

MY FIRST TERRORIST EXPERIENCE

I also had an early experience with terrorism in La Crosse, or at least feeling terrified. It came the first time I encountered “June Bugs” or as they were sometimes called “fish flies”. I recall coming out of the Wisconsin Theater on Main Street after dark in the summer of 1952 shocked to find myself being swarmed by hundreds and hundreds of big buzzing bugs with large wings that were formed into huge black swirling clouds under every street light and around lights in stores. They had a terrible fishy smell, and they crunched when you stepped on them. With its multiple bulbs to attract movie goers, the front of the theater was full of them. Not knowing what they were or what they could do to me, I ran through them to the entry way of the next store only to be engulfed again. It was only when I ran at top speed away from the lights toward some darkened side streets that I finally escaped, but with multiple flies in my hair and still attached to my clothes. They didn’t bite or do anything to harm you, but they were obnoxious and scary in huge numbers.

I later learned that the bugs were bred in the river and would hatch each year in May or June and then rise up in unison out of the river and swarm for one night only. By the next morning they would have perished, lying around the downtown would be foul smelling piles of dead bugs. Legend had it that sometimes there would be so many that snow plows had to be used to remove them, but I never saw that myself.

I also kept up my fascination with police cases and crime. La Crosse was a town near an Army base named Camp McCoy. There were a lot of National Guard units training there. Soldiers would come to town to drink down on Third Street, which was the bar street in La Crosse. One night a Guard member was murdered and his body was dumped right across the street from our house. I still remember going over to see the indentation in the neighbor’s garden where the body had been dropped. There was also a terrible case of the disappearance of a 15 year old girl named Evelyn Hartley, who attended Central High School. There was a massive hunt for clues, including every car being inspected and issued a “My Car is Okay” sticker that appeared in the window. But, the case was never solved until some clues emerged very recently, over 50 years later.

We also had to call the police when someone vandalized my bike that was left sitting outside at night by the side of the house. I suspected a kid who lived in the next block with whom I had some kind of feud. Those crimes were really very unusual occurrences. La Crosse was a very safe place, a Catholic town, with Catholic churches seemingly everywhere: German Catholics, Irish Catholics.

Q: Well, there were you aware of the difference between Irish and Polish or --

QUINN: From living in New York, I was certainly aware of that. But I don't remember many ethnic divisions in La Crosse. There weren't many Italians in La Crosse. There were lots of Germans, Swedes and some Irish. But basically it was just being Catholic. That's what made us different from everybody. And the nuns always told us that, "We're the ones going to heaven and they're not." It was very reassuring.

Q: Well, this --

QUINN: Yeah.

Q: How about -- did you start picking up and showing interest in any particular subjects by this time, or was --

QUINN: No. I don't remember any -- I was interested in learning Latin for the mass. So that was intriguing. But it was memorization. I was saying words but didn't know the meaning, I was OK at spelling. I remember I did real well in fifth grade geography learning about South America countries and memorizing those. We also studied some of Africa. I used to know where Northern Rhodesia was and Southern Rhodesia and also the Belgian Congo: but, not Asia. I didn't know where anything was in Asia since we never studied it. That would come back to impact me years later on the GRE- the Graduate Record Exam, which was like the SAT except for graduate school, when I got a low score on geo-politics.

Q: Did the Korean War intrude at all?

QUINN: I was certainly aware of the Korean War. I remember Panmunjom and Eisenhower pledging to go to Korea. So I knew there was a war going on, but it didn't affect my family. We didn't have any relatives there. My Dad hadn't been in the military at all. Somehow he had missed the draft or had been exempted in World War II. So the only things I remember about Korea is from news reports I had seen in New York and then on radio. Yes, we only had radio, as there was no TV in La Crosse. So, I was back to listening to radio shows again.

I used to sit at night with the radio -- late at night--and turn the radio dial to try to find stations from far away. It was intriguing when I could get a station from Canada or a 50,000 watt clear channel station from Del Rio, Texas. Faraway places on the radio attracted me. It was this fascination that I see as the beginning of my yearning to explore the world which would draw me to the Foreign Service.