Leaflets News and Information for the Arborists of Michigan

A Christmas Story

By David L. Roberts, Ph.D, *Michigan State University*

Sliding through Thanksgiving and into the Christmas and New Year's holidays, it is often a period for reflection for many of us. It is a time when we visit with relatives, renew old acquaintances and contemplate the past and future.

My parents grew up in the Great Depression. Both lived on self-sufficient farms where geese were raised for down to stuff pillows and mattresses, maple syrup was made from boiled sap in a log cabin in the woods, chickens were reared for eggs and meat, etc . . . you get the picture. As such, they were probably not nearly as affected by the Great Depression as many people who were displaced and struggled from day to day, sometimes to even find food. Nevertheless, my parents have lived their entire lives as if the Great Depression still exists, being frugal with everything from clothes to food, and not buying a new car unless they could pay with cash.

While I was born more than two decades after the Great Depression began, I also lived through the Great Depression through my parents. As a youngster, I sometimes worried about the holidays. My birthday falls on December 27, way too close to Christmas for my comfort. I worried that I might be short-changed on gifts with only two days separating the two most important days in my life. Compared to other kids, I probably was short-changed, but, my parents taught me the value of things and of life. Of the few toys I received, I still have most today, also the reason I am the biggest Pack Rat I know. Have you seen the poster that shows a garage packed with stuff to the roof and has the caption, "He who has the most stuff when they die, wins"? That's me.

One Christmas, just like Ralphie in the movie, I got a Daisy BB gun. Luckily, I never shot my eye out, but quite a few BBs hit me when they ricocheted off of trees, buildings and rocks and things. Like many younguns, I played Cowboys and Indians. That western outfit (Photo 1) was actually borrowed from a neighbor so that the picture could be taken; we couldn't "afford such fancy duds." Those were my guns, though. I always wanted a horse, but my dad had had enough of horses. You see, he grew up with and started farming with horses, and, boy, can they be stubborn. He was so happy when the iron horse (tractor) came along. So, without a horse, I had to improvise; that's my pet pig, "Fatty Cheeks," in the picture (Photo 2). Growing up on a farm, I did many of the things farm kids did. I belonged to 4H and raised steers to show at the county fair (Photo 3), which also helped me save money for college. As a teacher, my mother was a strong proponent of education for her sons. After college and with ownership of three advanced degrees, I became a scientist at a Land Grant University and became involved with a wonderful landscape industry whose purpose is to create a wonderful environment for us all.

Photo 1

Photo 2

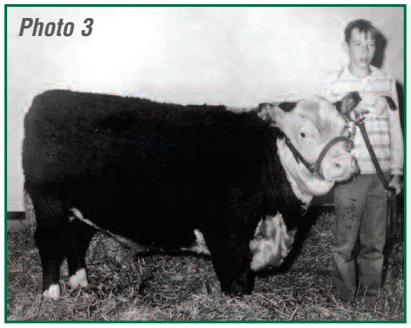

Photo 3

Photo 3: My steer, "Big Boy," at 1,200 pounds, was the biggest and probably most docile steer at the fair that year. I'm glad he was too big to move very far or very fast. Otherwise, I might have had the wildest "horse" ride of my life.

The experts say we are gradually recovering from the worst recession since the Great Depression. Even so, many more people are still losing their jobs. During these holidays, it will be difficult for me to not feel deep compassion for the millions of people who have lost their jobs, their homes and who have no health care. For many years, when family members asked what I wanted for Christmas, I'd respond, "Buy me something 'Made in the USA,'" thinking that I would at least be supporting our country and our communities. Most of my family and many of my friends sometimes look at me with pity as though I belong in some asylum when I repeat my strongly held beliefs about supporting our jobs and our economy, and living within our means. I still can't comprehend how we can expect the economy and jobs to recover when we borrow money from other countries so that we can buy more stuff from those countries, increasing our debt and frittering away future generations' standard of living. That Depression-era living style sure has instilled in me unshakable beliefs that most people today regard as old-fashioned or foolish.

I have lived a very blessed life and have accomplished so many things, if I do say so myself . . . and my parents are extremely proud. Perhaps the greatest gift of all is helping each other. I hope you all have a joyous, loving and happy holiday season. And, uh, did I mention "Buy American"?