

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 4, 2017

Jonathan J. Roberts (ca. 1927-ca. 1999): Jonathan "Jay" Roberts was a plumber, fuel oil dealer, and amateur boiler-maker who bought the old W. W. Walp Coal Yard in Avondale. Jay was an atrocious housekeeper with a small worn-out pick-up truck, a very poor business man, and slovenly in appearance, but he had a heart of gold. I was privileged to call him a friend.

Jay must have done a small plumbing job for my father about 1960 when the first of the Auburn Valley steam locomotives was being completed in the shop. At no cost, he built a rail cart with large steel wheels to move this engine from the shop to the track near the new turntable (that cart is still around). However, many of Jay's customers were accustomed to efficient, high-priced plumbers, and Jay was neither. His charges were very reasonable, but he may have used second-hand material to do the job, and he seldom finished it. He would fix the leak or burner malfunction, but he would leave with the job unfinished. That suited me as I could put on the finishing touches, but most customers were extremely dissatisfied. He would rather be called in the middle of the night with a leaking pipe or a failed boiler than to have fixed it right in the first place. He always came quickly if his customer had an emergency. There was seldom a charge for those emergency night calls.

Jay Roberts had an older brother, Bill, and a younger brother, Stewart. Bill was with the post office department in Kennett Square and had a very attractive English war bride. Stewart lived in Delaware and had a small brick-laying business. Jay's wife, Jean, was the personal secretary for one of the top Hercules Powder Company executives. Jay and Jean bought a property along Sharp Road southeast of Avondale that had a modern house, and the remnants of an old barn with open sheds behind that served as Jay's storage for plumbing fittings. This soon became his business headquarters, and he gave up the old coal yard in Avondale. Thrown in one huge pile in the sheds were new fittings, scrap fittings, and usable fittings. To find what he was looking for, Jay had to climb on top of the pile and dig. Usually in a very short time, he would find something that would work for his current job. He never went to a job with a supply of fittings on his truck, the bed of which was in the same condition as the sheds behind the barn. Instead, he would examine the project and then return home hurriedly to get what he needed. The customer was never charged for this inefficiency.

Jay liked to make old things work, rather than supplying new. A major portion of his business was supplying mushroom growers with portable steaming equipment for sterilizing their beds between crops. At first, old steam traction engine boilers were mounted on high-mileage stake-bodied trucks, with oil burners and tanks also mounted in the truck's bed. These worked well and were much cheaper for the customer than the purchase of new boilers. When the Magic Age of Steam began at Auburn Heights in 1971, Jay Roberts did the plumbing for our public rest rooms in the snack bar building, installed the septic tank and drainage field, and installed an oil-fired 200 p.s.i. Weil-McLain sectional steam boiler for heating our buildings and running our paddle-wheel steamboat and our stationary steam engines. Nine years later, when we needed only small boilers for heat in each of three buildings, the big boiler was removed and sold to a mushroom grower as part of a portable unit. Jay then installed two new heating boilers in the carriage house and the museum. His brother Stewart built their chimneys and a small boiler room on the back wall of the museum. When it came to heating the big house, however, Jay balked on supplying a new boiler and burner.

In the basement of the "mansion" was an old but little-used coal-fired Roberts boiler made in Collegeville (PA). It may have been as old as the house (1897) but more likely was installed by my father about 1915 as a back-up for steam piped underground from the paper mill to heat Auburn Heights. Cigar butts were still laying in the firebox. Even though its builder was not related to Jay, the latter took an interest in it and wanted to convert it to burn fuel oil. With his own oil-burner design, he got it to work well and "finished" the job by leaving his vise-grip plyers holding the fire door closed. The vise-grips remained there for at least five years, but I had a very inexpensive heating system that I thought would last forever.

In the middle of a cold winter night some 12 years after it went into service, the old Roberts boiler sprang a leak, and the cellar floor was covered with water. I called Jay, who came immediately, helped mop up the water, and installed

a temporary kerosene space heater at the base of the cellar steps. With the door open at the top, hot air circulated through the house and we had no freeze-ups. This time we had to buy a new boiler-burner unit, which was in place and working within 48 hours. We had to cut the old boiler apart to remove it from the basement.

As mentioned, Jay was not a good business man and gave away most of his profit on plumbing and “mushroom-grower” jobs. Once he wanted to give his son Paul a car and needed the money to buy it. I made him a loan of about \$3,000, which he was not able to repay. However, he wouldn’t charge me for any work from that time on, and I came out far ahead.

Jay Roberts was the only person I knew who died from asbestosis. He had been careless all his life when working in asbestos dust, and the inhalation of this obviously destroyed his lungs. He never smoked. He died about 1999 at the age of 72. He and Jean had three sons, one of whom was a farmer, and the other two were in plumbing and heating, following in their father’s footsteps.