



Minnesota Unraveled

EP109 - Meatpacking in Minnesota: How Migration and Labor Transformed Worthington

Publish Date: 3/6/2025

Chantel Rodríguez:

Between Minneapolis and Sioux Falls, there's a long stretch of wide-open highway, Interstate 90, that spreads out across the southwest corner of Minnesota. That's where I find myself now, hungry, in need of a snack and more gas. I took a quick turn off the highway for a pit stop. I was in a small town called Worthington, the kind of place with a main street lined with shops and restaurants. But as I drove down Worthington's Main Street, something struck me. I passed a Panaderia, a taco shop, an Asian grocery store, all in one of the more rural parts of Minnesota I've been to. It wasn't exactly what I was expecting to see. As I headed back towards the interstate, I passed a sprawling parking lot chock-full of cars surrounding a huge warehouse-like building.

JBS was in big red letters on the side of it. Underneath that, the sign read Worthington Pork Plant. This threw me for a loop. When I thought about meatpacking, I always pictured St. Paul's Stockyards or Hormel, home of Spam in Austin. What was a meatpacking plant doing here in a small rural town? Who are the people working inside the plant? What does the work of meatpacking look like? Does this plant have anything to do with Worthington's multicultural Main Street? To get to the bottom of these questions, I talked to a few different people. I spoke with three Worthington residents, all with ties to the meatpacking plant.

Antonio Morales:

My name is Antonio Morales and I've lived in Worthington my whole life and I work at JBS.

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

My name is Andrea Valeria Duarte-Alonso. I live in Worthington, Minnesota. I've been living in Worthington since pretty much as a second grader, so for a while. I'm 28 years old.

Leonardo Duarte:

Hello, my name is Leonardo Duarte. I am 52 years old and I'm from Mexico. I was born in a very rural town in Michoacán.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Andrea is Leo's daughter. You'll hear her come in throughout the episode to help with translation. Lastly, to make sure I had all the historical context, I spoke to Roger Horowitz.

Roger Horowitz:

I'm Roger Horowitz, I am the director of the Center for the History of Business Technology and Society at the Hadley Museum Library, which is a large research library in Wilmington, Delaware. I also am Professor of History at the University of Delaware.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I'm Dr. Chantel Rodríguez, and this is Meatpacking in Minnesota: How Migration and Labor Transformed Worthington. Roger's been studying meatpacking since the late 1980s. He could speak to a whole host of things within the industry, so to make sure I was fully prepared for our conversation, I did some preliminary research. I wanted to make sure I understood exactly what meatpacking is. I had always thought it was strictly about making sure the meat got wrapped and packaged correctly.

Turns out, it's a whole lot more than that. Meatpacking involves not just packaging meat, but the slaughtering, processing and distribution of it as well. From Roger, I wanted to understand how this industry, one I have always associated with tight urban spaces, could have ended up all the way out here. Part of that meant getting a deeper understanding of what sorts of facilities are necessary for the processing and packaging of meat.

Roger Horowitz:

Well, the meatpacking industry is created because Americans like meat, and you have to have an organization of business and labor and technology for that to happen. When we speak about meatpacking, usually referring to two main physical artifacts. One is the slaughterhouses, obviously, in which animals go in, they're killed, they're cut in various pieces so they could be sent off to supermarkets, restaurants and your dinner table. Then there's the stockyards because the animals have to be prepared for that. The stockyards are created really to supply the packinghouses, because otherwise you ship the animals live and you don't need a stockyard to do

that. But no, the Armour, Swift and Cudahy, three of the large packing companies all had plants in the St. Paul area.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When I was talking to Roger, it became clear that to understand why meatpacking plants moved from urban centers to rural towns like Worthington, I'd have to take a step back to the early days of the meatpacking industry. Before the 1860s, meat was sourced locally. It was impossible to ship meat any distance without refrigeration.

Roger Horowitz:

Well, the challenge of meatpacking on a big scale is very elementary. One is that once the animal is killed, it starts to deteriorate. Bacteria can form in the animal and that's a big problem, obviously. They also come in odd sizes, so it's very hard to create an assembly line, so it's like a car where you could do that before you have refrigeration, which is really 1880s.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Refrigerated rail cars were introduced in the 1880s by Swift, a major meatpacking company. The company's founder, Gustavus Swift himself, is credited with these developments. Refrigerated cars changed the game. Now meat could be processed during the summer months and shipped long distances. As this technology spread, new, larger packing firms began replacing the smaller local firms. These large firms built operations at Midwestern cities with significant railroad hubs. The Midwest was ideally positioned closer to the cattle ranches out west and in the Great Plains with easy rail access to ship processed and packaged meat to the East coast.

Roger Horowitz:

The first time you have refrigeration in slaughtering, you have to move the animals themselves, and that's complicated and expensive to say, move millions of animals from one place to the other on railroad cars. And it's cheaper. The closer you get the animal to where it's raised and kill it and ship the meat, it's cheaper, always cheaper. It's like a rule of meat packing.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This is where St. Paul comes into the picture. Western livestock farmers needed a place to locally slaughter and process livestock headed for Chicago. A prominent railroad businessman named Alpheus Beede Stickney, solved that problem in 1886 when he opened the St. Paul Stockyards. Stockyards were sprawling areas outside packing plants where animals were gathered and prepared for slaughter. The St.

Paul Stockyards were once spread across 260 acres, filled with small square pens, each filled with livestock. Over time, the stockyards attracted four major meat packing companies, including Armour and Swift, that controlled the bulk of the meat production in the US. As for the slaughterhouses themselves, they had to be fit into small footprints to make efficient use of their urban space.

Roger Horowitz:

These plants are four, five, six stories high, and the way they move meat around these plants was by a system of chutes that would drop the meat from one floor to the next, or men would wheel them in carts from one place to the other, and that reflected that they're in downtown stockyards areas where space was there. Also, you wanted to use gravity to distribute the water, distribute the meat and all that. Refrigeration is everything in this industry. When they start refrigerating the packing houses, that's really the early 20th century, that extends the amount of time you have to get your meat to market.

Chantel Rodríguez:

At the same time that the distribution of meat is expanding, Americans' taste for meat is growing. These factors converged and led to an increase in production. A bigger market meant producing more meat. To do that, meat packing companies had to hire more workers. By 1925, there were 125,000 meat packing workers in the country, compared to only 8,000 in 1870. Over the course of little more than 50 years, meat packing employment had gotten 15 times bigger. Can you tell me a little bit about the packing houses and who the workers are that work in the packing houses and the kind of work that they do?

Roger Horowitz:

Well, it's immigrant labor. Again, we're thinking, say 1900, 1930, in that range, meatpacking has never been a desirable job because you're taking an animal apart, essentially. And it's blood and it's flesh and the actual plant itself is covered in grease. Anybody who ever walks into a plant, you'll be afraid of slipping because there's grease all over the place, there's blood all over the place. There are animal parts all over the place, so it's kind of a gruesome place to go. Very challenging environment there. So usually, workers who have any other way of getting out meatpacking go someplace else.

Early 20th century, that meant that the native-born workers by and large, went into trades like construction or they went to the steel mills, all of which again, these are industrial trades and all that, but they're not as dirty as meatpacking is. So the people who come into meatpacking are the immigrants, the recent immigrants, Croatians from Slavs, Czechs, you name it, Poles. A lot of Poles come in there to those jobs, and

you also get for African-Americans in a lot of places in the country, meatpacking was the best job they could get because of racial discrimination.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Anyone who could avoid working in meatpacking, did. It wasn't just gruesome, it was dangerous. Combine a floor that's slick with blood with fast-moving, knife-wielding men, and you have a workplace rife with accidents. This is the time before safety standards, before labor laws. And on top of all that, for those with few options outside meatpacking, it wasn't exactly stable employment or easy to get the job in the first place.

Roger Horowitz:

Many times in meatpacking, you had what was called in other sectors of the economy, a shape-up, which meant if you wanted to work, you went down to the plant maybe 5:00 in the morning and you stood outside, hoping that you'd get picked to work that day. And if you knew the foreman or you had some connections, you'd be more likely to be picked. You'd work that day, and then the next day you do the same thing. So casual, very casual employment. This is an attractive job again, with quotes around it because it had decent pay, but you didn't know how many hours you were going to work in the course of that time. That's your workforce. I mean, you have a potential to work well, but it also means that the workers are highly vulnerable to company pressure.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Meatpacking plants were and are highly specialized workplaces. There are workers whose role begins and ends on the kill floor, those who butcher whole animals, others who slice and package bacon, not to mention administrators, supervisors and cleaners, which is all to say a meatpacking plant requires a sizable number of employees. That was another pro of having them located near urban centers. There were plenty of people looking for jobs, but Worthington, Minnesota is a far cry from an urban center. It still didn't make sense why I'd see a meatpacking plant off the highway all the way out here. How and why did these plants make the move out of the cities?

Roger Horowitz:

One big change, which you might not think as being relevant is we start getting a highway network. And the highway network allows trucks to take the place of railroads in distribution, which means that the plants are no longer forced to be in the center stockyards where the rail connections are, and that effect happens slowly, but by the '50s and '60s, it's forcing plants in the big centers to close so that they could be decentralized in the plants that are in the countryside because you can, the

cattle are there in Minnesota. The cattle haven't moved or the pigs haven't moved. What they're doing is they're moving them to different places for processing.

It's also cheaper if you have, say, cattle and hogs in southern Minnesota, which there are plenty, to send them to Worthington, Minnesota, also in southern Minnesota [inaudible 00:13:06] Chicago, you don't have to ship them in all that. Much easier, and you can do it through trucks now because you have those opportunities. So you put these things together, you can imagine the accountants, the statisticians and looking at the numbers and thinking, "It's just going to be cheaper if we do this in Worthington than if we do that, continue to Chicago."

Chantel Rodríguez:

With the growth of the national highway system in the 1950s, rural areas were much more appealing for meatpacking. The highway allowed for distribution of meat and livestock in a new way, one that wasn't controlled by the major meatpacking companies who had long relied on rail transport. Other companies took advantage of the highway system and began to establish processing factories out in rural areas. But Roger says there was another important player that was affecting change in the meatpacking industry, supermarkets.

Roger Horowitz:

The other thing which happens, which is related, is supermarkets grow. And while we're so used to supermarkets being everywhere, they weren't really there until the early '50s as institution. And so what supermarkets do is they say to these new packing companies, "Hey, ship your meat to us and our butchers will cut it up and we'll send it right to the supermarkets." So these plans that are killing and cutting, as they're saying, they go directly to the supermarkets and that's distribution, and supermarkets are all over the place. That changes the locational rules of the game. So over the course of the next 20 years, it's pretty much all downhill for the big companies. These new companies come in there and they're much more aggressive in labor relations, a lot of them are non-union.

Chantel Rodríguez:

All this gets us to Worthington. In 1964, Armour opened a plant in the small, predominantly White town of 9,000. But Armour brought in workers, many of whom were African-American, from places like Chicago.

Roger Horowitz:

What happens when African-American workers end up in Worthington, Minnesota where the United Packing house workers was aware that they're having African-Americans going to a town that was lily White, no African-Americans there.

So they sent groups of workers in there to talk to the residents, to talk to the mayors and to talk to the churches and say, "Look, we're coming. Don't be scared of us, here's what's up there." So they did a lot of work of community relations before that happened.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the 1980s, Worthington experienced a transformation. The decreasing power of unions and a new wave of immigration converged to change the workforce at the Worthington Meatpacking Plant and the town itself.

Roger Horowitz:

Mid '80s, there's massive de-unionization in the industry, wages plummet. To give you some numbers, 1982, '83, average pay was \$10.69 an hour. By 1988, it's \$6.50 an hour, \$4 an hour drop in pay the 1980s, so it's a mess. It's a mess, it's an ugly situation, but it also means that a lot of the workers that were there, who were native born African-American, they get out. They go for other jobs. They're not willing to work under the conditions in meatpacking for this really bad pay, so the companies have to find new workers willing to work for much less money than before, so they go back to immigrants, which is the old playbook of the meatpacking industry going back to the 19th century.

And these immigrants come from all sorts of places. Of course, there's massive immigration from Mexico, especially places where you had parts of Mexico that were caught in civil wars or the controversies that were happening in the '80s. Guatemala, which has a civil war, sends a lot of immigrants to North America. It's not just Minnesota which gets them, it's all over the places there. African refugee migration takes place.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Worthington of the 1980s was similar to other small towns across the Midwest at the time. It had a population of about 10,000 with only about 100 residents who identified themselves as Hispanic. Most of the town's, White or African-American residents were unwilling to work for the lower wages at the meatpacking plant. Roger is saying that immigrant workers were the ones to fill this gap. What did it look like for these people newly arrived from Mexico, Guatemala and other parts of Central and South America? The United Packing House Union had laid the groundwork for African-American workers moving to Worthington in the 1960s.

Roger Horowitz:

Now, what happens of course in the '80s is nothing like that. There's no union really there as a force for that when these new immigrants come in. It's generally quite

chaotic, and what happened to these towns is really rough on them, because all these immigrants move to town very quickly. There isn't enough rental housing for them, so they're sleeping in the park, they might be sleeping where they have beds rented two or three times a day and you get the bed during the night shift, you get the bed during the day shift. A lot of young men crowding into houses for all that, who of course are drinking outside, which the residents don't like. Imagine groups of Latino men sitting outside in parks with cases of Coors or things like that. That's not very friendly, but of course, these men have no place to go.

They want to socialize, they want to relax and all that there, and it's also very expensive for these towns because these workers require social services and the taxes they're paying are going to the federal government, they're not going to the town. So the town suddenly has this financial hit especially when these workers start having children and the children go into the school system. These workers are renters, they're not homeowners, so there is an increase in the property tax revenue for the school districts. So there's a lot of resentment and anger at these immigrants in Midwestern towns.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That resentment goes back to how the town of Worthington was doing in the 1980s. The farm crisis in the mid 1980s led to higher interest rates on loans, increases in land prices and rising production costs. All this meant agricultural jobs were drying up. Worthington's already small population was dwindling and the town was struggling to stay economically afloat. This is the context that the immigrant workers arrived into. Some Worthington residents were welcoming towards the immigrant community through local churches or other means. They embrace the economic benefits brought by the new arrivals. Others felt the new arrivals were a burden on the local economy. The people moving to Worthington were moving for the jobs at the meatpacking plant, giving new life to the town's number one employer and all the other jobs in town that support it like truck drivers, veterinarians, plant kitchen staff and livestock transporters to name a few.

In 1983, the Armour plant in Worthington got new ownership. Swift Independent Packing Plant purchased the whole operation. Over the following years, the facility would triple in size. By the time JBS, a Brazilian meat company, purchased the plant in 2007, it was processing more than 20,000 hogs per day compared to the 5,000 a day in 1964. This all brings us back to those three Worthington residents I mentioned at the top of the episode. Here's Antonio Morales, he was born and raised in Worthington. Antonio's parents immigrated to Florida from Guatemala and moved here for his father's job at JBS. Would you mind sharing one of your earliest memories of living in Worthington?

Antonio Morales:

My earliest memory, probably it was when was my parents would take us out to see the soccer games every Saturday, they were small Sunday leagues.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Before landing in Worthington, Antonio's parents moved around to various towns with various packing plants. That's something many workers in the meat packing industry do. It's an effort to find the job with the best wages. These can range from \$16 to \$20 an hour. Leonardo Duarte has moved all around the Midwest, but has put roots down in Worthington.

Leonardo Duarte:

I started working since 1992 in Dodge City, Kansas. I worked at XL Cargo. Then after that, we moved to Nebraska because the work was better and in the same industry. I moved again to Tama, Iowa and I lasted there with them for a bit. The same bosses that I had in Windham promoted me by requesting I help them out by organizing a floor. I was then also offered another opportunity in Plainwell, Michigan. I wasn't there for long because I didn't like the city. There was too much traffic and I didn't feel as comfortable there, so I returned to Tama.

Chantel Rodríguez:

It wasn't just the lack of traffic that made Worthington appeal to Leo. It became enough of a home for his family that they bought a house here. Here's his daughter, Andrea Valeria Duarte-Alonso. Would you mind sharing your first memory of Worthington when you arrived here, back in 2006, I believe it was?

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

Yeah, I was a second grader. I was so mad, my dad pulled me out of school and I forgot my pencil box. All I remember is just sitting in that car, being really upset and everything looked blue to me. But I do remember my classroom, I remember a lot of my classmates were White and there might've been a few students of color at the time. Yeah, it definitely felt like a different environment or energy. I don't know how to describe it, but I just think it felt less overwhelming coming into Minnesota, I feel. There was just this weird vibe of just newness and I think maybe the winter had something to do with that. Just because I was super unknown, I didn't understand what kind of community Worthington was at the time, but I just remember it being super White with just trees with no leaves and cold.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And señor Duarte, what do you remember about coming and moving your family to the Worthington area? Why did you choose to come to Worthington and how did you feel about Andrea being upset, having to move?

Leonardo Duarte:

It was something unexpected. We didn't plan to stay because of the work, but I saw that things seemed different in Worthington and it has nice weather. There's the lake and all of that enticed us, and we bought a house that rooted us in the community. But I know and understand that my daughter struggled because I would work in one place, for six or four years in one place, and then we'd move her from school at a young age. But ultimately, when Andrea came and returned to Worthington, I noticed she had a strong mentality and was really involved, and I like to see that. That is why we stayed in Worthington and it's a nice place.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Both Leo's and Antonio's family moved around to find the best paying job in meatpacking. They were not alone. They were part of much bigger regional migration and global immigration patterns. In Leo's time working at various plants, he's worked with people from all around the world, not just from Latin America.

Leonardo Duarte:

Well, in Dodge City, Kansas, I worked with many Asians. Because there were so many of them and from different countries, we all just call them Chinos, but in reality, they were from places like Vietnam. They are really good people. They have a great technique to keep a sharp knife, they work fast. Their animal bone pieces are white, but there is also people that you can't say anything to them, you can't even touch them. People from Somalia and Ethiopian are a little different. Ethiopians can work with pig and beef, but there's Muslim people who can't work with both animals.

I did get to work with people from many races. There are some people that you can't make a comment to, you can't raise the voice at them because they then accuse you of something that isn't. That's why it's better to leave people do what they need to do. Yes, many Latinos. Here in JBS is where there's a high percentage of Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans, but Guatemala has 10% to 15% more people. When I worked in Dodge City, there was no Salvadoran and hardly any Hondurans. There's a big group of Asian people, but mostly from Guatemala. Those people work well, too. People from Mexico too, Mexicans seem to be moving up. They don't want to be working as much in meatpacking.

Chantel Rodríguez:

With so many employees from different backgrounds, it made me wonder if language was an issue in the workplace. What happens if the person next to you wielding a knife, doesn't speak the same language as you?

Antonio Morales:

There's a thing that we have, it's like a sign language that everybody has to learn once we start working there. When I started working there, the people I couldn't communicate with, they would give me hand signals and I was kind of just like, "I don't know what that means," but slowly I started learning what they meant. That's kind of how we communicate now, and since it's so loud in there, we can barely hear each other talk, so that's kind of how we have to talk or communicate. You have to pick it up or either ask.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This issue of language is something I wondered about. I asked Roger how employers have dealt with it.

Roger Horowitz:

A lot of these immigrants don't speak English, and if you have a lot of these immigrants in the plant, they don't speak the same language, so that creates a much more fragmented workforce there. When this happens, they increase the speed of production lines enormously, and you have what's called an epidemic of carpal tunnel syndrome. These immigrants are much less able to resist these pressures to work faster. The unions are weakened or are gone entirely there, so all sorts of workplace injuries, and so that takes us really towards the industry which we still have today.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When I asked Antonio more about the fast pace of work, he told me about his dad, who has worked in meatpacking for more than 20 years.

Antonio Morales:

Well, I remember him always smelling like pork, coming home, smelling like pork, saying his body is tired. He was very tired all the time. He was a production worker when he first got there, and I think he's been working there over 20 years now. But yeah, it was hands-on with pork, he worked on the kill floor. It was a heavy duty job.

You got to work at a fast pace. It's really hot in there and you're on the kill floor, so you're actually doing the killing and it stinks in there. There's a lot of blood.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And so his job on the kill floor, does that mean that he was sort of wielding tools?

Antonio Morales:

Yeah, long knives. I think one of them is called a wizard machine, something like that is what they call it. It's like an arm kind of, and it has a big circle blade attached to the end and you have to guide it with your arm, but it's connected to a little, how do I say it? It's like a little machine, but you have to guide it and then it'll do it by himself.

Chantel Rodríguez:

While Antonio's father works on the kill floor during the day, Antonio works to clean and sanitize it on the night shift.

Antonio Morales:

I go in at 11:30 PM, and then the first thing I do when I get there, we have a safety topic meeting, so everybody in the sanitation department gets together in the cafeteria, and then we have the safety managers talking about new topics every day. And then after that, we get a little break and then we go down to the floor. Oh, sorry, I don't know if you can hear my dogs. Then we'll go down to the floor, and then since my department doesn't start until 3:00 AM, we have to go and help out in different departments that need help. And then we get our little break around 2:30 and then go back down to the floor at 3:00 and then start our area or in our department. We were given a yellow jumpsuit kind of thing to protect our skin, wear rubber gloves. We wear helmets, earplugs or earmuffs, just any type of ear protection.

I wear glasses or goggles. Goggles, because we work with chemicals, so it's really bright. We got some bright lights because to be safe, you have to kind of see everything that's going on. Obviously, it's a mess. There's blood everywhere, there's all type of pig parts on the floor, on the machines, everything's kind of just a mess. We basically have to take everything apart and then take some conveyor belts off, unscrew some of the machinery, and then we have to wait for a while to make sure all the production workers are outside before we can start hosing. And then once they're all out, we can start hosing and then that's when we start.

We have to dry the ceilings first, because then sometimes there'll be little water droplets that'll drip down. Then there's the quality control, they'll say that that could cause bacteria from the ceilings, so we have to make sure we dry it. We use fans, but

the main tool is a big metal pole, and then we connect it to a air hose that's connected to the wall, and then kind of have to dry the ceiling with that. Turn the air on, you have air coming out at a strong pressure, so then that helps. I clean up the kill floor. We get out very late since the line stops around 3:00 AM, so we have to work in the fast pace because we have to have the floor ready and turned in by 6:00 AM.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That fast pace is a universal trait of work in the meat packing plant. Leo has felt that same pressure. And so what the speed and pace of work looked like when you were doing that work?

Leonardo Duarte:

It's something very different. It's very different because the process of cattle is working with a bigger piece, but mostly you do the same job. Well, not everyone has the same luck with working with knives and using saws. Others have to force themselves by carrying big stuff like boxes. But to me, what caused my attention of the industry is how one can work with people holding a knife in one hand, a saw in the other, walking in and out the area.

There's been accidents too, that I've witnessed. The people that are not accustomed to the work can panic, but then with time, one becomes comfortable. And many times many people that work with knives and can't get a good sharpening will injure their shoulders or their hands swell up. It's a very physical job. Well, I know more about cattle as a former supervisor. I had to calculate the efficiency of the line by just knowing how many people are on the line and how the speed of the line would go.

Chantel Rodríguez:

According to Leo, working at that speed is something that not just anyone can do, and the consequences of going slow or of making a mistake can be severe.

Leonardo Duarte:

Wow, before when I was a supervisor, it was not the same to work with the people who arrived so that they stay to work and do not get hurt, it makes the job easier. Sometimes as a supervisor, you don't have the time to explain detail by detail. There's another person in charge of training. Not everyone has the same ability, the same intelligence to understand how to make things easier and have better technique like maintaining a sharp knife. The job is very dangerous. A job for me, well, I prefer to be a laborer. If you're a good worker in understanding and you don't like to be scolded, then you'll do the things how they should be. But there's things too, that happen in there, like abusing people who are fast and great workers. People expect these

people to do more and take on responsibilities that the others can't seem to do just as fast or as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In spite of language barriers, fast pace of work and long hours, the workers at JBS have nonetheless formed a community.

Antonio Morales:

Yes, definitely. I feel like everybody there that works there somehow knows each other, you know how the saying.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yes.

Antonio Morales:

Yeah, there's just that. You can feel it, that there's a little community there when you go to work.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Over the last 30 years, immigrants have come through Worthington to work at the meatpacking plant and accept other job opportunities. They have transformed the small town of Worthington. In 2020, Worthington's population was close to 14,000, with more than a third of residents identifying as Hispanic. It has the highest percentage of Hispanic residents of any city in the state. The influx of immigrants has also had an impact on the Worthington cultural and economic landscape. As of 2017, the town had more than 24 Hispanic owned businesses.

St. Mary's Catholic Church regularly has hundreds of attendees at its Saturday evening Spanish mass. The Ethiopian community in Worthington is substantial enough to have established an Ethiopian Orthodox church. This led me to another question. I wanted to know how recent arrivals create community in a new place. Here's Leo and Andrea. For either of you or your family, generally speaking, do you feel like there's a specific community group or organization, a church, et cetera, that you feel very connected to, being in Worthington?

Leonardo Duarte:

We are close to the Catholic Church here. It's the only thing we have for Sundays, the church.

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

Yeah, I think there's definitely organizations that have been impactful to our family. I know when we first came to Worthington, the Nobles County Integration Collaborative was a big part of my life, being able to go to after-school programs. There's also the community education, which, my mother attended a lot of English classes, and so there's programming available and sometimes that programming has become so packed for the big need of a lot of individuals that recently, I've noticed we've gotten a bigger group of Haitian immigrants in our area, and I wouldn't have seen that 10 years ago. And so a lot of them are trying to also get more of an education, grab their GED or just continue to go to English classes, so there's that.

We're not obviously as connected to the programs that we used to because I feel like we've received our adequate enough of resource and we know that that resource is needed for other individuals as well. But I think to back up my dad, for a lot of individuals in the Worthington community, there's the Catholic St. Mary's Church, but there's also different denominations within the area that have kind of kept people's grounding, spiritually, religiously. We've been lucky to have been welcomed by St. Mary's many of many times growing up here. Having that connection, obviously to your culture is really important to be able to sustain your livelihood.

Antonio Morales:

I did keep playing soccer in the winter because JBS put in money to create an indoor facility we have here in town, and so when they created that, they gave us a chance to play soccer in the winter. Yeah, that was actually a pretty big thing in our community.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Can you tell me a little bit more about how people were reacting or why they felt it was a big thing?

Antonio Morales:

I think the main reason was because of the soccer thing. They created their own soccer team in that facility and I feel like the number one sport in this community is soccer.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Do you have a sense for beyond the field house, how JBS has really shaped the community in Worthington?

Antonio Morales:

Kind of just by having a little, because every year they'll have a picnic, they have bouncy houses blown up for the kids and anybody who works there is welcome. They have a grill-out, just different type of activities. I think that really brings people together, it gives people something to do, have fun. Well, my dad would take us when we were kids and they had everything for the kids there, so it was pretty fun. They had food, you could win prizes, there'd be microwaves, TVs.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The changing population of Worthington has had other more gradual types of impacts on the town.

Antonio Morales:

Yeah, definitely there's new businesses, there's different type of stores, Mexican stores, African stores, Guatemalan stores, just new stores that have been added on recently.

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

Growing up in Worthington is nothing to what I'm seeing now as a teacher. I know that obviously, I was introduced in Worthington to friends from Eritrea and Ethiopia, friends from Guatemala, El Salvador, and different Latin American countries that were represented here, as well as East African and obviously Asian as well. But it was very much still a farm town in a sense of the kids who went to school grew up on a farm. My best friends' parents are farmers or were farmers right outside of Worthington, and I mean, the culture of that Anglo-White was definitely very, very present when I was growing up here.

And so anyway, in the last few years, I think because more people have come to work at JBS, Worthington has just racially diversified so much that as a teacher, most of my classes are Latinx, it's majority Latino. And I think you could see that in statistics, that our school is over 60% students of color, and so the impact it's had has been huge. And I know our neighbors have noticed, new neighbors who are entering what used to be White neighborhoods. Our family, we moved into a very white neighborhood at the time. We were the only Latinos in that one street, and now there's over six families of color that are living in what used to be a very White

neighborhood. Anyway, I do think that because of JBS, we just have become a very diverse, what they call a melting pot, and I think there's pros and cons to it.

I think obviously, my dad might have said earlier that sometimes you can't communicate all the time because there's just different understandings of what etiquette is, and so there's obviously the things that we might get at each other, but there's also a lot of my students can say, go off to college and be like, "Well, yeah, college is super diverse here, but imagine back home it was way more diverse." It's just a very, very interesting culture that has grown within the obviously overwhelming amount of cultures and ethnicities that live in our Worthington area.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That diversity is something that Andrea has worked to capture through her own oral history project.

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

This project, Stories from Unheard Voices, the purpose of it is to collect and bring forth the voices of first and second generation immigrants who reside in greater Minnesota and specifically in Southwest Minnesota. I wanted to make sure that they had a voice to be able to feel empowered in hearing their own story, just because I feel like oftentimes marginalized voices don't get heard enough. And so in a sense, I thought, "What a better way to feel super empowered and special about your own voice." And just being able to find that story too, of the reasoning, your why, you're here again in the States or in Minnesota area. And also, the project is a way to show that our people are present, living and existing in places that people wouldn't fathom would be there.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the words of Professor Mumbi Mwangi, one of Andrea's interviewees, "I just wonder how many people actually recognize the journey that immigrants go through. Even to make sense of where they are in a new culture, a new context, a new environment. Nobody asks you, 'How are you doing? What is your journey?' They just assume that you are just a part of it. Worthington is home to robust populations of Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants, Hmong immigrants from Vietnam and Kareni refugees from Burma and Myanmar, just to name a few."

Kesamet Uldu is an Eritrean immigrant. He moved to Worthington with his parents when he was four. He told Andrea, "My dad was the first of his family to migrate to the US. First, he ended up in California, but ultimately he ended up in Worthington. The ease of finding a job at the pork plant and having an Eritrean community in Worthington prior to him coming here made his decision to move here that much

easier. Plus, it was a small town and he saw it as a great safe place for his future children to grow up in."

Pastor Sae Ele Pla, who immigrated from Burma to Worthington, had similar reasoning behind moving here. "I like living in Worthington, it's better compared to a big city. The bigger city has too many people and is noisy. In a smaller city, it's quiet and a little better. Here, we have a lot of opportunities. If you want to do anything, you can do it." For the three Worthington residents I spoke with and those Andrea interviewed for her oral history project, the town is more than just where JBS happens to be. It's a place they've been able to build community and make a home.

Leonardo Duarte:

Before, I didn't think much about the JBS plant, and in reality, it is tightly held by the Worthington people. Many people sometimes don't need work, but have to work to obtain benefits such as insurance. The insurance helps a lot, and I think that's why many people stay at the plant. In this plant, the only firing done is if the person doesn't show up, shows up late and does things they are not supposed to do. In reality, the people are content because many don't drive too far out from their house, and there's the plant. I think that JBS here, even those working at the top will say the same, that everything they have, they have because of JBS.

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

I went off to college for four years, but throughout those years when my parents moved back to Worthington, I also felt called and I think it's just, I definitely grew up feeling like I felt a part of the fabric of Worthington, so I think I felt like I was threaded in whatever design Worthington was quilting.

Leonardo Duarte:

The one thing I like about Worthington is that I get to see how Andrea is motivated here. And in reality, we had moved her around a lot. Another thing, the weather is really nice. Here, if you don't mess with anyone, no one messes with you. And really, we wanted to say that they had a good opportunity. Andrea was very motivated, very involved at school. She always had good grades, and so we decided to stay until she could decide for herself what she wanted to do with her life and after.

Andrea Duarte-Alonso:

Because I grew up with an immigrant household, I think I was provided with this idea of immigrants working really hard to provide for their kids for the next generation, and with the stories on my parents told me from the plant or from their other work, I saw that in other people's eyes, too. Even though I didn't personally know a lot of immigrants, I mean, we were part of the St. Mary's community for a

long time, I just felt like I knew people, even though if I didn't know them personally, I just knew that they were special. And so surprisingly enough, I felt called to come back home.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Speaking with Worthington residents has helped me to understand how the meatpacking industry has shaped their lives and the town itself, but I also wanted to know the reach of Minnesota's meatpacking industry. I knew JBS is a Brazilian company, but what about the products themselves? What ships outside of the United States? Here's Roger again.

Roger Horowitz:

So many processed products in America have spread around the world. A great example of that is Spam, which of course, is produced just south of Minnesota in Austin, Minnesota. It's a Minnesota product that spreads around the world in World War II. It's also important for the way we process products because there's some kinds of meats that are more popular elsewhere in the world. Chicken Feet, for example, are all shipped to Asia, and we slaughter a lot of chickens, that's a lot of feet. So what would you do with the feet if you couldn't send them to Asia?

Chantel Rodríguez:

And its impact goes beyond international commerce. There are a lot of ways animal bi-products have been used to create other consumer items. Most famously, Dial soap was invented in the 1940s by chemists at the Armour Company. Meatpacking has even led to pharmaceutical innovation.

Roger Horowitz:

There's a lot of pharmaceutical products that have developed out of, say, the organs that produce various kinds of chemicals. The ideal was to have get everything but the oink and the moo. That was the phrase, everything but the oink, everything but the moo. That was what they tried to do.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The blood-thinning medication Heparin gets one of its ingredients from something called mucosa that's found in the small intestines of hogs. 48,000 pounds of the stuff yields about 22 pounds of the drug. All of this sounds like it's worlds away from the meatpacking plants of the late 1800s. But at the same time, I couldn't help but notice there are some common threads across the history of meatpacking. I'm trying to think about what it might've been like for, for example, Mr. Swift, who starts his big

company and stuff in the 1880s, 1890s, if he were to somehow be able to time travel to today, what he would say about the meatpacking industry today.

Roger Horowitz:

He would be amazed, but the thing is he would recognize it. He'd recognize the importance of refrigeration, for example. He'd say, "Well, I started that," pat himself on the back for that. He could look at all these immigrants there and go, "Well, they're not speaking Czech and they're not speaking Polish, but they're just like the immigrants that I had back in my day, who I gave jobs to and all that." And he might go into a restaurant and appreciate some of the meat that's there as well. So it would be very different, but it's not fundamentally different. He would understand what's going on.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As I got onto I-90 and Worthington faded in my rear-view mirror, I felt like I was seeing the landscape around me and the food so often on my plate in a completely different light. The meatpacking industry isn't what I thought it was, the late 1800s in the St. Paul Stockyards or the Hormel factory in Austin. It might've started there, but the meatpacking industry changes and moves to these small rural towns like Worthington. The history of Minnesota meatpacking is complex and many threaded. It's a history of the ever-changing and evolving business of meatpacking. It's a story of a single industry's impact on small towns, and it's a story of an immigrant workforce finding ways to create a sense of community and a sense of home.

People from all over the world, working in Worthington are not only a part of this long history, they are helping to make it.

Special thanks to Emilee Dehmer and Jamie Kherbaoui for their help with this episode.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources and MNopedia articles at our website. Mnhs.org/unraveled. Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People.

Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chasson, Angela Yee and Brett Baldwin, and sound design and editing by Erica Wong, lead Research by me, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. Our theme music is Careless Wanderer by Arthur Benson. Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the state of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4th, 2008, and our generous donors and members. Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious

and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.