Holiday Ramblings from the Plant Doctor

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For the past several years, I have written rather personal messages for the December/Holiday issue of *the Landsculptor*. Last year, I wrote about the passing of my father and relayed some thoughts about my dad's generation; that article stimulated many wonderful supportive comments from friends and colleagues in the industry. I hope you will not mind if I deviate once again from the scientific world and subsume to some further ramblings as we remember those who have gone but are not forgotten during this important Holiday Season.

Whether Weather:

2011 was one of the wettest years on record, and 2012 was one of the driest years on record. Growing up on a farm, such variation in weather could have dire consequences for crops and subsequent yields necessary to maintain financial fluidity for the family business. Our landscape industry can similarly be affected. Then, along came Hurricane Sandy, which devastated many homes and livelihoods on the east coast. Video and photos from Sandy's tantrum brought an all-too-close familiarity from my past.

Many of my friends and colleagues in the industry probably don't know that I was involved in an extreme weather event as a young lad many years ago, and, I am fortunate to have survived it. On Palm Sunday, 1965, at approximately 11:17 p.m. (that's when the clocks stopped), a Tornado ripped through our farming community near Radnor, Ohio (Photo 1). My brother and I were upstairs asleep in our home when the roof was torn off. Unbelievable as it may seem, my brother and I slept through it!! My dad called from the ground floor where he and mom were sleeping, and when we did not answer, he thought we were gone. As he looked up the winding staircase, he saw a clear sky with numerous stars. Refusing to believe the tornado had swept my brother and me away, he finally woke us from our deep slumber. We were then forced to walk in the dark to a neighbor's house about a mile away, stepping over downed power lines, dead farm animals and debris all the way. Most of our farm's outbuildings simply disappeared. Straw had been driven into the bark of what relics of trees were left standing. Several people in the community died that night as their more modern construction homes were ripped apart and dispersed for miles along the tornado's path. When observing our house, many people remarked that someone had to have been watching over us. That may be true. However, the main square structure of our home was of heavy log construction. The tornado actually moved the house off its foundation. Needless to say, my family and I have felt very fortunate to have survived that potentially deadly encounter with nature.

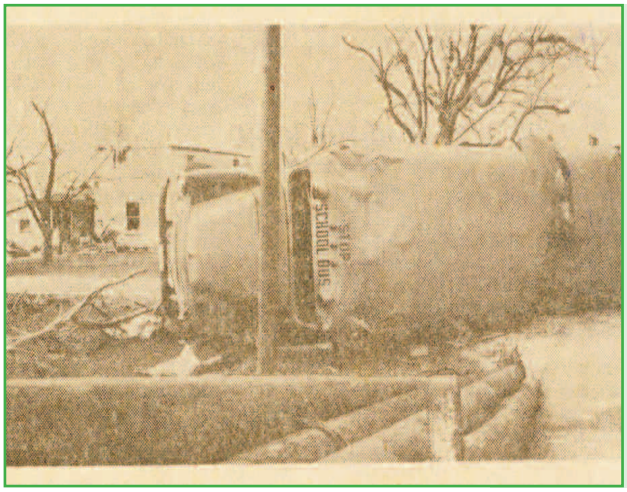

Photo 1: After witnessing Hurricane Sandy's wrath, I can't help but remember that on Palm Sunday, 1965, a Tornado destroyed our family's home. The school bus that my dad drove for the local school district was rolled 100 feet and punctured with a telephone pole. My brother and I were sleeping on the second floor of the house in the background; the roof was torn off but we slept through the whole event! I was frightened by stormy weather for years thereafter.

Photo 2: As a child, I never had many toys and things, especially after the tornado took most of our worldly possessions. This cowboy outfit belonged to a neighbor, who loaned it to me so that my parents could snap this picture of me as a young "dude."

Gremlins and Things:

Having a couple of parents who grew up in the Great Depression, they continued to live meagerly and simply throughout the rest of their lives. To save money, my mom often bought dresses and coats at the thrift store and was constantly sewing patches on our clothes when they seemed close to wearing out. As a youngster, I never had many things due to our Depression-Era style living (Photo 2). What few worldly possessions my family and I did have were swept away by that tornado on Palm Sunday, 1965. Little did I know at the time, but my

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parents were living frugally to save for rainy days and to help put their children through college. My mother, having graduated from college in the 1930s, strongly believed in education, the primary reason I am blessed with an occupation as a scientist at Michigan State University, a Land Grant University established by my "mentor," Abraham Lincoln.

I was instilled with a hard work ethic and the need to live within my means. Because I worked on the family farm and had limited ways to save money for college, I supplemented what little savings I had by raising steers and showing them at the county fair (Photo 3). After graduation from high school with honors (making my parents very proud), I was told I could buy a new car (Photo 4) to drive to college because our family's old Rambler was practically worn out. As reward for all of those years of working on the family farm without pay, my parents had saved sufficient funds to put me through college and buy me a new car. The caveat with the new car was that I would have to live at home (and yes, help with the farm) for the first two years of college and commute to the local Ohio State University branch rather than live on the main campus. In the fall of 1971, I ordered a new 1972 Gremlin from the factory ($2300 brand new); for a young man who never had much throughout his childhood, this new car was a dream come true. Today, people might scoff at a Gremlin, but my own new car represented absolute freedom and snob appeal for a kid who never had much. I drove that Gremlin through college and all my years of graduate studies. After more than 12 years and 140,000 miles, I decided to retire the car and stuck it away in a barn where it would remain undisturbed for the next 28 years. This past spring of 2012, I decided to retrieve that old Gremlin to celebrate its 40th birthday. My dad had always instilled in me that if you took good care of things, they would last a long time. With new brakes, fresh gas and a tune-up, that 40 year-old Gremlin fired right up and ran great (Photo 5). Unfortunately, I think I inherited my mother's Depression-Era affliction known as Pack Ratism. I can't seem to throw anything away - "It might come in handy one day." I hope no one submits my name to that TV program known as "Hoarders."

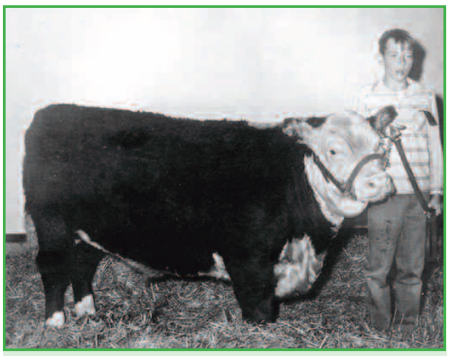

Photo 3: Because I didn't earn any money while working all those years on the family farm, I raised and showed steers at the county fair to save for my college fund.

The Gift of Giving:

Perhaps in contrast to their frugality, my parents were also very generous to the community. As a child, I would have to help my mother prepare dinners for "shut-ins" – her term for the elderly or people who were disadvantaged or ill. The menu usually consisted of turkey dinners for Thanksgiving and ham dinners for Christmas. Of course, she also prepared these meals at other times as well. I recall all the hard work that went into preparation of all those dinners and sometimes wondered why she did it. My wonder disappeared upon delivery of those meals, long before there was a "meals on wheels," when the shut-ins' eyes would light up with overwhelming graciousness and gratitude. Many of these folks were very lonely and loved the

Photo 4: I worked on the family farm until age 18. As part of my parents' reward to me, I was able to buy this new Gremlin in the fall of 1971 as I entered college. I drove that Gremlin for 12+ years and 140,000 miles. I'm astride my older brother's motorcycle.

Photo 5: After being stored in the barn for about 28 years, I finally resurrected the 40 year-old Gremlin this past spring of 2012. The car, having never been overhauled or restored, still looks and runs pretty good.

Photo 6: Since World War II, my dad (left) and Uncle Edgar had given so much blood that they set new records every time they donated-virtually guaranteeing them a photo in the local newspaper. At the time of this photo in the mid 1970s they had contributed over 20 gallons of blood.

companionship my mother gave them, not to mention the great cooking! She also published a monthly newsletter about her family and other events in the community. Too many times I felt embarrassed as everyone in the community learned about my latest (what she regarded as) achievements through my mom's writings. My dad was always helping plant or harvest crops when others became ill or injured from that dangerous occupation known as farming. He would help build new barns if some neighbor's barn burned or blew down. My uncle Edgar (my dad's brother) was a B-17 pilot in World War II. One of my dad's and uncle's many charity efforts after the war was to donate blood. Even though they gave blood only once or twice a year, over the many years they began to set records for blood donations every time they donated again (Photo 6).

I don't think I can ever begin to match the generosity of my parents and relatives of that generation. However, as we approach the Holiday Season and the end of this year, I always try to remember just how rewarding it is to do whatever we can to help others. Now that my parents are gone, I hope as I continue on through this season and succeeding years with their memory and hope that their son still makes them proud.

Thank you for allowing me to share some miscellaneous personal ramblings during this special time of year. Happy Holidays, everyone!