

Biography of Edgar F. Johnson

Edgar F. Johnson was born June 13, 1899 in Waseca County to Mr. and Mrs. C. J. (Charlie) Johnson. It is perhaps somewhat coincidental that this was the year that Marconi invented the wireless. When he was four, his family moved into Waseca, where his father was a homebuilder, and later owned a hardware store and woodworking shop. In later years, Edgar would credit much of his success to the upbringing his parents gave him. He described them as self-reliant, strong individuals. The family walked to school and church, regardless of the weather. Both were important to the family. Edgar would later say of his parents, "The things that I value they taught me."

Edgar's interest in electronics traces back to his boyhood days when he took discarded wire and batteries and strung telegraph lines between neighborhood houses. When asked how it worked, he admitted, "Not very well." That experience, along with other exposure to radio in high school, influenced him to study Electrical Engineering at the University of Minnesota, where he graduated in 1921. During Christmas break in 1920 Edgar brought home a broadcast receiver that he built in the University lab. The people of Waseca heard for the first time broadcasts from radio pioneering station KDKA, and other early broadcast stations. Upon graduation he returned to Waseca, where for two years he worked with a partner in the electrical business, accounting for most of the electrical wiring done in the county at that time.

As a student at the University, Edgar met his future wife Ethel Jones, who came to Minnesota to pursue a degree in education. Before their marriage on July 28, 1923, she taught school at Wishek, North Dakota, and worked in social services at the University of Minnesota. After a wedding in California, the couple made their home in Waseca.

On October 10, 1923, they stepped out into a business venture. An inventory of radio parts became available at a substantially reduced price. With savings that Ethel had from teaching school, the parts were bought for a sum of \$1,594.65. Space in his father's woodworking shop was given rent free, mailers were sent to perspective customers, and a business was started. The office, which consisted of a borrowed typewriter and supplies, was literally kept under the couple's bed when not in use. During slow times Edgar would work in the woodworking shop making window sash and screens for 40 cents an hour. By 1924, however, the business had outgrown the space in the shop, and Edgar rented a building for \$65 per month. In 1925 the first employee, Ira Sorenson, was hired as an accountant. Later that year, Edgar's brother Marvin was persuaded to join the operation.

In the late 1930s, the city of Waseca suffered an economic loss with the closing of the city's largest employer, the EACO flour mill, and the decline of the railroads. Edgar vowed to spare the town from suffering further loss, and dedicated his energies to bring progress, prosperity, and security to the town and its people. This became the overriding vision of Edgar and the company.

In 1936, despite the depression, the company made a bold decision to build the first portion of a plant, located on 2nd avenue S.W. The cost of the land was \$12,000, half of which was borrowed. The years of 1940 through 1945 saw rapid expansion, due to production of radio components for the war efforts. Every year during that period a new addition was added to the building. Also, with the added business, Edgar's brother Everett was persuaded to join the business. As a result of wartime production efficiencies, the company received the prestigious Army-Navy "E" award three times.

The production of the war years catapulted the company to a new plateau of business volume and expertise, and left a base for continued growth. The company ventured into the amateur radio market, first with production of equipment in kit form. When customers began to ask for assembled radios, employees took the kits home and were paid extra money for the assembly work. The first complete amateur radio transmitters were manufactured on an assembly line in 1949. In 1958 the company branched out into the manufacture of Citizens band (CB) radio. The company became a leader in that market, dominating all other domestic manufacturers. Sold under the trade name Messenger, the company's product is exhibited in the Smithsonian Institute, a tribute to its technological and cultural significance in American society and history. Total production of CB radios by the company exceeded 2 million units. The company branched off into the production of commercial two-way radio in the 1970s, and continued in that market until the present. For 55 years Edgar led the company as managing partner, president, and lastly, chairman of the board, retiring from that position in 1978. He remained a board member until 1983.

In 1975 Edgar was chosen to serve as part of a delegation of major electronic communications manufacturers to the People's Republic of China. This was the first time a group from a U.S. industry visited the People's Republic, and was considered a significant step forward in the friendly trade relations between the two countries.

Edgar was the recipient of many awards and honors. In 1975 he was the recipient of the Radio Club of America's Sarnoff Citation for his contributions to electronic communications. In 1977 he was awarded the University of Minnesota Outstanding Achievement Award, conferred upon graduates of the university who have attained unusual distinction in their chosen field. He received a Bicentennial gold metal from King Karl Gustaf XVI of Sweden in 1977. Also in 1977 he was inducted into the Minnesota Business Hall of Fame. Also that year, he received the Gustavus Adolphus College Greater Gustavus Award. In 1991 the Radio Club of America renamed its Pioneer Citation Award to E. F. Johnson Pioneer Citation Award.

Edgar was a vibrant and active member of the community. He was a life long member of the First Congregational Church of Waseca, and served as Trustee for 15 years. He was a member of the Waseca school board for 18 years. Other organizations that he was active in included the Waseca Charter Commission, Masonic Lodge, Lions Club, Waseca Lakeside Club, American Legion, Minneapolis Club, Radio Club of America, Minnesota Historical Society Executive Council, Trustee of Gustavus Adolphus

College, Trustee of Operation Bootstrap Tanzania, and Trustee of Courage Foundation of Minneapolis.

In the 1960s the Johnson family established the E. F. Johnson Foundation for the purpose of funding scholarships and other worthwhile projects in the Waseca area. In 2007, after a period of time when the foundation came under the control of Minnegasco and its successor companies, the fund was renamed the E.F. Johnson Foundation. The funds assets currently exceed \$3.6 million.

Edgar Johnson succumbed to a long illness on February 11, 1991. His wife, Ethel passed away two days later. The couple were honored and remembered in a funeral service on February 14, 1991.

The City of Waseca owes a great debt of gratitude to Edgar Johnson. As a pioneer, he brought technology to a small town. As an entrepreneur he brought employment and economic stability to a community. As a leader, he molded a company that provided valuable products to a nation. Yet, he was a man of humility. He was often heard giving credit for the success of the company to those around him, and made people feel that they worked with him instead of for him. His legacy is that of a man whose life would well be emulated.