

Harvest of Change: Meatpacking, Immigration, and Garden City, Kansas

by

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Abstract: Garden City, Kansas, embodies the dramatic changes that have beset many rural communities in the wake of a broad restructuring of the American economy. Beginning in 1980, the opening of two massive beefpacking plants on its outskirts turned Garden City into a modern boomtown and the first majority-minority community in Kansas. But when one of those plants burned down in 2000, the boom went bust. The author has studied Garden City for almost three decades. Here he tracks the long-term demographic, economic, social, and cultural changes that have made Garden City a bellwether for small towns throughout the Midwest and South that have attracted food factories and their immigrant workforces.

In December 1980, IBP opened the world's largest beefpacking plant 10 miles west of Garden City, near the hamlet of Holcomb in southwest Kansas. Three years later ConAgra bought out a small beef plant on Garden City's east side and expanded its operations. These signature events set off a protracted boom, fueled by migrants from around the United States, immigrants and refugees from across the globe, who came to work on packinghouse floors. Almost exactly two decades later, on Christmas night 2000, the ConAgra plant burned, putting 2,300 out of work. Eleven years later, the plant remains an abandoned shell.

For a quarter century, my colleague Michael Broadway and I have studied Garden City, combining intensive, in-depth fieldwork (1987-1991) with periodic rapid appraisals and monitoring through news sources and contacts with key informants. Our research, and that of colleagues who worked with us in the late 1980s, has produced an extensive literature on how one town has grappled with the challenges of rural industrialization, rapid population growth and subsequent decline, amidst a continuous flow of immigrants and refugees. It has also drawn the attention of other social scientists, historians, journalists, filmmakers, and photographers. Here I review Garden City's social and economic ups and downs over the past 30 years and how it has dealt with them. Let me begin with a brief explanation of the catalyst behind Garden City's transformation--the meatpacking industry.

The structure and location of the beef industry began to shift in the 1950s, thanks to the development of hybrid corn and grain sorghum (milo) as sources of cheap cattle feed and center-pivot irrigation systems, which let High Plains farmers tap the vast Ogallala Aquifer. By the 1980s southwest Kansas had emerged as the epicenter of cattle feeding and contained the largest concentration of beefpacking plants in North America.

Fortunately for these plants, the early 1980s were a time of increased immigration and refugee flows to the United States. Southeast Asian “boat people” were being resettled across the country, and many of these newcomers lacked the English-language abilities necessary to compete for skilled jobs. Meatpacking offered entry-level employment and a chance for a new life in America—a function the industry has performed for immigrants since the days of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. By 2000, these two plants had a combined workforce of 5,300—90 percent of whom were hourly employees. The need to fill so many jobs, coupled with employee turnover that exceeded 100 percent in 1990 (Cultural Relations Board, 2001:14), forced meatpacking plants to recruit far and wide.

Newcomers and Garden City

As these two plants came on line in the early 1980s, the population of Garden City skyrocketed. [**Table 1**] Surrounding Finney County became the fastest growing county in Kansas in the 1980s (39%) and the second fastest in the 1990s (22%). The apex of Garden City’s growth coincided with the 2000 federal census. Nine months later, a suspicious fire on Christmas night closed the county’s second largest employer, ConAgra. Workers with families did not immediately leave town, however, choosing instead to finish out the school year and hope the plant would reopen. It didn’t. [**Table 2**] Eventually they left and school enrollment fell. Yet by the end of the decade enrollment was once again on the rise as employment opportunities increased. But as Tables 1 and 2 clearly show, Garden City has yet to regain the population it lost from the fire and its aftermath.

Rapid growth—and more recent decline—is only part of Garden City’s story. More dramatic has been alterations in its ethnic composition. Hispanics increased from 16 percent of the county

population in 1980 to 47 percent in 2010. Non-Hispanic whites, on the other hand, declined from 82 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 2010. At the same time, non-Hispanic whites have become more diverse as Low-German speaking Mennonites entered southwest Kansas from Chihuahua in northern Mexico.

Garden City's schools dramatically reflect this demographic transition. Hispanics now make up over two-thirds of the school district's pupils, while non-Hispanic whites have declined to a quarter of the student population. Yet broad census categories, such as Hispanic, mask the human tapestry that Garden City has become. The Hispanics enumerated in 1980 were Mexican Americans, with a deep history in the town (Ávila (1997)). The label "Hispanic" now encompasses not only these established residents, but new immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Cuba.

When Garden City's economic boom began in the early 1980s, one-third of the newcomers were Southeast Asian refugees, primarily Vietnamese. But their numbers have dwindled as this stream of refugees slowed to a trickle, and as they moved to climates more akin to their homeland; took jobs or started businesses with money saved from working in the beef plants; followed their children away to college. As the Southeast Asian labor supply shrank, the packers turned to another ready source—Latinos. **[IBP/ConAgra workforce histogram]**

By the late 1980s, IBP and ConAgra recruiters were traveling to Texas and New Mexico in search of workers. But it was during the 1990s that Mexican immigration to Garden City surged. The companies had always recruited in border cities by advertising on radio stations that could be heard in Mexico. But beginning in the mid-1990s, IBP, with the blessing of the INS, established a labor office in Mexico City, offering to pay recruits' bus fares to the United States (Cohen 1998).]

The results of this migration are evident in Garden City's landscape. Entering Garden City from the east along U.S. Highway 50, visitors are immediately aware of its diverse population. On the edge of town are Latino dance halls and retail stores; nearer town two mini-malls house Mexican bakeries, Asian markets and a billiard hall. Highway 50 becomes Fulton Street in town, and the stores and restaurants that line this major thoroughfare further testify to Garden City's cosmopolitan quality.] Sharing a parking lot and a sign are Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal Church, Bad Boyz Boxing Club, and Lam Gia Thai Restaurant. Across the way are El Remedio Market and Pho Hoa Vietnamese restaurant. Turn north onto Main Street and you enter the downtown--its banks, jewelers, clothing stores, soda shop, Internet café, and upscale Mexican restaurant cater primarily to the shrinking Anglo population. Thumb through the Yellow Pages and you will find 68 restaurants listed: 22 are chain franchises; 23 are Latin American; 5 are Asian.

A quick glance at virtually any of the telephone book's white pages reveals the many peoples who call Garden City home--Murillo, Murphy, Nguyen, Nichols, Nunez.

Visit the high school and you will see young Burmese women in hijabs sitting in the cafeteria or in ESL classrooms alongside Somalis and Latinos. In fact, 23 percent of the district's students are enrolled in ESL.

The first Burmese arrived in Garden City in December 2007, recruited by Tyson (formerly IBP)--others followed to find work on its floor. Current estimates of the Burmese population in Garden City range from 150 to 700. Somalis began arriving in 2006. More followed in 2008, after Tyson closed its beef slaughter operation in Emporia, Kansas. Since then other Somalis came from Minneapolis. An estimated 300 now live in town, along with 100 or so Ethiopians.

Garden City's Boom, Bust, and Recovery?

Garden City's boom came in the 1980s, when the number of employed persons shot up by over 50 percent [Table 3]. Job numbers increased by 23 percent in the 1990s. But employment fell after the ConAgra fire, as did payrolls and the number of business establishments. These numbers are climbing once again, but they have yet to recover to 2000 levels. One of the most visible gains is an ethanol plant, which opened in 2007. The plant's operator credits it with creating 32 jobs and an additional 50 spin-off jobs (Farley 2009). In 2008 voters approved a \$97.5 million bond issue to build a new high school--210 worked at the site in summer 2010 (Ahmad 2010).

Meatpacking has been Garden City's economic engine since 1980, roaring till 2000, sputtering since. With jobs in meatpacking have come new jobs in the service sector. But many of them pay poorly and provide only part-time employment. [Table 4] As a result, the average wage in Finney County fell from 92 percent of the Kansas average in 1980 to 84 percent in 2000, and there it remains. Per-capita income has also fallen relative to the state and, more significantly, to rural Kansas (Table 5).

Given income levels, it is not surprising that the proportion of students in Garden City public schools who receive free or reduced-price lunches has risen sharply—to 7 of every 10 students (Table 6).

The Social Burdens of Boom and Bust

In June 1980, construction of the IBP plant was in full swing. Its need for housing became so critical that Garden City officials held a press conference to ask home owners to make sleeping quarters available to workers unable to find accommodations (Reeve 1996:219). A year after the plant opened, IBP surveyed its employees and found that 5 percent were living in motels or cars,

while 33 percent felt they were paying excessive rent. IBP convinced local officials to rezone land on the eastern edge of town for a mobile home park. East Garden Village grew to more than 500 units and houses nearly a tenth of the town's population.

Thirty years later affordable housing remains a critical issue. Most of the community's newcomers cannot afford single family homes, but very few rental units were built over the past 10 years, so many end up staying with friends and relatives in crowded conditions. Some landlords rent by the head. Approximately 300 housing units in any given month are occupied but are not hooked up to any utilities. According to Garden City's planner, "These people are not squatters; they simply cannot afford to pay for the utilities."

Health care is a serious problem, thanks to an economy based on low paying jobs that provide few benefits. In the early 1990s, Finney County placed in the bottom 10 percent of Kansas counties on the Primary Care Status Index, which includes percent of births lacking early prenatal care, children lacking adequate immunization, and births to mothers without a high school education. The county's poor performance stems from inadequate "access to and availability of health resources for low-income minority households" (Hackenberg and Kukulka, 1995: 195). Twenty years later, a nationwide survey of health behaviors also placed Finney County in the bottom 10 percent of Kansas counties: reported rates of adult obesity, adult smoking, binge drinking, and teen pregnancy far exceed statewide averages (University of Wisconsin Health Institute n.d.)

United Methodist Western Kansas Mexican-American Ministries Care Centers and Clinics (better known as Mexican-American Ministries, or MAM) provides basic health care for those without medical insurance in Garden City and surrounding counties. Services are provided in

English, Spanish, and Low German. Founded in 1987, MAM's Care Centers and Clinics recorded 6,000 primary care visits in 1990. By 2010 the number of clinic visits had quadrupled to 24,783. But even this staggering figure does not reflect true demand. According to MAM's director, Garden City's clinic must turn away 15-20 people a day because of insufficient staff. (**Table 7**)

Need for other social services continues to climb. Food stamp recipients in Finney County rose from 1263 in 2000 to over 4000 in 2010. Rising demand for food stamps is a national phenomenon, but the 226 percent increase far surpasses the statewide increase of 130 percent during the same period.

Church volunteers founded Garden City's Emmaus House in 1979 to provide temporary shelter and hot meals for indigents, drawn by the construction of IBP and a regional power plant. During the 1980s the number of persons sheltered and fed increased by 250 percent. The loss of jobs associated with the ConAgra fire dramatically affected Emmaus House. (**Table 8**) From 2000 to 2001, the number of food boxes it dispersed doubled, while meals provided on-site tripled. Although demand for these services dropped in 2002 and 2003, the number of meals served soared by nearly 400 percent during the decade, while the number of food boxes increased by a third. More and more people in Garden City are dependent upon charity for food-- many of them work for Tyson.

Garden City's Great Big Meat Adventure

Boomtowns have always been a part of the western landscape. Rapid growth, high wages, and increases in social disorders characterized the energy boomtowns that sprang up in the intermountain West in the 1970s. Beefpacking has created a different type of boomtown on the High Plains. With their high turnover, minimal benefits, dangerous working conditions, and low

wages, these plants have created few jobs for local people. Instead, the packers target immigrants and refugees, while paying bonuses to workers who recruit new employees. In packinghouse towns, wage levels fall and communities are confronted by rising tides of impoverished residents. These “booms” produce dramatic surges in need for social, educational, and health services which do not abate. Increased costs for these services fall to local government, voluntary organizations, and ultimately to permanent residents.

The 20th century ended in Garden City with the ConAgra fire, which destroyed 2,300 jobs. The following spring, the city sent a delegation to the company’s Colorado headquarters to ask that the plant be reopened. ConAgra executives refused to meet with them. A member of that delegation told us: “I don’t see how a company can do that to a community. They cut us off at the legs” (authors’ 2004 fieldnotes). Today, the abandoned plant is owned by JBS, a Brazilian company. Pleas for the company to do “something” with the plant still fall on deaf ears.

Garden City has spent the 21st century trying to climb back to where it was before the fire. The Tyson plant remains a magnet for those with little command of English who are not afraid of hard work. And these latest arrivals--Burmese, Somalis, Ethiopians--provide new challenges for a community with a long history of accommodating immigrants.

Painting a rosy picture in 1979, Battelle’s social impact study failed did not forecast the economic burdens and social upheavals that awaited Garden City. They failed to anticipate that within three decades 70 percent of school children would be so-called minorities. Nor did they foresee that high school administrators would one day brag on newcomer children who actively participate in extracurricular activities and regularly enroll in honors classes. They did not envision a direct bus service connecting Garden City to Chihuahua City. Or Anglo professionals

lunching next to refugees and new immigrants on Vietnamese pho and Salvadoran papusas.

The past three decades have taught Garden Citians that in a globalized economy, multinational corporations have few loyalties to the communities in which they operate. But Garden Citians have also learned to embrace the steady stream of newcomers and the rich heritages they bring with them. It is this willingness to accept and to offer a helping hand to all who come that has become the hallmark of Garden City. And it is what keeps drawing me back.

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