

# From Mogadishu to Dixon

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## The Somali Diaspora in a Global Context

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**The Red Sea Press, Inc.**

Publishers & Distributors of Third World Books

P. O. Box 1892  
Trenton, NJ 08607



P. O. Box 48  
Asmara, ERITREA

2007

## THE SOMALI DIASPORA IN SMALL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF BARRON, WISCONSIN

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### INTRODUCTION

Tens of thousands of Somali refugees have settled in the Midwestern United States since Somalia's civil war erupted in 1991. Minnesota's Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have become the de facto "capital" of the Somali community in North America. Somalis have arrived directly from refugee camps or in secondary migrations from other US cities, drawn by an attractive urban job market and refugee service agencies.

More recently, many Somalis have begun to settle in smaller cities and towns around southern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. This secondary diffusion is creating an "immigration hinterland" that increasingly resembles the ethnic make-up of the Twin Cities. The Somalis have been drawn by meat processing plants (and other industries that do not require advanced English language skills) in small Minnesota cities such as Rochester, St. Cloud, Owatonna, Faribault and Marshall, and in the town of Barron, in northern Wisconsin. Somalis have racial, cultural and religious gaps in these previously monoethnic rural towns, much greater than Latino meatpackers before them.

This study focuses on one such town, the Wisconsin "turkey capital" of Barron, about 80 miles northeast of the Twin Cities. In conducting our research, we have investigated the connections between Somali immigration to the Twin Cities, and subsequent

urban-to-rural migration of Somalis to smaller communities such as Rochester and Barron. We sent questionnaires to the mayors and superintendents of several Minnesota cities, along with conducting interviews in Rochester.

Continuing our research, we conducted a series of interviews in Barron with the Somali director of the International Center, Nasra Xashi, and Somali residents, along with the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at the Barron High School and the school district superintendent.

There has been a great deal of research conducted on immigrant groups in the rural Midwest from the perspective of the local American population. Therefore we felt that it was important to conduct a study from the perspective of the immigrant group, in this case the Somalis.

There are several theoretical questions that this research set out to examine. The first question revolves around the cultural gap facing Somalis in rural America. The majority of Somalis are war refugees, like many immigrant groups before them. However, the Somalis have a unique culture, and have arrived with little knowledge of English. They are Muslim and African, unlike the predominantly Mexican or Hmong immigrants who preceded them in the rural Midwest. This combination of a minority culture, religion, and race therefore provides for a different type of immigration issue.

Another question revolves around the issue of assimilation. Do the Somalis intend to be absorbed into US society, even in a small town? Do they see their rural US experiences as more positive or negative than their urban experiences? Are the Somalis being educated to "blend" into the local culture, or are the local residents being educated about the culture and religion that the Somalis have brought into the community?

Finally, the question of the urban-to-rural migration comes into play. Barron, WI is located in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area's hinterland and has a large Somali population, similar to the Twin Cities. Nearby, Eau Claire, WI, also located in the Minneapolis/St. Paul hinterland, has a large percentage of Hmong immigrants from the highlands of Laos, another immigrant group with a significant population in the Twin Cities. Mexican and other Latin American



immigrants have also settled in other nearby rural areas, drawn by meatpacking and "factory farm" jobs from their homelands and the Twin Cities. Rural southern Minnesota and western Wisconsin is becoming an "ethnic hinterland" of the Twin Cities, slowly developing the same Mexican-Hmong-Somali mix as the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area.

## EARLIER IMMIGRANT GROUPS IN THE MIDWEST

In recent years, the rural Midwest has increasingly hosted immigrant workers, particularly in the meatpacking industry. Over the past two decades, the decreasing consumer demand for meat has forced the meatpacking industry to cut costs. One of the simplest solutions is to move to more rural areas, and to hire immigrant workers who are typically willing to work for lower wages than Americans. The firms benefit from the immigrant workers, not only because immigrants work for lower wages, but also because of high employee turnover, and linguistic barriers to labor organizing:

Plants benefit from turnover in at least five ways: 1) it keeps aggregated labor costs low; 2) it prevents many workers from becoming eligible for health benefits; 3) it allows the plant to use job training funds to supplement the wages of new hires; 4) it provides replacements from injured and tired workers on a continuing basis and fewer workers become eligible for union representation; 5) and unstable workers are less likely to become union activists.

Another way in which the meatpacking plants benefit from high turnover is that fewer employee injuries are reported to regulatory agencies, because the injured worker is no longer an employee; therefore they avoid fines or higher equipment improvement costs.<sup>2</sup> Also, because some of the immigrant employees are undocumented, unions have difficulty organizing within the plant.<sup>3</sup> Many of the immigrant workers are refugees from countries or regions in which governments and companies have harshly repressed unionization.

The meatpacking industry does not hire immigrants only to save money. A plant is often forced to hire immigrants because the local

American youth no longer want to work there.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, immigrants can sometimes provide a more reliable labor pool than local employees. At one point in the 1990s, approximately half of the population in Norwalk, Wisconsin was Mexican, due to the presence of a meatpacking plant, and its continuous need for a workforce.<sup>5</sup>

The meatpacking industry's practice of hiring immigrant workers is not always beneficial to its bottom line. High turnover rates can end up costing plant money due to the costs of new interviews, screening, training, and periodic labor shortages.<sup>6</sup> High turnover rates can create problems in the host community, such as unstable school enrollments.<sup>7</sup> Conflicts between the local population and the immigrant population can also arise. These tensions are exacerbated by issues such as immigrant workers dating local young people, or perceptions that immigrant workers are "taking away" local jobs.<sup>8</sup> Tensions are particularly acute if local American workers have recently been laid off or fired from the plant.

Not only are immigrants attractive employees for the meatpacking industry, but meatpacking is an attractive job for immigrants. Most jobs in the meatpacking plants require few technical skills, and what skills they do require can be learned fairly quickly. Notably, little English proficiency is needed to successfully complete a job on a processing or packing line. Translators are often hired for the training process, but then the employee is left to do the work and not required to learn any English.<sup>9</sup> (Some companies promise English instruction, but do not deliver.) Another positive aspect of working for the meatpacking industry is its flexibility. For example, workers are able to quit their job, take a break, and then be rehired at the same plant or at another nearby plant.<sup>10</sup> This allows the workers to take a break, visit family back home, or move around the area in search of better jobs.

## COMPARING SOMALIS WITH OTHER IMMIGRANT GROUPS

Midwestern states have hosted Hispanic (Latino) immigrants from Mexico and Central America since the 1970s. Large meatpacking companies in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have recruited and employed Latino immigrants. Latino immigrants were sometimes recruited by the employer in order to break a strike, and



in other cases to offset local labor shortages. The Latino immigrant workers were willing to work for lower pay and fewer benefits than the American workers. This allowed the factory to keep its lower wage structure and may have left some local residents unemployed, thus creating a negative feeling towards the immigrant group.

Somali workers employed in meatpacking factories were not brought in to break unions, but were generally recruited to fill empty positions that local workers did not want. This factor, however, does not outweigh the many "negative" aspects that the Somali population has been forced to confront which the Latino immigrant population has not.

For example, the majority of the Latino immigrant population is Christian. The Latinos therefore blend in with the existing religious beliefs of the majority of the American population, and do not have to face the religious gap that the Somali Muslim population faces. Muslim customs and practices are typically not well known in Midwestern communities, and this lack of understanding has created several points of conflict. Somali women's Muslim dress is very different from the attire of the majority population. The Somali women wear brightly colored dresses and head coverings, and so stand out amongst the rest of the population (more so than do Somali men).

Second, the greater contrast in skin color makes Somali immigrants stand out more than Latino immigrants, and make them more easily identified as a foreign "other." The only other distinctively "foreign" immigrant community in northern Wisconsin is the Hmong from Southeast Asia.

Third, due to the longer span of time that the Latino immigrants have been in the US, and the common border with Mexico, Americans are more familiar with Latin Americans than with Africans. Spanish is a much more common language in the US than Somali (or Arabic). This makes finding Somali translators much more difficult, and also makes some of the local American residents feel uneasy because they are not knowledgeable or familiar with the Somali language. Although some Somalis have been exposed to English in the formerly British northern region of Somaliland, or in Kenyan refugee camps, most arrive in the US with little or no knowledge of the language that opens the door to a wider range of American jobs.

## WAR IN SOMALIA AND EMIGRATION TO UNITED STATES

Somalia gained independence in 1960, unifying the formerly Italian south and the formerly British north (or British Somaliland). Despite its ethnic and religious homogeneity, Somalia has a history of conflict among its six major clan families and smaller sub-clans. In Somalia, which has an arid environment and limited natural resources, people have long had to depend on their clan for survival. This situation of dependency created strong clan ties, which later developed into political allegiances along the clan lines, often encouraged by national governments that ruled through divide-and-conquer tactics.<sup>11</sup>

In 1969, Mohammed Siad Barre, a member of the Marehan (a sub-clan of the Darod) became president of Somalia. Although he promised a government that would not be clan-based, Barre "systematically replaced top officials with his own clansmen and by 1987 half of the senior officer corps in the army were Marehan."<sup>12</sup> He also waged a war in the late 1970s against Ethiopia, to annex the ethnic Somali Ogaden region, where fellow Darod clan members lived. The US backed Barre against Soviet-allied Ethiopia, and in return received strategic naval bases in Somalia formerly used by the Soviet fleet.

The clan shift in government greatly upset the northern region of Somalia which was mainly inhabited by members of the Issaq clan. In May 1988, an uprising against Barre began in the north and continued as armed opposition spread across the country.<sup>13</sup> Soon the country was embroiled in a civil war among the clans. Barre's army destroyed the northern city of Hargeisa.<sup>14</sup> In January 1991, southern rebel forces fought their way into Barre's residence in the capital city of Mogadishu, forcing him to flee. When Barre and his supporters fled Mogadishu, they left Somalia without any form of government.<sup>15</sup> The weapons Barre had possessed were left in the hands of the clan leaders, who quickly became militia leaders (called "warlords" by the West) ruling over different regions and different Mogadishu neighborhoods.

Chaos overtook Somalia in 1991-92. More than 300,000 Somalis were killed in the war, or from the famine that resulted from militia confiscation and blockade of food shipments. US forces intervened



in late 1992 as part of a UN peacekeeping force, but soon took sides in the clan war by hunting the most powerful Mogadishu militia leader, Mohamed Farah Aidid. After losing 18 soldiers in a 1993 Mogadishu battle with Aidid's forces (popularized in the movie *Black Hawk Down*), the US forces withdrew. Refugee camps in Kenya became flooded with Somali refugees fleeing the violence and famine. These refugees were soon on their way to cities in the United States. The majority of the refugees settled in large cities (such as Minneapolis or Atlanta), but also moved to smaller communities such as Lewiston, Maine.

## LEWISTON, MAINE

In 2001-02, more than 1,000 Somalis moved into Lewiston, a small working-class city of 36,000 in southern Maine. The initial group came in a secondary migration from Atlanta, drawn by Maine's low crime rate. Most of the local American residents only knew of Somalia from the Hollywood film *Black Hawk Down*, which was not a realistic presentation of Somalia or its people. Within a short time, rumors about the Somalis began to spread around Lewiston. The rumors contended that the Somalis had access to free cars, air conditioners, and groceries, along with US government grants of \$10,000. While these rumors were false, they still created a negative feeling among the local residents towards the Somali newcomers.<sup>16</sup>

These negative feelings in Lewiston escalated when Mayor Laurier T. Raymond Jr. wrote an open letter to the Somalis in Lewiston asking them to stop other Somalis from coming to Lewiston. Somalis quickly responded with their own letter accusing the mayor of being an "ill-informed leader who is bent toward bigotry."<sup>17</sup>

Soon Lewiston, Maine became the center of national protests against immigration, and at the same time a center for protests supporting immigration. At least two white supremacist groups (one led by the Illinois militant Matt Hale) quickly turned Lewiston into a national rallying cry against immigration. Petitions began circulating and rallies were held against and in support of the Somali immigrants.<sup>18</sup> A January 2003, pro-immigrant rally drew 4,000 people. Since then, the situation has calmed down in Lewiston, but some of the Somali residents have also left for other cities.



## MIGRATION IN AND OUT OF THE TWIN CITIES

There are currently between 10,000 and 30,000 Somalis residing in Minnesota's Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The ambiguous number is partly a result of continuously shifting populations, but mostly due to the amount of error in census data regarding Somali refugees (as the US Census notoriously minimizes other recent immigrant populations).<sup>19</sup> This large Somali population makes the Twin Cities the *de facto* Somali "capital" of North America.

There are several "pull factors" that drew Somalis to the Twin Cities, including an initially attractive job market, and experienced refugee social service agencies. More recently, the presence of a large Somali community allows newer Somali immigrants to feel at home, and the presence of Somali restaurants and shopping centers makes meeting Somalis' everyday cultural needs much easier than living elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

However, large American cities also have their drawbacks. The Twin Cities has a higher crime rate than elsewhere in the state. A larger city is much more expensive in which to live, and the unemployment rate is higher. Also, the school system in the poorer neighborhoods of the Twin Cities is not as well funded as the school systems in other communities. Therefore, Somalis have experienced some major "push factors" to leave the big city and move to smaller communities. Although the lower crime rate draws some to small cities such as Rochester, MN,<sup>21</sup> the prospect of employment attracts most Somalis to even smaller rural communities.

Manufacturing jobs in St. Cloud, technical and janitorial jobs at IBM in Rochester, and the Jennie'O Turkey Store in Barron are just a few of the employment opportunities that have pulled the Somalis away from the Twin Cities to the surrounding hinterland. These jobs have many similarities including a low level of required English proficiency required, and immediate on-the-job training.

Yet employment was not the only attractive aspect of the smaller communities for the Somalis. The school systems in general are much better in the smaller communities than in the Twin Cities neighborhoods where most of the Somalis were living. Smaller towns are small enough that Somalis could walk to work and school without driving--a major attraction for immigrants without drivers' licenses.

A smaller community is also quieter and safer than the large city, with a slower lifestyle that is more familiar to Somalis. These “pull factors” were major reasons for Somalis moving to small communities in both Minnesota and Wisconsin.

## MINNESOTA COMMUNITIES

### Saint Cloud, Minnesota

St. Cloud, Minnesota is a small city located 75 miles northwest of the Twin Cities, with a population of 59,200. Somalis arrived in St. Cloud in 2000-01. The number of Somalis residing in St. Cloud is in the 2,000-3,500 range, with 135 Somali children enrolled in the public school system in 2003. As in Barron, WI, the majority of Somalis work in either poultry or manufacturing factories, and have yet to be employed outside these types of jobs.

St. Cloud has one of the only local governments to act prior to the arrival of the Somali immigrants, in order to prepare the local community. First, the city acted to educate and train public service providers and the general community about the Somali population, culture, and Islamic beliefs. Second, the city identified the housing needs of the Somalis, and was able to negotiate housing opportunities with providers. Next, the city set aside funding and space to encourage and allow the Somalis to practice their culture and religion.<sup>22</sup>

The policies that the city of St. Cloud implemented helped to proactively address many conflicts with the local community before they arose. There were, however, some areas that needed to be addressed after the Somali population arrived in St. Cloud. First, a basic curriculum was developed to educate the Somali population on American culture, community norms, laws, and general resources. Second, panel presentations were organized to provide educators, religious communities, service providers and the general community with information about Somali culture and Islamic beliefs. Next, cultural awareness training was provided for City administrators, and human rights and housing brochures were translated into Somali.<sup>23</sup> Also, the Mayor's office set aside funding for local nonprofit Somali organizations, “to directly serve immigrants and refugees.”<sup>24</sup>

There were many positive interactions between the Somali immigrants and St. Cloud's American population. Several Somalis



sought to become involved in the St. Cloud community, and the St. Cloud population was eager to learn about the Somali culture. However, after September 11, 2001, there were some negative interactions between Somali and American employees at one of the factories. Also, in the fall of 2002 a Somali community center was vandalized with hate graffiti, and again in late 2002 a Somali-owned and an Ethiopian-owned business were both vandalized with hate graffiti. The city reacted very quickly to “denounce the hate crimes and discrimination of any kind.”<sup>25</sup> Several community members contributed to a fund to remove the graffiti and the community sent letters of support, made personal contacts and developed business relationships with the Africans who were impacted by hate crimes.

### **Rochester, Minnesota**

Somali students arrived in the Rochester School District in the summer of 1997; therefore the schools were forced to put programs in place before the school year began in September. The most difficult issue for the Rochester School District was the language barrier between the Somali students and the English-speaking staff. The main struggling point within the ESL program was that most of the Somali students had grown up in refugee camps in Kenya, where a limited amount of education was available in either English or Somali. The refugees were not literate and sometimes not even fluent in Somali. Instruction in English became even more difficult because the teachers did not have a base language to teach from. Also, many of the students had never had experience in a formal educational system and were not accustomed to the school structure. This made the learning environment even more tense between the students and teachers.<sup>26</sup>

Because most of the Somali youth had grown up in a war-torn country or in refugee camps, they were accustomed to a more turbulent living situation, and were therefore more easily provoked. Therefore, an innocent bump in the crowded hallways could easily turn into a physical fight. Also, *qat* chewing was popular among some Somali students. The *qat* leaf is commonly used in Somalia and is taken ingested by chewing. However, the use of *qat* is illegal in the US, and therefore prohibited in the schools.

There were also a few instances of Somali students taking advantage of the cultural and religious misunderstandings present in the



school staff. For example, some of the students would use prayers as an excuse to skip school. However, after meeting with some of the elders in the local mosque, the school district was able implement policies regarding prayer in school.

All of the students in the Rochester Public High Schools are of the traditional student age, or under 18. The Rochester School District has the Adult and Family Literacy Programming at Hawthorne Education Center. The Adult Literacy Program is an educational system through the Rochester Public Schools that is set up specifically to educate adults of all ages in many different programs. Adult Basic Education not only teaches immigrants English, but also reading, math, writing, and computer skills. There are staffed homework rooms and one-on-one tutoring sessions with volunteers, and daycare and preschool provided for the children of the adult students. The adult education program allows adults to learn in an environment with other adults, which provides not only childcare, but also a schedule that is flexible around work schedules.

Since 1997, there have been several policy changes made in the Rochester School District to accommodate Somali cultural and religious practices, and also to help diminish the language barrier. For instance, prior to 1997 it was a policy violation for any type of head covering to be worn inside a school building. This policy needed to be changed to accommodate the Somali cultural and Muslim religious practice of the woman wearing a *hijab*, or head covering. The school district's policy was changed to allow head coverings for religious or medical reasons (therefore also allowing students undergoing chemotherapy for cancer treatment to cover their heads).

Another policy change was implemented to encourage Somali parents to become more involved with their child's education. Previously, teachers had contacted parents with a letter if there had been any academic or behavioral trouble with the student. This practice, however, was not advantageous for the Somali students, because oftentimes the parents could not read English and would depend on the student to translate the letter. A new policy was implemented to allow translators to contact the parents with any concerns that the teachers may have about the students.

The Rochester School District has adopted a Cultural Responsive Program, with a series of activities to enhance cultural understanding. All staff within the school district will take part in the program, first looking at their own culture and then comparing it with other cultures in the school district. After staff members have gone through the program; they will begin passing on their instruction to the students. A major focus of the program is correct name pronunciation. The superintendent of the Rochester School District feels that correct name pronunciation is a very important part of the program, because it shows respect for the students.<sup>27</sup>

### **Owatonna, Minnesota**

Owatonna is another small community in southern Minnesota that is home to a large Somali population. Owatonna is 42 miles west of Rochester, and has a total population of 22,400. The Somali immigrants first arrived in Owatonna in 1995. They have since continued to move into Owatonna, but often move out to follow different opportunities afforded to them in other towns.

The 2002 census estimate of approximately 1,400-1,500 Somalis does not truthfully represent the number of Somali immigrants that reside in Owatonna (or for that matter anywhere in Minnesota).<sup>28</sup> The majority of Somalis are employed by factories; however, some have begun to find jobs outside of the factories. For example, several women are employed in health care jobs and in nursing homes, and Somali youth can be found working in the local supermarket. There is also a *halal* market that is owned by a local Somali.<sup>29</sup> The halal market not only provides jobs for Somalis, but also provides the Somalis a local place to buy their food rather than through driving to the Twin Cities.

As of 2003, there were not any policies adopted by the Owatonna city government that specifically addressed the new Somali population. This is largely due to Owatonna's past experience with other immigrant groups, such as Vietnamese, Hmong, Bosnians, and other groups. Past experience with non-English speaking immigrant groups prepared the community and the city government to be open to different ethnic groups. However in 1996, Mayor Peter Connor developed the Cultural Diversity Network, which helped supply Somali immigrants with furniture, clothing, food, and other basic



needs. Today the Cultural Diversity Network continues to help the community, but through "emphasis on helping to create an environment of understanding and mutual respect."<sup>30</sup> Many long-time residents and local church groups have helped the Cultural Diversity Network by helping welcome the Somalis and also supporting the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Learned Language (ELL) programs.

The reaction to the Somali immigrants has not been wholly positive. Beginning in 2001, the Steele County Coalition for Immigration Reduction formed and began lobbying Congress to reduce the number of legal immigrants to pre-1970 levels.<sup>31</sup> Members have also lobbied to completely close US borders and prevent undocumented immigrants from entering the country. Although the group's direct objective may appear national in scope, the Mayor sees as its indirect objective "to make Owatonna an unwelcome place for those who are racially and culturally different."<sup>32</sup>

The Mayor contends that the vast majority of Owatonna's population, about 80%, is still fairly neutral in its feelings toward the Somali immigrants. He asserts that the other 20% is divided equally into 10% who welcome the Somalis and the 10% who want the Somalis to leave Owatonna.

## **BARRON, WISCONSIN: A CASE STUDY**

Barron is a small community in northwestern Wisconsin with an estimated 2003 population of 3,250 residents. Of the 3,250 Barron residents, approximately 400, or 13% of the population, are Somali immigrants. Somalis first began to move to Barron in 1999 when the Jennie'O Turkey Store experienced a labor shortage in its poultry processing plant. The younger generation of Barron residents was moving out of Barron, or had no interest in the meatpacking business. The Turkey Store was forced to look to a larger pool of potential employees in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Many Somali immigrants who were living in the Twin Cities took jobs in Barron, and moved 90 miles to the small Wisconsin community. The Turkey Store offered employment that required little formal education, little English proficiency, and provided a steady job with overtime hours available.



The state of Wisconsin had a strong appeal to Somalis who were interested in attaining their high school diploma. Minnesota requires each high school student to pass a graduation standards exam, which is very difficult to pass if the student is not highly proficient in English. Therefore, many young Somali students moved across the state boundary to Barron, WI, in order to attain their high school diploma without having to take the Minnesota graduation standards exam. The employment option at the Jennie'O Turkey Store also guaranteed that the students could afford to live in Barron while attending school.<sup>33</sup>

As the Turkey Store began to provide jobs to Somali immigrants, the community was not prepared for the sudden increase in the numbers of non-English speaking residents. The plant did not initially offer English classes, but later funded classes at a nearby service agency. Although Barron had small numbers of Mexican and Hmong residents, the schools and medical facilities were caught off guard and did not have the necessary staff for translation needs. Some residents among the Christian majority were unprepared for a large Muslim minority. The Somalis were not only foreign immigrants, but were racially, religiously and culturally more distinct than previous immigrants.

## COMMUNITY NEEDS IN BARRON

Due to the uniformity of the Barron population prior to the arrival of Somali immigrants, the stores and public services in Barron were not prepared to provide for the needs of the Somalis. For example, the grocery stores in Barron were not aware of the special food needs of Somali Muslims. They did not stock halal meats, or the seasonings that the Somalis use in their food preparation. Even though there would be a considerable profit to be made from selling these items to the Somali community, the stores still do not supply the items, and the Somalis are forced to drive to the Twin Cities to buy their groceries.<sup>34</sup>

Somalis in Barron have also had a difficult time organizing and finding a building to start a community center and mosque. Although a mosque would be well attended and the community center would provide the Somalis a place to gather rather than the park, the Barron

community has not supported the proposal, and the Somalis are forced to also drive to the Twin Cities to attend a formal mosque.

## BARRON SCHOOLS

There have been only a few incidents of conflict between the Somali students and the local Barron students. In October 2001, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack and the arrival of more outspoken urban Somalis from the Twin Cities, there was a short period of name-calling between the local students and the Somali students. A Somali flag was desecrated by small groups of American students, who later as restitution met with members of the Somali community. This problem was addressed and the verbalization ended, but the negative feelings persisted. In April 2002 there was a physical fight between five American students and five Somali students, all of whom were expelled due to the school district's strict no-tolerance of violence policy.

After the violent breakout it became more difficult for the teachers to motivate Somali students, due the students' lack of trust stemming from the expulsions. There has been no outward conflict between the American and Somali students since April 2002. There are still, however, some tensions around racial and cultural differences and the American students' perception of the Somali students' "special treatment." Some of the American students are jealous, for example, that the female Somali students are allowed to cover their heads, but that American students are not allowed to wear hats in school (American students wore banned hooded sweatshirts as a protest). However, the conflict in the school during the 2002-03 school year appeared to occur more among Somalis than between the Somali and American students.<sup>35</sup>

The largest problem for the Barron schools was the language barrier between the Somali students and the English-speaking staff and students. The Barron School District had very little experience with non-English-speaking students. In the past there had been a few students in the public school system who were Mexican immigrants. However, the number of non-English-speaking students had never been great enough to form an ESL program.<sup>36</sup> In 2001, there were suddenly 28 non-English speaking Somali students at the high-



school level who enrolled in the Barron public school. This number was clearly great enough for an ESL program to be initiated.

Once the ESL program was put into place, there were other key issues facing the Barron High School, as pointed out by Kim Frandsen, ESL coordinator/teacher for grades K-12 in the Barron Area School District. Most of the Somali students attending the school were not traditional students, but somewhat older. Some Somali students who had enrolled in the Barron High School had moved from Minnesota to Wisconsin to take jobs at the Turkey Store and by doing so--according to Frandsen--avoid taking the newly stringent Minnesota Graduation Standards test. This test was put in place in Minnesota in 1996 to ensure that all students receiving a diploma from a Minnesota public schools were meeting specific standards in English, math and science. Some Minnesota high school students who were unable to pass this exam (sometimes due to lack of English proficiency) moved to Wisconsin in order to obtain their high school diploma. Therefore, many students that move to Barron to complete their education are older students struggling with mastery of English. These students require additional help from instructors in order to earn their diploma, and this situation has put great demand on the ESL teachers and other staff at Barron High School.

Since most Somali high school students in Barron are over the age of eighteen, they no longer live with their parents, but with relatives, friends, or each other. They often lack the parental guidance so their teachers have no parents to contact for additional help. According to Frandsen, the students have a lack of guidance in career goals, due to the absence of parents. Many Somali students do not have goals after receiving their high school diploma. Although there have been efforts made by the ESL teachers to set up mentorships with community members, only a few mentors have volunteered for the numerous Somali students.<sup>37</sup>

The students are dependent on themselves not only for their education, but also for their economic livelihood. After completing a full day of school, most of the students head directly to the Turkey Store to work the second shift from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.<sup>38</sup> This demanding work schedule leaves little time for homework or extra-curricular activities.



Despite these obstacles, the Barron School District has made some major advances. The faculty within the school district has been required to undergo diversity education. For example, a panel of Somali students volunteered their time to educate the faculty and staff about Somali culture, religion and language, and to answer any questions. Videos on intercultural understanding have been produced under the direction of Superintendent Monti Hallberg. Through Hallberg's fortuitous previous teaching experience in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Kenya, he learned about Islam and speaks Arabic. (He had coincidentally visited the same Somali refugee camps in Kenya that housed the district's future students.) The school district has developed a way to test the Somali students' English proficiency before they attend school in order to better place them in classes, using school transcripts from refugee camps in Kenya.<sup>39</sup> Hallberg also initiated Boys and Girls Soccer teams at the high school level. Since soccer is a very popular sport among the Somali, American, and Mexican students, the creation of a soccer team helped bridge the gap between them.<sup>40</sup> One of the American students involved in the Somali flag desecration went on to play on the soccer team and make Somali friends. These conflict resolution strategies continue to be developed by the school district.

## HOUSING IN BARRON

In Barron there is currently a shortage of affordable housing. This limitation has forced many Somalis to reside in one of two apartment complexes on the outskirts of town. Because of their low rent, these apartments were initially the only housing options for the Somalis who work at the Turkey Store. The two apartment complexes are owned and operated by two Mennonite sisters who have been very responsive to the needs of the Somalis. Somalis typically live with their extended family, and it is not uncommon for several young single adults to live together, if their family is not present. The employment and educational situation in Barron has drawn many young adults to the area who live with friends or distant relatives.

The apartments were intended to be rented to one or two tenants per apartment; however, while only 1-2 names were on the lease, the Somalis were living with five or six people per apartment. This situ-

ation initially caused misunderstandings, however the cooperation of the tenants and the landlords has allowed for five of six people to live in one apartment, as long as all of their names are on the lease and they do not break the lease. (In 2004 some Somalis began to rent their own apartments in the community, potentially easing the housing shortage).

Even with five or six people residing in one apartment, the housing shortage has caused Somalis to search in other small communities around Barron, such as Rice Lake and Cameron, for housing options. This simple housing shortage in Barron has begun to affect the surrounding towns. For example, while adults might commute to work in Barron, the children attend school in the smaller communities in which they live, thus creating the need for ESL classes and other language and cultural services in the communities surrounding Barron.

Most Somalis moving into surrounding Wisconsin communities continue to commute to work at the Turkey Store plant. But a few have begun to diversify their seasonal employment options, such as taking jobs at a vegetable canning plant in Balsam Lake, a computer manufacturing plant in Chippewa Falls, and a furniture plant in Cumberland. The contagious diffusion of Somalis from Barron means that neighboring communities are starting to face the same questions that Barron faced at the start of the decade. The lessons of Barron can be a resource for these communities, to learn how to make Somalis feel welcome, and how to educate the local American community to prepare for Somali immigration.

## **SURVEY OF BARRON SOMALI COMMUNITY**

In the summer of 2003 we distributed an extensive survey to the Somali community in Barron, through the International Center and the ESL program at Barron High School. Upon collection of the survey we determined that the survey was too complex, and developed a shorter, simpler survey to target more specific areas of interest. This simpler survey was distributed in spring 2005, and is yielding ongoing results.

The survey was designed to target the specific areas of migration to and within the United States, and the different push and pull factors affecting Somali migration from large cities, such as Min-

neapolis, MN, and smaller communities, specifically Barron. While the survey is still in circulation, the preliminary results (approximately 10% of the Somali population in Barron) are as follows.

The first section of the survey traced the migration from Somalia, to the US, and then within the US. There was space to record up to six migrations; however, no more than five were used on any of the returned surveys. Preliminary results show that of the Somali immigrants entering the US 42% settled in Minneapolis, MN upon arrival. Of the remaining immigrants 10.5% settled in California, and other states listed as first arrival points were Ohio, Tennessee, New York, and Massachusetts.

Migration to Barron also showed results similar to those we predicted. Of the Somali immigrants settling in Barron, 76% arrived directly from the Twin Cities. The remaining 24% were equally distributed between Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington State. The survey also asked how Somali immigrants heard about Barron, and the responses indicated only two sources: family members (56%) and friends (44%).

Survey participants were also asked to rate their first experience in Barron as Very Positive, Positive, Negative, or Very Negative. While the majority reported their experience as Very Positive, or Positive, there were some individuals who felt their experience was negative. The results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. FIRST EXPERIENCE IN BARRON, WI

First Experience	Percentage
Very Positive	44%
Positive	37.5%
Negative	12.5%
Very Negative	6%

The final section of the survey asked participants to compare and rank different aspects of the larger cities, such as Minneapolis, in comparison to smaller communities, such as Barron. The responses to these questions (in the form of numerical rankings from 1 to 5) were then averaged in order to evaluate the push and pull factors affecting migration from the larger cities to smaller communities. The preliminary results showed little difference in several categories.



However, when comparing the averages, there were some which showed a difference of greater than half a unit. For example, the larger city ranked higher for having more jobs available. However, the smaller community ranked higher as a safer place to live, and as an easier place in which to support a family, to overcome regional and clan differences among Somalis, and to provide a closer knit community. These categories should be taken into consideration for the preliminary results, with the hope of more conclusive results shown after more surveys have been returned. The averages of this section of the survey are presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2. COMMUNITY ASPECTS COMPARISONS BETWEEN LARGER CITIES AND SMALLER COMMUNITIES; BASED ON THE AVERAGE OF NUMERICAL RANKINGS FROM 1 (STRONGLY DISAGREE) TO 5 (STRONGLY AGREE).**

<b>Community Aspect</b>	<b>Average for Large City (rounded to two decimals)</b>	<b>Average for Smaller Community (rounded to two decimals)</b>
<b>Less Prejudice</b>	3.67	4.00
<b>More Welcoming</b>	4.07	4.19
<b>Better Schools</b>	4.19	4.14
<b>More Jobs</b>	4.14	3.35
<b>Safer Place to Live</b>	3.57	4.25
<b>Easier to Support a Family</b>	3.56	4.21
<b>More Accepting of Religious Differences</b>	3.88	4.21
<b>More Accepting of Cultural Differences</b>	4.06	4.29
<b>Stronger Sense of Somali Identity</b>	3.81	4.14
<b>Have Overcome Regional or Clan Differences</b>	3.17	3.67
<b>Closer Knit Com- munity</b>	3.60	4.20
<b>Better Working Conditions</b>	4.31	4.00

## **SURVEY METHODS**

The process of conducting this survey was not without difficulty, as several factors impeded the process. The first difficulty was the language barrier. The majority of Somalis in Barron are not highly proficient in English, so the survey was a bilingual survey

printed in English and Somali. The original survey was translated by the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association in Rochester, MN, and the changes to the secondary survey (and written remarks) were aided by a Somali student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Abdirahman Ahmed.

However, a bilingual survey was not enough to overcome the language barrier. The majority of Somali immigrants in Barron were raised in refugee camps in Kenya, and therefore do not have strong literacy in Somali. Therefore, the surveys must be completed with the aid of an individual who can read either Somali or English; this can be accomplished in ESL classrooms at the High School or International Center. As a result, completing even a short survey can be very time consuming. The majority of Somalis in Barron work at least full time, go to school, and travel to the Twin Cities on the weekends, so they have very little free time to complete the survey.

In addition there are no major gathering points for Barron Somalis, so distributing the survey has been limited to the High School and International Center. Translators have had to clearly communicate the purpose of the survey, since some in the community are on guard after post-9/11 FBI raids on several Somali businesses in the Twin Cities, and recent attempts to expatriate Omar Jamal, a Somali leader in Minnesota. These barriers make the survey process more difficult and time consuming, but they do not make it impossible. With ample time and patience it is still possible to obtain results.

## CONCLUSION

Through the interviews that were conducted in Barron, the questionnaires that were returned from the Minnesota communities, and the interviews conducted in Rochester, MN, it is apparent that the most of the educational efforts in these communities are directed at the Somali immigrants, to ease their transition into Midwestern American society. In general, the education that the Somalis received appeared to be aimed at assimilating them into the local culture and the American way of life. There have been relatively few efforts, however, to educate the American community about the Somalis.

Somali grocery items, a mosque for worship, English-language classes, and other basic needs can go a long way in making Somalis

feel welcome, and keeping them in town on the weekends, when socializing with Americans is the most possible. Invitations to participate in weekend festivals can also keep Somalis from leaving for the Twin Cities, at the same time as educating local Americans. But even these basic needs are not a substitute for educating local Americans about Somali history, culture and religion, in order to open the doors of understanding between the communities.

While there have been some programs directed at the local population, the majority were passively advertised, and only attended by individuals that had a previous interest in cultural diversity. Without a concurrent program to educate Americans--in their schools, social clubs, and places of employment--the programs to educate Somalis can become irrelevant when confronting by local assumptions, fears, and prejudices.

In a small community of 2,000 or 3,000 people, it is possible to develop educational curriculum, videos, and speaking tours that can systematically reach all American adults and young adults in the community. Generalized appeals to "respect diversity" or experience ethnic dances or foods at an annual multiethnic event are not a substitute for education on more difficult aspects of war, refugee status, family structures, customs, language, and religious beliefs. State agencies such as the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction have in the past developed educational curriculum on intercultural understanding (such as the "Act 31" legislation of 1989, requiring instruction in fourth and eighth grades on Wisconsin American Indian history and culture).

Somali immigrants will not go away in western Wisconsin, even if future moves toward a peace agreement are finalized in Somalia, and some refugees return home. Over the past decade, an "ethnic hinterland" has been growing around the Twin Cities. The Minneapolis-St. Paul area is home to a large number of Somalis, Hmong, and Latinos. Many communities in the hinterland around the Twin Cities also now contain a high percentage of these same immigrant groups.

Barron, WI, for example, is home to a large Somali population that came mainly from the Twin Cities, and which is slowly diffusing into neighboring towns. Eau Claire and La Crosse, WI have been home to a large Hmong population since the 1970s. Strum, Merril-



lan, and Curtiss, WI are home to a growing Latino population. Large communities, such as Rochester, MN, have large and mixed Somali, Hmong, and Latino populations.<sup>41</sup> While the push and pull factors may vary for individuals, the push factors of crime and increased job competition tend to press people to leave the larger city, and the pull factors of employment, good schools, and a safe, smaller community tend to draw them into rural communities in the "ethnic hinterland" around a metro area.

The development of this "ethnic hinterland" means that communities that have not yet experienced ethnic or racial diversity may have to deal with it in the very near future. Proactive education of local Americans, to help them to ease the transition for the immigrants, and to view immigration as a potential gain rather than loss for their community, can prevent some of the problems that have beset unprepared communities.

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