



Samuel Spencer Johnson

1911-1984

“Sam Johnson was the epitome of all that is good about Oregon. He was an openly dedicated environmentalist, a compassionate and intelligent businessman, a willing philanthropist of grand proportions, a committed public spirit and a fine human being.” Governor Victor Atiyeh

Sam Johnson was the third generation of his family to be engaged in the timber and forest products business, and though he was not personally active in the business during the last years of his life, he remained interested in its problems and successes.

His grandfather, S.S. Johnson, was for a time the operator of a sawmill in Cloquet, Minnesota. His father, S. Orie Johnson, was active in the timber and lumber business in Central Oregon, in the Klamath Falls area, and in northern California. Sam Johnson was a graduate forester, who first became involved in the marketing of his father’s timber holdings in the Sisters, Oregon area during the mid-1930s. That was the start of an active career, which lasted about 30 years.

Sam Johnson was born in Berkeley, California, the son of Col. and Mrs. S. Orie Johnson. He attended elementary and secondary schools in the San Francisco Bay area and elsewhere, attended Georgetown University, and received his forestry degree from the University of California at Berkeley. He spent the five years immediately preceding World War II selling timber from his family’s Central Oregon lands to a variety of mills in the Sisters area.

During World War II he served as an officer in the Army Corps of Engineers in Missouri, San Francisco, Walla Walla and Portland. He was in charge, while in Portland, of lumber procurement for the Corps, and retired as a lieutenant colonel after wartime and reserve service. It was during his wartime service in Portland that Captain Sam Johnson met and married Lieutenant Elizabeth Hill, an officer in the WAVES, USNR. They became parents of two daughters, Betsy, a law graduate of Lewis and Clark’s Northwestern Law School and Patti, a graduate of Emanuel Hospital School of Nursing. Betsy became one of the nation’s most accomplished helicopter pilots and Patti became one of the world’s finest fixed wing aerobatic pilots.

Shortly after the Johnson marriage, the war ended, and Sam made arrangements to purchase his father's share of the family timber business. He managed it with skill and good fortune until the last of the timberlands had been sold.

It was during the post-war period that he became a partner in the Tite Knot Pine Mill in Redmond, Barclay Logging of Sisters and Dahl Pine, Inc., a sawmill located on the Warm Springs Reservation.

In 1956, Sam and his associates built the first plywood plant east of the Oregon Cascades. Called Jefferson Plywood Company, it was built in Madras and began operating in 1957.

In November of 1963, Sam disposed of his interest in Tite Knot, Barclay Logging and Dahl Pine, and increased his ownership in Jefferson Plywood Company. In 1965 he acquired sole ownership in the plywood company and purchased the large pine sawmill in Warm Springs, Oregon, from the Wilson family in Portland.

It was at this time that Sam became involved in one of the major successes of his lifetime. That was to make it possible for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Oregon, to own and operate their own forest products manufacturing facilities in order that they could utilize their vast timber holdings to the maximum economic advantage.

The concept of Tribal ownership was triggered by a fire that destroyed a part of the plant in Madras, Oregon, in August, 1966. After months of planning, and negotiation among the Tribes, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Jefferson Plywood Company, an agreement was reached in April of 1967 whereby the Confederated Tribes of Oregon, Warm Springs, acting through a subsidiary, Warm Springs Products Industries, would acquire the manufacturing facilities owned principally by Sam under the corporate entity of Jefferson Plywood Company. Sam agreed to finance the purchase by the Tribes of the sawmill in Warm Springs, the plywood machinery in Madras, and then, the construction of a plywood plant at Warm Springs. Sam also agreed to guarantee the working capital necessary to operate the business and manage the operation until Tribal members were ready to assume the management responsibilities.

By 1974, Warm Springs Forest Products Industries had paid all of the debts incurred in the acquisition of the plants from profits generated from the operation. No Tribal or government funds were ever used or needed.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs officials called this development one of the most successful Tribal enterprises on record. Upon payment of all of the debts, the Tribes assumed management of the operation at which time Sam was selected to the Board of Directors of Warm Springs Forest Products Industries, a position he held until his death.

Sam took a great deal of pride in his contribution to a very successful enterprise, and he is held in high regard by the people of Warm Springs for that contribution.

By the early 1960s, Sam Johnson's business activities were becoming less demanding. He had been active in a variety of business and industry affairs – on the board of the national Association of Manufacturers and on a Public Land Law Review Commission created by Congress. But he turned, beginning 20 years before his sudden death, to his state and its institutions and its communities.

He first sought a seat in the Oregon Legislature in 1964. He won a spirited race, and served seven terms before he retired. He became a respected and influential member of the Oregon House of Representatives, one of the most popular in that body during his period of service. His

business activities made him a valuable member – and Chairman of the House Revenue Committee, and of the Joint Ways and Means Committee. He retired from the Legislature in 1978.

The retirement was a short one. In 1978, he ran for and was elected Mayor of Redmond, the city in which he and his family had lived since the end of World War II. He quickly became the most active mayor in that small city's history, working six and even seven day weeks on city affairs. He was re-elected in 1980 and 1982 and was serving at the time of his death.

He showed his interest in public affairs in many ways. He and his wife, Becky, became two of Oregon's most important lay influences on the state's education system, public and private. She served on three major statewide education boards; jointly they were given Lewis and Clark College's highest honor for their efforts in behalf of it and other education institutions. The two of them were the recipients of the David Abrams Award for Philanthropic Leadership in 1982. Sam Johnson became involved in the Oregon Historical Society and was one of its major benefactors. The Society honored him by choosing him to hold a variety of its offices, including its presidency.

He was an active member of the Society of American Foresters. He served on advisory councils for the U.S. Forest Service (Pacific Northwest Region and Deschutes National Forest). He was a supporter of the Western Forestry Center, the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, the Oregon High Desert Museum and the Oregon Community Foundation. He served on the board of directors of each of the latter three organizations.

He became an active personal philanthropist, through the S.S. Johnson Foundation, which supported the efforts of a great variety of individuals and institutions. He may be remembered best for the gift he and Becky made of the headwaters of the Metolius River to the U.S. Forest Service. The small park there is one of the favorite spots for visitors to the central part of Oregon.

Sam Johnson was close to his family, and supported members in personal activities in which they engaged for business or pleasure. He and Becky enjoyed travel and made trips to various places in the world, always together and often with friends.

Those friends were legion. They included members of cultural organizations.

Few people are blessed with time and funds to share with others, especially during their active years. Sam had those assets, but more importantly, he had the desire to share and also he had the initiative to transform that desire into reality. The people of Oregon benefited from those attributes in the past and will miss them in the future.