Community Voices: Postville Oral History Project

Interview with Leigh Rekow

November 19th, 2014
Postville, 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

Leigh Rekow has spent his whole life in the Postville area, attending Postville High School and making a career as a farmer between Postville and Luana. After his children took over the farm, Leigh spent time in the Peace Corps and traveling overseas using his agricultural experiences to help communities in Africa and Russia. Leigh has had a long political career. He spent one term as a state representative, fourteen years as a city council member, and at the time of the interview was serving as Mayor of Postville. In the interview, Leigh discusses his experiences with the above mentioned positions as well as the aftermath of the May 12th, 2008 ICE raid, how the media has portrayed Postville, and his hopes for the future and the new owners of the processing plant Agristar.

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Leigh Rekow

November 19th, 2014, Postville, Iowa

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

Leigh Rekow: I have been a resident of this area practically my whole life, other than some of the travels I have done, so I have been around.

I noticed you were born in Luana, have you always lived in Postville?

No, I farm between Postville and Luana for probably fifty-sixty years. I moved into Postville in 1989 and started on the City Council in 1990.

What was the Postville area like while you were growing up?

Pretty much sheltered. Not much to do with the outside world. I went to High School, probably never saw a black person until after graduation. I mean we were pretty much isolated, a farming community.

Can you tell me about the work you did before becoming mayor?

Well, always farming was my basic work until I moved to town. I have been mayor five years now. I have always been involved in politics or community affairs. It’s just something I believe in.

I see that you were a state representative; can you talk to me about that?

Its something I never planned on. They wanted me to run, I happened to get elected. However, I only served one term. I felt that I could be more useful in my own community then being down at the state level. I’m not much outspoken, if I agreed with everything, I never said anything.
Can you tell me about your time in the Peace Corps?

I'd come near to the end of my farming career. My daughter and son-in-law were ready to take over the farm. The Peace Corps was advertising for agricultural people. There was famine in Africa and they wanted volunteers. Being quite naïve, I volunteered and I went to Tanzania. I served on a 6,000 acre farm it was originally an Israeli Kibbutz. They got kicked out after their three-day war. I was helping run that while I was there.

That’s really interesting. How have you seen the town of Postville change over the last 25 years or so?

The first change was when the Jewish people bought the packing plant and started coming to Postville. The local residents were afraid that the Jews were going to take over the town. That was the first impression that most of the locals had. Some left and some didn’t.

What about the changes more recently in town, within about the last ten or 15 years? [5:00]

The first change came when we decided to annex the local plant. A lot of the local businesses were afraid that the Jewish people would leave if we annexed them, they threatened to. We stood firm and annexed them anyhow, which proved to be an advantage for them in the long run. We could do more to help them. At that time we had a turkey plant [Iowa Turkey Products] and a kosher plant [Agriprocessors] and both were using the same waste treatment facilities and that grew into a problem.

I see you served on City Council for 14 years, can you tell me a little about that experience?

It was a good experience. They needed level headed people on the Council and some of the times there were people that weren’t. They were very anti-Jewish, anti-Latino and they wanted to punish those people. I guess I stuck around so long to try and keep things on the straight and
level. During my Peace Corps experience I learned to live with other people and had a lot of experience with different nationalities so I felt I could help out by staying on the Council. The people believed in me and kept re-electing me, so I must have been doing something right.

Before you went in to the Peace Corps, before all the changes started happening in Postville, did you have any knowledge about different countries like Africa or Central America?

Not a lot, no. Everything was mostly what happened locally. I wasn’t very worldly. After the Peace Corps I travelled overseas for the next ten years to different countries helping them form cooperatives and other aspects of agriculture. I learned more about other countries than I had our own United States really. I was to Russia several times, Czechoslovakia. I went back to Africa several times, on the east coast and west coast. It was an interesting experience and I enjoyed it.

Have you attended any events in Postville that deal with diversity?

I belong to the Diversity Council so I have always attended that. I have been invited to a lot of Jewish events, some Bar Mitzvahs. I have good relationships with the Jewish people. Actually the Rubashkins were good people. We always communicated back and forth. Their dad, the elder Rubashkin used to come to town and he would invite me over to the store. We would visit and it was a good relationship. [10:00]

I see you have been mayor for five years, what has that experience been like?

Since I had spent a long time on the Council I knew what the job was. The last mayor had become disenchanted and resigned so I offered and was appointed. I have been elected for two terms.
Could you run me through a typical week for you as the mayor?

The mayor is perceived to have a lot of power. Whenever anybody from some country or different organization comes they expect the mayor can do this or do that, which is not really true. I mean the mayor does have some influence. The first thing [I did] when I was elected mayor I had the computer taken out of my office. I wanted everything to come through the city, I wanted no private dealings with anybody. We have an excellent Council and excellent workers. I try to make all the decisions come through the Council. Our city manager is excellent and does a good job. We all work together. A typical week we just talk things over together and if we can’t come to a good decision we throw it out to the Council and let them make the decision, as it should be.

You kind of mentioned this, but how do you as the Mayor and the City Council meet the diverse needs of the Postville residents?

The present Council we have really have an open mind. They treat everybody fairly. There is no punishment like there used to be in the earlier Councils. They treat everybody fairly and they make good decisions, so it makes it easy for me.

How have you seen the Postville community deal with the diversity that is in town?

Lately, we just don’t have any problems. The Jewish people have evolved over the last 25 years. They wave at you and talk to you, which was a little difficult at first with a lot of them coming from foreign countries and New York where a friendly greeting just isn’t a thing. The Latino population fits right in. They do not have a community of their own. They fit in with regular residents, they become friends, they exchange greetings. They help each other out lawn mowing, snow shoveling. It seemed to take the Jewish people a little longer to learn to care for
a lawn or shovel a walk, but that’s something they never did whenever they were. Its all come together pretty good I’d say.

*Were you in Postville at the time of the raid?*

Yes. I wasn’t mayor then nor was I on the Council. It didn’t really affect me that much. Postville people are [15:00] pretty solid people, and we just went on. We didn’t bemoan the fact that we were raided. It hurt for a while but we just kept going, started over, and never looked back. We’ve done well.

*Can you remember any of your experiences around that time?*

Basically we are still a farming community and everything depends upon farming so the plant affected some of the business and some of the local feed dealers. We just kept going and we’ve come out of it.

*[At this point, Mayor Rekow was scheduled to deliver meals around town with his wife]*

*It’s almost 11 o’clock, I just have a few more questions. Did you want to stop or did you want to keep going?*

I know my wife is outside waiting I can tell her just to go ahead and we’ll finish.

*Okay thank you, I am sorry about this.*

No it’s okay. [35 second pause] Continue.

*Did you attend any of the rallies or events that were held in Postville after the raid?*

Not as an active member. I went to them just to see what was going on, some of the gatherings at the Catholic Church and some of the marches but I never participated.

*What did you see at those events?*
There were quite a few people marching. They’d march up to the plant. There were a lot of people around, but it wasn’t the city’s policy to dwell on it. Like I said we just didn’t look back we just kept going forward. I suppose it helped the town in some of the grants we applied for because of the raid. We worried, but we just kept going.

How have you seen Postville regroup over the last six years or so since the raid?

We are doing quite well. There is always some new business, like Dollar General came. Farming kept going. I think we have done better than some of the surrounding towns. We have always had a progressive attitude. We believe in Postville and so we just kept going.

How have you felt about the media’s portrayal over all these years?

We’ve become known all over the United States. Some books have been written about Postville. The Jewish people didn’t like the books that I know. My basic opinion [is that] Shalom Rubashkin was a pretty decent fellow, he just got in over his head. When Don Hunt died, who was managing the plant, [20:00] that’s when Shalom took over. He was never meant to manage. He lived in town, we could go to him when we had a problem with anything at the plant and he would take care of it. He did a lot of good things for some local people. It’s just something that happened. Plus when they sold the plant they forgot to add in the taxes and that created a huge legal problem. The new owner, it kind of soured him on the deal, but they are operating and expanding and we are moving along.

What are your hopes for the future of Postville?

We’ll probably never grow a lot bigger than we are now. We have a different group of workers coming in like the Somalis. They don’t mix with the local people. They are just not well thought of, but they fit in at our school. Our school expands and hasn’t had to join with any other one.
We have an excellent school, there are no color barriers. All the diverse populations fit in. It’s a little different than old Postville. I would say our school is about 40 percent Latino now. We have better soccer players than football players. We’ll just keep moving forward same as always.

*Do you have any closing comments you would like to share with me? Anything we didn’t cover about Postville, your life, or your job?*

When Agriprocessors was at its peak they used to take the Council into New York for their celebrations. They were doing really well. They lost a lot of their markets when they went bankrupt. We did make National Geographic at one time. No, I have nothing more.

*Thank you so much for talking to me. We’ll turn this off and maybe I can take a look at that.*

[23:04]

Additional information from Leigh Rekow: The owner of AgriStar has brought in a non-Jewish chief operating officer with over 40 years of global sales, marketing, and general management experience. He is also experienced in turnaround situations with a focus on growing top line revenue while reducing cost and increasing profit margins. This, in my opinion, has been much needed. I am impressed by the progress to date. He has met with me several times and spoke before the City Council and pledged to work with the city and also make AgriStar a better place to work.