*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**The Great Pumpkin story**

Halloween and harvest season is the time of year when we pay lots of attention to large garden fruit.

I’m referring to pumpkins — which is not only a fruit but technically a berry. From pumpkin-spice everything to jack-o-lanterns to pies, we love our pumpkins. We especially love giant pumpkins.

There’s a serious competition every year in Wisconsin and around the world to see who can grow the biggest pumpkin. The current world record, according to Guinness, belongs to Mathias Willemijns of Belgium who grew a 2,624.6 pound behemoth in 2016, bigger than the previous mark of 2,323 pounds grown by Swiss farmer Beni Meier in 2014.

Those weights are certified by the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth, an organization that cultivates the hobby of growing giant pumpkins throughout the world by establishing standards and regulations as well as weigh-off sites.

The record Wisconsin pumpkin to date weighed 2,283 pounds, grown in 2018 by John Barlow and Caleb Jacobus of Gays Mills. The state record comes in at No. 10 on the worldwide list.

According to wisconsingiantpumpkingrowers.com the first pumpkin to weigh more than 500 pounds was in 1990. That record weight doubled to more than 1,000 pounds in 2002 and grew to more than 1,500 pounds in 2009. The 1-ton mark was eclipsed in 2015.

Those ponderous pumpkins dwarf the 300-pound specimen my mother grew in 1994 that we displayed on our porch when we lived in West Salem. I’ve told the tale before.

After Halloween passed, I intended to send the pumpkin back to the farm in my dad’s pickup when he stopped by on his way to pick up a part in La Crosse. Like many farm trucks, Dad’s pickup no longer had a tailgate. The pumpkin had a natural flat spot where it had sat on the soil while it grew, but Dad decided to prop it up against the cab so people could admire it.

A few minutes later when I headed for work at the La Crosse Tribune, I was slowed by a traffic jam — something that always puts me in a foul mood. A street-department truck blocked the lane.

As I passed the truck I drove over smashed pumpkin that a worker was busy scooping up. The junk smeared all over the bottom of my car. It was obvious that some jerk had smashed several pumpkins on the street in some type of senseless childish post-Halloween vandalism.

A couple days later I talked with Dad again; I asked him how he disposed of the pumpkin. He started to laugh and said the pumpkin never made it home. Dad said he was turning the corner with the pickup when the precariously perched pumpkin rolled out and smashed into pieces on the street.

He stopped long enough to push the pieces of pumpkin to the side of the street so traffic could go through. He was going to pick up the pieces on his way back, but by the time he returned all that remained of the pumpkin was a few scattered bits of orange flesh.

By then it had dawned on me. I asked him where the pumpkin was pulverized. Sure enough, that anonymous jerk I was angry at was my own father.

The Great Pumpkin story, as we call it, came to mind the other day after I drove past a giant-pumpkin display near Pigeon Falls. I pulled over to take a photo, thought about my late father and smiled.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at chardie1963@gmail.com.*

102920-agrv-life-hardie-1: Shannon Leer, a giant-pumpkin grower near Pigeon Falls, Wisconsin, proudly displays the results of his work in his yard. Photo by Chris Hardie

102920-agrv-life-hardie-2: A pumpkin grown by John Lanier of Black River Falls, Wisconsin, weighs more than 1,200 pounds. If you take a picture with the giant pumpkin, post it on Facebook and tag the Black River Falls Downtown Association by Oct. 31; submitters will be entered into a cash drawing. Photo courtesy of the Black River Falls Downtown Association.

102920-agrv-life-hardie-3: Giant-pumpkin growers John Barlow, left, and Caleb Jacobus are barely visible in 2018 behind their Wisconsin-state-record 2,283-pound pumpkin. Photo courtesy SWnews4u.com