

Send Slaughterhouse Packing by Holly Nelson

When I came to Winnipeg in 1973, I remember the slaughterhouse district, spreading a palpable smog over St. Boniface. Palpable means "you can touch it with your fingers," and that described the oily, penetrating fug that originated at the huge plants.

Today, we are told that the smell might be eliminated. If that's the case, good. But other effects cannot be eliminated. Someone's going to get hurt.

I knew the slaughterhouse district because my ex-husband, Robert, worked there, first at Canada Packers as a meat cutter and later as a federal meat inspector. The stories he brought home would chill your blood. Men getting their arms caught in the bacon skinner, cantaloupe-sized abscesses in the cattle, sharp knives going astray into human hands and arms.

But what would you expect from a production line that combined razor sharp knives with 300 cold, wet, slippery hog carcasses every hour?

Slaughterhouses don't just "manufacture" roasts, chops and sausage. They also crank out disabled workers, usually comparatively young men. The injury rate in packing plants and slaughterhouses is one of the highest of any occupation.

If we have wondered, "Why Winnipeg, for a new hog plant?" it's probably people. In a time of low unemployment, it's hard to hire people willing to learn the skills of the kill floor and the cutting line.

As Brandon's Maple Leaf plant has learned, workers are getting scarce.

In an article in the Brandon Sun recently, Guy Beaudry, vice-president of business development for Canada's largest pork producer, La Broquerie's Hytek Ltd., said that the hog supply would not be the limiting factor in the new plant's capacity. "It'll be based on our ability to recruit and properly train workers within that facility."

Winnipeg's 700,000 people can probably supply enough labour to do a cold, messy, dangerous job at low wages. Unionized or not, meat-cutting has such high turnover that the effective pay for most workers is unlikely to rise above \$10 an hour. Maybe we won't even have to bring in "guest

workers" to keep the place going, the way Maple Leaf has done in Brandon.

Is that any better? Providing jobs? When you factor in the human cost, probably not.

Meat-cutting is dangerous. Injury is an inevitable part of a packing plant, even if no one gets cut. There's the additional problem of repetitive strain injury (RSI).

The phrase "repetitive strain" pretty much defines slaughterhouse work, and it can't be done by machines.

Such injuries were not conceded to be a "real" problem in the early 80s, but that didn't stop RSI from disabling many meat cutters, as it did my husband.

After only eight years on the cutting floor, the pain got so bad that Bob had to give up his job. Tendinitis was diagnosed. It affected both his wrists and permanently sidelined him from the workforce at age 40.

His condition was so severe that, for a couple of years after losing his job, he sometimes needed both hands just to lift a glass of milk. Ask yourself -- how many jobs can you do without using your hands?

If the plant is built, we can expect a wave of disabilities. How many? Lots.

One study in Denmark showed that between five and eight per cent of slaughterhouse workers developed carpal tunnel syndrome. Another Finnish study showed that 30 to 40 of every 1,000 workers are injured at work. After a couple of years of lead-up time, the plant would be manufacturing two or three dozen disabled workers a year purely from repetitive strain conditions, and more from traditional injuries.

The cost to the province in health care, rehab, or social assistance, could cut into the taxes earned from the plant's operations. I estimate about \$500,000 a year, just for initial diagnosis and treatment of RSI injuries, not counting follow-up treatment, rehabilitation, and retraining.

But in a land of public health care, that wouldn't damage the company's bottom line much at all.

Like the lowering of mill rates due to lost property values in St. Boniface, the cost of the care of injured workers is largely externalized --

externalized being the economist's term for "not the hog plant's problem." These costs would instead be Winnipeg's problem.

Maybe it's too soon for a plant like this to come back to town, because we remember. When I listen to radio phone-in shows, it's obvious that Winnipeggers haven't forgotten the bad old days. They still remember the stink, and they still have disabled friends and relatives who worked at the slaughterhouses -- right up till their luck ran out.

And we still remember the pattern of so many other projects like this. We build a for-profit business with tax dollars. It operates for awhile, often needing more propping up by taxpayers (witness the Neepawa facility which needed more funding in its first year). And then it closes, leaving the province holding the bag for polluted land, vanished tax dollars, and injured workers.

We've seen it all before. We didn't like it. So why do it again?

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