



*Rural Minnesota Journal 2012*

*Who Lives in Rural Minnesota:*

*A Region in Transition*

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## **The Reshaping of Pelican Rapids: How One Small Town Met the Challenge of Transformation**

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Sometimes you can see problems coming from a long way away. Sometimes problems crash down on you, taking you completely unaware. The challenges posed by the cultural diversification of Pelican Rapids, a small rural community in west central Minnesota, did both.

In 1956, this agricultural community invested in West Central Turkeys, a cooperatively owned turkey processing facility. The farmers contracted to provide the necessary number of birds each year and the community raised startup funds to build the plant, which turned live turkeys into packaged turkeys, a grueling production line job that paid quite well for its time and place. West Central Turkeys was wildly successful, and soon the managers were looking outside the Pelican area for employees. The plant bused people in from surrounding communities, trained patients from the mental health facility in an adjacent town, and persuaded farm wives to begin working outside the home.

The first Hispanic residents of the community were recruited and transported from South Texas by West Central Turkeys in 1971, when the Vietnam War had reduced the local labor pool. The Hispanics lived in dedicated housing at the plant and ate at the plant cafeteria. At the end of the production year, they were laid off by the plant and returned home until the plant reopened three or four months later. These people had little apparent impact on the town. They walked the half mile to the post office to send money orders home after pay day and sometimes bought Christmas gifts in town for their children before they returned south.

The next change in the face of the community came during the 1980s, when area churches began sponsoring families of East Asian refugees. These immigrants from war-torn Laos and Vietnam found jobs at the plant. Because they had been sponsored by churches, they were befriended by church members, who helped them learn the ropes of living in America, taught them how to apply for jobs, enroll their children in school, make an appointment, and even how to shop at an American grocery store. The Asian refugees learned English out of necessity—there was no one in town to translate for them. These new immigrants were well accepted by the Pelican Rapids community in large part because American individuals in the community took the time to become their friends. The children worked hard and did well in school, and the adults worked hard and did well at the plant.

In the mid-1990s the diversification of Pelican Rapids accelerated. Denise Gubrud, an employee of West Central Turkeys, persuaded the company to sponsor two families of Bosnian refugees. She had watched the images of skeletal men behind barbed wire in concentration camps on television and decided that she had to do something. The management at the plant gave her the time necessary to help these newcomers adjust to life in America. She publicized their stories and asked the community for help. Once again, community members stepped forward to befriend the new refugees.

Although the war in Bosnia was over, hundreds of thousands of Bosnians lived in refugee camps, unable to go home because their homes were now lived in by Serbians or in a Serbian-controlled part of the country. People in cross-cultural marriages, common before the war, could find nowhere to live. Word filtered back to the refugee camps that Pelican Rapids was a good place to live. The work was good, the people were friendly, and there was housing.

During two weeks in August of 1996, a large number of Bosnian Roma, originally from the city of Sanski Most, Bosnia, arrived in town. These refugees had been settled in other parts of the United States but followed a respected member of their clan to Pelican. They left the houses that had been found for them and the refugee resettlement money that had been set

aside for them to seek the promise of security in a small town in Minnesota.

Pelican Rapids, a city of 1,800, was unprepared for the influx of refugees. Newcomers were living six to twelve in two-bedroom apartments or sleeping on the floor in trailer houses. They had no food, no money, no English skills. They needed medical care, dental care, help with paperwork, friends. Pelican was a half-hour drive from the county seat, where all the social service facilities were located. Few of the newcomers drove.

After finding a new Bosnian refugee near death from a retained placenta after delivering her baby at home, volunteers went to the Otter Tail County Commissioners for help. "We have a social emergency on our hands," school bus company owner Jim Christianson said. "You have to help us before someone dies." In 1997, Otter Tail County found \$25,000 in funding to support the Pelican Rapids Multicultural Committee. This committee would work with the Otter Tail-Wadena Community Action Council to explore and begin to respond to the problems.

In the meantime, volunteers stepped forward to help. Some drove people to doctors' appointments. Others worked on housing. The Pelican Rapids Multicultural Committee, which had formed to work on diversity issues, held a clothing, household items, and furniture drive. In one day, people filled the elementary school cafeteria with food, clothing, supplies, and furniture. Then volunteers brought the newcomers through, helping them transport their new belongings home. At the end of the day, the room was still full. The organizer, Johanna Christianson, made a crucial decision. She asked the area social workers and service providers to bring in poverty-level Americans to pick out what they needed. That gesture of inclusive generosity formed the core of the mission of the Multicultural Committee, that it was "dedicated to the creation of a safe, positive environment within the community." The focus was not the refugees, but the community. "We hope we won't see the races," Johanna said, "we'll see the need."

The new refugees put a tremendous strain on the community. The schools, clinics, even the turkey plant were

unprepared for the scope of the problem. These new Bosnians were Roma, or gypsies. Many of them were uneducated, and because of the war, their children had never been to school. The Roma were culturally very different from other Bosnians and very, very different from Americans. The first Bosnians to arrive in the community began to work as volunteer drivers and translators. They were eventually paid for their translating services by the grant. "We invested in key people, people that we saw potential in," said Connie Payson, manager of the temporary office of refugee resettlement in Pelican Rapids, which was also paid for by the grant. They trained Bosnians to help their countrymen and women fill out applications for banking, housing, work, and school. They taught Americans to help the refugees through SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) training, workshops from the Center for Victims of Torture, and cross-cultural health training. Pastors of various churches described the needs of the new refugees to their congregations. Groups and individuals worked together on the problem. "I can remember having lunch with Father Alan, Mariza Hajdar (a Muslim), and me, a Protestant," Connie said, "and saying a little prayer."

As people worked together to solve problem after problem, they became friends. Those friendships bridged the chasms between cultural differences, religious belief systems and misunderstandings. While the teachers struggled to identify the "phantom pooper" on the playground, students taught their new Roma classmates how to use the bathrooms at the school, how to act in the lunch room, how to walk in the halls—all this without speaking a common language.

Meanwhile, the Hispanic population continued to grow. New immigrants came looking for work at West Central Turkeys. Most of them lived in a trailer park near the plant. When the facility became a full-time, year-round employer, workers from Mexico, south Texas and southern California brought their families and stayed, because they appreciated the reliable job and the good schools. The Bosnian Roma had a very different culture from that of the small Midwestern community into which they had moved. As townspeople learned to deal with the Roma, they realized that the Hispanics

were really just like their other neighbors, the only difference being skin color and language. The Roma became the underclass in Pelican and the Hispanics became “us.”

The Vietnamese population also grew during those years. When housing became tight, Vietnamese volunteers took new arrivals into their homes and taught them what they needed to know to live in America, helped them fill out forms and make applications. Extended families shared housing. Community resources were directed at increasing low-income housing options.

The crisis management grant was extended for a second year, but by the time it expired, the need in town was even greater than it had been in 1996. Churches and nonprofits from all over the state saw Pelican Rapids as a service opportunity and provided playground equipment and English language camps. College students began tutoring English and doing homework help in the local library. The University of Minnesota brought emergency medical and dental clinics to the community.

In 1998, Lutheran Social Services opened a Refugee Services office in a church basement in Pelican Rapids and provided a part-time Bosnian translator and a part-time manager who spoke Vietnamese. The manager believed that new refugees did better in small towns. He was impressed by the cultural climate in Pelican Rapids, so he preferred settling people here. With an office in town to help with problems, as well as routine paperwork and new arrivals through Lutheran Social Services, diversity issues took a back seat to other, more typical small town challenges, like economic development.

But as the town had discovered in the mid-nineties with the influx of Roma, not all refugee settlements are planned. In 2001, the Somali population in the community jumped from 15 individuals to 150 in three months. Lutheran Social Services and the community volunteers continued to problem-solve, but this time with a different set of problems. The Somali were obviously different from the Americans, in skin color, clothing, and religion. These attributes caused problems at work—it was dangerous for women to wear *hijabs* and run machinery; at school, prayer several times during the school

day disrupted classes and set students apart for criticism or envy; and in town, people looked twice at a black woman in a long dress walking down the street. Pelican Rapids felt even less like home to the old timers. And yet, the Somali refugees caused less distress than the Roma had, and perhaps less than the Mexican immigrants who had lived in town since the 1970s.

The programs and attitudes that the Pelican Rapids Multicultural Committee had begun to foster in the mid 1990s were having a benefit. The Committee's mission statement said, "We seek to promote cultural awareness and to foster respect, appreciation and understanding that crosses cultural barriers. We strive to do this by providing opportunities to interact for common goals through dialogue, learning, sharing and socializing." Over the years, the Committee, working with other service groups in the community, sponsored international dinners, *Journeys*, a continuing series of talks by new and old immigrants about their experiences, and an International Friendship Festival that ran for fourteen years. Every June the two-day Festival included world music, world arts and crafts, a speaker on some type of cultural diversity, samplings of food from around the world supplied by members of different cultural groups, and in recent years, a Naturalization Ceremony. Many organizations within the community volunteered to be part of this festival, run entirely by volunteers, both Americans and new immigrants. Craftsmen and artists from different cultural backgrounds demonstrated their work. Service organizations put up flags representing all the countries of the community, old and new, for that festival and all the other festivals in town.

Pelican Rapids became known for its diversity, and the diversification of the community brought a new vigor. Today in 2012, a Mexican grocery store, a Mexican restaurant, and a Somali general store are located next to a gift shop, an assisted living facility, and the Lutheran Social Services office. The main grocery store in town and one of the gift shops sell Asian foods. The new immigrants are buying houses in town, integrating the neighborhoods that for so long housed the descendents of Norwegian and German immigrants.

The National Honor Society includes students with Somali, Vietnamese, and Hispanic names. The checkout people at the grocery store might be Hispanic, Bosnian, or from Ukraine.

Not everyone in Pelican Rapids was pleased with the changes in town. After hearing why and how the new immigrants were coming to town, one man stood up at a community meeting called by the Multicultural Committee and asked “Can’t we just set up barriers on the highways into town?” He was frightened. Johanna Christianson, the president of the Multicultural Committee and the moderator at the meeting, acknowledged his fears and tried to help him understand them. This approach exemplified the work of the Committee, which accepts people wherever they are and tries to build community from there. At every opportunity, the Multicultural Committee spoke about the benefits of diversity. (Isn’t it nice to be able to buy fresh mangos at the supermarket?) They publicized and celebrated the cultural diversity of everyone in the community through talks, videos (a yearlong series of human rights videos were shown at the public library and moderated by respected locals), and many human interest articles in the local newspaper. (If you see someone’s picture and read their story in the newspaper, they don’t seem as foreign or as frightening when you see them on the street.)

The diversity had a negative effect on the image of Pelican Rapids in the surrounding communities, however. People who had read in the newspaper about the “social emergency” in 1996 thought it was still in effect in 2006. Some outsiders were afraid to come to Pelican Rapids because of “the Mexican gangs.” Others drove through town, saw women in long dresses and *hijabs* and decided to buy a home in another community. The school district struggled to keep enrollment up as more students left for the surrounding school districts through open enrollment than came to Pelican from those districts.

In recent years, though, opinions have changed about Pelican Rapids. Judicious use of friendly, open-minded reporters from television and newspapers outside of Pelican Rapids has created a more informed population. The positive

effects of fourteen years of International Friendship Festivals have shown people another side of diversity. The schools, through modeling by staff and the work of the West Central Minnesota Cultural Collaborative, have taught their students that diversity is a positive. The collaborative is a Minnesota Department of Education program that creates opportunities for students from outside school districts to interact with the students in Pelican Rapids, where now over 30% of students do not speak English at home. The program also increases learning opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds. Many individuals have demonstrated that diversity creates positive change and that you interact with new immigrants in the same way that you interact with any other community member.

For many decades, the population of Pelican Rapids hovered at 1,800. The 2000 Census, however, came in at 2,454. Many people have tried to understand why Pelican Rapids has been able to successfully absorb what amounts to a third again the original population of the town; to integrate newcomers who spoke little or no English, had different customs, different religions and who didn't look like the blonde, blue-eyed Scandinavians and Germans who lived there. Some people believe that northern Europeans respect people with good work ethics and that the immigrants came here to work, thus earning respect or at least tolerance. Others have suggested that the small size of the community has made cooperation necessary. In a community of 2,000 people you can't overlook the family living in their car in the park. Someone steps forward and helps them find work and housing. "When the need is right in front of your face," said Dianne Kimm, retired Refugee Program Manager for Lutheran Social Services, "somebody has to help them." Also, the immigrants want to live in Pelican Rapids. Abdirashid Nuur, a Somali refugee himself and site manager of the Pelican Rapids Refugee Resource Center, said, "Refugees prefer small towns like Pelican Rapids. You can find work even if you don't speak English. There are no work opportunities in big cities if you don't speak English. And you don't have to have a car—you can walk everywhere." It has been suggested that



the respectful, institutional response to the new immigrants from schools, the plant, the library, churches, and the police department set the tone for the rest of the community.

The peaceful changes in this community are the result of all those things and more. Forty years into the diversification of Pelican Rapids, community relationships are good. The new immigrants find job opportunities outside of the turkey plant. Bosnian, Somali, and Hispanic young people work at McDonalds, a gathering place for all of the Pelican community, newcomers and old-timers alike. "They are such good ambassadors," Johanna Christianson said. "They impress the tourists and the rest of the community." The new immigrants buy homes. They volunteer. They become Americans. The new immigrants have become our neighbors and friends. Pelican Rapids is no longer a community in crisis.

