

## Mediation Story or Roots

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By Jerry Barrett

In the late 1960s, I was a federal mediator assigned to Milwaukee, where the unions were big and strong in that heavily industrial region. Many union members in industrial plants were second generation Europeans who had a lot of national pride.

A senior mediator had been assigned to a dispute at a large manufacturing plant where he had mediated several times before. When he took sick I substituted for him.

When I arrived at the plant, management and union negotiating committees were waiting in separate rooms. I visited the management room first to introduce myself. Then I enter the union room to do the same, before getting the two sides together. Before I had said two sentences, one of the guys (they were all guys) said: “Barrett is an Irish name. Are you Irish?” I was surprised by the question, but I said: “Yes, but I was born in this country.” Another guy started a series of questions about my Dad. Was he a Hibernian? Did he march in the St. Patrick’s parade? Does he wear a green tie or shirt on St. Patrick’s Day? Had I been to Ireland? Where did I visit? What was my Dad’s home county?

Another union member ask about my Mother’s birthplace? I reported that her Dad came to the U.S. at age 14 from Switzerland. More question on my Mother, and then someone asked: “Did you know the Swiss Government will extend citizenship to any descendent of anyone who

migrated from Switzerland? I did know that, which got a big laugh.

Many questions followed until, someone asked: “How does your Irish Dad and you Swiss Mother get along?” So I told him very well, even though my Dad liked to say: “The only two European countries that stayed out of WW11 were the cowardly Swiss and the peace-loving Irish.” When Dad said that, my Mother would always say: “Oh Hank.” And smile and laugh.

After at least 20 minutes with the Union, I returned to the management room to invite them to join me and the Union in the large conference room. As they came out of their room, one of the managers asked if the Union had asked about my nationality. When I answer yes, they all laughed.

After two full days with them, which included much good-natured banter about nationalities, we reached an agreement to everyone’s satisfaction.

As we all shook hands, the union credited my mediation skills to me knowing my roots; and management credited the settlement to me being able to get-on with the union.

(When this story happened, I was in my early 30s.)