Holiday Sentiments

By David L. Roberts, Ph.D., *Senior Academic Specialist, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University*

Over the past several years, I have occasionally taken the opportunity to express some personal sentiments in The Plant Doctor's column for the December issue. I am cognizant that everyone has similar experiences and hope readers don't mind me sharing a few more of my own experiences.

Photo 1: My mother was educated, independent, resolute and wonderful.

Photo 2: Ruth Elizabeth ("Betty"), my mother, believed her three sons should be raised in a religious and educated environment (I am the youngest).

Family Matters

When I was young, my parents and their siblings (my uncles and aunts) used every holiday as an excuse to call a family gathering. We had picnics galore, sometimes rotating among the family farms but often meeting in the plethora of state parks in Ohio. Veterans Day, Thanksgiving and the Christmas Holiday seasons represent special holidays for most of us toward the end of each year. My parents and my relatives had a great influence on my character and my development as a young lad. Family really mattered. And strong-willed, independent women can have an extraordinary influence on their children. As related previously, my mother (Photo 1) was, perhaps, somewhat unique among mothers of her generation because she graduated from college in the 1930s. She made sure that her sons (Photo 2) had every opportunity to get an education as her parents had given her. Although both of my parents passed several years ago, this past year was again difficult because my final aunt and uncle have now passed. It has suddenly dawned on me in occasional feelings of abandonment and loneliness that I am now a member of the "older generation."

Photo 3: My Aunt Mary (left) and Uncle Edgar (center, a B-17 Pilot in World War II) strongly believed in education and science, and spurred me on to greater heights.

My Aunt Mary (Photo 3) left us just a year ago, just before Christmas, 2012. Also unique among women in those days gone by, she graduated from college and espoused the need for an education for all her children, her extended family (including me) and others in the community. She was not only devoted to education in the community, having served on the school board, etc., but she became an administrator at THE Ohio State University. I'm embarrassed to admit that during one quarter in my sophomore year at THE OSU, I failed all my classes ... but, I became very good at ping pong! Although my mother was disappointed with my grades, she wasn't too alarmed because she knew I could excel at anything I put my efforts toward. My Aunt Mary, however, knew just how to push my buttons and ignite a candle under my momentary lapse. As an Administrator at THE OSU, she had apparently been following my progress, somehow becoming aware of my failing grades (I wasn't about to tell her!); as she approached me one day in the hallway, she simply said, "Well Dave, perhaps you're not cut out for college." I was sooo embarrassed. From then on, I vowed to knuckle down and get to work to prove to my family that I was capable. As I tell youngsters today - "Not only did I walk to school in subzero weather, uphill both ways, we could not erase those failing grades." Actually the latter was true - I repeated those failed courses, four-pointed all of them, but they averaged into my GPA with the failed grades. It seemed to take forever to get my GPA up to where I could qualify to graduate school. Like my mother, Aunt Mary was always supportive of my accomplishments

and frequently asked to read my publications over the years. She especially liked the colorful articles from *the Landsculptor*.

My Uncle Bob (my mother's brother) passed in July (Photo 4). Born in 1911, he lived to 102 years. He was a giant among men… I mean that literally. He stood about 6'5" tall (big for those days!) and was big-boned. He was so gentle and soft/well-spoken that I often thought of him as the "gentle giant." As with most family members of that generation, he contributed to the war effort by enlisting in the Army in World War II. After the war, Uncle Robert, as my mother called him, became a Cooperative Extension and a Soil Conservation Agent and undoubtedly helped to spark some of my interest in science. The career he assumed and the career with which I am fortunate to be involved were largely brought about by President Lincoln's passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, during the turmoil of the American Civil War. The Justin Morrill Act granted land for the establishment of "Land Grant Universities" in each state. Michigan State University was the first Land Grant University, having already been established in 1855, and served as a model for others to follow.

As you have probably surmised, my family is very important to me, and our celebration of the upcoming holidays is a priority in my immediate and extended families. Unfortunately however, as time marches on, fewer of our elders are around to partake in the celebrations. One of my sentimental manners of holding onto my family and to honor them in my own meager way is to cherish their possessions (Photo 5).

Religious Freedom

The holiday season at this time of year often invokes an overriding religious tone in many households. Ours was no exception. I was raised in a very strong Christian family with the associated traditions. First and foremost during the Christmas Holiday, our desire for the accumulation of gifts was secondary to the religious message. In my youth, I had to attend Sunday school and church every Sunday. Feigning a life-threatening illness was not necessarily a guarantee I could avoid going to church (believe me, I tried!). The only illnesses I can recall that actually were legitimate excuses were the rather obvious mumps and measles. It may surprise many who know me, but I sang in the choir, played trumpet solos and even taught Sunday school. I can recall that as a very young child, I played the baby Jesus in the church's Christmas

Photo 4: My Uncle Robert (here with wife Polly) was a giant among men; as a soil conservation agent, he became part of the Land Grant University system established by President Abraham Lincoln.

play; later as a teenager, I played the mature Jesus, donning a fake beard and long hair. My mother was so devoted to her church and community that she took every opportunity to help the needy and teach the Christian message whenever she could. When performing what she considered to be her obligatory Christian duties, she took every opportunity to witness for her Lord and her faith. At times I worried that she was too aggressive and possibly overbearing about her faith, sometimes, perhaps, implying that her religion was the one, true religion. And, at times over the years, she sometimes expressed concern that I was straying too far from "our religion." In her later years, she softened quite a bit. Possibly with some regret for her prior strong opinions, she would occasionally even admit, very quietly you understand, that yes, some of those people of other faiths will probably go to Heaven, too. Religious tolerance had entered our household.

Invariably, as in past years during these holidays, political pundits will enrage many citizens by proffering charges that the government or some politician is waging a war on religion because "politically correct" terms such as "Holiday Tree" or "Holiday Ornaments" are enunciated instead of "Christmas Tree" or Christmas Ornaments." As an occasional student of history I am a strong believer in the quote attributed to Sir Winston Churchill - "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees Freedom of Religion and, hence, the separation of church and state: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof……." In my recent study of U.S. history, I found it quite interesting how

Photo 5: Even though we can do nothing to stop the advance of time and subsequent, eventual loss of our parents and family members, I express my sentimentality by cherishing my family's belongings. This is my parents' 1984 AMC 4WD Eagle at a car show in 2011.

the First Amendment was devised. After the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the ensuing war for independence, the U.S. Constitution took several years and innumerable drafts by the Founding Fathers before finally being ratified by a quorum of states in the late 1780s. During this period of struggle for independence, many of the states had state-sanctioned religion, essentially emulating what England had imposed on its subjects in the colonies in the Americas. Religious oppression and taxation without representation were primary reasons for the Revolution. Thomas Jefferson, believing that religion could be corrupting and oppressive, initially passed legislation in Virginia's state legislature separating government from religion. Subsequently, Jefferson adopted similar language into the U.S. Constitution. Ironically, the minority evangelical movement of the day, knowing they would likely not become a government-sponsored religion in competition with other, more powerful, established religions, colluded with the liberal Jefferson to integrate religious freedom into the U.S. Constitution. Interestingly, without the Evangelical support, religious freedom might not have been advanced in the U.S. Constitution. Gradually, most states adopted religious freedom. Even so, Connecticut did not disestablish its state-sponsored Congregationalist Church until 1818. Massachusetts, the last holdout, did not expunge all religious restrictions until 1833. And, Connecticut would withhold equal rights for Jews for another decade after that.

With the coming holiday season, I am reminded of the Holidays' true spirit and values: family, love, kindness, tolerance, and charity. During these holidays, may there be peace on earth and goodwill to all people. Happy Holidays everyone!

The sentiments expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of Michigan State University or The Michigan Green Industry Association.