# Midwest farm town, transformed by immigration, thrives

Wed, Jun 20 2012

By Mary Wisniewski and Christine Stebbins

BEARDSTOWN, IL (Reuters) - Two years ago, Bozi Kiekie taught English at a university in the Congo. Although he liked his work, he wasn't earning enough to make a good life for his family.

So Kiekie, 44, entered a lottery for one of 55,000 annual visas to enter the United States. When he won a so-called diversity visa, he came to Illinois, where he found a job cutting out hog tongues at the meatpacking plant in Beardstown, a small river town about 200 miles southwest of Chicago.

"Leaving a teaching position and pulling tongues - that's a big gap," said Kiekie, who talks with his wife and three young children by Skype or phone every day. But he said he and the other immigrant workers at Cargill's pork plant - more than 900 of them from 34 countries - are willing to work hard at just about anything for a better life in the United States.

The Cargill plant and the community that depends on it are emblematic of two changes in U.S. immigration. The first is the shift of job-seeking immigrants from big cities like Chicago and New York to rural and suburban areas, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The second is the crackdown on illegal immigration, primarily affecting workers from Mexico and Central America. Companies looking for legal labor are increasingly hiring workers with diversity visas, offered via a lotto system to countries with low immigration to the U.S. or refugee status from a variety of nations, according to immigration experts.

This has created challenges for small communities like Beardstown, which first had to adapt to one new language - Spanish and a mostly Mexican culture - and now have to deal with dozens of new cultures, said Mark Grey, professor of anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa and director of the Iowa Center for Immigration Leadership and Integration.

"People were screaming for years, 'We want a legal workforce!' They're getting it," Grey said.

20,000 HOGS A DAY

Beardstown, with a population of about 6,000, advertises itself as the home of the "Almanac Trial" courthouse. In 1858, then-Illinois lawyer Abraham Lincoln used an almanac to show that a witness in a murder case was lying about the position of the moon.

The main attraction, however - and main employer - is the Cargill plant, a 430,000-square-foot concrete slaughterhouse that turns almost 20,000 hogs a day into meat. Trucks roll in filled with

squealing hogs from surrounding farms; refrigerated trucks leave with meat. On a warm day the smell of manure is staggering.

Inside the plant, workers are assigned to one of two floors. On the "hot floor," where temperatures are over 80 degrees Fahrenheit, they slaughter pigs, burn off their hair, and constantly clean with hot water. Temperatures are kept at about 40F on the "cold floor," where hogs are cut into pieces and wrapped for shipment. About 2,200 workers are there for two shifts a day; a third group of contract workers cleans up the mess at night. Cargill denied a Reuters request to visit the plant.

Cargill is the biggest private company in the United States and the third-largest U.S. meatpacker, shipping meat from Midwestern plants to food distributors around the world.

The Beardstown plant used to be run by Oscar Mayer, which closed it in 1987. Cargill reopened it in 1987 and offered lower wages - $6.50 an hour instead of $8.75, according to a November 2011 report by Faranak Miraftab, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

Lower wages, along with increases in work speed and injuries - a trend in meatpacking plants across the Midwest in the late 1980s - made jobs less attractive for most white skilled workers, according to immigration experts. Turnover at the plant was 72 percent in 1990, according to Cargill.

Wages have since come back: Base salary at the Beardstown plant is now $13.65 an hour, according to workers.

Latino immigrants started coming to Beardstown, once an all-white town settled mostly by Germans, in the 1990s. Immigrants are drawn to Cargill because meatpacking pays better than other available jobs, such as picking crops, and you don't have to speak English to do it.

Cargill recruited the first wave of Latinos, advertising on both sides of the Mexican border, according to Miraftab. Many were already working in the United States when they heard about the company from relatives, according to former and current Cargill workers.

Cargill spokesman Mike Martin said the recruiting information in the University of Illinois study was inaccurate and that the company does not recruit employees from outside the United States or U.S. territories.

"Cargill has never sent mobile recruiters to Mexico to fill positions at its pork processing facilities in the U.S.," he said in an email. "Immigrant employees come to Beardstown based on word-of-mouth passed through immigrant and personal networks because quality jobs are available." When the plant experienced high turnover rates in the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s, he said, "there were some employee recruiting trips within the U.S., to areas of high unemployment ... and its possessions such as Puerto Rico."

Areas where Cargill recruited included Michigan, Texas, Florida and Alaska, Martin said.

Workers who process meat must join the United Food and Commercial Workers Union at Beardstown's Cargill plant as a condition of the job, union officials said. The union has both Hispanic and African representatives.

A ROCKY START

While both native community residents and immigrants agree that most people accept the newcomers, they concede the beginnings were rocky and some problems remain.

When Jesus Lopez, 40, started working in the Cargill plant 20 years ago, graffiti like "KKK is here" and "Go back where you came from" used to cover the lockers.

"It was pretty rough," the Mexican native remembered. He recalls with gratitude how some older white workers protected him and helped him learn the job. Lopez is now a supervisor.

Ricardo Montoya Picazo, 25, who came to Beardstown when he was 7, remembered there was "so much hatred" that Latino children had to be walked to school for their safety.

In a series of controversial, high-profile raids during the Bush administration, federal agents descended on meat plants in the middle of the night, helicopters hovering overhead, to target hundreds of illegals. In 2007 an overnight raid by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested 63 illegal workers, all employees of a cleaning contractor, at the Cargill plant.

"The next day they identified about 48 kids without a mom or dad," said Julio Flores, a native of El Salvador who does community outreach for the public schools and is president of the Amigos Unidos committee, an Hispanic cultural and civic group. "We had two Guatemalan soccer teams. Now we don't have any."

Martin, the Cargill spokesman, said its policy is to employ only legal workers. Former workers and community residents said illegals have worked there using false documents but are fired when their identity is found out.

The raids these days are largely silent. Federal immigration officials audit company employment records, in particular "I-9" identification data. In the past five years, ICE nationally has stepped up audits of I-9s from 254 in 2007 to 1,662, so far, in 2012. Criminal arrests of employers have jumped from three in 2005 to 221 last year.

"Because of the silent raids, the major employers, who for years relied predominantly on a Latino workforce, legal and illegal, started recruiting among other marginalized populations," said Grey, who co-wrote a book about the ICE raid on a Postville, Iowa meat plant in 2008 that resulted in 400 arrests.

After the 2007 raid, Cargill sent recruiters to Florida and Puerto Rico to search for workers with residency cards or citizenship, Miraftab said. Puerto Ricans arrived at the plant soon after, along with Cubans.

Africans started coming to the plant 10 years ago, but most have arrived in the past three years, according to Kiekie. In addition to English and French, he speaks three African languages and is the UCFW liaison to African workers. He said there are about 350 Africans from 14 countries. A few are refugees, but the vast majority are here on diversity visas. Most are French-speaking immigrants from Togo and the Congo, and many are highly educated - former doctors, lawyers and teachers.

The diversity visa program, started in 1995, is a lottery for receiving a U.S. residency card, or Green Card. Applicants from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States are selected to vary the population mix. From 2000 to 2010, 216,900 Africans migrated to the U.S. through the program.

TAMALES AND DRIED OKRA

Beardstown public schools now have both Spanish- and French-speaking liaisons for new immigrants. Cargill, which offers English as a second language as well as citizenship classes, communicates with employees in three languages. The Easter service at Beardstown's St. Alexius' Catholic Church had English, Spanish and French choirs.

Beardstown has had it relatively easy: The Cargill community has only had to adapt to two new languages. The meatpacking town of Marshalltown, Iowa, has up to 30 different languages and cultures, according to Grey. Des Moines has 100.

The influx of first Latino and then African immigrants has transformed Beardstown and neighboring Rushville.

In Beardstown's city park, across from the Almanac Courthouse, thousands gathered last month for a Cinco de Mayo celebration, with mariachi bands and costumed schoolchildren performing folk dances. Around the park flew flags from two dozen nations.

Just off the town square is a grocery store that caters to Latino tastes, with tall aluminum tamale steamers and poblano peppers. Spanish-language magazines share space with a copy of "Ingles Para Los Trabajodores" (English for Workers), with useful phrases like "Who is the forelady?" and "Full time?"

In Rushville, at the Passi grocery store, Koku Akoto chats with his customers in French as they purchase West African staples like palm oil, dried okra, groundnut paste, and sardines in tomato sauce. Akoto, a Cargill employee who once worked at a Togo bank, helps his wife, Passi, with the store on weekends.

"It's good to find your food," said one customer, Yawo Ayivi, who once taught French in Togo and now works at Cargill.

Beardstown lost population from 1980 to 2000, from 7,232 to 5,766, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. But it grew from 2000 to 2010, back up to 6,123. Blacks increased from 52 to 360, while the number of Latinos grew from 1,032 to 1,994. The number of whites fell from

5,233 in 2000 to 4,576 in 2010, and from 90.8 percent of the population to 74.7 percent. Smaller Rushville has also seen a spike in the number of minorities.

Both towns are well-kept, with mowed lawns and flowers in the front of brick and frame homes. They lack the forlorn, hollowed-out quality of some other rural Midwest towns that are more troubled by job and population loss. Beardstown Mayor Bob Walters said Latinos bought and fixed up many run-down houses.

Marge Corwin, 62, who owns a Rushville flower and gift shop, thinks diversity is good for the area, both for learning about different cultures and for economic growth.

"There are some people who will never, ever accept it," she said. "But they're dying out."

LEGAL AND ILLEGAL

Different immigration statuses create two distinct ways to be an immigrant in the Beardstown and Rushville communities - legal and trying to adapt to American ways, and illegal and living in fear.

Sister Magdalena Paz, a Mexican native who works with immigrant families at St. Alexius, said many of the newer Hispanic immigrants are working with "borrowed" documents on farms. Paz, who has been in Beardstown for almost a year, said some undocumented Latinos are former teachers and engineers who decided life was too hard in Mexico. "There are no jobs, and everything is very expensive," Paz said through a translator. "The schools are very bad."

She said many families are separated, with wives remaining in Mexico while the men work here. The separations can last for years, and the coming and going of immigrants make it hard to build community.

"My dream would be that in Mexico and other countries they were more fair with their people so they wouldn't have to emigrate," said Paz.

Another problem for illegal immigrants is what happens to their children who are not born here and therefore do not automatically become citizens. Amigos Unidos' Flores sees children, fluent in English, who get top grades only to find out their status will keep them from college.

"They are so mad," he said. "They don't have any reason to stay in school." This problem may be addressed by President Barack Obama's June 15 announcement that illegal immigrants who entered the U.S. as children will not be deported if they meet certain requirements.

BINDING TOGETHER

The African immigrants, too, are often separated from their families. Visa applications and travel costs add up to about $4,000 a person - more than six times the income of a well-paid civil servant in Togo, according to the University of Illinois report.

Kiekie said friends and relatives pay the costs to allow new immigrants to come over, and the new immigrants reimburse them once they earn enough in the United States. The African immigrants formed a Beardstown-Rushville social group to give one another support.

"We talk life, how to integrate into this country, problems we face at work," said Kiekie. He is working on a master's degree to teach French and hopes to bring his wife and children to the U.S. someday.

Kay Brown, a former Beardstown resident who works at a Rushville consignment shop, said she finds the African immigrants "more outgoing" than the Hispanics have been. "I think they're a little more cautious," said Brown of Latino immigrants.

Flores said perceptions may be connected to the novelty factor - the Africans are new, while Latinos have been coming to the U.S. for a long time.

MELTING POT

New immigrants or old, both groups have started blending into the community. Mixed couples - Hispanic and white - are a frequent sight in Beardstown. Trujillo complained that his children don't want to speak Spanish. Atoko wants his children to keep speaking French at home so they don't lose it.

Georgia Degboe, a Congo native who now acts as the French-speaking liaison to immigrant families for the Beardstown public schools, said many African immigrants she knows would like to continue their old occupations in the United States but are blocked by a new language and the difficulty of combining school with working all day.

"Their primary goal is to become a doctor or lawyer again, but that rarely happens," said Degboe, 33, who has a law degree in her native country. "Along the way, people get discouraged."

Degboe didn't. She got her U.S. law degree through a program for foreign students, though she'll need additional training to take the bar exam in Illinois.

Her counterpart doing community outreach at the Beardstown public schools, Maricela Chavez, didn't get discouraged, either. She had taught kindergarten in Mexico. After two years at Cargill, she decided to go back into education. Two of her children are in college, studying to be bilingual teachers.

Many immigrants at meatpacking plants are "the sacrifice generation" - people who know they'll have to work at hard, menial jobs so their children can rise to something else, said Grey of the University of Northern Iowa.

And though Mexican immigration has fallen to a net zero, according to a recent Pew Research Center report, people will continue to flow in from Mexico and other countries, legally or illegally, as long as they find a better life here, working with immigration policies that have not seen any significant change since 1986.

"The global economy includes capital, includes businesses, but does not include workers," said Flores. So workers go where the work is, whatever it takes. "The border for the hungry is going to be broken," he said.

http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/20/us-usa-immigration-meatpacking-idUSBRE85J0FA20120620