A CHRISTMAS STORY 2:

In loving memory of my father, Emery Guy Roberts, 1916-2011

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December is the month for reflection about the past year and anticipation of the coming New Year. Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday when it is appropriate to recognize many of our blessings. Christmas, however, is a very special holiday for many families, but particularly for mine. This Christmas will mark the first December since I was born (and I was born in December) that I will not be celebrating with my father, Emery Guy Roberts. He passed this year at the age of 95. My dad, the eldest of four siblings, had become the patriarch of the Roberts clan. My mother had passed several years before, but her brother, my uncle Bob, turned 100 this past summer. I also lost several friends and acquaintances this year. 2011 has been a very somber year for me.

A Farming History: My heritage can be traced to Radnor, Wales. In the early 1800's, some Roberts brothers immigrated to the North America in search of a new life. Some of them traveled along the Erie Canal and one eventually settled in a Welch community near, appropriately, Radnor, Ohio. The Roberts's were farmers. Like his father and grandfather, my father assumed the farming life. The community was very close. If someone needed help, neighbors and relatives "pitched in." I remember on several occasions when my dad would either plant or harvest crops for some other farmer because the other farmer had fallen ill. My parents would sometimes talk about The Great Depression when so many people were out of work and suffering. As farmers they related how they were not as affected by the Depression as others were. They lived on "self sufficient" farms: grew their own food in gardens, cut blocks of ice in the winter for refrigeration in the summer, raised geese for down for pillows and bedding, chickens for eggs and meat, beef and pigs for meat, sheep for wool, obtained maple syrup from their woods, maintained an orchard for apples, pears, peaches and grapes, and a cow for milk and cheese. They shared what they had with other less well off or unfortunate people during those difficult years. Nevertheless, my parents continued to live "The Great Depression" the rest of their lives. They rarely splurged on anything. Even though my mom could afford new clothes, she frequently went to the Salvation Army or some other second-hand store for a winter coat or "new dress." My dad never borrowed money; he bought cars, trucks and farm equipment by writing a check from money they had saved. They didn't buy a new car every couple of years but always kept them at least 10 years, until they wore out. They were humble people, never needing to own the biggest house or the fanciest car. To better care for his family my dad also worked on the C&O railroad for several years (Photo 1). If more Americans lived within their means today, we might not find ourselves in the current economic crisis, some call the "Great Recession."

A Love of Plants: Growing up on a farm teaches you many things. My love for plants came at an early age. We always had a large vegetable garden where I learned the propagation and care of plants; despite being a teacher, my mother somehow found the time to can much of the produce from that garden. As a youngster, I planted many trees, probably stimulated early on by our tradition that every Christmas we would journey to a distant "You Pick" tree farm where we would dig, not cut, our Christmas tree. Soon after the holiday ended, the Christmas tree was planted in our yard. Not all of them lived, but many did. I remember one Christmas tree that was the most perfect tree I had ever seen; later, I learned that it was called a Colorado blue spruce, not the scruffy pines we normally planted. I watched in wonder as it grew every year in perfect, precise structure. One year, some "worms" (sawflies) ate most of the needles from the tree, and I was devastated. In high school, I became interested in science. One science fair project involved "grafting" where I learned to graft tomatoes on peppers and peppers on eggplant, etc. Because my high school was close to a USDA Forest Research Station near Delaware, Ohio, I also grafted an American elm scion onto a Siberian elm rootstock. At the time, some scientists believed that the Siberian root stock might confer resistance to Dutch Elm Disease(DED) to the American elm scion (top). After the project was completed, I planted the small pencil-sized grafted elm in my parent's front yard and forgot about it. Several years later, I received a call from the USDA scientists who had taught me how to graft the tree; they wondered if the tree was still alive. Apparently, all of their hundreds of grafts had failed, and my tree became an instant celebrity. My elm tree not only

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Photo 1: Long ago, my dad (posing in front) was "Fireman" on C&O's H-8 Allegheny 1601 shown here in the Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Some experts considered the H-8 to be the world's largest and most powerful steam locomotive ever built (move over Union Pacific "Big Boy"!).

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survived the grafting procedure but continued to grow, to their amazement, and eventually reached more than 40 feet tall (Photo 2). It finally succumbed to DED in 2001, but the Siberian root stock continued to survive. While my father believed that I could get a decent job or become a successful farmer, my mother, who graduated from college in 1937 (Photo 3), believed in education. Hence, I was "strongly urged" by her to attend college. As had always been a part of their life, my parents sacrificed to help support my education as well as future generations.

The Greatest Generation: Tom Brokaw considered my/our parents generation the greatest generation this nation has ever seen. This is a rather bold suggestion when all of the previous generations, particularly the founding fathers of this country, are considered. However, I agree with Mr. Brokaw for of several reasons. This generation helped to create and witness more change than any generation previously experienced. My dad started out farming with horses at the "home place" (Photo 4). When he bought his first tractor, it was a quantum leap in technology (Photo 5). Today, much more advanced tractors plant and harvest crops controlled by satellites from space. Their generation also watched the rapid development of aviation and space flight. Uncle Edgar (Dad's brother) piloted B-17 bombers over enemy-held territory in Europe and was extremely lucky to return home (Photo 6); many did not and made the ultimate sacrifice. As I write this article on Veterans Day, I'm reminded that those veterans who survived the war are dying by the thousands every day as they reach their twilight years. Unlike today (with the utmost respect for those in our armed forces), everyone in my dad's generation participated in some manner in World War II. And with their sacrifices, the U.S. and Allies prevailed. Otherwise, our country might be far different today. My dad witnessed the introduction of electricity into homes, the atomic age, the development of television, radio, telephone, computers and so many other marvels of technology. When I was young, my dad frequently took me out into the yard at night to watch the astronauts and satellites fly over. Their generation also ushered some important changes in the U.S. Constitution… such as a woman's right to vote and equality for all races of Americans. My parents, like many in their generation, continued to sacrifice to make our lives better. Perhaps I'm showing my age, but I believe that if more recent generations were less selfish, this country might not be in such dire straits today.

I love older people largely because of

Photo 2: In his mid-80s, my father poses next to the American/Siberian elm I grafted in high school. The graft union can easily be seen. This tree, originally a pencil-sized tree when planted in my parent's front yard, was apparently the sole survivor of 100's of grafts performed by USDA scientists during the 1960's and 1970's.

Photo 3: My mother, Ruth Elizabeth, graduated from college in 1937, an uncommon achievement for women in those days. She strongly believed in education and urged me into college and beyond.

Photo 4: My father's generation witnessed more changes than most generations. My father was born in this house and started farming with horses as his father had before him.

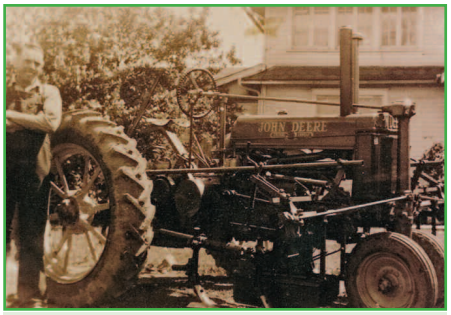

Photo 5: My father's first tractor was a monumental leap in technology.

Photo 6: My uncle Edgar was a B-17 bomber pilot in World War II. In this photo, he is piloting his plane "Flak Dodger." Early in the war on some missions, 50-60% of these bombers and their crews were sometimes shot down over Europe. My uncle came home with many medals and was considered a war hero; many didn't come home and paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Photo 7: In this old family photo, my dad (on stump) poses with my grandfather after they had cut down this tree with the two-man saw (leaning on trunk). Over twenty sheep were killed under this tree during a lightning strike, which also killed the tree.

Photo 8: This Burr oak was "born" many years before Abraham Lincoln became President. What a story it could tell! As with many other trees, this old Burr Oak in Ohio provides an environment of solace for me during some of my more somber moments.

my deeply help respect for the sacrifices they have made to make this country and our communities a better place. I love to hear about their knowledge and experiences, which they are usually so willing to share (Photo 7). I suppose that's also why I love and respect trees (Photo 8). And, I am very thankful for a career with the green industry. Thank you for allowing me to share a few personal moments; I'm sure many of you have similar experiences. Please let me wish you and your family a most wonderful holiday season.