



S. S. Johnson

1857-1905

S. S. Johnson, pioneer lumberman of the Lake States and the West Coast, was born Samuel Johnstone on September 5, 1857, at St. Thomas, Elgin Parish, Ontario, Canada. When Johnstone was three years old, his parents moved their large family to the United States and settled on a farm near Flint, Michigan. Here Johnstone spent his boyhood years. At the age of fourteen he left home and began his career in the lumber industry. He began falling timber for an older brother who was running a logging camp on the Michigan tributary to the Muskegon River. The next year he followed the logs down the river to Muskegon for his first job in the lumber manufacturing business. His fellow loggers and millworkers shortened Johnstone's name to Johnson, and the shorter name stayed with him.

The American lumber industry had shifted from the New England area to the Lake States. Muskegon had become the largest lumber manufacturing center in the world. Johnson was fascinated by this gigantic industry that required so much knowledge, energy, and capital. He became determined to be a part of it. For the next seven years he worked in a sawmill during the summer and spent his winters falling timber in the woods. He soon felt the need to add to his rural school education and enrolled in night school in Muskegon. Here he studied commercial courses while continuing to work full time.

He married Emma Gibbs in Muskegon in 1879 and soon moved to Howard City, Michigan. He and Emma had two sons: Samuel Oramel (Orie), born in 1881, and William Paul, born in 1889. Johnson's abilities and knowledge grew and he was placed in charge of a sawmill and butter tub factory. He managed this mill for three years until the company's local supply of timber was harvested. During the following twenty years, Johnson successfully managed operations of sawmills in many locations in Minnesota, constantly building his expertise.

By 1899 he had acquired a majority interest in the Johnson-Wentworth Lumber Company, an operation he had been guiding for six years. The Weyerhaeusers were beginning to buy land and mills in Minnesota, and by 1902 the Johnson-Wentworth Company was the only lumber business in the area still independently owned. That year Johnson sold the company to Rudolph Weyerhaeuser, then stayed for a year to manage the plant.

In the fall of 1903 Johnson was employed by the Shevlin-Hixon-Carpenter-Clarke interests of Minnesota and Wisconsin to manage their newly-acquired lands in northern California. He moved west to assume the position of general manager for the McCloud River Lumber Company and its carrier, the McCloud River Railroad Company. The company's main office was located in San Francisco in keeping with the custom of large companies to operate from major cities. Johnson made his home in Berkeley. The mill was located at McCloud, California, just south of Mount Shasta. Here the company had the largest sugar pine and ponderosa pine operations on the West Coast at that time.

In 1905 S. S. Johnson became ill and died in Berkeley at the early age of forty-seven. In his short lifetime Johnson rose from a modest childhood to become a highly successful businessman in the lumber industry. He earned the respect of others within the industry for his abilities and accomplishments. One of his strongest characteristics, and one for which he is remembered, was his deep sense of individual responsibility always to do the best job possible.

In 1907, in memorium to S. S. Johnson, his family gave an armory to Shattuck Military School at Fairbault, Minnesota. Both of his sons attended school there. In 1949, long after his death, he was honored by the California Forest Protective Association for his part in the first efforts of applied forestry on the West Coast at McCloud, California. A student benefit foundation in his name was established in the School of Forestry at the University of California, Berkeley.