



## 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.** Dave Bakke writes about how this couple made it last.

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## HOLIDAY HELPERS

**Your donation helps families in need.**

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

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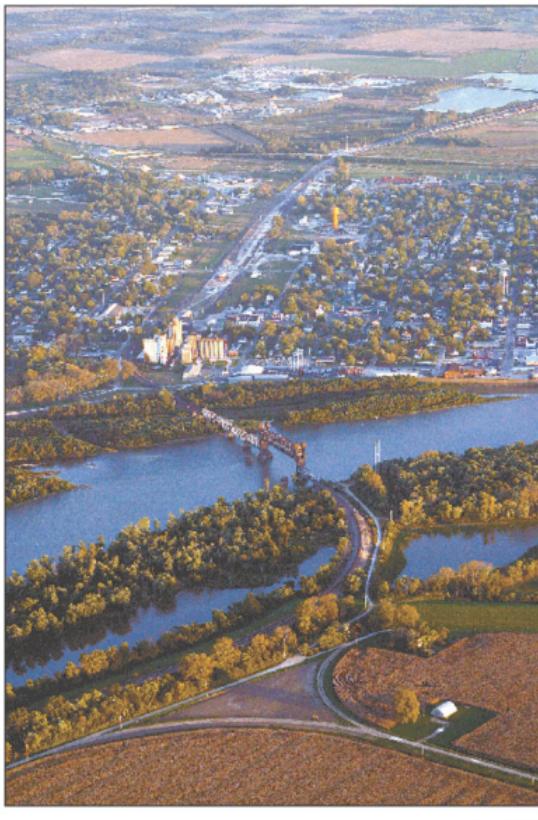


**BEARDSTOWN**  
The city of a changing America

THE OLDEST NEWSPAPER IN ILLINOIS™

SUNDAY

NOVEMBER 9, 2003

Part 1  
Tension in the air

**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.**

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 our four-day report examining one community's 15-year adventure in social change.

Barry Locher

Editor

Story by S. LYNN WALKER

Photographs by KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER

**B**EARDSTOWN — On winter afternoons, in the afternoons of twilight, dividing the town from night, Bob Walters drives 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. Beardstown was a town. Now, it was losing the comfortable rhythm of small-town life slipping away.

In just two years, three Beardstown homes had closed their doors, eliminating 500 jobs. Now, the town's biggest employer — the Oscar Mayer pork slaughterhouse — was shutting down, along with another 800 jobs. With no hope of finding work, families were beginning to leave.

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

continued on page 6



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 guards inside held off the intruders.

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.

TICKRIT, Iraq — Houses shook, walls cracked and children swayed and cried as parents awoke in terror for their parents as U.S. planes dropped 500-pound bombs on the outskirts of Saddam Hussein's hometown overnight.

The shelling came after Friday and Saturday's news 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.

## Iraqi resentment deepens after U.S. show of force

By HAMZA HENDAWI

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TICKRIT, Iraq — Houses shook, walls cracked and children swayed and cried as parents awoke in terror for their parents as U.S. planes dropped 500-pound bombs on the outskirts of Saddam Hussein's hometown overnight.

The shelling came after Friday and Saturday's news 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.

"I feel we have won a new lease on life," said a retired Iraqi general, working a traditional Arab robe and looking

See IRAQ on page 5



At least two people dead  
Riyadh  
SAUDI ARABIA  
YEMEN  
OMAN  
Gulf of Oman  
ETHIOPIA  
JORDAN  
IRAQ  
EGYPT

SOURCES: Associated Press, ESPN AP



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.



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 Stoplight Liquors owner Lisa Mincy cashes her paycheck.

# “...it’s hard to adjust”

continued from page 1

Excel Corp., the second-largest meatpacker 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 new found and future holidays. They also

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

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

What Walters had seen on his trips across the Midwest was also drawing to 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 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

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

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 had been down town, too. In 1858, the town 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 100 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 records before letting it locate in the enterprise zone at the outskirts of town. Excel received all the economic benefits Illinois had to offer, including state funds for job training.

Beardstown already had a labor force trained in the meatpacking business. With downtown 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 him.

“I wanted Americans to hold the job,” 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 employees. 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 Americans' tables, and pig tails to canners for pork 'n beans and shipped sausages to Alabama for pickling.

The money that Excel's workers earned flowed back into Beardstown's economy. Hardee's and McDonald's opened hamburger joints 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 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 was so motivated by racism, Walters said, but his years of experience in the meatpacking industry.

“They take Hispanics, blacks and the down-towners 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 disabled, veterans.”

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 colored and very few Mexicans,” he recalled. “Every time we'd try to hire 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 suits began to rear their ugly heads.

class action suits for \$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 205-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 fumes from a cooler where slaughtered hogs were being held 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-

inois' 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 seekers, 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 outside 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 includes 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 a memo to its employees in September, 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 Mincey to the Texas-Mexico border at least 10 times during the eight years she worked at the plant. Sometimes, Mincey 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 Mincey, 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.

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**N**obody can remember when the first Mexican families moved into Beardstown. Suddenly, they were just there.

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

Buffy Tillin-Pratt, a longtime real estate agent and a member of the family Beardstown, said, "I can't tell you 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 Tillin-Pratt, who owned 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 enter their 6-year-old daughter.

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

People'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 mostly 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. "They didn't know the laws," said Antonio Casas, 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. Not even the district had any Spanish-speaking students. By 1996, it had seven 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 it 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.'"

Despite the scare, Excel's Hispanic work force continued to grow.

Ruiz brought 26 Hispanics to work with him at Excel in July 1995. 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, business began to cater to the new residents' tastes.

Si Casas, 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.

**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 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.

## 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 long-time Beardstown residents turned to resentment.

Martina Martinez, 29, was denied her right to register to vote at the same time she applied for a driver's license, which she 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 threw flaming rags at the house," said her husband, 35-year-old

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

**O**n 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 Brown, 22, at El Flamingo. Brown was a friend of one of Beardstown men whose ex-wife was living with Arambula.

The next night, a 6-foot-high makeshift

cross was doused with diesel fuel and set ablaze in front of the bar.

Arambula was found four 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.

Police also descended on 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 bare and closed his doors.

Police soon arrested a 20-year-old resident of nearby Rushville, but Illinois state police patrolled the town for weeks.

When rumors circulated that the Ku Klux Klan was headed to Beardstown, the local police chief had to go to the national KKK convention with its own whereabouts.

"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 [swalker@terra.com.mx](mailto:swalker@terra.com.mx). Photographer Kristen Schmid Schurter can be reached at [kristen.schmid@sjr.com](mailto:kristen.schmid@sjr.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, 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.

## 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 4-year-old kindergartener, 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 United, 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 1,032 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 4,700 total.

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

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

**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 downtown 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.

1989: 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 \$7.9 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 at Beardstown's Excel plant is 200 out of 1,160 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 African. Plant capacity increases to 17,400 hogs a day.

Angela Smith/The State Journal-Register

Delivery questions?  
Call 780-1440

INSIDE



## BEING A VETERAN

Veterans talk  
about their time  
in the service in  
Portraits of  
Courage

Special section

TO THE  
WIREThe Rams  
win in the  
end, but the  
Bears  
just can't  
hold on.

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IT'S ALL  
CLEARMore and more  
are seeing the  
benefits of vision  
correction surgery.

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HOLIDAY  
HELPERSMany families  
can benefit from  
your donation.

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## WEATHER

Clouds and sun  
today: high 54,  
Chance of a drizzle,  
tongue: 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 bells pealed for unity and ministers urged 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 woman.

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, in the space 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 1996, the meatpacking industry had opened plants in almost 150 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., Hispanic manufactured carpet. In Kinston, N.C., Hispanic migrant workers 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 lifetimes

and attitudes that made Americans feel uneasy.

They saw Mexican flags popping up all over town and heard Spanish spoken in stores and restaurants. In the Wal-Mart across the street, Hispanic children rode the slides and sat the town square where a plaque cited Abraham Lincoln's famous anti-segregation speech, "A house divided cannot stand."

continued on page 4

Story by S. LYNN WALKER • Photographs by KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER

Al-Qaida  
blamed  
for Saudi  
attackAnger at royals  
likely motive

By DONNA ABU-NASIF

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RAVADHI, Saudi Arabia — Saudi militants 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 send masses to 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, hunks of twisted metal, broken glass and large craters.

"It is no longer an issue of terrorism for them," said Dawood al-Shirian, 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 18, including five foreigners — after a second explosion 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 spokesman 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 Sunday 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 targeted 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

## 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 a tight financial climate and fearing the study of 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 systems, delegates to national conventions will be used instead of choosing delegates to the national conventions.

"Fewer voters will participate because (caucuses) are more complex," said Carl Gadd, director of the Committee for the Study of the Presidency and Congress. Electoral 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 relatively conservative delegations, have canceled their state-run 2004 primaries. Republican legislators tried unsuccessfully to drop primaries in Arizona and Missouri, but Democratic governors in those states proposed 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 challenges.

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. (Primary dates 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 state scarce resources?" he said.

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

"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

See PRIMARIES on page 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 riots in the 1990s that had broken out 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 headed into ghettos, as they had been in other manufacturing 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 "extras" 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.

"I think the people here are nice. They send 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 here 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 community 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 Fall 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 1800s, it 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 was concern 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. Alexius Catholic Church.

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

 At St. Alexius Catholic Church, the Rev. Eugene Weitzel heard the hushed complaints.

People were uncomfortable with his stance de  
fense 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 the United States. 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. Alexius 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."**



Reflection of a changing America

Part 2



Daniel Villegas, 5, performs a large-motor-skills test for Leah Torres as part of his kindergarten assessment screening. Beardstown kindergartners 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.



"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 out of five families eventually left the parish.

"There are people here in my own parish who would be happy as a lark if they just leave town," he said. "One of the men who came to me 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 was the worst thing for Mexicans, because he tried to push the Mexicans on Americans instead of letting people try to live together," said Eugene Ayres, a 64-year-old retiree who attends St. Alexius.

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

"People at the church don't like the separation. They want to be one parish," said Jackie Tanner, 47, who moved to Beardstown in 1998.

"They don't like two service groups. They don't like two youth groups. Resentment. That's what you have when you see segregation."

Edmundo Bernal, a 25-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.

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

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

"They think they are better than us," he said.

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 several ESL English as a second language, or ESL, classes. He is one of 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.

"Bearers. 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're more."

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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 to change the way we worked"



Tomas' teachers recommended that he be moved to English-speaking classes, and in eighth grade he became an Anglo. Tomas, who grew up in poverty and 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 smart people who stayed in ESL," said Tomas. "They're out at Excel now."

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

Like the parents who came to America before them, Hispanic parents and fathers wanted their children to become professionals. For them, having children who ended up cutting meat at Excel represented a way out.

But the school system wasn't prepared for students like Tomas. 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 blamed 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 the 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 sys-

tem. 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 on a ranch with his parents. It's like distance learning from their parents."

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 those children? You're not," Haut said. "You don't do that for the Anglo students. 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 to all Anglo students to a bilingual program," Haut said. "If they think this school is going to be a Mexican school, it's not. It's going to be Anglo institu-

tion."

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.

Hispanic parents and 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 Dora Sanchez, it's a status symbol to be able to speak English," she said. "They're afraid of people who are like distance learning from their parents."

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

She persisted even after a different staffer from the bilingual program settled 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 summoned to the office and 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.

"Now she's a whole mom of Arely," said her sixth-grade teacher, Susan DeVitt. "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

not 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 schools often enjoy the town would be united in the future.

From the moment the first Hispanic child was enrolled in 1993, principal Pam DeSollar said Beardstown's most recent 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 middle level to get the Hispanic children where we're going to go," said DeSollar, principal of Grand and Washington kindergarteners. "We've been challenged. But am I sorry about that? No."

DeSollar, 60, who grew up in California's San Francisco Bay area, moved to Beardstown after she married her husband. He is from an established local family. When she arrived in 1963, 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 Mexican dishes, so she refined beans and canned chilies by the can.

DeSollar saw the arrival of Hispanic families in small-town America as a natural progression of the wave of immigration that had settled in California and other border states. If Beardstown could 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. Lynn Waller is the Mexico City bureau chief for Copley News Service. She can be reached at [swaller@terra.com.mc](mailto:swaller@terra.com.mc).  
Photographer Kristen Schmid Schrader can be reached at [kristen.schmid@j-r.com](mailto:kristen.schmid@j-r.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 Raya, 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 in the most advanced sixth-grade math group.

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INSIDE



## FROSH LIFE

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

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## LINK CUT

Excel will no longer tie acquisition of Illinois Power to a rate increase.

Page 39



## HOLIDAY HELPERS

Newspaper readers are showing their generosity.

Page 14

## TWO LOST

Springfield comedi 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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[www.sj-r.com](http://www.sj-r.com)

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"This is the American dream and we are living it," said Marisela Chavez, enjoying a quiet summer evening with Stephanie, one of her three daughters. Chavez came to Beardstown in 1995; she works for the school system's bilingual program 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, the two cultures kept them apart: Many of the Hispanics working at Excel Corp.'s slaughterhouse were living illegally in the United States.

By 1998, Excel's workers 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



*Left: citizens of a changing America*

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

To protect themselves, the undocumented residents avoided most of the neighborhood. They were afraid of settling into small town life, of going to ball games or 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 lost almost 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 small, predominantly Hispanic congregation at the Church of the Nazarene. "I cried a lot because I knew I was living along with them. I began to talk with God. I said, 'God, they left their country to come here to work. They are people. It is not my responsibility to judge. You must judge them. Let me help them.'"

The dual identities filled school records, police 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 repeatedly assured them that their names wouldn't be turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS (now called the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

"The INS do not plan to be the police," said School Superintendent Jim Lewis. "Our mission is not to turn people in, 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 mothers of their babies.

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

continued on page 6

Story by S. LYNN 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 what students at the Springfield, Urbana-Champaign and Chicago campuses are paying this fall.

University officials on Monday re-

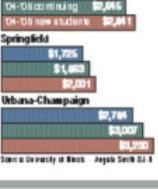
vealed proposed tuition rates to comply with the state's new guaranteed tuition plan, which requires that public universities charge new undergraduate stu-

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

The U of I board of trustees will consider the proposal in its meeting Thursday. Chancellor Richard Ringenbach of the University of Illinois at Springfield said fall new full-time undergraduate students next fall would increase from

### U of I tuition increases

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



See U OF I on page 5

## 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 its first case since the start of the war on terrorism, an appeal asking whether foreigners held at the U.S. Navy base in Cuba may contest their captivity in American courts.

The 16 detainees more than 650 prisoners held indefinitely 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-

tailed indefinitely without charges or trial.

Mostly Muslims, they have had no access to lawyers or other outsiders, and do not know if they are the subject of the case the court agreed to

See COURT on page 4

TUESDAY  
NOVEMBER 11, 2003

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

Staffers, guards on governor's shuttle

By BERNARD SCHOENBERG

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 state 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 Schaefer, spokesman for the governor. He said the Illinois 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 aircraft.

The amount charged for Blagojevich alone was \$734, or just over \$62 per flight. And the governor's flight last week was billed at \$432, or just over \$1,800, by the state police paying the rest for the security guard on each flight.

Last Tuesday through Thursday was the first three days of a planned six-day fall vacation 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 that he had planned to return to Chicago Tuesday night for some time off, but he found out he had to end up getting to spend "like two minutes" with the eldest of his two daughters, who is 7. He said then he decided to go to Chicago Wednesday night instead.

"If you're asking me, am I guilty of changing plans at the last minute ... and rather than spend the night in that big 34-room house with the servants and the cooks and everything else that goes along with it, but instead kind of felt like I wanted to go home and see my 7-year-old and kiss my baby, if that's what you're asking," he said.

Thursday at a news conference where he chided lawmakers for a "spending orgy," he was upset that he had been overruled.

"One thing I will not do is sacrifice what my values are, and when it comes to raising a family and spending time with my children, that's critical," he said.

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



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. In most cases, they used identification cards 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-nationality problems when they arrested 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 who had the same names but had different surnames.

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.

He went to the (former) chief of police and told him he had two 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 coming from American citizens.'

Based on that response, 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 to look at.

**B** eardstown 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 lies out of them. We've made cheats out of them," said the Rev. Eugene Weitzel, who presides over the St. John the Baptist Catholic Parish. "They've got to have real names. That's a lie. They carry papers that have real names on them."

"One of the reasons they don't come together more with the community is that they are 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 bought 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 bought cars, too, and when they went shopping, they had more 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 Eddie Bernal, 26, 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 \$300, so what?"

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

"In Mexico, for our people, level, we would live like donkeys," Martinez said. "Here, everything that I wanted, I have been able to buy."

Bar 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 that information down. Faced with 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 into Beardstown.

"I'm here, here, here," she said. "I tell my husband, 'Let's go back.' But he doesn't want to go back. My son is happy here."

Her 48-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 Weitzel. 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 Gyure, who wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the American flag and the words, "These colors never run."

Gyure 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, a lot of resentment. A lot of people feel that the Hispanic community has more laws than we do," said a 33-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 tires you when you're upset."

**E**xcel has been silent about many of the issues surrounding its Beardstown operation. The company denied recent media reports of 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 and verify against government databases. 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.

"We've been getting our documents got into the plane easier," he said. "Now, the plane is verifying all kinds of documents, including the work history of the job candidate."

Alvarez's 24-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Bernal, was an intern at Excel's Springfield human resources 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. "I've 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 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 midwives for as much as \$1,500.

One Hispanic woman told police she had been doing this for 10 years, working door-to-door in Beardstown. Her husband told police he 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 bones 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 presented is a citizen or a legal resident 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 Hispanic 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 her name, she says, "It's me, I'm Alicia." She imitates 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."

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 said he 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 Mexican restaurant. They also bought sound equipment that Bernal created out under the name "Si Puede," a Spanish phrase meaning, "Yes, it can be done."

—

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

Bernal tells his story like an adventure tale.

He struck out for the border in 1987, and 10 times he was detained by immigration agents in San Diego. Ten times, he was again given a year to remain in the 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 and then took a bus to a place he slept 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 journey 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, who's been here since 1990 and has lived well.

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

**L**ike 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 the west, "they call me Edmundo. On this side of the river, everybody just calls me Eddie."

As owner of Salón Azul, Eddie Bernal became one of the most visible Hispanics in town. He smiled and waved at everybody. He had a smile, a greeting in English and Spanish.

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, they don't mind it. It's not much."

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

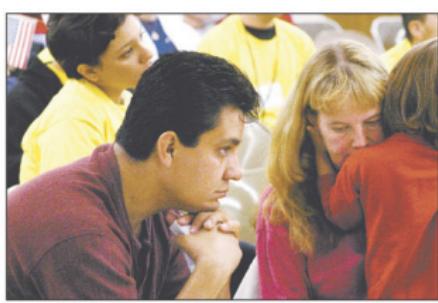
Nine-year-old Eddie Jr., wants to become a police officer.

Two-year-old Jimmy, a robust kid with bushy black hair, 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 [swalker@terra.com.mx](mailto:swalker@terra.com.mx). Photographer Kristen Schmid Schaefer can be reached at [kristen.schmid@sjr.com](mailto:kristen.schmid@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 (IWF) stopped there on their way to Washington, D.C. Rafael Trujillo and Lorraine 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 their employer's retaliation. She witnessed this firsthand with her husband, a former Excel employee and now a U.S. citizen.

**M**embers of Beardstown's Hispanic community seek out the Rev. Tomás 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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Delicious seem like  
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Partly sunny  
today; high 58.  
Mostly clear  
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year. No. 3



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.

## Part 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.

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

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



*Left: Tomas of a changing America*

daily life.

In almost every county, the 2000 census showed the rise in Hispanics outpacing overall population growth. From northern Illinois to Massachusetts, the rural Mississippi Delta and 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 Covesville City, Iowa, they're the majority.

In the 16 years since Excel Corp. opened a pork slaughterhouse at the outskirts of Beardstown, the Hispanic population has risen 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 masked by an acceptance, even appreciation, of the new people, of the new ideas that cultural diversity has brought.

Bob Walters sensed the difference in the fall of 2000 when he knew he was one of each of the town's 1,299 residents, leading his campaign for another term as mayor. Walters had left Beardstown for a better job in 1991 after serving as mayor for five years.

The city of 1,000 people, parents, brothers, a son and his wife, brought him back to Beardstown.

In his door-to-door campaign, he heard citizens complain about things that bother people everywhere: the increasing police department, unsightly garages and the city's mismanaged budget.

"One few griped about the number of Hispanics, but Walters stopped them short.

"He suggested people ask Beardstown people is that they think this is only happening in Beardstown," said Walters, who

continued on page 4

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

Story by S. LYNN WALKER • Photographs by KRISTEN SCHMID SCHURTER



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

## A dozen jobs created at IDOT

*Democrats' donors  
get most of them*

By JOHN O'CONNOR  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

White 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 Democratic, including \$2,550 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 \$62,200 annually in salaries alone. Adding in fringe benefits pushes the cost of the 12 jobs to more than \$800,000.

Transportation officials 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 represent state in conferences to 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 \$2.2 million to publicize the reconstruction of Interstate 74 through Peoria. Contract costs for this year include \$27.4 million for "strategic development," \$46,000 for "identifying groups for speaking opportunities," \$25,000 for writing news releases and \$17,000 to write newspaper opinion pieces and letter 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 from public-relations firms to a new, \$1 billion Mississippi River bridge from Illinois to St. Louis.

Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Otness said the liaisons are necessary to help IDOT be

See JOBS on page 2

## Sacrifices remembered

Vets honored  
at Statehouse

By ADRIANA COLOMBO

STATE CAPITOL BUREAU

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

"We're mom," said Victor, a Springfield resident. Her son, Sgt. Marc Victor, is in the 22nd Infantry Division.

Victor, also of Springfield, her son, Capt. Jeff Royer, is commander 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.

## Faster power shift to Iraqis wanted

Bremer rushes  
home to huddle  
with Bush aides

By RICHARD STEVENSON  
N.Y. TIMES NEWS SERVICE

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

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

The meetings reflected discussions 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.

At a recent Bush press conference, Vice President Dick Ch-

eneys said there was no evidence that Bush had any plans to leave Iraq in Bremer's hands. In a White House statement, Bush referred to ways of speeding the transfer of sovereignty.

Several administration officials said there was no evidence that Bush had any plans to leave Iraq in Bremer's hands, either, although the president wants him to move quickly.

Bremer's visit had an unusually urgent quality. To be here, he had to break an appointment in

See IRAQ on page 8



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 68 Park. Bernal stopped to say hello when he saw Walters checking on the park's sprinklers.**



**Jerry "Boogie" Quintanilla, left, and Tidiane Soumara, center, are friends even though Tidiane doesn't speak Spanish and Boogie speaks little English. On Saturdays, Boogie calls Tidiane and says, "Hey, TJ, 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

was 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 country."

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 1990 and 2000. Excel doubled its plants — 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 2 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 man was found shot to death, 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, some people say, an economic model for hundreds of American towns that are slowly dying.

Hispanics have given the town what real estate agent Buffly Tillitt-Pratt calls a "youth boost." The 80-year-old high school is so crowded that it has to turn away 200 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 foresees 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," he said.

Clearly, the town has changed. And so has Walters, a Purple Heart veteran of the Vietnam War, who admits he grew up a red-neck in a shadow of the town he now rules just like him. In Vietnam, his fellow soldiers hooted with laughter when he finally worked up the nerve to ask, "What's the hell is a soul brother?"

"They asked, 'How naive you are when you come from a small, all-white area,' " he said. "I was 18-year-old major 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 prefare 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. But some of the racial barriers remain.

"You still hear people say, 'westbacks,' " said the Rev. Tomas Alvarez, 46, who leads the Spanish-speaking congregation at the Church of the Immaculate Conception. "In the Hispanic community, I still hear 'gachos,' a derogatory term for Anglos."

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



barriers. Although he built the separate church with his own hands for Hispanic worshippers, Alvarez said they often join the Anglo congregation. "Many times we're just like us," he said.

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

Mike Huberman, 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 is too crowded with Mexicans," said Huberman, 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."

Huberman cringes when he hears people from other towns laugh and call Beardstown "the Mexican."

"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."

As the town changes, so does the demographic. The Rev. Eugene Weitzel baptized 12 Hispanic babies over the past two months and just one Anglo infant.

The Rev. Jim Edmiston, a Franciscan priest who served as pastor of St. Alfonso in 1999 and 2000, said it's not hate but confusion that is making Anglos leath.

"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."

Edmundo Bernal, a 35-year-old Mexican who has lived in Beardstown since 1996, said he doesn't feel at home in the town.

"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."

**T** he town believes lack of community involvement is holding Hispanics back. When Walters was elected, roughly 2,000 people voted, but fewer than 20 were Hispanic.

"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, whether they're in a new town or not."

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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 becoming 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.

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 think realize 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 assassination.

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.

**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.**

**M**exican 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 sombreros.

As the game went on, the Brown County fans yelled, "We want tacos," said Tomas Alvarez, a high school senior who was at the game.

"People were mad. They really care about



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

**"I think it may become an international town"**



# “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 become an international town.”

That international flavor already permeates every block in Beardstown.

Hispans live next door to Anglos. And both are adjusting to their neighbors like Tidiane Soumara from the country of Senegal.

When Soumara arrived in Beardstown a year ago, he was one of only 20 African workers in the town. Now, he said, his community has moved to Beardstown.

As he looks up and down the production line at Excel, where he earns \$11.95 an hour cutting paper, Soumara sees whites, Hispanics, Africans and a Vietnamese named That.

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

He practices his Muslim religion here, praying five times a day. On weekends, he shops for produce at the market.

Soumara was offered 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 Soumara, a tall, lanky 28-year-old who speaks English, French and three African languages. “I told her, I don’t have a problem with them. I work with them. They are nice.”

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

“I see Africans like Mexican people,” said Dihouibou. “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.

**M**any long-time residents of Beardstown welcome the new arrivals.

“We would never have heard Mexican music 10 years ago.

Now it is commonplace to hear different ethnic music,” said Wyatt Sager, 48, a long-time Beardstown resident who is the Cass County coroner.

“Beardstown is a much greater world scope now than it did 10 years ago.”

Sager and his wife, Trish, own their town’s largest funeral home, so their most personal encounters with Hispanics 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 to burials, and the two sets of remains 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 “horrible hurt and heartbreak 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 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.”

**E**ven people in Beardstown who’ve come to care about their Hispanic neighbors are not immune to 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 Secu-

rity 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 illegals who come here but to Excel about its hiring practices. They play in the gray area. They don’t play by the book, either.”

Excel refused repeated requests for the past seven months for a face-to-face interview with a company official. But the company said in a written statement that, “like most companies, 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 workers and 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 time. Beardstown doesn’t seem to interest them a lot or attract them to come here.”

“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.”

So immigration agents are responsible for a vast area that stretches the lengths of Illinois, from Rockford at the state’s northern 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 areas.

“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 discriminatory. The law that 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 Florida.

“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.”

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 and those who stayed put off having children. Agents will become a regular occurrence in Beardstown, like they are in other meatpacking towns.

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

“People felt secure here,” said the Rev. Alvarez.



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 fuss over 5-month-old Joe Bron. From left are Fatima Fernandez from the Dominican Republic and the Rev. Tomas Alvarez’ daughters Ruth, middle, and Claudia, right.

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“People felt secure here,” said the Rev. Alvarez.

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.”

Now, he’s stability in Beardstown now, but it is a fragile

stability propped up by a single undocumented work force and uneasy residents.

Excel is likely to continue to be a 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 jobs of 1,000 people.

Not so 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 she said the leaders 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 person 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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**After a summer school performance, Alejandra Gaytan, 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.**



**“Pequeno milagro desciende en paz”: Little miracle, a baby who lived only four days in 2001 is buried in the Beardstown cemetery, and to the generosity of Sager Funeral Home and St. Alexius Catholic Church. Burying a loved one in the United States, rather than sending the body back to Mexico, is a sign that Beardstown’s Hispanic residents consider America their home.**