

Community Voices:
Postville Oral History Project

Interview with
Sharon Drahn

July 13th, 2015
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

Sharon Drahn is the newspaper editor of the Postville Herald, and has worked there for over 27 years. She is an active member of St. Paul's Lutheran Church and volunteers at the Good Samaritan Center. Sharon moved to Monona a small town near Postville in 1969, leaving for a while in the 1980s for school and to teach in Iowa City, but shortly returned. As editor of the newspaper, Sharon has an insight into the events and happenings of the town. In the interview Sharon describes what it means to work for the newspaper in a small town from working on the planning committee of the Taste of Postville celebration for many years to handling Letters to the Editor and covering major events like the May 12th, 2008 ICE raid while national and local news sources also looked for the scoop. Sharon describes how much of the life of the town revolves around the school in Postville where athletics, cultural celebrations, and cooperation and change bridge the demographic and cultural differences of Postville's residents.

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RaeAnn Swanson: I'm interviewing Sharon Drahn here in Postville on July 13th, 2015. Sharon the first question I have for you is can you tell me a little about yourself?

Sharon Drahn: I'm the newspaper editor at the Postville Herald. I have been here since the 80s. I am the mother of three. I have three grandchildren. My husband is a retired teacher and coach. I'm very active in my church. I am a player of cards, a blogger, lover of the written word, I love people.

What brought you to Postville and when did you come?

We moved here in 1969. My husband got a teaching and coaching job here. He is also actually from Monona so I was very familiar with northeast Iowa before we ever came up in this area to live, but that's what brought us here. We were here and left when he had some additional schooling and teaching in Iowa City for a few years in the 80s, so we were gone and came back.

When you came back did you just come back because you liked the area?

Actually, he came back to teach and coach again. The position reopened after he had done some teaching in Iowa City. We were ready to get back to small town living, so we moved back.

What was Postville like when you moved here the first time?

Very different than it is today. Mostly German and Norwegian people. Very Christian, very white, very few people that were any thing but those types. Everybody was pretty much related

to someone else, or they came here because of a job. The majority of people their family and ancestry went back several generations.

How have you seen Postville change over the years that you have been here?

That's obvious I think. When we left in 1979 and went to Iowa City for a while, when we came back there weren't a lot of differences. The school had been built on to, but the population was still 95 percent white, German and Norwegian Americans. The school district was very ethnically one. There just wasn't the diversity. It started actually when Agriprocessors opened and Iowa Turkey Products was still going when the first Hispanic people came and then more nationalities came. We started to have people from 20 to 30 different ethnicities. Most of the people that came at first were from Eastern Europe and then they started to come from Mexico and Guatemala and a lot of Hispanic populations.

What is it like to work in Postville?

It's probably not the way any of us ever envisioned it, but for me it has been an adventure. I've done a lot of feature writing, I've gotten to know a lot of the people. I'm a firm believer that there is way more good than bad. It's not the way that any one would have envisioned.

Sometimes things are very frustrating because these new people don't always follow the rules the way we think they should, so therefore there are some problems that way. As a personal thing and as a newspaper, I can honestly say that I haven't had problems. It hasn't made our business grow because, if their child is in the newspaper or if we do a feature about a business they've started [5:00] or a celebration they are having they'll come get it, but they don't subscribe to the newspaper. In the late nineties or early 2000s we tried doing a Spanish

newspaper once a month, but first of all, we weren't very good at it, and second of all, they didn't buy it. We had trouble finding advertisers so we had to give it up.

That's interesting. I didn't know that that was ever a thing.

Well it was just a page or two in the newspaper and we did it probably for six or eight months. It didn't last very long.

Can you tell me what a typical week is like here at the newspaper?

I don't know that there is such a thing as a typical week, but I can sure try. On Mondays, days like today, that is the day we put the paper together and it goes to the printer. We put all the news that we gathered onto the pages. It gets emailed, or put on a Fetch site. It goes to Hampton where we print. On Tuesdays, I don't work. I'm actually semi-retired. I work Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On Tuesdays they put things on the website. They get things going for the next week. They take care of incidentals, paperwork and that kind of thing. When I get back here on Wednesday I start writing for the next week. Every week I do a flashback. I try to start editing anything that might have come in. This week I have a couple of interviews set up already for Wednesday and Friday. Then it all starts over again.

That sounds like a lot of fun.

It is fun.

I noticed that you have a lot of volunteer and extra activities that you do and especially at your church, can you talk to me about those?

I am real active at St. Paul's Lutheran Church. I met your little sister a couple of different years because she comes to bible school that your grandma brings her. I'm active in the women's organization and the youth committees. I just volunteer whenever I can with things at the

church and with senior citizens and that kind of thing. I go out to the Good Samaritan Home and play cards with the older people and help with birthday parties.

Can you tell me what you do with the women's group?

Sometimes we have speakers come in. Every month we have a Bible study. We are having a group come in this fall and we are hoping that people from all over northeast Iowa will come. They are called Thistle Farms out of Nashville Tennessee. They are women that have survived prostitution and human trafficking, because of some of our diversity and some of the women from Somalia that have been exploited. They are going to be at Upper Iowa University and they are going to be in Oelwein and then they are going to come here for a presentation at our church. We are hoping that a lot of people come. Its kind of one of those taboo things that people don't talk about. What else do I do? I do a lot of writing. If the church newsletter needs me, which reminds me I think I have an article due. I do articles for our church newsletter as well.

Can you tell me about the Good Samaritan Home?

It's the nursing home. I have several older lady friends, some men too, but mostly they are women that I go over and play cards and visit with.

In what ways have you seen Postville deal with the diversity that is here?

I think the children and the young adults have coped very well. I think our school district is flourishing. I think because of our population Postville Community Schools has been one of the few schools that has able to avoid consolidation, whether that is a good or bad I don't know. Our class sizes continue to grow. There are three sections in every grade, there will be in the fall. That hasn't happened [10:00] for years. Because some of these people are from different

cultures that have been some drawbacks as far as athletics. Some of these kids don't participate as much, although we have really good soccer. That kind of thing has had to change to go with the flow. We've had some neat presentations, some community wide programs where they've danced and showed their culture through readings and that kind of thing as well.

Does that ever spill over into any opinion pages that you have here at the newspaper?

Once in a great while somebody will be upset about something and write a letter to the editor. Lets face it, some of these people aren't good about keeping their yards manicured. These are old school people who want everything to look just right, or they get too loud, or they don't watch their children well enough or whatever. Sometimes we get some letters to the editor or we get somebody that wants us to write an article. If someone's not following the rules, if children are running around after curfew or if someone gets arrested because they aren't following the rules. I don't seek out those kinds of things. I want my newspaper to be a bulletin board. I know that I have to, that is part of the job. We have to publish both the good and the bad, but I don't go looking for it.

Can you tell me about your experiences around the time of the raid?

I remember that day like it was yesterday. We have only been in this building about three years. Our office was across the street and two doors up. it was a Monday so it was a press day. We were busy putting the paper together when we heard helicopters. Somebody called and said they were raiding out at the plant. We still had to finish the newspaper. At that time we had to be done on Monday evening. We have to be done earlier now then it used to be. At any rate, we went right up to the plant and started taking pictures. The school children, they were frightened. We were getting calls from the media and of course they came from all over. They

were here from national news too, but channel 2, 7, and 9 were all here. It was a pretty spooky time and it went on for a long time, because these people were so frightened that some of them were afraid to go home and they took refuge in the churches. I was part of a group that started taking meals to some of them that were afraid to go home or afraid that they would come and get them. People were taken. They said they didn't take anybody who was going to leave children without one parent or a guardian, but in reality I think there were some cases where there were children who had no one. It was really sad and scary.

What was it like to work here at the Postville Herald around the time of the raid?

There was tension, not among us or the coworkers. The community felt the tension. Everybody was saying what's going on, what's going on? You need to put more in the paper. We didn't want to invade people's privacy either, so we tried to put the things in about what was going with the community and what was happening. Of course, when you are a small weekly newspaper and this was a major raid, one of the largest in the history of this country, everybody is going to scoop you. Everything was already all over the national and the local TV stations and Cedar Rapids and USA Today. You had to try to come up with [15:00] different aspects and rapport with people. We tried to do interviews with the school administration and with the clergy. Our food pantry, where your grandma is real active, became an integral part. These people didn't have any food, they were afraid to go to work. It was trying, but I think we did okay. I think we came out of it okay.

Did you attend any of the marches or rallies that were held after the raid?

I did, basically to cover them for the paper, but also because I felt that it was important that we showed our solidarity. Yes I did. I remember one in particular in town here, and then there was

one, it was not in Postville, I'm trying to think if it was in Waterloo. I did go to one out of town rally, I can't tell you for sure where it was anymore. There were several events at the various churches as far as rallies and time to reflect. Those things I attended. I remember one march that was well attended by people in the community. I did not go the last couple of times. They had one for the five-year anniversary and I chose not to go.

Can you tell me what it was like to be in one of those marches and what did you see here?

A lot of emotion, a lot of people that were still very bitter. People that were loud, but not disrespectful, but very aggressive in the way they felt. There were not, and this is a sad thing to say, there were not a lot of people, just regular Postvillians born and bred. It was mostly the immigrants and the clergy and some school kids. Everyone else had kind of dropped off by the wayside.

I heard in a different interview that there was, at one of these marches, an opposition group kind of stationed on the other side of the street from the rally. Did you hear anything about that?

I did see them and I know that they were there. I didn't talk to them. It was obvious they were there, RaeAnn, but they weren't obnoxious about it. It wasn't probably the best thing on earth, but there again it was within their rights and I think they were okay the way they demonstrated.

How did you feel about the outside media that came in to cover Postville around the time of the raid?

It depended on who they were. Some were fine. They obviously cared and had compassion. Others were just out to get the big story. They didn't care whose toes they stepped on as long

as they could get the scoop so to speak. Some of them were looking for ways to say well this is what happens when you bring in these illegals and blah, blah, blah and they were pretty nasty. Most of the media was okay and when they came in here, to the newspaper, they were always polite and just doing their job. I had no complaints.

How have you seen the community regroup after the raid and in the seven years since then?

I think the community has coped about as well as any small community can. I think they've [20:00] tried to come together. I think the school district has done well. There are still people that have a hard time with the way things ended up as far as the value of property and the way that some of the immigrants live and carry on as opposed to what the norm is supposed to be. I think we've coped about as well as any small town can. I think that people have worked together. I think they've tolerated one another is maybe a better way to put it. They are not ever going to be best friends, especially the people in the Jewish community because of their religious background. They live side by side, maybe not even in harmony but coexisting pretty darn well for a town of less than 3,000.

What are some of the changes that you've noticed in town since the raid?

Less businesses than we're used to, some of the local businesses have closed. But yet they've opened a few. There is a Jewish grocery store. There are a couple of Somali stores. We have one Muslim Mosque and two synagogues, so the houses of worship have changed, the business settings have changed. I think because some people are reluctant to move into a community such as ours, there seems to be more property for sale and maybe the value isn't what people would like or expect. I don't really think its affected the mindset so much of the people. I think some of the older people, even older than me, that had roots here are disappointed and upset

at the way the whole things has turned out. I think the majority of people have banded together.

I was wondering if you attended any of the Taste of Postville celebrations?

I did, all of them I think. In fact, I was on the original committee. I don't know if I was on the committee every year, but I was on at least the first three or four and they were fun. It was a great time. We had people from all walks of life with their food booths and with the entertainment. The first year there were maybe five to six hundred people, by the time of the last one there were several thousand. It was a great time. Did you ever get to come?

I did, my grandparents brought me at least a couple years.

It was fun. I hated to see it end. I still don't know for sure why we couldn't have kept it going. It's kind of that thing where the same people do things all the time and if you get tired and nobody steps up to the plate. It was great for our community. It was everything from pork and beef on a stick locally grown here to things from the Philippines and Russia and the Jewish specialties. I thought it was great.

Can you tell me what it was like to work on the committee?

At first when they asked me I thought I don't know how this is going to work because we had some people from the Jewish community and we had a few ladies that were immigrants from Mexico and then we had an active chamber of commerce at that time, they might have been called Postville Community Club, and I thought are these people going to be able to work together because most of us didn't know each other from Adam. It went really well. People worked together [25:00] well. The biggest thing was because you were preparing all this food you had to be inspected. I think that is part of the reason that it just got so that it was

more and more difficult to make sure that everything was according to law. It went fine, people worked together well and finding entertainment and getting school kids involved. We had this parade of flags, I thought it was really, really a big deal.

I know the last two years they've held the Diversity Celebration up at the school and I was wondering if you attended any of those?

I went to one and not because I didn't want to go to them all, it seems like I had conflicts. That's really something. There is a group of teachers that have worked really hard to keep that going and to work with those children and for them to share their culture. It's sort of like when my ancestors left their homelands in Europe, they didn't want their families to forget. I think it's really important for these kids too. They want to move into our culture and hopefully they will become immersed in it, but they don't ever want to forget either. So I think that's a cool thing.

How has living and working in Postville influenced you personally?

Well first of all I have to tell you that I live in Monona for the simple reason that when my mother in law got sick in the 90s, we had a chance to move in to her place. But I always say I sleep in Monona and I live here. My church is here, my friends are here, and my job is here. It's a great place, I have no regrets, I really don't. I have wonderful friends, I like my job, obviously I've been sitting here for thirty years almost. I just think it's good.

Do you have any hopes for the future of Postville?

I have lots of hopes, but obviously it hasn't happened overnight and it's not going to happen in the next five or ten years either. Things get a little bit better every year. More and more kids are going on to college. Their parents are being immersed into the school system as well. When it's time for people to help with things at school like at Booster Club, more and more of the

parents of the Hispanic and Somali children are helping. We had a terrible tragedy where a Somali family was killed and this community really did rally. It didn't matter that those four kids were Somali children or that nobody knew their parents or had probably never met them, they took them food and we had a drive at school that they would have clothing and that kind of stuff and so that the children knew that people cared about them. To answer your question in a round about way I think every year things get a little bit better and people are more accepting. Probably the locals are a little less accepting that the new people. The people your age and I would say people from their teenage years through thirty-somethings, people like you in their 20s are probably the ones that are the best at making things work and seeing the good. People that have children in the little grades or in preschool they wrap their arms around the whole thing. It's the senior citizens, and as more of those people pass away or are no longer in the workforce, I think things will continue to improve. Its not the way any of us probably [30:00] envisioned it, but you have to make the best of what you got and go from there.

That's all the questions I have for you, but if there is anything you'd like to add or talk about that I didn't ask you, the floor is yours.

I can't think of anything, unless you can think of anything. I think you've done a really good job.

Okay great, well if you have thing that you want to add, we can add it to the transcript.

If I think of anything I will send you an email. [30:35]