their September 1986 meeting, the South Sioux City school board recognized that a number of students in the district were not proficient in English. The board decided to hire a full-time aide to work with these individuals specifically on language skills so that they could later be incorporated into standard-curriculum classes. It was not a unanimous decision, however, as the board split 3-2. Although the district had English language learners at all grade levels, the board decided to focus its efforts primarily on the elementary school level because, according to the school's superintendent, "there [wasn't] much that [could] be done for those students who [had] reached the Junior and Senior High School levels." He also noted that the number of non-English speakers was holding steady at about 40 each year throughout the district.²³

Just over a month later, at the school board's next meeting in October 1986, the situation had changed enough to warrant reconsideration. This time, the board voted unanimously to approve the hiring of an additional aide to work with English language learners at the secondary level. Whereas the superintendent had said in September that the number of students requiring English language instruction outside of the normal curriculum was holding steady at around 40, Jeannette Borich, the district's lone ESL instructor reported in October that the number of ESL students was up to 60 and "increasing almost daily."²⁴

Invasion (Petosky, MI: Social Contact Press, 1994); Dale Majaridge, *The Coming White Minority: California's Eruptions and America's Future* (New York: Random House, 1996); Juan F. Perea, *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulses in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

²³ James Lempares, "Hire Aide For Non-English Speaking," *South Sioux City Star*, 23 October 1986.

²⁴ James Lempares, "Will Have Individual To Work With Non-English Speaking Students Here," *South Sioux City Star*, 18 September 1986.

Union representatives also had to adapt to changes as immigration to the community increased. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) that represented workers at IBP after the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America (AMCBW) merged with the Retail Clerks International Union in 1979 had to adjust to language and cultural differences as the workforce it represented changed. According to Marv Harrington, a longtime IBP employee and union official, there was no lasting animosity toward immigrants who came to work in the plant as strikebreakers. After each of the labor disputes during the 1970s and 1980s was resolved, the UFCW was keen to incorporate all workers--even those who started in the plant as strikebreakers. The only change the union had to make, Harrington recalled, was to “adapt to the translation problems.” Many of the newcomers were strongly pro-union and quickly joined. They also participated in subsequent walkouts and strikes alongside their Anglo counterparts. Harrington said that incorporating immigrants into the union was not difficult and that the union and the newcomers “adapted at the same time together.” The union recognized bilingual workers as a resource and they became union stewards and officers in the late 1980s, which helped to ease the transition for newly arriving workers by offering assistance on the job in their native languages. Sioux City’s Local #222, and Harrington specifically, were also involved in a UFCW International effort to better consider the particular issues and interests of Hispanic workers. This effort culminated in the 1987 creation of the United Hispanics of the UFCW, a special council dedicated to the pursuit of those interests.²⁵

²⁵ *UFCW Timeline*, Available: http://www.ufcw.org/about_ufcw/ufcw_history/timeline/index.cfm (accessed November 12, 2010); Harrington.

While the UFCW made some efforts to help new recruits adapt to work at IBP, it is notable that after the frequent labor disputes of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the 1990s saw no such actions. The UFCW continued to negotiate labor contracts and advocate for the interests of the plant's workers, but IBP's willingness and ability to recruit labor from outside the local community undercut the union's former power.

Adaptation to Change

By the late 1980s, OSHA investigations, congressional hearings, and Bureau of Labor Statistics data had all demonstrated the hazards of working in the meatpacking industry. Despite all that was known about these dangers, meatpacking remained one of the most dangerous industries in the United States, with little improvement in safety throughout the 1990s. In 1996, the lost-workday injury and illness rate for meatpacking was 30.3 percent, over four times the rate for the private sector and just 3 percentage points lower than it had been in 1977.²⁶ The difficulty and danger of the work as well as the low wages and lack of opportunities for advancement remained among the most significant challenges for new immigrants.²⁷

It was not uncommon for workers to arrive in town with few or no resources. Those recruited from out of state frequently invested what little they had to move to Dakota County and then lived paycheck to paycheck. For some, the real trouble began when one was injured on the job or simply unable to meet the physical demands of the packinghouse. Immigrants in this situation had no job, few job skills that were in demand

²⁶ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Injuries and Illness in the United States by Industry*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (1997).

²⁷ Ana-Maria Wahl, Steven E. Gunkel, and Thomas W. Sanchez, "Death and Disability in the Heartland: Corporate (Mis)Conduct, Regulatory Responses, and the Plight of Latino Workers in the Meatpacking Industry." *Great Plains Research* (2000). On segmented labor markets, see David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

in the area, and often not enough money to get back to their previous homes. Social service agencies provided assistance for housing, clothing, and nutrition in many cases. Sometimes they simply offered such workers enough money for return transportation.²⁸

For some new immigrants, finding a place to live was one of the first challenges faced upon arrival. Although housing prices in the 1980s were low relative to many other parts of the country, the availability of housing in South Sioux City and Dakota City was simply inadequate to handle the growing population during the late-1980s and early 1990s.²⁹ Some of the packing plant workers lived across the Missouri River in Sioux City, Iowa, where there was a larger pool of housing available. Many others found homes in the burgeoning mobile home parks of South Sioux City. Often those who came to Dakota County as single workers rather than with families shared housing, frequently mobile homes, with other workers. This met their needs for shelter and also allowed them to save more of their paychecks either for remittances or for future needs. This practice was unsettling to some members of the community simply because it did not conform to common housing practices in the area.³⁰

The influx of new immigrants in the late 1980s and early 1990s strained community services as well. New arrivals frequently came to the area with few resources and few, if any, social connections. For these immigrants, any disruption of their planned

²⁸ de la O.

²⁹ Harrington; Emilio Diaz.

³⁰ Harrington; de la O; *South Sioux City (Dakota County, Nebr.) City Directory* (Kansas City, Missouri: R.L. Polk & Co., 1993). Housing shortages and adaptations to overcome them were common in communities experiencing rapid immigration at this time. See Susan Blank, "Hearth and Home: The Living Arrangements of Mexican Immigrants and U.S.-born Mexican Americans," *Sociological Forum* 13 (Winter 1998): 35-59; Lourdes Gouveia and Donald D. Stull, "Dances with Cows: Beefpacking's Impact on Garden City, Kansas, and Lexington, Nebraska," in *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America*, by Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway, and David Griffith, 85-108, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Mark A. Grey, "Storm Lake, Iowa, and the Meatpacking Revolution: Historical and Ethnographic Perspectives on a Community in Transition," in *Unionizing the Jungles: Labor and Community in the Twentieth-Century Meatpacking Industry*, by Shelton Stromquist and Marvin Bergman, 242-262, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997).

employment at IBP or any unforeseen expenses could be catastrophic because they had no savings and no support network. Organizations like the South Sioux City Community Center and local churches made efforts to help new arrivals with basic needs, but even simple supplies like clothing and blankets were scarce at times. When formal organizations were unable to cope with the needs of new immigrants, the old system of reliance on neighbors and family sometimes helped to bridge the gap. Norma de la O related one such story from when she was working for Goldenrod Hills Community Action, a regional social service agency. A family that had just arrived in Dakota County to work at IBP had no home, no money, and nobody to watch their children while both parents worked. De la O was unable to help them with childcare in her official work capacity, but she did enlist her own mother to watch the family's children for the first week so the parents would not lose their jobs while they worked out other arrangements for childcare.³¹

Wage declines and benefit cuts during the 1980s hurt the Siouxland in several ways. For one, fewer IBP employees (and there were over 2,800 of them in a county with a total workforce of about 8,000) could afford to purchase cars, homes, or other products that would drive the local economy. In addition, even meeting basic needs could be challenging for one-earner families. A new production line worker at IBP in 1987 earned \$5.90 per hour. Such a worker would barely clear the poverty threshold for a family of four even if he or she worked 40 hours a week every week of the year. (An unlikely scenario, anyway, as the high injury rate and occasional slow production periods limited

³¹ de la O.

workers' opportunities to consistently work that many hours.)³² The shift of meatpacking work from a relatively high-wage occupation in the 1970s to a low-wage, often temporary, job in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s coincided with a shift to a workforce increasingly composed of ethnic minorities--mostly Latinos and Southeast Asians.

One of the results of these two patterns of change was a significant economic disparity in Dakota County between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites in 1990. Latino families earned, on average, about \$10,000 per year less than their Anglo counterparts. When tabulated on an individual basis, Latinos were twice as likely to be below the poverty line (21.5 percent to 10.6 percent for non-Hispanics). The likelihood of a *family* being in poverty shows an even greater gap: 25 percent of Hispanic families were below the poverty line compared to 8.4 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Significantly, this economic disparity existed despite a higher level of workforce participation among Latinos than Anglos.³³

The difficulties of living on a low income were complicated by additional factors such as cultural differences and unfamiliarity in a new area. For instance, health care was a challenge for both immigrants and health care providers in new destination communities. For health care providers, language barriers made providing care more difficult and more time-consuming. In addition, newcomers with no health insurance--workers at IBP in the early 1990s were not eligible for coverage until after 6 months of

³² Harrington; *Prior HHS Poverty Guidelines*. January 21, 2011, Available: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/figures-fed-reg.shtml>, (accessed April 3, 2011); *Poverty Thresholds 1987*. September 16, 2010, Available: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/thresh87.html>, (accessed April 3, 2011).

³³ U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990: *Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: Nebraska* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991).

employment, and many did not last that long--added to uncompensated care costs for clinics and hospitals in the area. For the immigrants themselves, barriers to medical care included lack of transportation, inconvenient office locations or hours, lack of insurance or income, lack of understanding of the healthcare system, and distrust of doctors.³⁴ The combination of these factors could make even fairly routine illnesses into major ordeals.

For Paola Velasco, her first encounter with the health care system was one of the most difficult challenges she faced after moving from Mexico to northeastern Nebraska. Her children contracted chickenpox in 1994. The family lacked medical insurance at the time and Paola had to take her children to the emergency room for care. They were able to get the treatment they needed, but it was expensive. On top of that, the whole episode was unsettling for Paola; she was worried about the health of her children and how they would pay the bills. Paola especially missed her support network back in Guadalajara at this time.³⁵

There is little record of overtly racist acts against the Latino population of the Siouxland in the 1990s, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it was at least an occasional problem. Marina Galvan recalled one incident shortly after her move from California. While Marina was visiting her sister's house in South Sioux City, a neighbor yelled at her for parking her car on the street. The neighbor threatened to call the police and immigration authorities, neither of which was particularly frightening to Marina because she was a legal resident and had not done anything wrong. Nevertheless, the incident

³⁴ Joe Blankenau, Joni Boye-Beaman, "Health-Care Utilization and the Status of Latinos in Rural Meat-Processing Communities," *Great Plains Research* 10 (Fall 2000): 275-294, 275.

³⁵ Velasco.

suggests that for at least some residents Latinos were not welcome and not considered or treated as legitimate members of the community.³⁶

More subtle racism was also an issue, though it is difficult to document exactly what impact this had in the community. Marco Diaz remembered that when he was growing up in the 1980s, newcomers to his school would be treated differently by their peers depending on language ability as well as skin color. Latino children with darker complexions, he said, were not as readily accepted as those whose skin was lighter. In other places in the community as well, such as local businesses, people sometimes seemed “uncomfortable” or “apprehensive” when interacting with Marco and his parents.³⁷

Like dealings with the community in general, Latino immigrants’ interactions with local law enforcement authorities were generally positive, but there were some notable exceptions. Marina Galvan was pulled over by police five times in a one-month period in 1994. In each instance, she was asked for her license, registration, and proof of insurance. Upon producing these documents, she was allowed to go with no citation or warning for any type of traffic violation, suggesting that the only reason she was stopped in the first place was the officers’ suspicion that she may not have had proper documentation.³⁸

One of the common complaints of longtime residents in many communities with new immigrant populations in the 1980s and 1990s was that newcomers brought

³⁶ Galvan; Hedquist.

³⁷ Marco Diaz.

³⁸ Galvan.

increased crime to their community.³⁹ Statistics show increased calls to police departments, which often resulted in the hiring of additional patrol officers.⁴⁰ Evidence for Dakota County for the late 1980s and early 1990s suggests that a simple answer to the question of a connection between immigration and crime is insufficient. By one standard measure, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, the crime rate in Dakota County dropped 33 percent between 1986 and 1995, a period when many new immigrants were arriving, suggesting that the influx of new immigrants did not lead to increased crime. Critics of this measure point out, however, that the Uniform Crime Reporting Program only considers serious crimes and ignored increases in offenses such as simple assault, drunk driving, and minor drug-related offenses--the number of offenses in each of these categories at least doubled during the same time period.⁴¹

For most residents, the increase in minor crimes did not alter their views of Dakota City and South Sioux City. Both towns continued to be considered safe and comfortable places to live and raise a family by both the older Anglo population and newcomers. Marina Galvan, for whom low crime was a particular point of attraction to the area, was pleased to find that it was much quieter and safer than her former home in California.⁴² Many people who had lived in Dakota County their whole lives continued to

³⁹ This perception, while common and persistent, has little basis in reality. In fact, the evidence suggests that on the individual level immigrants were less likely to commit crimes than the native-born. On a macro level the evidence is less clear but still shows a correlation between increased immigration and reduced crime. See Graham C. Ousey and Charis E. Kubrin, "Exploring the Connection between Immigration and Violent Crime Rates in U.S. Cities, 1980-2000," *Social Problems* (Aug. 2009): 447-473.

⁴⁰ Grey, 252-254; Gouveia and Stull, 91, 96.

⁴¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Community Development: Changes in Nebraska's and Iowa's Counties with Large Meatpacking Plant Workforces*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998).

⁴² Galvan.

consider it a safe place, though others were less comfortable with the rising number of newcomers.⁴³

The influx of new immigrants and the associated challenges that characterized the late 1980s and early 1990s sparked several responses from within the community. Rita Frost of the South Sioux City Community Center organized a meeting of various community leaders in 1986 which included Anglos and Latinos, religious and secular, to try to coordinate efforts to provide basic social services for new arrivals. Religious leaders from various churches in town helped by offering whatever resources they could from their congregations. Some community members complained that IBP was not shouldering enough of the responsibility for the welfare of their employees. They pressed the company, though with little effect, to ensure that their recruits would be able to support themselves rather than relying on community social service agencies or charity for food, shelter, and clothing.⁴⁴

In response to such criticism and calls for company contribution to solutions, IBP supporters, including some local government officials and the media, pointed to the benefits that the plant brought to the community: “Those concerned with funds being used to assist new residents coming to this area should look at the long-term benefits in taxes being paid by IBP and its workers, by the payroll which has pumped life into the Siouxland economy and by the market IBP has provided for area livestock farmers.”⁴⁵ Clearly there was disagreement in the community during this period of rapid influx of new immigrants over whether the economic development that IBP brought to the community was worth the costs paid by established residents and new arrivals alike.

⁴³ Hedquist; Harrington; Jacobs.

⁴⁴ De la O.

⁴⁵ Henry Trysla, "Look At The Benefits," *South Sioux City Star*, 20 April 1989.

Despite the disagreement over who should bear the costs of IBP's labor turnover and labor recruiting practices, local leaders continued to work to improve conditions. According to Lance Hedquist, South Sioux City's City Administrator, it was often difficult to get members of the immigrant community involved in this process because most were busy working to support their families. The physical strain of working on the processing line at IBP meant that most workers were too tired at the end of the day to get involved with committee work or other efforts that often took place in the evenings. Some immigrants, often those who had arrived in the 1970s and achieved some measure of stability by the late 1980s, did get involved, however. Although their presence in community groups and local government was small and grew slowly at first, it was significant.⁴⁶

Tony Gomez is one example of an immigrant who moved beyond the processing line both in terms of work and community involvement. He began working at IBP in 1971 and worked various jobs in the meatpacking industry until 1986. In 1983 he started his own business, Gomez Pallet Corporation, to supplement his income from IBP. He manufactured wooden pallets that he sold to companies around the region, including IBP itself, which allowed him to quit his meatpacking job after a few years. In addition to his business, Gomez also served on the Nebraska Mexican American Commission from 1981 to 2002, the St. Michael's Parish Council from 1982 to 1986, the Hispanic Committee at St. Michael's from 1982 to 1988, and the Briar Cliff College (Sioux City,

⁴⁶ Hedquist.

Iowa) Board of Trustees from 1997 to 2000.⁴⁷ He thus became a leader not only within the immigrant community on the local level, but at the regional and state levels as well.

Continued Challenges and Adaptations

During the spring and summer of 1999, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) implemented a new approach to strengthen interior enforcement of immigration laws (as opposed to efforts to enforce those laws in border regions). This effort, dubbed Operation Vanguard because it was intended to be just the beginning of a wider interior enforcement effort, targeted every meatpacking operation in the state of Nebraska plus a few plants in western Iowa counties. Previous efforts to enforce immigration laws in the interior of the country had relied on raids of businesses, often meatpacking plants, suspected of employing undocumented workers. In Operation Vanguard, the INS hoped to avoid the disruption caused by such raids but also to be more thorough than a raid on a single plant could be. The INS subpoenaed employment records from all meatpacking employers in the targeted region and checked the information against databases of other government agencies, such as the Social Security Administration, to locate any inconsistencies. Out of approximately 24,000 meatpacking workers in Nebraska, about 4,500 records contained some sort of discrepancy and the companies were required to notify these employees to appear at work on a day that INS agents would come to interview them. Not surprisingly, only about one third of those notified showed up on the appointed days. Over 2,000 “suspect” workers quit their jobs rather than submit to interviews, which the INS concluded was an indication that they were not legally authorized to work. The American Meat Institute (AMI), and the

⁴⁷ Hedquist; de la O; *Tony Gomez for Dakota County Commissioner*, (2008), Available: <http://tony-gomez.com/Experience.html> (accessed January 4, 2011). The Nebraska Mexican American Commission was renamed the Nebraska Latino American Commission in 2010.

meatpacking companies it represents, suggested instead that the INS's interview tactics simply intimidated legal workers with questions such as "Are you *or any members of your family* not authorized to be present in the United States?"⁴⁸ Of those who did show up for their INS interviews, only 34 out of more than 1,000 interviewees were arrested and deported. The AMI concluded: "Operation Vanguard [was] an irrational approach to interior immigration enforcement: it was all economic pain for Nebraska residents, with no measurable immigration-enforcement gain."⁴⁹

Operation Vanguard was poorly received in the communities where meatpacking operations were targeted and it met opposition from an unusual mix of groups. In addition to the meatpacking industry's opposition, the National Council of La Raza asked President Bill Clinton to suspend further implementation of the program because it fueled racism against Latinos and Asians.⁵⁰ Lourdes Gouveia, a sociologist at the University of Nebraska at Omaha who had been studying the relationship between meatpacking and immigration for over a decade, characterized the meaning of the immigration enforcement effort this way: "Operation Vanguard can be viewed as a set of practices and discourses which ultimately contributed to the historical devaluation of immigrant workers' role in feeding U.S. consumers. Unlike the wholesome and virtuous farmers . . . with whom customers can readily identify and trust, immigrants are reduced to the status of 'illegal aliens', and thus devoid of identity, history, and humanity."⁵¹ While the particular reasons that scholars, civil rights groups, and the meatpacking industry's trade

⁴⁸ Sherry L. Edwards, "Operation Vanguard," (Arlington, VA: American Meat Institute, 2000), 1, emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁰ *Rural Migration News*, "Operation Vanguard, IBP," July 1999.

⁵¹ Lourdes Gouveia and Arunas Juska, "Taming Nature, Taming Workers: Constructing the Separation Between Meat Consumption and Meat Production in the U.S.," *Sociologia Ruralis* (2002): 370-391, 12.

group opposed Operation Vanguard may have differed, their unity in opposing the plan, along with the incredibly low rate of success in identifying and deporting undocumented workers, suggests that it was a failure.

In Nebraska, the meatpacking industry drew continued attention in the wake of Operation Vanguard and media reports later in 1999 describing poor working conditions.⁵² IBP spokesman Gary Mickelson defended the company's record, arguing that "Preventing employee injuries and illnesses is important to us from both a human and economic standpoint."⁵³ The increased attention to these issues prompted Nebraska governor Mike Johanns to assign Lieutenant Governor David Maurstad to conduct a review of working conditions in Nebraska's meatpacking plants. In a memorandum to Governor Johanns outlining his findings, Maurstad did not mention the competing interests--employment and economic development, workers' rights and human rights--that made the matter a complicated one, but he did acknowledge indirectly that the issues were complex: "There are no easy solutions," he wrote.⁵⁴

Maurstad's investigation into work conditions at meatpacking plants, which included visits to processing operations and meetings with workers, uncovered concerns that generally fell into four categories: "Abusive and Discriminatory Language and Behavior by Supervisors, ...Inadequate Communication of Company Policy & Inadequate Training,...Unsanitary Working Conditions,...[and] Unsafe Working Conditions."⁵⁵ He made several recommendations for addressing these issues, including increasing safety training, further study of line speed and its impact on workers, and a

⁵² The most significant was "Critics: Hispanics Exploited in Omaha Meatpacking Jobs," *Lincoln Journal Star*, 5 September 1999.

⁵³ Quoted in *Ibid*.

⁵⁴ David Maurstad, "Memorandum to Governor Mike Johanns," 24 January 2000, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

Worker's Bill of Rights to be developed by the Nebraska Department of Labor.⁵⁶ In June 2000, following Maurstad's recommendations, Governor Johanns did sign a Meatpacking Worker Bill of Rights. It enumerated eleven entitlements including the right to organize, a safe workplace, complete information regarding the terms of employment, and access to existing state agencies and legal protections for addressing grievances.⁵⁷ On the local level, the community continued to organize to meet short-term needs but also began addressing longer-term concerns.

Norma de la O emerged as another community leader at the turn of the twenty-first century. After graduating from South Sioux City High School and attending a few years of college, de la O began working in jobs that, in various ways, offered social services for community members. In the late 1980s, she worked as a police officer in Dakota City and for Goldenrod Hills Community Action before moving to Garden City, Kansas. In Garden City, her husband worked in meatpacking and Norma worked for a social services agency during the rapid growth of the immigrant population after the construction of two beef processing plants there in the 1980s. When Norma and her husband moved back to South Sioux City in the late 1990s, she continued that work in her formal career with the New Iowan Center, a part of Iowa Workforce Development in Sioux City designed to help immigrants to the region. But she set about organizing the Latino community through independent efforts as well.

In 2000, de la O and others organized the first Cinco de Mayo celebration in the Siouxland. One of the benefits of emphasizing positive cultural celebrations, de la O said,

⁵⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁵⁷ "Meatpacking Worker Bill of Rights," *Nebraska Department of Labor*, 28 June 2000, Available: <http://www.dol.nebraska.gov/nwd/center.cfm?PRICAT=2&SUBCAT=5K&ACTION=bor>, (accessed April 4, 2011).

was that it brought together both established and newly arrived immigrants as well as other community members from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. She compared the Cinco de Mayo festivities to similar celebrations of European cultural heritage common in towns throughout the Midwest. In 2002, seeing a need for some organization to improve conditions in general for the Latino community and to make progress possible, she led the formation of two groups, the Siouxland Latino Leadership group and Siouxland Unidad Latina, “created to empower, promote and develop the Siouxland Latino Community.”⁵⁸ De la O saw a need for more emphasis on leadership and education and through these groups she was able to promote both. Siouxland Latino Leadership offered workshops to help local residents of all ages develop leadership skills and strategies. Unidad Latina, among other things, offered scholarships to students pursuing college education.⁵⁹

Anglo community leaders in South Sioux City and Dakota City put a positive spin on the changes the community underwent; many were especially proud to note the determination of Latino immigrants and their work ethic.⁶⁰ But such praise for the work ethic of new immigrants should be treated with caution, warn sociologists Gouveia, Carranza, and Cogua: “Their work ethic is celebrated by employers and townsfolk but such celebrations may unwittingly or conveniently stigmatize and racialize Mexicans as the group that is best fitted to do the dirty work and to occupy the lower rungs of our social institutions.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Siouxland Unidad Latina*, Available: <http://www.siouxlandunidadlatina.org/> (accessed October 15, 2010).

⁵⁹ De la O.

⁶⁰ Hedquist, Harrington.

⁶¹ Gouveia, Carranza, and Cogua, 31.

In 2001, IBP's phenomenal growth and success as a business ended when the company was acquired by Tyson Foods, Inc., making Tyson the largest producer of meat products in the United States (the company processed one out of every four pounds of beef, pork, and chicken in the country). There is no clear way to determine if IBP's revolutionary approach to meat processing, developed from 1960 to 2000, was an overall benefit to communities like Dakota City and South Sioux City; it depends on who you ask. Certainly some immigrants were able to capitalize on an initial opportunity for a decent--albeit difficult and dangerous--job and create a stable and prosperous life for their families. The Diaz's story illustrates what was possible. After over twenty years of work in meatpacking, they had saved enough to open a restaurant and work for themselves. All four of their children pursued successful careers outside of the packing industry. Others, especially those who arrived after wages declined in the 1980s and the line speed was increased, were unable to make a decent living or were disabled by their time on the processing line. After working at IBP from 1992 until 2000, Duc Tran suffered a heart attack and had to take some time off of work. He attempted to go back several times after his doctor cleared him to return to work, but between his weakened heart health and the effects of cumulative stress injury in his hands (which caused them to go numb after even short periods of knife work) he was unable to meet the physical demands of work on the processing line any longer. Because of his poor health, he was also unable to find work elsewhere. Duc did receive some Social Security disability benefits, which helped his family.⁶²

For the established residents of Dakota City and South Sioux City, the outcomes of the IBP's arrival were similarly mixed. These communities would almost certainly be

⁶² Tran.

smaller and less well-off today were it not for IBP's decision to build there in 1964. Lance Hedquist, a lifetime resident of South Sioux City and the City Administrator since 1980 characterized the community as little but "used cars and bars" during the 1950s and 1960s. South Sioux City had a reputation for spring flooding, poor housing, and a high crime rate during that time. The jobs provided by the construction and operation of IBP's slaughter and processing plant changed the community for the better, Hedquist said. Other industries were attracted to the area in the following decades, so IBP's operations in Dakota County not only meant over 2,000 jobs for local workers at the packing plant, but also created conditions which led to additional economic development during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶³ The presence of some of the residents of Dakota County in 2000 whose families had lived in the area for decades could, like the presence of immigrants, be attributed to the packing plant. Most rural communities experienced population loss during this time period as young people sought opportunities elsewhere, but the Anglo population of Dakota Country grew by over 15 percent.

⁶³ Hedquist.

Conclusion

Changes in the meatpacking industry following IBP's revolutionary approach to cattle slaughter and beef processing created significant shifts in the communities that were home to their plants. First, the revitalized meatpacking industry provided a base for economic growth in rural communities that were otherwise facing stagnation or decline. Further, industrial change spurred immigration to rural areas when demand for low-wage labor outstripped the local supply in places like Dakota County, leading to population growth in these communities while other rural towns lost population. Neither of these two significant historical trends--industrial change in meatpacking and immigration--would have happened as they did without the other.

The political discussion about immigration, especially in the 1990s, focused on illegal immigration. But beginning the story with the migrant's action--crossing the border without proper documentation--ignores the industrial changes that created the demand for immigration beyond what could be supplied within legal limits. In meatpacking and in other industries, the need for low-wage laborers was greater than the local supply. This excess demand attracted newcomers.

Despite the development of a system of employment practices and immigration by the end of the twentieth century, many challenges continued for the industry and for workers. Political backlash against employers who hired undocumented workers kept the meatpacking industry's labor practices in the news. Workers continued to struggle for fair treatment and safe working conditions, with only minimal success. A study of the impact of the Nebraska Meatpacking Worker Bill of Rights conducted by Nebraska Appleseed in 2006 concluded that it had little effect: "In communities across Nebraska that have meat-

processing plants, neither workers' awareness of their rights nor the freedom to assert them has changed significantly since the introduction of the [Meatpacking Worker] Bill of Rights six years ago."¹ "What happens is that what it says out there [on the bill posted outside the working area] is not followed inside," one worker explained.²

While many migrants' motivation to move was economic, their experiences in the Siouxland were shaped by both economic and social factors. Workplace hazards were a significant part of the experiences of immigrants to rural meatpacking communities in the late twentieth century, but other factors shaped their experiences as well. In Dakota County, the existence of a labor union helped to protect workers to some extent, although the strength of meatpacking unions (and the labor movement in general) declined throughout this period. Religious communities, neighbors, and family connections all served to help early immigrants adapt to their new homes. Immigrants who arrived in the late 1980s and 1990s also benefited from the earlier immigrant community's success. Immigrant-owned businesses, Latino civic leaders, and independent social action organizations all made for a more welcoming atmosphere in addition to the concrete changes--such as the increased availability of English language classes and Latino leadership initiatives--that eased the transition for newcomers.

Dakota City and South Sioux City experienced significant changes in the ethnic and cultural makeup of their populations between 1960 and 2000 and also experienced economic growth while other small rural communities in the region declined. This economic success allowed what many people (established residents and newcomers alike)

¹ Nebraska Appleseed, *Dignity on the Line: An Evaluation of the Nebraska Meatpacking Workers Bill of Rights*, (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska Appleseed, 2006), 5.

² Quoted in Lourdes Gouveia, Miguel A. Carranza, and Jasney Cogua, "The Great Plains Migration: Mexicanos and Latinos in Nebraska," In *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*, by Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León, 23-49. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 38.

considered the positive aspects of small-town life to persist: small businesses on Dakota Avenue catered to the needs of the community, religious communities remained central for both spiritual and social reasons, and residents generally felt safe and secure in their homes and neighborhoods.

Despite the apparent economic success of communities tied to meatpacking plants, there were costs brought about by the modernization of the industry. IBP employed many residents of Dakota County, but unlike meatpacking workers at mid-century, workers' wages in the 1980s and 1990s were sometimes not enough to provide a comfortable and stable living for their families. One common trend in rural communities during the second half of the twentieth century, population decline, was mitigated in Dakota County by an influx of new immigrants, but the poverty and lack of opportunity for advancement that plagued rural communities across the country did not spare Dakota City and South Sioux City.

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