

MOVING TO THE EAST BANK---OF THE MISSISSIPPI / THE AGONY OF A BRONX ACCENT

*Q: You were well out of it. OK, then you were 10-years-old when you went to La Crosse.*

QUINN: Yes.

*Q: What was La Crosse like?*

QUINN: Oh, my heavens. It was like I had landed on the moon. It was so different from what I came from. It was a small town of maybe 40,000 people. The downtown looked a little bit like a Bronx neighborhood in New York. I remember we got off the train and we stayed in the Stoddard Hotel on Fourth Street, and there was a movie theater across the street playing "Ma and Pa Kettle at Home." As I looked out the window, I was wondering, "Where am I? And how did I get here? I didn't know anybody. So by now I had moved twice from a school in two years, and had left behind all my friends on Decatur Avenue, which was heartbreaking. No problem leaving behind Gun Hill Road. But in Wisconsin, everything was so different. There was no TV. I was going back to listening to the radio. And, I was put in school in fourth grade in the middle of the year in the local Catholic school, St. Joseph's. No one knew me. I could play sports, so that helped a little bit. Gradually, I made a friend, Patrick Pralle, who became my best friend.

I was an altar boy, so that also gave me a little identity as my religious zeal was still strong. But, I remember one day being laughed at in class because I spoke with a Bronx accent. It happened despite my Dad's encouraging me to practice speaking with that Swedish accent; and reminding me to say "hi" to everybody on the street (whether I knew them or not); and remembering that water fountains were called "bubblers" ; and that it's not "soda," but "pop." My biggest language crisis came in fourth grade and it happened when the nun asked a question. I wanted her to call on me because I thought I knew the answer. I was thrusting my arm up in the air while shouting, "Sister, Sister." And she called on a couple others and --

*Q: Sticking your hand up.*

QUINN: Yes, my hand was up and I said, "Sister, Sister, I've got an 'idear'." The other kids started laughing at me a little bit. And, looking around, I said "Why are they laughing? I repeated "Sister, I have an 'idear'." With that they were laughing a lot more. So, finally I said, "Sister, why are they laughing at me? All I said was I have an 'idear'." By then, she was laughing at me with tears running down her face. And, finally she got herself under control and she said, "Well Kenneth, the word is 'i-de-a.'"

I replied: "That's what I said, 'idear'." And --

*Q: (laughs)*

QUINN: I figured it out finally, and I said to myself that "I don't want to be laughed at like that ever again." I vowed to myself that I was never going to speak with a New York accent again, and so I had to figure this out. The other memory I have of being embarrassed in that school came on the first day when recess took place in the middle of the morning. When the bell rang, I didn't know what it was. We didn't have recess in New York. I thought it must be lunch, but it was still very early. So everybody got up and went outside and started playing. I went outside and didn't know anyone and didn't want to appear stupid by not knowing what was going on. My Dad's store -- the KayBee Store -- wasn't far away, so I ran over there.

When I got there, he asked "What are you doing here?" I replied, "Well, the bell rang and everybody went out. I guess school's over."

And the woman who worked for him said, "Oh, it's recess."

"What's recess," I asked? She explained, so I quickly ran back and when recess was over, we went back inside and continued school. That's how I learned about recess.

*Q: Well, by this time, what about courses and all? How were you in English, math, other --*

QUINN: I was okay, I guess. I don't really remember. I got pretty good grades. I think I was a good student -- I wasn't the star student. I wasn't the smartest kid in the class or the teacher's pet, or anything. But I think I did well enough. I don't remember getting bad marks. I don't remember getting all A's either. I was an altar boy and I played sports and got invited --- this was when I was a sixth-grader -- to try out for the school football team, which was all seventh and eighth graders. This was a big deal. I made starting right guard and played in the games against other schools like Blessed Sacrament. I had an old style, black leather football helmet which I took home and decorated with a strip of white adhesive tape to make it look modern. Then I painted the strip red with nail polish, so it was very with it.