

# The New Pioneers

*Rural America is hemorrhaging its native population, clearing the way for newcomers who see in its wide open spaces and plentiful menial jobs a land of opportunity. And small-town life is changing forever.*

BY STEPHEN G. BLOOM

THE INSULATED WORLD OF NEW YORK MOVERS and shakers ends abruptly at the Hudson River. For Washington power brokers, that border is just outside the beltway. For California pop-culture *machers*, America ends at the Golden State Freeway. What's in between—roughly 2,900 miles—is flyover country: jigsaw-puzzle pieces scattered with thousands of dots that make news only when rivers overflow, twisters spin out of control, or shy Iowa seamstresses deliver septuplets.

Much of what our nation's coastal elites might think characterizes small-town rural America is true: Friday fish fries at the American Legion hall, shopping at Wal-Mart, Christmas crèches with live donkeys, camouflage-clad hunters stalking turkeys in the fall. You can tell who is driving past just by the familiar sound of the vehicle. The reason everyone seems related is because, if you go back far enough, many are, by either marriage or birth. In Iowa,

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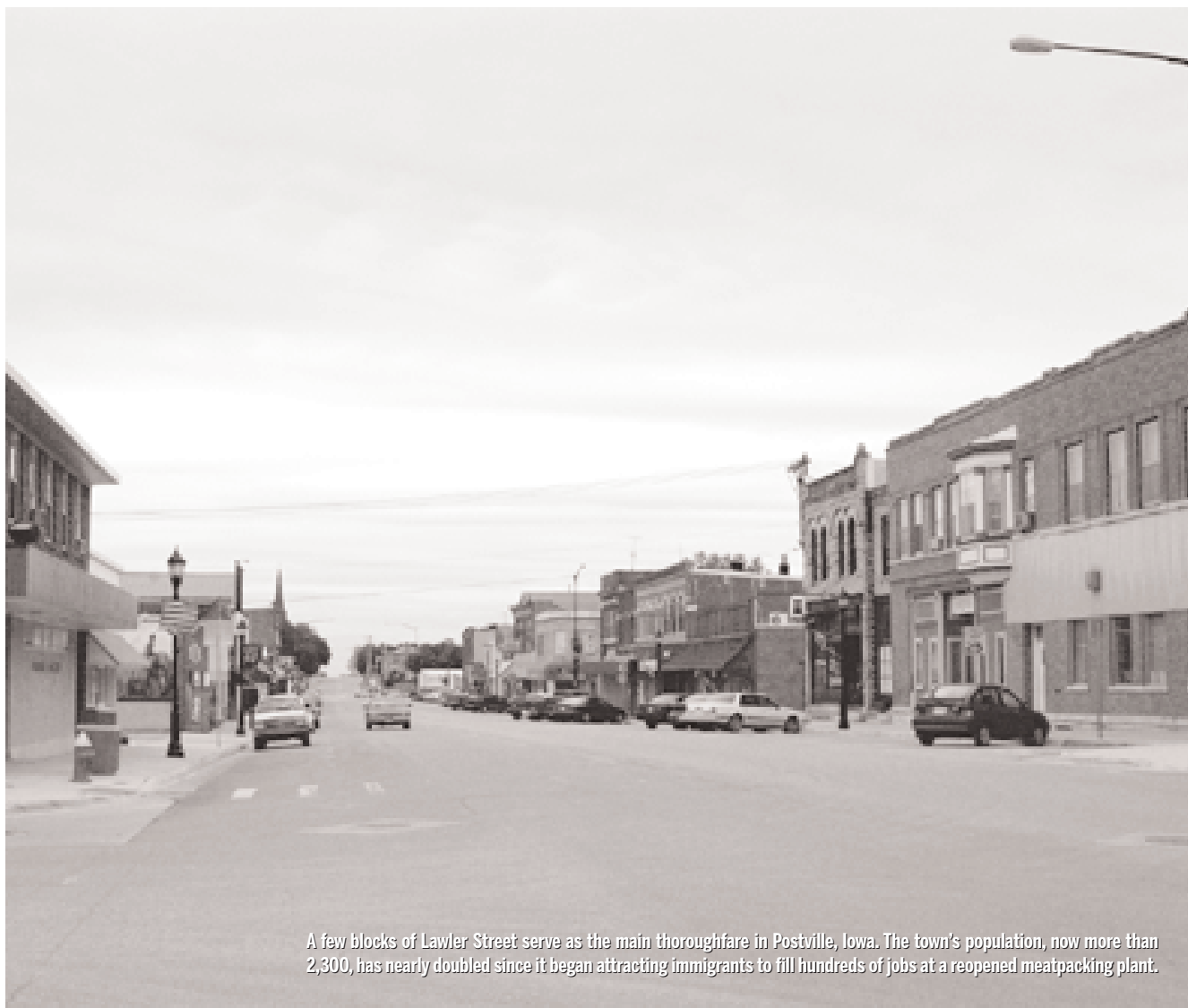
where I live, names like Yoder, Snitker, Schroeder, and Slabach are as common as Garcia, Lee, Romero, and Chen are in big cities.

Rural America has always been homogenous, as white as the milk the millions of Holstein cows here produce. Many towns are so insular that farmers from another *county* are outsiders. Historically, at least after 1920, whether because it was too hard to get to, too uninviting, or too short on opportunity, few newcomers chose to knock on rural America's door.

Until now.

Four states—California, Texas, New York, and Florida—get two-thirds of the nation's immigrants. But for many immigrants these states serve only as ports of entry; once inside the United States they move north, east, and west, converging in rural America in waves of secondary





A few blocks of Lawler Street serve as the main thoroughfare in Postville, Iowa. The town's population, now more than 2,300, has nearly doubled since it began attracting immigrants to fill hundreds of jobs at a reopened meatpacking plant.

migration. Other newcomers head directly inland, altogether bypassing coastal cities. However the immigrants get here, rural America, which makes up 75 percent of the landmass of the United States, is up for grabs as tens of thousands of pioneers, almost all Hispanic, arrive each month.

While the countryside is changing fast, these newcomers arrive in a place where homes still sell for \$40,000, a serious crime is toilet-papering a high schooler's front yard, the only smog comes from a late-autumn bonfire, and getting stuck in traffic means being trapped behind a John Deere tractor on Main Street. But immigrants don't flock here for the quality of life. They come for one

reason: jobs. They are taking the places of the old who are dying, the young who are leaving, and the locals who refuse to take the low-paying, menial jobs that abound. In doing so, they are shaping rural America's future.

That future hinges on simple demographics. Iowa, in the heart of the heartland, is home to the highest percentage of people over 85, the second-highest percentage over 75, and the third-highest percentage over 65. Iowa's greatest export isn't corn, soybeans, or pigs; it's young adults. Many born in rural Iowa towns grow up well educated, products of the state's land-grant universities and an abiding familial interest in education. (Iowa has more high school diplomas per capita than any other state.) The

only state that loses a higher percentage of college-educated youth is North Dakota.

At the University of Iowa, where I teach, 60 percent of graduates each year choose to leave the state. With diplomas in hand, few want much to do with farming or living in a state where the nearest movie theater might be a 30-mile drive and the first freestanding Starbucks store opened just two years ago. From 1980 to 1990, all but seven of Iowa's 99 counties lost population. School districts consolidated or closed. If any state needed an influx of new residents, it was Iowa.

And that's what it got, starting in the mid-1990s. Almost all the newcomers were Hispanic immigrants, some legal, most illegal. Between 1990 and 2000 Iowa's population grew by 5.4 percent, to 2.9 million. Two-thirds of that growth was due to immigrants, mostly Latinos and

larly at many rural meatpacking houses, and the high turnover results in a revolving work force of inexperienced employees prone to accidents.

The journey to this jobs mecca is not without its own perils. Many Americans got a glimpse of those dangers in October 2002, when 11 smuggled Mexican immigrants were found dead inside a sealed Union Pacific grain hopper railcar in the Iowa meatpacking town of Denison, 130 miles west of Des Moines, that had originated in the border city of Matamoros, Mexico. Other popular Iowa destinations for slaughterhouse workers include Marshalltown (home to one of the largest pork-processing plants in the world, with 1,600 production jobs), Postville (home to the world's largest kosher slaughterhouse), Columbus Junction, Cherokee, Waterloo, West Liberty, Storm Lake, Sioux City, Sioux Center, Hartley, Tama, and Perry.

Once immigrants arrive, securing work is relatively easy. Just showing up at the employment window with a Social Security card, which can be purchased for as little as \$100, is usually all that's required. So many undocumented immigrants have converged on rural slaughterhouses that, even if there were a mandate to enforce employment laws, the immigration authorities

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couldn't begin to do so. The dirty secret in rural states about undocumented workers is that, politicians' and industry leaders' comments to the contrary, it is very much in their best interest to keep things the way they are. Without undocumented workers, the U.S. meat-processing industry would grind to a halt.

For more than a century, slaughterhouses were located in cities. Chicago rose to prominence because of its famed cattle-processing industry. The city's Union Stock Yards opened in 1865 and eventually grew to 475 acres of slaughterhouses. Today, only one slaughterhouse remains in Chicago. Industry leaders realized decades ago that it made more economic sense to bring meatpacking plants to corn-fed livestock than to truck livestock to far-off slaughterhouses in expensive cities with strong unions. Refrigeration allowed for processed meat to be trucked

mostly from Mexico. By 2000, Iowa's Hispanic population had grown 153 percent. The 2000 census counted 82,500 Hispanics in Iowa, but many say today that there are upwards of 150,000 here. By 2030, half of Iowa's population of three million is expected to belong to minority groups. By far the greatest number will be Hispanics working in low-level jobs.

Entry-level work for these newcomers is plentiful, usually as kill-floor employees at slaughterhouses, where workers don't need to know a word of English. The only requirements are a strong stomach and a strong back. It's no wonder locals spurn dangerous work as knockers, stickers, bleeders, tail rippers, flankers, gutters, sawers, and plate boners, toiling on what amounts to a "disassembly line." Turnover in these grueling jobs often exceeds 100 percent annually. Safety instruction is minimal, particu-

lary at many rural meatpacking houses, and the high turnover results in a revolving work force of inexperienced employees prone to accidents.



Phone and fax services for Hispanic immigrants eager to stay in touch with friends and family back home are among the offerings at El Vaquero, a store opened three years ago by Mexican-born Gustavo Moncado in Postville, Iowa. As he and son Luis mind the store, the television shows a World Cup match.

without spoilage. At the same time, the industry became highly mechanized. Innovations such as air- and electric-powered knives made skilled butchers unnecessary. Larger plants in rural outposts became more profitable than small urban slaughterhouses.

Wages for union meat-production workers peaked in 1980 at \$19 an hour, not including benefits. Today at many slaughterhouses, located in isolated pockets of America, starting pay is often not much more than minimum wage, with few or no benefits. At Postville's meat-packing plant, pay starts at \$6.25 an hour. Health insurance is available to workers and their families at about \$50 a week, but few can afford such a hefty deduction, and many immigrant workers aren't familiar with the concept of health insurance plans. Some don't believe they'll need the coverage, some think there must be a catch to it, and some figure they'll be fired or deported if injured.

Today, 90 percent of all packinghouses employ more than 400 workers. The meat and poultry we eat are processed in plants owned by large corporations such as Tyson Foods, Cargill Meat Solutions, Swift & Company, and Smithfield Foods, located for the most part in America's small towns. The rural states of Nebraska and Kansas rank first and second in beef processing. The world's largest turkey plant, Smithfield-owned Carolina Turkey, processes 80,000 turkeys a day and is located in the unincorporated eastern North Carolina community of Mount Olive (population 3,957).

**M**uch has been written about the proliferation of fast-food restaurants and Wal-Mart stores in the rural United States, where, if immigrants can procure documents, they often find work. But

little has been noted about another industry that increasingly serves as a job magnet for newcomers: legalized casino gambling, with its insatiable appetite for low-wage restaurant and service workers, laborers, maids, and janitors. Iowa, in particular, has become fixated on casino gambling, which has led many to call the Hawkeye State the “Nevada of the Midwest.” Since Iowa legalized gambling on licensed excursion boats on the Mississippi River in 1989, no fewer than 17 casinos have opened in the state. Since its enactment, the law has been modified to allow gambling on licensed stationary riverboats, then in licensed casinos located on or adjacent to a body of water. Several casinos in Iowa today are miles from any river or lake, but are built on elaborate underground bladder systems to comply with the law. And more are on the way. Casinos opened in the rural towns of Northwood and Emmetsburg this past spring, another is scheduled to open in rural Riverside in September, and a fourth will open next spring in Waterloo (population 66,767). The casino industry makes peculiarly efficient use of the immigrant work force, targeting non-English-speakers as both low-wage workers and gamblers, in a new spin on the old company store. Immigrant workers return much of their wages by gambling in the same casinos that employ them. When all four new Iowa casinos are in operation, they will employ as many as 2,000 low-income workers, and that doesn’t include those in building trades needed to construct these gambling palaces.

Once they arrive for such jobs, learning local Midwestern culture is nearly impossible for most outsiders. In Iowa, county fairs, Future Farmers of America, regional dialect, knowing everyone *and* their parents, and foods such as seven-layer salad, Tater Tot casseroles, loose-meat sandwiches, Red Waldorf cake, and Lit’l Smokies (the state’s ubiquitous appetizers) are elements that bind natives together. Half of Iowa’s 952 incorporated towns have fewer than 500 residents, and two-thirds of the state’s towns have fewer than 1,000. The typical Iowa high school has so few seniors that there is a tradition of ordering T-shirts printed with the name of each member of the graduating class.

Some newly arrived immigrants do what they can to integrate with their rural neighbors and start the process of becoming Americanized; most, though, do not. There’s no need to try to fit in. In Marshalltown,

Iowa, for example, one-quarter of the slaughterhouse production employees, about 450, come from the Mexican town of Villachuato in the state of Michoacán. These workers, mostly men, travel frequently between Villachuato and Marshalltown, but few become permanent residents of Iowa. In a sense, they are commuters—working to earn money in Iowa, saving and sending it back home to Mexico, then returning to their families for months at a time. While here, they live and work together, forming a tight-knit Mexican enclave.

Postville, Iowa, has become a classic boomtown. In 1986, Aaron Rubashkin, a Hasidic butcher from Brooklyn, New York, bought a defunct slaughterhouse in Postville, installed his sons as managers, and soon started killing the rich, corn-fed Iowa beef. The meatpacking plant, AgriProcessors, ultimately became the largest kosher slaughterhouse in the world. As more and more Hasidim moved to town, tiny Postville became home to the most rabbis per capita of any municipality outside Jerusalem (meat must be certified by a rabbi to be labeled kosher). Hasidic Jews belong to one of 40 or so ultra-Orthodox sects; Rubashkin, his sons, and many who settled in Postville are members of one of the largest, Lubavitch. The kosher slaughterhouse in Postville operates six days a week, except for the Jewish Sabbath and holidays, and has a seemingly never-ending need to fill its 800 jobs. As many as 90 percent of its workers are Hispanic. In 1990, the town’s population was stagnant at 1,472. By 2000, Postville had grown 64 percent, to 2,273, and today its population is 2,352. Unofficial estimates place the population closer to 2,600, about one-quarter Hispanic.

When I started reporting on Postville in the mid-1990s, the kosher slaughterhouse owners flatly told me they preferred to hire Eastern Europeans over Hispanics. Most workers on the kill floor then were neither Jews nor locals, but Russians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Bosnians, and Poles. Many lived in trailer courts on the outskirts of town or in small apartments downtown that five or six men rented together. Some would hang out at the Club 51 tavern on Lawler Street, which cashed workers’ paychecks. When I walked

into Club 51 one Friday evening, the cigarette smoke was so dense that I couldn't see from one end of the bar to the other. Weary Russian and Ukrainian men, chatting in their native tongues, stopped in for quick shots of vodka. At Spice-N-Ice Liquors down the block, there was an astonishing array of vodka for sale: 24 brands and types from Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. I felt I wasn't in rural America at all, but in a working-class Eastern European neighborhood after the factory whistle had blown.

Today, Eastern Europeans by and large have stopped coming to Postville. The slaughterhouse jobs are too menial and the pay too low. Most of these workers have begun the process of mainstreaming into larger cities in the state—Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Dubuque. At Spice-N-Ice, the vodka has given way to Mexican beers and tequilas, but the store's owner says most Mexicans he sees prefer American products such as Budweiser beer and Black Velvet whiskey.

Like the Mexicans from Villachuato who have emigrated to Marshalltown, many of the slaughterhouse workers in Postville come from a single Mexican village, in this case El Barril, a town of 2,300 in the state of San Luis Potosí, 300 miles north of Mexico City. Postville also has become a destination for scores of Guatemalans, who, unlike Mexican workers, often bring their families and show little intention of moving back to their native country.

Like many onetime immigrant communities, from New York's Lower East Side to Los Angeles' Boyle Heights, the areas of Postville that once belonged to locals, and later to Eastern Europeans, now have given way to Latino immigrants. Newcomers who don't live in trailers or storefront apartments in town find their way to a complex of newly built but already deteriorating duplexes and apartment buildings north of town. At least 225 workers—about a third Guatemalans and two-thirds Mexicans—live in the complex. A sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment rents for about \$400 a month, says one of the land-

lords, Kermit Miller. A Pentecostal church is scheduled to be built within the complex in the next six months. (About half of Postville's Guatemalans are Pentecostals, who for now meet in the basement of the Presbyterian church for services.)

Many Hispanics gather at the two Mexican restaurants in town, Sabor Latino and Red Rooster (which serves Tex-Mex food). On Saturdays, when Agri-Processors shuts down, the coin-operated Laundromat in town, Family Laundry, is a busy place. There's also a new Mexican clothing store, El Vaquero (the Cowboy), which sells sombreros, Mexican-style baby clothes and dresses (particularly for baptisms and *quinceañeras*), shirts, and Mexican flags. Every night, scores of Mexican men play soccer in an open field at the edge of town.

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Attempts to Americanize Hispanic immigrants generally begin in school programs designed to teach English to children of workers who do bring their families. This approach has produced mixed results. In Postville, the influx of immigrants has spurred a white flight of Anglo students to outlying school districts. Superintendent David Strudthoff doesn't mince words when he says white parents who pull their children out of the school district are engaging in "ethnic cleansing." To prevent the student body's ethnic makeup from becoming more lopsided, Postville created a desegregation plan in 2003 that allows two Anglo students to transfer out of the district only if one new immigrant student matriculates.

Immigration is a double-edged sword in small towns such as Postville. This fall, the Postville Community School District will receive \$5,141 per year per Anglo student, which comes from property taxes and state education coffers. But for each immigrant student, the state will chip in an additional appropri-

ation that goes toward hiring teachers to provide English-language instruction, bringing the total to \$6,272. For Hasidic families in Postville who send their children to the yeshiva in town, the school district will realize \$3,084 per student. More than a third of the 578 students currently enrolled in Postville's public schools are immigrant children. The proportion of immigrants is 14 percent in high school and 29 percent in middle school. In the town's elementary school, it jumps to 55 percent.

In an era when rural schools are consolidating because of dwindling enrollments, Postville school numbers are strong. Since 1999 the district has received grants of more than \$2 million from government agen-

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cies earmarked for a variety of purposes, but, says Strudthoff, all are based on the increased number of immigrant children attending Postville schools. The latest grant requires a dual-track language program. Starting in the fall, all Postville kindergarten students will receive mandatory half-day immersion instruction in both Spanish and English, and Spanish-language training will be required for all students in each subsequent grade level through high school.

For the most part, rural American towns have always been self-contained extended families, with just about every resident white and Christian. For many Iowans, shared faith is the litmus test for acceptance. Since many Hispanic immigrants are Catholic, religion is one area where relatively little assimilation would appear necessary. Most natives in this part of Iowa are Lutherans, but many towns have a Catholic church as well. In part to attract this younger, emerging constituency, several years ago the priest at St. Bridget's Church, Paul Ouderkirk, decided to cele-

brate Mass once a week in Spanish.

More than a few local parishioners retaliated by taking their prayers 10 miles down Highway 18 to St. Patrick's Church in Monona, where Mass is strictly an English-language affair. "A small group told me that the migrants were stealing our Mass," Father Ouderkirk told me recently. "They said their ancestors built the church, and because of that, they deserved all Masses to be in their language." Another group of Anglo parishioners took a different tack, said Ouderkirk. "They said that if I continued with Mass in Spanish, I'd be catering to the Hispanics, and they'd never move away." Ouderkirk is now retired, but he returns to Postville to celebrate one Spanish Mass a week.

Postville is still the kind of community where parents drop their kids off at the municipal pool on Wilson Street to swim all day long without worry. Everyone's phone number still starts with the same 864 prefix. But the insulated nature of the town is changing. Residents lock

their doors now—both front and back. Crime isn't rampant, but it's more common than it was 10 years ago, when on a summer night residents would leave their car engines running while they popped into Casey's convenience store on Tilden for a cherry ICEE.

A large number of single Hispanic men in their twenties live in Postville with little to do but work, sleep, and hang out. As in other meatpacking communities, few have high school educations. They belong to the demographic group with the highest incidence of criminal activities, write rural anthropologists Michael J. Broadway and Donald D. Stull.

Since 2000, there have been one murder and three attempted murders involving Postville immigrants. Drugs are a reminder of the influx of newcomers. Authorities suspect that the Mississippi River town of Prairie Du Chien, 26 miles away, is a hub for drug trafficking. In June, Postville police and the Clayton County sheriff's office were instrumental in a bust in Rockford, Illinois, that yielded 625 pounds of mari-



**Hasidic Jews are a common sight on the once-homogenous streets of Postville, which has become home to the most rabbis per capita outside of Jerusalem. A member of an ultra-orthodox Hasidic Jewish sect operates the world's largest kosher slaughterhouse there, which has altered life in the tiny town.**

juana. Drunk-driving arrests in Postville went from two in 1992 to 36 last year. Domestic trouble calls to the police in 1992 totaled 32; last year there were triple that number.

**I**n every community, cultural norms are tested when newcomers arrive. When five local high school boys gather on a Postville street corner on a Saturday night and wave at a local girl driving her dad's pickup, that's OK. In fact, it's what everyone expects. But when five Hispanic guys on a corner whistle at the same girl? This can stretch community tolerance, leading to talk of Hispanic gangs, not to mention the endangered virginity of heartland daughters.

Politicians have exploited such fears with varying degrees of success. Steve King, a Republican congressman from the western quadrant of the state, blames

immigrants for many of Iowa's ills, employing some fairly vitriolic rhetoric. "Thousands of Americans die at the hands of illegal aliens every year," one of King's press releases reads. "Every murder, every rape, every violent gang crime committed against Americans by illegal aliens is an utterly preventable crime." King is riding a crest of conservative anti-immigrant support in Iowa. A bill now pending in the Iowa legislature would prevent banks from awarding home mortgages to illegal immigrants. The state supreme court ruled in 2005 that undocumented persons are not eligible for driver's licenses. The net impact is that many undocumented workers drive illegally, with no insurance.

In Postville, some members of the city council appear frustrated by the indelible impact of newcomers. First the Hasidim came to town and reopened the long-defunct slaughterhouse and made it hum, and now Hispanics have converged on Postville to work there. In



May, the *Postville Herald-Leader* published this letter to the editor, written by a council member:

A diversity of values is at the core of what some want to call racist or bigots or anti-Semite. One group wants to isolate itself, by dressing a little differently, keeping their children out of our public schools and wanting a different day for the Sabbath. They generally will not eat in other establishments. Another group here sends money back to other foreign countries and brings with it a lack of respect for our laws and culture which contribute to unwed mothers, trash in the streets, unpaid bills, drugs, forgery, and other crimes. We also have savvy employers that hire people at the lowest possible rates to obtain the greatest value to their company, which in turn contributes to overcrowded housing and increased use of public services and lowers the standard of living.

The following week, the newspaper published several responses, including one signed by 13 community leaders, repudiating the letter.

In a community that awards a yard-of-the-month certificate, many locals are irritated by how messy they perceive the newcomers—Hispanic and Hasidic—to be. Lawns are often not mowed and garbage sometimes is strewn in front yards. Some immigrants don't hang curtains over their windows. Dilapidated cars are parked on some front lawns. Lowriders with the bass turned up rattle windows. Parties, often thrown by Hispanics, are so loud that the council last year authorized the purchase of a decibel reader so police could issue citations.

Unless something wholly unexpected happens, more and more immigrants will stream into rural America. Some will return home after a few months and never come back; others will be itinerant workers, coming and going, in constant flux; many will stay and become part of the evolving social fabric of the rural United States. A separate group, already Americanized, will not arrive directly from their homelands, but from crowded coastal cities, seeking middle-class opportunities—buying up property and starting businesses. Other newcomers, like the Hasidim in Postville, will be members of cohesive religious groups that move to rural America because of afford-

able land and a longing for isolation.

“Pioneers go places civilized people shun,” writes Iowa historian Michael J. Bell. “And they tend to go there, wherever ‘there’ is, because the one thing they can be sure of is that civilization is not there waiting to tell them how things ought to be done.” That’s why disciples of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi incorporated a community in 2001 near Fairfield, Iowa, 200 miles south of Postville, and called it Vedic City, where more than 150 homes, topped with small gold-colored vessels, face east, and community-wide meditation sessions take place twice a day. It’s why more than 125 families belonging to a cult called the Old Believers—which in dress and custom attempts to mimic life in 17th-century Russia—settled in rural Erskine, Minnesota, in 1998. And it’s why Mennonites have moved into the north-central Iowa town of Riceville, buying up local businesses and starting their own school.

The common thread running through slaughterhouse boomtowns, casino outposts, and revivalist communities is opportunity—whether rooted in economics or in faith. The stories of these small towns are parables of change in rural America, where unplanned and uncontrolled social experiments are taking place. This aging, long-neglected region is being defined anew by a pioneer mentality sustained by young blood and vitality. Power is seldom relinquished easily, and many of these rural towns are, or will be, battlegrounds for acrimonious power struggles.

People in rural America have gotten along just fine for more than 150 years. But times have changed. The only way the natives of these insular communities will gain traction as their own numbers continue to dwindle is to forge power alliances with newcomers. How successfully thousands of rural towns enfold newcomers into a workable social structure foreshadows how the greater American society will be able to incorporate larger and larger blocs of new Americans who increasingly demand to be defined on their own terms.

Immigrants by nature are pioneers—as American as Huck Finn, who reckoned he had “to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest.” That’s what immigrants do. A sense of purpose and adventure pushes them to seek their futures in unfamiliar and distant places, while others back home, perhaps more timid, choose to stay put. It is in getting to such faraway places, often in tiny rural towns, and staking their claim, that these new pioneers are forever changing the rules of America—and of becoming American. ■