

Dan Rather Reports

Episode Number: 331

Description: A new wave of immigrants in America's small towns are from unlikely parts of the world.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

AMERICAN BIG CITIES, LIKE LOS ANGELES, NEW YORK AND CHICAGO, CONTINUE TO ATTRACT WAVES OF IMMIGRANTS SEEKING JOBS AND BETTER LIVES. BUT IN THE PAST DECADE, A SURGE OF FOREIGN BORN FAMILIES HAVE CHOSEN A DIFFERENT PATH -- ONE LEADING STRAIGHT TO RURAL AMERICA... IT'S A DRAMATIC DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT THAT HAS TRANSFORMED SMALL TOWN MAIN STREETS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES. AND THERE ARE FEW PLACES WHERE YOU CAN SEE THESE CHANGES AS VIVIDLY AS IN LEXINGTON, NEBRASKA – A SMALL TOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF AMERICA'S HEARTLAND.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HEARTLAND AMERICA – IT'S RAILROADS, VAST FIELDS OF CORN...CORN...FAMILIAR FACES...AND SLOW STROLLS DOWN TREE-LINED MAIN STREETS. BUT ACROSS THE COUNTRY, DRAMATIC CHANGES ARE HAPPENING: SMALL TOWN AMERICA IS ALSO STARTING TO LOOK LIKE THIS. UNLESS YOU LIVE THERE, YOU MAY HAVE MISSED IT -- BUT IN THE PAST 15 YEARS, A STEADY FLOW OF IMMIGRANTS HAS BYPASSED THE TRADITIONAL BIG CITY AND BORDER TOWN GATEWAYS FOR RURAL AMERICA. AND THAT'S MEANT MAJOR CHANGES TO MAIN STREETS EVERYWHERE FROM DODGE CITY, KANSAS TO DOBSON, NORTH CAROLINA TO HERE IN LEXINGTON, NEBRASKA... A TOWN OF 10,000 SMACK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE UNITED STATES THAT WENT FROM BEING NEARLY ALL WHITE TO MORE THAN HALF HISPANIC IN ABOUT 10 YEARS. AND IN RECENT MONTHS, THERE'S BEEN AN INFLUX OF AN ESTIMATED 1,000 REFUGEES FROM SOMALIA. MANY HAVE COME TO TAKE JOBS AT NEARBY MEATPACKING PLANTS, WHICH WERE CLEARED OF HUNDREDS OF HISPANIC WORKERS IN FEDERAL IMMIGRATION RAIDS LAST YEAR. WEARING HEAD COVERS AND LONG DRESSES, THESE MUSLIM SOMALIS PRESENT AN EVEN MORE VISIBLE CONTRAST FROM THE WAY THE TOWN USED TO LOOK. HERE AT THE A& D CAFE ON MAIN STREET, LIFELONG LEXINGTON RESIDENT DAVID HANNA TOLD US CHANGE IS ACCELERATING... AND HE SAYS THAT'S NOT SUCH A BAD THING.

DAVID HANNA, LEXINGTON RESIDENT

People that are here now, most of them, are doing what we're trying to do. And that's have a better living, take care of their kids, and live a good life.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE DRAMATIC DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT CAN BE SEEN ACROSS THE COUNTRY. THE LAST CENSUS REVEALED IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS WERE GROWING FASTER IN RURAL COMMUNITIES, LIKE LEXINGTON, THAN IN METROPOLITAN AREAS. WHAT'S DRIVING IMMIGRANTS TO SETTLE IN SMALL TOWNS ACROSS THE COUNTRY IS AN ABUNDANCE OF LOW-SKILLED JOBS ON FARMS AND IN THE MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY. IN LEXINGTON, THE CHIEF EMPLOYER IS A TYSON BEEF PACKING PLANT THAT OPENED IN 1990 AND HAS MORE THAN 24-HUNDRED MOSTLY FOREIGN-BORN WORKERS...SOME OF WHOM ARE SEEN HERE FILING IN FOR THE AFTERNOON SHIFT. ABDULLA MOHAMED FLED THE BLOODSHED OF SOMALIA'S CIVIL WAR IN THE EARLY 1990'S... AND AFTER SEVERAL YEARS IN A KENYAN REFUGEE CAMP, HE CAME TO THE UNITED STATES – AND TO LEXINGTON, TO WORK AT A TYSON PLANT.

ABDULLA MOHAMED, SOMALI LEXINGTON RESIDENT (TRANSLATED FROM SOMALI)

I have a good life here and in Somalia there is civil war and fighting. But the only thing I miss is speaking my own language everywhere.

HANNA

The other cultures, the Somalians, the Muslims. Of course it brings on a completely different light of things, because, again, a culture that not everyone totally understands. A language we definitely don't understand. So it's causin' some stress amongst social services, law enforcement, schools.

SUE MAY, LEXINGTON RESIDENT

It's gone from a sleepy town to one that needs to be woke up to the problems that - when you get different cultures to come in to deal with.

TERRY UNTERSEHER, LEXINGTON RESIDENT

The dual language situation—our schools are really addressing that, and that our kindergarten, first and I believe second now this year, have dual language classes in one of our elementary schools.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ACCORDING TO THE MOST RECENT U.S. CENSUS COUNT, NEARLY ONE AND A HALF MILLION FOREIGN-BORN PEOPLE NOW LIVE IN RURAL AMERICA... A RELATIVELY SMALL PERCENTAGE OF THE NATION'S MORE THAN 33 MILLION IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES...BUT THEIR IMPACT HAS BEEN STRIKING IN TOWNS, SUCH AS LEXINGTON, WITH SUCH SMALL AND PREVIOUSLY HOMOGENEOUS POPULATIONS. IN SOME PLACES, LIKE THIS MEXICAN BAKERY JUST OFF MAIN STREET, THE TRANSITION HAS BEEN SMOOTH...THESE LONGTIME LEXINGTON RESIDENTS MEET HERE DAILY. BUT, ELSEWHERE, A MUTUAL UNEASINESS HAS SURFACED. POLICE AT CHECKPOINTS ROUTINELY VERIFY THAT WORKERS DRIVING TO LEXINGTON'S TYSON PLANT HAVE DRIVERS LICENSES AND CAR

INSURANCE...AN INCONVENIENCE THAT SOME FOREIGN BORN RESIDENTS CALL UNFAIR RACIAL PROFILING. IT'S A SUSPICION STOKED BY THE RECENT FEDERAL IMMIGRATION RAIDS ON MEAT PACKING PLANTS IN SIX STATES – RAIDS THAT ROUNDED UP AND SCATTERED HUNDREDS OF HISPANIC WORKERS. IT HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN EASY FOR SOMALIS EITHER, EVEN THOUGH MOST HAVE LEGAL REFUGEE STATUS. ABOUT ONE HUNDRED RECENTLY QUIT THEIR JOBS AT A MEATPACKING PLANT IN A NEARBY TOWN WHEN THEIR EMPLOYER REFUSED THEIR REQUEST FOR PRAYER BREAKS. BUT SOMALIS WE SPOKE TO SAID THEY HAVE FOUND QUITE A LOT IN COMMON WITH THEIR AMERICAN-BORN NEIGHBORS-- EVEN IN THEIR LOVE FOR FAST FOOD.

BARRE HASSAN, SOMALI LEXINGTON RESIDENT

At times we go to McDonald's. Like, we go-- way we go-- drive-thru and then we get-- we take what you call-- McChicken and-- drinks as well.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BARRE HASSAN AND MANY OF HIS LEXINGTON NEIGHBORS FLED SOMALIA DURING THAT COUNTRY'S CIVIL WAR IN THE 1990'S...TWO YEARS AGO, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT GAVE HASSAN AND HIS FAMILY REFUGEE STATUS... AND LURED BY THE PROSPECT OF A BETTER LIFE, HE FOUND HIMSELF HERE LAST YEAR.

HASSAN

Lexington really is a very small town. It's really very good new arrivals, specifically like people who come from Africa. And-- they can really stay here peacefully. And-- we have no problem being in Lexington.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BARRE HASSAN SAYS HE IS GRATEFUL TO LEXINGTON FOR WELCOMING HIM AND HIS FAMILY.

HASSAN

Americans are very welcoming people, very open. We have no problem at times of— integration with them. Really, we deal with them very good.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AS THE SOMALI POPULATION GREW IN RECENT MONTHS, HASSAN FOUND WORK AS AN INTERPRETER. HERE HE'S HELPING A NEW ARRIVAL TO TOWN IN A MEETING WITH A CASEWORKER FROM LUTHERAN FAMILY SERVICES -- AN AGENCY THAT HELPS IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES GET SETTLED IN THEIR NEW HOMES.

KITCKI CARROLL, LUTHERAN FAMILY SERVICES

They're looking for a community that's welcoming. They're looking for a good place to put down their roots for their family.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

COMMUNITY SERVICES DIRECTOR KITCKI CARROLL TELLS US THE AGENCY IS PLACING MORE AND MORE REFUGEES IN NEBRASKA'S SMALL TOWNS.

CARROLL

There are lots of meatpacking opportunities out here in rural Nebraska, and that's at least a start for them-- as they start to make their way here in the United States, become familiar with the United States. The children will get further education and go on to bigger and better things.

RANDY CANTRELL, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA SOCIOLOGIST

Immigration to this country is immigration to jobs.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA RURAL SOCIOLOGIST RANDY CANTRELL SURVEYED THE STATE'S ATTITUDES ON IMMIGRATION. HE SAYS HE FOUND THAT MOST RURAL NEBRASKANS, WHILE AMONG THE NATION'S MOST CONSERVATIVE RESIDENTS, HAD A SURPRISINGLY NUANCED VIEW ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION.

CANTRELL

56 percent of rural Nebraskans believe that if a person has been here legally or illegally-- for five years paying taxes, doing their job, have demonstrated a commitment to the community, a willingness to participate and contribute to it, they believe that there should be-- an opportunity for them to apply for an acquire citizenship.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT PROFESSOR CANTRELL SAID THAT ALMOST HALF OF NEBRASKANS TAKE A MORE HARD-LINE STANCE ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION... SOME WE SPOKE TO OFF CAMERA IN LEXINGTON BLAMED IMMIGRANT RESIDENTS FOR INCREASES IN CRIME AND BLIGHT. AND ABOUT 200 MILES AWAY IN FREMONT, NEBRASKA, TOWN OFFICIALS PROPOSED AN ORDINANCE THAT WOULD PENALIZE THOSE WHO RENTED TO OR EMPLOYED ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS. THE FACT THAT THE ORDINANCE WAS NARROWLY DEFEATED WAS AS MUCH A STATEMENT ON ECONOMICS AS IMMIGRATION. UNTIL RECENTLY, RURAL POPULATIONS WERE SHRINKING AND ECONOMIES FIZZLING. BUT IMMIGRANTS HAVE BROUGHT NEW LIFE TO SMALL TOWN MAIN STREETS.

CANTRELL

In the communities where we have seen significant Latino immigration, we see full storefronts. The difference is they don't look like the traditional rural American

storefront, the things that are in the window will be opportunities to buy Latino clothing or opportunities to ship things to Ecuador or El Salvador.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THESE NEW STOREFRONTS ARE ALSO EVIDENCE THAT SOME IMMIGRANTS HAVE PROGRESSED FROM PACKING MEAT TO OWNING THEIR OWN BUSINESSES. REMEMBER THE A & D CAFE WE SHOWED YOU EARLIER? MEET ITS OWNER-- DEMETREO DELATORRE, AN IMMIGRANT FROM MEXICO WHO CAME TO TOWN 14 YEARS AGO.

**DEMETREO DELATORRE, OWNER, A & D CAFE
(TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH)**

I started working at a restaurant...And I said good, lets save money by sacrificing, and not spending money...And said to my wife, lets open a business. If we make out, good, if we don't, well we lose.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT WAS EIGHT YEARS BEFORE DELATORRE SAVED ENOUGH MONEY, BUT HE NOW OWNS MAIN STREET'S BUSIEST RESTAURANT... SOMETHING HIS CUSTOMERS SAY IS A 21ST CENTURY VERSION OF AN OLD SMALL TOWN AMERICAN DREAM.

MAY

Our forefathers came over here and look at how they settled in. It was due to patience of people before them. If we can remember that and keep that in mind, that we're all melting pots. Lets, lets integrate, let's surround each other and cooperate. And learn from each other.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

A THOUGHT THAT YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE HEARD IN LEXINGTON, NEBRASKA -- OR ANYWHERE ELSE IN RURAL AMERICA -- 10 YEARS AGO... BUT IT'S NOT ALL ROSY IN THE CORNHUSKER STATE. REMEMBER HOW WE TOLD YOU ABOUT THOSE SOMALI MEAT PACKERS WHO WALKED OFF THE JOB? THEY RECENTLY RETURNED TO WORK, WHEN THEIR EMPLOYER GAVE THEM THE PRAYER BREAKS THEY HAD DEMANDED. HOWEVER, THE SOMALIS LEFT AGAIN WHEN THE SAME EMPLOYER RESCINDED THE PRIVILEGE. WHY? WELL THE PLANT'S OTHER WORKERS, MOST OF WHOM ARE HISPANIC, COMPLAINED THAT THE SOMALIS WERE RECEIVING SPECIAL TREATMENT. AND THAT'S OUR PROGRAM FOR TONIGHT. FOR HDNET, FROM NEW YORK, DAN RATHER REPORTING. GOOD NIGHT.