

# The World “Meats” Canada: Meatpacking’s Role in the Cultural Transformation of Brooks, Alberta

by  
**Michael J. Broadway**  
Photographs by the Author

## Introduction

Brooks, Alberta, Canada seems an unlikely place to attract immigrants and refugees from around the globe. It’s a small city of about 14,000 inhabitants situated along the Trans-Canada Highway about two hours southeast of Calgary (Figure 1). Until the last decade of the twentieth century, the local economy had been based upon providing services for surrounding farming communities and the oil and gas industry. Extensive grazing land coupled with irrigation transformed this semi-arid area and made it ideal for raising cattle. But beginning in the mid-1990s, the city of Brooks’ cultural landscape was altered by the expansion of the Lakeside meatpacking plant three miles northwest of town. Within a short period

Sub-Saharan refugees, many of whom came from the Horn of Africa, flocked to the community and helped lead a hard-fought battle to unionize the plant. In the aftermath of this effort, the company opted away from employing refugees and turned instead to temporary foreign workers from Latin America and Asia to staff the plant.

Lakeside’s plant was constructed in 1974 and it was designed to supply cow carcasses to other companies for further processing. By the early 1990s, the plant employed about 500 workers. In 1994, Lakeside was acquired by the US-based beefpacker IBP. The company then invested about 100 million dollars (CD) to increase the plant’s slaughter capacity and add processing and rendering facilities. In all, about 2,000 new employees were needed to staff the plant after its expansion. Staffing a meatpacking plant or any large agri-processing facility in a rural area is difficult. Rural areas typically have little surplus labor- you either have a job or you leave to find work elsewhere. Before Lakeside began recruiting in December 1996, total unemployment in the town amounted to about 300 persons (Statistics Canada 1999). So the company cast its recruitment net to include Lethbridge (1996 pop. 63,053) and Medicine Hat (1996 pop. 46,783) that are within a two-hour drive of the plant. But high employee turnover meant that this regional labor pool was quickly exhausted. The company then sent recruiters to Atlantic Canada and the interior of British Columbia where collapses in local resource-based economies had produced high levels of unemployment. For a period of a year or two there was steady trickle of workers from Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to Brooks. But

once people returned home with tales of what it was like to work in the plant this labor supply soon dried up.

US meatpacking companies in rural areas have traditionally dealt with the challenge of high employee turnover by staffing their plants with legal and illegal migrants from Mexico and Central America. But Canada’s meatpackers and other firms dependent upon a comparatively low-wage work force do not have a relatively porous border with a poorer southern neighbor from which to draw labor. So Lakeside and other meatpackers turned to immigrants, refugees and temporary foreign workers from around the world to meet their labor needs (Kukushkin 2009). Between 2000 and 2005, approximately two-thousand Sub-Saharan refugees moved to Brooks, with the largest single source country being the Sudan, followed by Ethiopia and Somalia (Global Friendship Immigration Center 2004). Within a few years of Lakeside’s expansion this typical western prairie town was transformed into a multicultural and multilingual community drawing newspaper reporters and TV crews from across Canada because of its apparent uniqueness (Anderssen 2003; Solomon 2005; Berenyi 2010). In 2010, the city’s multicultural character was celebrated in a documentary “Brooks- the City of 100 Hellos,” (Yanchyk 2010) that aired across Canada.

This article examines how the meatpacking plant and its labor force have altered Brooks’ cityscape and illustrates how a relatively isolated community in a rural area can be affected by the forces of globalization. First, the structural changes in Canadian meatpacking that underlie the reliance on an immigrant and refugee



Figure 1. Location of Brooks, Alberta

labor force are briefly reviewed. Then the impact of Lakeside and its changing recruitment practices on Brooks' population and cultural landscape are identified. Most of the material dealing with community change in Brooks and how this is manifest in the landscape is the result of field observations and interviews with local residents collected over the past 17 years.

### Canada's Packers

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic change in the structure and location of Canadian meatpacking. Historically, cattle and hogs were shipped by rail for slaughter in large multi-storied packing plants close to railroad terminal sites in major Canadian metropolitan centers. An oligopoly, consisting of Canada Packers, Burns Meats and Swift Canadian dominated the industry. Wages were high and, beginning in 1948, were maintained by a union master contract that dictated wages and working conditions throughout the industry.

By the late 1970s studies linking diets high in cholesterol to heart disease were published and consumers responded by reducing beef consumption. This drop in demand occurred at the same time the industry was confronting an increase in US meat imports. These two factors produced an overcapacity problem for the industry. And, with wages ten percent higher than their US competitors, Canadian firms began cost cutting. In 1984, the master contract was challenged by Burns Meats. The company argued that all its plants were losing money and demanded its workers accept a 40 percent reduction in the \$11.99 base rate (which is equivalent to \$24.28 in 2012). The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union insisted on retaining the industry-wide agreement. Burns filed unfair labor practice charges against the union for bargaining in bad faith, a position that was upheld by several provincial Labour Relations Boards. Workers responded by striking (Forest 1989). Other companies followed Burns' lead, demanding wage concessions and closing plants. In Brooks, the UFCW struck Lakeside Packers and the plant became non-union when replacement workers took the place of striking workers at wages 30 percent below the union rate (Noël and Gardner 1990; MacLachlan 2001).

Across the US border, meatpacking was undergoing a series of cost-cutting

innovations, commonly referred to as "the IBP revolution" (Stull and Broadway 2013:98), which would put the Canadian industry at a competitive disadvantage. IBP's first plant in 1961 revolutionized North American meatpacking. Instead of locating it at a railroad terminal site, it was constructed in a cattle-producing region of western Iowa, outside the small town of Denison. The plant's location helped reduce the shrinkage and bruising associated with shipping cattle long distances. IBP purchased cattle directly from producers and eliminated the stockyard middleman. The Denison plant, unlike its older counterparts, was a single story structure which allowed the incorporation of a disassembly line with workers responsible for a single step in the preparation of the carcass. This "deskinning" was used to justify paying workers lower wages.

In the late 1960s, the company introduced boxed beef. Instead of shipping a carcass, it is fabricated into smaller cuts and then vacuum-packed. Removing fat and bone at the plant enabled their transformation into a host of byproducts including soap, perfume and gelatin. And, with less weight to ship, transport costs were lowered. A 1993 study estimated the average cost of shipping fed cattle from Alberta to Ontario to be \$82/head more than for boxed beef (Canadian International Trade Tribunal 1993). Boxed beef marked the end of Ontario's meatpacking industry as it was now cheaper to supply Canada's largest consumer market with Alberta beef, instead of shipping cattle from the prairies and slaughtering them in southern Ontario.

IBP's innovations were adopted in Alberta by US-based Cargill when it constructed its High River plant, thirty-five miles south of Calgary (Figure 2). Cargill was lured to the province by plentiful supplies of beef cattle, a favorable labor climate and incentives from the provincial government (Broadway 2000). The plant opened in 1989 with a non-union labor force paying wages at \$3-\$4 an hour less than its competitors. Within months of its start-up, Cargill's competitors accused it of selling beef at below market prices (Stevenson 1991). Although the charges were never proven, the introduction of a lower-cost producer had predictable results. In 1991, Canada Packers closed its western Canada plants leaving Cargill and Lakeside as the dominant players in Alberta. Cargill has a similar labor force composition to Lakeside but most of its line workers prefer to live in Calgary and commute to the plant (Fortney 2007; Broadway 1998).

Meatpacking's low wages combine with a dangerous and unpleasant work environment to make most jobs unattractive to Canadian citizens. In the old plants work varied between hog and cattle slaughter, and workers split their time between the kill floor and processing (Novak 1989). Modern plants on the other hand, slaughter a single species and most line workers now stand shoulder-to-shoulder making the same cuts over and over, resulting in a high rate of repetitive motion injuries (Stull and Broadway 1995). Meat processing workers in Alberta have the highest probability of a disabling



Figure 2. Cargill's beef processing plant located on a greenfield site three and one half miles north of High River, Alberta.

injury among all manufacturing employees in the province, with a rate in 2010 that was nearly triple that of manufacturing as a whole (Alberta Human Services 2011). Injuries and relatively low pay contribute to high employee turnover. After a plant has operated for several years turnover among line workers typically averages six to eight percent a month (Stull and Broadway 1995). This means that for a plant the size of Lakeside about 1,800 workers will leave and need to be replaced each year. Companies must, therefore, constantly recruit workers. The effect of this recruitment effort has been to transform Brooks into a multicultural community.

### *Brooks: Beautiful, Bountiful and Booming*

Brooks' motto, "beautiful and bountiful," reflects the transformation by irrigation of the surrounding semi-arid landscape into productive agricultural land - a process that dates back to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and its development of the Brooks aqueduct in 1915. The town's population grew slowly, from 499 in 1921 to 4,010 in 1971. But with the coming of the oil and gas industry in the 1970s, the town experienced its first boom and its population more than doubled to 9,421 by 1981. The collapse of the energy sector in the 1980s stalled the town's growth and, on the eve of its second boom in 1996, the town's official population stood at 10,093. Fifteen years later the population had grown to 13,576, a 35 percent increase (Statistics Canada various years).

Lakeside began in 1966 with the construction of a feedmill and feedlot just west of Brooks. Less than a decade later, the company constructed its meatpacking plant across the Trans-Canada Highway from its feedlot. By the early 1990s, the widespread adoption of boxed beef meant Lakeside's traditional market of supplying cow carcasses to other companies for further processing was drying up, and the company realized it needed to get into the boxed beef business. But it lacked the capital for such an investment, and so Lakeside's owners "welcomed" its purchase by IBP, recognizing that the US company "had the necessary capital and expertise to make a success of producing boxed beef" (Altwasser 2006).

Packing companies have a publicly stated policy of recruiting workers locally and Lakeside was no different when it began hiring at the end of 1996. But within three months the company's human

resources manager concluded "we've pretty much exhausted the local labor supplies" (field notes 3/11/1997). Lakeside then began recruiting nationally, beginning in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, where the collapse of the Northern cod fishery had produced unemployment levels of 30 percent and more in coastal communities. In January 1998, the author picked up a Lakeside employee hitch-hiking into town from the plant. He was from North Sydney, Nova Scotia and was the only one left out of 15 people who had been recruited from that town; the rest had returned home. Some of this first wave of migrants stayed to support a fish and chips shop that had moved from Marystown, Newfoundland to Brooks (Sillars 1998), but few remain at Lakeside since they have found other local jobs (field notes 1/17/2006).

Beginning in 1998, it was apparent that domestic labor sources would be insufficient to meet Lakeside's staffing needs and so the company turned to Canada's refugee population. Working with Immigrant Aid Societies recruiting videos were translated into Arabic and shown to potential recruits at Calgary's Catholic Immigration Society (field notes 1/5/1998). The company contracted with Medicine Hat's Saamis Immigrant Services Association to provide on-site assistance in filling out immigration forms, most of which dealt with family reunification. By 2002, the demand for immigrant and refugee services was so great that a local Immigrant Aid organization was established in Brooks. In 2003, nearly 90 percent of its 413 clients were refugees; with the leading sources being the Sudan (199), Ethiopia (48), Pakistan (33), Somalia (30) and Afghanistan (21). Other sub-Saharan countries represented were Burundi (4), the Democratic Republic of Congo (8), Liberia (2), Tanzania (1), and Sierra Leone (1). Most were secondary migrants who had moved to Brooks from elsewhere in Canada (Global Friendship Immigration Center 2004). This process was promoted, in part, by a company policy that paid employees a \$1000 bonus for referring friends and family members who stayed with the company beyond a minimum period (Lakeside n.d.). By 2006, immigrants and refugees accounted for about 60 percent of Lakeside's labor force (Altwasser 2006); and an even higher percentage among line workers.

### *Brooks: The City of Hundred Hellos*

In 2005, Lakeside employees went on strike to obtain a union contract. Most

strikers were African line workers and one of the strike's leaders was Sudanese. Predominantly white clerical and maintenance staff crossed the picket line and tried to get the union decertified. Violent confrontations between picketers and employees ensued and police arrested some picketers for intimidating strike breakers. After three weeks the strike was settled.

The strike changed Lakeside's labor recruitment strategy. Instead of targeting new immigrants and refugees, the company turned to Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program. Soon after the strike ended, the company announced that in order to fill its immediate need for 250 employees it would be looking to the Philippines, China, El Salvador and Ukraine for workers "accustomed to physical labor" (*National Post* 2006:WK5).

The TFW program is run by the federal government and is designed to help Canadian employers fill immediate skill and labor shortages when Canadians and permanent residents are unavailable. When a TFW recruit's four-year contract is up, Lakeside can nominate him or her for permanent residency if it so chooses. This provision is particularly controversial. Critics charge that temporary employees will hesitate to complain about working conditions for fear the company will brand them "troublemakers" and send them home. The prospect of permanent residency and family reunification is a powerful inducement for workers to "stick it out" (fieldnotes, March 4, 2011). All that is required for the company to continue its policy of recruiting TFWs is to list its vacant positions on the Canada job bank web site for ten days and assert that it has been unable to fill the vacancies. The government then reviews the company's request and, if applicable, issues a favorable labor market opinion which allows applicants to apply for a work permit.

Alberta's unemployment rate increased in 2009 and 2010 which meant Lakeside was unable to obtain a favorable labor market opinion. But, in 2011, the rate dropped and led the federal government to approve 69 Mexican TFWs to work at the plant in 2012 (field notes 4/30/2012). Lakeside continues to experience staffing difficulties despite the use of TFWs. Once employees apply for permanent residency, many decide to leave the plant. This is particularly the case for those with good English language skills and a drivers' license since they can then obtain a position in the now-booming oil patch as a rigger. About one-third of Lakeside's labor

force consisted of TFWs in 2011. A year later this figure had dropped to about eight percent reflecting the increases in employees applying for permanent residency status (field notes 5/1/2012).

A 2012 job listing for a Lakeside production employee provided a starting wage of \$15.40 (CD). "No education," and "repetitive tasks, manual dexterity, hand-eye co-ordination and standing for extended periods" were listed as essential requirements for the position. The work site environment was described, "Odors, Hot, Cold/refrigerated" with the essential skill as "working with others" (Job Bank n.d.). Other manual labor jobs requiring no education pay \$20-\$30 an hour in the province's oil sands production area; which makes working at Lakeside a relatively unattractive proposition. Some officials argue that Lakeside's human resource policies discourage local people from applying to work at that plant. A person who fails an interview, for example, must wait three months before being considered eligible to apply again. The company is also reluctant to provide former refugees leaves of absences so they can go abroad and see family and friends, preferring instead to let them leave and then not rehire them upon their return. The net effect of these policies is to short staff the plant and thus increase the need for TFWs (field notes 5/2/2012).

Immigrants and refugees who arrived soon after the plant's expansion created a variety of challenges for social service providers, most notably in the areas of education, health care and law enforcement. School teachers and administrators had difficulties communicating with parents some of whom were illiterate in their own language. Newcomers' inability to speak either English or French meant the local hospital subscribed to a California-based translator service to provide patient services, while ignorance of Canadian norms regarding driving meant an increase in local traffic incidents (Broadway 2007). The impact of the first wave of TFWs who applied for permanent residency status is now noticeable in the demands for social services. SPEC (Support Prevent Education Counsel) is a non-profit organization based in Brooks that provides early intervention programs for children, family support services and newcomer assistance. In 2012, it reported the number of persons it was servicing had increased from 680 to over 1,800 in the space of three years and the non-profit agency was seeking more

funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada to deal with persons entering under the family reunification process (field notes 5/1/2012). The influx of young families is also noticeable in the local public schools where enrollment in early childhood programs is up over one-third or 63 students between 2009 and 2011.

### *Meatpacking's Impact on the Cultural Landscape*

Lakeside's expansion has directly and indirectly altered Brooks' cultural landscape as is evident by the alterations and additions to the cityscape observed by the author since 1996. One byproduct of increased beef production has been a surge in the number of cattle haulers and semi-trailer trucks loaded with boxed beef. And, drivers waiting for loads to be completed need places to sleep and eat. Thus the number of motels and fast-food restaurants in Brooks has increased since 1996. These changes are most evident on the landscape near the main exit off the Trans-Canada Highway into Brooks where three new motels/hotels and several fast-food restaurants have been constructed (Figure 3).

Adding 2000 meatpacking jobs and the associated payroll boosted the local demand for goods and services. But, as has been noted in other communities with packing plants, many of the so-called spin off jobs are low-paying and part-time (Stull and Broadway 2013:140) and Brooks is no different. Big box retailers including Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire along with a new Safeway and Alan's Nofrills grocery store have been constructed on a green-field site south of the main highway. When the demand for beef is at its peak,

Lakeside operates two shifts and an overnight clean-up crew which has impacted Brooks' temporal landscape. Service providers have expanded their hours of operation to meet the needs of shift workers with restaurants, gas stations, convenience stores and one supermarket now open 24 hours a day (Figure 4). Part-time hourly workers comprise the bulk of employees at these service providers.

Under a new contract between Lakeside and the UFCW, workers are guaranteed a 36 hour work week. But during so-called "dark days" when the demand for beef drops during the winter months, the number of hours worked at the plant can be reduced to 32. Recent high cattle prices (Guttormson 2011) and the rising value of the Canadian dollar have decreased Alberta's beef exports to the United States, and reduced overtime opportunities at the plant. The economic hardship brought about by reduced hours has increased the demand for payday loans and social services. Two years after Lakeside's expansion, Brooks established a Food Bank. Its initial purpose was to provide a stop-gap measure for indigents who arrived in town, took a job at the packing plant and were waiting for their first pay check. It remains in business today and continues to provide food for Lakeside employees (field notes 5/1/2012). Back in 2005, Brooks had one store that provided payday loans; in 2012 there were four.

Another indicator of the unique demands brought about by Lakeside's labor force is provided by the growth in so-called "dollar stores" and outlets that specialize in reselling second or third-hand goods. At the time of Lakeside's expansion there was one such outlet- the Salvation



Figure 3. The main exit off the Trans Canada Highway has seen an expansion in the hospitality sector with the construction of several motels and fast-food restaurants.



Figure 4. A newly refurbished supermarket that is now open 24 hours a day to cater to shift workers.



Figure 5. One of three thrift stores in downtown Brooks, Alberta.



Figure 6. One of the services offered by "The Asian Store" is wiring money back to migrants' origin countries.

Army's thrift store in downtown Brooks (Figure 5). In 2012, it had two other competitors and two "dollar" stores all within a one-block radius. This growth can be explained by refugees and TFWs sending money back to relatives and the reduction in overtime opportunities which reduces workers' spending power (Figure 6). Another indirect measure of lack of spending power is the growth in local taxi services. Many newcomers cannot afford to purchase a car and there is no public transit system, so to get people from their homes to work or shops taxis have filled the gap. In 2005, there was one taxi firm; by 2012 there were four such firms.

Visual evidence of the newcomers' presence is provided by the sights of the hijab and "ethnic" businesses. The fish and chips shop established by migrants from Newfoundland back in 1998 has morphed into the Codfather seafood restaurant. Another "old" business is an Asian restaurant and market founded back in the late 1990s by a Cambodian who came to work at Lakeside, and then quit (Figure 7). At one point, the fish and chips shop and Asian business were located next to each other in a small strip mall on the city's west side, but both businesses grew and moved to larger premises.

At the height of Sub-Saharan migration, an African grocery store, hairdressers, music shop and nightclub operated. In 2006, the nightclub in downtown Brooks shut its doors for good and the hairdressers closed soon afterwards. The music store has added clothing and moved to a new location on the edge of the downtown area. In 2011, a new business opened on the east side- the East African café (Figure 8).

Two Latino stores are recent additions to the landscape- one is located about a mile north of downtown on the main road out to the Trans-Canada Highway, while the other is located about a block from the East Africa Café (Figure 9). Downtown contains two stores serving the Filipino community. A Colombian restaurant business was started downtown in 2010, but it failed due to the lack of a varied menu and reliable hours; you simply were forced to eat what food was prepared for that day. In its place, a group of Colombian women have set up a home business for Lakeside workers providing them with \$5 lunches (field notes 5/1/12).

There is a small mosque on the south-east edge of Brooks serving the local Muslim population (Figure 10). But none of the other newcomer groups have constructed any places of worship, preferring instead



Figure 7. One of Brooks' oldest "ethnic businesses" is the Phnom Penh Oriental market.



Figure 8. The East Africa Café, an Ethiopian restaurant on the east side of Brooks. Note the car in the foreground that has a bumper sticker with the word Oromia, the largest ethnic region in Ethiopia.



Figure 9. The Latino store located one block west of the East Africa Café. The store sign illustrates the owners' attempt to cater to the town's newcomers.

to rent out space from existing churches (field notes 5/1/12).

In a metropolitan area it would be expected that newcomers would initially seek the support and assistance of other members of the same ethnic group and would, therefore, cluster together in the same neighborhood. But Brooks is a small city that has experienced rapid population growth and housing shortages. Thus newcomers have few choices about where to live. The local council avoided the simple palliative of approving the expansion of existing trailer courts to provide housing; a strategy that has been used in US towns with packing plants (Stull and Broadway 2013:134). The solution to housing Lakeside workers and their families was



Figure 10. Brooks' mosque serving its growing Muslim population.

eventually solved with the construction of about 200 multi-family units between 2002 and 2007. These apartments and duplexes were constructed on vacant land on the northwestern and eastern edges of town. And it's here that many newcomers have settled in relative isolation from the city's core and so it's not uncommon in the warmer months to see pedestrians walking from these outlying neighborhoods to the main shopping areas.

### Conclusions

For over a century North American meatpackers have relied on an immigrant labor force and for much of that time the industry has been located in metropolitan areas. The industry provides entry level jobs that require little knowledge of English or much formal education. The work is relatively low-paying and hazardous; and employees must have the stamina to

endure a physically demanding job in an unpleasant environment. It is, in short, a job with limited appeal for native-born Canadians or Americans. Thus, in an era of globalization, packing firms search the world for a compliant workforce; and meatpacking towns, in turn, deal with successive batches of recruits.

This study illustrates that the meatpacking industry's impact and that of its labor force goes beyond the increases in the demand for social services that have been well documented in previous studies (Stull & Broadway 2013) to include changes in a city's landscape. Brooks' cityscape has been altered by the growth in businesses and services catering to newcomers with limited means of financial support, while newcomers have altered the cultural landscape with the addition of ethnic businesses. Unlike a typical North American metropolitan area with distinctive immigrant neighborhoods, Brooks' newcomers are widely dispersed, reflecting the city's ethnic diversity and the scattered pattern of affordable housing.

This article is based on field observations undertaken over the past 17 years. In considering future research in Brooks it would be worth examining the various ethnic businesses identified in this study and their success over time. Are their fortunes tied to the presence of a particular ethnic group or is it possible for them to diversify beyond their initial ethnic base to include other groups? Another possible avenue for future research would be determining the degree to which newcomers become involved in local community activities and whether participation varies among different groups.

Globalization in the form of labor recruitment has brought the world to Brooks and these workers and their families have enriched the community. For many local residents the newcomers have provided the city with a new identity based on cultural diversity. If the past is any guide to the future, and as long as the plant continues to operate, Brooks will experience a continued influx of newcomers who will, in turn, alter the cultural landscape and add to the city's diversity.

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