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# Postville adjusting to jolt of diversity

New jobs mix cultures in Eastern Iowa town used to its own ways

By Stephanie Simon

Los Angeles Times

**P**OSTVILLE — Used to be if you wanted a quickie breakfast here, your choices were pretty much limited to doughnuts. Now you can get a kosher blueberry bagel. Or a loaf of dense, tangy Russian bread. Or even a Mexican pastry.

Diversity has arrived in this tiny farm town, and locals are trying hard to cope.

For 150 years, Postville was all white, all Christian, all Norman Rockwell, an everyone-knows-everyone, live-and-die-here kind of town run by farmers of German and Norwegian stock. Then, a decade ago, an Ultra-Orthodox Jew bought a boarded-up meat-packing plant on the edge of town and converted it into a kosher slaughterhouse. Word soon got out that Postville had jobs. Lots of jobs.

The Jews came first — three dozen rabbis trained to kill and inspect kosher meat, plus friends and relatives to help. Then came the others. Mexican, Guatemalan, Ukrainian, Nigerian, Bosnian, Czech — dozens, then hundreds, of immigrants swarmed to jobs in the kosher slaughterhouse and in the Iowa Turkey Products plant next door. To locals, it seemed an invasion.

"It was a little scary at first," said Becky Meyer, a lifelong resident.

"You'd see them and you wouldn't really know how to talk to them, how to act around them," high school sophomore Wade Schutte recalled. "It took a while to adjust."

And no wonder. Postville's population is just 1,500. Many folks born and raised here until recently had never met a black person, never met a Jew, never heard a foreign language except in school.

Now they run into rabbis in long black coats and prayer shawls walking down the streets speaking Hebrew. On their way to the pharmacy, they pass a Mexican store decorated with bullfight posters.

Some locals refuse to talk about Postville's new look. But many here are trying to adjust.

"This is a little town that's 20-some miles from even a McDonald's," reasoned Doug All, a quality inspector at the slaughterhouse, "so we have to get along."

If locals are unsure what to make of the newcomers, the feel-



Gazette file photo

Visitors to the first Taste of Postville festival last September participate in a Russian folk dance. Taste of Postville featured a variety of foods prepared by members of ethnic groups living in Postville.

ing is mutual.

"The first time I'd ever heard of Iowa was when we moved here," said 15-year-old Ilya Pakarov of Kazakhstan.

"It's way different from California," said Susy Navarro, who moved here from Oakland so her husband could work at the slaughterhouse.

With several dozen Jewish families, virtually all of them adherents to the Lubavich branch of Hasidism and many with six or eight children, Postville "is a very interesting little place," said Mark Grey, an anthropologist at the University of Northern Iowa who has studied the town.

Aaron Rubashkin bought the slaughterhouse to supply fresh meat to his kosher store in New York. When

the slaughterhouse first opened in 1990, the Rubashkins and the rabbis they hired commuted from large cities with established Jewish populations. But that became tiresome. So a few years ago, they committed to Postville. They set up a synagogue. They converted a former hospital into a Jewish school. They bought homes.

The Jews were quickly pegged as snobby because they wouldn't eat in the local pizza joint (it wasn't kosher) or greet their neighbors warmly (among the Lubavich, men don't shake hands with women and women don't shake hands with men). They were thought odd because their little boys all have such long hair (by tradition, it can't be cut until age 3) and because the women all wear wigs (they

cover their natural hair out of modesty).

In time, however, many grew to love the measured tempo of Postville. Locals began to relax as well.

The newspaper recruited a Jewish woman to write a regular column explaining Hasidic customs. Kids of all religions started playing together.

Most important, the kosher plant, AgriProcessors, was doing well by Postville's economy. The workers shopped in town, boosting local merchants. They also spurred development in a town that had long been stagnant.

"You could say the quality of life here has deteriorated if you liked a small, sleepy town," Mayor John Hyman said, "but there has been economic betterment."

Despite these gains, tension persists.

Spanish-speaking immigrants, many of whom live in a beat-up trailer park on the fringe of town, seem to have had the toughest time integrating into Postville society.

"They don't like Mexicans," concluded Santiago Flores, a 19-year-old immigrant who puts in 65 hours a week at AgriProcessors.

Although overt acts of racism are rare, community leaders say most old-time Postvillians cope with the changes in their beloved town by staying aloof. "A few of us, maybe 10 percent, intermingle and get along well," newspaper editor Sharon Drahn said. "The rest coexist."

Among the 10 percent is Hall Roberts. "A lot of the older people in Postville, bless their souls, can't bear to see anyone (unfamiliar) in this community," Roberts said. "But I've been very excited by it."

The way Roberts sees it, immigration is an old story, even in Postville: "They've forgotten," he said, "that in the old days of this town, the Germans couldn't stand to see Norwegians here."

For a longer version of this story, go to <http://www.latimes.com/HOME/NEWS/COLUMNS/t000007789.1.html>

## Postville makes the front page of L.A. Times

**T**his story about Postville's diverse ethnic population ran Tuesday on the front page of the million-circulation Los Angeles Times.

Its author, Stephanie Simon, the Midwest correspondent for the Times, works out of St. Louis.

Michael Kaeser, managing editor of the Los Angeles Times/Washington Post News Services, said it was selected for the front page because the blending of immigrants into a nearly all-white community, immigrants that southern Californians see everyday, made the story appealing.