A Brief History

of

Robert H. Johnson

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by

Rod Watkins
In choosing a subject for my oral history project, I wanted to interview somebody whose professional field would be in my own interest. I felt that a lawyer would not only be able to offer an interesting historical account of our state and local area, but also some insight into my intended profession. I wanted somebody who had played a role in state and local government too. After examining the guidelines I had set for this project, my choice was quite clear. Bob Johnson an attorney and the present Sweetwater County Democratic Central Committee Chairman would more than foot the bill. Bob gladly accepted to share a very interesting life's history with me and others who might listen to the tape recordings of these events.

Robert Henry Johnson is the son of Henry and Ellen Johnson. Bob was born August 16, 1916 in his parents home in Denver Colorado in the part of town that is today the colored section of Denver. At that time however the area was made up of middle classed railroad families. Approximately one year later Bob and his family moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming where he grew up. Bob's father was a machinist for the Union Pacific Railroad which had brought him to Cheyenne. They lived on the South Side of Cheyenne, a part of town that Bob remembers as being rather small. Today this part of Cheyenne is bigger than many towns in Wyoming. Bob recalls growing up in Cheyenne and said that it was a nice place for a kid. There was a lot of prairie and a small
stream that flowed through the area. "Cheyenne was chiefly
a railroad town and Fort D. A. Russell, the 30th Infantry,
76th Artillery made up the best part of the payroll".

Bob's first involvement with politics was at an early
age, a bit too early. In his third grade year he began
selling newspapers on the Senate side of the Wyoming
Capital Building. His parents felt that he was too young
however, at this particular age because he had to cross
the viaduct and walk several blocks. He later returned
to selling newspapers in his junior high school years, and
again on the senate side. It took seniority to sell papers
on the house side of the Capital Building, because there
were nearly twice as many people on that side. He sold
between thirty and forty papers a day at five cents a piece,
earning himself about a dollar each day. "That was a good
deal of money for a junior high school student at that time."
Bob worked his way up in the newspaper business, working as
a proofreader and reporter off and on while attending college.

Bob graduated from high school in 1934, finishing
sixth from the top in his class of about 206. He was able
to go on to college with the aid of the Grace Raymond Hubert
Scholarship (not sure of the spelling here) which was the
income on $5,000.00 dollars. This paid for more than half
of a years costs, about $250 dollars at the University
of Wyoming in Laramie. Bob also earned money through a work
assistance program that most of the students participated in.
He earned ten dollars a month at about twenty cents an hour. One should recognize that this was still in the recovery years of the Great Depression. The enrollment at the University was about 1,700 at this time, a much smaller Laramie than we know today. His major was basically that of his own interests, taking classes that he felt would do him the most good. The Journalism Department more than frowned on his methods and told him that they would recommend others ahead of him for jobs. Bob gave little consideration to their threats, knowing that he had a job with the paper in Cheyenne. He chose to take the classes that he felt were most important, including a class at the Law School. This is a quality that I cannot help but to like in a person.

Bob participated in sports activities while at the University of Wyoming. He was an intramural boxer all four years and also on Ed Lance's first wrestling team. Wyoming did not have much of a football team at this time and often the team would only consist of about twenty two players. The basketball team drew the crowds. This was when they still had the center jump, making the scores a lot lower.

Bob worked on the college paper all four year he was in Laramie. After graduating from a class of about two hundred at the University of Wyoming, he went to work for the paper in Cheyenne on a full time basis. After working three months at the Cheyenne paper he was asked to go to Worland where they had intended to start a daily paper, and Bob accepted. He worked there up until the time of
World War II and he had gained part ownership in the Worland paper. After the war he returned to Worland to work on the paper up until 1951, when he came to Rock Springs as editor of its paper. He had married Helen M. Hamm two years before moving to Rock Springs and had acquired part ownership in the Rock Springs paper, the Worland paper, the Rawlins paper, and a small interest in the Cheyenne paper.

In 1961 Bob went to Law School in Laramie and summer school in Colorado. He began his own practice in 1963 in Rock Springs. However, at the same time another man by the name of Robert Johnson was hired as the new executive director of the Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce. Many people would mistake this Robert Johnson for himself. Thinking that he was the executive director of the Chamber of Commerce many would not feel he would be able to dedicate the proper amount of time to his law practice. This would hurt business and to overcome this mistaken identity a friend had suggested he run for political office. He had three choices: County Commissioner, County Attorney, or the State Legislature. A County Commissioner seat was not a very practical race to attempt at that time. The County Attorney seat would be a professional loss if he was not elected. The State Legislature would provide him with the needed publicity. He chose to run for the senate because it would provide a better challenge than the house and he won in 1966 the first try.

Once in office he would soon become one of Wyoming's
most successful Democrat legislator. The first piece of legislation that Bob was able to maneuver through congress was the trona mining bill that allowed the mines to expand. He played a role in the passage of the Joint Powers Act. This has provided money to build the Sweetwater Memorial Hospital, Western Wyoming College, new schools in Green River, and the Rock Springs-Sweetwater County Airport through loans. Bob led the opposition to the coal slurry pipeline projects. He nearly repealed the right-to-work law in Wyoming. One of his biggest accomplishments came in his first of three terms. This was the Education Code and Bob nearly wrote this code single handedly. He had overlooked nothing in preparing it. He had allowed for students rights and also a section for the handicapped. These things had never existed in previous Wyoming education guidelines nor federal guidelines. Bob's work was almost ahead of its time, and in a few years the federal government handed down a law dealing with both education for the handicapped and also students rights that was virtually the same. Bob has many other good marks on his legislative record, these are just a few. An article from the Wyoming Eagle referred to Bob as the "most capable man in the Wyoming senate", and that he may have been. He did a great deal for Sweetwater County and Wyoming while he was there. He was beat in 1978 in a heated primary campaign.

He fell victim to the tide of the times. His cedibility
had been overshadowed by a 60 Minutes Documentary that all but convicted everyone that had anything to do with city government. Bob was the city attorney at this time, so the Dan Rather accusations of scandal and fraud would take their toll. However, the 60 Minutes Documentary proved to be nothing more than accusations. After a grueling effort by a grand jury investigation that was to find evidence to prove the guilt of the city fathers, nothing was found. There had been no scandal, but the documentary had served its purpose.

Bob has later found out that this was an attempt by the Republican party to break down the Democratic stronghold in Sweetwater County. I asked Bob if he thought that he had overcome the credibility loss due to the documentary and his answer was that he felt he had. "People have come to realize what happened and the 1980 election shows that."

A solid slate of Democrat candidates were elected to office this last year and Bob played a role in that. Bob is presently the chairman of the Sweetwater County Democratic Central Committee and the campaign that he ran as chairman for the Democrats running was not only a success, but also very fair.

Bob is presently looking forward to the election in 1982 when Sweetwater County will gain two more house seats and one more senate seats. "It is our job (as Democratic Central Committeeman) to find good Democrat candidates and
I am sure we can find them." There will be two senate seats up and five house seats. Bob Johnson will do his best to fill those seats with Democrats and I hope to be able to help him.

All information was taken from an interview with Bob Johnson. I did use a quote from a newspaper clipping that Bob gave me and that was printed out in the paper. I truely thank Bob Johnson for a very interesting oral history and the material for an excellent project.

Rod Watkins