

Immigrants Keep an Iowa Meatpacking Town Alive and Growing

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STORM LAKE, Iowa — When Dan Smith first went to work at the pork processing plant in Storm Lake in 1980, pretty much the only way to nab that kind of union job was to have a father, an uncle or a brother already there. The pay, he recalled, was \$16 an hour, with benefits — enough to own a home, a couple of cars, a camper and a boat, while your wife stayed home with the children.

“It was the best-paying job you could get, 100 percent, if you were unskilled,” said Mr. Smith, now 66, who followed his father through the plant gates.

After nearly four decades at the plant, most of them as a forklift driver, Mr. Smith is retiring this month.

The union is long gone, and so are most of the white faces of men who once labored in the broiling heat of the killing floor and the icy chill of the production lines. What hasn’t changed much is Mr. Smith’s hourly wage, which is still about \$16 an hour, the same as when he started 37 years ago. Except today, his paycheck buys only about a third of what it did then.

The forces that have helped transform this snug lakeside town in northwestern Iowa and others like it during Mr. Smith’s working life have created a complex swirl of economic successes and hardships, optimism and unease.

Fierce global competition, agricultural automation and plant closures have left many rural towns struggling for survival. In areas stripped of the farm and union jobs that paid middle-class wages and tempted the next generation to stay put and raise a family, young people are more likely to move on to college or urban centers like Des Moines. Left behind are an aging population, abandoned storefronts and shrinking economic prospects.

Yet Storm Lake hustled along by the relentless drive of manufacturers to cut labor costs and by the town’s grit to survive, is still growing. However clumsily at times, this four-square-mile patch has absorbed successive waves of immigrants and refugees — from Asia, from Mexico and Central America, and from Africa.

They fill most of the grueling, low-paid jobs at the pork, egg and turkey plants; they spend money at local shops, and open restaurants and grocery stores; they fill church pews and home-team benches. While more than 88% of the state’s population is non-Hispanic white, less than half of Storm Lake’s is. Walk through the halls of the public schools and you can hear as many as 18 languages.



Members of the Storm Lake High School varsity soccer team standing for the national anthem.

But if the newcomers have brought some of the economic dynamism that President Trump promised to restore to the struggling Midwest and South, they have also fed some of the anxieties and resentments that he stirred.

Steve King, the Republican congressman for this predominantly white, conservative district, blames immigrants and refugees for pushing down wages, bringing unwelcome cultural diversity and burdening public services.

While Mr. King's nativist comments have been labeled racist by critics, his fervent animosity to immigration has done little over the years to dent his electoral popularity in most of the 39 counties he represents.

Storm Lake, with a population of roughly 11,000, is in no way immune to the strains and tensions that an influx of poor, low-skilled and non-English-speaking immigrants and refugees can bring. But after decades of living and working together, the residents recognize that their future is a shared one.

"Other communities our size are shrinking and consolidating school districts," said Mark Prosser, the police chief. "We have schools bulging at the seams. There are expensive challenges, but which one do you want: a dying community or one that has growth?"

Less than a half-mile from the police station, the shelves at Valentina's Meat Market offer a still-life version of the town's inhabitants. A kaleidoscope of packages, jars and produce from nearly every continent is jammed in — side by side are purple yams from Laos, green plantains from Ecuador, mahogany-brown cassava from Nigeria, tan egg roll wrappers from Vietnam.



Produce at Silvino Morelos's store, Valentina's Meat Market, which stocks items reflecting the various immigrant groups in town.

Silvino Morelos, the Mexican-born owner, has lived in Storm Lake for more than 20 years. He came after his grocery business in Los Angeles was looted and burned during the racially charged 1992 riots. Here, he said, he has always felt welcome and secure.

"A lot of different communities are living together," said Mr. Morelos, who aims to feed them all.

His wife, Mayela, works from 5 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the pork plant, earning \$18 an hour, before handling the register at Valentina's until the early evening. Mr. Morelos often doesn't finish up before midnight, he said, and rarely takes a day off. He recently bought a 22-acre farm about five minutes outside of town where he is now raising lambs and goats. Dedicated workers, he said, can live "a good life."

'Just Trying to Make a Buck'

Shared ambitions and a willingness to work hard command respect across cultures here.

Mr. Smith, looking back on his decades at the plant, acknowledges that a supply of immigrants makes it easier for employers to pay less, but he doesn't begrudge them the work.

"I harbor no ill feelings for anybody who's trying to make a better life for themselves," he said, settling on the living room couch in his home, a corner house next to the railroad tracks, which he shares with his girlfriend. "They're just trying to make a buck for their family, like I am."

Mr. Smith remembers that it wasn't the arrival of foreign workers that initially drove down wages, but the plant owners.

First was Hygrade Food Products Corporation, an old-style meatpacking house that introduced Ball Park Franks to the Detroit Tigers' stadium in 1957 and operated the Storm Lake plant when Mr. Smith went to work there. Faced with competition from new companies that had developed a faster, more efficient method of boxing beef and selling it to supermarket chains and fast-food outlets, Hygrade in 1981 asked its workers to take a pay cut of \$3 an hour. When they refused, the plant closed.

With vigorous support from town leaders, the upstart Iowa Beef Processors (later known as IBP) bought and reopened it a few months later — slashing wages by more than half and shunning the union.

At that point, Mr. Smith returned to do night cleanup, earning \$5.50 an hour with no benefits, but a vast majority of his former co-workers were turned away, he said, because the new owner did not want to hire union supporters. Instead, the company began actively recruiting in Mexico and in immigrant communities in Texas and California.

“They learned real fast to keep a sharp knife and didn’t complain if they had a sore arm,” Mr. Smith said.

The new form of meatpacking that sprang up in Iowa and the Midwest transformed the industry.

Tyson Foods bought IBP in 2001, and its red oval logo greets visitors as they drive into town. Tacked onto the entry gate, a large banner announces, “New starting pay” — \$15 an hour on the production line.

Even at that level, more than twice the state’s \$7.25 minimum wage, workers can be hard to come by. Standing in the same spot for eight hours or more at a time, in near-freezing temperatures, slashing at carcasses that swing by at a fast pace, can numb body and soul. The poultry industry also ranks among the most dangerous in the United States, according to a new report by the National Employment Law Project.



The work force at the Tyson plant, a major local employer, has shifted over the years to include more immigrants.

Even if pay were raised to \$20 or \$25 an hour, Mr. Smith said, “I don’t think you could get white guys.”

Those who are hired can be dogged by a common negative stereotype. As one supervisor at the plant recalled, some of the Mexican workers on the line complained after he hired a white worker, saying: “This guy is not going to last as long. He’s young and he’s not going to work hard.”

Most of the 2,200 workers now at the pork plant are primarily of Hispanic descent, said Caroline Ahn, a spokeswoman for Tyson. Asians make up the second-largest group, followed by Caucasians. Men slightly outnumber women. She would not specify the turnover rate, but several employees said the company was engaged in a never-ending hiring campaign.

In Buena Vista County, which includes Storm Lake, the jobless rate has dropped to 2.7%, and both small and large businesses complain that they cannot find enough workers. The competitive squeeze is expected to only worsen when two new pork plants open in nearby Sioux City and Eagle Grove.

But David Swenson, a regional expert at Iowa State University, is skeptical of employer complaints about labor shortages. For an industry that needs to be where the animals are, he said, the only answer is to “pay workers enough to retain them or attract them.”

Art Cullen, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial page editor of his family-run newspaper, *The Storm Lake Times*, acknowledges that processing-plant work is tough. Yet for a refugee or an immigrant without English or skills, butchering livestock at that wage, he said, is a “first rung on the American ladder to success.”

That was the way it worked for Abel Saengchanpheng, who came to Storm Lake from Northern California in 1997, when he was 16, after relatives talked up the job opportunities there. Born in a Thai refugee camp after his family escaped from Laos, Mr. Saengchanpheng, now 36 and an American citizen, joined his parents at the plant after he finished high school. He has been there ever since, working his way up to general foreman in 2013, and he now oversees 300 production workers.

With earnings that place him comfortably in Storm Lake's upper middle class, he owns two cars, a Subaru and a Honda, and a home.

"I was so blessed to get into Tyson," he said, sipping coffee at Grand Central Coffee Station. "I remember looking at the first paycheck and thinking, 'There is free money going around.'"

The work, though, can feed drudgery as well as dreams.

Blanca Martinez, who came from El Salvador with her husband (a naturalized citizen who lived in Storm Lake) and their daughter, now 5, has been at the turkey plant for two years. She earns \$15.70 an hour cutting bone six days a week on the 6 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. shift.

"It's very hard," Ms. Martinez, 37, a permanent resident, said in Spanish through an interpreter. "I'm still not used to the cold." At work, she wears three gloves on her left hand and two on her right — giving her cutting hand a little more flexibility.

Speaking English would widen her options, Ms. Martinez said, but she has had no time for lessons since her husband received a diagnosis of cancer.

This Is Who We Are Now'

The contrast between Storm Lake and many neighboring towns is both by accident and by design.

Refugees from Southeast Asia made their way to the area more than 40 years ago, when Iowa became the first state to offer resettlement assistance at the end of the Vietnam War.

"That was a proactive choice on the part of community leaders," said the Rev. Charles Valenti-Hein, the pastor at Lakeside Presbyterian Church, which sponsored the first group. Making room for other immigrants, he said, was "an extension of that initial act of hospitality, something we've chosen."

Other residents suggested that the proximity of a university, Buena Vista, with some minority faculty members and students, as well as the town's location as a central stopping point on sales routes, may have contributed to the openness.

Yet the flood of Mexican recruits who were funneled to the IBP plant in the 1990s engendered suspicion and tensions. School overcrowding, a surge in uncompensated care at the hospitals and a new need for translators drained city coffers. Complaints about a rise in crime and drugs followed.

"There was a collective holding of breath as the community started to change," said Mr. Prosser, the police chief since 1989 and a Catholic deacon. "At first, people born and raised here felt, 'We want it to go back to the way it was.'"



Nancy Alvarez, who is expecting her fourth child, at her baby shower in Storm Lake with her sons, from left: Marcos, 10; Jonathan, 5; and Carlos, 11. While many rural towns are losing population, Storm Lake is growing.

But over time, the community evolved, he said. The immigrants and refugees bought homes, opened businesses and saw their children graduate from school. Nonprofit and advocacy groups sprouted to ease the transition. The police department hired bilingual community liaisons. Most residents still don't bother to lock their doors.

"We've had all sorts of problems over a period of 30 to 35 years," Mr. Prosser said. "But the pros so outweigh the cons. The community as a whole understands that, and for the most part they've embraced it."

Some surrounding towns have embraced the model, while others have rejected it. Decades ago, the picturesque city of Spencer, about 40 miles north, spurned the overtures of a packing plant, with some residents saying at the time that they didn't want their town to turn into Storm Lake.

Other Iowa towns, like Denison, have followed Storm Lake's lead, though the rapid transition has brought growing pains.

The Rev. Timothy Friedrichsen was the Roman Catholic pastor in Denison before coming to St. Mary's Church in Storm Lake in 2013. "I was aghast at the open hostility towards immigrants that cropped up pretty regularly," he said of his former home of Denison, where the Latino population doubled in less than a decade.

"Though some people still feel, 'This is not the Storm Lake I grew up in,'" he said, for most of the population, "there is a kind of comfortableness. This is who we are now."

The most palpable anxiety these days has been fueled by Mr. Trump's statements on immigrants and border control.

Graciele Vrieze, a Spanish-speaking civilian community-service officer with the local police department, said her own 13-year-old son, an Iowa-born citizen, had come home from school asking if they were all going to be deported to Mexico. There are few reliable statistics on the number of foreign-born residents with fake or no documents; estimates run to the thousands. Several with documents also said they were postponing trips abroad, however, because of the fear that they may not be allowed to return.



Sunrise in Storm Lake, a town of about 11,000 people in northwest Iowa.

The drive among refugees and immigrants to remain in or return to Storm Lake stands out in a state where more than two-thirds of the counties are shrinking in population. "I love my town," Mr. Smith said, but all three of his children and both of his girlfriend's have moved elsewhere.

Most of the farm boys and farmers' daughters have left, said Mr. Cullen of The Storm Lake Times. "Second-generation immigrants want to stay with their families," he said from the cozy one-room newsroom. He jumped up from his chair to hunt among the stacks of newspapers for a recent edition that featured a scholarship student from El Salvador returning from college to Storm Lake to start a house-painting business. "Those kids are our future."

Immigrant parents who labor on the production lines say they want their children to go to college instead of taking their places at the plant. But the expectation is that those children will return home after graduating.

Ms. Martinez, the worker at the turkey plant, does not have time to take English classes herself, but the future she envisions for her 5-year-old includes going to medical school, becoming a doctor and then coming home to work here in Storm Lake.