Fast Food NATION

the dark side of the all-american meal

ERIC SCHLOSSER

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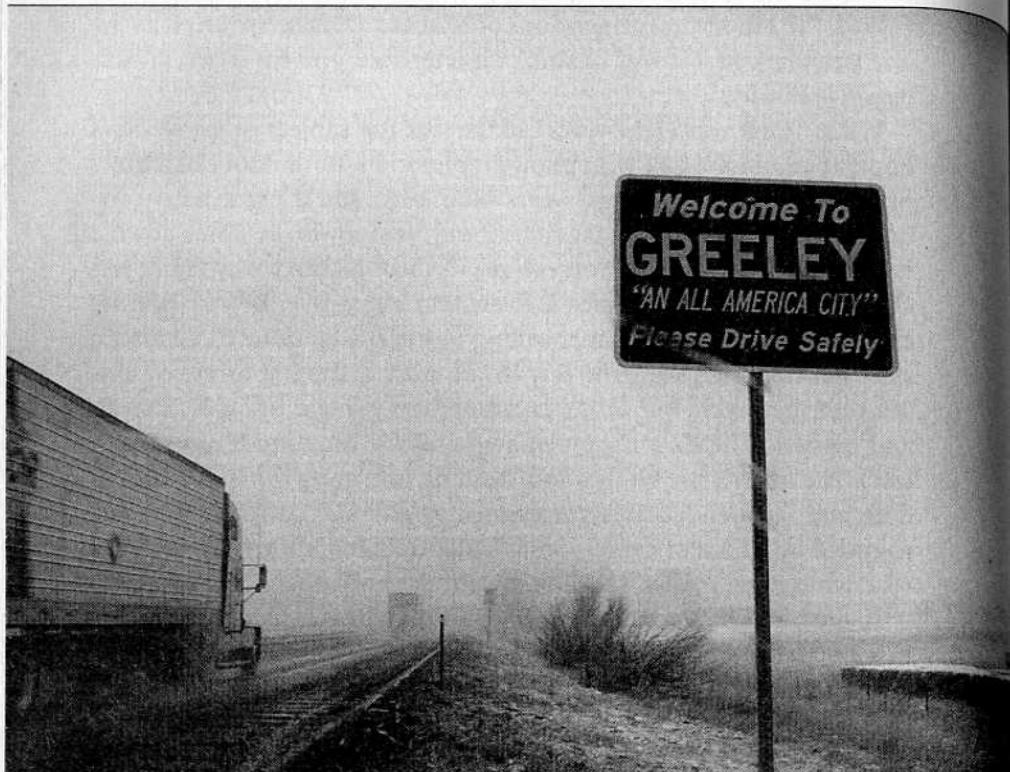

7 / cogs in the great machine

YOU CAN SMELL Greeley, Colorado, long before you can see it. The smell is hard to forget but not easy to describe, a combination of live animals, manure, and dead animals being rendered into dog food. The smell is worst during the summer months, blanketing Greeley day and night like an invisible fog. Many people who live there no longer notice the smell; it recedes into the background, present but not present, like the sound of traffic for New Yorkers. Others can't stop thinking about the smell, even after years; it permeates everything, gives them headaches, makes them nauseous, interferes with their sleep. Greeley is a modern-day factory town where cattle are the main units of production, where workers and machines turn large steer into small, vacuum-sealed packages of meat. The billions of fast food hamburgers that Americans now eat every year come from places like Greeley. The industrialization of cattle-raising and meatpacking over the past two decades has completely altered how beef is produced — and the towns that produce it. Responding to the demands of the fast food and supermarket chains, the meatpacking giants have cut costs by cutting wages. They have turned one of the nation's best-paying manufacturing jobs into one of the lowest-paying, created a migrant industrial workforce of poor immigrants, tolerated high injury rates, and spawned rural ghettos in the American heartland. Crime, poverty, drug abuse, and homelessness have lately taken root in towns where you'd least expect to find them. The effects of this new meatpacking regime have become as inescapable as the odors that drift from its feedlots, rendering plants, and pools of slaughterhouse waste.

The ConAgra Beef Company runs the nation's biggest meatpacking complex just a few miles north of downtown Greeley. Weld County, which includes Greeley, earns more money every year from livestock products than any other county in the United States. ConAgra is the largest private employer in Weld County, running a beef slaughterhouse and a sheep slaughterhouse, as well as rendering and processing facilities.

To supply the beef slaughterhouse, ConAgra operates a pair of enormous feedlots. Each of them can hold up to one hundred thousand head of cattle. At times the animals are crowded so closely together it looks like a sea of cattle, a mooing, moving mass of brown and white fur that goes on for acres. These cattle don't eat blue grama and buffalo grass off the prairie. During the three months before slaughter, they eat grain dumped into long concrete troughs that resemble highway dividers. The grain fattens the cattle quickly, aided by the anabolic steroids implanted in their ear. A typical steer will consume more than three thousand pounds of grain during its stay at a feedlot, just to gain four hundred pounds in weight. The process involves a fair amount of waste. Each steer deposits about fifty pounds of urine and manure every day. Unlike human waste, the manure is not sent to a treatment plant. It is dumped into pits, huge pools of excrement that the industry calls "lagoons." The amount of waste left by the cattle that pass through Weld County is staggering. The two Monfort feedlots outside Greeley produce more excrement than the cities of Denver, Boston, Atlanta, and St. Louis — combined.

Before Greeley became a meatpacking town, it was a utopian community of small farmers. It was founded in 1870 by Nathan Meeker, a newspaper editor from New York City who wanted to create a city in the American West dedicated to agriculture, education, mutual aid, and high moral values. Meeker named the idealistic new settlement after his boss at the *New York Tribune,* Horace Greeley, who had given some career advice that proved legendary: "Go west, young man." The town of Greeley, Colorado, eventually thrived, becoming a major producer of beans and sugar beets. But Nathan Meeker did not live long enough to enjoy its success. In 1879, Meeker got into a dispute with a group of Ute Indians, who killed him and then scalped him.

For many years the farmers of Greeley held themselves apart from local ranchers, at one point building a wooden fence around the town to keep cattle out — a fence fifty miles long. During the Depression, when commodity prices hit rock bottom, a Greeley schoolteacher

named Warren Monfort started to buy grain from local farmers and feed it to his cattle. At the time, American cattle were mainly grass-fed, not grain-fed. They roamed the range, eating native grasses, or they lived on farms and ate hay. Monfort soon became one of the nation's first large-scale cattle feeders, buying cheap corn, sugar beets, and alfalfa from his neighbors. His feedlot business greatly expanded after World War II. By feeding cattle year-round, Monfort could control the timing of his livestock sales and wait for the best prices at the Chicago stockyards. The meat of grain-fed beef was fatty and tender; unlike grass-fed beef, it did not need to be aged for a few weeks; it could be eaten within days of the slaughter. Feedlots began to open throughout the rural Midwest. American grain surpluses, largely fueled by government price supports, provided inexpensive food for livestock and made cattle-feeding a standard practice in the beef industry. Warren Monfort started his business in the 1930s with eighteen head of cattle. By the late 1950s he was feeding about twenty thousand.

In 1960 Monfort and his son Kenneth opened a small slaughterhouse in Greeley near his feedlots. They signed a generous union contract with the Amalgamated Butcher Workmen, granting benefits like seniority rights and pay bonuses for work on the late shift. Jobs at the Monfort slaughterhouse were among the highest paying in Greeley, and there was a long waiting list of people seeking work at the plant. Greeley became a company town, dominated by the Monfort family and ruled with a compassionate paternalism. Ken Monfort was a familiar presence at the slaughterhouse. Workers felt comfortable approaching him with suggestions and complaints. He had an unusual background for a meatpacking executive. He was a liberal Democrat who had served two terms in the state legislature. He was an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam war, one of the two people from Colorado to earn a place on President Nixon's "enemies list." Appearing on that list, in Monfort's view, was a great honor. After a union vote at the Greeley slaughterhouse in 1970, Ken Monfort sent the newly elected steward a warm personal letter. "If I can ever be of help to you," he wrote, "my door is open." The prosperity and labor peace in Greeley, however, were soon threatened by fundamental changes sweeping through the meatpacking industry — an upheaval that came to be known as "the IBP revolution."

go west

WHEN THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE IN Greeley first opened, its rural location was unusual. Meatpacking plants were much more likely to be found in urban areas. Most large American cities had a meatpacking district with its own stockyards and slaughterhouses. Cattle were shipped there by rail, slaughtered, carved into sides of beef, then sold to local butchers and wholesalers. Omaha and Kansas City were prominent meatpacking towns, and the United Nations building now stands on land once occupied by New York City's stockyards. For more than a century, however, Chicago reigned as the meatpacking capital of the world. The Beef Trust was born there, the major meatpacking firms were headquartered there, and roughly forty thousand people were employed there in a square-mile meat district anchored by the Union Stockyards. Refrigerated sides of beef were shipped from Chicago not only throughout the United States, but also throughout Europe. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Upton Sinclair considered Chicago's Packingtown to be "the greatest aggregation of labor and capital ever gathered in one place." It was in his view the supreme achievement of American capitalism, as well as its greatest disgrace.

The old Chicago slaughterhouses were usually brick buildings, four or five stories high. Cattle were herded up wooden ramps to the top floor, where they were struck on the head with a sledgehammer, slaughtered, then disassembled by skilled workers. The animals eventually left the building on the ground floor, coming out as sides of beef, cans of beef, or boxes of sausage ready to be loaded into railcars.

The working conditions in these meatpacking plants were brutal. In *The Jungle* (1906) Upton Sinclair described a litany of horrors: severe back and shoulder injuries, lacerations, amputations, exposure to dangerous chemicals, and memorably, a workplace accident in which a man fell into a vat and got turned into lard. The plant kept running, and the lard was sold to unsuspecting consumers. Human beings, Sinclair argued, had been made "cogs in the great packing machine," easily replaced and entirely disposable. President Theodore Roosevelt ordered an independent investigation of *The Jungle*'s sensational details. The accuracy of the book was confirmed by federal investigators, who found that Chicago's meatpacking workers labored "under conditions that are entirely unnecessary and unpardonable, and which are

a constant menace not only to their own health, but to the health of those who use the food products prepared by them."

The popular outrage inspired by *The Jungle* led Congress to enact food safety legislation in 1906. Little was done, however, to improve the lives of packinghouse workers, whose misfortune had inspired Upton Sinclair to write the book. "I aimed for the public's heart," he later wrote in his autobiography, "and by accident I hit it in the stomach." For the next thirty years, unions battled to gain representation among Chicago's stockyard and slaughterhouse workers, who were mainly eastern European immigrants. The large meatpacking firms used company spies, blacklists, and African-American strikebreakers to thwart organizing efforts. Nevertheless, most of Chicago's packinghouse workers had gained union representation by the end of the Depression. After World War II, their wages greatly improved, soon exceeding the national average for workers in manufacturing. Meatpacking was still a backbreaking, dangerous job, but for many it was also a well-paid and desirable one. It provided a stable, middle-class income. Swift & Company, the largest firm in the industry until the early 1960s, was also the last of the big five meatpackers to remain privately controlled. Much like Ken Monfort, Harold Swift ran the company founded by his father with a paternalistic concern for workers. Swift & Company paid the industry's highest wages, guaranteed long-term job security, worked closely with union officials to address worker grievances, and provided bonuses, pensions, and other benefits.

In 1960 Currier J. Holman and A. D. Anderson, two former Swift executives, decided to start their own meatpacking company, convinced that by slashing costs they could compete with the industry giants. The following year Iowa Beef Packers opened its first slaughterhouse — a meat factory that in its own way proved as influential as the first Speedee Service McDonald's in San Bernardino. Applying the same labor principles to meatpacking that the McDonald brothers had applied to making hamburgers, Holman and Anderson designed a production system for their slaughterhouse in Denison, Iowa, that eliminated the need for skilled workers. The new IBP plant was a one-story structure with a disassembly line. Each worker stood in one spot along the line, performing the same simple task over and over again, making the same knife cut thousands of times during an eight-hour shift. The gains that meatpacking workers had made since the days of

The Jungle stood in the way of IBP's new system, whose success depended upon access to a cheap and powerless workforce. At the dawn of the fast food era, IBP became a meatpacking company with a fast food mentality, obsessed with throughput, efficiency, centralization, and control. "We've tried to take the skill out of every step," A. D. Anderson later boasted.

In addition to creating a mass production system that employed a de-skilled workforce, IBP put its new slaughterhouses in rural areas close to the feedlots — and far away from the urban strongholds of the nation's labor unions. The new interstate highway system made it possible to rely upon trucks, instead of railroads, to ship meat. In 1967 IBP opened a large plant in Dakota City, Nebraska, that not only slaughtered cattle but also "fabricated" them into smaller cuts of meat — into primals (chucks, loins, ribs, rounds) and subprimals (such as chuck rolls). Instead of shipping whole sides of beef, IBP shipped these smaller cuts, vacuum-sealed and plastic-wrapped, as "boxed beef." This new way of marketing beef enabled supermarkets to fire most of their skilled, unionized butchers. It also left IBP with a great deal of leftover bones, blood, and scraps of meat that could be rendered into profitable byproducts such as dog food. IBP soon added "grinders" to its plants, machinery that made hamburger meat in enormous quantities, driving small processors and wholesalers out of business. The company's low wages and new production techniques transformed the entire beef industry, from the feedlot to the butcher counter.

The IBP revolution was guided by a hard, unsentimental view of the world. Amid a packinghouse culture that valued toughness, Currier J. Holman took pride in being tougher than anyone else. He didn't like unions and didn't hesitate to do whatever seemed necessary to break them. IBP should always conduct business, Holman argued, as though it were waging war. When workers at the IBP plant in Dakota City went on strike in 1969, Holman hired scabs to replace them. The striking workers responded by firing a bullet through Holman's office window, killing a suspected company spy, and bombing the home of IBP's general counsel. Confronted with a real war, Holman sought assistance from an unusually powerful ally.

In the spring of 1970 Holman and three other top IBP executives held secret meetings in New York City with Moe Steinman, a "labor consultant" who had close ties with La Cosa Nostra. Unionized butchers in New York were blocking the sale of IBP's boxed beef, out of solidarity with the striking workers and fear for their own jobs. IBP was eager to ship its products to the New York metropolitan area, the nation's largest market for beef. Moe Steinman offered to help end the butchers' boycott and in return demanded a five-cent "commission" on every ten pounds of beef that IBP sold in New York. IBP planned to ship hundreds of millions of pounds of beef to New York City every year. Currier J. Holman agreed to pay the mob its five-cent commission, and the leaders of New York's butcher union promptly withdrew their objections to IBP's boxed beef. Shipments of IBP meat were soon being unloaded in Manhattan.

After a lengthy investigation of mob involvement in the New York City meat business, Currier J. Holman and IBP were tried and convicted in 1974 for bribing union leaders and meat wholesalers. Judge Burton Roberts fined IBP $7,000, but did not punish Holman with any prison term or fine, noting that bribes were sometimes part of the cost of doing business in New York City. Holman's links to organized crime, however, extended far beyond the sort of payments that honest New York businessmen were often forced to make. He appointed one of Moe Steinman's friends to the board of IBP (a man who a decade earlier had been imprisoned for bribing meat inspectors and for selling tainted meat to the U.S. Army) and made Steinman's son-in-law a group vice president of IBP, head of the company's processing division (even though the son-in-law, in Judge Roberts's words, "knew virtually nothing about the meat business"). And Holman forced out four top IBP executives who opposed dealing with organized crime figures. Subsequent investigations by *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal* cited IBP as a prime example of how a mainstream corporation could be infiltrated by the mob.

The relentless low-cost competition from IBP presented old-line Chicago meatpackers with a stark choice: go west or go out of business. Instead of symbolizing democracy and freedom, going west meant getting cheap labor. One by one, the packinghouses in Chicago closed down, and slaughterhouses were built in rural states hostile toward labor unions. The new meatpacking plants in Iowa, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, and Nebraska followed IBP's example, paying wages that were sometimes more than 50 percent lower than what union workers earned in Chicago.

I recently drove through Chicago's Packingtown with Ruben Ramirez, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Local 100A, the city's meatpacking union. Ramirez is in his early sixties, but still looks fit enough to work in a packing plant, with broad shoulders, a thick neck, and strong hands. His smoothly shaved head adds to his formidable appearance. When Ramirez arrived at the Chicago stockyards in 1956, cowboys on horseback still herded cattle from their pens to the slaughterhouses. He was seventeen years old at the time and did not speak any English. He'd just come from Guanajuato, Mexico, and found a job at an old processing plant operated by Swift & Company. He was one of the few Mexicans employed there; the other workers were Polish, Lithuanian, and African-American. They looked down at Mexicans, and so Ramirez was not allowed to use a knife or perform any skilled tasks. Supervisors gave him the lowest menial jobs in the plant. He carried heavy boxes and barrels of meat, getting soaked in blood that hardened and froze to his clothing during the winter. After a few years he went to work for a nearby processing company, Glenn & Anderson, where he worked in sanitation. Three years later Ramirez was finally promoted and allowed to cut meat. He saw friends get badly injured on the job, lost the middle finger on his right hand while using a saw, got knocked unconscious when a side of beef fell off a hook and struck him in the head. He married a young woman he met in church, and they later had six children. He woke up at four o'clock in the morning, worked eight hours a day at Glenn & Anderson, then took college courses at night. Life was far from easy, but his salary was good enough to let his wife stay home and look after the kids. All of their children went to college.

Ruben Ramirez became active in the union, first as a shop steward, then as an executive. He became an American citizen, loved this country, felt grateful for the opportunities it had given him, and took great pride in the accomplishments of his children. In 1993 he became the first Latino to head a local UFCW meatpacking union in the United States. But as Ramirez climbed to the top of Packingtown, the whole thing was crumbling right before his eyes. Any enjoyment of his own success had to be tempered by a hard, cold reality. While listening to Ruben Ramirez's life story, I looked out the car window at one poignant scene after another, at abandoned warehouses and slaughterhouses, at junkyards, slums, and parking lots where Chicago's stockyards once stood.

The world's biggest aggregation of labor and capital in one place has largely disappeared, with bits and pieces of its history lurking amid brick housing projects. The local meatpacking industry that once employed 40,000 people now employs about 2,000. Ninety-five

percent of its jobs have moved elsewhere. The last of the Chicago stockyards closed in 1971. Today there's only one slaughterhouse left in Packingtown, an old hog plant. There's just a handful of meat processors: firms that make bacon, sausage, hamburger patties, and kosher products. When the large meatpackers departed, the soul of the place fled with them.

We got out of the car at the entrance to the Union Stockyards, built in 1875, a grand archway with two Victorian turrets on either side. Millions of men, horses, and cattle had passed through it over the years. A spot that had for generations been at the center of tumult and loud commotion now was desolate and quiet, except for an occasional car driving past to a nearby industrial park. The sculpted head of a steer gazed down from the center of the arch. Broken glass and an old sneaker lay on the ground beneath it. Weeds grew between the crumbling brick paving stones, and the pale beige surface of the arch was marred with cracks. The place felt like an archeological site, the ruins of a lost American civilization.

bags of money

DURING THE 1970s THE cordial relationship between Monfort executives and workers at the Greeley slaughterhouse came to an end. The underlying source of conflict was straightforward. Monfort wanted to reduce labor costs, but its workers thought that wages should not be cut at a time when the company was earning profits and the nation's annual inflation rate had reached double digits. In the midst of contract talks with Greeley workers in 1979, who were now represented by the UFCW, Ken Monfort purchased a slaughterhouse in Grand Island, Nebraska, from Swift & Company. Before handing over the plant, Swift shut it down and fired all of the workers, who also belonged to the UFCW. When Monfort took control of the slaughterhouse a few weeks later, he signed a sweetheart deal with the National Maritime Union — a group that had never before represented meatpacking workers and that quickly agreed to a large pay cut.

In November of 1979 the workers in Greeley went on strike. Monfort refused to meet their demands, and the dispute became ugly. The company began to hire scabs. Ken Monfort received death threats. Eight weeks after going on strike, the workers decided to return to their jobs without a contract, but riot police prevented them from entering the slaughterhouse. When the company allowed workers back into the plant, many of them disobeyed supervisors and committed acts of sabotage. After a few months of industrial anarchy, Monfort closed the Greeley slaughterhouse and fired all its workers. The days of paternalism were over in Greeley. Ken Monfort was no longer a liberal Democrat. He had become a pro-business Republican.

In 1982 the slaughterhouse in Greeley reopened without a union, paying wages that had been cut by 40 percent. Former workers were not offered jobs. Instead Monfort transferred some employees from its Grand Island plant and hired new ones. Although Ken Monfort decided to follow IBP's tough policy on labor unions, he strongly resisted the increasing consolidation of the meatpacking industry. During the early 1980s one independent meatpacker after another either went out of business or was purchased by a large corporate rival. In 1983, Monfort sued Excel — the nation's second-largest beef processor — to prevent it from acquiring Spencer Beef, the nation's third-largest beef processor. Monfort argued that the proposed acquisition would allow Excel to engage in predatory pricing and to reduce competition. A panel of federal judges ruled in favor of Monfort, but Excel appealed their decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. President Reagan's Justice Department submitted a brief in the case — and argued on behalf of Excel, claiming it had every right to buy a rival company.

The Reagan administration did not oppose the disappearance of hundreds of small meatpacking firms. On the contrary, it opposed using antitrust laws to stop the giant meatpackers. In 1986 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the earlier ruling and approved the merger of America's second- and third-largest meatpacking companies. The following year, Monfort agreed to a friendly takeover by ConAgra. "It seemed to me that if the industry was going to be concentrated," Ken Monfort explained, "there should be at least three large players instead of just two." As part of the deal, he became a top executive at the company, head of the ConAgra Red Meat division, and his family received about $270 million in ConAgra stock.

By purchasing Monfort, ConAgra became the biggest meatpacker in the world. Today it is the largest foodservice supplier in North America. In addition to being the number-one producer of french fries (through its Lamb Weston subsidiary), ConAgra is also the nation's largest sheep and turkey processor, the largest distributor of agricultural chemicals, the second-largest manufacturer of frozen food, the second-largest flour miller, the third-largest chicken and pork processor, as well as a leading seed producer, feed producer, and commodity futures trader. The company sells its food under about one hundred consumer brand names, including Hunt's, Armour, La Choy, Country Pride, Swiss Miss, Orville Redenbacher's, Reddi-Wip, Taste O'Sea, Knott's Berry Farm, Hebrew National, and Healthy Choice. Although few Americans have heard of ConAgra, they are likely to eat at least one of its products every day.

Twenty years ago, ConAgra — a combination of two Latin words whose intended meaning is "partnership with the land" — was an obscure Nebraska company with annual revenues of about $500 million. Last year ConAgra's revenues exceeded $25 billion. The company's phenomenal growth over the past two decades was driven by the entrepreneurial spirit of its longtime chief executive, Charles "Mike" Harper. When Harper took over ConAgra in 1974, it was losing money, the market value of its stock was $10 million, and the value of its debt was $156 million. According to the company's official history, *ConAgra Who?* (1989), Harper promptly instituted a new corporate philosophy. "Harper told each general manager that he'd been given a bag of money," the company history explains, "and that at the end of the year he'd be expected to return it — plus a little extra." He gave each of his top executives a personalized, inspirational plaque. On it was a cartoon of two vultures sitting in a tree. "Patience, my ass," one vulture says to the other. "I'm gonna go kill somebody."

The intense pressure to return a bigger bag of money every year has prompted a number of ConAgra employees to break the law. In 1989, ConAgra was found guilty in federal court of having systematically cheated chicken growers in Alabama. During an eight-year period, 45,256 truckloads of full-grown birds were deliberately misweighed at a ConAgra processing plant in the state. ConAgra employees tampered with trucks and scales to make the birds seem lighter. The company was forced to pay $17.2 million in damages for the fraud.

In 1995, ConAgra agreed to pay $13.6 million to settle a class-action lawsuit that accused the company of having conspired with seven other firms to fix prices in the catfish industry. For more than a decade, ConAgra executives allegedly spoke on the phone to, or met at motels with, their ostensible rivals to set catfish prices nationwide. According to the plaintiffs in the case, ConAgra's price-fixing scheme gouged independent wholesalers, small retailers, and consumers.

In 1997, ConAgra paid $8.3 million in fines and pleaded guilty in federal court to charges involving wire fraud, the misgrading of crops, and the addition of water to grain. According to the Justice Department, ConAgra cheated farmers in Indiana for at least three years by doctoring samples of their crops, making the grain seem of lower quality in order to pay less for it. After buying the grain at an unfair price, ConAgra employees sprayed water on it and thereby fraudulently increased its weight, then sold it and cheated customers.

the new industrial migrants

HAVING BROKEN THE UNION at the Greeley slaughterhouse, Monfort began to employ a different sort of worker there: recent immigrants, many of them illegals. In the 1980s large numbers of young men and women from Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia started traveling to rural Colorado. Meatpacking jobs that had once provided a middle-class American life now offered little more than poverty wages. Instead of a waiting list, the slaughterhouse seemed to acquire a revolving door, as Monfort plowed through new hires to fill the roughly nine hundred jobs. During one eighteen-month period, more than five thousand different people were employed at the Greeley beef plant — an annual turnover rate of about 400 percent. The average worker quit or was fired every three months.

Today, roughly two-thirds of the workers at the beef plant in Greeley cannot speak English. Most of them are Mexican immigrants who live in places like the River Park Mobile Court, a collection of battered old trailers a quarter-mile down the road from the slaughterhouse. They share rooms in old motels, sleeping on mattresses that cover the floor. The basic pay at the slaughterhouse is now $9.25 an hour. Adjusted for inflation, today's hourly wage is more than a third lower than what Monfort paid forty years ago when the plant opened. Health insurance is now offered to workers after six months on the job; vacation pay, after a year. But most of the workers will never get that vacation. A spokesman for ConAgra recently acknowledged that the turnover rate at the Greeley slaughterhouse is about 80 percent a year. That figure actually represents a decline from the early 1990s.

Mike Coan candidly discussed the whole subject during a 1994 interview with *Business Insurance,* an industry trade journal. At the time, he was the corporate safety director of ConAgra Red Meat. "There is a 100 percent turnover rate annually," Coan said, in an article that applauded Monfort's skill at keeping its insurance costs low. Another

ConAgra meat executive agreed with Coan, noting that "turnover in our business is just astronomical." While Monfort did keep some long-term employees, many slaughterhouse jobs needed to be filled several times every year. "We're at the bottom of the literacy scale," Coan added; ". . . in some plants maybe a third of the people cannot read or write in any language."

During a federal hearing in the 1980s, Arden Walker, the head of labor relations at IBP for the company's first two decades, explained some of the advantages of having a high turnover rate:

Counsel: With regard to turnover, since you [IBP] are obviously experiencing it, does that bother you?

Mr. Walker: Not really.

Counsel: Why not?

Mr. Walker: We found very little correlation between turnover and profitability . . . For instance, insurance, as you know, is very costly. Insurance is not available to new employees until they've worked there for a period of a year or, in some cases, six months. Vacations don't accrue until the second year. There are some economies, frankly, that result from hiring new employees.

Far from being a liability, a high turnover rate in the meatpacking industry — as in the fast food industry — also helps maintain a workforce that is harder to unionize and much easier to control.

For more than a century, California agriculture has been dependent on migrant workers, on young men and women from rural villages in Mexico who travel north to pick by hand most of the state's fruits and vegetables. Migrant workers have long played an important role in the agricultural economy of other states, picking berries in Oregon, apples in Washington, and tomatoes in Florida. Today, the United States, for the first time in its history, has begun to rely on a migrant industrial workforce. Thousands of new migrants now travel north to work in the slaughterhouses and meat processing plants of the High Plains. Some of these new migrants save their earnings, then return home. Some try to establish roots and settle in meatpacking communities. And others wander the country, briefly employed in one state after another, looking for a meatpacking plant that treats its workers well. These migrants come mainly from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Many were once farm workers in California, where steady jobs in the fields are now difficult to find. To farm workers who've labored outdoors, ten hours a day, for the nation's lowest wages, meatpacking jobs often sound too good to be true. Picking strawberries in California pays about $5.50 an hour, while cutting meat in a Colorado or Nebraska slaughterhouse can pay almost twice that amount. In many parts of rural Mexico and Guatemala, workers earn about $5 a day.

As in so many other aspects of meatpacking, IBP was a trailblazer in recruiting migrant labor. The company was among the first to recognize that recent immigrants would work for lower wages than American citizens — and would be more reluctant to join unions. To sustain the flow of new workers into IBP slaughterhouses, the company has for years dispatched recruiting teams to poor communities throughout the United States. It has recruited refugees and asylum-seekers from Laos and Bosnia. It has recruited homeless people living at shelters in New York, New Jersey, California, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. It has hired buses to import these workers from thousands of miles away. IBP now maintains a labor office in Mexico City, runs ads on Mexican radio stations offering jobs in the United States, and operates a bus service from rural Mexico to the heartland of America.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that about one-quarter of all meatpacking workers in Iowa and Nebraska are illegal immigrants. The proportion at some slaughterhouses can be much higher. Spokesmen for IBP and the ConAgra Beef Company adamantly deny that they in any way seek illegal immigrants. "We do not knowingly hire undocumented workers," an IBP executive told me. "IBP supports INS efforts to enforce the law and do[es] not want to employ people who are not authorized to work in the United States." Nevertheless, the recruiting efforts of the American meatpacking industry now target some of the most impoverished and most vulnerable groups in the Western Hemisphere. "If they've got a pulse," one meatpacking executive joked to the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1998, "we'll take an application."

The real costs of this migrant industrial workforce are being borne not by the large meatpacking firms, but by the nation's meatpacking communities. Poor workers without health insurance drive up local medical costs. Drug dealers prey on recent immigrants, and the large, transient population usually brings more crime. At times, the meatpacking firms have been especially brazen in assuming that public funds will cover their routine business costs. In September of 1994, GFI America, Inc. — a leading supplier of frozen hamburger patties to Dairy Queen, Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, and the federal

school lunch program — needed workers for a plant in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It sent recruiters to Eagle Pass, Texas, near the Mexican border, promising steady work and housing. The recruiters hired thirty-nine people, rented a bus, drove the new workers from Texas to Minnesota, and then dropped them off across the street from People Serving People, a homeless shelter in downtown Minneapolis. Because the workers had no money, the shelter agreed to house them. GFI America offered to pay the facility $17 for each worker and to donate some free hamburgers, but the offer was declined. The company's plan to use a homeless shelter as worker housing soon backfired. Most of the new recruits refused to stay at the shelter; they had been promised rental apartments and now felt tricked and misled. The story was soon picked up by the local media. Advocates for the homeless were especially angry about GFI America's attempt to misuse the largest homeless shelter in Minneapolis. "Our job is not to provide subsidies to corporations that are importing low-cost labor," said a county official.

The high turnover rate in meatpacking is driven by the low pay and the poor working conditions. Workers quit one meatpacking job and float from town to town in the High Plains, looking for something better. Moving constantly is hard on their personal lives and their families. Most of these new industrial migrants would gladly stay in one job and settle in one spot, if the wages and the working conditions were good. The nation's meatpacking firms, on the other hand, have proven themselves to be far less committed to remaining in a particular community. They have successfully pitted one economically depressed region against another, using the threat of plant closures and the promise of future investment to obtain lucrative government subsidies. No longer locally owned, they feel no allegiance to any one place.

In January of 1987, Mike Harper told the newly elected governor of Nebraska, Kay Orr, that ConAgra wanted a number of tax breaks — or would move its headquarters out of Omaha. The company had been based in the state for almost seventy years, and Nebraska's tax rates were among the lowest in the United States. Nevertheless, a small group of ConAgra executives soon gathered on a Saturday morning at Harper's house, sat around his kitchen table, and came up with the basis for legislation that rewrote Nebraska's tax code. The bills, drafted largely by ConAgra, sought to lower the state taxes paid not only by large corporations, but also by wealthy executives. Mike Harper personally stood to gain about $295,000 from the proposed 30 percent reduction in the maximum tax rate on personal income. He was an avid pilot, and the new legislation also provided tax deductions for ConAgra's corporate jets. A number of state legislators called Harper's demands "blackmail." But the legislature granted the tax breaks, afraid that Nebraska might lose one of its largest private employers. Harper later described how easy it would have been for ConAgra to move elsewhere: "Some Friday night, we turn out the lights — click, click, click — back up the trucks and be gone by Monday morning."

IBP also benefited enormously from the legislation. Its corporate headquarters was located in Dakota City, Nebraska. One study has suggested that after the revision of the state's tax code every new job that ConAgra and IBP created there was backed by a taxpayer subsidy of between $13,000 and $23,000. Thanks to the 1987 legislation, IBP paid no corporate taxes in Nebraska for the next decade. Its executives paid state income taxes at a maximum rate of 7 percent. Despite all these financial benefits, IBP moved its headquarters out of Nebraska in 1997, relocating in South Dakota, a state with no corporate taxes — and no personal income tax. Robert L. Peterson, the chairman of IBP, said that moving to South Dakota was like giving his employees a 7 percent raise. "The move shows you how ungrateful corporate tax-break beneficiaries are," Don Weseley, a Nebraska state senator, told the *Omaha World-Herald*. "They take whatever you give them and then, if there's a better offer, leave you hanging and move on to the next best deal."

IBP had been based in Nebraska since 1967. From its inception, the company that started the revolution in meatpacking — by crushing labor unions and championing the ruthless efficiency of the market — has made ample use of government subsidies. In 1960, Currier J. Holman and A. D. Anderson launched Iowa Beef Packers with a $300,000 loan from the federal Small Business Administration.

the sweet smell

THE CHANGES THAT HAVE swept through Greeley, Colorado, have also occurred throughout the High Plains, wherever large meatpacking plants operate. Towns like Garden City, Kansas, Grand Island, Nebraska, and Storm Lake, Iowa, now have their own rural ghettos, drugs, poverty, rootlessness, and crime. Some of the most dramatic changes have occurred in Lexington, Nebraska, a small town about three hours west of Omaha. Lexington looks like the sort of place that Norman Rockwell liked to paint: shade trees, picket fences, modest Victorian homes, comfy chairs on front porches. The appearance is deceiving.

In 1990, IBP opened a slaughterhouse in Lexington. A year later, the town, with a population of roughly seven thousand, had the highest crime rate in the state of Nebraska. Within a decade, the number of serious crimes doubled; the number of Medicaid cases nearly doubled; Lexington became a major distribution center for illegal drugs; gang members appeared in town and committed drive-by shootings; the majority of Lexington's white inhabitants moved elsewhere; and the proportion of Latino inhabitants increased more than tenfold, climbing to over 50 percent. "Mexington" — as it is now called, affectionately by some, disparagingly by others — is an entirely new kind of American town, one that has been transfigured to meet the needs of a modern slaughterhouse. You would never think, driving past the IBP plant in Lexington, with its colorful children's playground out front, with Wal-Mart and Burger King across the street, that a single, innocuous-looking building could be responsible for so much sudden change, hardship, and despair.

In Lexington I met a cross-section of IBP workers. I met Guatemalan Indians who spoke no English and barely spoke Spanish, living in a dark basement strewn with garbage and used diapers. I met Mexican farm workers struggling to get used to the long Nebraska winters. I met one IBP worker who'd recently been a housekeeper in Santa Monica and another whose previous job was collecting manure from fields in rural Mexico and selling it as fertilizer. I met hard-working, illiterate, religious people willing to risk injury and endure pain for the benefit of their families.

The smell that permeates Lexington is even worse than the smell of Greeley. "We have three odors," a Lexington resident told a reporter: "burning hair and blood, that greasy smell, and the odor of rotten eggs." Hydrogen sulfide is the gas responsible for the rotten egg smell. It rises from slaughterhouse wastewater lagoons, causes respiratory problems and headaches, and at high levels can cause permanent damage to the nervous system. In January of 2000, the Justice Department sued IBP for violations of the Clean Air Act at its Dakota City plant, where as much as a ton of hydrogen sulfide was being released into the air every day. As part of a consent decree, IBP agreed to cover its wastewater lagoons there. "This agreement means that Nebraskans will no longer be forced to inhale IBP's toxic emissions," said a Justice Department official. As of this writing, IBP is also preparing to cover its Lexington wastewater lagoons.

On July 7, 1988, IBP held a public forum at a junior high school in Lexington, giving local citizens an opportunity to ask questions about the company's proposal to build a slaughterhouse there. The transcript of this meeting says a lot about how IBP views the rural communities where it operates. Would there be much turnover among workers at the new IBP plant, someone asked. Once the slaughterhouse was running, an IBP executive replied, it would have a stable workforce. "Ninety percent of our people," he said, "or 80 percent will be fairly stable." Would local people be hired for these jobs, someone else asked. "We will not bring in an hourly workforce," the IBP executive promised. A local IBP booster, who had just returned from a visit to the company's slaughterhouse in Emporia, Kansas, suggested there was little reason to worry about the "type of people" the plant might attract or the potential for increased crime. He said that in Emporia, apparently, "they work them so hard at IBP that they're tired and they go home and go to bed." An IBP executive, a vice president of public relations, confirmed that assessment. "And people who work on our lines work hard," he told the gathering. "As the chief of police [in Emporia] said, they go home at night and go to bed rather than carouse around town." Another IBP executive, a vice president of engineering, assured the audience that the new plant in Lexington would not foul the air. No odor would be noticeable, he promised, even "a few feet away" from the plant. In any event, the smell emitted by slaughterhouse lagoons would be "sweet," not objectionable. And the smell from the slaughterhouse itself, the IBP vice president said, would be "no different than that which you produce in your kitchen when you cook."

8 / the most dangerous job

ONE NIGHT I VISIT a slaughterhouse somewhere in the High Plains. The slaughterhouse is one of the nation's largest. About five thousand head of cattle enter it every day, single file, and leave in a different form. Someone who has access to the plant, who's upset by its working conditions, offers to give me a tour. The slaughterhouse is an immense building, gray and square, about three stories high, with no windows on the front and no architectural clues to what's happening inside. My friend gives me a chain-mail apron and gloves, suggesting I try them on. Workers on the line wear about eight pounds of chain mail beneath their white coats, shiny steel armor that covers their hands, wrists, stomach, and back. The chain mail's designed to protect workers from cutting themselves and from being cut by other workers. But knives somehow manage to get past it. My host hands me some Wellingtons, the kind of knee-high rubber boots that English gentlemen wear in the countryside. "Tuck your pants into the boots," he says. "We'll be walking through some blood."

I put on a hardhat and climb a stairway. The sounds get louder, factory sounds, the noise of power tools and machinery, bursts of compressed air. We start at the end of the line, the fabricating room. Workers call it "fab." When we step inside, fab seems familiar: steel catwalks, pipes along the walls, a vast room, a maze of conveyer belts. This could be the Lamb Weston plant in Idaho, except hunks of red meat ride the belts instead of french fries. Some machines assemble cardboard boxes, others vacuum-seal subprimals of beef in clear plastic. The workers look extremely busy, but there's nothing unsettling about this part of the plant. You see meat like this all the time in the back of your local supermarket.

The fab room is cooled to about 40 degrees, and as you head up the line, the feel of the place starts to change. The pieces of meat get bigger. Workers — about half of them women, almost all of them young and Latino — slice meat with long slender knives. They stand at a table that's chest high, grab meat off a conveyer belt, trim away fat, throw meat back on the belt, toss the scraps onto a conveyer belt above them, and then grab more meat, all in a matter of seconds. I'm now struck by how many workers there are, hundreds of them, pressed close together, constantly moving, slicing. You see hardhats, white coats, flashes of steel. Nobody is smiling or chatting, they're too busy, anxiously trying not to fall behind. An old man walks past me, pushing a blue plastic barrel filled with scraps. A few workers carve the meat with Whizzards, small electric knives that have spinning round blades. The Whizzards look like the Norelco razors that Santa rides in the TV ads. I notice that a few of the women near me are sweating, even though the place is freezing cold.

Sides of beef suspended from an overhead trolley swing toward a group of men. Each worker has a large knife in one hand and a steel hook in the other. They grab the meat with their hooks and attack it fiercely with their knives. As they hack away, using all their strength, grunting, the place suddenly feels different, primordial. The machinery seems beside the point, and what's going on before me has been going on for thousands of years — the meat, the hook, the knife, men straining to cut more meat.

On the kill floor, what I see no longer unfolds in a logical manner. It's one strange image after another. A worker with a power saw slices cattle into halves as though they were two-by-fours, and then the halves swing by me into the cooler. It feels like a slaughterhouse now. Dozens of cattle, stripped of their skins, dangle on chains from their hind legs. My host stops and asks how I feel, if I want to go any further. This is where some people get sick. I feel fine, determined to see the whole process, the world that's been deliberately hidden. The kill floor is hot and humid. It stinks of manure. Cattle have a body temperature of about 101 degrees, and there are a lot of them in the room. Carcasses swing so fast along the rail that you have to keep an eye on them constantly, dodge them, watch your step, or one will slam you and throw you onto the bloody concrete floor. It happens to workers all the time.

I see: a man reach inside cattle and pull out their kidneys with his bare hands, then drop the kidneys down a metal chute, over and over

again, as each animal passes by him; a stainless steel rack of tongues; Whizzards peeling meat off decapitated heads, picking them almost as clean as the white skulls painted by Georgia O'Keeffe. We wade through blood that's ankle deep and that pours down drains into huge vats below us. As we approach the start of the line, for the first time I hear the steady *pop, pop, pop* of live animals being stunned.

Now the cattle suspended above me look just like the cattle I've seen on ranches for years, but these ones are upside down swinging on hooks. For a moment, the sight seems unreal; there are so many of them, a herd of them, lifeless. And then I see a few hind legs still kicking, a final reflex action, and the reality comes hard and clear.

For eight and a half hours, a worker called a "sticker" does nothing but stand in a river of blood, being drenched in blood, slitting the neck of a steer every ten seconds or so, severing its carotid artery. He uses a long knife and must hit exactly the right spot to kill the animal humanely. He hits that spot again and again. We walk up a slippery metal stairway and reach a small platform, where the production line begins. A man turns and smiles at me. He wears safety goggles and a hardhat. His face is splattered with gray matter and blood. He is the "knocker," the man who welcomes cattle to the building. Cattle walk down a narrow chute and pause in front of him, blocked by a gate, and then he shoots them in the head with a captive bolt stunner — a compressed-air gun attached to the ceiling by a long hose — which fires a steel bolt that knocks the cattle unconscious. The animals keep strolling up, oblivious to what comes next, and he stands over them and shoots. For eight and a half hours, he just shoots. As I stand there, he misses a few times and shoots the same animal twice. As soon as the steer falls, a worker grabs one of its hind legs, shackles it to a chain, and the chain lifts the huge animal into the air.

I watch the knocker knock cattle for a couple of minutes. The animals are powerful and imposing one moment and then gone in an instant, suspended from a rail, ready for carving. A steer slips from its chain, falls to the ground, and gets its head caught in one end of a conveyer belt. The production line stops as workers struggle to free the steer, stunned but alive, from the machinery. I've seen enough.

I step out of the building into the cool night air and follow the path that leads cattle into the slaughterhouse. They pass me, driven toward the building by workers with long white sticks that seem to glow in the dark. One steer, perhaps sensing instinctively what the other don't, turns and tries to run. But workers drive him back to join the rest. The cattle lazily walk single-file toward the muffled sounds, *pop, pop, pop,* coming from the open door.

The path has hairpin turns that prevent cattle from seeing what's in store and keep them relaxed. As the ramp gently slopes upward, the animals may think they're headed for another truck, another road trip — and they are, in unexpected ways. The ramp widens as it reaches ground level and then leads to a large cattle pen with wooden fences, a corral that belongs in a meadow, not here. As I walk along the fence, a group of cattle approach me, looking me straight in the eye, like dogs hoping for a treat, and follow me out of some mysterious impulse. I stop and try to absorb the whole scene: the cool breeze, the cattle and their gentle lowing, a cloudless sky, steam rising from the plant in the moonlight. And then I notice that the building does have one window, a small square of light on the second floor. It offers a glimpse of what's hidden behind this huge blank façade. Through the little window you can see bright red carcasses on hooks, going round and round.

sharp knives

KNOCKER, STICKER, SHACKLER, RUMPER, First Legger, Knuckle Dropper, Navel Boner, Splitter Top/Bottom Butt, Feed Kill Chain — the names of job assignments at a modern slaughterhouse convey some of the brutality inherent in the work. Meatpacking is now the most dangerous job in the United States. The injury rate in a slaughterhouse is about three times higher than the rate in a typical American factory. Every year more than one-quarter of the meatpacking workers in this country — roughly forty thousand men and women — suffer an injury or a work-related illness that requires medical attention beyond first aid. There is strong evidence that these numbers, compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, understate the number of meatpacking injuries that occur. Thousands of additional injuries and illnesses most likely go unrecorded.

Despite the use of conveyer belts, forklifts, dehiding machines, and a variety of power tools, most of the work in the nation's slaughterhouses is still performed by hand. Poultry plants can be largely mechanized, thanks to the breeding of chickens that are uniform in size. The birds in some Tyson factories are killed, plucked, gutted, beheaded, and sliced into cutlets by robots and machines. But cattle

40k hurt

still come in all sizes and shapes, varying in weight by hundreds of pounds. The lack of a standardized steer has hindered the mechanization of beef plants. In one crucial respect meatpacking work has changed little in the past hundred years. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, amid an era of extraordinary technological advance, the most important tool in a modern slaughterhouse is a sharp knife.

Lacerations are the most common injuries suffered by meatpackers, who often stab themselves or stab someone working nearby. Tendinitis and cumulative trauma disorders are also quite common. Meatpacking workers routinely develop back problems, shoulder problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, and "trigger finger" (a syndrome in which a finger becomes frozen in a curled position). Indeed, the rate of these cumulative trauma injuries in the meatpacking industry is far higher than the rate in any other American industry. It is roughly thirty-three times higher than the national average in industry. Many slaughterhouse workers make a knife cut every two or three seconds, which adds up to about 10,000 cuts during an eight-hour shift. If the knife has become dull, additional pressure is placed on the worker's tendons, joints, and nerves. A dull knife can cause pain to extend from the cutting hand all the way down the spine. 33x

Workers often bring their knives home and spend at least forty minutes a day keeping the edges smooth, sharp, and sanded, with no pits. One IBP worker, a small Guatemalan woman with graying hair, spoke with me in the cramped kitchen of her mobile home. As a pot of beans cooked on the stove, she sat in a wooden chair, gently rocking, telling the story of her life, of her journey north in search of work, the whole time sharpening big knives in her lap as though she were knitting a sweater.

The "IBP revolution" has been directly responsible for many of the hazards that meatpacking workers now face. One of the leading determinants of the injury rate at a slaughterhouse today is the speed of the disassembly line. The faster it runs, the more likely that workers will get hurt. The old meatpacking plants in Chicago slaughtered about 50 cattle an hour. Twenty years ago, new plants in the High Plains slaughtered about 175 cattle an hour. Today some plants slaughter up to 400 cattle an hour — about half a dozen animals every minute, sent down a single production line, carved by workers desperate not to fall behind. While trying to keep up with the flow of meat, workers often neglect to resharpen their knives and thereby place more stress on their bodies. As the pace increases, so does the risk of accidental cuts and stabbings. "I could always tell the line speed," a former Monfort nurse told me, "by the number of people with lacerations coming into my office." People usually cut themselves; nevertheless, everyone on the line tries to stay alert. Meatpackers often work within inches of each other, wielding large knives. A simple mistake can cause a serious injury. A former IBP worker told me about boning knives suddenly flying out of hands and ricocheting off of machinery. "They're very flexible," she said, "and they'll spring on you . . . zwing, and they're gone."

Much like french fry factories, beef slaughterhouses often operate at profit margins as low as a few pennies a pound. The three meatpacking giants — ConAgra, IBP, and Excel — try to increase their earnings by maximizing the volume of production at each plant. Once a slaughterhouse is up and running, fully staffed, the profits it will earn are directly related to the speed of the line. A faster pace means higher profits. Market pressures now exert a perverse influence on the management of beef plants: the same factors that make these slaughterhouses relatively inefficient (the lack of mechanization, the reliance on human labor) encourage companies to make them even more dangerous (by speeding up the pace).

The unrelenting pressure of trying to keep up with the line has encouraged widespread methamphetamine use among meatpackers. Workers taking "crank" feel charged and self-confident, ready for anything. Supervisors have been known to sell crank to their workers or to supply it free in return for certain favors, such as working a second shift. Workers who use methamphetamine may feel energized and invincible, but are actually putting themselves at much greater risk of having an accident. For obvious reasons, a modern slaughterhouse is not a safe place to be high.

In the days when labor unions were strong, workers could complain about excessive line speeds and injury rates without fear of getting fired. Today only one-third of IBP's workers belong to a union. Most of the nonunion workers are recent immigrants; many are illegals; and they are generally employed "at will." That means they can be fired without warning, for just about any reason. Such an arrangement does not encourage them to lodge complaints. Workers who have traveled a great distance for this job, who have families to support, who are earning ten times more an hour in a meatpacking plant than they could possibly earn back home, are wary about speaking out and losing everything. The line speeds and labor costs at IBP's nonunion plants now set the standard for the rest of the industry. Every other company

must try to produce beef as quickly and cheaply as IBP does; slowing the pace to protect workers can lead to a competitive disadvantage.

Again and again workers told me that they are under tremendous pressure not to report injuries. The annual bonuses of plant foremen and supervisors are often based in part on the injury rate of their workers. Instead of creating a safer workplace, these bonus schemes encourage slaughterhouse managers to make sure that accidents and injuries go unreported. Missing fingers, broken bones, deep lacerations, and amputated limbs are difficult to conceal from authorities. But the dramatic and catastrophic injuries in a slaughterhouse are greatly outnumbered by less visible, though no less debilitating, ailments: torn muscles, slipped disks, pinched nerves.

If a worker agrees not to report an injury, a supervisor will usually shift him or her to an easier job for a while, providing some time to heal. If the injury seems more serious, a Mexican worker is often given the opportunity to return home for a while, to recuperate there, then come back to his or her slaughterhouse job in the United States. Workers who abide by these unwritten rules are treated respectfully; those who disobey are likely to be punished and made an example. As one former IBP worker explained, "They're trying to deter you, period, from going to the doctor."

From a purely economic point of view, injured workers are a drag on profits. They are less productive. Getting rid of them makes a good deal of financial sense, especially when new workers are readily available and inexpensive to train. Injured workers are often given some of the most unpleasant tasks in the slaughterhouse. Their hourly wages are cut. And through a wide variety of unsubtle means they are encouraged to quit.

Not all supervisors in a slaughterhouse behave like Simon Legree, shouting at workers, cursing them, belittling their injuries, always pushing them to move faster. But enough supervisors act that way to warrant the comparison. Production supervisors tend to be men in their late twenties and early thirties. Most are Anglos and don't speak Spanish, although more and more Latinos are being promoted to the job. They earn about $30,000 a year, plus bonuses and benefits. In many rural communities, being a supervisor at a meatpacking plant is one of the best jobs in town. It comes with a fair amount of pressure: a supervisor must meet production goals, keep the number of recorded injuries low, and most importantly, keep the meat flowing down the line without interruption. The job also brings enormous power. Each supervisor is like a little dictator in his or her section of the plant, largely free to boss, fire, berate, or reassign workers. That sort of power can lead to all sorts of abuses, especially when the hourly workers being supervised are women.

Many women told me stories about being fondled and grabbed on the production line, and the behavior of supervisors sets the tone for the other male workers. In February of 1999, a federal jury in Des Moines awarded $2.4 million to a female employee at an IBP slaughterhouse. According to the woman's testimony, coworkers had "screamed obscenities and rubbed their bodies against hers while supervisors laughed." Seven months later, Monfort agreed to settle a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on behalf of fourteen female workers in Texas. As part of the settlement, the company paid the women $900,000 and vowed to establish formal procedures for handling sexual harassment complaints. In their lawsuit the women alleged that supervisors at a Monfort plant in Cactus, Texas, pressured them for dates and sex, and that male coworkers groped them, kissed them, and used animal parts in a sexually explicit manner.

The sexual relationships between supervisors and "hourlies" are for the most part consensual. Many female workers optimistically regard sex with their supervisor as a way to gain a secure place in American society, a green card, a husband — or at the very least a transfer to an easier job at the plant. Some supervisors become meatpacking Casanovas, engaging in multiple affairs. Sex, drugs, and slaughterhouses may seem an unlikely combination, but as one former Monfort employee told me: "Inside those walls is a different world that obeys different laws." Late on the second shift, when it's dark outside, assignations take place in locker rooms, staff rooms, and parked cars, even on the catwalk over the kill floor.

the worst

SOME OF THE MOST dangerous jobs in meatpacking today are performed by the late-night cleaning crews. A large proportion of these workers are illegal immigrants. They are considered "independent contractors," employed not by the meatpacking firms but by sanitation companies. They earn hourly wages that are about one-third lower than those of regular production employees. And their work is

so hard and so horrendous that words seem inadequate to describe it. The men and women who now clean the nation's slaughterhouses may arguably have the worst job in the United States. "It takes a really dedicated person," a former member of a cleaning crew told me, "or a really desperate person to get the job done."

When a sanitation crew arrives at a meatpacking plant, usually around midnight, it faces a mess of monumental proportions. Three to four thousand cattle, each weighing about a thousand pounds, have been slaughtered there that day. The place has to be clean by sunrise. Some of the workers wear water-resistant clothing; most don't. Their principal cleaning tool is a high-pressure hose that shoots a mixture of water and chlorine heated to about 180 degrees. As the water is sprayed, the plant fills with a thick, heavy fog. Visibility drops to as little as five feet. The conveyer belts and machinery are running. Workers stand on the belts, spraying them, riding them like moving sidewalks, as high as fifteen feet off the ground. Workers climb ladders with hoses and spray the catwalks. They get under tables and conveyer belts, climbing right into the bloody muck, cleaning out grease, fat, manure, leftover scraps of meat.

Glasses and safety goggles fog up. The inside of the plant heats up; temperatures soon exceed 100 degrees. "It's hot, and it's foggy, and you can't see anything," a former sanitation worker said. The crew members can't see or hear each other when the machinery's running. They routinely spray each other with burning hot, chemical-laden water. They are sickened by the fumes. Jesus, a soft-spoken employee of DCS Sanitation Management, Inc., the company that IBP uses in many of its plants, told me that every night on the job he gets terrible headaches. "You feel it in your head," he said. "You feel it in your stomach, like you want to throw up." A friend of his vomits whenever they clean the rendering area. Other workers tease the young man as he retches. Jesus says the stench in rendering is so powerful that it won't wash off; no matter how much soap you use after a shift, the smell comes home with you, seeps from your pores.

One night while Jesus was cleaning, a coworker forgot to turn off a machine, lost two fingers, and went into shock. An ambulance came and took him away, as everyone else continued to clean. He was back at work the following week. "If one hand is no good," the supervisor told him, "use the other." Another sanitation worker lost an arm in a machine. Now he folds towels in the locker room. The scariest job, according to Jesus, is cleaning the vents on the roof of the slaughterhouse. The vents become clogged with grease and dried blood. In the winter, when everything gets icy and the winds pick up, Jesus worries that a sudden gust will blow him off the roof into the darkness.

Although official statistics are not kept, the death rate among slaughterhouse sanitation crews is extraordinarily high. They are the ultimate in disposable workers: illegal, illiterate, impoverished, untrained. The nation's worst job can end in just about the worst way. Sometimes these workers are literally ground up and reduced to nothing.

A brief description of some cleaning-crew accidents over the past decade says more about the work and the danger than any set of statistics. At the Monfort plant in Grand Island, Nebraska, Richard Skala was beheaded by a dehiding machine. Carlos Vincente — an employee of T and G Service Company, a twenty-eight-year-old Guatemalan who'd been in the United States for only a week — was pulled into the cogs of a conveyer belt at an Excel plant in Fort Morgan, Colorado, and torn apart. Lorenzo Marin, Sr., an employee of DCS Sanitation, fell from the top of a skinning machine while cleaning it with a high-pressure hose, struck his head on the concrete floor of an IBP plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa, and died. Another employee of DCS Sanitation, Salvador Hernandez-Gonzalez, had his head crushed by a pork-loin processing machine at an IBP plant in Madison, Nebraska. The same machine had fatally crushed the head of another worker, Ben Barone, a few years earlier. At a National Beef plant in Liberal, Kansas, Homer Stull climbed into a blood-collection tank to clean it, a filthy tank thirty feet high. Stull was overcome by hydrogen sulfide fumes. Two coworkers climbed into the tank and tried to rescue him. All three men died. Eight years earlier, Henry Wolf had been overcome by hydrogen sulfide fumes while cleaning the very same tank; Gary Sanders had tried to rescue him; both men died; and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) later fined National Beef for its negligence. The fine was $480 for each man's death.

don't get caught

DURING THE SAME YEARS when the working conditions at America's meatpacking plants became more dangerous — when line speeds increased and illegal immigrants replaced skilled workers — the federal government greatly reduced the enforcement of health and safety laws. OSHA had long been despised by the nation's manufacturers, who considered the agency a source of meddlesome regulations and unnecessary red tape. When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, OSHA was already underfunded and understaffed: its 1,300 inspectors were responsible for the safety of more than 5 million workplaces across the country. A typical American employer could expect an OSHA inspection about once every eighty years. Nevertheless, the Reagan administration was determined to reduce OSHA's authority even further, as part of the push for deregulation. The number of OSHA inspectors was eventually cut by 20 percent, and in 1981 the agency adopted a new policy of "voluntary compliance." Instead of arriving unannounced at a factory and performing an inspection, OSHA employees were required to look at a company's injury log before setting foot inside the plant. If the records showed an injury rate at the factory lower than the national average for all manufacturers, the OSHA inspector had to turn around and leave at once — without entering the plant, examining its equipment, or talking to any of its workers. These injury logs were kept and maintained by company officials.

For most of the 1980s OSHA's relationship with the meatpacking industry was far from adversarial. While the number of serious injuries rose, the number of OSHA inspections fell. The death of a worker on the job was punished with a fine of just a few hundred dollars. At a gathering of meat company executives in October of 1987, OSHA's safety director, Barry White, promised to change federal safety standards that "appear amazingly stupid to you or overburdening or just not useful." According to an account of the meeting later published in the *Chicago Tribune*, the safety director at OSHA — the federal official most responsible for protecting the lives of meatpacking workers — acknowledged his own lack of qualification for the job. "I know very well that you know more about safety and health in the meat industry than I do," White told the executives. "And you know more about safety and health in the meat industry than any single employee at OSHA."

OSHA's voluntary compliance policy did indeed reduce the number of recorded injuries in meatpacking plants. It did not, however, reduce the number of people getting hurt. It merely encouraged companies, in the words of a subsequent congressional investigation, "to understate injuries, to falsify records, and to cover up accidents." At the IBP beef plant in Dakota City, Nebraska, for example, the company kept two sets of injury logs: one of them recording every injury and illness at the slaughterhouse, the other provided to visiting OSHA inspectors and researchers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. During a three-month period in 1985, the first log recorded 1,800 injuries and illnesses at the plant. The OSHA log recorded only 160 — a discrepancy of more than 1,000 percent.

At congressional hearings on meatpacking in 1987, Robert L. Peterson, the chief executive of IBP, denied under oath that two sets of logs were ever kept and called IBP's safety record "the best of the best." Congressional investigators later got hold of both logs — and found that the injury rate at its Dakota City plant was as much as one-third higher than the average rate in the meatpacking industry. Congressional investigators also discovered that IBP had altered injury records at its beef plant in Emporia, Kansas. Another leading meatpacking company, John Morrell, was caught lying about injuries at its plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The congressional investigation concluded that these companies had failed to report "serious injuries such as fractures, concussions, major cuts, hernias, some requiring hospitalization, surgery, even amputation."

Congressman Tom Lantos, whose subcommittee conducted the meatpacking inquiry, called IBP "one of the most irresponsible and reckless corporations in America." A Labor Department official called the company's behavior "the worst example of underreporting injuries and illnesses to workers ever encountered in OSHA's sixteen-year history." Nevertheless, Robert L. Peterson was never charged with perjury for his misleading testimony before Congress. Investigators argued that it would be difficult to prove "conclusively" that Peterson had "willfully" lied. In 1987 IBP was fined $2.6 million by OSHA for underreporting injuries and later fined an additional $3.1 million for the high rate of cumulative trauma injuries at the Dakota City plant. After the company introduced a new safety program there, the fines were reduced to $975,000 — a sum that might have appeared large at the time, yet represented about one one-hundredth of a percent of IBP's annual revenues.

Three years after the OSHA fines, a worker named Kevin Wilson injured his back at an IBP slaughterhouse in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Wilson went to see Diane Arndt, a nurse at the plant, who sent him to a doctor selected by the company. Wilson's injury was not serious, the doctor said, later assigning him to light duty at the plant. Wilson

sought a second opinion; the new doctor said that he had a disk injury that required a period of absence from work. When Wilson stopped reporting for light duty, IBP's corporate security department began to conduct surveillance of his house. Eleven days after Wilson's new doctor told IBP that back surgery might be required, Diane Arndt called the doctor and said that IBP had obtained a videotape of Wilson engaging in strenuous physical activities at home. The doctor felt deceived, met with Wilson, accused him of being a liar, refused to provide him with any more treatment, and told him to get back to work. Convinced that no such videotape existed and that IBP had fabricated the entire story in order to deny him medical treatment, Kevin Wilson sued the company for slander.

The lawsuit eventually reached the Iowa Supreme Court. In a decision that received little media attention, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's award of $2 million to Wilson and described some of IBP's unethical practices. The court found that seriously injured workers were required to show up at the IBP plant briefly each day so that the company could avoid reporting "lost workdays" to OSHA. Some workers were compelled to show up for work on the same day as a surgery or the day after an amputation. "IBP's management was aware of, and participated in, this practice," the Iowa Supreme Court noted. IBP nurses regularly entered false information into the plant's computer system, reclassifying injuries so that they didn't have to be reported to OSHA. Injured workers who proved uncooperative were assigned to jobs "watching gauges in the rendering plant, where they were subjected to an atrocious smell while hog remains were boiled down into fertilizers and blood was drained into tanks." According to evidence introduced in court, Diane Arndt had a low opinion of the workers whose injuries she was supposed to be treating. The IBP nurse called them "idiots" and "jerks," telling doctors that "this guy's a crybaby" and "this guy's full of shit." She later admitted that Wilson's back injury was legitimate. The Iowa Supreme Court concluded that the lies she told in this medical case, as well as in others, had been partly motivated by IBP's financial incentive program, which gave staff members bonuses and prizes when the number of lost workdays was kept low. The program, in the court's opinion, was "somewhat disingenuously called 'the safety award system.'"

IBP's attitude toward worker safety was hardly unique in the industry, according to Edward Murphy's testimony before Congress in 1992. Murphy had served as the safety director of the Monfort beef plant in Grand Island. After two workers were killed there in 1991, Monfort fired him. Murphy claimed that he had battled the company for years over safety issues and that Monfort had unfairly made him the scapegoat for its own illegal behavior. The company later paid him an undisclosed sum of money to settle a civil lawsuit over wrongful termination.

Murphy told Congress that during his tenure at the Grand Island plant, Monfort maintained two sets of injury logs, routinely lied to OSHA, and shredded documents requested by OSHA. He wanted Congress to know that the safety lapses at the plant were not accidental. They stemmed directly from Monfort's corporate philosophy, which Murphy described in these terms: "The first commandment is that only production counts . . . The employee's duty is to follow orders. Period. As I was repeatedly told, 'Do what I tell you, even if it is illegal . . . Don't get caught.'"

A lawsuit filed in May of 1998 suggests that little has changed since IBP was caught keeping two sets of injury logs more than a decade ago. Michael D. Ferrell, a former vice president at IBP, contends that the real blame for the high injury rate at the company lies not with the workers, supervisors, nurses, safety directors, or plant managers, but with IBP's top executives. Ferrell had ample opportunity to observe their decision-making process. Among other duties, he was in charge of the health and safety programs at IBP.

When Ferrell accepted the job in 1991, after many years as an industrial engineer at other firms, he believed that IBP's desire to improve worker safety was sincere. According to his legal complaint, Ferrell later discovered that IBP's safety records were routinely falsified and that the company cared more about production than anything else. Ferrell was fired by IBP in 1997, not long after a series of safety problems at a slaughterhouse in Palestine, Texas. The circumstances surrounding his firing are at the heart of the lawsuit. On December 4, 1996, an OSHA inspection of the Palestine plant found a number of serious violations and imposed a fine of $35,125. Less than a week later, a worker named Clarence Dupree lost an arm in a bone-crushing machine. And two days after that, another worker, Willie Morris, was killed by an ammonia gas explosion. Morris's body lay on the floor for hours, just ten feet from the door, as toxic gas filled the building. Nobody at the plant had been trained to use hazardous-materials gas masks or protective suits; the equipment sat in a locked storage room. Ferrell flew to Texas and toured the plant after the accidents. He

thought the facility was in terrible shape — with a cooling system that violated OSHA standards, faulty wiring that threatened to cause a mass electrocution, and safety mechanisms that had deliberately been disabled with magnets. He wanted the slaughterhouse to be shut down immediately, and it was. Two months later, Ferrell lost his job.

In his lawsuit seeking payment for wrongful termination, Ferrell contends that he was fired for giving the order to close the Palestine plant. He claims that IBP had never before shut down a slaughterhouse purely for safety reasons and that Robert L. Peterson was enraged by the decision. IBP disputes this version of events, contending that Ferrell had never fit into IBP's corporate culture, that he delegated too much authority, and that he had not, in fact, made the decision to shut down the Palestine plant. According to IBP, the decision to shut it was made after a unanimous vote by its top executives.

IBP's Palestine slaughterhouse reopened in January of 1997. It was shut down again a year later — this time by the USDA. Federal inspectors cited the plant for "inhumane slaughter" and halted production there for one week, an extremely rare penalty imposed for the mistreatment of cattle. In 1999 IBP closed the plant. As of this writing, it sits empty, awaiting a buyer.

the value of an arm

WHEN I FIRST VISITED Greeley in 1997, Javier Ramirez was president of the UFCW, Local 990, the union representing employees at the Monfort beef plant. The National Labor Relations Board had ruled that Monfort committed "numerous, pervasive, and outrageous" violations of labor law after reopening the Greeley beef plant in 1982, discriminating against former union members at hiring time and intimidating new workers during a union election. Former employees who'd been treated unfairly ultimately received a $10.6 million settlement. After a long and arduous organizing drive, workers at the Monfort beef plant voted to join the UFCW in 1992. Javier Ramirez is thirty-one and knows a fair amount about beef. His father is Ruben Ramirez, the Chicago union leader. Javier grew up around slaughterhouses and watched the meatpacking industry abandon his hometown for the High Plains. Instead of finding another line of work, he followed the industry to Colorado, trying to gain better wages and working conditions for the mainly Latino workforce.

The UFCW has given workers in Greeley the ability to challenge unfair dismissals, file grievances against supervisors, and report safety lapses without fear of reprisal. But the union's power is limited by the plant's high turnover rate. Every year a new set of workers must be persuaded to support the UFCW. The plant's revolving door is not conducive to worker solidarity. At the moment some of the most pressing issues for the UFCW are related to the high injury rate at the slaughterhouse. It is a constant struggle not only to prevent workers from getting hurt, but also to gain them proper medical treatment and benefits once they've been hurt.

Colorado was one of the first states to pass a workers' compensation law. The idea behind the legislation, enacted in 1919, was to provide speedy medical care and a steady income to workers injured on the job. Workers' comp was meant to function much like no-fault insurance. In return for surrendering the right to sue employers for injuries, workers were supposed to receive immediate benefits. Similar workers' comp plans were adopted throughout the United States. In 1991, Colorado started another trend, becoming one of the first states to impose harsh restrictions on workers' comp payments. In addition to reducing the benefits afforded to injured employees, Colorado's new law granted employers the right to choose the physician who'd determine the severity of any work-related ailment. Enormous power over workers' comp claims was handed to company doctors.

Many other states subsequently followed Colorado's lead and cut back their workers' comp benefits. The Colorado bill, promoted as "workers' comp reform," was first introduced in the legislature by Tom Norton, the president of the Colorado State Senate and a conservative Republican. Norton represented Greeley, where his wife, Kay, was the vice president of legal and governmental affairs at ConAgra Red Meat.

In most businesses, a high injury rate would prompt insurance companies to demand changes in the workplace. But ConAgra, IBP, and the other large meatpacking firms are self-insured. They are under no pressure from independent underwriters and have a strong incentive to keep workers' comp payments to a bare minimum. Every penny spent on workers' comp is one less penny of corporate revenue.

Javier Ramirez began to educate Monfort workers about their legal right to get workers' comp benefits after an injury at the plant. Many workers don't realize that such insurance even exists. The workers' comp claim forms look intimidating, especially to people who don't speak any English and can't read any language. Filing a claim, challenging a powerful meatpacking company, and placing faith in the American legal system requires a good deal of courage, especially for a recent immigrant.

When a workers' comp claim involves an injury that is nearly impossible to refute (such as an on-the-job amputation), the meatpacking companies generally agree to pay. But when injuries are less visible (such as those stemming from cumulative trauma) the meatpackers often prolong the whole workers' comp process through litigation, insisting upon hearings and filing seemingly endless appeals. Some of the most painful and debilitating injuries are the hardest to prove.

Today it can take years for an injured worker to receive workers' comp benefits. During that time, he or she must pay medical bills and find a source of income. Many rely on public assistance. The ability of meatpacking firms to delay payment discourages many injured workers from ever filing workers' comp claims. It leads others to accept a reduced sum of money as part of a negotiated settlement in order to cover medical bills. The system now leaves countless unskilled and uneducated manual workers poorly compensated for injuries that will forever hamper their ability to earn a living. The few who win in court and receive full benefits are hardly set for life. Under Colorado's new law, the payment for losing an arm is $36,000. An amputated finger gets you anywhere from $2,200 to $4,500, depending on which one is lost. And "serious permanent disfigurement about the head, face, or parts of the body normally exposed to public view" entitles you to a maximum of $2,000.

As workers' comp benefits have become more difficult to obtain, the threat to workplace safety has grown more serious. During the first two years of the Clinton administration, OSHA seemed like a revitalized agency. It began to draw up the first ergonomics standards for the nation's manufacturers, aiming to reduce cumulative trauma disorders. The election of 1994, however, marked a turning point. The Republican majority in Congress that rose to power that year not only impeded the adoption of ergonomics standards but also raised questions about the future of OSHA. Working closely with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, House Republicans have worked hard to limit OSHA's authority. Congressman Cass Ballenger, a Republican from North Carolina, introduced legislation that would require OSHA to spend at least half of its budget on "consultation" with businesses, instead of enforcement. This new budget requirement would further reduce the number of

OSHA inspections, which by the late 1990s had already reached an all-time low. Ballenger has long opposed OSHA inspections, despite the fact that near his own district a fire at a poultry plant killed twenty-five workers in 1991. The plant had never been inspected by OSHA, its emergency exits had been chained shut, and the bodies of workers were found in piles near the locked doors. Congressman Joel Hefley, a Colorado Republican whose district includes Colorado Springs, has introduced a bill that makes Ballenger's seem moderate. Hefley's "OSHA Reform Act" would essentially repeal the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. It would forbid OSHA from conducting any workplace inspections or imposing any fines.

kenny

DURING MY TRIPS TO meatpacking towns in the High Plains I met dozens of workers who'd been injured. Each of their stories was different, yet somehow familiar, linked by common elements — the same struggle to receive proper medical care, the same fear of speaking out, the same underlying corporate indifference. We are human beings, more than one person told me, but they treat us like animals. The workers I met wanted their stories to be told. They wanted people to know about what is happening right now. A young woman who'd injured her back and her right hand at the Greeley plant said to me, "I want to get on top of a rooftop and scream my lungs out so that somebody will hear." The voices and faces of these workers are indelibly with me, as is the sight of their hands, the light brown skin crisscrossed with white scars. Although I cannot tell all of their stories, a few need to be mentioned. Like all lives, they can be used as examples or serve as representative types. But ultimately they are unique, individual, impossible to define or replace — the opposite of how this system has treated them.

Raoul was born in Zapoteca, Mexico, and did construction work in Anaheim before moving to Colorado. He speaks no English. After hearing a Monfort ad on a Spanish-language radio station, he applied for a job at the Greeley plant. One day Raoul reached into a processing machine to remove a piece of meat. The machine accidentally went on. Raoul's arm got stuck, and it took workers twenty minutes to get it out. The machine had to be taken apart. An ambulance brought Raoul

to the hospital, where a deep gash in his shoulder was sewn shut. A tendon had been severed. After getting stitches and a strong prescription painkiller, he was driven back to the slaughterhouse and put back on the production line. Bandaged, groggy, and in pain, one arm tied in a sling, Raoul spent the rest of the day wiping blood off cardboard boxes with his good hand.

Renaldo was another Monfort worker who spoke no English, an older man with graying hair. He developed carpal tunnel syndrome while cutting meat. The injury got so bad that sharp pain shot from his hand all the way up to his shoulder. At night it hurt so much he could not fall asleep in bed. Instead he would fall asleep sitting in a chair beside the bed where his wife lay. For three years he slept in that chair every night.

Kenny Dobbins was a Monfort employee for almost sixteen years. He was born in Keokuk, Iowa, had a tough childhood and an abusive stepfather, left home at the age of thirteen, went in and out of various schools, never learned to read, did various odd jobs, and wound up at the Monfort slaughterhouse in Grand Island, Nebraska. He started working there in 1979, right after the company bought it from Swift. He was twenty-four. He worked in the shipping department at first, hauling boxes that weighed as much as 120 pounds. Kenny could handle it, though. He was a big man, muscular and six-foot-five, and nothing in his life had ever been easy.

One day Kenny heard someone yell, "Watch out!" then turned around and saw a ninety-pound box falling from an upper level of the shipping department. Kenny caught the box with one arm, but the momentum threw him against a conveyer belt, and the metal rim of the belt pierced his lower back. The company doctor bandaged Kenny's back and said the pain was just a pulled muscle. Kenny never filed for workers' comp, stayed home for a few days, then returned to work. He had a wife and three children to support. For the next few months, he was in terrible pain. "It hurt so fucking bad you wouldn't believe it," he told me. He saw another doctor, got a second opinion. The new doctor said Kenny had a pair of severely herniated disks. Kenny had back surgery, spent a month in the hospital, got sent to a pain clinic when the operation didn't work. His marriage broke up amid the stress and financial difficulty. Fourteen months after the injury, Kenny returned to the slaughterhouse. "GIVE UP AFTER BACK SURGERY? NOT KEN DOBBINS!!" a Monfort newsletter proclaimed. "Ken has learned how to handle the rigors of working in a packing plant and is trying to help others do the same. Thanks, Ken, and keep up the good work."

Kenny felt a strong loyalty to Monfort. He could not read, possessed few skills other than his strength, and the company had still given him a job. When Monfort decided to reopen its Greeley plant with a non-union workforce, Kenny volunteered to go there and help. He did not think highly of labor unions. His supervisors told him that unions had been responsible for shutting down meatpacking plants all over the country. When the UFCW tried to organize the Greeley slaughterhouse, Kenny became an active and outspoken member of an anti-union group.

At the Grand Island facility, Kenny had been restricted to light duty after his injury. But his supervisor in Greeley said that old restrictions didn't apply in this new job. Soon Kenny was doing tough, physical labor once again, wielding a knife and grabbing forty- to fifty-pound pieces of beef off a table. When the pain became unbearable, he was transferred to ground beef, then to rendering. According to a former manager at the Greeley plant, Monfort was trying to get rid of Kenny, trying to make his work so unpleasant that he'd quit. Kenny didn't realize it. "He still believes in his heart that people are honest and good," the former manager said about Kenny. "And he's wrong."

As part of the job in rendering, Kenny sometimes had to climb into gigantic blood tanks and gut bins, reach to the bottom of them with his long arms, and unclog the drains. One day he was unexpectedly called to work over the weekend. There had been a problem with *Salmonella* contamination. The plant needed to be disinfected, and some of the maintenance workers had refused to do it. In his street clothes, Kenny began cleaning the place, climbing into tanks and spraying a liquid chlorine mix. Chlorine is a hazardous chemical that can be inhaled or absorbed through the skin, causing a litany of health problems. Workers who spray it need to wear protective gloves, safety goggles, a self-contained respirator, and full coveralls. Kenny's supervisor gave him a paper dust mask to wear, but it quickly dissolved. After eight hours of working with the chlorine in unventilated areas, Kenny went home and fell ill. He was rushed to the hospital and placed in an oxygen tent. His lungs had been burned by the chemicals. His body was covered in blisters. Kenny spent a month in the hospital.

Kenny eventually recovered from the overexposure to chlorine, but it left his chest feeling raw, made him susceptible to colds and sensitive

to chemical aromas. He went back to work at the Greeley plant. He had remarried, didn't know what other kind of work to do, still felt loyal to the company. He was assigned to an early morning shift. He had to drive an old truck from one part of the slaughterhouse complex to another. The truck was filled with leftover scraps of meat. The headlights and the wipers didn't work. The windshield was filthy and cracked. One cold, dark morning in the middle of winter, Kenny became disoriented while driving. He stopped the truck, opened the door, got out to see where he was — and was struck by a train. It knocked his glasses off, threw him up in the air, and knocked both of his work boots off. The train was moving slowly, or he would've been killed. Kenny somehow made it back to the plant, barefoot and bleeding from deep gashes in his back and his face. He spent two weeks at the hospital, then went back to work.

One day, Kenny was in rendering and saw a worker about to stick his head into a pre-breaker machine, a device that uses hundreds of small hammers to pulverize gristle and bone into a fine powder. The worker had just turned the machine off, but Kenny knew the hammers inside were still spinning. It takes fifteen minutes for the machine to shut down completely. Kenny yelled, "Stop!" but the worker didn't hear him. And so Kenny ran across the room, grabbed the man by the seat of his pants, and pulled him away from the machine an instant before it would have pulverized him. To honor this act of bravery, Monfort gave Kenny an award for "Outstanding Achievement in CONCERN FOR FELLOW WORKERS." The award was a paper certificate, signed by his supervisor and the plant safety manager.

Kenny later broke his leg stepping into a hole in the slaughterhouse's concrete floor. On another occasion he shattered an ankle, an injury that required surgery and the insertion of five steel pins. Now Kenny had to wear a metal brace on one leg in order to walk, an elaborate, spring-loaded brace that cost $2,000. Standing for long periods caused him great pain. He was given a job recycling old knives at the plant. Despite his many injuries, the job required him to climb up and down three flights of narrow stairs carrying garbage bags filled with knives. In December of 1995 Kenny felt a sharp pain in his chest while lifting some boxes. He thought it was a heart attack. His union steward took him to see the nurse, who said it was just a pulled muscle and sent Kenny home. He was indeed having a massive heart attack. A friend rushed Kenny to a nearby hospital. A stent was inserted in his heart, and the doctors told Kenny that he was lucky to be alive.

While Kenny Dobbins was recuperating, Monfort fired him. Despite the fact that Kenny had been with the company for almost sixteen years, despite the fact that he was first in seniority at the Greeley plant, that he'd cleaned blood tanks with his bare hands, fought the union, done whatever the company had asked him to do, suffered injuries that would've killed weaker men, nobody from Monfort called him with the news. Nobody even bothered to write him. Kenny learned that he'd been fired when his payments to the company health insurance plan kept being returned by the post office. He called Monfort repeatedly to find out what was going on, and a sympathetic clerk in the claims office finally told Kenny that the checks were being returned because he was no longer a Monfort employee. When I asked company spokesmen to comment on the accuracy of Kenny's story, they would neither confirm nor deny any of the details.

Today Kenny is in poor health. His heart is permanently damaged. His immune system seems shot. His back hurts, his ankle hurts, and every so often he coughs up blood. He is unable to work at any job. His wife, Clara — who's half-Latina and half-Cheyenne, and looks like a younger sister of Cher's — was working as a nursing home attendant when Kenny had the heart attack. Amid the stress of his illness, she developed a serious kidney ailment. She is unemployed and recovering from a kidney transplant.

As I sat in the living room of their Greeley home, its walls decorated with paintings of wolves, Denver Broncos memorabilia, and an American flag, Kenny and Clara told me about their financial condition. After almost sixteen years on the job, Kenny did not get any pension from Monfort. The company challenged his workers' comp claim and finally agreed — three years after the initial filing — to pay him a settlement of $35,000. Fifteen percent of that money went to Kenny's lawyer, and the rest is long gone. Some months Kenny has to hock things to get money for Clara's medicine. They have two teenage children and live on Social Security payments. Kenny's health insurance, which costs more than $600 a month, is about to run out. His anger at Monfort, his feelings of betrayal, are of truly biblical proportions.

"They used me to the point where I had no body parts left to give," Kenny said, struggling to maintain his composure. "Then they just tossed me into the trash can." Once strong and powerfully built, he now walks with difficulty, tires easily, and feels useless, as though his life were over. He is forty-six years old.