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THE NEW IMMIGRANTS

Curtiss, Wisconsin, was settled more than 150 years ago by Norwegians and Germans. Today, most of its residents are from Mexico. Yet the divergent paths of immigration to this outstate farm town are more similar than you would think.

BARBARA MINER — JULY 27, 2015

Located in the middle of north-central Wisconsin, Curtiss is a town you pass by on your way somewhere else. There are no “Up North” tourism attractions, no prominent lakes, forests or rivers. The closest city, Wausau, is 41 miles to the east.

My father-in-law grew up on a dairy farm 2 miles outside of Curtiss, part of a closely knit Norwegian community. Every other year, give or take a few, my husband Bob and I travel to Curtiss on a mid-July Sunday for family reunions involving the descendants of various Ole’s and Peder’s and Tandlokken’s from the Lillehammer region of Norway.

When I think of Curtiss, what comes to mind are dairy farms. Lots of them. In fact, Clark County, where Curtiss is located, has more dairy herds than any other county in Wisconsin.



Curtiss, WI, home of the Abbyland Foods pork slaughterhouse. (Photo by Barbara J. Miner)

With its history of dairy farming and 19th-century immigration, Curtiss is an iconic Wisconsin village. But it also foreshadows Wisconsin's future. Sleepy, middle-of-nowhere Curtiss, with 279 people, is now 70 percent Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census' latest American Community Survey.

"The older white families that lived here, they've died or moved out, and now it's mostly Hispanic," says Randy Busse, the village president. Busse, a father of five, jokingly says of his family: "We're the oddballs in town."

A century ago, Busse would've been anything but odd. European immigration was the norm, as Norwegians and Germans, in particular, called Curtiss home.

These European immigrants are now invariably honored as hardworking people who built Wisconsin. Looking through the rose-colored glasses of history, we forget the tensions that existed – the stereotypes of Irish as drunkards, the criticisms of German immigrants who sought to maintain their language and culture.

I wondered: A century from now, how might Hispanic immigrants be viewed, as second and third generations learn English and become "Americanized"? And what might the small town of Curtiss tell us today about this latest wave of American newcomers

Bob's family's history in Curtiss began in the 1870s. Ole Thompson and Peder Pederson, Bob's great-grandparents, were part of a Norwegian migration that found a touch of home in the farms, forests and winter temperatures of central Wisconsin. What's more, the area had one of the largest bodies of pine timber in the state, and by the 1870s, the logging industry was well established. Which meant jobs.

Norway, by contrast, offered few opportunities. Ole, for instance, was one of seven children, but he was not the oldest son. Which meant he did not inherit the family farm. Which meant he had a limited future. Which meant that America beckoned, especially those undeveloped lands in central Wisconsin.

Like all family histories, Bob's Norwegian genealogy is complex. But one story stands out. When Ole Thompson and Peder Pederson came to Wisconsin, they worked the lumber camps during the winter. But what they wanted above all was land. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, you could get the deed to 160 acres if you cleared and developed roughly 5 acres every year for five years.

During the summer, when the lumber camps shut down, Ole and Peder pitched tents next to each other and helped each other clear land. They made sure they were on separate boundaries so they could make separate claims.

I've always been impressed by the practicality of pitching those tents next to each other. And by the determination it took to clear 5 acres of land a year, long before gas-powered chainsaws.

Both Ole and Peder were part of large families that immigrated to the Curtiss area, the first arrivals earning enough money to send back to Norway for siblings. Once in Wisconsin, they stuck close together (and sometimes married their friend's sister, which is how both Ole and Peder became great-grandparents to Bob.) Those early settlers helped establish the village of Curtiss in 1882 and laid the groundwork for its economic infrastructure, from sawmills to banks to cheese factories. They even set up a Norwegian Lutheran Church, because they didn't want to be mixed in with the Germans and wanted services in their mother tongue. Many, including Ole, never learned more than a smattering of English. Ole's grandchildren, in turn, never learned more than a smattering of Norwegian.

Bob's father, Art, was one of Ole's grandsons. Art boasted that he was "full-blooded Norwegian," and he chaired the Oslo-Madison sister city project. He traveled to the family's Norwegian homestead near Lillehammer and, until his death, proudly flew the Norwegian flag at Brewers tailgate parties. No document, however, identified Art as Norwegian; he was American.

The categorization for 21st-century non-white immigrants is more complex. "Hispanic" was first used in 1970s U.S. Census reports to refer to people from Spanish-speaking countries, Spain included. Some prefer "Latino," which identifies people from Latin America and is based on geography, not language. This story uses

the term most commonly used by people in the Curtiss area and which conforms to government statistics – Hispanic.



Curtiss during its days as a bustling lumber town.

Humberto Lopez, 51, was one of the first Hispanics to settle in Curtiss. In an interview at his home, half in Spanish, half in English, he explains his story. He was born in a small pueblo in north-central Mexico, and left for the United States when he was 16. He worked as a butcher in small towns and cities in Illinois and Wisconsin – everything from a two-employee business that made dog food to a slaughterhouse that butchered 200 cows a day. But he did not have legal papers, and ultimately was apprehended and deported. Like many in that situation, he returned to the U.S., crossing the border on foot with the aid of “coyotes,” the name given to human smugglers. A family member had told Lopez about work at a slaughterhouse called Abbyland, so he came to Curtiss.

Twenty-five years later, Lopez still lives in Curtiss. He and his wife, who is from the same pueblo in Mexico, have raised six children here. Both have become U.S. citizens; their children, by virtue of being born here, have always been citizens.

In an odd way, Lopez reminds me of Bob's Norwegian relatives, and not just because he's tall and lanky and wears jeans, a fleece jacket and a baseball cap. He's a man of few words. He shrugs off events that others might dramatize – deportation, crossing the border illegally, the realities of working in a slaughterhouse. Hardship is part of life.

Work is the main reason Lopez is in Curtiss. But that's not all. In a sentiment echoed by other Hispanics, he speaks of good schools and, equally important, "seguridad." The Spanish word is used broadly to mean not just economic security but the benefits of small-town life, without the crime and problems of big cities, and where neighbors look out for each other. Having grown up in a small Mexican pueblo, he's comfortable with the slow pace of Curtiss. He doesn't mind that the town almost died after the railroad stopped running in 1938, or that the main street is little more than a post office, a community center and a scattering of homes.

After nearly two decades at the Abbyland slaughterhouse, Lopez left to work at the Tombstone Pizza factory in nearby Medford. His wife still works at Abbyland, as does his oldest son, Oscar. In fact, it's hard to find anyone in the area, white or Hispanic, who doesn't know someone who works at Abbyland.

The story of Abbyland begins in Abbotsford, a city of some 2,300 people about 7 miles east of Curtiss and the region's economic hub. In 1977, Harland Schraufnagel started Abbyland with a beef plant in Abbotsford. From a handful of workers, the company has grown to 1,000-plus employees in eight divisions. The Curtiss-based divisions include Abbyland Trucking, the Pork Pack plant, and the Curtiss Travel Center that includes truck stop facilities and the El Norteño restaurant.

The heart of the company is its meat processing, with the beef slaughterhouse in Abbotsford and the pork slaughterhouse in Curtiss. No figures are available publicly, but it's common knowledge that the plants rely on Hispanic workers. As Busse, village president of Curtiss, says, "You can't get white people to work in the slaughterhouse. That's what Harland told me himself."

When I was turned down for an interview with Schraufnagel, I figured Abbyland didn't want to talk about its employees' legal status. But that's not the only reason. In this era of animal rights, the last thing any slaughterhouse wants is a reporter knocking on its door. There's never been a comforting way to kill, decapitate, dehide and debone a 250-pound pig or a 1,400-pound beef cow. Busse, who lives next door to the pork plant in Curtiss, has seen the company grow. In the beginning, he says, the plant slaughtered 100 hogs a day. "Now they slaughter about 2,200 hogs a day. That's a lot of hogs."



Ubaldina Romero, with her granddaughter Natalie. Romero lives in Curtiss and works at Abbyland pork plant. "She's the last person the pigs see before they die," Ubaldina's daughter, Alma, jokes. (Photo by Barbara J. Miner)

Alejandro Vazquez is one of the many Hispanics who has worked at the Abbyland pork plant. He came to Abbotsford 11 years ago and worked second shift cleaning the plant. "Bastante sangre [plenty of blood]," he says. But, he adds, it was only a job. Vazquez's real passion is his bilingual weekly tabloid, Noticias.

The 54-year-old Vazquez was born in Mexico City and trained as a journalist. When he first immigrated, he worked at several jobs in Illinois and Wisconsin, everything from an electronics factory to inseminating cows. He returned to Mexico for a decade and then came back to the United States again, this time to Sparta. While working at a small plastics factory near Sparta, he started Noticias.

"One day," Vazquez says, "a friend called and said, 'Alejandro, you need to write your paper in Abbotsford.' I asked why. 'Because there's a big Hispanic community,' he said. 'And if they like your newspaper there, people everywhere will like it.'"

Almost 11 years later, Noticias is going strong. In one of the many indications of the growing Wisconsin Hispanic presence, Vazquez distributes Noticias to more than 60 towns, villages and cities in a dozen-plus central Wisconsin counties.

Vazquez's two children, meanwhile, have decided to settle in the area, which makes him immensely happy. His 25-year-old daughter graduated with an international business degree from the University of Wisconsin-Stout and works for an international company in Wausau that often sends her abroad because of her fluency in both English and Spanish. His 18-year-old son works as a welder, having returned from a brief stint in Oklahoma. As Vazquez tells the story, "After six months he called and said, 'Dad, I miss you and I miss Abbotsford and I miss Wisconsin.'"

Vazquez is an intermediary between the white and Hispanic populations. He is well-suited. During our breakfast interview at the Abby Cafe, he is dressed casually in knee-length shorts, Nike high-top sneakers and a Noticias T-shirt. Slightly overweight and slightly balding with gray specks in his hair, he has the demeanor of a friendly uncle. He also has a decent command of English.

An unabashed booster of Abbotsford, Vazquez takes offense that anyone might question his commitment to the community. He launches into what could be misconstrued as a lecture, but I interpret it as a reflection of deeply held convictions.

"We don't select the country where we are born," he says, speaking slowly and clearly so that he is understood. "Next year, I will write my application for citizenship, and I, too, will be an American. And this decision is my decision. It's not my father's decision. So I am more American than many people who are born in America. Because I decided."

No one knows for sure how many of the Hispanics in the area have legal papers. Everyone I talked to assumed that, except for children, young adults and second-generation Mexican-Americans born in the U.S., most are undocumented. Voting records in Curtiss provide one possible indication. According to Jane Stoiber, the village clerk, there are 43 registered voters in Curtiss, and of those, only three are Hispanic. At the same time, the U.S. Census' 2009-2013 ACS report estimates 70 percent of the residents are Hispanic. (The Curtiss ZIP code, meanwhile, serves about 1,200 people in the village and surrounding areas, and about 16 percent are Hispanic, according to the census.) "There are more Hispanics that are able to vote; they just haven't registered," Stoiber says.

As I traveled the back roads of Clark and Marathon counties, I was struck by the overwhelming quiet. No sirens. No interstate highway traffic. No big-city bustle. No big hills, just gentle rises and falls, with straight sand-and-gravel roads that stretch to the horizon. If the wind is not blowing, time itself seems to stand still.

Change does not come quickly to Clark County. But if you take a longer view, the changes are significant. I think back, once again, to Bob's Norwegian ancestors.

Norwegian immigration to Wisconsin began around 1840, made possible by the Black Hawk War of 1832. After the Sauk leader's defeat in what is now southern Wisconsin, Native Americans were pressured to sell their land and move west of the Mississippi River. White settlers rushed in, and in 1836, the Wisconsin Territory was established. In 1848, Wisconsin became a state. Eager to attract more immigrants, the state established a Board of Immigration and published Wisconsin guides that were translated and distributed in Europe. The modern-day system of passports and visas hadn't been invented, and European immigrants didn't have to worry about being branded as "illegals."

On Feb. 2, 1848, a few months before Wisconsin became a state, the U.S. and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican-American War. Overnight, Spanish-speaking residents of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado were no longer Mexicans. The always-complicated relations between the countries began a new chapter.

Even before statehood and the Mexican-American War, there were Hispanics living in Wisconsin. But it wasn't until the 1950s that Mexicans gained a significant foothold. In big cities, they would often work in the tanneries or factories. Most, however, came as migrant agricultural workers under the federal Bracero Program that ran from 1942 to 1964. By 1961, there were an estimated 18,000 migrant workers in Wisconsin, mostly Mexicans.

The stereotype remains strong that Hispanics in rural Wisconsin are migrant workers. And while many still work in agriculture, they are permanent workers. What's more, the Wisconsin dairy farm, an institution central to the state's identity, would not survive without the immigrant workers. "If the Hispanic workers were deported tomorrow, we'd be shut down, just like half the state," says Steve Bach, a dairy farmer near Abbotsford who has a herd of more than 1,500 cows.

Bach estimates that about half of his hired help is Hispanic. That's in line with a study published by UW-Madison in 2009, which found that 40 percent of the workers on dairy farms were immigrants, most from Mexico.

Bach, like other farmers, isn't crazy about reporters. Issues of immigration and legal status are controversial. Besides, there's rarely any downtime on a dairy farm. Plus, there's the concern the reporter is fronting for an animal rights group. A farmer I'll call Tom D. Harry allowed me to visit. But the rules were clear. No name – "Tom, Dick or Harry will do," he said – and no photos with his workers' faces. "I don't want to get any of my workers in trouble," he said.

Harry, who is in his mid-70s and has been a farmer his whole life, has a picture-perfect Wisconsin farm near Abbotsford. He has hundreds of dairy cows and, except for members of his family, all of his workers are Mexican, five full-time and one part-time. Two of the full-time workers have been with him for 13 years, the others for seven or eight years.

Dairy farming has never been easy. Every day, regardless of weather or whether you're sick, tired or just wanting a break, the cows need to be milked. Today, the norm on all but the smallest farms is to use milking parlors and milk three times a day. "Anybody milking 150 cows or more, or anybody using a parlor, they pretty much got Hispanics working for them," Harry says. Echoing comments by others, Harry says the farmers depend on Hispanic workers because "the whites don't want to do the work. They all want 9-to-5 jobs."

Harry's farm's milking schedule – 5:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. – means that workers are needed 24/7. With factory-like precision, cows enter the milking parlor in groups of 20. Workers swab the udders, attach the milking machines, and when the milking is done, shepherd the cows back to the barn and bring in a new group. Even if I had been allowed to interview the workers, there wouldn't have been time.

Neither Harry nor Bach had much good to say about federal and state immigration policy. "The whole thing is stupid," Harry says. "Let's face it, agriculture needs these workers."

The prohibitions on getting driver's licenses made the least sense to them. Ten states provide access to driver's licenses regardless of legal status, but Wisconsin does not. The exception is undocumented young people who fall under a 2012 Obama administration policy granting increased protections.

When I met Harry in his farm's driveway, before I barely had time to introduce myself, he launched into a complaint as we walked to the barn. "And then they can get a \$700 fine if they don't have a driver's license," he started, explaining how it was easy for his workers to get in legal trouble. He then backtracked and told the story from the beginning.

A few years back, he got a call from a worker at 3 a.m. The worker lives in nearby Abbotsford, and said a cop had been following him and called in his license plate. Harry believed his worker when he said he wasn't breaking any driving laws. But, Harry surmises, when the registration showed a Hispanic surname, the cop pulled his worker over. "My son and I go to get him, and he also gets a fine for driving without insurance. It added up to \$700."

Harry drove his worker home, and asked him how he would get to work on Monday. "He said he would drive," Harry says. "And they all drive, 'cause how else are they going to get to their job?"

Julian and his wife, Victoria, are in their early 30s and have lived in Abbotsford five years. He admits they do not have legal papers but, with the confidence of youth, he readily gives me his last name. Like farmer Tom D. Harry, I don't want to get anyone in trouble, and so I don't use it.

Julian and Victoria grew up in a small town near Ixtepec in southern Mexico, where he worked in the cornfields. But after economic changes brought on by the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), when U.S. corn flooded the Mexican market, agriculture jobs started drying up. Julian and Victoria headed to the U.S., first to Indiana and later to Atlanta.

Like many recent immigrants to the area, their first language is Mixtec, a grouping of indigenous dialects common to southern Mexico. They speak Mixtec to each other but generally speak Spanish to their four daughters, who range in age from 4 months to 6 years.

Unlike Lopez and Vazquez, Julian and Victoria hope to earn enough money to return to Mexico and build a home. "Los abuelos están en Mexico [the grandparents are in Mexico]," Julian explains.

Julian had a sister living in Abbotsford, and she knew he wasn't happy with Atlanta. He worked at a factory, but the pay wasn't great and he didn't like the commute. What's more, he missed small-town life and working on a farm. "My sister called and said, 'Come here to Abbotsford. The work pays more, and you can get more hours,'" Julian says in Spanish.

For the last five years, Julian has worked at a dairy farm 15 minutes from home. There are 10 Mexicans at the farm and four whites. The Mexicans work in the milking parlor while the whites drive tractors and work the fields.

Julian has an easy laugh and a friendly smile, and shows nothing of the toll of working six days a week while being the father of four young girls. Dressed in blue jeans, slide sports sandals, a black T-shirt and an Adidas baseball hat worn backward, he looks like anyone else in his generation, white or Hispanic. During our conversation, it unfolds that Julian not only works six days a week, but 13-hour shifts on four of those days, beginning at 4 p.m. and ending at 5 a.m. He earns \$8.50 an hour, no overtime. Nonetheless, he likes it better than the factory because it's close by and he can work more hours. At no point does he complain, and at one point he merely says, "Luchar para vivir [fight to live]."

Two days later, I interview a family with a father in his mid-40s who also works on a dairy farm. The family is more cautious, and a look of fear spreads over the mother's face until I reassure her I will not use her last name. Both children are U.S. citizens in their 20s, and both live in Marshfield, but the parents do not have legal papers.

The family came to the Abbotsford area two decades ago. The father, Jorge, works six days a week at a dairy farm of 200 cows. He is salaried, \$800 every two weeks.

The owner has moved away from the farm, and they live in the farmhouse free of charge. A few years ago, Jorge took a week off due to health problems. Other than that, he's not had a vacation in 14 years.

Back in Milwaukee, I tell some of these stories to Bob, especially the long hours for the dairy farm workers. He thinks of his late Uncle Ralph. As the oldest son, he inherited the farm homesteaded in the 1870s by Peder Pederson, whose last name was later Americanized to Peterson. Ralph worked decade after decade without a break. He lost his leg in a logging accident and eventually ceded the farm to Tom, his oldest son. Tom held on to it as long as he could, nearly working himself to death. About 15 years ago, a Mennonite farmer came to the door, opened up a briefcase full of cash and offered to buy the farm. Tom reluctantly took him up on the offer, knowing it was the end of the Pederson/Peterson family farm but feeling he had little choice.

Variations on this story are common in Clark County as older white families face two main choices: expand and hire immigrant labor, or sell to the Amish and Mennonites increasingly settling in the area.



Jose and Serafina Hernandez, at their home in Abbotsford, WI. The couple emigrated from Mexico to California in 1970, and came to Wisconsin in 1998. (Photo by Barbara J. Miner).

When I started working on this story, I wondered if Curtiss was an anomaly. But perhaps it's merely ahead of the curve.

Wisconsin's Hispanic population remains centered in the state's southeastern cities, especially Milwaukee. But a growing number are moving to rural areas to the north and west. According to a March 2014 report by UW-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory, in Trempealeau County along the Mississippi River, the Hispanic population increased by 595 percent from 2000 to 2010. In Lafayette County, along the Illinois border near Iowa, it increased 467 percent. In Clark County, the Hispanic population grew 220 percent.

In Abbotsford, the changing demographics are most apparent in the schools and churches. Reed Welsh, district administrator of the Abbotsford School District, took his first teaching job in Abbotsford 38 years ago and hasn't left. He lives a block and a half from the school and has been a football coach, social studies teacher and high school principal.

Welsh first noticed the changing demographics about 20 years ago, when a Spanish-speaking student, Oscar, joined the football team. Today, the K-12 district is almost 40 percent Hispanic, with the figure approaching 50 percent in the early elementary grades. The area's economics have also changed, and the school provides just under 70 percent of its students free or reduced-price lunches.

Under a 1982 U.S. Supreme Court decision, undocumented children have the right to a public education. But Welsh goes beyond that legal obligation. Soft-spoken, calm, with an aura of competence that has no need for bluster, he says, "I am all about Abbotsford and this school. Anybody who walks through these doors, we're going to give them our best shot."

Welsh admits that "as a school district, we've had a few bumps along the way." He likens the situation to stages of life. "When that first wave of families came in, it was as if the veteran teachers had grandchildren, and we wanted to make it work. Then we went through those teenage years, with a bit of rebellion, and I remember stopping a few rumbles before they occurred. And now we're in the adult stage. Things are running well as a school district."

The Hispanics have also become essential to the district's finances. While schools in some surrounding areas are losing students (and state aid), the current enrollment in Abbotsford of about 720 students is some 10 percent higher than 15 years ago.

If anyone has a better handle than Welsh on Hispanics in the area, it is the Rev. Tim Oudenhoven

– a priest in his early 30s who looks young enough to be one of Welsh's high school students. Father Oudenhoven is a Green Bay-area native of Dutch, German and Bohemian ancestry. He took Spanish in high school and college, and that was enough to get him assigned to serve Hispanics within the La Crosse diocese after he was

ordained five years ago. Known to Hispanics as Padre Tim, he spreads his time between four parishes, often hours apart.

In Abbotsford, Padre Tim celebrates Mass in Spanish every Sunday at 1 p.m. at St. Bernard's. The Hispanic church membership has doubled under him, to some 300-400 people. More than 135 children and teenagers are signed up for catechism classes. On the Saturday I interviewed him, he was to perform five baptisms in Spanish.

Padre Tim doesn't care if his parishioners have legal papers, but he's aware that immigration issues cause the most problems. For some, leaving Mexico – or returning – may be a matter of life or death. "A lot of the people I serve come from very tough areas of Mexico, especially these days with the drug wars," he says.

For many, immigration "becomes a dance," Oudenhoven explains. "The children may be legal, but the parents aren't. And there's no way right now for them to become legal. They'd have to go back to Mexico, wait 10 or 15 years and, if they're lucky, get papers."

And, of course, there's the constant fear of the immigration authorities. "La Migra [immigration officials] came to Sparta in September and detained 12 people in the middle of night," Padre Tim says, citing the most recent example he knew of. Within Abbotsford, there were raids a couple of years ago with black vehicles coming into town and apprehending people, according to Welsh.

More recently, problems tend to happen when people are stopped for other reasons, perhaps driving without a license, and found to be without legal papers.

Padre Tim's sense is that intercultural relations are generally civil. The problems, he says, stem mostly from misunderstandings: "Some whites think Hispanics are breaking the law by not having papers, and so they are bad people. Or they are trying to milk the system and 'we're paying for them.' But of course, the Hispanics pay taxes.

"On the Hispanic side," he continues, "there's a lot of fear. If they are here illegally, they don't want anyone turning them in. And if one person is mean to you, you worry that everyone will be mean to you.

"Generalizations, on both sides, get us into trouble."

When I interviewed Padre Tim, it was over breakfast at Medo's Family Style Restaurant in Abbotsford, a classic diner complete with homemade pies and fresh-baked bread. At one point, he talked about how whites and Hispanics tend to live in parallel but separate worlds. In between bites of his waffles, Padre Tim nodded toward the kitchen, took a sip of coffee and said: "I know for a fact that there's a Hispanic working back there. To most people, he remains invisible."



*Curtiss children at play this May at the Lion's Club park
(Photo by Barbara J. Miner)*

During my final visit to Curtiss, I drive over from Abbotsford on a Saturday afternoon to hand out “thank-you” photos I had taken a week earlier. I go to the Lions Club park, which consists of a children’s playground, an open-air pavilion in case of rain, and a baseball diamond. It also acts as an informal town center.

The Abbotsford High School graduation had been that afternoon and, as I enter the park, it’s clear there’s a party. I realize it is for Jessica, the daughter of Humberto Lopez. He recognizes me, gives me a big ¡Hola! and before I know it, Jessica’s mother is handing me a paper plate and telling me in no uncertain terms to get some food.

Memories flood over me. The park pavilion is the exact same place where the Tandlokkens/Petersons hold their family reunions. The exact same picnic tables, the exact same buffet setup at a wooden counter in front of a small but serviceable kitchen. Even the Nesco cookers look the same, except they have beans and rice instead of pork-n-beans.

I look outside and, I swear, the young group of men standing just outside the pavilion could easily be Bob’s cousins. Backlit by the setting sun, you can’t tell if they’re Norwegian or Mexican. But you hear their laughter and notice their casual banter, the fingers hooked into their pants pockets, the beer bottles resting against their hips.

The next day, back in Milwaukee, I tell Bob about stumbling into the celebration and how it brought back so many memories. But, I tell him, there was one noticeable difference. The Mexican celebration had an amazing sound system, with really good Mexican music. This was a party just getting started.

Bob tried to be offended. But he knew what I meant. The Norwegians have many admirable traits, but dance music is not one of them.

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