

## EARLY INSTINCTS TO EXPLORE: THE BRONX BOTANICAL GARDENS

QUINN: I remember the Edison Theater was also right across Broadway from her apartment. But I was only four or five years old, too little to go out on the street on my own in Manhattan. However, up in the Bronx on Decatur Avenue, when I was six and seven, I used to go wandering off. My mother had certain rules. I wasn't allowed to cross big streets alone, so I couldn't cross 200th Street or Webster Avenue. But, I found a way to get across 200th Street. I would go down to Webster Avenue, which was the next street down from Decatur Avenue. It was a main thoroughfare, where the elevated subway train, known as the EL, was located. And there were stairs going up to the EL station on both sides of 200th street. You could go up on one side and just cross over through the station without paying anything, and walk down the stairs on the other side of 200th Street, so I could get across this main thoroughfare without disobeying my mother.

The Bronx Botanical Gardens was nearby, but it was on the other side of Webster Avenue, which was also a busy street with cars, trolleys and the EL. There were businesses and taverns and grocery stores all along Webster Ave. I wasn't allowed to cross that street either. But just as I could cross over 200th Street by going up to the EL station and crossing over, so too could I go up two blocks to Mosholu Parkway which had a bridge, an overpass that crossed over Webster Ave. So I would go up there, walk along the sidewalk on the overpass over Webster Avenue, and come down on the other side.

There was a nice amateur baseball field there, named for Frankie Frisch aka "The Fordham Flash." Born in the Bronx, Frisch had attended nearby Fordham College and then was a major league player for the New York Giants. He was a local hero, and I remember my Dad telling me about him. Sometime I would stop and watch the game. Or I could continue along another overpass to the other side of the New York Central and New Haven Railroad tracks that ran parallel to Webster Avenue, and which separated the shopping area along Webster Avenue from the Botanical Gardens.

From there, I could walk into the Botanical Gardens and along the Bronx River and go exploring for blocks and blocks, again without ever violating my mother's rules. I would go off, always by myself, wandering around. I remember that there was a swimming hole with a rope on which boys would swing out and drop into the pond.

If I wanted to take a shortcut, rather than going back up to the overpass to get to Webster Avenue, I would cut across the train tracks, walking right over the New York Central and the New Haven Railway. So I often did that. I remember one day, I was in the middle of the tracks, when all of a sudden I heard a horn. I looked up and, there was a train barreling toward me with

its bright light and the horn blaring (gasps). I froze! But then, somehow, I jumped off just in time. I still remember to this day how close it was.

*Q: Oh yeah.*

QUINN: I have really vivid memories of this period when I was seven, eight, nine, and 10 years old living in the Bronx on the "Block" of Decatur Avenue.

*Q: What about your friends? Were you aware of the differences? I mean I don't remember as a kid -- I lived in the Los Angeles area -- and going to my Jewish friends' places smelled differently because the cooking was different.*

QUINN: Yes.

*Q: I mean were you aware of the differences?*

QUINN: The first thing when you met a new kid, the first thing you asked him was, "What are you?" Which was meant to ask-- what's your ethnicity? "What are you?" And the answer would be German or Irish or Italian or -- whatever.

*Q: What would you say?*

QUINN: Irish.

*Q: Mm-hmm.*

QUINN: Irish. I wouldn't say Irish Catholic. I'd just say Irish.

*Q: Irish.*

QUINN: It was right after World War II. And so there's a little bit of antagonism toward kids who were German. I don't remember World War II, but I knew Germany had been our enemy. But you didn't immediately dislike or fight kids who were German just because of that.

*Q: And what about the Italians?*

QUINN: My best friend was Italian, Dougie De Matteo. He lived down the street from me in an apartment house on Decatur Avenue. The Antonucci boys, Johnny and Jimmy, also Italian, lived

there as well. They were considerably older. I idolized them because they were big and good athletes. They were the best stickball players on the block.