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Of Meat and (Wo)Men: Meatpacking's Consequences for Communities

by

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Of Meat and (Wo)Men: Meatpacking's Consequences for Communities*

Donald D. Stull

[T]he U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) predicts that meatpacking and poultry dressing will offer "substantial rural job growth" in the 1990s.

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The Packers are Leaving the City...

On November 9, 1993, BeefAmerica, the nation's fifth-largest beefpacker, closed three plants in Omaha. It consolidated operations in Norfolk, Nebraska, a town of 21,500, some 100 miles to the northwest, where 1,700 employees now slaughter and process up to 4,200 cattle per day. Headquartered in Omaha, BeefAmerica had been the city's largest meatpacker in jobs and production. The consolidation eliminated 900 jobs.[1] Less than two months later, on December 30, 1993, Monfort ceased operating its St. Joseph pork plant and laid off 1,050 workers, despite rapidly expanding pork production in northern Missouri.[2]

Such closures are ironic. Until recently, these cities were major meat-processing centers. In the years after World War II, for example, the plants of industry giants such as Armour and Swift dominated the skyline of South Omaha. Today, thirty of the city's meat plants stand idle.[3] Its stockyards could soon follow those in other railhead cities that once served as principal livestock markets, such as Kansas City, whose stockyards were abandoned and torn down in 1991.

These closings are but the latest chapters in a process of restructuring and relocation that began some three decades ago. Since the 1960s, meatpacking's Big Three — IBP, ConAgra, and Excel — have supplanted the Beef Trust, whose names once meant meat — Armour, Swift, Morris, Cudahy, and Wilson. The new packers have abandoned the urban base of the older firms to build modern plants in rural communities close to sources of cattle and hogs.[4]

The Big Three rose to prominence by reducing costs. They build their plants in right-to-work states and, unlike their predecessors, avoid negotiating industry-wide agreements with unions. Instead, improved technology has enabled them to simplify the meatpacking process and replace highly-skilled butchers with lower-paid and less-skilled workers. In so doing, packers have

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driven down wages and weakened the unions as well. In 1960, meatpacking line workers earned 15% more than the average manufacturing worker. By 1990, they earned 20% less.[5] A decade ago, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the nation's leading meatpacking union, held contracts with the leading packers that set a base wage (the rate of pay after one year of employment) of $10.69 an hour.[6] Today's meatpacking workers, however, are likely to labor on the line in a nonunion plant, and those employed in unionized plants often find themselves without contracts or forced to accept major concessions to keep their plants open. Base wages are $2 to $3 below those of a decade ago.[7]

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And Moving to the Country

Even as meatpacking workers in Omaha and St. Joseph were getting pink slips for the holidays, nearby small towns pinned their economic hopes on meatpacking. In February 1993, Tyson Foods opened a renovated pork processing plant, formerly owned by Wilson, in the west-central Missouri town of Marshall (population 12,700 in 1990; note that population figures for 1990 will be listed after every town). The plant presently employs 500 and plans to add a second shift and double its workforce in 1994. Seaboard Corporation, a diversified agribusiness and transportation company, is building a $50 million pork plant in the Oklahoma panhandle town of Guymon (7,800 in 1990). It hopes to begin operations with one shift of 800 workers in April 1995 and add a second shift by 1998. The Guymon venture follows closely behind Seaboard's renovation of a Farmstead Food's pork plant in Albert Lea, Minnesota (18,310 in 1990) and its new poultry plant in Mayfield, Kentucky (9,935 in 1990).

These new plants are but the latest to appear, seemingly overnight, on rural horizons across the Midwest and Central Plains. In the past decade, for example, IBP, the nation's leading producer of red meat, bought and renovated three pork plants and built a new one — all in Iowa (Columbus Junction [1,616], Perry [6,652], Storm Lake [8,769], and Waterloo [66,467]). In 1990, IBP opened a new beef plant in Lexington, Nebraska, where it presently employs some 2,100 — *25% of the city's 1993 population!*

Columbus Junction, Iowa, Guymon, Oklahoma, Lexington, Nebraska, and Marshall, Missouri are adding value to agricultural products (feed grain and livestock) that have long been the economic base of these towns. Other communities will follow: the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) predicts that meatpacking and poultry dressing will offer "substantial rural job growth" in the 1990s.[8]

But plants are not cheap. As site selection for a new plant narrows, communities lure packers with economic incentives. In 1980, Finney County, Kansas, commissioners used $100 million in industrial revenue bonds and $3.5 million in property-tax relief spread over ten years to entice IBP to build the world's largest beef plant outside Garden City, instead of in nearby Lamar, Colorado (8,343 in 1990). Ten years later, IBP used Nebraska's Employment and Investment Growth Act to reduce its county property taxes, while the City of Lexington removed the plant from its tax rolls, and the State widened the highway in front of the new plant.[9]

More recently, Guymon, Oklahoma, wrested Seaboard's pork plant from Liberal, Kansas, a beefpacking town forty-five miles to the north. It used a lucrative package that included sixty acres in the city's industrial park, ad valorem tax increment financing for twenty-five years, a five-year abatement on ad valorem taxes, and a fifteen-year one-cent city sales tax to pay off $8 million in revenue bonds issued to help construct a state-of-the-art facility. The State contributed $1.7 million for highway improvements and will reimburse the City of Guymon 85% of the abated tax dollars over five years. In return, Seaboard has promised $175,000 a year to the school system for the next twenty-five years — and 1,400 jobs. Base wages for hourly workers will be $6.75 to $7.50. Annual payroll is projected to be $25 million when the plant is fully operational in 1998.[10]

Economic development is necessary if rural communities are to survive and prosper. But do the development strategies that these communities have adopted, and the jobs they attract offer renewed opportunity and reverse community decline and poverty, or do they increase economic vulnerability, strain community resources and social services, and exacerbate social pathologies? The answer may be found in the experiences of two communities that my colleagues and I have been studying for several years: Garden City, Kansas and Lexington, Nebraska.

When the Packers Move to Town

In December 1980, IBP, Inc. (formerly Iowa Beef Processors, Inc.) opened the world's largest beefpacking plant ten miles west of Garden City, Kansas, in rural Finney County. In 1983, another plant, now owned by Monfort (a subsidiary of ConAgra Red Meats), opened on Garden City's eastern edge. Today, these facilities combine to employ about 4,100 workers, who slaughter and process up to 8,400 head of cattle per day, six days a week.

With an official population of 24,097 in 1990, Garden City is the largest community in western Kansas. A decade of rapid growth has made it the primary trade and service center for the surrounding region, eclipsing its chief rivals, Dodge City and Liberal, as the capital of beefpacking's "Golden Triangle." Nine months before IBP opened its Finney County plant, the 1980 Census counted 18,256 people in Garden City, 82% of whom were white. Hispanics, who first came in the early 1900s to work in the sugar beet fields and on the railroad, made up 16% of the population.[11]

Two beef plants and a decade later, Garden City had been transformed into a multicultural community, with the addition of Vietnamese and Laotian refugees and Mexican and Central-American migrants. Not only was Garden City the state's fastest growing community in the 1980s, increasing by one-third, but it has become perhaps its most ethnically diverse. According to the 1990 Census, 31% of the population are minorities (25% Hispanic). School records reveal a higher, and probably more accurate, percentage of minorities — 37% at the close of the 1990-91 school year.[12]

On November 8, 1990, IBP began slaughtering cattle in Lexington, Nebraska. The 1990 Census, taken eight months before IBP opened, counted 6,601 people in Lexington.[13] As in Garden City, Mexicans settled in Lexington in the 1920s, finding work on the Union Pacific and harvesting sugar beets and potatoes. Unlike in Garden City, however, they were few and remained largely "invisible" to Anglos. The 1990 Census reported 4.9% of Lexington's population as Hispanic; 7.3% were classified as minority.

Recognizing the inopportune and costly timing of the 1990 Census, county officials paid for a recount, which was conducted on February 24, 1993. This special census counted 8,544 persons in Lexington — an increase of 29% (1,943 persons) in just three years! Hispanics, virtually all new immigrants, increased by almost 500% to one-fourth of the total population (2,021 persons). Overall, the surrounding county (Dawson) grew by 13%, making it and an adjoining county Nebraska's fastest growing counties in 1990 and 1991.[14]

Garden City and Lexington have experienced rapid growth and increased ethnic diversity because meatpacking remains labor intensive, no less today than when Upton Sinclair shocked the nation in 1906 with *The Jungle.* Today's meatpacking firms still draw workers from among disadvantaged minorities, new immigrants, and women.

An examination of the work force at IBP's Finney County facility over the past decade clearly demonstrates a growing reliance on these groups. In 1984, almost half (48%) of the plant's employees were white; the remainder were divided about evenly between Hispanics (27%) and Southeast Asians (23%). One-fifth were women. By 1992, the demographic profile of the plant had shifted dramatically: almost two-thirds (63%) were Hispanic, while whites and Southeast Asians each comprised less than one-fifth of the workforce (18% each). More than one-fourth (26%) of the workers were women.[15]

Packers admit targeting women for recruitment. As a top executive of a major packing firm put it: "We couldn't . . . begin to staff our plants if we didn't have women . . . . I hope we can get them to stay longer because they probably aren't as mobile. . . . [Our] average employee is a 24-year-old divorcee with two kids, and she needs the work."[16] When IBP was under construction in Lexington, company officials projected that 60% of their processing workers (the majority of hourly employees) would be women, many of them single mothers or farm wives. IBP hoped on-site day care, a first for the industry, would draw and hold them, thus lowering turnover. But the day-care center has not been fully utilized, largely because workers cannot afford the fee (initially $9/day for the first child, $8 for the second; now, it is more). In fact, the proportion of women employees declined from 29% to 20% over the plant's first twenty-one months.

Even as the percentage of female employees was declining at IBP's Lexington plant, it remained a steady 25% at its Emporia, Kansas, plant from 1984 to 1992, and rose from 20% to 26% during the same period at IBP's Finney County plant. Women at these and other meatpacking plants are an important segment of the labor force, filling somewhere between one-fifth and one-third of the jobs.

While the number of women working in the industry remains relatively stable, the proportion of Hispanics has risen dramatically. At IBP-Lexington, Hispanics went from 18% of the workers at start-up to 57% twenty-one months later.[17] They now comprise 22% of the workers at IBP's Emporia plant, up from 8% in 1984. At IBP's Finney County plant, they make up two-thirds of the labor force.

Ethnic mix and gender mix vary between plants: Southeast Asians comprised less than 2% of Monfort's 1988 work force, but they were one-fourth of IBP's just ten miles down the road. The number of Southeast Asians at IBP-Lexington has remained small (4%), but the number has grown from 2% of IBP-Emporia workers in 1984 to 14% in 1992. At IBP's pork plant in Storm Lake, Iowa, 25% of the 1,200 workers are Lao or Tai Dam; only 7% are Hispanics, while two-thirds are Anglos. One block away, at Bil-Mar Foods' turkey-processing plant, only 10% of the workers are Southeast Asian, while 15% are Hispanic.[18]

Although Hispanics and Southeast Asians have increasingly found work in meatpacking over the past decade, most enter — and remain — in the lower-paid and more dangerous jobs. Again, using IBP's Finney County and Emporia plants as examples, we find that white males predominate among officials, managers, and professionals; white females predominate among clerical and office staff. Out on the floor, jobs for technicians and skilled craft workers are generally filled by white males, while Hispanics and Southeast Asians are usually assigned to semi-skilled and unskilled line work. In recent years, new immigrants, minorities, and women have captured a bigger share of the jobs at all levels. Most, however, are still relegated to the line, where the work is dangerous, benefits are limited, and turnover is high. And it is there that most will stay.

Packinghouses create jobs, not just on their floors, but in support industries (such as feedyards, trucking, and box manufacturing) and in the expansion of services that accompanies growth.

Company officials say they want to hire locally, but everyone knows better. The industry's need for a pliant and docile work force makes new immigrants, disadvantaged minorities, and women an ideal reservoir from which to recruit. Given plant size, limited labor supplies in small host communities and surrounding rural areas, and monthly turnover rates of 6% and up, plants rapidly run through the local supply of willing workers, especially during start-up when a monthly turnover of 12% (IBP-Lexington's rate for its first 21 months) is considered good. Word of mouth and "bounties" to employees for each new hire recruited combine with advertisement in packing towns and pockets of high unemployment to bring in a steady flow of applicants. Recruiters take to the road if need be, and if labor supply is down they may offer to cover some initial expenses against wages.

Given meatpacking's high turnover and the resulting constant need for new workers, we should not be surprised when communities that host plants face school overcrowding, declining supplies and increased costs of housing, and elevated crime and social problems.[19] We should also expect that Hispanics and Southeast Asians, upon whom the industry increasingly depends, pose linguistic and cultural challenges for educators, law enforcement officials, and social service providers in small towns and rural regions that were, until recently, predominately Anglo-American.

Meatpacking attracts the poor and the disadvantaged with its so-called good wages and absence of prerequisite job skills; however, hourly wage rates for production workers — $6.60 to start at IBP in Garden City; $7.15 in Lexington — are deceiving. Hours vary seasonally and even weekly depending on the price and supply of fat cattle, consumer demand, and profit margins. Gross annual income for line workers ranges from about $15,500 to $22,000, depending on job grade and length of employment.

Packinghouses create jobs, not just on their floors, but in support industries (such as feedyards, trucking, and box manufacturing) and in the expansion of services that accompanies growth. And it is these jobs that glitter in the eyes of long-time residents of host communities. But most such jobs are in the service sector and are characterized by low pay and part-time employment. Approximately 77% of the job openings in 1990 in and around Lexington paid under $6.00 an hour.[20] Those holding such jobs often must rely on social service agencies for supplemental food, medical care, and other basic needs. Many packinghouse workers must also rely on these agencies.

Not surprisingly, school enrollment soared. From 1980 to 1990, enrollment in the Garden City public schools jumped from 4,535 to 6,600, an increase of 46%! Even the construction of three new elementary schools and the expansion of other facilities could not keep pace with such explosive growth.[21]

Enrollments in the Lexington schools rose 15% from 1988 to 1992. Lexington's voters approved a bond issue in 1990 to renovate and expand two elementary schools, but overcrowding remains a problem. In the fall of 1991, elementary schools were at 88% capacity, the junior high at 98%, and the high school at 101% capacity.[22] Even so, in November 1993 and March 1994, voters defeated bond issues that would have expanded facilities.

In 1990, Garden City public schools had the highest dropout rate in Kansas, turnover of almost one-third each year, and chronic absenteeism. Of ninth graders in 1986, 36% dropped out by the time their class graduated four years later. Poverty is clearly a factor — 36% of the district's students qualify for the federal lunch program. It is not surprising that many students must work — two-thirds of those in high school do — one-third for more than thirty-five hours a week. Officially, packinghouses do not hire anyone under eighteen, but underage workers have been reported, and for a time, Monfort even advertised for workers in the high school newspaper. Of course, many students are over eighteen, and some work second shift from 4:00 p.m. until after midnight.[23]

Greater social disorder comes with packing plants, though the blame is not solely theirs. Violent crime and property crimes climbed throughout the 1980s in Garden City, while falling in Kansas. Crime has risen in Lexington, too. Monthly police bookings increased 63% between October 1988 and October 1991. Domestic violence and property crimes account for the largest increases.[24] Lexington's crime rate of 90.8 per 1,000 population was the highest in Nebraska in 1991, more than double the state average of 43.7 per 1000.[25] Whether these increases come from an influx of young, single males — the group with the highest crime rate — as Broadway suggests for Garden City,[26] or from locals using newcomers to mask their own increased illegal activity (as law enforcement officials in Lexington suspect) awaits detailed study.

Increased demands on service providers signal declining fortunes of newcomers and old-timers alike. Garden City's Emmaus House provides temporary shelter and hot meals for indigent transients and newcomers seeking work. It also provides food boxes and commodities for the community's poor. In 1988, it sheltered 625 people, served 69,000 meals, and gave out 3,614 holiday food boxes, a level of service two-and-a-half times greater than six years earlier.[27]

Modeled after Emmaus House, Haven House provides a bed and two warm meals a day for new arrivals to Lexington. Many newcomers spend their first nights there. After securing permanent housing, they may send for their wives and families. A total of 834 adults and ninety-three children stayed at least one night from its opening in January 1991 until July 1992. Eighty-four percent of guests have been males; 65% Hispanic. The number of guests has steadily increased from thirty-seven adults per month in the winter of 1991 to fifty-eight adults per month by the summer of 1992.

Packers exacerbate existing socioeconomic problems, and they place ever greater demands on community institutions by extracting concessions, such as tax abatements, that strain the local economy.

Affordable housing is always a problem for communities experiencing rapid growth. Most line workers live, initially at least, in mobile home parks on the outskirts of town. One-tenth of Garden City's population resides in one trailer park alone, a park built specifically — and reluctantly — to house IBP's expanding work force.

The costs of economic expansion through meatpacking are also paid in declining levels of worker health and a growing crisis in access to care. Meatpacking is America's most dangerous industry. In 1990, the annual injury and illness rate was 42.4 per 100 full-time workers, 9% higher than a decade earlier and three times greater than the overall manufacturing average.[28] Line workers face occupational hazards and, along with their families, limited access to care. They are not alone. In Finney County, the ratio of physicians to population has fallen sharply. In 1988, Finney County had one physician for every 858 persons, but by 1993, this ratio had fallen to only one physician for every 1,897 persons. Access to care is even more remote for persons with low incomes since most physicians do not serve them: of Garden City's 15.8 full-time equivalent (FTE) primary care physicians, only one physician's practice is devoted exclusively to serving the medically indigent, and only 2.96 FTE is available for persons at or below 200% of the poverty level.[29] Regardless of ability to pay, access to health care is increasingly remote in Garden City.

Is it Worth it?

Three years after IBP opened in Lexington, and thirteen years after it did so in Garden City, rapid growth, increased ethnic diversity, population mobility, and expanded demands on health and social services are endemic. Packers exacerbate existing socioeconomic problems, and they place ever greater demands on community institutions by extracting concessions, such as tax abatements, that strain the local economy. They do little or nothing to help alleviate overcrowding and increased turnover in the schools, greater demands on social service agencies, rising crime, and declining levels of health, problems for which they share much of the blame. But they do bring jobs. And jobs are in short supply.

On September 10, 1993, John Morrell & Co., the centenarian Cincinnati meatpacking firm, announced it would shut down its Sioux City, Iowa, pork plant the following December, putting 1,300 out of work. Only the year before, it had abandoned beefpacking when it closed its Sioux Falls, South Dakota, facility, and erased 400 jobs. Following the September 10 announcement, Sioux City officials, the governor's office, and the UFCW worked "heroically" to keep the plant open. On December 1, 1993, with just nine days to spare, Morrell canceled plans to close the Sioux City plant. In exchange for operating the plant for three more years, Morrell received a combination of state and local incentives and a new five-year labor agreement with the union. Although the total value of the package is not known, the city's portion alone is worth $1.3 million.[30]

Even as Sioux City, and the rest of Iowa, celebrated Morrell's change of heart, UFCW Local 1149 was soundly rejecting IBP's proposed four-year wage freeze at the Perry, Iowa, pork plant.[31] Less than two weeks later, IBP purchased a Wilson Foods pork plant in Logansport, Indiana, promising to invest $22 million in renovation and expansion and hire 1,700 employees. Three million dollars of public funds helped to attract the company.[32] The following month, IBP announced that it would close its Perry pork plant in April 1994, putting 800 people out of work. The reasons IBP gave for closing the plant, which it had purchased from Oscar Mayer and reopened in 1989, were failure to reach a contract agreement with the UFCW, high utility costs, a proposed city annexation of the plant, and conflicts with federal inspectors that reduced plant efficiency. Industry observers see Iowa's excess hog-slaughter capacity as the major factor in IBP's decision, however. Nevertheless, the governor, and city, state, and union officials immediately began exploring ways to keep the plant open.[33]

Until forced to change, meatpacking giants such as IBP will exact the cost of the economic development they bring to job-hungry communities on the backs of imported and expendable workers. Economic development based on meatpacking will be paid for with increased socioeconomic problems and ever greater demands on beleaguered community institutions. The people of Guymon, Oklahoma, and other communities seeking economic salvation in such development had best look to places like Garden City and Lexington and ask themselves: "Is it worth it?" All of them should keep a watchful eye on Perry and Sioux City. It is in these communities where we are finding out just how high is the price.

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