Community Voices:
Postville Oral History Project

Interview with
Barbara Herzmann

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Luana, Iowa

Interview Conducted by RaeAnn Swanson-Evans
Interview Transcribed by RaeAnn Swanson-Evans

Interviews conducted as a joint project with The Postville Project
Interview Description

Barbara Herzmann and her husband bought a farm near Postville in 1972, and she has lived there ever since. She worked at the Postville elementary school for 27 years before retiring in 2012. In the interview, Barbara discusses the changes in Postville and especially within the school as students from Russia, Ukraine, Mexico, Guatemala, and many other countries came to rural Iowa. The day of the May 12th, 2008 ICE raid, Barbara was teaching third grade and shares emails and recollections of the events that occurred over the next couple days. She also offers insight into how she came to understand the sacrifices and struggles of undocumented immigrants. Before the raid, Barbara, along with some other teachers, were able to take a tour of Agriprocessors and she shared that experience in the interview as well. Finally, Barbara closes the interview with her hopes for the future of Postville.

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RaeAnn Swanson: Could you tell me a little about yourself?

Barbara Herzmann: I am a retired teacher, I taught thirty years at Postville. I retired two years ago. I have two sons, I have two grandchildren and one grandchild on the way. I taught second grade and third grade at Postville.

Have you always lived in Postville?

I live on a farm six miles south of Luana, my husband and I got married in 1972 and bought the farm and moved here then. I was born and raised by Edgewood, Iowa which is just south of here. I graduated from Ed-Co High School and then graduated from Wartburg College with a degree in Elementary Education.

What was the area like when you came?

There were a lot more farms, especially more dairy farms. Postville had two major industries. The Hy-Grade packing plant which later closed and the Iowa Turkey Products plant. When I first taught at Postville most of the parents were farmers with some who were workers in plants and other places in Postville.

Can you describe to me what the area is like now?

We have fewer farmers, the farms that are here are larger. We have especially fewer dairy farmers. Small towns in this area are struggling to keep population. The schools in the area
have declining enrollments. Postville is unique, they are one of the schools that has increasing enrollment.

*What was it like to be a teacher in Postville?*

I think it was always a respected profession. When I first started teaching there, the churches in Postville would get together and have a welcome potluck. Harley and Valetta Radloff were our hosts, picked us up, took us up to the meal and brought us back again. I always felt welcome in Postville, I always felt that I belonged there. So teaching there was a positive thing for me. It was kind of rare here in the rural area where I live, there were not a lot of women who worked off the farm. I got a little negative feedback mainly in the form of teasing from some of the men in the neighborhood. My husband got a little bit of teasing from them saying *must be nice having a wife that is a rich teacher* which of course was never true. My income helped us, we bought this farm with a farm loan, so my income helped pay for this farm. My husband was always positive about me working. He passed away in November of 2010, but he was always very supportive of the fact that I was teaching. The joke with us was that every three years I would get a new car. He always said to me *you’re earning the money, you can spend it. Plus I want you to have a good vehicle for driving back and forth to work every day.* I was the first, well I have one younger brother, but among my cousins and in both sides of my family there were only about two [5:00] people that had graduated from college. My mother, especially, was very proud of the fact that I was working. She worked off the farm part time as I was growing up doing income tax, working for a lawyer in Edgewood. So I grew up with the idea that women worked off the farm. She worked very hard on the farm also, but then in the winter she would go off to this other job. I realize now
what she was doing, she was bringing in an income. So I grew up with that [idea] that was no big deal that women worked off the farm.

*How have you seen the Postville School change over the years?*

The diversity. Our first student, our first foreign student, was from Russia or Ukraine, I am not sure which. [She was] a little kindergarten girl named Julia. My room was just down the hall, and I remember many days that the aide would just have to take her out of the classroom because she just cried and cried and cried. They searched for and finally found a woman who spoke some Russian to help the little girl. In my memory, our next foreign students were from Mexico. At one time we only had five. The school hired an aid, Lucy Healey, who was originally from Cuba, she was an aide that helped those girls. I remember my first student, Blanca, a non-English speaking student. One morning I had a knock on the door and it was the principal. He brought in this little girl with her parents said *this is Blanca, she’s in your classroom.* He took the parents and left, and there I was. I had very little preparation. My high school and college French did me no good at all. So my humorous story about Blanca is, I was teaching second grade then. Second grade morning routine, one of things we did was take milk count, so you ask the students who would like milk in the afternoon and counted them and put that up on the board. Then later that afternoon, after recess the milk helpers would go get milk. So I am asking all my students if they’d like milk this afternoon, and I looked at Blanca and I am trying to think how to ask her if she would like milk. Of course, my brain didn’t know any Spanish. I went searching and I found the word *leche,* and I looked at her and said *Leche?* She just gave me the strangest expression and did not answer me. First recess one of my little girls volunteered to take Blanca with her to go outside to play. All of a sudden, I thought to myself *Leche, that is*
the name of a breastfeeding support group, did I just ask this little girl if she wanted to breastfeed? So at the recess I went running to Lucy Healey the aide and just said oh, I think I did something totally stupid, did I ask her to breastfeed? Lucy got a good chuckle out of it and said no, I don’t know where you came [up] with that, but you were right that is the word for milk. I just kind of stumbled along the best I could. I partnered her up with other kids. I had some picture books, I would give her picture books to look at. As she got more comfortable she herself had a notebook and she would write in that notebook. I had gone shopping and found a Spanish-English picture dictionary. Blanca would sit there and copy out of there and she would write it in her notebook. She would write the English word and she would write the Spanish word. She was just very driven to learn. That was my first experience. So our first Spanish speaking students were from Mexico. We started getting students from Eastern European countries. [10:00] We were getting students from countries that I didn’t know the names of. World geography was never my strong suit, but boy oh boy I was using the atlas a lot. I found an article from the fall of 2007 written by the University of Iowa. They had brought teachers, professors in May of 2007 to visit our classroom. They had talked to our Superintendent David Strudthoff. In May of 2007 there were 500 students in our school kindergarten to 12th grade. 225 of them were Hispanic and 50 of them were from Eastern Europe. After the students from Eastern Europe then we started getting students from Guatemala. At the time of the raid in 2008, I had 24 students in my classroom, 15 of the 24 were from Mexico or Guatemala or were bi-racial, one student was from Ukraine. That was the biggest change in the school adapting to diversity.
What sort of help did the school get from its administration or from the AEA to deal with the diversity?

We were kind of on our own. In Iowa the Area Education Agency provides a lot of support, they provide a lending library for books, for VCR for Video tapes to use with the students, they provide Special Ed consulting services and other kinds of consulting services. They didn't quite know what to do with us. We were the only school in this AEA 1 dealing with this much diversity and they were just at a loss of what to do with us. Finally there were two members, Becky Kimberly Barry and Gary Halva who made a real point of educating themselves. Whenever they would go to conferences they were always on the lookout for ideas. They started talking to other people in Iowa who had already dealt with this, Marshalltown, Tama, Toledo, of course Des Moines, the Quad Cities, Dubuque was starting to diversify. They were a help to us. For a lot of things, it seemed to me we were just kind of stumbling along on our own.

By the time of the raid the Department of Education in Iowa had a program called Our Kids. Every summer for four days they brought together teachers from across the state in schools with diversity and a large group of us teachers would always go to those. I think we went three summers, and wow did we learn. Of course the speakers were always great, but we caught on right away, find the teachers especially the ones Marshalltown, Tama, and Toledo because they had packing plants like we did. We would just pick the brains of those teachers. I know some of us took an online class about diversity. I know that we had our Spanish teacher in High School and the school had hired a Spanish teacher in the elementary. She offered some night school classes in Spanish so we would take those. I am proud of our faculty. We supported each other, we did the best that we could, always with the best of intentions. We just adapted year by year.
by year, constantly sharing whatever information [15:00] we could get. I know every time I went to Barnes and Noble I went straight to the section to try to find Bilingual. Its a big deal in schools, we have Weekly Reader, as a child I remember Weekly Reader, its a weekly news magazine that comes in. I finally could get that bilingual, I could get it in Spanish. I bought that with my own money so I could have that in my classroom. Book orders, Scholastic still is the big company that sells children’s books. Every other month or so I would do a book order and we always had flyers to give to kids if they would like to buy books, but they started offering books in Spanish and also bilingual, plus along with that they had books on tape in Spanish. With my own money, I would buy what I could. I knew that these kids who spoke Spanish who were dropped into my classroom and heard me, I speak fast anyway, how long could they sit there and absorb English? I caught on, they just needed time to take a headphone and a tape and go sit and listen to Spanish. So I utilized that quite a bit. We just would search any place and anyway we could to bring in resources for those kids. The school started adapting, we started hiring English as a Second Language teachers, we also had a teacher who came in and taught all the kids Spanish. The school had a goal of us being a bilingual school. For awhile, we started it, we had kindergarten and first grade where the kids were taught half a day in English and half a day in Spanish but it just became a real problem money wise and it became a real problem to find teachers. So I think that program has been dropped now, but that had been our goal. So we did the best we could with what we had.

What sort of groups are you involved in around the Postville community?

I volunteer at the Food Pantry in Postville. Once a week people can come for food. Last week we served 63 families, sometimes its 40, 63 is quite a few for us. We’ve been serving a lot of
families lately because many of the families that come to the Food Pantry work at AgriStar, the new company since Agriprocessors went bankrupt. This has been the season in the last several weeks where there are many Jewish holidays, I know in one two-week period one gentleman told me he had six days off. So we realize their paychecks are much less, they don’t get paid if they are not working. That’s why we are seeing more people at the food pantry right now because their paychecks are smaller. I enjoy working there, I get to see some of my former students, parents of some of my former students. I worked the summer after the raid and then didn’t go back. After retirement, I really felt that I wanted to keep a connection with Postville so I go up there once a week and do that.

*How have you seen the community of Postville deal with the diversity in town?*

It’s been a challenge. We always tell the joke that before the Jewish families came, before Sholom Rubashkin came to Postville, there were many big old houses that were owned by widows. When Sholom came and bought the old Hy-Grade plant and started Agriprocessors he brought [20:00] with him many Jewish families. They were looking for places to live and here sat these big old houses. Many of them have large families, and so these houses were very appealing to them. They started renting or buying from the widows. The joke was that of course these ladies then would drive back into town to see what their houses was like and were becoming upset. The lawns weren’t being mowed, the flowers that they had left behind weren’t being taken care of. If they had left an outside barbeque grill, that had been taken down, because of kosher rules, the families could not use those barbeque grills. We had a lady who was an employee of our school as an aide, working with our Russian speaking students, her name was Raquel Mamin. She was a member of the Lubavitcher Hasidic Jewish religion. She
really stepped out of her culture to work in our school. She said to me that Sholom Rubashkin had asked her and her husband to come to Postville, and asked them to come to really work on community relations. So someone mentioned to her one day about the ladies and their houses and she said well you have to understand many of the families are coming from New York City where they never had a lawn, the children didn't have bicycles, they didn't have flowers to take care of. So she said they’re learning what it means to live in a house and have all this stuff to take care of. She did a lot with our faculty, I don’t know what she did out in the community because every night I would come home to the farm six miles away, so I wasn’t in the community, [didn’t] live in the community. She did so many good things at our school. She just had a very natural way of accepting any question you asked her and in a very nice way explaining things to us, and explaining the Jewish culture. She brought food that she cooked to share with us. She just in an everyday casual conversation would educate us about Jewish culture. One day, it was a very cold day, and we were sitting in the teacher’s lounge having lunch and she was eating her lunch.

We were complaining about the cold. She said oh I remember six years ago, I was in Ukraine, I had my two children in a stroller, and I was standing in a bread line in the bitter cold, she said, at the Synagogue, I got to the end of the bread line and the Rabbi said, I am sorry there’s no more bread, but I do have matzah. Which is a flatbread, to me like a cracker. She had a family of five children and he handed her a couple packages of matzah and that’s what she had for the week. The teacher’s lounge just went silent and we thought to ourselves oh wow we have no reason to complain. That’s what Raquel did for us. Then when Agri needed more workers they started actively recruiting in Mexico and also in Eastern Europe. At first families from the Ukraine and
then Mexico. Again we hired aides at school. In the community we had a Jewish deli and restaurant. Started a Mexican restaurant. There was a [25:00] radio station, KPVL, they started broadcasting some things in Russian and in Spanish. Seeing faces around town, people around town. At the grocery store we were starting to see some different items for sale in the grocery store. Those are the main things I remember.

**Were you here around the time of the raid?**

Yup, I was teaching in my classroom third grade that morning. I saved some emails that I sent from my classroom at the end of each day. So here is the one from Monday May 12th, 2008, [Reading] “We’re being raided, helicopters and planes are circling Postville. The sound is frightening.” [End reading] I had taken my children to the High School to a class, maybe art, I can’t remember for sure, so I didn’t have children in my classroom when I started hearing the helicopters. The next thing I heard was a woman crying out in the hallway, so I went into the hallway. It was the kindergarten teacher, she had been on recess duty. The December before she had had a heart attack and had been airlifted by helicopter to the Rochester hospital. She died and had her heart restarted several times in the helicopter. I think she was having a panic attack, but we were all afraid that she was having another heart attack. So I went out in the hall, the other teacher had brought her in. The other teacher had to go back out because the kids were at recess. I said I’ll call the nurse and I’ll stay with her. The nurse came down and checked her heart and everything and it was okay. We just were sitting and talking with her to help her calm down. When I went over to get my students from the High School I saw the High School principal and I said what's happening? and he said Agriprocessors is being raided that’s all I know. I brought my students back to the classroom. One parent
showed up at my door, well the office called and said so and so’s parent is coming down, they are taking them out of school today. I just thought it was for the day, so I didn’t send anything with him, any of his school supplies. I just thought it was for the day. Well he never came back. That family left that day and never came back. I left all of his things in his desk and could not touch it until after school was over and I knew he wasn’t coming back, then I finally cleaned out his desk. Here is an email I sent at the end of the day on May 12th, [reading] “what a day, local news sources are reporting that 300 people are being detained. We tried to keep the day as normal as possible. Chad Wahls, the principal, announced that we would keep the children inside all day, no outside recess. It was so hard to get information during the day. I went on the Internet to the KWWL TV station. I found out more online than I found out from our administrators. During the day, I had four parents stop by to pick up their children.” [End reading] That afternoon the principal came to my door and said, now at the end of the day we do not want any of the kids whose parents might be involved in the raid to go home to an empty house, so all of the Hispanic students are going to be taken over to the Fine Arts Center at the end of the day, and they will not be released to go home until there is a responsible adult to pick them up. And I looked at him and said, Hispanic? But I, who’s Hispanic? Now, [30:00] I don’t know if that was just a shocked reaction or if that was a reaction to how hard we were working in my classroom, in our school, not to label our students. But also when I look at my class list, three or four of my students who technically were Hispanic had white mothers. Chad just looked at me and said, anybody with a Hispanic last name. Okay, so that settled that. So we did at the end of the day. Those students were kept there until their parents came to pick them up.

[Reading] “Some children were still there at 4:30 pm because no one had picked them up, so
they were bused down to the Catholic Church, some sort of sanctuary was being set up there. The authorities were saying that they interviewed each detained person to make sure an adult would be at home when school let out. We are hearing that some parents were released with an ankle GPS unit and a promise to appear later in court. I have no idea what tomorrow will be like. We know some parents who were not at work during the raid are in hiding.” [End reading]

This wasn’t in the email, but this happened. During the day a fifth grade girl came and knocked on my door and said to me, I need to talk to, and she said the name of one of my little girls. I said to her I do not want you saying anything to her that will upset her, and she said, no I’m not, I have good news for her. Her father is hiding in the ceiling at Agri. He has his cell phone and he called out to my family and wants me to give the message to his daughter that he is safe. As far as I can search my memory, I think the father was one of those that hid all day and did come out at night, so he was not arrested. ICE had learned from a previous raid, I can’t remember if it was, maybe it was Marshalltown, that had happened in the previous year. They had raided that facility, swooped up everybody, men and women, and took them to Omaha and then sorted out who they were. They had left behind children who had no one at home when they went home from school that day. The press in Iowa made a big deal, rightfully so, made a big deal about that. I believe that ICE was very conscious of that and so when they raided Postville I believe they made a point of not making that mistake again. We had heard the story that some women were detained in the plant in a room which was guarded at the door. The story I heard was that the women in the room among themselves came to the agreement that some of them would probably be released to go home, some might be detained. According to the story that I heard, the women
themselves picked out a certain number, maybe six, that if someone came to door and said some of you are going to be released, those six would be pushed forward and say these are the ones that have reasons. They had an elderly parent to care for, their husband might be detained and they would be the only one home with the children. The story I heard was that these women among themselves, I don't know if this story is true, decided that. Some of those women then were released with GPS ankle bracelets. Okay, I came home that night and I said to my husband I cannot go back and my husband said you have to go back, you’re their teacher. You are the one they know, they need you. I didn’t sleep much that night, I watched the news a lot. So the next day, I went back to work. Here is the email I sent on Tuesday, May 13th, [reading] “I have nine out of 23 students gone. Of the three Hispanic children who are here, two mothers were detained and then released with a tracking bracelet. We have helicopters again today, but today it’s the news media. [35:00] Some families are staying at the Catholic Church believing that it is a sanctuary. I spent the first hour today sitting in a circle with my kids talking about any questions and rumors they have. We are trying to stick to our routine where possible. Today we are having outside recess plus our scheduled music and art.” [End reading] Okay, this is the email I sent on Wednesday. Oh, when we were sitting in a circle and talking, frankly I don’t remember the specific things that we talked about with the kids. I just remember trying to stick to facts. The families were very concerned that ICE would come back again because they only swept up workers from one shift and Agri I think was running two or three shifts. So everyone knew there were other people in town who hadn’t been swooped up by the raid. There was a constant thing in the community and a constant talk and that’s why families were at the Catholic Church. There was this constant feeling, they’ll be
back, they’ll be back. They’re driving up and down the streets looking for people. So there was a pervasive fear in the community. There were a lot of strange people driving through town. Some of it was media and some of them were just gawkers, but the community was very sensitive about who’s driving through our town and why. I know that is one of things we talked about with our children as best we could. I don’t know if ICE came back, they may have for certain people, but I don’t remember that. That was one of the things I remember we talked about. We talked, this one boy vanished, his family vanished. We talked about where did he go.

I would say well I am assuming he and his family ran, I am assuming they are safe. Some of the kids knew who was at the Catholic Church so we talked about that. Some of the women had been released with ankle bracelets. I remember talking with the kids about whose mom had been released, we talked about that. Here is my email from Wednesday May 14th, [reading] “Today four of my children who had been at the church came to school. That leaves three girls absent. I have seen two of them in photos taken at the church. No one seems to know about Myra. I think that desmoinesregister.com seems to have the fairest coverage. I’ve downloaded the search warrants from KCRG.” [End reading] Those were the warrants served at AGRI. [Reading] “Most teachers are going to the Catholic Church each day, I can’t. You know I am a sponge who soaks up pain. I did get some sleep last night. I know I have to stay healthy to do my job here at school. I did give money to the kindergarten teacher who made a trip to Walmart to buy kids underwear. There are no shower facilities at the church so the kids are taking showers here at school. The children from the church are being bused over here to school each day. Our principal told us a harrowing tale yesterday.” [End reading] So our principal Chad Wahls and his father Ron Wahls. [Reading] “went to Agriprocessors late Monday
evening the night of the raid, ICE had left town. People who were hiding in the plant were calling out to say where they were. Both Chad and Ron went through the plant buildings calling for people to come out, about 20 did that night. Some were hiding in freezers, in packing containers, above in the ceilings, and worst of all some were hiding in a semi-load of animal parts intended to be taken to a rendering plant. Some people didn’t come out until Tuesday afternoon. The only question I ask my children is are your parents safe? So far the answer has been yes.”

This is an email from Thursday May 15th, “I know where all my kids are. One boy left town, all of the children from the church are here today. Four of them have moms wearing ankle bracelets. Another mom is still detained. Today I am only sending you good news. Number one, it was a joy to see all my kids playing outside at recess today. Two [40:00] of the girls who have been at the church since Monday afternoon were laughing and smiling as they as they tossed a ball back and forth. The simplest pleasures brings joy. One of the boys who has been at the church brought a Beanie Baby bear to school. He gave it to me and said, please keep it here in your room. Every time we look at it, we can remember all the kind people who have helped us.”

It still makes me cry after six years, it still brings back memories. I compare it to being in seventh grade and hearing my math teacher tell me that John Kennedy was dead. It’s burned into my memory, I can see my teacher’s face. The other thing I compare it to is being in my classroom the day of September 11th, 2001, the terrorist raids. Again, burned in my memory. I have talked to my former students who were in my classroom that day and It’s burned in their memory, so Agri is up there, right up there with those other two that I’ll never forget.
Before the raid, was there any indication that something terrible might happen?

We were aware of the raid on Marshalltown, so that was a possibility. We were aware that some government agency was mobilizing at the National Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo. The media, local media was covering it, they had people stationed outside the gates, they saw the vehicles, the things coming and going. So we knew something was going to happen, but we didn’t know it was going to be Postville. There were other packing plants that it could have been. We knew that, and I don’t remember when it was, but it was months before the raid, a search warrant was served at our school. I do not remember who served the search warrant, I don’t know what government agency it was. I know that they were searching for student records. Specifically that they were looking for records of birth certificates. We assumed that they were investigating underage people working at the plant. Everyone was aware that there were underage kids working at the packing plant. We knew that kids were dropping out of school and working there. I personally know a woman who called a government agency, I don’t know if it was OSHA, I don’t know it was the Department of Labor, but she called them and said there are underage kids working at the plant and was told we don’t have enough investigators to go there. She made another phone call and said there is an underage boy working with knives on the kill line and again was told we don’t have enough to investigate it. It was not a secret that this was going on. We knew that there were illegals. At first at school when I became aware of that, it bothered me, it upset me. I knew it was against the law. I was raised by a family where you did not break the law. It was explained to us at school that in the state of Iowa you educate every child that is in your school district, so I let go of it. When I saw the faces of those children, there is not one of them that I would have
denied an education. The fact that they were illegal, the fact that it was not a secret, that was beyond me. The fact that people had tried to report Agri and nothing happened, [45:00] that was beyond me. I had a student from Guatemala, this was a year or so before the raid, who was having learning difficulties. We were trying to get assistance for him. Now, that runs through the Area Education Agency, and even with white students you go through quite a few hoops to get a child in the Special Ed program, and that’s rightfully so. For a child whose first language is not English, it’s even harder to get that child help. We were working through the steps and one of the final points was to have an interview with the family. I was present with the parents and the little boy. One question was asked of the father, what is your goal for your son. I expected this man was going to say I want my son to get a high paying job. But this man said my son wants to be an artist. I want my son to do in life what makes him happy. That blew my stereotype out of the water. Then the interviewer asked the little boy what is your favorite thing about America? He said shoes. In Guatemala my feet bled. I remember thinking wow, I can’t deny this boy anything. I just can’t. I started learning of the sacrifice and the danger the parents went through to get here. At first we knew about coyotes who were hired to transport people. We knew that that was dangerous. We had heard a story about a relative of one of our students who never made it to Iowa and whose body was found later in the desert in Texas. We knew of that danger, but then we started to catch on, if we looked at a map, that the people coming from Guatemala first had to get out of their own country and had come all the way across Mexico. They were subject to pirates and rape and everything. It hit me of the huge sacrifice that these families were making to come here. My family background is mainly German. My relatives came here to Iowa in the
1850s. They came here for a better life. In Germany if you were a peasant farmer, it was
difficult for your children to find work. The oldest son would farm, but what were your other
sons going to do? In my family history, they sent first a son, he found work as a hired hand here
in Clayton County, Iowa. When he saved a little money he sent home for his sister, she came
over and worked as a hired girl. When they had saved enough money they sent for their
parents to come. It just so happened that in the 1850s when my ancestors came, America
welcomed them. They had a deal, the Homestead Act, if you came over and lived on a piece of
land and farmed it for so many years you had the right to buy it. So America welcomed my
ancestors. When I would look at the kids in my classroom I would think okay this is a
story that has been part of America since 1492, so I had that perspective on it. I let go,
it was beyond me, all the legalities of everything and I just made a point of welcoming whoever
came into my classroom and doing the best I could for them.

How have you seen the town or the school regroup in the six years since the raid?

That first summer we were very worried. [50:00] Well one thing that happened the first
summer is the plant started back up and they started recruiting people from homeless shelters
in Texas and Chicago. They were bringing people in that had nothing but the clothes on their
backs. They recruited out of Palau, they recruited Somalis from the Twin Cities. That was
frightening for the town. They were bringing people in, promising them a paycheck, but then
also the company doing the recruiting was also renting the apartments. I met a gentlemen at
the Food Pantry one day that first summer who was standing in line and asked me, he said is
this where we get the free food and I said yes he had said do you think I’ll
qualify? and he handed me a paycheck. He had less than a dollar after a weeks work. He had
less than a dollar in a paycheck, because they had deducted, this company that had recruited him had deducted for his boots, for his helmet, the hard hat he had to wear at the plant, for his apartment. He stood there with his wife and two kids and said to me, I am so stupid, I am so stupid, I never should have brought my family here. That was upsetting to the community. We didn’t know, when we showed up for work at school in the fall, we had no idea who was going to be there. We were pleasantly surprised to find many of our students were still there. The women who had ankle bracelets were still in town. I don’t know exactly who but there were a lot of people coming in who were supporting those women, helping them. There was a huge hit on empty apartments, empty houses. It was hard for businesses. The kosher deli had closed. The little restaurant had closed. It was very hard for businesses to keep going because there was just a lot less money in town. The school, there was sadness because of some of the students who had vanished. For the most part we were pleasantly surprised how many of our students were still there. There had been arrests of people that had worked in the plant, of management and other things, so we were constantly listening to the news about that. Gradually things went back to normal. The plant then was sold and reopened under the name AgriStar. They started hiring workers again and so the town started to rebuild. Postville School right now is one of the few that has growing enrollment because they are still expanding up there and hiring more workers.

*How do you think the media has handled the changes in Postville?*

Well the first thing was the book, Stephen Bloom's book Postville a Clash of Cultures. I don’t remember what year that came out. I have a copy of the book, it was mostly accurate I think in the portrayal of Postville. I remember that we had groups that would tour the school.
Educational, one University of Iowa, I remember Teacher Education students from UNI. I remember being uncomfortable having these strangers walk through our school, I felt like I was kind of an animal in the zoo on display. I felt protective of the kids, but it was always cleared through the school, it was always explained to us why they were there. [55:00] The media, we were a big deal at the time of the raid, but then I don’t know, was it within a month, the floods hit here in Northeast Iowa especially Cedar Rapids. The media switched over to that story and left us alone for a while. I know among some of my neighbors there was well how could you have been working in a town where those horrible things were going on? Why didn’t anybody do anything to stop it? And I’d tell them we didn’t know all of the horrible things that were going on and people were trying to stop it, but no one would listen and no one would stop it. I don’t know that we were horribly portrayed by the media.

*You told me earlier of a trip that you took through the processing plant at one point in time?*

The fall before the raid our principal told us that he was going to take all teachers and staff on a tour of Agriprocessors. A lot of us didn’t really want to go, because it’s a slaughter house. Now I am a farm wife, I grew up and my mother butchered chickens, so I understand. I eat meat. But the sheer size of it, I wasn’t quite sure of. The principal kept saying *no this is important. I want you to see where the parents of your students are working. I want you to see what the working conditions are. You need to understand what it’s like.* So we went on the tour. I wear glasses so I remember we’d go in and out of cool areas into warmer humid areas. I remember my glasses always fogging over so I wasn’t always clearly seeing things. I remember there being plastic tarps overhead filled with water and water was dripping so it was damp working conditions. I remember we came in a side door, I don’t even
know if there is a main door. We came in through one of the changing rooms. I remember as we were in there thinking if the lights go I’ll never find my way out. I had no idea where the exits are, I couldn’t see windows. That was upsetting to me. I remember these overhead lines where chickens were hanging by their feet. I remember one room, an entire room was full of people. The chickens would come in one end with their feathers and the chicken would come out the other end with head off, feathers off, gutted, just the feet left on. I remember being amazed at how many people were doing that. I know I thought I couldn’t work here, I couldn’t do that repetitive motion over and over for eight hours. We were aware by then that yeah there is an eight hour day, but many, many of the workers were working extra hours. We found out later that they were not being paid overtime. I remember standing in one area while the guide was saying something and my glasses were kind of foggy. I looked to my left and there was this rolling track. I remember thinking why do I see scrub brush handles on this rack? I took my glasses off and looked closer and the rack was full of tongues hanging on hooks. I am grateful that our principal made us do it, so that the day of the raid when they talked about people hiding in places, I got it. I could understand what was happening. It gave me a real appreciation for the sacrifices these moms and dads were making so that their kids could have school, that their kids could have a better life. I am very glad that we did it. [60:00]

Over The years have you attended any events in Postville that had to do with diversity?

I don’t know why, I know they had Taste of Postville, it was always in the fall before school. I’m not a great one to go to things where there are big crowds, so I never attended, no. I didn’t go to the commemoration of the raid either. I just dint. No I didn’t.
Do you have any hope for the future of the Postville area or the Postville school?

My hope is that the economy of Postville could be more diversified so that it is not as dependent as it is on AgriStar. My hope is, I am hoping the people working now are being treated fairly, I have no way of knowing. I am aware that the Rubashkin family does not own the plant, but that some members of the family still work there. Some people that used to be in management in Agriprocessors are still in management at AgriStar. I am hoping that the abuses are not happening now, but I have no way of knowing. When I ask people around Postville how are things going at Agri, everybody shrugs their shoulders, nobody seems to know. I don’t ask the workers that I meet at the Food Pantry, I don’t think that is my place to ask them what their jobs are like, I just don’t ask. I am not hearing anything about it. My wish would be that the economy could be more diversified. That’s not a problem just in Postville, that’s a problem all over Northeast Iowa, all small towns are dealing with that. I know that the student body now at Postville now, white students are now the minority. I know that AgriStar is recruiting a lot of Somalis, many are coming from the Twin Cities. Since I have left Postville in two years there has been a big change again with more Somali students. When I left in 2012 there were a few, there were also black students some from Chicago that were attending. I am seeing in the news about the school or online at their website, I am seeing more minority students who are now participating in sports. I think I am seeing more students who are graduating. I am not up there so I don’t know the statistics, but when I see the pictures of the graduating class to see a Somali girl in the class. I have talked to a couple of my former students, Hispanic students, who are now attending community college. One is studying to be a welder, so that is a positive change at Postville. For years we were searching for ways to keep kids in school, not have them drop
out and go to work at Agri. To help them so that they could graduate, to see that the potential was there. Not that they needed a four year degree, but that there were training options and jobs available to them. I talked to someone in the community a week ago and asked the question are things better for the workers? She said to me some of the Hispanic families that I know appear to be driving better cars and appear to be dressing better, but she said I think those families are not working at Agri anymore, they have moved on to other jobs in town that pay better. Mueller Concrete, Bacon Construction. So again can't really gauge how things are going at Agri. Other schools in the area are dealing with what are we going to do? How are we going to keep our doors open? Postville doesn't right now seem to have that problem, but my fear is that if for some reason AgriStar shuts down, then what? What will happen? I talked to a gentleman who does some contract work at Agri [65:00] he said they are expanding their chicken processing, so they are expanding again. My wish is better wages, workers treated fairly, diversified economy, continued growth in the school. I know they continue with their English as a Second Language program. I know they try, when hiring staff, trying to hire minority people. It is difficult to attract a teacher into Northeast Iowa, a minority student teacher to Northeast Iowa. There are jobs, opportunities elsewhere, higher paying jobs elsewhere. I know they are trying, but I know it is difficult to recruit and also then to keep minority students here as teachers. I feel positive about Postville and positive about the school.

Do you have any closing comments or anything you want to talk about that we didn't cover today?

No I don't think so.
Well, thank you so much for talking with me today. [66:37]