



SCHWARTZ *Report*

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À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU

I should extend my apologies to Marcel Proust, the early 20th century French novelist, for borrowing the title of his magnum opus for this minimum opus. If recollection serves me correctly, the core of its message has something to do with an experience in the present triggering memories from the past. Literally it would translate to something like remembrance of or in search of lost times. Memories are never really lost at Christmas. In Dickens' novella "A Christmas Carol", for example, the spirits who visit Scrooge on Christmas morning prove to be instructive and benevolent to the old humbug. You see, he had blocked so much out of his past and present experience and they were there to remind him of what was missing in his life.



I received a gift in a small bag with the image depicted above on it. It shows a Christmas tree sticking out of an open car window. It brought back fond memories of my early working experiences involving the care and sale of Christmas trees. More on that in a minute, but first some background.

I like to say that I learned about real estate from the ground up. You see, tending to grounds was my pre-MOS (Military Occupation Specialty). While never very good at growing grass, I sure had a lot of early experience at cutting, digging, and laying it out. It is said of sod that you can hardly go wrong if you keep the green side up. At about age 14 or 15, I was "apprenticed" to the Gildea Family Nursery, my first real job. Bob Gildea was a larger than life jovial man who operated the nursery on a parcel of leased Klair land on Kirkwood Highway across from the iconically designed Chuck Wagon Restaurant. The nursery had a few beds of plants for retail sale in the front while the rear areas consisted of an office/shop and a marshalling yard for his landscape maintenance operation which was the heart of the business. Bob was well-connected and the core of his sphere of influence was his membership in the West Wilmington Optimists Club where my dad served as president in 1957. Perhaps that is where he and Bob met. Regardless, they became fast friends. A few years later I went to work for Bob as his summer shop boy. I would tend the shop, sell a few plants, keep the place tidy, etc. - all of the tasks that a kid could do in those pre-minimum wage, non-helicopter parenting days. I think I started at 50 cents an hour. Work was available during the summer, spring, and Christmas vacations. Each season seemed to have its own plants to tend and its own lessons to learn.

Among Bob and Dad's mutual friends and acquaintances were the plant managers of the local Avon, Motor Wheel, General Foods, and other operations whose grounds the nursery's staff would maintain. There were also among the Optimists a cadre of some of the area's most industrious and successful entrepreneurs, builders, contractors, and a smattering of doctors and dentists. Our former neighbor, Bob Peoples, is a prime example. His name will always be associated with the Caravel Academy and the many fine developments and homes that dot the southern

Hundreds of New Castle County. Early on he was a road and heavy infrastructure (sewer) builder. My dad called him "Sweetness" because he always seemed to be covered in mud, etc. Alton Neal, the mason contractor was another. Then there was Frank Robino and Bob Smith, his brother-in-law, whose company built so many west Wilmington developments in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. One can hardly go anywhere in the Pike Creek Valley and environs without traversing through one of them or running across one of his ubiquitous "Holiday Split-Level" models.*

We would also do the landscape maintenance for the sample home sites and their personal residences as well. Late spring and early fall were always busy as the regular crews were out maintaining the succession of office/industrial sites that I have mentioned.

Not wishing to take any of them off this bread and butter work, the ever resourceful Bob G. put together what he called the "taxi squad" consisting of myself, a hard working fellow by the name of Tommy Ruff, and whoever was new or had fallen out of favor with the boss. Bob, a former catcher in the Cincinnati Reds farm system, referred to this as being sent down to the minors.

Every work day was assigned to a different set of moguls' personal residences. So Monday might be reserved for Mr. Avon; Tuesday might be Mr. General Foods; Wednesday it could be Mr. Motor Wheel, etc. Friday it always seemed was reserved for Frank Robino's family home in one of the newer sections of Westover Hills and the Smith family home in Centreville.

Tommy was the team leader and also the driver of our converted Sunbeam Bread panel truck. It could hold a couple of mowers and whatever other yard equipment was needed. As a rookie, I was kept away from the machinery. My spot was on the lowest rung of the grounds maintenance ladder - weeding. If I had known at the time that goats eat weeds, I'd have probably asked for one as a pet. Just like a goat, my job was to make the ground look clean.

An early visit to the Robino manse was a memorable one. I'd worked my way around that sprawling brick home and with a feeling of weary accomplishment had reached the kitchen door when my wondering eyes beheld an untouched patch of what appeared to be weeds. Now a weeder hates weeds! So I dug into that patch with exasperated gusto, piled the offending plants into my basket and returned to the bread truck. Tommy always said that this bread truck meant dough, e.g. money. Off we went back to the shop. We had no sooner arrived when the boss came out all red in the face. He wanted to know who the dumb SOB was who pulled up Mrs. Robino's herb garden!

Now, lest you think that my train of thought has left the station, back to the holidays and Christmas trees. Christmas vacation would find me working at the nursery tagging and stacking the conifers by type, size, and price. None went for more than \$10 or \$20 as I recall.

By late on Christmas Eve, we'd be left with, in Bob's estimation,

far too many of Charlie Brown's finest for us to go home early. Dad had arrived to pick me up and also to share some Christmas cheer with Bob. The customers were dwindling and my overriding thought was: "When are we going to close?" There was, however, a method to this madness. Bob was waiting for the arrival of what I came to call the wrecking crews of bargain hunters. Soon carloads of merry makers, some obviously overserved, would careen into the lot. I remember the leader of one five-some size merry band who sprang from his car and accosted the boss with the pregnant question: "It's seven o'clock on Christmas Eve; what are you going to do with these tomorrow?" Nonplussed as ever, Bob rose to the occasion: "I have already marked these fine specimens down to \$10.00, but, tell you what I'll do; there's five of you and I'll give each of you a tree of your choice, free of charge if you can get them all and yourselves in the car together and off my lot. If not, you'll owe me the fifty bucks. Deal?" They and others like them did not

pass up the offer. Dad always said it was worth a long day in the cold to see this show. Invariably, they each picked the largest of the trees which did not bode well for success. Grown men would ram pines and spruces through the open windows of the car. Some would charge at it like knights on horseback while others tried to ease their selections into the back, trunk, or onto the roof. Bob gladly supplied the rope. Their successive attempts failed and they had to pay off the bet. Dad and the boss would wink at each other celebrating the culmination of another successful Christmas Eve gambit, and a few more Charlie Browns would leave the lot. Bob sent them off with a "Merry Christmas" and a hearty "You all come back and try again next year! Happy New Year!".
*Original denizens of Heritage Park off of Milltown Road will remember that development's entry onto Whitman Drive where each of the models offered are lined up next to one other. Prominently featured is the Holiday Split Level.

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