

Biography of Charles Johnson
--Ruth Dyson

Charles Johnson was one of the best known and best loved pioneers of Griggs County. He kept a small country store and was known far and wide for his good humor and wit. He was sympathetic, helpful and jolly and consequently was very well liked.

Charles Henry Johnson was born in Milo, Maine on April 6, 1847. His father was Levi Johnson, a farmer in Piscataquis County, Maine. There were three boys and two girls in the family. Charles was the oldest of the boys.

When the Civil War broke out he was very anxious to go. In 1864 although he was only sixteen years old and not very tall he tried to enlist but was refused. However, disappointed but undaunted, he put on his father's big overcoat and tried again. This time he was admitted. He served faithfully to the end of the war and was honorably discharged in August, 1865.

After the war he served as apprentice to his uncle in order to learn the carpenters trade.

In September, 1871 he was married to Esther L. Smith at Brownville, Maine.

About this time many people were migrating west. He got the Western fever as many others had. In the spring of 1876 he came west with two other men, one of whom was part owner of a large tract of Red River Valley land in the Dakota territory. They got off the train at Fargo and purchased oxen, plows, lumber and provisions. With these supplies they drove overland forty miles to Traill County. With the lumber they built a small house which served as their headquarters that summer while they broke the land.

They were six miles from their nearest neighbors and twelve miles from a Hudson Bay trading post called Caledonia. The trading post included one store, a blacksmith shop, a flour mill, saloons, and a hotel (a Black Hills to Winnepeg stage station).

1876 was the year of the Custer Massacre on the Little Big Horn in Montana. Rumors of the dreaded Sioux were spreading all over the northwest.

One day when Justin Safford, one of the Men with Mr. Johnson, was out plowing he turned around to find an Indian, carrying a gun, following him in the furrow. He dropped the plow handles and ran to the house where he found the yard and a neighboring grove of trees filled with Indians. That night the Indians had a pow-wow around their camp fire. The young men supposed it was a war dance and that their doom was close at hand. In order to keep the Indians in a good humor they gave them all of their provisions and went to the trading post for more. The next day one of the Indians stepped up to the young men, shook hands with them and said good-bye. He went away chuckling to himself because the young men had been so frightened. Later it was discovered that these were

C. H. Johnson

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friendly Chippewa Indians from the reservation in Minnesota. They were on their way to Devils Lake to visit the Sioux.

When the breaking contract was completed, Mr. Johnson returned to Maine and in 1879 he brought his wife and two small daughters with him to Dakota. He bought a lot on thirteenth street in Fargo and built a small home. Fargo was growing rapidly and as a contractor and builder he was very busy. In 1882 his home was broken up by the death of his wife. The following spring he sold his Fargo property and leaving his children with his brother's family he started for Griggs County. He and two other men made the trip with a team of horses and a wagon. There was no bridge across the Sheyenne river and the water was high. The men drove up the river until they came to a place where there was a small boat. With the boat and a long rope they were able to get the horses across one at a time. Then they pulled the wagon over. When the wagon was only about half way across it suddenly dived forward and disappeared under the water. However, the men managed to pull it out right side up.

The men went up to Willow Lake and took up squatters rights on unsurveyed government land. In 1884 the land was surveyed and Mr. Johnson's claim was found to be in section 2, township 148 north, of range 60 west. Immediately after locating his claim he built a log store and home combined, hauling the logs from Willow Lake. He hired some breaking done on his land and plowed a furrow around it to protect it from other settlers. After farming the land for a year or two himself, he rented it for a year for a share of the crop. The wood they used was hauled from along the Sheyenne river. The railroad came to Cooperstown in 1883 so he was able to get supplies for his store there. Serious trouble was often experienced in hauling the provisions. When the water was unusually high, it sometimes took as many as ten or twelve horses to pull an ordinary wagon through the fords of the slews and streams.

Izra Hagerty, E. S. Hamilton and Mr. Johnson were appointed by the county officials to lay out the first road from the Willow region to Cooperstown. They followed the ridges and higher ground all the way necessarily paying very little attention to section lines. There were several slews and creeks on the way with which they could do nothing but pick out the shallowest fords to be found.

When Mr. Johnson came to Griggs County there were no townships. The land was laid out into sections but the sections were ~~divided~~ undivided. Mr. Johnson was one of the leaders in the movement to organize the region around Willow Lake into a township. It was organized on March 15, 1887, one of the first in the county.

The small log store was replaced in a few years by a larger frame structure and soon after Mr. Johnson built a frame house also. At one time the Lawrence brothers were also in Mr. Johnson's store. Later they sold their share to Charles Miller of Fargo. E. S. Hamilton who had a nearby claim worked in the store when he was not busy on his claim. There was a blacksmith shop, a warehouse for grain, two barns, the old log store, the new store and house, a little school house and a building that was used as a cheese factory in the little group of buildings which comprised Mr. Johnson's farm. The school house was a small structure which Mr. Johnson built himself so that his children might go to school. School was ~~only~~ held only during the warm months.

Through the efforts of Mr. Johnson and Le Forest Connant, the cheese factory was started on Mr. Johnson's farm. To this the farmers brought their milk and cream instead of taking it to Cooperstown. The cheese factory was quite a success until the people started to leave the country because of the repeated crop failures.

There were several men who used Mr. Johnson's home as their headquarters living in the old log house when they weren't working on their claims and many people traveling through the country stopped at his farm over night.

Mr. Johnson hired a man to haul his grain to Cooperstown for him. This man would start in the evening driving a yoke of oxen. He would arrive in town in the morning after driving all night. The next evening he would start back again. Mr. Johnson bought the settlers' grain or took it in exchange for groceries. He also kept some of it in his warehouse and sold it in the spring for seed.

In October, 1885, Mr. Johnson married Cora E. Hagerty, the daughter of one of the other new settlers in Willow township. He brought his two daughters and they lived at Willow until 1898.

Joseph Buchheit was their nearest neighbor. Ben Kuhns, Herbert Safford, Izra Hagerty, Andrew Knutson, E. S. Hamilton, George Pratt, Sylvester Flick, Paul Flick, Mrs. Root and Mrs. Ruth were some of the people who lived near them and traded at his store.

Around 1897 there were several crop failures in succession. Many people left Willow township. Many people too were unable to pay their debts in the store so Mr. Johnson was forced to discontinue his business there and come to Cooperstown.

In Cooperstown he took up his contracting work again. He also did some work in Mayville, a town which at that time was growing very rapidly.

Finally he and Erik Erickson started a store in Cooperstown. After a time they took Berg Brothers into their firm and built the building which is now occupied by Albert Larson & Company. Then Charles Johnson sold his share to Albert Larson and ran a small furniture store. At this time he was also county judge.

On April 25, 1899 his life was brought to a sudden end by pneumonia. He left five small children besides his wife and one married daughter.

H.
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by Ruth Dyson, grand daughter

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