

For Latinos in the Midwest, a Time to Be Heard

The New York Times

April 25, 2006 Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2006 The New York ***Times*** Company

Section: Section A; Column 4; National Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 1350 words

Byline: By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD

Dateline: LIBERAL, Kan., April 21

Body

The pro-immigration rally here two weeks ago was not the largest or most sophisticated, considering the tens of thousands of people who marched in places like Washington, Los Angeles and New York.

It came together in just a few days, spread by word of mouth and a hastily written flier posted in stores. People picnicked or milled about as children played and vendors sold ice cream. They chanted "Si, se puede" -- yes, we can -- but did not venture many more slogans than that.

But the turnout of 800 or so in this windswept prairie town reflects the activism around the immigration debate that has rippled to rural areas in the ***Midwest***, where the Latino population has soared in recent years but opposition to illegal immigration remains deeply ingrained.

"We've never been united like that, all of us ***Latinos***," said Jose Torres, a meatpacking plant worker who attended the rally. "We are here and not leaving, and we need to let people know that."

The main elements of the national debate are here, just somewhat hidden beneath the surface: the mutually dependent relationship of employers and immigrant workers, the financial benefits and setbacks an influx of immigrants brings to a community, and the awkward question of who is legal and how much it should matter.

There have long been ***Latinos*** in southwestern Kansas, a place steeped in Americana. One of the towns, Dodge City, still promotes the legend of Wyatt Earp. Liberal celebrates an annual pancake festival and stakes a tourist-minded claim as the hometown of Dorothy from the "Wizard of Oz" -- complete with a yellow brick road.

Mexican laborers first arrived more than a century ago to help build railroads, and some of their descendants remain.

The marches here and in nearby towns, however, underscored the other, parallel world of newly arrived Mexican laborers living impoverished in trailer parks and working in the unglamorous meatpacking industry.

With the growth of the meatpacking industry here in the early 1980's came droves of new immigrants. At \$10 an hour, the messy, taxing and sometimes dangerous assembly-line work of slaughtering cows and processing them into steaks and hamburger was a bonanza compared with jobs in Mexico, El Salvador and elsewhere in Latin America.

By 2000, the Latino share of the population of this town of 20,000 had quadrupled to 43 percent from 10 percent in 1980, reflecting a pattern throughout southwest Kansas.

For Latinos in the Midwest, a Time to Be Heard

"They came to fill important jobs in the community and work, and people in our world respect hard workers," said Donald D. Stull, an anthropologist at the University of Kansas who has studied the demographic changes across the region.

Liberal got its name, the story goes, from the generosity of its founder, S. S. Rogers, who would give out water to settlers passing through. That welcoming spirit pervaded many prairie towns and continues to some extent today.

Still, many people here who are not Hispanic take offense at the waving of foreign flags -- during the rally here a few carloads of young white men drove past pointedly brandishing American flags -- and chafe at hearing so much Spanish spoken on the streets.

In a Survey USA poll earlier this month for The Wichita Eagle and KWCH-TV, nearly three-quarters of 500 adults statewide answered "yes" when asked if the United States should find and deport all illegal immigrants.

Even so, there has been a respect here, sometimes grudging, that the majority of the immigrants have come to work and have helped keep Liberal and other towns hanging on, in contrast to dying farm towns. But complaints about the strain on services and crowded schools are growing, too.

"We don't look at it as growth and progress always because we are getting the growth and progress, but from the lower incomes that are a drain on government services," said Sally Cauble, a longtime resident who is running for the state school board.

The imprint of Latinos in Liberal goes well beyond the schools. Bakeries, Mexican food stands, Spanish-language radio and other businesses catering to them have sprouted up over the years. On Pancake Boulevard, a main drag dotted with fast food restaurants and cheap motels, a restaurant, El Amigo Chavez, rubs shoulder with the KFC, and the counter girl at McDonald's takes orders in Spanish while a group of older white men hold court at a table.

"They work hard and don't cause too much trouble, so I guess it's been good for these parts," said one of the men in the McDonald's, Fred Sanders, a former Liberal resident on a visit.

It is common belief, if difficult to prove, that many of the new arrivals are illegal, but this town generally has taken a "don't ask, don't tell" approach. For many years, it was better not to know -- the work that needed to get done was getting done.

Nonetheless, the nationwide crackdown by the Department of Homeland Security on illegal immigrants and those who employ them has caused a stir here, as many believe the meatpacking plants, despite assurances from executives that identity documents are checked, employ some workers with fake work permits and Social Security cards.

The state's political leadership has been split on how to deal with the problems of illegal immigration. Last month, state legislators beat back a proposal to repeal college tuition breaks for the children of illegal immigrants, a proposal the governor, Kathleen Sebelius, a Democrat, had criticized.

Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican, broke with fellow conservatives to favor a provision in a Senate bill that would allow a guest worker program that ultimately would steer illegal immigrants to citizenship. That put him in the company of major agriculture and industry leaders here.

The state's other senator, Pat Roberts, also a Republican, has emphasized a crackdown on the border to keep illegal immigrants out. The congressman from this region, Representative Jerry Moran, a Republican, voted for a House bill in December that, apart from strengthening border security, would make it a felony to be an illegal immigrant or aid one.

Against the uncertain political backdrop, some Latinos see opportunity. In recent months a generation of longtime workers and their relatives, some of whom have moved on to better-paying work, opened businesses and raised families here, have seized on the immigration debate in an effort to increase Latino political power.

For Latinos in the Midwest, a Time to Be Heard

"I went to a meeting in Topeka and they said, 'What, there are Hispanics in southwest Kansas?' " said Concha Aragon, a custodial worker in Ulysses who is organizing a chapter of an advocacy group, Hispanos Unidos, in the area. "I said, 'Yes, and we're taking action.' "

The younger generation, especially the children of the immigrants, who make up nearly two-thirds of the public school enrollment now, are also beginning to assert themselves.

Kasmine Hidalgo, 25, whose father came here years ago to work in a meatpacking plant, National Beef, recalled an awkward moment when a local radio reporter approached her during the demonstration here on April 10.

"He asked me, well, 'Are you Mexican or American?' " Ms. Hidalgo said. "I said: 'I am Mexican-American. I was born here.' People do not realize a lot of us are from here. We do need more political leaders, and maybe this is a step."

As in a lot of the country, much of the focus these days is on May 1, when immigrant groups in many states are threatening a work stoppage. Organizers here are discussing the possibility of joining the boycott, but some church leaders argue against it and some workers fret over antagonizing their bosses at the plants. National Beef, which operates plants here and in Dodge City, issued a letter before the April 10 demonstration sympathizing with the cause of immigration law reform but discouraging employees from skipping work.

Fresh from her shift at the plant, Adela Torres sat at the kitchen table of her Liberal home in a neighborhood of small houses and mobile homes.

"We have to keep this going, to claim our rights," Ms. Torres said. "We're just deciding how."

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Graphic

Photos: Cultures meet in Liberal, Kan., as Apolinar Oropeza sells ice cream to Ethan Davis, 5. **Latinos** make up 43 percent of the town. (Photo by David Bowser for The New York **Times**)(pg. A1)

The growth of the meatpacking industry in Liberal, Kan., in the early 1980's brought droves of immigrants. By 2000, the Latino share of the population had quadrupled, and its influence grew more visible. (Photographs by David Bowser for The New York **Times**)(pg. A22)Map of Kansas highlighting Liberal: **Latinos** living in Liberal, Kan., have enjoyed an uneasy peace. (pg. A22)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (76%); POLITICAL DEBATES (74%); POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS (74%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (73%); FACTORY WORKERS (72%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (70%); ANTHROPOLOGY & ARCHAEOLOGY (68%)

For Latinos in the Midwest, a Time to Be Heard

Industry: ANIMAL SLAUGHTERING & PROCESSING (88%); RETAILERS (76%); FACTORY WORKERS (72%); TRAILER PARKS (65%); RAILROAD CONSTRUCTION (50%)

Geographic: LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (79%); NEW YORK, NY, USA (79%); KANSAS, USA (91%); **MIDWEST** USA (71%); MEXICO (93%); EL SALVADOR (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); LATIN AMERICA (74%)

Load-Date: April 25, 2006

End of Document