

# Postville, Iowa, Is Up for Grabs

By MAGGIE JONES

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Around 10 on a clear May morning in 2008, two black helicopters circled over Postville, Iowa, a town of two square miles and fewer than 3,000 residents. Then a line of S.U.V.'s drove past Postville's main street and its worn brick storefronts. More than 10 white buses with darkened windows and the words "Homeland Security" on their sides were on their way to the other side of town. Postville's four-man police force had no forewarning of what was about to happen. Neither did the mayor.

The procession of S.U.V.'s, buses and state-trooper cars were descending on Agriprocessors, the largest producer of kosher meat in the United States and Postville's biggest employer, which occupies 60 acres on the edge of town. Several silos clustered together like old, overgrown tin cans behind the plant's chain-link fence. Low-slung, rusted metal buildings — one with a 10-foot menorah mounted on its top — contained hundreds of workers, chickens and cattle.

The early shift at Agri, as Postville residents call it, had been under way for several hours when dozens of agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, dressed in black flak vests, stormed the plant's buildings. Workers shouted, "*La migra, la migra*" (immigration police), dropped their butcher and boning knives and fled from their jobs at the cutting and grinding machines. A group of women ran to a bathroom and locked themselves in the stalls before I.C.E. agents forced them out. A couple of men scaled Agri's fence and hid in the cornfield across the street, where they remained until the next morning. Others climbed onto the roof near the smokestack of the chicken-processing building. From there, one man called a friend from his cellphone: "Take care of my children," he pleaded.

Fermin Loyes Lopez, a 27-year-old father from Guatemala who had been living in Postville for five years, found his wife, Rosa Zamora Santos, who worked the same shift, cutting chicken meat off breast bones. One of their daughters, a toddler, was with a baby sitter; the other, a 5-year-old, was in kindergarten. After a quick call to the baby sitter, Lopez counseled his wife: "Tell them the truth," he said, referring to the I.C.E. agents, just before he was arrested. "Tell them your real name. Tell them we have children."

Meanwhile, several blocks away, on Lawler, the town's main street, Elver Herrera, a former plant worker who ran the local bakery, hid Latinos in an apartment above his store. The head of the local Catholic Church's Hispanic ministry raced to a nearby apartment complex where many Latino families lived and handed out printed information about undocumented immigrants' rights, while a school counselor went door to door, telling families to stay away from the plant.

Within hours of the raid — which I.C.E. had planned for months, based on evidence that large numbers of Agri's employees used suspect or false Social Security numbers and that plant managers hired minors and violated other labor laws — I.C.E. agents detained 389

undocumented workers, most of them Guatemalan. (Agri employed more than 900 workers, over three shifts.) The agents handcuffed the wrists of the men and women and loaded them into the Homeland Security buses. With one state-trooper vehicle in front of each bus and another behind, they drove 75 miles to Waterloo, Iowa. There, I.C.E. had transformed an 80-acre fairgrounds, the National Cattle Congress, into a temporary processing center for the workers. Many of the detainees, including Lopez, were then sent to prisons throughout the country, where they would spend five months before being deported to Guatemala.

Back in Postville, about 400 residents poured into St. Bridget's Catholic Church, which would become the town's de facto relief center in the months to come. Women, men and children ate at the church and slept in the pews, afraid I.C.E. might be waiting for them at home.

On almost any other May evening, Guatemalan families, many of whom had lived in Postville for years and were a tight-knit group from two villages in Guatemala, would have been outside, pushing strollers down Lawler Street, stopping for tacos at the Mexican restaurant, Sabor Latino, and for ice cream at the Sweet Spot. Instead, downtown was empty. At the Tidy Wave laundromat, washers and dryers were filled with clothes. No one ever came to claim them.

Some families packed their cars in the middle of the night and drove to other meatpacking towns in Iowa or to another part of the United States altogether. Others turned to a van service, run by a local Guatemalan-American, that would eventually shuttle more than 100 people to O'Hare Airport in Chicago for one-way flights to Guatemala City. Children stopped going to school. Within weeks, roughly 1,000 Mexican and Guatemalan residents — about a third of the town — vanished. It was as if a natural disaster had swept through, leaving no physical evidence of destruction, just silence behind it.

Postville — a town with no stoplights, no fast-food restaurants and a weekly newspaper that for years featured the "Yard of the Week" — had been through one of biggest single-site immigration raids in U.S. history. For 20 years, this community of schoolteachers, town officials, farmers and others had lived diversity up close, through influxes of Orthodox Jews, Guatemalans and Mexicans, in ways many people in large cities never do. The raid might have pushed that diversity out of Postville. Instead, the post-raid, post-Latino years would create a more complex community and more big-city challenges for tiny Postville than anyone could have envisioned.

**Like many Iowa towns,** Postville was hit hard by the Midwest farm crisis in the 1980s. Small farms folded, businesses shuttered and people moved to bigger cities for better opportunities. Then, in 1987, Postville, it seemed, got lucky: the Rubashkin family, part of the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidic Jews, extended its meat business from a butcher shop in Brooklyn, N.Y., to a defunct factory in Postville. It was part of a trend of major meatpacking plants moving to the Midwest, closer to livestock and lower-paid, nonunion workers. Even among these new destinations, though, Postville stood out. While many rural meatpacking towns have populations of 30,000 to 60,000, Postville's population was just 1,400 when Agri arrived.

Initially, Russians and Ukrainians worked at the plant. But as they moved on to better jobs and other towns, Mexicans and later Guatemalans took their place. Tensions in Postville — where intermarriage was a Swede marrying a Norwegian — ran high at times. The newcomers were

largely single men with “too much time on their hands on the weekends,” according to Michael Halse, the Postville police chief. Some longtime residents grumbled that Guatemalans took jobs from white Iowans; a rumor spread that Mexicans killed dogs for meat.

Not everyone was pleased with the presence of Orthodox Jews, either, many of whom were managers and rabbis at the plant. About 100 Jewish families ultimately moved to Postville, where they opened a synagogue and schools for their children. Dressed in black felt fedoras and black suits with *tzitzit*, or tassels, hanging from their shirts and sometimes *shtraimels*, large fur hats, the Orthodox men stuck out among others walking down Lawler Street. The Jews were remote, some complained; they drove as if they still lived in New York City; they let their grass grow too high.

But by the mid-2000s, time and experience had softened Postville’s mood. Latinos, Jews and longtime Iowans were still largely segregated socially, but tolerance was the norm. It helped that many of the single Guatemalan and Mexican men had moved on or settled down, often bringing their families from back home. The public schools had a new fine-arts building, developed a K-12 bilingual program and hired additional staff members. New businesses sprouted: a Mexican restaurant and grocery store, a Guatemalan restaurant and the Guatemalan-owned Tonita’s Express, where workers lined up on Saturday mornings to wire hundreds of dollars back to villages in Guatemala and bought phone cards, Spanish-language CDs and DVDs, tortillas and birthday cards.

By that time, Aaron Goldsmith, an Orthodox Jew, had won a seat on the Postville City Council. And volunteers organized an annual food festival downtown, where, along with cotton candy, funnel cakes and hot dogs, the booths featured falafel, tacos and Ukrainian *blinchiki*, while the entertainer Uncle Moishy — flown in from Brooklyn — performed Yiddish songs.

In 2005 Herrera, the former Agri worker, who had been a teacher in Guatemala, took over the Postville Bakery — a town fixture since the late 1800s — and transformed it into a spot where old-time farmers lingered over doughnuts and coffee and Latinos bought *pan dulce*, tostadas and *conchas*. A new welcome sign went up on the edge of town, declaring Postville “Hometown to the World.”

Among the many who benefited economically from the immigrant population was Candy Seibert. She and her husband bought a handful of apartments to rent to workers; she opened the laundromat Tidy Wave and the Sweet Spot ice-cream store, while her husband worked in construction and ran a cabinetmaking business. When she wasn’t managing cabinet orders, Seibert was scooping ice cream, picking up a few Spanish words, collecting rent and fielding phone calls about dripping faucets. She knew almost all of the town’s newcomers. She liked watching Latino kids, some of whose parents had never finished elementary school and didn’t speak English, graduate from high school. “We didn’t know how good we had it,” she says.

**During my first** trip to Postville two years ago, Seibert and I sat in her real estate office one morning, in a converted garage two blocks from Agri to the east and two blocks from downtown to the west. Dozens of keys hung from the wall, and a dry-erase board listed needed repairs at her properties.

Seibert is 43, with long blond hair that she hastily pulls into a ponytail, a wardrobe of jeans and zip-up hoodies and a no-nonsense manner. “It takes some mothering,” she said of being a Postville landlord, which she likened to the decade she spent bartending in a biker bar. “And I have to yell a lot.”

Her mini-empire of working-class housing includes apartment buildings and clapboard single-family homes divided into units. Following the raid, she also began managing dozens of properties for a bank when a major landlord went bankrupt.

But in the immediate aftermath of the raid, Seibert and many local business owners struggled to stay afloat. Mexican-owned grocery and clothing stores shut down, along with Restaurante Rinconcito Guatemalteco. Business at Seibert’s laundromat and several other local shops dropped by at least 50 percent.

Down the street, Agri was collapsing, too. Most of the work force was in jail or had left town. In the best of circumstances, meatpacking is bloody, exhausting and dangerous work. It draws the desperate: undocumented immigrants, refugees with limited English skills and a smattering of U.S. citizens thin on luck. Agri’s conditions were worse than most. About 75 percent of its workers — some of them minors — were undocumented, and many earned only \$6 to \$7 an hour, often without overtime. Female workers reported being sexually assaulted by managers, and workplace accidents were not uncommon, including broken bones, eye injuries, hearing loss and grisly mishaps that resulted in amputations.

The raid itself did nothing to improve conditions. In subsequent days, one Iowa job agency, Labor Ready, provided 150 replacement employees for Agri, then pulled them out about a week later, complaining that the plant was unsafe. A group of Native Americans from Nebraska and students from Kyrgyzstan also quit shortly after starting. Mysterious ads — Agri officials denied placing them — appeared in newspapers and on telephone poles in Guatemala City, pitching meatpacking jobs for \$8.50 an hour in Postville, “a technologically developed town with a friendly atmosphere, pretty green areas, public schools and family recreation areas.”

Then, in one of its most desperate moves, Agri recruited 170 people from the Micronesian island of Palau — whose status as a former U.S. protectorate means its citizens can work legally in the United States. In September 2008, the Palauans traveled 72 hours and 8,000 miles on planes and buses before arriving in Postville with little more than flip-flops and brightly colored shorts and tops.

Meanwhile, Agri hired other job agencies that recruited Somali refugees from Minnesota and bused in homeless people from Texas, with promises of a hiring bonus and a month of free housing. The once-quiet town entered its “inner-city, homeless phase,” Seibert said. The Postville police chief added more officers — the department was used to dealing with stray animals, locked cars and bar brawls — to the Friday and Saturday night shifts. Arrests went up during the fall and winter of 2008. Drug problems spiked. There was a double stabbing downtown.

In the midst of this upheaval, Sholom Rubashkin, the chief executive of Agri, was charged with providing funds for fake ID cards for workers; later, he was also charged with defrauding banks of millions of dollars. (He is serving a 27-year prison sentence for 86 counts of financial fraud, including money laundering and bank, mail and wire fraud. Other managers received prison sentences for bank fraud and helping immigrants get false work papers.) The same month Rubashkin was arrested, a bank began foreclosing on the plant, and the company suspended hundreds of employees without pay. Work at Agri slowed to a crawl. With few workers to slaughter the animals, hundreds of turkeys, stuck in cages on tractor-trailers outside the plant, began dying. The smell of decay seeped into the neighborhood.

Agri stopped paying its property taxes to Postville, and the town's two biggest landlords — Seibert was not yet among them — folded shop, leaving behind thousands of dollars' worth of unpaid water and heat bills, as well as hundreds of angry, out-of-work tenants.

Many of the laid-off workers fled immediately, including several from a house that Seibert showed me one afternoon. On the outside, paint peeled, and the porch sagged from rot. Several windows were cracked, and one was completely shattered. Inside, beer cans, cups and plastic bags littered the kitchen counters and floors. Upstairs, a toilet tank was cracked down the middle. Seibert — who ended up managing the building after the tenants left — guessed that either someone smashed the toilet or it froze when the heat was shut off. In a bedroom, a pair of flip-flops lay next to a bare mattress, as if its occupant had been too rushed to pack.

Some workers had little choice but to stay put. One winter evening in 2008, Herrera, the manager of the bakery (which would be destroyed by fire the following year), arrived home and greeted his wife: “Baby,” he said, “I have some company.” He had several Palauans with him. Herrera had found them on the street with their suitcases, no money and nowhere to go. Four of them spent several months in Herrera's basement before moving on to other cities and better opportunities.

Of course, the raid was not directly responsible for the treatment of the Palauans and everything else that happened that year: for too long, Postville had been dependent on a corrupt plant and a largely illegal, exploited work force. Still, the raid upended a careful balance in Postville and left chaos in its place.

**One Friday afternoon**, Seibert took me to meet some of the workers who had come to town since the raid. They gathered at an apartment with wood floors and a small kitchen on Lawler Street. It was the social club for dozens of Somalis in town. Several men sat on metal chairs, watching CNN. Others talked in the kitchen where a stand-alone freezer held the meat of three goats and half a cow. The sign taped to the wall read: “Private club. Members and their guests only. See Abdirahman Dagane for membership. \$1 donation for refreshments appreciated.”

Drawn mostly by word of mouth, the men had come to Postville from Minneapolis, Kansas City, Buffalo and other cities. As Abdullahi Hassan offered me a cup of sweet Somali tea, others talked about the downsides of small-town life: the lack of English classes, job-placement agencies and translation services. One man said he heard that if you talked to the mayor about problems at the plant, you would lose your job. “I don't even know where the mayor's office is,”

Jama Guhat said. (It was across the street and a few storefronts away.) Guhat, who moved to Postville several months earlier from Minnesota, was long and lanky and wore a dark brown suit, a Marlboro dangling from his fingers. On Saturdays — the Jewish Sabbath, when the plant closes — Guhat and many Somalis leave Postville for Minneapolis, a three-hour drive, to spend their paychecks on trunks full of halal meat, which meets Islamic standards, as well as seasonings and tea.

Though some Somalis showed up to fill jobs immediately after the raid, many more had come to town since late 2009, after a Canadian businessman named Hershey Friedman bought the Agri slaughterhouse out of bankruptcy court. He renamed it Agri Star and invested millions in revamping the plant. Offering starting wages of \$8.50 an hour, Friedman has increased Agri Star's work force to its current level of about 600 workers from about 300 after bankruptcy.

Like the first Guatemalans, many Somalis in Postville are single: either unmarried or with spouses waiting in Minneapolis or other cities while the men decide if Postville will become home. Others have wives and children still in Kenyan refugee camps. There are about 150 Somalis in town today — down from roughly 250 in 2010 — and no other group in Postville has stood out quite so much: Somali women dressed in head coverings and flowing *hijabs* shopping in the IGA supermarket; tall, dark-skinned Somali men, smoking cigarettes and speaking Arabic outside a store that they rent for their mosque, two doors down from Club 51, the town's lone bar.

Mark Grey, an anthropology professor at the University of Northern Iowa and director of the Iowa Center for Immigrant Leadership and Integration, says the raid resulted in waves of new immigrants not only in Postville but in other meatpacking towns in the Midwest as well. Many meatpacking companies have increasingly steered away from hiring Latinos — even though they may be in the United States legally — because they fear government scrutiny, says Grey, who is an author, with Michele Devlin, a colleague at Northern Iowa, and Aaron Goldsmith, the former Postville councilman, of “Postville, U.S.A.: Surviving Diversity in Small-Town America.” Instead, they have recruited African and Burmese refugees and other non-Latino immigrants, who, while they may be legal, also challenge communities with new cultures and new languages. “People can scream about the illegal work force, but a legal work force will also be more ethnically diverse,” he says. “In these towns, I have people whispering in my ear, ‘I miss my illegal Mexicans.’ ”

**Seibert says she** hopes that the Somalis will make Postville their home. As a landlord, she likes that they are family-oriented and that most don't drink alcohol, in keeping with their Muslim beliefs. Among her favorites is Abdirahman Dagane, who ran the Somali social club. Dagane is 26, exceedingly polite, with boyish looks and outfits of buttoned-up white shirts, khakis and sweater vests. He was 11 when fighting broke out in his Somali village. Playing with friends at the time and unable to find his family before they fled town, he spent the next couple of years living in the back of a village restaurant. Eventually he made his way to Kenya, where he found one of his brothers in a refugee camp. After moving to Minnesota as a refugee, he spent less than a year in 10th grade before dropping out to earn money for himself and his family.

Dagane has heard the talk around town that Somalis don't work as hard as the Guatemalans. "With Somalis, if the supervisor yells, they aren't going to take it," Dagane said. "The Guatemalans always kept working because they don't have papers."

We were sitting in his kitchen on a rainy Saturday a year ago, while lamb boiled on the stove and a five-pound bag of basmati rice sat on a chair next to us. Upstairs, in the three-bedroom apartment that Dagane shared with four other Somali men, the furnishings included little more than a TV, a couple of tables and mattresses on the floor.

While many Somalis were in Minneapolis for the day, Dagane — whose car bumper sticker reads "One who prays but does no work is as one who shoots without a bowstring" and who lists his activities on Facebook as "work and making something better" — preferred to stick around in Postville, doing errands, enjoying the quiet of the town. He hoped to make more money, marry and raise a family there.

Dagane had orchestrated a meeting at the local mosque to identify people who could serve as liaisons between the Somali community and Postville leaders. He and his friends also had plans to open a tea shop. It would be the only Somali-run business in town and a step toward making Postville their own.

Not long after I last saw him, Dagane called me with some news. Dagane, his best friend and three others had left Postville, lured by manufacturing jobs with Whirlpool in Amana, Iowa, that paid \$12 an hour, had better health insurance and offered more time off. Guhat, the Somali of the brown suit and the Marlboros, also left, along with several other Somalis, for a meatpacking plant in Kansas with higher starting wages. This is the story of meatpacking towns: if workers can move on, they usually do.

And while the opening of a Costco or another large retail business might create a more stable work force for Postville, local leaders don't count on that happening, given the economy and Postville's size and remote location. "The town feels fortunate to have a meatpacking plant," Mark Grey says, "even if it creates its own set of problems."

Those problems were relatively minor, so it seemed, before the raid. Many residents refer to that time as Postville's "golden years." Guatemalans had settled and invested in Postville, in part because they liked its safety and small-town atmosphere. Many, though, were undocumented — and afraid. With no papers and scant education and English skills, few could walk away from even the lousiest jobs. Their limitations created Postville's sense of stability.

Some of those Guatemalans have now returned. Rosa Zamora Santos, whose husband was deported following the raid, was part of a group of Agri women who reported sexual harassment and other workplace violations to law-enforcement authorities. The women were allowed to stay as government witnesses, with GPS tracking devices strapped to their ankles for months. Then, two years ago, Santos became one of more than three dozen other women and children who were awarded U-visas, given to victims of crimes committed in the United States. That allowed her to finally bring her husband back to Postville last year. Other Latinos — some legal, some not — have moved in, too, along with a few African-American families escaping crime-ridden

neighborhoods in Chicago and other cities. The work at Agri is still grueling; wages are low (Agri Star, like Agriprocessors before it, is not unionized), and some of the old managers from Agriprocessors are still in place. Yet over all, most people think Agri Star is an improvement.

New shops have also opened in Postville in the last two years, including a Mexican convenience store, a Dollar General store and, last year, a kosher store to replace one that folded after the raid. Tzvi Bass originally considered using a Hebrew name for his new grocery before settling on Glatt Market, which he hoped would attract more non-Jews. (The Jewish population has declined to about 50 families from 100 in 2008.) And though Somalis still head to Minneapolis to visit friends and buy Somali food in bulk, a Somali wanders occasionally into Glatt Market shopping for spices, canned beans and meat (kosher meat meets halal standards) among the aisles of eggs, milk, challah, gefilte fish and cold cuts. “It was easy to destroy this town,” Bass told me a few weeks ago. “It’s harder to rebuild. But I see it slowly, slowly coming back.”

Seibert sees it gradually growing, too, albeit in a different — and still-to-be-defined — form. Some Somalis have settled down with families, including Abdi Kassim, who has lived in Postville for three years and in June married a Somali woman, whom he met at Agri. “I plan to grow old here,” he told me last month.

As for Abdirahman Dagane, the Whirlpool job did not last. Not long after he started, the company began a round of layoffs: as the last hired, Dagane and his friends were the first let go. He returned to Postville a couple times in the last year to visit friends and toyed with the idea of moving back. But this spring he found a job driving a taxi in Des Moines. “I love Postville,” he told me. “But in America, if you find a job, you gotta go. And I’m not starting over again at Agri for \$8.50 an hour. Somalis go where the jobs are. We are pastoralists. We don’t stay in one place too long.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/magazine/postville-iowa-is-up-for-grabs.html>