

Garden City, Kansas

Garden City sits in far southwestern Kansas, at thirty thousand souls the biggest town you'll find in the vast, lightly settled triangle formed by Denver, Amarillo, and Wichita. Over the past half-century, it has creased the national consciousness just twice, both times because of death. In 1959, in the hamlet of Holcomb, ten miles to the west, rancher Herbert Clutter, his wife, and two of their children were murdered by two drifters; the incident's initial effect was a run on locks at the hardware store in Garden City, but it took on a darker national resonance after Truman Capote turned it into *In Cold Blood*. A little over twenty years later, the giant meat-packer Iowa Beef Processors opened the largest beef-packing plant in the world in Holcomb. Up to eight thousand cows a day can be processed there: killed, skinned, gutted, dismembered, and turned into IBP's signature specialty, boxed beef.

There is no doubt which of these two events has given the town more notoriety. Even now, almost forty years later, the most commonly asked questions of reference librarians at the Finney County Library concern the Clutter murders, and there isn't a week that Olga Montgomery, the librarian at the county historical museum, doesn't pick up the phone to find someone calling from some corner of the country wanting to know more about the killings or about Capote, who put up at the now-vacant Windsor Hotel on Main Street when he was researching the book.

Few of those who live in Garden City, however, give the Clutter incident much thought these days. It's like a disreputable ancestor—it lends the town an enjoyable little tang, but only because it's safely in the past and doesn't really have to be reckoned with. Even after *In Cold Blood* appeared, Garden City didn't change much; people began locking their doors, but it was still slow, neighborly, self-contented. The

after-church coffee crowd didn't even get anything equally lurid to discuss until 1989, when the son of a local lawyer went on a drug-stoked killing spree that began with two convenience store clerks in Garden City and wound its way through Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico before he was caught.

The truth is, though, change had already come to Garden City by then, in the far more prosaic form of the meatpacking plant—or, more precisely, in the workforce it drew to town. Killing and cutting up beef cattle is not pleasant work: it's bloody, smelly, dangerous, and physically punishing. So ever since the IBP plant opened in December 1980, jobs there have been filled by the same people who take dirty and potentially crippling jobs elsewhere in the United States: immigrants. Mexicans and Central Americans, Vietnamese and Laotians, Somalis, Indians from the Guatemalan highlands, even a small group of German Mennonites from Mexico have all found their way to southwestern Kansas.

The result is that Garden City has become a more troubled, more complicated, and, to many of its residents, far more interesting community over the last decade and a half. It has also become something of an emblem, a ready-to-hand miniature of the impact of immigration on American society. Over the years, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, newsmagazines, even the television networks have all descended on Garden City to outline the cuteness of a High Plains beef town where Asian restaurants now outnumber steakhouses. "We're kind of fun, and if things are slow and there are no trials on, they come here," says Nancy Harness, who runs the center in town where immigrant adults learn English. It's gotten to the point, in fact, that Donna Skinner, an administrator at Garden City Community College, has put

In a midwestern town, immigrants have come looking for the American Dream—but at what cost?

BY ROB GURWITT

together a self-guided tour for visiting journalists, academics, and the merely curious of businesses in town owned by Hispanics and Asians: the Mexican restaurants, the Vietnamese noodle houses, the auto body shops, clothing stores, cleaners, and hair salons run by immigrant entrepreneurs. You can understand the appeal. In a town whose biggest event of the year is the Beef Empire Days Rodeo, it's a bit unexpected to wander into a store and find bags of tamarind candy, packs of dried cuttlefish, shelves of curry pastes, and an entire aisle of noodles.

Still, change of this sort has come to lots of out-of-the-way American communities over the last couple of decades, from the shrimping towns of the Texas Gulf Coast to the Scandinavian fastness of the Red River Valley, and it has caused no shortage of comment. At the extremes, there are those who love it, who see every break in the dike of American cultural complacency as an unalloyed good, and there are those who hate it, who see nothing but harm in the metamorphosis of traditional heartland communities. Both kinds of people exist in Garden City. They are, however, decidedly outnumbered by those who have chosen simply to live with it.

For what is ultimately most striking about a place like Garden City is not its transformation, but its resilience. Poke around, and you'll find that the corn-fed, faintly shopworn values we associate with the Plains—self-reliance, respect for hard work, deference to community standards, and solicitude for the hard-pressed stranger—are still held by a lot of people in town. As one local police officer puts it, "Here, as a cop, when you drive down the street people wave at you, and they use all of their fingers." If the fight swirls on nationally between those who think it fine to ignore the needs of immigrants and those who think it fine to ignore the needs of

American coherence, Garden City plods along forging a middle ground, gradually coming to terms with its new identity while at the same time propelling many of its immigrants toward the American mainstream. It may seem odd to have to come to the country's midsection for a lesson in how immigrants and the communities they settle in affect each other, but then, that is precisely what many of the families who have come here in recent years had to do. A fair number of them are Laotian refugees, who arrived from California. For them, the cities of the West Coast offered the temptations of an immigrant's haven, but they were not places that encouraged planting one's feet securely in the soil of American society. For that, they had to come to Kansas.

Hard Work, Steady Paycheck

The man who convinced them of this is a former Royal Lao Air Force pilot named Roger Vilaysing. These days, Vilaysing works for the immense hog processing plant down in Guymon, Oklahoma, but for the first half of the 1990s he ran the South East Asian Mutual Assistance Association in Garden City. MAA, as everyone calls it, occupies a worn, three-room bungalow on the edge of downtown, just by the Santa Fe rail tracks; it's where Asian families come for help when they need to deal with the intrusions of the world around them—an official notice translated, a hand in finding work for a newly arrived relative, a bit of help in understanding the state or federal bureaucracy.

Vilaysing arrived in the United States in 1976, after the Communists took over in Laos and sent him off to reeduca-

tion camp, where he languished for eight months before escaping to a refugee camp in Thailand. Once in this country, he drifted from job to job, working in a restaurant in Los Alamos, a beef-packing plant in Texas, and a school bus repair shop in Wichita before finally getting a job with the Kansas welfare department. That work eventually led him to Garden City and the MAA. At the time, the MAA existed only to provide services to Asian families that had made their way to Garden City on their own or with the help of a local church, but not long after arriving, Vilaysing learned about a federal program to help refugee families on welfare move to communities where they could get work. It was a chance, he decided, to get other refugees off public assistance.

Vilaysing is a true believer in the redemptive value of hard work and a steady paycheck, so it was with the zeal of a proselytizer that he headed for California, where a high percentage of refugee families in the early 1990s were on welfare. Using social service agencies and friends—former Lao fighter pilots keep in close touch with each other—he would find families ripe for recruiting and approach them with a simple, bottom-line argument: work in the beef plants might be hard, but they'd still be better off than living on welfare. "Right now if you die," he'd say, "your wife and kid will probably stay on public assistance for the rest of their lives. But if you work ten years, have an accident and it kills you, your social security money will pay for your child, and your wife will receive some part, too."

This rather fatalistic argument did appeal to some families, but on his first trip to California, Vilaysing stumbled on what was to prove his most persuasive line. "I was with one father with four kids," he recalls, "and the thirteen-year-old girl walked in. She yelled at him in English—she didn't speak Lao—'Dad, give me a hundred bucks.' He said he didn't have it. She screamed at him: 'Where's my money? We just got it two days ago!' He told her that he'd paid the rent and her two-hundred-dollar phone bill. She used very slang language—she said, 'Fuck it, I'm going to call the social worker to cut your money.' I didn't look at his face. I felt very depressed. I said to him, 'You didn't do your duty, the duty of a father. Now you depend on your kid to receive public assistance. But if you work like me, your kid will depend on you. Now, she's your boss, she plays until midnight, she goes with gangs, you can't control her. What's her future? In the place I live, parents teach their kids to learn the value of money.'"

Southeast Asian families—whether Laotian, Cambodian, or Vietnamese—have had no shortage of issues to struggle with in this country, from the psychic aftermath of war, devastation, and defeat to the individualism that Americans prize so highly. None has cut so deeply, though, as the dissonance between parents' values and the foreign culture that tugs so mightily at their children. It is especially acute in the cities, where kids find themselves caught between the nihilism of the streets and their parents' belief in the overriding authority of age and family needs. Andrew Lam, an editor at the Pacific News Service in San Francisco and the son of a South Vietnamese military officer, found the wreckage of this clash in a 1991 incident in which four young Vietnamese

men, three of them brothers, took hostages at an electronics store in Sacramento; two of the brothers and their friend were eventually killed by a police SWAT team. Afterward, in the *Los Angeles Times* magazine, Lam wrote:

Asked how his quiet obedient boys wound up becoming hostage-takers, Nguyen and his wife provided only a miserable silence. This is the silence of an older generation of Vietnamese refugees who no longer feel anchored anywhere but in their impoverished homes. The exterior landscape belongs to America, strange and nonsensical, not their true home. Inside, many Vietnamese refugees tend to raise their children with stern rules—the way they themselves were raised back home. Vietnamese is spoken, with familial personal pronouns—youngest son, older sister, aunt, father, great uncle, and so on—lacing every sentence to remind the speakers and the listeners of their status in the Confucian hierarchical scheme of things. These parents are unprepared for children who lead dual lives, who may in fact commit rash and incomprehensibly violent acts—not at all the docile and obedient Vietnamese children they had hoped to raise.

"They are no longer really Vietnamese, nor are they really Americans," said a former teacher, who recently came from Vietnam and now lives on welfare in Sacramento, of his own children. He called their tangled assimilation "crippled Americanization."

"You don't find a lot of Southeast Asian kids going into white American homes; there isn't a mingling between the cultures," explains Judith Bling, who founded an organization in Stockton, California, to help Hmong refugee women find their way in American society. "So, unfortunately, a lot of what they learn comes from television—imagine one of your kids learning about American life from TV! Add to that that they know all about child protective services, so if you try to discipline them, they threaten to call CPS. So parents don't know how to discipline their kids in America, and their kids grow up with a foot on each side, but not a substantial foot on either side. It's worse if the father isn't working, because it's the kids who have learned the language and what they've perceived to be the culture, which puts the young kid at the top of the line instead of the father. And the old people, who were at the top back home, aren't listened to over here: they don't know anything."

Their family life subverted, finding no elders who can command respect in these changed circumstances, a lot of Southeast Asian kids create their own family and culture in a gang; in cities like Stockton and Fresno, gangs have simply become a fact of life for poorer refugee families, and a constant worry for parents, who see children as young as ten or twelve being pressured to join. The various social service agencies set up to help refugee families have tried hard to help, but they're fighting overwhelming odds. So when Roger Vilaysing began showing up with his Garden City Chamber of Commerce video and promises of work for parents, decent schools for children, and a community where gangs weren't an everyday threat, he always found takers.

Cattle Country, U.S.A.

Next to the fairgrounds south of the tracks, just this side of the course taken by the Arkansas River—always referred to hereabouts as the ArKANSas River—you'll find four baseball fields. Pretty much any night you go there during the summer, they'll be lit; this is what a lot of young kids do with their summer nights in Garden City. You can stand off by the river, watching the grain elevators that loom over downtown fade in the settling darkness, and still hear the fields, the chirrup of "Hey, batter, batter," the small crowds of mothers and fathers, grandparents and siblings and friends applauding or shouting encouragement. There are Anglo parents in their cotton shirts and neat trousers, Mexican fathers in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and mesh caps, coaches bending over to offer solace: "You ran your hardest," they'll say. "That's all I ask." The kids—both girls and boys—all wear the T-shirts of their team sponsors: RT Sporting, Preferred Cartage Service, the oil pump stencil of H&D Contract Pumping.

It's easy to rhapsodize about baseball in small towns, but there is a reason for that. As people mill about their coolers of soda, fathers playing catch with their toddler sons, boys flirting with girls, ten-year-old friends huddled together exchanging secrets, parents passing the time with one another, it all seems easy and familiar, families doing what families do, the way that towns hold themselves together. Where the families come from, how they got there, none of it matters when the throw from left field gets stalled at third base while the pitcher, shortstop, and third baseman all fumble for the ball while a run scores and everybody is yelling, most—though not all—of the parents with smiles on their faces. Debates over immigration seem very far away.

There is no denying, though, that Garden City had to work hard to arrive at summer nights this bucolic. To get a sense of just how hard, you might visit a photograph that hangs behind the doors that take you to the administrative offices of the Finney County Historical Museum. It ranks among the most dramatic objects the museum owns, though you could make a case that for sheer impact even it can't match the museum's fifty-five-pound hairball, reputedly the world's largest, discovered some years back in the stomach of a cow out at the IBP plant. The photo, taken during the dust bowl days of the 1930s, shows an approaching mountain range of black dust that blots out the sky, about to engulf a cluster of houses and telephone poles. It is an awe-inspiring, almost frightening reminder of how fragile life could be on the prairie. It is also a pretty good metaphor for what happened to Garden City after IBP arrived.

"I don't think the city and the county realized what they were walking into," says Jim Keller, an insurance agent who has lived in town since 1953. "Everybody was looking for an opportunity to make our town grow. They didn't realize that it was a one-sided deal. I really think that if people had realized the commotion that it would cause this town, that plant would never have gotten built."

The company came to Finney County because, over the previous two decades or so, the arrival of center-pivot irrigation and the tapping of the Ogallala Aquifer had turned the prairie into a fertile producer of feedgrains, which in turn attracted a cluster of cattle feedyards; this is why Garden City's air is always tinged with the smell of cow dung. The coming of the feedyards dovetailed quite nicely with IBP's corporate strategy, which was in the process of revolutionizing meatpacking. Until a few decades ago, the industry was for the most part based in the great stockyard cities—Chicago, Kansas City, St. Paul—and cattle were shipped there to be cut up by skilled, well-paid, and unionized butchers. After it came on the scene in the early 1960s, IBP took a different route: it found that by locating its plants in the middle of cattle country and developing a disassembly line using mostly unskilled labor, it could cut its costs dramatically. The old packinghouses could not compete, and by the time the Garden City plant opened, it was indisputably the industry's future. Indeed, with the IBP plant and ConAgra's Monfort plant in Garden City, Excel's plant in Dodge City, and National Beef's plant in Liberal, something approaching twenty thousand head of cattle can be slaughtered every day in this corner of Kansas alone.

What Finney County offered IBP—in addition to a set of generous tax breaks—was its concentration of nearby feedyards and ready access to the aquifer; meatpacking requires a lot of water. What the beef plant offered was a commodity that had been disappearing throughout the rest of the country: jobs that didn't require a high school diploma, technical knowledge, or even much command of English. The thing of it was, Finney County itself didn't actually need the jobs right away: the year before the plant opened, only a few hundred people were listed on the unemployment rolls. So, although IBP insisted that it tried to recruit locally, it mostly recruited aggressively elsewhere in the United States and Mexico.

For a long time, it seemed as though Garden City would lose its moorings under the pressure. There were people arriving every day from all over the country, exhausted families pulling into town, pinning their hopes on six-dollar-an-hour jobs, scrabbling for shelter, sleeping in their cars, camping in city parks. School enrollment ballooned, but the meatpacking population is a transient one—people quit in disgust, or get injured—so the dropout rate did, too. The crime rate rose as well, faster than pretty much every other place in Kansas, especially in domestic violence cases. Incidences of reported child abuse tripled in just five years. Referrals to the state hospital in Larned for alcoholism or psychiatric problems grew steadily. "IBP pushes that line," says Gibson "Bear" Auten, a Garden City police sergeant. "You stand there in 48 degrees cutting the guts out of cows, and there's no slack time. So we had people coming out from the cities who found the work was too hard for them, but they didn't have the money to go back." What struck residents most forcefully was the town's changing ethnic makeup. Finney County had had a sizable Mexican community since the early years of the century, drawn originally by the county's once-dominant sugar-beet industry, and following the

fall of Saigon in 1975, local churches had adopted a handful of Vietnamese refugee families, but what happened after IBP opened was of an entirely different order.

"We were naive," says Donna Skinner. "We assumed people would come in and build a little house with a picket fence and settle in and that would be that. Instead, over one summer, the summer of '82, the Asian population in a single school jumped from six kids to seventy-two kids. These were brand-new refugees: they didn't know English, they didn't know how to turn the water on and off, and we were deluged with these people." Suddenly, teachers were struggling with classrooms that had five or six language groups and children who might appear one day and be gone a month later. Police officers found themselves coping with an epidemic of gambling, drunken brawls, drivers who couldn't actually drive, domestic fights over matters they couldn't understand, and the occasional Asian gang from Wichita or one of the coasts that would stop off in Garden City for a few home invasion burglaries before moving on. Matrons shopping at the supermarket or lunching on Main Street were taken aback to find Vietnamese men loitering there, unable to find any closer substitute for the open-air markets back home. And in the cafés, at church gatherings, over backyard fences, rumors flew: cats and dogs were disappearing from the streets; the federal government was buying each refugee family a new car; there had been a dramatic increase in traffic accidents caused by all the foreign drivers; the immigrants were making out like bandits, holding down jobs at IBP and getting welfare at the same time. No one in Garden City quite matched the rhetorical brass of the Dodge City commissioner who was quoted in the paper there likening illegal immigrants to cockroaches—"If you spray for them there, they only end up here," she said, though she later claimed her comment had been taken out of context—but that was just because Garden liked to think of itself as more cultivated than Dodge.

One night, a couple of years after the IBP plant opened, two Garden City police officers ventured into the Brick Barn to arrest someone. The Barn was a tavern in a large, Quonset-hut-like structure a half-mile from the center of town where a lot of cowboy wannabes and bikers liked to do their drinking. Garden City only had eighteen policemen at the time, and none had been trained in crowd control, so when the crowd turned on the officers, smashing in the windows on their cruiser, the police weren't certain what to do; it began to look like the town was about to have its first riot. Backups arrived, and some of their windows got smashed as well, but eventually the police got things settled down.

Monte Fey was the pastor at Garden City's Presbyterian church at the time—he has since moved on to Ponca City, Oklahoma—and sitting in a coffee shop the next morning, he listened as dismayed townspeople argued about the incident. Even though neither Hispanics nor Asians drank at the Brick Barn, the café was awash in grumbling about them, and Fey was stunned by the anger and resentment he heard boiling out of his usually polite neighbors. "Hospitality is the gift a Christian community can offer strangers," he reflects now.

"But I saw no hospitality." Looking around town, he realized there was little to be seen anywhere: church volunteers had opened a shelter for indigent transients and homeless job-seekers in 1979, the year before the IBP plant opened, as construction on it and a new power plant brought in the first waves of newcomers, but otherwise there was nothing to welcome immigrants except a shortage of decent housing, landlords demanding rents by the head, and a community in shock. He decided that had to change.

The Most Dangerous Foothold

Perhaps the most important thing the immigrants had going for them was the work they had come to do. Finney County was settled by people who worked hard, by rail laborers and buffalo hunters and homesteaders and the merchandisers who served them, and Garden City is filled with residents who can look back to grandparents or great-grandparents who made lives for themselves out of little more than sweat; people there have a history of respecting sheer, dogged labor in uncomfortable conditions. "You could come in and it didn't matter what you looked like or where you were from as long as you worked hard," says Mary Wildamon, who directs the historical museum. "If you did, welcome!" In a sense, then, IBP's workers were just following a long tradition; certainly, no one in town had any illusions that the life they'd chosen was an easy one.

You can see why if you head west out of Garden City on Route 50, past the old "Eat Beef Stay Slim" sign on the elevator at the Brookover Feed yard, at about 2:30 in the afternoon. This will get you to the IBP plant in time for the afternoon shift change. The plant itself is an immense, featureless facility, made of a sort of ribbed gray concrete that has been streaked black over the years. Only from the highway can you see the pens holding cattle. Once on plant grounds, even on the "kill" side where cattle are brought in to be slaughtered, you could be at an auto parts supply plant for all the eye can tell you; the pens are behind a grassy berm.

If you pull into the parking lot as shifts are changing on the "trim" side—the half of the plant where beef carcasses are broken down—two things strike you right off. The first is how varied the workforce is: there are whites, Hispanics, Southeast Asians, and a few blacks; there are probably as many women as there are men passing through the security gate; and there are some surprisingly old and frail-looking Asian women, shuffling along in their broad-brimmed hats, making their way in or out. The second thing is how many children are running around outside the plant gate. In many families, both parents work at the plant, but they work different shifts; if school's out or day care is hard to find or there's not enough money for a babysitter, the parents will trade the children off in the parking lot. So you'll see a three-year-old toddling along snacking on Chee-tos as he heads with his mother to the small waiting area outside the gate, or a seven-year-old girl clutching her teddy bear as she waits quietly for her mother to come out, or a brother and sister roughhous-

ing next to their car as their father, hard hat in hand and steel knife-sharpener on a cord slung over his shoulder, paces restlessly alongside. Only one day a week might the whole family be together; taking a job at IBP means organizing family life to suit the company's demands.

It also means a sojourn in one of the more mind-boggling workplaces humans have devised. "Going in there is one of the most bizarre things you'll ever do; it's like going to the moon," says Don Stull, an anthropologist at the University of Kansas who has studied the impact of meatpacking on towns like Garden City. "There are so many things going on, so many machines, people running around looking like they came out of King Arthur, with chain mail and knives and hockey masks, and there's blood everywhere. It's a nineteenth-century industry at the close of the twentieth. They're killing and processing four hundred head of cattle an hour. I don't like the word 'awesome,' but it's the only word I can use. It's awesome."

It is also backbreaking. The process is automated in the sense that, once a cow has been killed with a bolt to the back of the head, then skinned and gutted, its carcass gets hooked onto the disassembly line. But the work itself is purely manual. On the trim line, a carcass swings by every few seconds, presenting itself for a worker to wrestle into place and make the same cut he or she has already made hundreds of times that day. When the plant is really cranking and workers are putting in overtime, they may make the same cut three or four thousand times in a shift. Meatpacking is, statistically, the most dangerous job in the United States, which is hardly surprising, given that workers have to swing knives around in close quarters and are in constant danger of getting bumped off their feet by an arriving block of beef, but even if a worker isn't injured, the repetitive motion pretty much guarantees that he or she will live with constant pain. "At first," says one Vietnamese trimmer, "my arms and fingers were swollen all the time. Then I got an infection under the fingernails. Then that got better, but I can't sleep on my left side—it hurts too much." Talk to the children of beef plant workers and they can recite their parents' litany: your hands hurt; your arms hurt; your back hurts; you don't get enough sleep; when you do sleep, it's only on the side that hurts less. "They complain about it," says fourteen-year-old Somasack Vouthy, "every day."

This, along with fear of what animal-rights activists might do with a really good description of how beef is processed, may be why getting into the plant can be next to impossible for anyone whose agenda IBP suspects, above all journalists. If you call the plant and ask, you'll eventually be directed to IBP headquarters in Dakota City, Nebraska, where spokesman Gary Mickelson will tell you, "We get a lot of requests for tours, and we prefer not to accommodate all of them. We're not in the tour business." There is a smaller beef plant just east of Garden City owned by ConAgra's Monfort subsidiary, but there you don't even have to get shunted off to corporate headquarters to be denied entry. Asked by one Laotian employee whether he might bring in a visiting writer who would carry neither pad nor camera, the plant

manager responds, in all seriousness, "How do I know he won't have a camera hidden in his glasses?" The industry, explains Don Stull, "feels like it's been burned by the news media going back to *The Jungle*."

Of course, the industry also has some built-in public relations problems. Employees who get hurt will usually get re-assigned to an easier—albeit lower-paying—job, but if their injury prevents them from keeping up, or requires too much time off for visits to the doctor, they'll be laid off. Then there's the 1996 *U.S. News & World Report* article, "The New Jungle," which detailed the extent to which meatpackers rely on illegal immigrants to keep wages as low as possible. "This is," the magazine quoted one observer, "the resurgence of the politics of greed." And while at least one company seems willing to contribute to the communities it's located in—the Excel beef plant in Dodge City has helped that town's schools create an education program for the children of migrant workers—that is not the rule. In Garden City, IBP is seen more as a corporate interloper than as a corporate citizen. "They don't generally support the community in terms of grants and aid," says one forty-year resident of Garden City. "They take. They do not give."

Still, it is far too simple to cast meatpacking as the black hat riding into town. There is a paradox embodied by the beef plants, and Donna Skinner, who organizes the yearly Five-State Multicultural Conference at the community college and is about as sympathetic toward immigrant workers as you can be, puts it bluntly. "Beef packing," she says, "is an awful, dehumanizing, bone-breaking life, but it might be better than getting shot at in Vietnam or starving to death in Mexico when times are bad. It provides steady hourly work for people with no English skills and no education. It's a starting place." And the evidence is all around that some portion of the workforce has used it as just that. Garden City is filled with immigrant families launching themselves into middle-class American life thanks to beef packing.

A Stroke of Genius

That they can do so is thanks in no small part to the fact that Monte Fey and a few others decided to help the town gather its wits. "As an anthropologist I usually feel I have to wash my mouth out with soap when I talk about the 'great man' theory of history, but it's applicable to Garden City," says Don Stull, who not only lived in Garden City while he studied it, but became a bartender at night so he could understand it better. "There was this group of people who were all there at the same time, who really were good Christians in the sense that they saw this as something that had to be done." They numbered among them Wayne Paulsen, the Baptist minister, who has since moved on to North Platte, Nebraska; Levita Rohlmann, a former nun who still runs the Catholic relief services in town; Nancy Harness and Donna Skinner, who at the time was a public-school teacher; and a small group of civic leaders—the city manager, the police chief, the editor of the *Gar-*

den City Telegram—who took it on themselves to point the town in a constructive direction.

We tend to think of a community's accomplishments in institutional terms—the organizations created, the funds spent, the programs launched. Certainly, the ministers and townspeople performed in this regard. They got contributions from churches elsewhere in the country so they could import experts on Southeast Asian culture to help the police, schools, and other institutions in town understand the people who were arriving in their midst. They set up a summer language camp for refugee children who had nothing to do once school was out. They created the MAA and, working with the community college, established the Adult Learning Center, which became not only the place where immigrants could learn English but their most important interpreter of American society.

But if anything, their greater achievement lay in the new emotional temperature they wrought. Garden City, in essence, learned how to become a different kind of town. The schools, initially reluctant to come to terms with how they were changing, remade themselves to work with the children of plant workers. The police department trained its officers in how to communicate with new residents. "It's frustrating for an officer not to know what's going on, and that leads to poor decisions," says Jim Hawkins, Garden City's police chief, who taught himself both Spanish and Vietnamese. "You may arrest them for no reason, or you may insult them inadvertently. You need to understand that this is why Hispanics will tell you a long story to get to a certain point, or why an Asian won't look you in the eye." And the *Garden City Telegram* took seriously the notion that a newspaper exists to help its readers understand what's happening around them. "Rumors can destroy a community if you don't get to the source," argued Fred Brooks, the editor at the time, and so the *Telegram* looked into them. The U.S. government was buying refugees their cars? Not true, it reported. Refugees didn't have to pay income tax? Actually, it was their employers who were getting a tax break, not the refugees themselves. A woman had been raped by a Hispanic laborer? The paper tracked the rumor down to a weekly bridge game.

Many of the churches in town were, in their own way, adopting the same attitude. Life in Garden City had always revolved around them, along with Main Street and the high school, and though by then Main Street was starting to give way to the giant stores out on the edge of town, the town's churches still held its fabric together. So at Monte Fey's suggestion, they set up a volunteer tutoring program in the schools, which not only met a crying need for English language instruction, it also allowed ordinary townspeople to get to know some of the people who'd landed among them. "It was a stroke of genius," reflects Donna Skinner. "At its height, we had sixty-seven of these nice little old church ladies going into Lao or Vietnamese homes and seeing that these were normal people. One friendly relationship could make a whole church accept them: 'Oh, Pauline's been out at their home and she says there's nothing to be afraid of!'"

None of this is to say that Garden City became a paradise of

multicultural understanding. There are, to be sure, lots of people like Jimmie-Ruth Cobb, the wife of a prominent local architect and a former volunteer in the schools, who think the town has changed for the better. "The small-town feel is gone, but I like that—we've expanded our horizons," she says. But it doesn't take too much looking to find others who talk quietly of "Wal-Mex" or complain that the Dillon's supermarket has become little more than a Mexican food store. When a group of Southeast Asian teenagers began using Finnup Park to play soccer a while back, they found the field they had adopted fenced off after a few days; more recently, the Hispanic soccer league has been able to expand, but only after much wrangling with the town over playing space. Though Southeast Asians were able to use the MAA to help them connect at least a little with the society around them, nothing similar was set up for Hispanics. The posture Garden City came to take, in other words, was a complicated blend of embrace, acceptance, and barely sustained tolerance.

A Starting Place

For many of the immigrant families, that was enough. You can see this, oddly enough, by visiting the place that most embodies the conflicted feelings the town holds toward its immigrant workforce: East Garden Village. As its name implies, the trailer court sits at the far eastern end of Garden City, beyond the community college and a mile or so south of the huge plazas where Wal-Mart and Target and JCPenney and Radio Shack have set up shop over the last decade. It was built by a developer with close ties to IBP once it became clear that the plant's workers desperately needed affordable housing. It is not a cheery place. The trailers differ from each other only in their color—brown, gray, sea-foam green, all of them in need of a paint job. Each sits surrounded by its own patch of scruffy grass, with only the occasional touch added by the family living there—a bush or two, maybe a small porch, and, every so often, a tiny, neglected garden. As Jimmie-Ruth Cobb puts it, "It's an abomination. The trailer park created a place for people to live, but that's all. These people from out of town came in, built it, and gave so little to make it a nice place." Deposited as it is on the edge of one of western Kansas's vast, tilled fields, it has a brittle feel, which is hardly reassuring when you come to learn that in the event of a tornado, its shelter can hold perhaps thirty people; there are six hundred trailers. When tornado warnings sound, a lot of its residents run off to sit under nearby overpasses, while some Laotian families go streaming up the road to a new subdivision where other Laotian families have bought sturdier homes.

But there is also this about East Garden Village: you can buy a trailer there for seven thousand dollars or so. So it is where families start.

Invath Vongsouvanth moved his into one in 1991. He lives there with his wife, brother, daughter and son-in-law, and two small grandchildren, although there are almost always other children around as well; Invath is the elder of a small

band of tribal Lao from the north of the country, and as he is home much of the day, his trailer has become a natural place for them to gather. All of these people make do with three tiny bedrooms, a bare-bones kitchen, and a living room with a large television set and a couple of tattered couches. ("That old early American furniture you wondered where it went after it left your parents' basement?" says Nancy Harness. "Now you know it's in some refugee's living room.")

Invath, who had been in the Laotian army since 1955, when he was a teenager, spent three years in prison after the Communists took over, then a stint yoked to a plow in the rice fields; eventually he escaped to spend a decade leading a force of guerillas that made forays into Laos from Thailand. His family eventually made it to Fresno and, in 1991, followed Roger Vilaysing to Garden City. Invath appears strong, with a wide, expressive face and powerful chest, but his back and legs don't work well anymore and he has severe arthritis, so he doesn't work. The four other adults in the trailer, however, do. Each makes about nineteen thousand dollars a year working at IBP, and his wife and daughter both sew traditional Laotian clothing. So, because their circumstances are modest—like many of the Southeast Asian families in town, they can live on one person's salary—the household is actually putting away a fair bit of money each year. Enough, in fact, that the entire band of families headed by Invath is looking at buying land near San Antonio, Texas, and moving down en masse.

East Garden Village is brimming with families like this; it is a way station, not a final destination. Families move on—to better homes in Garden City, to Texas, to Colorado, to the Nissan plant in Tennessee, even back to California—but they leave wealthier than when they arrived. You can drive around Garden City's newer subdivisions looking at the pleasant houses and never realize—unless you happen to notice the shoes left outside on the mat—that they are filling up with families that not long before called a small trailer home. In five years, they've gone from living on welfare to living in a house with plaster raccoons on the front lawn.

If you talk to Garden City's white residents about the Southeast Asians, this is what they comment on: the new houses; the two Lexuses that the owner of Pho Hoa One, the Vietnamese noodle house and hot lunch spot in town, likes to park in front of his restaurant; the booming business that Toan Nguyen, who owns BT Plumbing, is doing these days; the looming material success. It's hardly surprising. "For Asian families, the values are very parallel to middle-class American values," comments Donna Skinner. "It's to get an education, to improve, to buy a car, buy a second car, get a house, get your own business." A lot of people in town can relate.

But talk to someone like Invath Vongsouvanth, and it's clear that there is more to it. "My children and grandchildren can get an education here," he says. "They can grow up without war, without gangs. They can be children."

To be sure, there are Hispanic gangs—the police watch them, but don't consider them a threat on the order of big-city gangs—and they sometimes hassle Southeast Asian kids.

It is not, however, much more than adolescent boys anywhere have to deal with. "They talk about us. They push us around, make fun of us," says fifteen-year-old Tholayouth Bounyalak. "When they don't respect us, we don't respect them." For the most part, young Southeast Asians in Garden City sound astoundingly like young people in any small mid-western town: they play basketball and go bowling and go to the state fair and complain that there's not enough to do; they listen to metal and rap and the Spice Girls; they chafe at the restrictions their parents place on them—curfews, the need to duck as they walk in front of their elders, what they can wear.

There are, of course, older Southeast Asians—they tend to be Vietnamese, rather than the somewhat more relaxed Laotians—who complain that the kids they see in Garden City have lost their manners. "When a kid sees an adult, he must bow to say 'Hello,' and not just, 'Hi!'" insists Dan Le, a French-educated bilingual administrator for the Garden City Schools, tossing his arm in a casual wave. "Here, they treat their teacher very impolitely; they treat him as a friend. I scold them: 'He's not a friend, he's a teacher!'" And if the subject of traditional community celebrations comes up among young Laotians, they tend to laugh uneasily and say that they'll go, but spend the time playing outside; even here, the second generation finds itself straddling two cultures.

Yet there is no question that, for the most part, what Roger Vilaysing promised his families in Fresno has come to pass: in Garden City, they've found a place where kids will grow up respecting and paying attention to their parents, simply because that's what's expected here. "We know what our responsibility is," says Tholayouth Bounyalak. "To finish college, get good jobs, and then support them back." Every once in a while, says Kam Virachack, a young Laotian who replaced Vilaysing as director of the MAA, a family will arrive from California with a son deeply into the gang life. "The kids get together with the Mexican gangs and make trouble for the parents," he says. "So the parents have to go through the court system, and it's embarrassing for them. Usually, they decide to move."

"Garden City is a good place for us," says plumber Toan Nguyen. "Friends told me, 'Go to Los Angeles and work there, there's more opportunity to move up.' But I look there, and there may be opportunity, but I don't see many people succeeding there. There's lots of trouble in big cities. It would be very easy for my kid to fall in with bad guys in his group. Here, it's a small community. We know lots of people. We feel safe." ■