



Lutheran School*

My 7th and 8th year of education was in Lutheran School in Sleepy Eye. The school was tight against the church in the southeast corner of town, as far from the Catholic church as possible.

Sleepy Eye had about a dozen churches when I was growing up and several of them were Lutheran of one kind or another, but they could just as well have been in different towns so far as interaction was concerned.

The Catholic church, by far, was the biggest church in town, located on the “other side of the tracks”. It has twin towering steeples visible when approaching Sleepy Eye from the east. The sight against a setting sun nourishes the soul.

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The Lutheran church was the second largest in Sleepy Eye. It too is a handsome building with a "not to sneeze at" steeple of its own.

I do not remember how the news was broken to me, but I remember crying when I learned my 6th grade would be my last in District 36. I was poking hay down from the hay loft for the horses with tears streaming down my cheeks.

I guess it had escaped me that Bonito had her 7th and 8th grades in Lutheran School, and so it would be with Carolla and Dean to follow.

But crying did no good. That fall I was in Lutheran School. Dad transported me (because you could not be bussed to a parochial school).

My teacher was Harold Klatt, a rotund fellow, about 5'9" with a head of pitch black hair. He was largely good natured, except when there was acting up in the classroom.

The whole point of Lutheran School was to make you a good Lutheran. You memorized a new hymn every week and on Mondays Klatt took church attendance. My parents were moderate church goers, so I was only able to respond "yes" about 50% of the time.

Our church was part of the Wisconsin Synod brand of Lutheranism, aka German Lutheran.

There are various brands of Lutherans, but Wisconsin Synod Lutherans are more Lutheran than Martin Luther. The Synod is a splinter from the Missouri Synod – it split over who knows what?

The Missouri Synod Lutherans, in the eyes of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, were a bunch of wild-eyed radicals just one step short of being pinko commies.

My minister, Gerald Hoenecke, was a fire and brimstone preacher. If you were not afraid when you walked in church, I can guarantee you were when you walked out.

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Women had no standing in the church. Women could not vote on church matters and in my young years had to sit apart from men – women on the left and men on the right. The lack of standing teed Mother off. Eventually it got so men and women could sit together and so women could vote and now, even a few women preachers.

The religion is fundamental. The Bible is interpreted literally. The Church used the begats in Genesis to deduce the age of the earth; exactly 6,342 years old when I entered school. The concept of evolution was a notion spread by the Devil, like portrayed in *Inherit the Wind*.

That approach to dating was to cause me trouble later. I was comfortable with the begat reckoning of time in Lutheran School because I had never heard of Darwin, but later on, in college, the begat system of dating would collide with carbon dating and Darwin.

Klatt did his best to immunize us against the work of the Devil. We had ample warnings how we would be confronted out in the world.

Both Klatt and Hoenecke made it clear that we should stay away from Catholics for the obvious reason. If you hobnobbed with them, chances were good that you would marry one and get sucked into the Catholic church. Even if you avoided that, there would be a fair chance that your kids would be Catholic. You cannot sustain a church without kids.

I was bothered by the admonition because our best friends were Catholics – the Mertz and Hirsch families. There were many a Sunday when we went on picnics to Fort Ridgely and in the winter when we were at Mertz's or Hirsch's or they at our house for birthday celebrations and card parties.

I found it hard to believe that we had stumbled on the one true faith, that all others were doomed, and that Catholics were the most doomed of all.

One day after church – we had to go to church for weekly scoldings, Wednesdays I think – and after the preacher had finished putting the fear of the Devil in us about

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all matter of things, I mustered up courage to ask him what would happen to Catholics when they died. Were they going to hell?

I don't remember how he answered, but it was a waffle. He implied that it would be hard for them to make it to heaven, but he did not rule it out.

Sleepy Eye was divided by religion. The "other side of the tracks" referred to Catholics living north of the railroad tracks. If some one turned Catholic it was the talk of the town. Jim Schwartz, our neighbor and member of our church, married a Catholic and got sucked in. It was as if he had died.

It was gloomy in our house when Bonito came dragging with a Catholic. The work-around was to be married by a Justice of the Peace, but the Catholic church did not recognize such marriages and hence, in the eyes of the church, they were living in sin. As a result, Hen was excommunicated from his church. That caused Bonito considerable mental anguish. Eventually they were "remarried" by a priest so Hen could go back to his church.

The irony is that after Hen remarried, following Bonito's death, he joined his wife's church - Lutheran!

Mother and Dad were not all that happy when Carolla came dragging with another Catholic, but by then were modestly philosophical about the dragging.

When Dean came dragging with yet another Catholic they did not care.

* Modified from entry by the same name in *Essays and Stories from Klinkapunk*