

SOME OF MY OWN SISTER KENNY
MEMORIES & IMPRESSIONS:

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I can remember the first time I interviewed her. Up to then -- though I was ~~xxxx~~ covering medicine -- I had avoided her. Too much talk about how difficult she was ~~xx~~ to deal with.

Reporters -- especially the girls (perhaps she could be more dominant with the girls) -- told how she more or less dictated to them, then, when finished, drew a breath and said: "Now read that back to me."

I saw her at the Lyckman hotel. We sat down -- another reporter there too -- ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ in the hall just outside a meeting room. She had an "important announcement," we'd been told. (It turned out to be "proof" again of her concept.) I remembered what Rita Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Tribune had told me (when we covered the Howard ----- trial): "I always got along with her 'cause I kidded her. She likes a good story, you know, and doesn't care if it's a little blue." (As best as I can remember what she said.)

So, after being introduced, I started out by saying: "Sister Kenny, there's one thing I've always wanted to ask you about." She asked what was it. I said: "Where do you get those hats." ... She said the mother of a patient made that one for her -- a sweeping graceful black and white number that could have passed for a flying saucer. She seemed pleased, all right, and amused.

She was quick to complain and write letters, see the editor etc when she thought she or her theories were wronged. We got many such letters. And Gid Seymour could expect a periodic visit. Once, she walked into his office -- the door was always open -- when ~~xxx~~ he was not there. His secretary spied her, but didn't know who she was. "Wouldn't you like to wait out here?" asked the secretary, wondering what sort of person this was -- a newspaper attracts odd sorts and peculiar callers like a horse attracts flies. "No, thank you," she said, "I'll wait right here." And did, to the secretary's discomfort.

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Once we devoted a page -- after she'd been here 10 years -- to her, however. A good one -- a good story, and one she liked. She called up at about 10 p.m. Sunday night, talked to a rewriter and told him, "This is Sister Kenny. I called to say I liked your story this morning."

I interviewed her for the better part of a morning (afternoon?) for that story. For months she'd been flooding us with duplicated copies of medical articles, letters and reports -- she was never without a briefcase full of documentation -- and all the stuff had been passed on to me. At one point she'd seen Seymour; he'd had ~~xxxxxx~~ me see Dr. Huenekens. Then he had Bill Elston (then assistant to the exec ed) see Huenekens too -- Huenekens advised us to hold off. Much of the stuff we'd printed before, or referred to. Anyway, I went to her home on Park Avenue that day.

She stepped slowly and with a good deal of majesty down the staircase, gave me a very formal and chilly hello, and said, right away: "What have you people done with all that material I've been sending you? Why haven't you had any stories?" I decided the fastest thing to do would be to take the blame, quickly and simply. So I said, "It's all my fault, Sister Kenny. The editors have been giving it to me, and they've wanted a story, but I just haven't been able to get to it until now."

Of course there was some truth, a good deal, in fact, in that -- but not all the truth by ~~xxxxxxxx~~ any means.

The truth is we were tired of her. "Sister Kenny? Not again," was the frequent reaction to a call or a letter or an item on the wife that she was claiming "new proof" someplace, or taking off again on the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis.

On her last or next-to-last trip back to Minneapolis, I saw her in her room at the Nicollet. I brought her a book. She thanked me, and she was very friendly and gracious that day -- actually the gift didn't seem to have anything to do with it. She was in a pleasant mood, and -- all the difference -- the world wasn't around watching.

Her secretary or companion went downstairs to get something to eat. Sister Kenny had to answer the phone when it rang. It was someone trying to sell her something or convince her of some crank idea about polio -- she was always plagued by these people, whenever they read that she was in town. She said, imperiously, over the phone, "Sister Kenny is not in. This is her secretary." And made short shrift of the caller. Some of the doctors who called her a "crank" might have been amused by knowing ~~xxxx~~ she was plagued by ~~xxxxxxxx~~ cranks too.

I never saw Sister Kenny move quickly. It was always slowly, and in a stiff, stately way. She seemed ~~xxxxxx~~ to have more and more difficulty moving, and carrying her own weight. But I saw her only in her very late years, after she had slowed down -- not in her earlier, much nimbler Minneapolis years, when she was merely in her early sixties.

She was a big woman. But she didnot seem pompous to me, so much as detached. She ~~ix~~ was, in part, in a little world of her own.

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I saw her spk, and at public occas^o's, many times. She was always a figure. ~~XXXXXXX~~ A presence. You were always aware of her presence. An actress would have said she had stage presence. She dominated a room, or a stage, or an auditorium, or a ~~ward~~ medical ward.

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