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INSIDE



PLAYOFF  
FACE-OFF

Sacred Heart-Griffin's rally and Glenwood's wild finish set up a quarterfinal showdown.

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ONE FOR  
THE AGES

They married at 19 and 14 and are still together at 53 and 48. Doree Baskie writes about how this couple made it last.

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HOLIDAY  
HELPERS

Your donation helps families in need.

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WEATHER

Mostly sunny but chilly today, high 42. Partly cloudy tonight, low 27.

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Part 1  
Tension in the air



FOR MORE THAN 200 YEARS, the peoples of the world have been welcomed in America, a country built upon the backs of immigrants. In cities and in small towns, new waves of immigrants look to improve their lives and those of their families in the same land of hope, opportunity and prosperity sought by their forefathers.

Here in central Illinois, the Illinois River community of Beardstown is no longer an enclave of mostly white residents. It has become a reflection of America's continually changing face, an international community with a significant population of Hispanics — and a growing number of Africans — who have come to work for Excel Corp., the pork processing plant. A demographic change

that is taking place across the country can be seen in microcosm in Beardstown.

Off and on for the past seven months, reporter S. Lynne Walker of the Mexico City bureau of Copley News Service lived in Beardstown. Walker's fluency in Spanish allowed her to understand a side of the immigrants' story not widely heard in central Illinois. The work of Walker and photographer Kristen Schmid Schurter offers an intimate look at the clash and commingling of distinctly different cultures.

Beginning today, we are pleased to present the first part of their four-day report examining one community's 15-year adventure in social change.

Barry Lecher  
Editor

Story by S. LYNNE WALKER

Photographs by KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER

**B**EARDSTOWN — On winter afternoons, in the silver of twilight dividing day from night, Mayor Bob Walters drove along his town's quiet streets troubled by the changes he feared were coming. Beardstown was an all-white community of 5,200 people built by German immigrants. No one remembered an African-American ever setting down roots in this Illinois River town. When Mexican immigrants began flowing into the state, they, too, had bypassed Beardstown.

An intimacy had grown from that cultural isolation. Bike-riding children waved to octogenarians resting in porch swings. People turned out for fish fries, baseball games and Fourth of July fireworks. Everybody knew everybody's name. But in that winter of 1986, Walters could feel the comfortable rhythm of small-town life slipping away.

In just two years, three Beardstown employers had closed their doors, eliminating 500 jobs. Now, the town's biggest employer — the Oscar Mayer pork slaughterhouse — was shutting down, idling another 620 people. With no hope of finding work, families were beginning to leave.

Walters, who worked for 18 years as a ham boner at Oscar Mayer, had reservations about what many saw as the salvation of his dying town.

continued on page 6

Above, Beardstown saw a major demographic shift in the 1990s when Excel began recruiting Mexican workers. The plant is visible at top in the center. Right, every Wednesday at 7:30 a.m., longtime Beardstown residents gather at the downtown square to pray for American troops overseas.



Courtesy of the Lincoln Courthouse Museum, Beardstown  
The Oscar Mayer plant opened with fanfare and Illinois pork queens in gloves; it was the town's major employer for 21 years.

Blasts shake Saudi capital day after alert

By DONNA ABU-NASR  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Three explosions rocked a residential compound in the Saudi capital Saturday night, killing at least two people and wounding 86 in what a government official said was a suicide car bombing.

The attack came a day after the U.S. Embassy warned terror attacks could be imminent in the tense Gulf kingdom, and America's three diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia were closed Saturday as a result.

Just before the midnight blasts, an

unknown number of attackers broke into the upscale compound of about 200 houses, a Saudi official said, and gunfire was heard.

An Interior Ministry official told The Associated Press early today the attack was a suicide car bombing, and that two security guards were killed and 86 people wounded. The official said he believed it was carried out by al-Qaida because of similarities to a May 12 attack in the capital that killed 35 people.

Saudi Arabia has been working

Gunfire, explosions rock compound

Three explosions shook a residential area in western Riyadh about midnight Saturday in what the government labeled a suicide car bombing.



SOURCES: Associated Press; ESRI AP

Iraqi resentment deepens after U.S. show of force

By HAMZA HENDAWI  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TIKRIT, Iraq — Houses shook, walls cracked, chandeliers swayed and children woke up screaming for their parents as U.S. planes dropped 500-pound bombs on the outskirts of Saddam Hussein's hometown overnight.

The show of force late Friday and early Saturday was a warning to the 120,000 people of Tikrit not to support insurgents, suspected of shooting down a Black Hawk helicopter hours earlier, killing six soldiers.

But while it succeeded in scaring

■ Excerpts from Jessica Lynch's biography / Page 41  
■ Officials estimate Saddam's government killed 300,000 people / Page 42

residents, the barrage only confirmed for many that the United States is their enemy.

"Now that it's over, I feel we have won a new lease on life," said a retired Iraqi general, wearing a traditional Arab robe and looking

See IRAQ on page 5

See SAUDI on page 4



## Reflection of a changing America *Part 1*

The Illinois River brought city founder Thomas Beard to the area, then known as Indian Mound Village, in 1819. In the early 1900s the waterway was a source of commerce and tourism.



Beardstown  
Courtesy of Harold Tyson



High silt levels have kept boaters out of the Beardstown marina since the 1970s, but next summer the Army Corps of Engineers is scheduled to dig a silt trap. Residents of all ages still turn out for the annual Illinois River Sweep to clean up the banks. Excel provides pork lunches for the volunteers.



Denise Sandoval sees the tangible results of another week's work at Excel Corp. as Stoptight Liquors owner Lisa Mincey cashes her paycheck.

# "...it's hard to adjust"

continued from page 1

Excel Corp., the second-largest meat-packer in America, wanted to reopen the Oscar Mayer plant, and most of the town's residents were enthusiastic about the offer. They thought life would be the way it used to be, with an influx of money, thriving businesses and jobs for their children and grandchildren.

But during his travels as a representative for the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), Walters had seen what happened when meatpackers, operating on profit margins of just 2 or 3 percent, opened plants in the rural Midwest.

Yes, they hired local folks. But they also recruited a stream of immigrants, most of them Mexican, to feed their insatiable demand for strong, young workers.

What Walters had seen on his trips across the Midwest was already starting to attract the attention of the nation's top demographers. By the late 1980s, they were recording the transformation that occurred when the meatpacking industry moved into small American towns.

People from different cultures who spoke different languages were crowding into communities where white, English-speaking Americans had lived for generations.

The new arrivals brought new music, new foods and new holidays. They also brought new social problems.

They weren't creating towns, as earlier waves of Europeans had done, but moving into tight-knit communities. Sometimes, the towns lost their identities and people from neighboring communities poked fun at them, calling them "Little Mexico."

Walters didn't know these new immigrants as people, but he knew their presence was changing a way of life in America's heartland.

He knew his own town, too. In 1858, the people of Beardstown had gathered in the town square to hear Abraham Lincoln deliver a stump speech opposing slavery. But

a century later, they had hung a noose in that same park, warning blacks to stay away.

"It had been an all-white, redneck community for 160 years," Walters said. "For a community like that to have a different ethnic group come in, well, it's hard to adjust."

**O**n a sweltering June afternoon in 1987, Excel quietly opened the company's first pork-processing plant in Beardstown. With no fanfare, the town took its place in the dramatic demographic change sweeping America.

By the year 2000, Beardstown's Hispanic population would grow 3,229 percent.

Illinois welcomed Excel because economically depressed Cass County, home to Beardstown, was one of the poorest in the state.

Gov. Jim Thompson signed special legislation waiving the requirement that Excel's parent company, privately held grain giant Cargill Inc., open its financial records before being allowed to locate in a free-enterprise zone at the outskirts of town. Excel received all the economic benefits Illinois had to offer, including state funds for job training.

But Beardstown already had a labor force trained in the meatpacking business. With downstate Illinois facing rising unemployment, Excel dropped the starting wage from \$8.75 to \$6.50 an hour.

At one of his first meetings with Excel officials, Walters pushed the company to hire former Oscar Mayer workers.

"I wanted Americans to hold the jobs," he said. "There were a lot of local people looking for work. I wanted to give them the opportunity first."

Excel finally agreed to hire 250 Oscar Mayer workers. Another 100 employees came from nearby towns.

Every day, more than 5,000 hogs were

chopped into pieces and boxed for shipment. The plant's work force put bacon on America's breakfast table, sent pig tails to canners for pork 'n' beans and shipped osuets to Alabama for pickling.

The money that Excel's workers earned flowed back into Beardstown's economy. Hardee's and McDonald's opened hamburger franchises to compete with the town's old-fashioned coffee shops serving biscuits and gravy. In 1989, Sam Walton Jr. phoned Walters from his private plane to say he'd be landing at Beardstown's tiny airport to look at a site for the town's first Wal-Mart.

The visit was so sudden, "we didn't even have time to get out the marching band," Walters said. Still, "they said they liked what they'd seen, that they liked our town."

Walters took great pride in pointing out that in Excel's early years, no Hispanics moved to Beardstown.

Although the 1990 census recorded 31 Hispanics, Walters insisted, "There were no Hispanics here. I'd like to think I had a lot to do with that."

He wasn't motivated by racism, Walters said, but his years of experience in the meatpacking industry.

"They take Hispanics, blacks and the downtrodden to work in their plants — those who don't have the computer skills or the basics for today's work environment,"

he said. "They seem to prey on that type of people. They take advantage of the disadvantaged."

As he left office in 1990, Walters gave his successor some advice.

"I told him, 'If you don't stay after Excel, you are going to have a lot of Hispanics and a lot of Asians come in here and take those jobs.'"

"That's exactly what happened," he said.

**T**he first Hispanics who showed up at Excel didn't last long.

When Excel hired Brad Hunter, a former Oscar Mayer worker, in 1989, "there was very few coloreds and very few Mexicans," he recalled. "Every time we'd try to tell them to do something, they'd look at us stupid. So we'd start harassing them and they'd quit."

But two things changed the equation: Excel stepped up its production, increasing the need for workers. And worker compensation costs began to soar, with injury claims reaching \$7.8 million a year by 1994, according to UFCW representative Duke Walters, who is the mayor's brother.

In the dangerous meatpacking industry, accidents were inevitable. Workers carved up a 265-pound hog every 4.5 seconds, and



Brad Hunter of Vermont, Ill., hasn't worked since he left Excel disabled in 1991. He says his lung and heart problems are work-related, but he can't find a doctor to confirm or deny his claims. Hunter lives on Social Security and spends his days looking after 4-year-old daughter Cassy Hilliard. "I'm used to work, I like to work, and now I can't. I started bawling the day they told me I couldn't work. It was the end of the world."



Being mayor of Beardstown means waving a lot. Bob Walters, who has been elected three times, checks on the sprinklers at Mile 88 Park, where he and his wife, Nancie, have spent many hours volunteering. During his years as mayor, Walters has seen the town's major employer and racial balance change. When Hispanic immigrants came to Beardstown, "it was culture shock for everyone," he says.



One hundred trucks full of 265-pound hogs, like these from Miller Farms near Auburn, arrive at Excel each day.

in the process cut themselves with knives, hurt their backs and suffered from repetitive stress injury, Walters said.

Excel's most serious accident came in 1990, when workers inhaled ammonia gas that leaked from a cooler where slaughtered hogs were kept, according to Occupational Safety & Health Administration records. Seventeen workers inhaled the toxic fumes; seven had to be hospitalized.

When Walters sat down at the bargaining table with Excel in 1994, the company made it clear that "if they continued to have those costs ... we were probably looking at closure."

Employee turnover was also a problem, reportedly hitting 100 percent a year by the mid-1990s. The company's slaughterhouse was strategically located near farms in Illi-

nois' sparsely populated countryside that produced the hogs Excel slaughtered. But there weren't enough workers living nearby, so when Excel increased production, the company had to import its labor.

Every week, Excel officials interviewed job candidates, but "they weren't able to get enough people in the job pool here," said Walters. "In order to build the factory and get the people they needed, they had to go outside the area."

So Excel began to look for workers from south of the border who acknowledged they didn't gripe about every ache and pain.

"After starving to death, after sneaking across the border, people are prepared to do anything. There is no pain," said a Hispanic man working in Beardstown. "If I came into the United States under a pile of

avocados, what right do I have to complain?"

Excel confirmed in a written statement that "we have done mobile recruiting in areas of high unemployment where people were looking for work opportunities. This included northern states as well as southern and western."

The company, which refused repeated requests over the past seven months for a face-to-face interview with a representative, sent recruiters to California, Arizona and the Texas border towns of Laredo, Eagle Pass, Brownsville and El Paso, drawing job candidates with spots on Spanish-language radio.

Excel sent nurse Lisa Mincy to the Texas-Mexico border at least 10 times during the eight years she worked at the plant. Sometimes, Mincy administered drug tests and

gave physicals to 35 job seekers a day during the two- to four-day trips.

"One guy rode his bike 12 miles to get to me," said Mincy, who left Excel last year. "It was hot. It was like 110 degrees that day."

Those who passed Excel's physical exam got a \$400 advance and a one-way bus ticket to Beardstown.

Nobody can remember when the first Mexican families moved into Beardstown. Suddenly, they were just there.

The Rev. Eugene Weizel recalls looking out at his congregation at St. Alexius Catholic Church in 1995 and seeing a handful of Mexicans in the pews. Soon, they were knocking at his door, asking for a Spanish-speaking priest.

Buffy Tillitt-Pratt, a longtime real estate agent and a member of the famous Beardstown Ladies Investment Club, can still recall the first time a Mexican family stopped by to ask if she might have a place for rent.

"It is against the law to discriminate. Some of the people in Beardstown probably did not realize that at first," said Tillitt-Pratt, who rented them a three-bedroom house she owned.

Principal Pam DeSollar remembers a Mexican mother and father walking into her kindergarten office and using hand signals to enroll their 6-year-old son.

"How were we going to talk to this family? How were we going to fill out the forms?" DeSollar said she wondered at the time. "We couldn't communicate."

DeSollar's concern was echoed throughout the town. For the first time in their lives, Beardstown residents weren't able to talk with their neighbors.

They didn't understand anything the Mexicans said or did. And the Mexican families didn't understand the stuffy, small-town rules that now dictated their lives.

Police officers showed up at Mexican homes because American neighbors complained the mariachi music was too loud. City officials arrived to caution Mexicans

"...after sneaking  
across the border,  
people are  
prepared  
to do anything"



After reopening the former Oscar Mayer plant in 1987, the Excel Corp. has increased pork processing production from 5,000 hogs to nearly 18,000 each day. The plant employs 2,000 area residents; approximately 60 percent are Caucasian and 40 percent are Hispanic.

continued on page 8





Reflection of a changing America

Part 1



Jerry Sanders, 12, stopped to look at the El Flamingo tavern in Beardstown after the building was gutted by fire on Aug. 16, 1996.

# "They said we came to take their jobs"

continued from page 7

that their lawn had grown taller than Beardstown's 8-inch limit. Police were constantly ticketing Hispanics for driving without insurance and driver's licenses.

"We didn't know the laws," said Antonio Carrillo, 36, a father of three who works at Excel. "That was part of the problem."

The police department was unprepared for the arrival of Spanish-speaking residents. None of the officers was bilingual. During routine traffic stops, police officer Jacob Swan pulled out his own license to show the new residents which ID he wanted to see.

The town's schools were also caught off guard. In 1993, the district had just one Spanish-speaking student. By 1996, it had several dozen.

Immigration agents showed up at the Excel plant in 1995 and pulled 60 workers off the production line for questioning.

"Everybody who wasn't Caucasian, they called into the office," said Sergio Ruiz, 36, who is now a chief steward for the UFCW, Local 431. "They asked you questions and they said, 'Leave. Stay. Leave. Stay.'"

Despite the scare, Excel's Hispanic work force continued to grow. Ruiz brought 26 Hispanics to work with him at Excel in July 1993. At the time, there were only about 15 Hispanics working at the plant, he said. Excel also paid its employees to help with the recruiting, handing out \$150 for each new worker.

When the number of Hispanics reached nearly 500, businesses began to cater to the new residents' tastes.

Su Casa, a Mexican-owned grocery store, opened near Beardstown's historic town square and offered tortillas, chilies and nopal cactus. A bar, El Flamingo, was opened by an American woman and her Mexican husband.

## Excel at a glance

### BEARDSTOWN PLANT

- Opened: June 1987
- Purchased from: Oscar Mayer
- Employees: 2,000
- Annual payroll: \$50 million in wages and benefits
- Average annual salary: \$29,000
- Average hourly wage: \$10.70
- Annual tax payment to city of Beardstown: \$720,000
- Production: 17,400 hogs slaughtered daily
- Brand name products: Tender Choice, Sterling Silver

### CORPORATE DATA

- Nationwide employment: 33,000
- Corporate headquarters: Wichita, Kan.
- Number of U.S. plants: 15
- Number of foreign plants: Five, located in Canada and Australia
- Parent company: Cargill Inc.

But as the Hispanics' presence became more obvious, ambivalence by some longtime Beardstown residents turned to resentment.

Martha Martinez, 28, was denied her right to register to vote at the same time she applied for a driver's license, which was entitled to under Illinois' "motor-voter" law. She asked why and was told, "It was because I was a naturalized citizen, not a citizen citizen."

Martinez's family was also the target of hate crimes.

"They throw flaming rags at the house," said her husband, 35-year-old

Alejandro. "They punctured our tires. They said we came to take their jobs."

On Aug. 10, 1996, Beardstown was rocked by its first murder in seven years.

Jorge Arambula, a 28-year-old Mexican who worked at Excel, was accused of fatally shooting Beardstown resident Travis Brewer, 22, at El Flamingo bar. A cross is burned, and the bar is torched six days after the killing.

Arambula was detained five days later at his home in Monterrey, Mexico. But Mexican law enforcement authorities refused to extradite him to Illinois. He has never been tried for the murder in Mexico, and the case remains open at the Beardstown Police Department.

The decision infuriated Beardstown residents. On Aug. 16, 1996, El Flamingo was gutted by fire, and anonymous callers warned the owner of Su Casa his business would be next. He stripped his shelves and closed the store.

Police soon arrested a 28-year-old resident of nearby Bushville, but Illinois state police paroled the man for two weeks.

When rumors circulated that the Ku Klux Klan was headed to Beardstown, the Mexican community braced for the arrival with its own whispered threat.

"For every one of us they kill," one Mexican resident remembers people saying, "we're going to kill five of them."

Continued on Monday.

S. Lynne Walker is the Mexico City bureau chief for Copley News Service. She can be reached at skwalker@terra.com.mx. Photographer Kristen Schmid Schurter can be reached at kristen.schmid@sj-r.com.

## S. LYNNE WALKER, 47, is the Mexico City bureau chief for Copley News Service, a position she has held for 11 years.

Walker spent five weeks living in Beardstown while researching this report over the last seven months. Fluent in Spanish, she interviewed nearly 100 residents and community leaders, as well as immigration experts and government officials. Walker conducted many of her interviews for this series in Spanish, so most English quotes from native Spanish speakers are her translations.

Prior to her assignment in Mexico, Walker worked for The San Diego Union-Tribune, The Sacramento Union, The Tampa Times and The Honolulu Advertiser. A journalism graduate of the University of Hawaii, Walker has won national awards for her reporting of immigration issues, including a National Headliner Award in 1997 and a Gerald Loeb Award in 1989. Among the assignments she's covered in Mexico are the armed uprising in Chiapas in 1994, the historic election of President Vicente Fox and the visits of Pope John Paul II.



**KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER, 30, is a staff photographer at The State Journal-Register.** Originally from Woodland, Calif., she has a bachelor's degree in anthropology and art from Stanford University and a master's degree from the University of Missouri School of Journalism. She has studied overseas in China and at Oxford University in England. Before coming to The State Journal-Register in June 2001, she worked as a staff assistant at National Geographic Magazine and interned at the Kenosha News; The Herald in Jasper, Ind.; The St. Petersburg Times; and the Hartford Courant. She was named the 2000 College Photographer of the Year by the University of Missouri at Columbia and the National Press Photographers Association. Kristen married Ted Schurter, also a staff photographer at the newspaper, in the midst of the seven-month Beardstown project. He has been very patient.



## Beardstown since 1986

Here is a look at how changes at a local pork-processing plant transformed a town.

### Community and schools

**1986:** Beardstown is an all-white community of 5,200.

**1989:** Wal-Mart breaks ground for a store.

**1990:** Census numbers show 31 Hispanic people living in Beardstown out of 5,246 total.

**1993:** First Hispanic student, a 6-year-old kindergartner, enrolls in Beardstown.

**1995:** Beardstown School District starts English as a second language (ESL) program.

**1995:** St. Alexius Catholic Church begins offering Spanish-language Masses.

**1996:** Hispanic worker accused of murdering Beardstown man at El Flamingo bar. A cross is burned, and the bar is torched six days after the killing.

**1996:** Beardstown Unified, an alliance between Anglos and Hispanics, is formed.

**1997:** School attendance: 114 Hispanic students out of 1,327 total.

**1998:** First Hispanic student graduates from Beardstown High School's ESL program.

**1998:** Mexican Independence Day is celebrated for the first time.

**2000:** Census numbers show 1,002 Hispanic people living in Beardstown out of 5,766 total.

**2000:** School attendance: 273 Hispanic students out of 1,321 total.

**2001:** Cinco de Mayo is celebrated for the first time.

**2001:** Church of the Nazarene inaugurates separate church for its Spanish-speaking congregation.

**2003:** Federal agents arrest 12 Hispanics for possessing and selling birth certificates and Social Security numbers.

**2003:** School attendance: 449 Hispanic students out of 1,400 total.

**2003:** An estimated 2,100 Hispanic people live in Beardstown out of 7,000 total.

### At the plant

**1986:** Oscar Mayer, the largest employer in Beardstown, announces it is closing its meatpacking plant.

### EXCEL

**1987:** Excel Corp. announces it is buying the Oscar Mayer plant.

**1987:** Excel Corp. opens its Beardstown plant in June, launching the company's first pork-processing operation. More than 5,000 hogs a day are processed.

**1987:** Excel hires 350 workers. With downstate unemployment rising, the starting wage is lowered from \$8.75 to \$6.50 an hour.

**1988:** Excel puts on a second shift of workers at the plant.

**1990:** Seventeen Excel workers inhale toxic fumes and seven are hospitalized when ammonia gas leaks from a meat cooler at the plant.

**1993:** First large Hispanic group is hired at Excel.

**1994:** Worker compensation claims at the Beardstown plant hit \$7.8 million, and the company considers closing the plant.

**1995:** Employee turnover at Excel hits 100 percent.

**1995:** Excel begins recruiting workers in California, Arizona and Texas border towns with spots on Spanish-language radio.

**1995:** Immigration agents question undocumented workers at Excel's plant.

**1996:** Number of Hispanic workers in Beardstown's Excel plant is 200 out of 1,860 total employees.

**1998:** UFCW starts printing the labor contract in Spanish.

**2002:** First African workers are hired at Excel.

**2003:** Excel donates \$50,000 to city of Beardstown for a new police station.

**2003:** Excel employs more than 2,000 workers, 40 percent Hispanic and 60 percent Anglo. Plant capacity increases to 17,400 hogs a day.

Sources: Beardstown School District; Staff research; United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 431; U.S. Census Bureau

Angela Smith/The State Journal-Register



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INSIDE



**BEING A VETERAN**

Veterans talk about their time in the service in Portraits of Courage.  
Special section

**TO THE WIRE**

The Raus vein in the end, but the Bears just can't hold on.

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**IT'S ALL CLEAR**

More and more are seeing the benefits of vision correction surgery.

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**HOLIDAY HELPERS**

Many families can benefit from your donation.

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**WEATHER**  
Clouds and sun today; high 54. Chance of a drizzle tonight; low 48.

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This year's Mexican Independence Day parade brought a few curious onlookers out of their houses, including Robert McGlothlin and daughter Crystal, 6. The Sept. 16 holiday commemorates the beginning of Mexico's revolution against Spain in 1810.

# Part 2 Conquering the great divide

A community struggles to set aside racial differences

Over the last 15 years, Beardstown has been transformed by the arrival of hundreds of Hispanics and others to work at the Excel Corp. pork plant. This is Part 2 of our report.

**B**EARDSTOWN — Shaken residents of Beardstown flocked to church services on Aug. 18, 1996, as bullets pooled for unity and ministers exhorted their congregations to overcome "the darkness of hate."

But when people heard those words, they knew the sheltered lives they once enjoyed had slipped from their grasp. Eight days earlier, a Mexican immigrant had murdered a Beardstown man. The incident had been followed by a cross-burning and arson. In the aftermath of the violence, lifelong residents were torn between fear and uncertainty.

Beardstown's residents had been shaped by where they lived, where they went to school, the things they had in common. Now, like the residents of many small towns across the United States, they were seeing their community reshaped by immigrants who'd made their way north from Mexico.

By 1990, the meatpacking industry had opened plants in almost 130 Midwestern



Beardstown's Hispanic and white children give hope that the next generation will mix easily. "That's what is making the change," said United Food and Commercial Workers Union chief steward Sergio Ruiz. Children of both races attended a recent family fun night at Washington preschool.

towns. Other industries were also beginning to draw Hispanics to communities throughout small-town America. In Dalton, Ga., Hispanics manufactured carpet. In Kennett Square, Pa., they harvested year-round mushroom crops. In Rogers, Ark., they cut and boxed poultry.

With each passing month, more Hispanics were recruited to Beardstown for jobs at Excel Corp.'s pork slaughterhouse. The new arrivals brought lifestyles

and attitudes that made Americans feel uneasy.

They saw Mexican flags popping up all over town and heard Spanish spoken in the aisles of the Wal-Mart store. Hispanic children rode their bikes past the town square where a plaque cited Abraham Lincoln's famous anti-segregation speech. "A house divided cannot stand."

continued on page 4

## Al-Qaida blamed for Saudi attack

Anger at royals likely motive

By DONNA ABU-NASR  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Saudis blamed al-Qaida militants Sunday for the suicide car bombing of a Riyadh housing complex that killed 17 people, declaring it proof of the terror network's willingness to shed Muslim blood in its zeal to bring down the U.S.-linked Saudi monarchy.

The Saturday night attack at an upscale compound for foreign workers also wounded 122 people.

The blast, not far from diplomatic quarters and the king's main palace, left piles of rubble, bunks of twisted metal, broken glass and a large crater.

"It's no longer an issue of terrorism for them," said Dawood al-Shirani, a Saudi analyst. "It's become a war on the regime, a war to turn the country into a new Afghanistan ruled by a Saudi-style Taliban."

An Interior Ministry official told the official Saudi news agency late Sunday that the death toll rose to 17 — including five children — after search crews pulled six more bodies from the rubble. At least 13 were Arabs, with the others as yet unidentified, the official said.

President Bush telephoned his condolences to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah. Bush told Abdullah the United States stands with the kingdom in the fight against terror, a White House official said.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said he was "personally quite sure" al-Qaida was behind the Saturday night attack "because this attack bears the hallmark of them."

Such attacks appear to be directed "against the government of Saudi Arabia and the people of Saudi Arabia," he said, adding that he expected more to follow.

Al-Qaida "will prefer to have many such attacks to appear bigger than they are," he told a news conference shortly after arriving in the Saudi capital. Such attacks showed that "all of us have to work together."

Led by Saudi-born dissident Osama bin Laden, al-Qaida has long opposed the Saudi royal family, accusing it of being insufficiently Islamic and too close to the West, particularly the United States.

The attack came as the kingdom is pushing social and legal reforms it has stalled for years and is pursuing Islamic militants with a determination and openness Saudis have never seen.

For decades, the government was reluctant to confront religious extremists because it draws its legitimacy partly from the royal family's close association with the strict Wahabi

See **ATTACK** on page 3

Story by **S. LYNNE WALKER** Photographs by **KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER**

## Some states cast aside presidential primaries

Five have canceled votes to save money

By **ROBERT TANNER**  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Several states have moved to drop their presidential primaries next year, worried about costs in still-tight financial times and wondering if the political exercise would serve any purpose.

Some say they can't afford the millions of dollars it costs to put on an election. Others say the decisions reflect the lopsided nature of modern primaries. The front-runner gets anointed by the

media and campaign donors after the first few state primaries and the rest of the primaries are formalities. The decisions add fuel to the argument that the primary system is in dire need of repairs. In most states forgoing a primary, he said, because caucuses bring in more delegates to the national conventions.

"Fewer voters will participate because caucuses are more complex," said Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. State politicians are freezing out average voters, he said, because caucuses bring "lower turnout, and more advantage to whoever's organized."

Primaries usually don't get turnout much higher than 20 percent of regis-

tered voters, but they're better than caucuses. In Missouri, the 2000 primary brought 745,000 people to the polls, while the 1996 caucus brought 20,000, the state Democratic Party said.

So far, Kansas, Colorado and Utah — all with Republican-controlled legislatures — have canceled their state-run 2004 primaries. Republican legislatures tried unsuccessfully to drop primaries in Arizona and Missouri, but Democratic governors either vetoed the primary bill or restored the funding.

Some Democrats complain that cutting primaries hurts them especially, with their crowded field of candidates. President Bush has no challenger.

Other Democrats, however, are pushing to get rid of primaries. Maine

dropped its presidential primary for next year, and New Mexico effectively did — it passed a law allowing parties to hold caucuses, and then Democratic Gov. Bill Richardson set an early Feb. 3 caucus (June primaries will go on for other elections).

Washington Gov. Gary Locke, head of the Democratic Governors Association, is calling a special session to discuss scrapping his state's primary next year. "Why waste \$7 million of scarce state money?" Locke said.

Democrats in Washington state are using precinct caucuses in February to allocate national convention delegates.

See **PRIMARIES** on page 2

**"WE'RE SPENDING all this money, we don't have an impact on the process and people aren't coming because they don't feel they have an impact."**

— LESLIE REYNOLDS  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECRETARIES OF STATE



Reflection of a changing America

Part 2

# "There's not animosity, but there's not a...togetherness"

continued from page 1

Hispanics also worried about the town's future. They had moved here after dangerous trips across the border or from jobs in big cities where they'd lived in poor, crime-ridden neighborhoods. Many felt that in Beardstown, they'd found not just a job, but a place in the United States they could call home.

They weren't herded into ghettos, as they had been in other meatpacking towns. Some bought houses on the town's tree-lined streets and were looking forward to raising their children. They appreciated the low crime rate and the city services that were provided without the "gratuities" they were used to paying in Mexico.

The good things about Beardstown reminded Mariela Chavez of her hometown in the Pacific Coast state of Michoacan.

Her Beardstown neighbors sent greeting cards to Chavez's two daughters on their birthdays, at Easter and Christmas. Chavez smiled as she remembered the moment her daughters opened the Christmas cards and found \$20 bills tucked inside.

"I think the people in Beardstown are like we are in our pueblo. They all know each other. They know where everybody works, who their children are," said Chavez, 38, who moved to Beardstown in 1995 and works with the school system's bilingual program.

Like other Hispanics, Chavez believed a mix of Anglos and Hispanics made Beardstown a stronger community.

When the town's 11 churches called a meeting after the arson, 60 people showed up to discuss their concerns about the growing tension.

By the end of the meeting, Anglos and Hispanics had formed an alliance called Beardstown United. Plans were made to enter a float in the town's Fall Fun Festival, and a block party was planned for October.

Beardstown United noted that the racial divide touched every facet of the residents' lives.

Although the town had been built by immigrants in the early 1880s and had been home to people of foreign ancestry ever since, "this new wave was different," said Loraine Brasel, who was a member of Beardstown United.

"They came right from Mexico with no established support group here. They didn't speak English. So they formed their own cohesive group," she said. "It was like having a little country dropped right in the middle of Beardstown."

There were concerns about whether the schools were teaching Hispanic children to assimilate into American life. People were also beginning to complain about the new Spanish-language Masses being offered at St. Alexis Catholic Church.

In 1996, Beardstown wasn't a community, but two separate groups of people: Anglos and Hispanics.

**A**t St. Alexis Catholic Church, the Rev. Eugene Weitzel heard the hushed complaints.

People were uncomfortable with his staunch defense of Beardstown's Hispanic residents and his decision to offer separate Spanish-language Masses.

It had been almost a year since four Hispanics knocked at his door and asked him to offer a Mass in Spanish. Weitzel, a 76-year-old Springfield native who didn't speak Spanish, readily accepted their proposal.

At first, most of his Spanish-speaking parishioners were men who'd left their families in Mexico when they came to Beardstown for work. But as Beardstown's Hispanic population grew with the arrival of women and children, so did attendance at Spanish-language Masses.

From the beginning, there was "tension between the two groups," Weitzel said.

The Rev. Eugene Weitzel of St. Alexis Catholic Church encourages nervous altar girl Eida Hernandez, 10, "I never thought there would ever be a Mexican in the building," he said, but he is devoted to his Hispanic parishioners. "I love each and every one of you," he said during the Spanish-language Mass. "As long as I am here, I will be here for you."



"This is a redneck town. They are slow to accept outsiders. Whenever we have people who are different, we seem to have a fear of them."

Weitzel said opposition was so strong that four or five families eventually left the parish.

"There are people here in my own parish who would be happy as a lark if they'd just leave town," Weitzel said. "One of the men came up to me and said, 'If they can't speak the language, then get the hell out.' Well, come on. His folks came over from Germany and they didn't speak the language."

Weitzel's outspoken remarks became a lightning rod for criticism about Hispanic residents.

"Father Weitzel has been the worst thing for Mexicans, because he tried to push the Mexicans on Americans instead of letting people try to live together," said Eugene Gyure, a 64-year-old retiree who attends St. Alexis.

Many in Beardstown insisted they didn't feel animosity toward Hispanic churchgoers.

"People at the church don't like the separatism. They want to be one parish," said Jackie Tanner, 47, who moved to Beardstown in 1998. "They don't like two services. They don't like two youth groups. Resentment. That's what you have when you separate a lot."

Edmundo Bernal, a 35-year-old Excel worker who had attended bilingual Masses in Chicago, was dismayed by the separation. "We share the same religion. The only difference is that we have a different language," he said.

**T**he racial divide was also clear in the schools. In a town where friendships were formed in kindergarten, it was hard for youngsters who didn't speak English to squeeze into the closed circle.

Victor Sanchez remembers feeling alone and alienated in 1998 as he walked down

halls filled with Anglo students.

"I was, like, shocked because I hadn't seen so many white people in one place," he said. "I felt strange. It's hard to get along with people when you don't talk the same language."

Victor and his family came to Beardstown from the central Mexico state of Hidalgo. The 13-year-old Victor was placed in seventh-grade English as a second language, or ESL, classes, where most of Beardstown's 153 Hispanic children — about 12 percent of the district's student body — were enrolled.

Victor picked up English quickly. In three months, he learned enough to help his mother, who worked at Excel, adjust to life in Beardstown.

"If you don't learn English fast, you get stuck," he said.

But as his language skills improved, he began to understand the comments Anglo students were making about their Hispanic classmates.

"Beaters. Wetbacks. Go back to Mexico," Victor remembered some kids saying.

"They think they are better than us," he

said. "They think when the Latinos are coming here, they are going to steal their work. But the companies prefer Latinos, you know? Because we can work more. Because we need more."

Georgianne Osmer, who teaches family and consumer science at Beardstown High School and helps coach the girls' softball team, watched her students segregate themselves.

"If I have four tables in my food class — four kitchens — I can guarantee that all the Hispanics will be at one table," she said.

"There's not animosity, but there's not a cohesiveness, a togetherness."

Tomas Alvarez was thrust into this divided world when he arrived in July 1998 at the age of 12. His father had been called from Guadalajara to a lead growing Spanish-speaking congregation at the Church of the Nazarene.

Tomas didn't speak English, so he was sent to ESL classes with Victor.

But after his first year, Tomas said, "It was obvious I wasn't learning much. I learned more from my friends than from the ESL teacher."

Daniel Villegas, 5, performs a large-motor-skills test for Leah Torres as part of his kindergarten assessment screening. Beardstown kindergarten will have some bilingual instruction for the first time this year. The program is starting gradually, with teachers switching classrooms for half an hour each day to teach colors, shapes and social phrases in the opposite language.





Hispanic children in Beardstown grow up celebrating the Fourth of July as well as Mexican Independence Day. Eddie Bernal Jr. runs across a friend's yard with a smoke bomb before attending the town's July 4 fireworks display with his family.

# "We had <sup>to</sup> change the way we worked"

Tomas' teachers recommended that he be moved to English-speaking classes, and in eighth grade he became an A student.

Tomas, who plays football and has helped the school district update its Web site, will be going to college after he graduates in May.

He's certain that if he'd stayed in ESL classes, he would have faced the same future as several of his classmates. "I know some real smart people who stayed in ESL," said Tomas. "They're out at Excel now."

For Hispanic parents who worked Excel's grueling jobs in extreme heat and cold, amid blood and field smells, Beardstown's schools offered their children a way out of a life of manual labor.

Like the immigrants who came to America before them, Hispanic mothers and fathers wanted their children to become professionals. For them, having children who ended up cutting meat at Excel represented their own failure.

But the school system wasn't prepared for students like Elvia Montoya, the first Hispanic student to graduate from Beardstown High's ESL program.

When Montoya arrived in Beardstown, she didn't speak English, so an interpreter accompanied her to most of her classes.

Her goal was to get her master's degree and become a Spanish teacher. But after

she graduated in 1998, her English skills were so poor that she couldn't even get into the local community college.

"Sometimes, I blame myself for not learning more, or I don't know if it was their fault because the program was just beginning," said Montoya, 24, who works as an interpreter at a Hispanic community outreach center in Beardstown. "I didn't come out of high school with good English; I came out with enough English to survive."

Kathy Haut, one of Montoya's ESL teachers and now coordinator of the bilingual program, said the arrival of Hispanic students "put a huge burden on the school system."

One 15-year-old Mexican boy who had been selling flowers on the streets of Tijuana arrived with a second-grade education. Another teenager came from the Mexican countryside, where he had been working his family's fields with oxen and a plow. When teachers asked him to use a computer to do his schoolwork, Haut said, he couldn't figure out how to switch it on.

"How are you going to have quality teachers for all those children? You're not," Haut said. "You're just doing the best you can. Parents don't understand that we can't just go out and pick up bilingual teachers. They can do it Chicago. They can do it in San Francisco. But who wants to come here?"

She's frustrated because she hasn't been able to solve the problems of bilingual education.

"As glad as I am that these people are here, they have to understand how hard it is to go from a school system that's 150 years old and all Anglo to suddenly having a bilingual program," Haut said. "If they think this school is going to be a Mexican school, no, it's not. It's going to be an Anglo institution."

Hispanic parents said Haut's staff pressured them to keep their children separate from Anglo students. They were warned that moving their children from ESL to regular classes would be tantamount to robbing them of their culture.

Haut blamed Hispanic parents for not getting involved in their children's education and suggested they might not understand educators' reasons for keeping their children in ESL classes.

For Hispanic parents, "it's a status symbol to be able to speak English," she said. "It's the language of power. It's like distancing themselves from their past."

Dora Sanchez ran into the ESL problem when a bilingual teacher said her daughter, Arely Madrid, should go into regular fifth-grade classes.

Sanchez persisted even after a different staffer from the bilingual program visited her at home and said Arely would be more immersed in her culture and her Spanish would be better if she stayed in ESL.

On the first day of school, however, Sanchez was shocked to discover that Arely was back in ESL. Weeks passed before the

dispute was settled and Arely was moved to English-speaking classes.

Although Arely started later than the other students, her grades were exemplary. This year, she'll be on the honor roll.

"Give me a whole room of Arelys," said her sixth-grade teacher, Susan DeWitt. "She's an outstanding student."

Sanchez was convinced she had made the right decision.

"Of course it is important that they learn their culture and their Spanish. What parent does

n't want their child to be prepared? That is why we are here," Sanchez said. "But if the bilingual program doesn't have the same quality as the English classes, we don't want them to go."

Anglo and Hispanic children in Beardstown's two kindergartens offered her the town would be united in the future. From the moment the first Hispanic child was enrolled in 1983, principal Pam DeSollar threw herself into the task of educating Beardstown's youngest residents.

At that age, the children were color-blind about their fellow classmates and eager to soak up a new language.

"We had to change the way we worked. We had to fight right to the state level to get the resources we think we're entitled to," said DeSollar, principal of Grand and Washington kindergartens. "We've been challenged. But am I sorry about that? No."

DeSollar, 60, who grew up in California's San Fernando Valley, moved to Beardstown after she married her husband, who is from an established local family. When she arrived in 1983, she found a backwater town that seemed disconnected from the rest of the world. The local grocery store didn't stock the ingredients she needed to fix her favorite meals, so she ordered her refined beans and canned chilies by the case.

DeSollar saw the arrival of Hispanic families in small-town America as a natural progression of the wave of immigration that had started in California and other border states. "If Excel stays here, we will continue to see this growth," DeSollar said. "What I hope is that we don't become two communities. Our country is bilingual. And it's only going to become more bilingual in the future."

By the late 1990s, everybody in town seemed to understand the Hispanics were here to stay. The challenge facing Beardstown was to find a way for Anglos and Hispanics to grow together instead of growing apart.

Continued on Tuesday: S. Lynne Mexico is the Mexico City bureau chief for Copley News Service. She can be reached at slmexico@terra.com. Photographer Kristen Schmidt Schurter can be reached at kristen.schmidt@sjr.com.

Detasseling corn has been a rite of passage for generations of Beardstown teenagers, and the town's new arrivals work this traditional summer job as well. Erin Lathrop, 14, left; Oscar Rayas, 15, right, formerly of Southern California; and Jose Perez, 14, far right, formerly of Chicago laugh as the personnel carrier they're riding turns into a new row. They work for Burrus Seed Farms of Arenzville, near Beardstown.



Arely Madrid's mother, Dora Sanchez, had to fight for her daughter to be in regular classes rather than ESL (English as a second language). Today Arely is the most advanced sixth-grade math group.



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## FRESH LIFE

The first months of college bring new friends, memorable moments and stress.  
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## LINK CUT

Exelon will no longer tie acquisition of Illinois Power to a rate increase.  
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## HOLIDAY HELPERS

Newspaper readers are showing their generosity.  
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## TWO LOST

Springfield comedian Barry Martin and Bill Miller, retired broadcast journalist and educator, are dead.  
Page 14



Mostly cloudy today; high 59. Showers possible tonight; low 50.  
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THE OLDEST NEWSPAPER IN ILLINOIS™



"This is the American dream and we are living it," said Marisela Chavez, enjoying a quiet summer evening with Stephanie, 11, one of her three daughters. Chavez came to Beardstown in 1995; she works for the school system and her husband, Valentine, left, works at Excel. Like many Mexican families in Beardstown, they purchased a home next to white neighbors and adopted local customs, such as flying the flag and maintaining their lawn.

## Part 3 Living with a lie

Some immigrants sacrifice their identities to stay in America

Over the last 15 years, Beardstown has been transformed by the arrival of hundreds of Hispanics and others to work at the Excel Corp. pork plant.

This is Part 3 of our report.

**B**EARDSTOWN — As Beardstown residents struggled to find common ground with their new neighbors, one issue kept them apart: Many of the Hispanics working at Excel Corp.'s slaughterhouse were living illegally in the United States. By 1998, Excel's work force had grown to nearly 2,000 employees, about 30 percent of them Hispanic. Although the company denied it knowingly hired undocumented workers, it was an open secret that most of the Hispanics



— perhaps as many as 80 percent — had purchased false IDs to get their jobs.

To protect themselves, the undocumented residents avoided the rest of the townspeople. They were wary of setting into small-town life, of going to ball games or being active in the PTA.

The Rev. Tomas Alvarez had been in town only a couple of months when he realized he

would be ministering to people who had to lie about everything — even their own names — in order to be hired at Excel. "It was very difficult for me to accept in the beginning," said Alvarez, who arrived in 1998 to lead the Spanish-speaking congregation at the Church of the Nazarene. "I cried a lot because I knew I was lying along with them. I began to talk with God. I said, 'God, they left their country to work as undocumented people. It is not my responsibility to judge. You must judge them. Let me help them.'"

The dual identities filled school records, health records, police records and voter registration lists with inaccuracies.

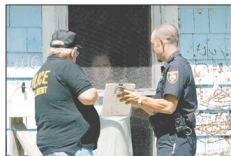
Excel employees working with false identities didn't want to use their real names — or their children's real names — on official

documents. School officials reportedly assured parents their records wouldn't be turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS (now called the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement). "We are not the INS. We do not plan to be the INS," said School Superintendent Jim Lewis. "Our mission is not to turn people in, but to help the families."

Pregnant mothers were urged to give their real names when they arrived at hospitals to deliver their babies. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to prove they were the children's real mothers.

At the Cass County clerk's office, irregularities cropped up on voter registration lists. A single Social Security number was

continued on page 6



On June 26, federal and local law-enforcement agencies arrested eight people for selling identification documents and took in several others for questioning. A 2002 traffic stop revealed false documents that led to a U.S. attorney's office investigation and a four-home raid. Because of the incident, some Hispanics stayed home from work or kept their children home from summer school.

Story by **S. LYNNE WALKER** Photographs by **KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER**

## U of I tuition plan outlined

16% increase for new students comes with four-year guarantee

By **DOUG POKORSKI**  
STAFF WRITER

The good news for new students at the University of Illinois next fall is that they will be guaranteed their tuition rate won't go up for the next four years.

The bad news is that that tuition rate will be 16 percent higher than last year's at the Springfield, Urbana-Champaign and Chicago campuses are paying this fall.

University officials on Monday revealed proposed tuition rates to comply with the state's new guaranteed tuition plan, which requires that public universities charge new undergraduate stu-

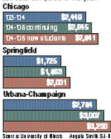
■ Tuition is rising around the country, and so are the salaries of college presidents / Page 5

dents the same tuition for four consecutive years beginning in 2004.

The U of I board will consider the tuition proposals at its meeting Thursday. Chancellor Richard Rognesen of the University of Illinois at Springfield said tuition for new full-time undergraduate students next fall would increase from

## U of I tuition increases

New students next year will have tuition costs guaranteed for four years but will pay more than continuing students. Below shows tuition increases for a semester compared to this year.



State U of I at Chicago Angelo Smith 11/11

## High court to hear Guantanamo appeal

Will decide if courts can review cases

By **ANNE GEARAN**  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court agreed Monday to hear the first case arising from the war on terrorism, an appeal asking whether foreigners held at Guantanamo Bay, the U.S. Navy base in Cuba may contest their captivity in American courts.

The case concerns more than 650 prisoners held incommunicado at Guantanamo Bay. The Bush administration maintains that because the men were picked up overseas on suspicion of terrorism and are being held on foreign land they may be de-

## 3 days of flying cost \$1,800

Staffers, guards on governor's shuttle

By **BERNARD SCHOENBURG**  
POLITICAL WRITER

Travel budgets of the governor's office and the Illinois State Police were charged about \$1,800 for the use of state aircraft that shuttled Gov. Rod Blagojevich, top staff members and security guards between Springfield and Chicago three times last week.

The costs are calculated on a per-passenger formula, depending on the distance traveled, according to Tom Schafer, spokesman for the governor. He said Chicago's Department of Transportation's Division of Aeronautics sets the price, but it does not cover all costs, such as the full purchase price of the airplanes.

The amount charged for Blagojevich alone was \$374, or just over \$62 per flight. And the governor's office in total was billed \$1,432 of the \$1,806, with the state police paying the rest for the security guard on each flight.

Last Tuesday through Thursday were the first three days of a planned six-day fall veto session of the legislature. Blagojevich, who lives in Chicago, flew to Springfield each day and back to Chicago each night on state aircraft. The final three days of the session are next week.

Blagojevich said last week that he had planned to return to Chicago Tuesday night for some events and to see his family, but he ended up getting to spend "like two minutes" with the eldest of his two daughters, who is 7. He said he then decided to go to Chicago Wednesday night as well.

"If you're asking me, I'm guilty of changing plans at the last minute... and rather than spend the night in that big, 34-room mansion, with all the servants and the cooks and everything else that goes along with it, but instead kind of left like I wanted to go home and see my 7-year-old and kiss my baby, if you're asking me, I'm guilty of that, I plead guilty," he said Thursday at a news conference where he chided lawmakers for a "sponsoring" of the session.

Schafer said the per-passenger costs charged internally by state government between Springfield's Capital Airport and Chicago's O'Hare Interna-

See **FLYING** on page 4

## THE MEN, mostly Muslims, have had no access to lawyers or other outsiders.

tained indefinitely without charges or trial.

The men, mostly Muslims, have had no access to lawyers or other outsiders, and do not even know they are the subject of the case the court agreed to

See **COURT** on page 4

See **U OF I** on page 5



Reflection of a changing America

Part 3

“...you live like a king here”



Working the early shift at Excel during the week and running his bar on weekends leaves Eddie Bernal tired. His sons Jimmy, left, and Eddie Jr., joke with him about asking for money to spend at the downtown carnival.



Parties are often a family affair for Beardstown's Hispanic residents. Adults and children celebrate a First Communion at Salon Azul until late at night.



Excel employees Eddie and Alicia Bernal have earned enough money to buy a house and are able to shop in Springfield for items such as computers and satellite dishes. The Bernals work different shifts so one parent will always be home with their two children, Eddie Jr., left, and Jimmy, center.



After a week of cutting off pig hooves at Excel, Alicia Bernal spends her weekend nights at the family's bar, Salon Azul. While Eddie DJs for the "gran baile" (big dance) the night before Easter, Alicia does everything from tending bar to cleaning bathrooms.

continued from page 1

sometimes used by as many as four registered "voters."

Few voted, however. In Beardstown's April 2001 mayoral election, fewer than 20 of the town's 120 registered Hispanics cast ballots. Instead, they saw the voter registration card as another form of identification. "They figure if they get the voter ID, it gives them some credibility in being here," said Cass County Clerk Michael Kirchner. Beardstown's police also ran into dual-name problems. When they stopped Hispanics for traffic violations, some had several IDs with different names in their wallets. A few were mistakenly arrested because charges were filed against the people whose documents they had bought.

Like most of Beardstown's legal residents, Alvarez worked out his own way of dealing with the shadow world inhabited by many of the town's Hispanic residents.

"I went to the (former) chief of police and told him people have different names. He said, 'If I were in their shoes, I would probably do the same thing.'"

"I went to Excel and they told me, 'Pastor, we don't want to know anything. We are contracting American citizens.'"

Based on those conversations, Alvarez decided he would minister to the undocumented immigrants the same way he ministered to any other Beardstown resident. He wouldn't help them do anything illegal. But if their only crime was working without documents, he wouldn't report them to authorities.

Beardstown had become a town built partly on lies. There were lies that religious leaders had been forced to accept, lies that schoolteachers had to overlook, and that police officials chose to ignore.

For Hispanic workers and their families, the lies created personal conflicts.

"We've made liars out of them. We've made cheats out of them," said the Rev. Eugene Weitzel, who presides over the St. Alexis Catholic Parish. "They've got to have two names. That's a lie. They carry papers that have another name on them. That's a lie."

"One of the reasons they don't come together more with the community is that they're embarrassed. They have a sense of insecurity."

Life in this small, quiet town had brought prosperity to Beardstown's immigrants. But their prosperity was built on lies as well. Their spending could continue only if immi-

gration agents didn't show up in the town.

The new arrivals brought cars, big-screen TVs and satellite dishes that brought Mexican news programs, soap operas and soccer games into their living rooms. They bought homes with huge down payments and paid them off with five-year loans. They delighted in knowing that when they went shopping, they had money in their pockets to buy almost anything they wanted. And they still had money left over to send to their families in Mexico.

"Economically, you live like a king here," said Alejandro Martinez, 35, who moved to Beardstown in 1994. "I have an account at the bank. I bought a car. We eat shrimp twice a week. We go to the store and if we spend \$200 or \$500, so what?"

Martinez and his wife used their Excel paychecks to buy a home and six rental properties.

"In Mexico, for people at our level, we would live like donkeys," Martinez said. "Here, everything that I have wanted, I have bought."

But Martinez is a legal resident of the United States and his wife is a naturalized American citizen.

Other Hispanics, working at Excel without legitimate documents, could never let their guard down. Fearful of being deported, they spent most of their off-work hours at home.

"I feel trapped," sighed a 49-year-old woman who left Acapulco in 1999 and crossed the border illegally.

"Every day I'm here, here, here," she said, sweeping her arm in the direction of the two-story home she and her husband bought. "We almost never go out. I feel very lonely."

As she remembered her home in Mexico's famous beach resort, she sighed again.

"Right now, our mango tree would be full of fruit. I miss the coconuts, the breeze from the sea," she said. "I tell my husband, 'Let's go back.' But he doesn't want to go back. My husband is happy here."

Her 49-year-old husband is now an American citizen. He's one of the lucky ones.

"Many of the people at Excel work with bought papers," she said. "It's easy to see who has papers and who doesn't. Those who don't have (legal) papers are afraid to speak."

Longtime resident Patricia Gyure sensed the Hispanic residents' reluctance to draw attention to themselves.

"They come here, they do their jobs, they're low-key. They don't bother anyone. They don't cause any problems," said Gyure, 60, who works at a nursing home. "They just blend in."



The number of children making their First Communion at St. Alexius Catholic Church increases each year, says the Rev. Eugene Weltzel. This May, 30 Hispanic children and nine white children took part in the sacrament in two separate ceremonies.

# "I have a lot of resentment"

But her husband ticked off a litany of complaints.

The Hispanics didn't speak English. They celebrated their own Independence Day. And he believed they didn't pay their fair share of taxes.

"We're saying if you're going to be living in America, you're going to celebrate American Independence Day," said 64-year-old Eugene Gysure, who wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the American flag and the words, "These colors never run." Gysure also didn't like being called Anglo. "We are not Anglos," he said. "We are Americans."

Few Beardstown residents believed racism was at the heart of their feelings.

"I don't think there's any prejudice around here. I think it's resentment. A lot, lot of resentment. A lot of people feel that the immigrants are protected by our own laws more than we are," said a 53-year-old Beardstown native who asked not to be named.

"My husband wants to move. I say, 'But this is our home.' If I really left, I'd feel like they'd driven me out. And I want to go on my own."

"It's so unfair. The schools protect them. Public aid has holes in it. Excel protects them. I have a lot of resentment," she said. "I'm dealing with it, because it's wearing me out. It times when you're upset."

Excel has been silent about many of the issues surrounding its Beardstown operation. Repeated requests made over a seven-month period for a face-to-face interview with company officials were denied.

However, Excel said in a written response

that "We make every effort to validate employment eligibility while protecting against discrimination. Despite what some might speculate (based on no facts), we are very good at verifying employment eligibility."

Alvarez agreed that Excel has gotten tougher in recent years.

"Before, people without documents got into the plant easier," he said. "Now, the plant is verifying all kinds of documents, including the work history of the job candidate."

Alvarez's 24-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Bursade, was an interpreter in Excel's human relations department. It was her job to contact the Social Security Administration's Springfield office every week to check the numbers new employees had given.

"I'm the mean one," she said with an apologetic smile before she left the company. "I'm the one who has to tell them that their Social Security number doesn't match."

But many of the numbers are valid, because some Hispanic workers buy legitimate birth certificates and Social Security numbers from Americans — prisoners, U.S. soldiers stationed abroad or wanted criminals — who sell their identities through middlemen for as much as \$1,500.

One Hispanic woman told police she bought her documents from a man going door-to-door in Beardstown. Her husband told police she also bought identity documents, first to get an Illinois driver's license, then to apply for a job at Excel or at the company that contracts workers to clean blood and bones from the slaughterhouse machinery.

Excel's responsibility is to fill out a government-required I-9 form stating that job candidates have presented at least two documents — such as a driver's license and So-

cial Security card — that prove they are eligible for work.

Employers are not required to verify Social Security numbers, nor are they responsible for investigating whether the person presenting documents bought them on the black market, said Cynthia O'Connell, interim chief of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's identity and benefits fraud unit.

"We cannot expect them to be immigration officers," she said. A Mexican woman said after she bought documents in 1999, she traced the original owner's signature over and over again, until she could produce an exact match of the six-letter name.

Now she signs easily. When someone calls her by the other woman's name, she instinctively turns and responds. But it troubles her to deny who she is. "I would like to have my papers," she said, "and present myself as I am."

The Hispanics who adapted most easily to life in Beardstown were people like Edmundo Bernal, who took advantage of a 1986 immigration law granting farm workers legal status in the United States.

Bernal tells his story like an American tale. He struck out for the border in 1987, and 10 times he was detained by immigration agents in San Diego. Ten times, he crossed again. That year, he said, nearly 1,000 men from his town of Villa Guerrero headed for the United States.

When Bernal finally got across the border, he rode the trolley to downtown San Diego, caught a train to Anaheim and slept in a park for two weeks. He picked asparagus in Stockton, then harvested beets in Idaho. There, he ran into a Mexican man from a town near his, who offered him a ride to Chicago.

Bernal's timing changed his life, because like 1.2 million Hispanic farm workers, he was savvy enough to take advantage of the legalization program before it expired in 1988.

"A lot of people missed the opportunity. Now, they're sorry," said the 35-year-old Bernal. "After I got my documents, I began to live well."

He married his wife, Alicia, in their pueblo in 1990 and sneaked his bride across the border at Tijuana the next day.

Because he was documented, Alicia also became eligible for legal work papers, which she received in 1996. Their two sons, Jaime and Edmundo Jr., — also known as Jimmy and Eddie Jr. — were born in the United States, so they are American citizens.

In 1998, Bernal also became a citizen and moved his family from Chicago to Beardstown in search of affordable housing, a low crime rate and good wages.

Bernal immediately went to work for Excel. Alicia soon followed, getting a job cutting off pig's feet.

They bought a \$53,000 house and just two years later, they only owed \$18,000. They refinanced and used the money to open a tavern called Salon Azul. They also bought sound equipment that Bernal rented out under the name "Sis Se Pude," a Spanish phrase meaning, "Yes, it can be done."

Like many Hispanics in Beardstown, Bernal had a dual identity. But in his case, it came from being bilingual and bicultural, not from living in the shadows.

"On that side of the river," he said, pointing to Mexico, "they call me Edmundo. On this side of the river, everybody just calls me Eddie."

As owner of Salon Azul, Eddie Bernal became one of the most visible Hispanics in town. He smiled and waved at everybody. He shouted greetings in English.

He had found the formula for getting along.

"You don't have to have a big conversation. But you can say, 'Hello,' and shake their hand," he said. "When you have good intentions, you don't have to talk too much."

Bernal's sons have already put down roots inside the Illinois River.

Nine-year-old Eddie Jr., a charismatic boy with bristly black hair, wants to become a police officer.

Twelve-year-old Jimmy, a robust kid with a penchant for Matchbox cars, has a more immediate goal.

"I'm going to be as tall as Abe Lincoln," he said.

Continued on Wednesday: S. Lynne Walker is the Mexico City bureau chief for Copley News Service. She can be reached at slwalker@terra.com.mx. Photographer Kristen Schmidt can be reached at kristen.schmidt@sjr.com.



Beardstown's significant immigrant population has not gone unnoticed by the outside world. In late September, Chicago participants in the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride (IWFR) stopped there on their way to Washington, D.C. Rafael Trujillo and Loraine Brasel spoke at the rally, accompanied by 3-year-old daughter Karina. Brasel says undocumented workers will not seek necessary medical treatment or file workers' compensation claims because they fear the employer's retaliation. She witnessed this firsthand with her husband, a former Excel employee and now a U.S. citizen.

Members of Beardstown's Hispanic community seek out the Rev. Tomas Alvarez for guidance and translation services, even those who aren't part of his congregation. The Nazarene Church brought him to Beardstown from Mexico to work with Hispanic parishioners, and the Spanish-speaking population grew so much that he started his own church, Iglesia Del Nazareno Libertad.





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Patrick Groth makes incredibly delicious seem like another continent.

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So, why, exactly, is medicine cheaper up north?

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UIS beats William Jewell 5-0 in the first round of the NAIA soccer playoffs.

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Assistance form.

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## WEATHER

Partly sunny today; high 58. Mostly clear tonight; low 27.

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www.sj-r.com

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Tomas Alvarez Jr. came to Beardstown as a seventh-grader who spoke no English. Now a college-bound football player, Alvarez wants to be an architect and live in a major U.S. city. He doesn't think there is a difference between being Mexican and being American. As a junior, he attended prom with Chelsie Carlton.

## Report 4 Dealing with change

Over the last 15 years, Beardstown has been transformed by the arrival of hundreds of Hispanics and others to work at the Excel Corp. pork plant. This is the final installment of our report.

Residents agree on one thing: There's no going back for their community



Birthplace of a changing America

**B**EARDSTOWN — By autumn of 2003, Beardstown had once again settled into a comfortable rhythm. But the rhythm was different before.

Beardstown was no longer a community of white faces, where people spoke only English and bragged about banning minorities. Instead, it was part of the new American Midwest, where brown faces and Spanish are woven into

daily life. In almost every U.S. county, the 2000 census showed the rise in Hispanics outstripping overall population growth. From Nantucket Island, Mass., to the rural Mississippi Delta, small communities were being changed by Hispanics settling in their towns. In Garden City, Kan., Hispanics now make up 44 percent of the popula-

tion. In Conesville City, Iowa, they're the majority.

In the 10 years since Excel Corp. opened a pork slaughterhouse at the outskirts of Beardstown, the Hispanic population has reached 30 percent. With Excel hiring at increasing production and some longtime residents of this town of 7,000 moving out, many people believe Hispanics will become the majority here, too.

That bothers some of the town's Anglo residents, although their resentment has softened over the years. There is still racial prejudice. But it is muted by an acceptance, even an appreciation by many people, of the new ideas that cultural diversity has brought.

Bob Walters sensed the difference in the fall of 2000 when he knocked on the doors of each of the town's 1,799 residences during his campaign for another term as mayor. Walters had left Beardstown for a better job in 1991 after serving as mayor for five years. But the call of home — parents, brothers, a sister and kids — brought him back to Beardstown.

In his door-to-door campaign, he heard citizens complain about things that bothered people everywhere — problems in the police department, unsightly garbage and the city's mismanaged budget.

Only a few gripped about the growing number of Hispanics, but Walters stopped them short. "The biggest problem with Beardstown people is that they think this is only happening in Beardstown," said Walters, who

continued on page 4

Story by S. LYNNE WALKER Photographs by KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER

## Sacrifices remembered

### Vets honored at Statehouse

By ADRIANA COLINDRES

STATE CAPITOL BUILDING

Just after Tuesday's Veterans Day ceremony at the state Capitol, Judy Victor and Jan Royer made it clear why they were there.

"We're moms," said Victor, a Springfield resident. Her son, Sgt. Marc Victor, is in Iraq, serving with the 23rd Military Police Company of the Illinois National Guard.

"We represent our children. We represent our sons," said Royer, also of Springfield. Her son, Capt. Jeff Royer, is commander of the 23rd.

"Absolutely," Victor added. "And also to honor the veterans." Victor and Royer didn't know each other before their sons' unit was activated. Now, they're friends.



Kristen Schmid Schurter/The State Journal Register  
Louise Edwards puts her hand on the back of her husband, Larry, during Tuesday's Statehouse ceremony. He was in the armed forces from 1955 to 1976, serving in the Army, Air Force and Marine Reserves.

They were among more than 300 people who attended the solemn ceremony in the Statehouse rotunda. The observance featured speeches, color guards and musical performances by the Springfield High School Band, the Springfield Municipal

Band and the St. Andrew's Society Pipes and Drums.

Veterans Day provides a chance to express appreciation to people who

See VETERANS on page 8

## Faster power shift to Iraqis wanted

### Bremer rushes home to huddle with Bush aides

By RICHARD STEVENSON

N.Y. TIMES NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — L. Paul Bremer, the American administrator in Iraq, made a hurried return to Washington on Tuesday as Bush administration officials held an urgent round of meetings to discuss ways of speeding up the transfer of power to Iraqis.

The meetings reflected dissatisfaction with the pace of progress in Iraq and a growing conviction that Bremer must abandon his plan to move gradually toward the election of an Iraqi government over a year or two, officials said.

As President Bush gave a Veterans Day speech vowing to stabilize Iraq, Vice President Dick Ch-



Bremer

■ The top U.S. soldier in Iraq says fear of Saddam hinders intelligence efforts / Page 3

eney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and other officials huddled with Bremer in the White House situation room to plot ways of speeding the transfer of sovereignty.

Several administration officials said there was no evidence that Bush had lost confidence in Bremer, although the presidential plans to move gradually toward the election of an Iraqi government over a year or two, officials said.

See IRAQ on page 8

## A dozen jobs created at IDOT

### Democrats' donors get most of them

By JOHN O'CONNOR

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

While hammering for months on the need to slash the state payroll, Gov. Rod Blagojevich has hired a dozen people, mostly Democratic campaign contributors, to act as community liaisons for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Seven of the new hires have given a combined \$7,500 to Democrats, including \$2,500 to

■ The governor's campaign fund will pay for one of his flights to Chicago last week / Page 9

Blagojevich, who took office in January facing a \$5 billion budget deficit. At least one of them volunteered for the Blagojevich campaign last year.

The 12 new hires, each with a job title of local agency liaison, make \$622,300 annually in salaries alone. Adding in fringe benefits pushes the cost of the 12 jobs to more than \$800,000.

Transportation authorities said the liaisons' duties are to meet with local officials and speak to community groups about road projects and the distribution of state road funds. They also participate in conferences that help small-business owners learn how to get state contracts.

But at the same time, IDOT is hiring public relations firms to perform some similar educational duties.

One firm is getting \$3.2 million over four years to publicize the reconstruction of Interstate 74 through Peoria. Contract costs for this year include \$27,000 for "message development," \$46,000 for "identifying groups for speaking opportunities," \$25,000 for writing news releases and \$17,000 to write newspaper opinion pieces and letters to editors.

The agency is preparing to award a similar public relations contract for a \$450 million rehabilitation of the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago and is seeking proposals for publicizing work connected to a new \$1 billion Mississippi River bridge from Illinois to St. Louis.

Blagojevich's spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff said the liaisons are necessary to help IDOT be

See JOBS on page 2



## Reflection of a changing America *Part 4*

Mayor Bob Walters, right, tells Eddie Bernal he and his wife should come to his house sometime for dinner as the two tease each other at Mile 88 Park. Bernal stopped to say hello when he saw Walters checking on the park's sprinklers.



Jerry "Boogie" Quintanilla, left, and Tidiane Soumare, center, are friends even though Tidiane doesn't speak Spanish and Boogie speaks little English. On Saturdays, Boogie calls Tidiane and says, "Hey, T.J., what time bar?" Then the two head downtown to shoot some pool. Tidiane left Senegal in 1998 for a job at Excel. He says people in Africa dream of living in America, "think you have money, good life. But it's not like that. You have to work hard."

continued from page 1

went the election with 60 percent of the vote. "They haven't got out and checked the real world yet. These people are all over the U.S. The facts are that it's the fastest-growing population in the United States."

One thing people didn't complain about was how the economy had rebounded since the Hispanics' arrival.

Per capita income in Cass County, home to Beardstown, shot up 70.5 percent between 1988 — the year after Excel opened its plant — and 1997. Two-income couples employed at Excel now earn about \$50,000 a year, a handsome sum in a town where monthly mortgage payments are as low as \$400.

Beardstown's sales tax revenues are growing about 3 percent a year, with Excel a major contributor to the town's economic well-being.

The crime rate remains low. Beardstown's last murder was in 1996, when a Mexican immigrant was accused of shooting an Anglo resident at a local bar. Drug cases increased 93 percent between 2001 and 2002, but even then the number of arrests was only 56.

Beardstown has become the town of the future, demographers say, an economic model for hundreds of small American towns that are slowly dying.

Hispanics have given the town what real estate agent Buffy Tillitt-Pratt calls a "youth boost." The 80-year-old high school is so crowded that it's being replaced with a \$20 million junior high and high school. At the beginning of this school year, one-third of the district's 1,400 students were Hispanic.

School Superintendent Jim Lewis sees the day when his job will be held by a bilingual superintendent. "You need to hear those voices without relying on an interpreter to tell you what those voices are saying."

Clearly, the town has changed. And so has Walters, a Purple Heart veteran of the Vietnam War who admits he grew up a redneck in a sheltered world made up of people just like him. In Vietnam, his fellow soldiers hoisted with laughter when he finally worked up the nerve to ask, "What the hell is a soul brother?"

"That shows you how naive you are when you come from a small, all-white area," the 55-year-old mayor said as he held a dying cigarette between his fingers.

The town, like Walters, has experienced an awakening.

People don't stare at Hispanics, like they did when the Excel workers first got here. Most Anglos choose their words carefully. Many preface any negative comments with, "I'm not a racist."

People don't like to bring up the subject of race because talking about it divides them again. But some of the racial barriers remain.

"You still hear people say, 'wetbacks,'" said the Rev. Tomas Alvarez, 46, who heads the Spanish-speaking congregation at the Church of the Nazarene. "In the Hispanic community, I still hear 'gabacho,'" a derogatory term for Anglos.

At his church, which he calls "Libertad," or freedom, Alvarez worked to reduce the

"I think it may become an international town"

barriers. Although he built the separate church with his own hands for Hispanic worshippers, Alvarez says they often join the Anglo congregation. "Many times we pray together."

But as more Hispanics moved into Beardstown, some longtime residents have moved out. Between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 776 people of German heritage moved away or died, along with 489 of Irish heritage.

Mike Haberman, who has lived in Beardstown all his life, put his \$140,000 house on the market in July and is moving his family to a place in the country.

"Beardstown's gotten too crowded with Mexicans," said Haberman, 34, as he and his wife worked in their front yard. "Before long, they'll be changing the street signs and putting them in Spanish."

Haberman cringes when he hears people from other towns laugh and call Beardstown a "little Mexico."

"I think more and more people are getting the same attitude I have. It's time to sell," he said. "If we're going to get our money out, we need to do it now."

At St. Alexius Catholic Church, the demographic changes can be seen in very human terms. The Rev. Eugene Walz reported 12 Hispanic babies over the past two months and just one Anglo infant.

The Rev. Jim Edmiston, a Franciscan priest who offered Spanish-language Masses at St. Alexius in 1999 and 2000, said it's not hate but confusion that is making Anglos flee.

"We don't have in this country an education system or a social service system that helps people deal with that confusion," he said. "The pastors don't know what to do about it, either."

Even after all these years, there's a distance between Beardstown's Anglos and Hispanics.

"It's still like 'us' and 'them,'" Walters said. "Once we get past that and become 'us,' we're all going to be better off."

The mayor believes lack of community involvement is holding Hispanics back. When Walters was elected, roughly 2,000 people voted, but fewer than 20 were Hispanics.

"If they've failed in any one area, it's a lack of showing leadership in the community," he said. "I've tried to work with them, but they don't ask for a lot. They don't call you at home. They don't go to city council meetings. I'm sure they feel like outsiders, which they are in a way."

"It would help their cause if they'd get involved in the community to show people that they're not just a bunch of people who swim across the river last night looking for jobs."

Hispanics who've migrated to the United States have a single focus: earning enough money to support themselves and their families in Mexico. The money chase leaves them little time for community activities. Their lives are often restricted to work, home, sleep, work and dreams of one day returning to Mexico.

"A lot of people become citizens, but they don't feel like they're a part of here," said Edmundo Bernal, who works at Excel and owns Salon Azul, a bar. "Once they are citizens, they think that's the end of the process."

Bernal, 35, speaks English and has an easy laugh that helps him bridge the two cultures. He is an American citizen and a Beardstown citizen, a Hispanic who has decided to make Beardstown his home.

For him, the process of being a citizen has only begun.

Bernal reached out to Walters, even though he was irritated that the mayor opposed his application for a liquor license for Salon Azul.

Walters, in turn, worried that the bar, which had a bad reputation under the previous owner, would continue to be a magnet for drug peddlers and other unsavory elements.

So Walters watched Bernal run the bar for several months, even stopping by for a beer every now and then. He caught himself laughing when he drank Coronas and saw

the Mexican customers drinking Bud Light.

"I wish I had 6,000 people like him in Beardstown, with his attitude, the way he approaches things," Walters said. "He wants to be part of the community."

Bernal sees the mayor as an example, too.

"Little by little, I think he had realized that I am not the person he thought I was," Bernal said. "And I have realized that he is not the person I thought he was."

Sometimes, Bernal daydreams about running for elected office. It is something he could never have achieved in Mexico, where political candidates are often chosen through a patronage system.

Bernal isn't sure he'll ever make it to city government. But with the Hispanic population continuing to grow, there's not much doubt in anybody's mind that Beardstown will one day have a Hispanic mayor.

"Mexican town" is the way some people in nearby communities now describe Beardstown.

At a Beardstown High School basketball game last season, about 20 fans of Brown County High School in Mount Sterling showed up wearing sweatbands.

As Beardstown players ran down court, the Brown County fans yelled, "We want tacos."

As Tomas Alvarez, a high school senior who was at the game,

"People were mad. They really care about

Rita Phelps, right, speaks no Spanish, but she felt God called her to join the Spanish-language Nazarene church, Iglesia Del Nazareno Libertad. She loves the music and the language, and refers to church members as her brothers and sisters in Christ. She and pastor Tomas Alvarez's wife, Ruth, offer prayers after Bible study.



A Fourth of July celebration combines traditional Mexican food with American products.



# "We didn't come to mess up America"

the image of Beardstown. That wasn't just against an ethnic group. It was against the whole town."

Tomas shook off the incident. "A lot of people say this is becoming a Mexican town. They don't really know what's going on," he said. "I think it may be come an international town."

That international flavor already permeates every block in Beardstown.

Hispanics live next door to Anglos. And both are adjusting to new neighbors like Tidiانة Soumare from the country of Senegal.

When Soumare arrived in Beardstown a year ago, he was one of only 20 African workers at Excel. Now dozens of his countrymen have moved to Beardstown.

As he looks up and down the production line at Excel, where he earns \$11.05 an hour cutting part, Soumare sees whites, Hispanics, Africans and a Vietnamese named Than.

In this new melting pot on the Illinois River, Soumare has found a quiet life and decent people.

He practices his Muslim religion here, praying five times a day. On weekends, he shoots pool with his Mexican friends.

Soumare was offended when a woman in the nearby city of Jacksonville said, "You're living in that Mexican town."

"She said the Mexican people, they are bad," said Soumare, a tall, lanky 28-year-old who speaks English, French and three African languages. "I told her, I don't have no problem with them. I work with them. They are nice."

Mamadou Dhiouabou, a 30-year-old from Senegal, was the first Excel worker of African heritage to arrive in Beardstown. When he found that jobs were plentiful, he passed the word to his friends.

"I see Africans like Mexican people," said Dhiouabou. "We didn't come to mess up America. We're working here. I've been a citizen for 15 years. I want the best for America. God bless America," he said.

Many longtime residents of Beardstown welcome the diversity.

"We would never have heard Mexican music 10 years ago. Now it's commonplace to hear different ethnic music," said Wyatt Sager, 48, a lifelong Beardstown resident who is the Cass County death examiner. "Beardstown has a much greater world scope now than it did 10 years ago."

Sager and his wife, Trish, own the town's largest funeral home, so their most personal encounters with Hispanic families have been during moments of profound sadness. They still remember the first Hispanic parents who asked them to ship their child's body home. Their 17-year-old boy had died

of cancer. "He had come up here hoping our medicine could save him, but it couldn't," Sager said.

He and his wife drove the body to Chicago themselves, and they got transit permits in English and Spanish stamped by the Mexican consulate. They saw firsthand the anguish a Mexican family experiences and the arduous process they face in sending a body home.

Now, they understand "that horrible hurt and how separated they must feel from their cultural background."

It bothers the Sagers when their friends in Jacksonville and Rushville tell them "you've just become a little Mexico down there."

"I've heard it so much. The quiet criticism of them as people," said Sager. "No one has the right to criticize someone for who they are. It should almost be taken as a compliment that people chose our community as the bright spot in their lives. That's what I tell people when they say that."

Even people in Beardstown who've come to care about their Hispanic neighbors are bothered by the fact that they're violating U.S. immigration laws.

American residents are uncomfortable with the laws that force people into a shadow world and they are uncomfortable with the people who live there.

The problem came into sharp focus in June, when dozens of federal agents swept into Beardstown and arrested 12 Hispanics for selling birth certificates and Social Security numbers to Excel workers. Charges were dropped against four of the people, but five others have pleaded guilty. Three more are awaiting trial on the charges, which carry a maximum penalty of five years to 15 years in prison.

Walters said his "hope is that the arrests will not only send a message to people who come here but to Excel about its hiring practices. They play in the gray area. They don't violate the law, but they sure don't play by the book, either."

Excel refused repeated requests over the past seven months for a face-to-face interview with a company official. But the company said in a written statement that, "like other businesses, we follow the government's I-9 requirements for verifying employment eligibility."

The mayor said he has repeatedly asked immigration officials to check the plant for undocumented workers. Longtime Excel employees said agents haven't questioned workers at the plant for immigration violations since 1995.

"We've invited them to come down here several times. They told us they don't have the resources. Beardstown doesn't seem to warrant a lot of attention," Walters said. "The truth of the matter is that they could come down here on any given day and put up a roadblock and Excel would have trouble operating the plant."

Six immigration agents are responsible for a vast area that stretches the length of Illinois, from Rockford at northern border to the tiny town of Cairo at the state's southern tip. Beardstown Police Chief Tom Schaefer said, "That spreads them kind of thin."

Greg Archambault, resident agent in charge of the Springfield office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, declined to comment on the number of agents in the area, but he denied that limited resources are forcing the agency to overlook some employees.

"We're interested in any case that comes across our desk. We do have the resources that we need and we do investigate any violation of the Immigration and Nationality Act."

"Of course," he said, "our main focus is anti-terrorism and apprehending the most dangerous criminals that might be in the country."

From where Walters sits, the United States has an immigration policy that is disconnected from reality. The laws on the books no longer seem to apply to a nation that depends on immigrant laborers to do its toughest and most dangerous jobs.

Immigration officials estimate that 7 mil-

lion undocumented workers lived in the United States in the year 2000. The states with the largest increases were California, Arizona, Texas, Georgia, North Carolina and Illinois.

"Personally, I have no problem with Hispanics being here as long as they're legal," Walters said. "The Hispanics are trying to make a better living for themselves and their families. You can't fault them for that. And I don't. But let's do it the right way."

As long as the current immigration laws are on the books, the fear of being sent back home will always be present.

After the June raid, some undocumented workers moved away. The ones who stayed are worried that patrols by immigration agents will become a regular occurrence in Beardstown, like they are in other meat-packing towns.

For a decade, Beardstown "has been a small corner of refuge."

"People felt secure here," said the Rev. Alvarez.

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After a summer school performance, Alejandra Gayitan, 7, walks home past Steve and Debbie Smith's 1856 mansion. Across the street, Mike Haberman has put his house on the market because of Beardstown's rapid Hispanic influx.



Now, he's concerned that too much attention has been drawn to this isolated town. "At any moment the INS could show up," he said. "I expect them to come again."

There is stability in Beardstown now, but it is a fragile stability propped up by one large employer, a partially undocumented work force and uneasy residents.

Excel is likely to increase its production over the next five years, bringing hundreds of new Hispanic workers to town. But Beardstown residents also worry Excel could close after 20 years of operation — just like Oscar Mayer did — destroying the gains this community has made.

Not too long ago, the mayor of a town in downstate Illinois asked Walters for advice. Hispanics were beginning to move into her town and she didn't know how to confront the challenges that lay ahead.

But Walters said most mayors of all-white towns are avoiding the issue. The matter wasn't even on the agenda at a recent Illinois Municipal League conference in Chicago.

"They always believe it'll happen every place but in their hometown," Walters said. "It's probably the same mentality that we had at one time."

Walters believes America's heartland will have to find ways to deal with the new cultures, lifestyles and beliefs because the change is irreversible.

"If a genie would jump out of a bottle and ask me if I'd like to have it the same way as 15 years ago, damn right I would," Walters said. "But that's not reality."

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Beardstown's Hispanic residents are no longer single men looking for work; they are families who have put down roots. Babies born American citizens are a common sight. After a service at Iglesia Del Nazareno Libertad church, members kiss over 5-month-old Jose Ben. From left are Fatima Fernandez from the Dominican Republic and the Rev. Tomas Alvarez' daughters Ruth, middle, and Claudia, right.