

Family Matters



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Dr. Roberts has researched many issues in Michigan's plant industry, including Oak Wilt, Dutch Elm Disease, Diplodia Tip Blight of Pines, along with a variety of cultural problems such as plant nutrition and herbicide toxicity. During his career, he has discovered a variety of new diseases and pests such as Phomopsis Canker of Spruce and the first bacterial wilt disease of turfgrasses in North America.

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INTRODUCTION:

Towards the end of every year, with Thanksgiving and the Christmas Holiday Season looming on the horizon, I usually engender some very sentimental feelings. Because this is the last issue of *The Michigan Landscape* for 2020, I thought I would deviate from my standard submissions and present some commentary from a more personal level. The COVID-19 Pandemic has drastically altered our lives and our industry, at least temporarily. Loved ones have been lost, many are unemployed, and the future is uncertain. I think it is fitting that, amid this Pandemic, we reassess our lives and express appreciation for our roots, especially for family matters. I hope you do not mind if I share some of my life's background and experiences.



A Farming History:

My heritage can be traced to Radnor, Wales. In the early 1800s, several Roberts brothers emigrated to North America in search of a new life. Some of them traveled along the Erie Canal and worked on that project for a while. One eventually settled in a Welch community near, appropriately, Radnor, Ohio (Photo 1). They tended to be God-fearing people and hard workers. Farming was their vocation, which apparently became rather prosperous for them in their new country (Photos 2 and 3). Like his father and grandfather, my father assumed the farming life (Photos 4 and 5). 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 relate their experiences about The Great Depression, when so many people were out of work and suffering. As farmers, they related how they were not as severely affected by The Great Depression as others were. They lived on “self-sufficient” farms: grew their own food in gardens, cut blocks of ice from ponds and rivers 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 by boiling maple sap in the sugar shack in their woods, maintained an orchard for apples, pears, peaches and grapes, and cows for milk and cheese. As I was growing up, our farm was not nearly as self-sufficient as when my parents were raised on their farms; even so, my farming experience was very enriching and unique (Photos 6A and 6B). My parents 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, because it scared them and they witnessed the suffering of so many people. 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 Mom was always sewing patches on clothes to attain more life out of them. 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.





P1 This old Roberts photo, dating back into the 1800s, shows the primary mode of transportation and power for farming. Horses were prized possessions to be shown off. My Dad was born in this house in 1916.

P2 Emery Roberts, my grandfather, is shown here as a young man with his new bicycle, probably in the early to mid-1880s. For those who are interested, the bicycle is still in the family and is an American Star 'Pony', a very pricey (\$75-100) mode of transportation in its day compared to other large-wheeled bikes. Note that the large wheel is in the rear (not in the front as were most high-wheeled bikes of the period); the bike is not pedaled but pumped (treadled), exhibiting such safety features as coasting capabilities and easier mounting and egress. When designed in the early 1880s, this brand of bicycle was ridden down the steps of the Nation's Capitol to demonstrate its stability.

P3 This photo, taken many years after Photo 1, shows my grandfather and grandmother (right) with one of the earliest automobiles in the community; note wooden-spoke wheels on this early model roadster. If we did not look closely, we might think my grandmother is holding a baby. Rather, she is cuddling a chicken!

P4 My father initially started farming with real horsepower (as in Photo 1). In this photo my Dad appears really proud of his 1930's John Deere Model B, which was a monumental leap in technology from farming with those ornery horses.

P5 In this old family photo, my Dad (on stump) poses with my grandfather after they had cut down this tree with the two-man (uh, two-person) saw, which is leaning on the trunk. Over twenty sheep were killed under this tree during a lightning strike, which also killed the tree. As I was growing up, my Dad often used this photo to promote his belief that a little hard work never hurt anybody. In looking at this photo, I often thought that those were the days when Men

Were Men. In his late 80s or early 90s, my Dad confessed that the tree wasn't as difficult to cut down as one might think - it was hollow!

P6A Starting in my youth, I rode motorcycles for transportation, fun, and excitement. I still ride today for relaxation and to escape the stresses of everyday life. For the uninitiated, Harley Davidson motorcycles are often called "Hogs", due to their size and weight.

P6B Today, most of my friends cannot believe I began riding "Hogs" at a very early age. This is my pet pig who grew up with me early in my development.



Education and Science:

My mother (Photo 7A) graduated from college in 1938, not a common achievement in those days for women. After marrying, Mom and Dad raised three sons (Photo 7B). My Mom and my Aunt (who also graduated from college) believed very strongly in education and urged their children to success in advanced education beyond high school. Because I worked on the farm most of my youth, I was urged at an early age to start saving money for college (Photo 8). Eventually, I would attend college as my mother always wanted (Photo 9). Because I had worked on the farm all of my life without a paycheck, per se, my parents made a deal with me – if I would live at home for my first two years of college and continue to work on the farm, they would buy a new car for me to commute to the University, as long as it was cheap (Photos 10A and 10B). Also, see Sidebar “Ramblin’ On”.



P10A



P10B



PA



PB

Ramblin' On

I attended one car show this past summer in Livonia, MI, and on my way home, I spied this cute little late 1950's Rambler American Wagon (Photo A). My heart flutters whenever I see an old Rambler. I followed it off the freeway into Milford, hoping to get a closer peek. It turned into another car show and guess who got out of it (Photo B)? That's right, Marv Wiegand, of Ray Wiegand's Nursery. I drooled over that car so much that I was worried observers might think I had contracted The Pandemic. Nice resto-mod job Marv!!!, ... and let me know if it's ever for sale!

"If you want to be cool like Marv and me, why not get an AMC?"

P7A & 7B My mother, Ruth Elizabeth, graduated from college in 1938, not a common achievement for women in those days. She was independent, strong-willed and self-assured, but yet kind and giving. She strongly believed in education and wanted her three sons to excel (7B). She was extremely instrumental in urging me into college and beyond. I am the youngest in Photo 7B.

P8 One of the ways I started saving money for college was to raise and show steers at the local county fair. In this photo from my youth, my steer "Big Boy" weighed in at 1,200 pounds and 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 fast. Otherwise, I might have had the wildest "horse" ride of my life.

P9 A photo of yours truly, the author, during his college days.

P10A I learned to drive in the family's 1960 Rambler Rebel and subsequently developed an affinity for the AMC brand. When my parents offered to buy me a new car if I commuted my first two years to college while still helping out on the farm, I ordered my brand new 1972 Gremlin from the factory.

P10B I drove my Gremlin for more than 12 years and put 140,000 miles on it before retiring it to the barn. In my own barn find 28 years later, I dusted it off and resurrected the Gremmie for car shows and Sunday drives. I call it a "Good Sixty Footer", meaning with all of its scratches and blemishes, it looks good from 60 feet distance (at my age, I've been told I look good at 60', too). Here, in 2012, at its 40th birthday (never restored and never overhauled), my Gremlin is leading a parade on Memorial Day. The highly sought after and gull-winged Delorean directly behind is my high school buddy's car. Don't tell my buddy, but my Gremlin got more stares and approving nods than did his Delorean that day.

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 our 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 survived, 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, hundreds of “worms” (years later I learned they were sawflies) ate most of the needles from the tree, and I was devastated. In high school, I became interested in science. For one science fair project I decided to perform some grafting experiments. I grafted tomatoes on peppers, peppers on tomato, tomatoes on potato, etc. At the time I was dating a classmate whose father, Dr. Carl Seliskar, was a Plant Pathologist at the nearby USDA Forest Research Station near Delaware, Ohio. At the time, with Dutch Elm Disease (DED) raging across America, some scientists wondered if grafting an American Elm scion (top shoot) onto a resistant Chinese or Siberian rootstock might confer resistance to the American Elm scion. Under the tutelage of Dr. Seliskar, I performed a Cleft Graft and entered the tree in the Science Fair with my grafted tomatoes and peppers. After the project was completed, I planted the small, pencil-sized, grafted elm, about a foot tall, into my parents’ front yard...and forgot about it. Several years later, I received a call from Dr. Seliskar who asked me what happened to the tree. I replied that the tree was in my parents’ front yard and that it had attained a height of about 15'. Dr. Seliskar was incredulous – apparently all of the hundreds of Elm grafts that the USDA had performed failed, likely due to graft incompatibility. My Elm became an instant celebrity and was featured several times over the years in the local news. I was “interrogated” by a team of scientists about what I had done to help this tree survive. As I recall, I replied that I had planted it after the Science Fair and forgot about it, but I’m sure my Dad occasionally watered it and applied some of that special brown elixir we called “manure” on the farm. My Elm tree not only survived the grafting procedure but continued to grow, to the scientists’ amazement, and eventually reached more than 60 feet in height (Photo 11). Woe is me; the tree finally succumbed to DED in 2001, but the Siberian rootstock continues to survive to this day.

P11 The American Elm scion that I grafted onto a Siberian rootstock in high school was the only tree that survived among hundreds grafted by USDA. The tree’s rapid growth enabled it to reach a large size in 30 years. My Dad was proud of that tree throughout all of those years of growth; in this photo, he poses beside it when he was in his mid-80s. The graft union attained over 30” diameter and can be seen near the base of the trunk. My interest in science and particularly in arboriculture began at an early age.

P12 I suppose I’m just an unapologetic tree hugger at heart.



Letters from Mom:

Women often have extraordinary influence over their children as they are growing into adults. Certainly, that can be said about my Mom as I already disclosed. However, let me share a few more experiences about Mom who I fondly remember as the years pass by. My mother always found time to write to me no matter where I was...at The Ohio State University or later in Michigan. Although my Dad never wrote letters to anyone else in his entire life, he always tacked on a page or two of his ramblings to Mom’s letters. Even though I rarely returned letters to them, they never, ever stopped writing to me. However, I visited them often, and they visited me in Michigan whenever they could. When we kids were very young, as part of Mom’s charitable efforts in the community (also see “The Shut-Ins”, next page), Mom developed her own “Gazette”, actually a newsletter of sorts. I can recall when she had her newsletter sketched out, she would take it to our church and “mimeograph” copies so she could send her newsletter out to people in the community. When those papers came out of the mimeograph machine, they were still slightly wet and exhibited an interesting chemical odor, which would probably be considered a nasty cancer-causing toxin today. But I loved to smell that chemical just as we thought Elmer’s Glue had an interesting odor back then. In her newsletter she would write about people in the community, people who needed our prayers to get over an illness or the loss of a loved one. And she would sometimes write a few lines about some scripture from

the Bible and about our need to be good Christians. Of considerable embarrassment, however, she wrote extensively about her sons and all of their successes. Whenever I encountered a recipient of Mom's newsletters, I usually had to remind them that Mom tended to embellish just a little bit about her family.

The Shut-Ins:


Mom coined the phrase "Shut-Ins" for the elderly, the infirmed, the handicapped, the downtrodden, and people who just couldn't get around much anymore. In addition to sending them her newsletter, she would also frequently stop by to visit them. And on many occasions, she would deliver her home-cooked dinners long before there was a Meals on Wheels or a Hungry Man TV dinner. As a youngster, I can remember that Mom operated a "Henry Ford-style" assembly line of homemade "TV dinners" in her kitchen. These homemade dinners usually consisted of Ham or Turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, pie, etc. As a youngster, my job on the assembly line was typically to spoon a large dollop of mashed potatoes and then a ladle of gravy onto the plates. She would deliver these dinners to the Shut-Ins, who relished those meals and looked forward to the next delivery. During her visits to the Shut-Ins, she would relate the news about the community, who was ill and needed our prayers, who was getting married, who was having a baby, who was getting divorced - what a shame(!), and perhaps just a little gossip now and then. Whether the Shut-In was religious or not, perhaps as a condition to my Mom's visit and delivery of her now famous "TV dinners", they had to listen to a short sermon, usually delivered in the form of a prayer. It might go something like, *"Dear Jesus, please help Edna heal from her fractured hip after she fell three weeks ago. She's been lonely ever since Lowell passed away two years ago from a heart attack. As you know, Edna devoted her life to teaching Spanish and French in high school. She's made the world a better place and her community still needs her now.....*

Let's also pray for the Millers, who lost their home to a fire last Tuesday. The community is collecting clothing and food to help sustain them while they search for a new home. But we still need your gracious assistance.....I want to also pray for Art Bishop; the rumor about his wandering eye is putting all of us at discomfort. Linda is a wonderful wife and companion and needs our support.....Please bless Davey Lee after his discovery of that new tree borer and help him to continue on to even greater success...In Jesus' name, we pray."

Holiday Sentiments:

If there is a Heaven, I'm sure Mom and Dad are there, looking down on me (and you). I hope I've made them proud. These days, I'm not a churchgoer nor do I support organized religion, per se. Today, I encounter many "people of faith" who seem to be angry, judgmental, and intolerant. As such, we as Americans have become a very divisive and divided society. I don't know what happened to the values instilled in me by my parents and their generation, that are still with me to this day: kindness, love, charity, forgiveness, and tolerance of all people regardless of their age, gender, sexual orientation or skin color. And, I cannot remember my parents, who were deeply religious people, ever belittling science and education as so many do today. I respect all religions and the freedoms that the U.S. Constitution purports to provide to us. I love older people largely because of my deeply held respect for the sacrifices they have made to make this country and our communities a better place. I love to hear their wisdom and their many experiences, which they are usually so willing to share.

I wish for a less hostile and divided country where many Americans could express love, kindness and tolerance, which I learned as a youth rather than the anger that is so prevalent today in our society. I suppose that is why I love and respect trees and other plants. If they could only talk and share their experiences, we could learn a lot from them (Photo 12). And I am very thankful for a career with the nursery and landscape industry in which I have developed so many friendships that have made my life so rewarding and rich.

Thank you for allowing me to share a few personal Moments. I'm sure many of you have similar experiences, and I'd love to hear them. Please let me wish you and your family a most wonderful holiday season. I'm looking forward to working with all of you next year. 



P12