Memories of a Raid

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Memories of a Raid

Part of the journal section “Forum: (Re)presenting (Im)migration”

Cheryl Roberts “Memories of a Raid”

1. Early spring, 2008. Exams finished, semester grades submitted. Many faculty and most students were already enjoying the start of summer break. I was serving as Head of the Department of Modern Languages so I had to be in the office, but traffic was light.

2. About a week before, rumors began circulating in the Hispanic community in Waterloo and nearby towns, where a number of Mexicans and Central Americans had found work. Was there going to be a raid? I didn’t know but promised to find out what I could. Soon FEMA minivans and busses were seen in town. The official word was that FEMA was planning a mock catastrophe event. They were setting up on the Cattle Congress grounds in Waterloo, a place with sheds and barns for livestock, a center for expositions, several additional buildings, and at one end, a lovely building called the Electric Park Ballroom, used for concerts and similar events.

3. FEMA? We thought perhaps that was OK. We weren’t entirely convinced that it was simply an exercise. We scoured the news, examined fresh rumors, tried to figure out what and when something was happening.
4. In the Hispanic community, anxiety was high. Some workers stopped going to work, fearing a raid. Some students stayed out of school, either because they were afraid or because their parents were afraid. The fear was palpable and intense.

5. And then it happened. Early in the morning of May 12, 2008, the busses and minivans pulled out of the Cattle Congress grounds and traveled north in a caravan. Arriving in Postville just over an hour later, hundreds of ICE officials—oh yes, ICE is part of FEMA now!—raided the Agriprocessors plant, the largest producer of kosher meats in the world. They had 900 or so warrants and rounded up some 400 workers: mothers, fathers, brothers, minors, women and men, indiscriminately. They didn’t check names, they stormed the building with guns and forced workers outside to the waiting busses. And then they hauled them to the Cattle Congress grounds, where cots had been set up in the expo center.

6. Word arrived in my office midmorning, from my colleagues at our local Latino center. I sent a quick email to all our Spanish-speaking professors and headed downtown. On the way there, I learned that hundreds of workers had been taken to the Cattle Congress and that there was chaos in Postville. Parents and other relatives rushed to the Catholic church. Children in school cried, not knowing what was happening to their families. People were afraid to return to their homes in case ICE was waiting. The church undertook the massive task of reuniting local families.

7. Meanwhile, at the Centro Latino, there was also chaos. Family members were calling to find out if their relatives had been caught up in the raid. Some who hadn’t been at work came to Waterloo to find their relatives and were staying in our office as we tried to get more information.

8. My Spanish isn’t fantastic but it’s generally sufficient so I, along with several others, headed to the Cattle Congress to see if we could get in and at least reassure ourselves that the workers were OK. But we arrived to find gates closed and locked, ICE workers with guns and dogs patrolling the perimeter, and no one willing to speak to us.

9. We headed back to the office. Some helped individuals—there was a woman due to give birth in just a week or so, trying to find out where her husband was and trying to contact a sister in Chicago. Could she go to Chicago not knowing where her husband was? Could she afford a bus ticket?

10. Another young woman had a son who was born in Wisconsin but she didn’t have a copy of his birth certificate. We called the hospital where he was born and were told that the father’s name wasn’t on the birth certificate and she’d have to contact a county office to request a copy.

11. Others in the office were trying to find out the names of the detained. Some, particularly the women, had been taken to various county jails. So we called and discovered that each county has its own rules. In one, the inmate can’t make a phone call without a phone card, which would have to be purchased and delivered in person. In many, we were told that we had to have the name of the inmate before they would confirm whether or not he or she was there. But we had some 400 names!
12. We also had people milling around the office scared and worried and unwilling to leave without knowing something. They needed meals, a place to sleep, transportation…So we got on the phone to our local churches and synagogue, begging for any help they could offer. And some were wonderful. Without hesitation, ministers offered cash. Several churches set up cots and used their kitchens to provide food. Some had minibuses that could be used to transport people from our office to the church. It was gratifying to see so many willing to pitch in and help without regard for politics, legal status, etc.

13. As the days went on, the government began publishing a list of those detained. It was sometimes inaccurate and slow to be updated, but at least we had a starting point. Of course, we were not the only ones working on this. Grinnell College had mobilized; more churches in Postville were offering help; the food banks were sending additional foods to Postville, and so on. But we still couldn’t get in to see a single detainee. A few lawyers had managed to get in, but meeting one-on-one meant they couldn’t meet with the vast majority of the detainees.

14. With stunning speed, the Feds decided to charge each of the detainees with identity theft, a charge that at that time was unwarranted (the individual had to know they were taking the Social Security number from a particular individual). Identity theft was a federal offense and carried a mandatory minimum sentence. Translators were mobilized for the “court”, a judge brought in, prosecutors to press charges. For expedience, they set the “courthouse” up in the Electric Park Ballroom, on the Cattle Congress grounds.

15. There are other accounts that tell a fuller story, but I am reporting simply on my own experience. I was overwhelmed with concern and compassion for the detainees and their families, and outraged at how they were being treated. But what could I do?

16. I read that these “trials” were public and decided that perhaps all I could really do was be a witness to the events happening there. I didn’t know if anyone else would be there to observe but I felt I had to try.

17. The day they began the trials, I headed to the Cattle Congress Grounds and to the Electric Park Ballroom. Security was very tight. Anyone hoping to enter had to go through screening that included a metal detector. I approached the small trailer set up for security and stepped inside.

18. “Who are you? What do you want?” federal agents asked me. “I am here to observe the trials,” I responded. They promptly told me I wasn’t allowed….I countered with “this is a public hearing and I am a member of the public”. They argued; I kept repeating that as a member of the public, I had a right to be there, which I did. And they finally let me enter but without a purse, phone, or anything besides my car keys, which was disappointing because I’d hoped to take a few pictures.

19. But at least I was in. There was a temporary “courthouse” set up…with the judge presiding, a table in front of her with prosecutors and defense attorneys, equipment for interpreters and seats for the accused. Behind a barrier were a few seats for observers. There weren’t very many of us….and behind us, men in ICE uniforms looming.
20. The first “trial” began. Five detainees entered, chained at the wrists and ankles, shuffling along, frightened and not understanding anything. They were given headphones for the translation. And they were told they had committed a federal crime and should plead guilty, and then they’d be deported.

21. It seemed clear to me that this had all been set up in advance. There was no defense; the defense and prosecution both advised pleading guilty to a federal crime. The detainees didn’t know they had rights and wouldn’t have known how to exercise them anyway. So obediently, one by one, they pled guilty. And were taken away just as they had been brought in. Another five followed and the scenario was repeated…and again…and again. It was heartbreaking and infuriating. I went a few other times, simply to be a witness to events, but I felt powerless to help.

22. The detainees, having pled guilty, were transferred to federal prisons, and since Iowa doesn’t have a federal prison, they were sent out of state, away from their families and friends and co-workers. Each was given a sentence of five months. After serving five months, they were to be deported. There was no need to force them to serve five months in prison and then be deported…. they should never have been charged with the federal crime of identity theft…. and they were railroaded into giving up their rights. It was a despicable circus.

23. A couple of weeks later, a Category 5 tornado hit Parkersburg, not far from the Waterloo/Cedar Falls area. And just like that, the Postville raid faded from the news. But it is remembered every year in Postville as the raid that tore the community apart, demonstrated the dishonesty of our justice system, and punished innocent workers for our country’s xenophobia. A sad chapter but not forgotten.