

Sometimes home can echo in a voice

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"Whatchu want this evening?" the sandwich maker asked the woman in front of me. He was tall with curly white hair and a friendly face; he sported a mustard-caked Ron Jon Surf Shop T-shirt and faded cut-off jeans. Rivers of wrinkles etched his face and arms, his body telling the story of years in the sun. I recognized his accent like the back of my hand, 1,900 miles and 36 years away from my hometown and most certainly near his, in sweet home Massachusetts.

As he discussed dinner options with the woman, I tried to place him more precisely in the state in vain, but I listened with pleasure to the accent which still rings true and clear and screams "home" in a way that nothing else in the world does.

"You sound like you're from the upper Midwest ... oh, Minnesota, huh? Ja, that's the great white North, isn't it? You want a six inch sub or a twelve inch sub? Not sure? I'll tell you why you're not sure ... it's because you don't know math. You were in school in the '70s, weren't you? Public school, right? Thought so. Well, I was in public school in the '60s, and let me tell you, back then, they could TEACH math. Okay, so you want the six inch sub, okay ... I'm on it ... "

"And you," he bantered, pulling me into the conversation, "you went to public school in the '70s too, didn't you?" When I answered in the affirmative, he replied, "Well, I'll bet you can't do math either!" He was wrong. I teach engineering at LSU, and if there's one thing you need to be good at to teach engineering, it's math. I couldn't bear to enlighten him, however, I was enjoying his commentary so much.

His monologue was moving much more quickly than the construction of the woman's sandwich, and the chow line was starting to swell. He ignored it and continued talking about the nuance necessary to master multiplication tables and long division, much of the time imitating his customer's pseudo-Fargo accent. He finally finished with her sandwich and rang up her meal. She grabbed the plastic-wrapped package and slunk out the door, thoroughly talked through.

"Now, whatchu want?" he quipped. I was ready with my sandwich order and I tacked the words, "Are you from Massachusetts?" onto the end of my request, knowing it was the only opportunity I had to get a word in edgewise.

"Yes! I'm originally from Newton - what about you, where are you from?" I told him that I was from New Bedford, but that my time in the Midwest had eroded my accent from distinctive to neutral. "Nah, I can still hear the trace of Massachusetts there," he lied. "When did you leave the state?" I asked.

"Well, back in '66, when I was 18 years old, I got my first boat and decided to sail here, to Cocoa Beach. I loved it so much that even though I returned to Mass after a few weeks, I knew I had to live here, so after a coupla years in the fishing business, I came back, this time to stay. Here I am. Been here 34 years. My boat's just out back. I live on it, too."

I stole a look at the line, which was now close to stretching out the door. Folks were looking antsy, which is quite a feat as far as customer service in the South, where slow is expected and glacial is acceptable. He didn't seem fazed in the least by their impatience, his New England efficiency as absent as my New England accent.

Because I live in Louisiana, I don't get much of a chance to talk to people who really understand the Red Sox Nation, so I jumped on my second and last opportunity to ask, "What do you think about the Red Sox? When they finally won the Series, I broke down and cried like a baby. Wasn't that great?"

"Not really," he said, "I mean, it's their lot in life to be losers, it's been their identity for 86 years. Now that they've lost that, what are they going to do? Anyway, here's your sandwich - enjoy Cocoa Beach while you're here. Make sure you try the mango margarita at Vincent's. And hey, I gave you the employee discount, how's that math for you?"

I thanked him and walked out of the store, past the line, which was now out the door, contemplating regional customs, the meaning of home, and the irony of winning.

Caption: B.W. illustration of a sandwich maker from Newton, Massachusetts. (by David I. Norwood)

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