

## **T. Edgar Johnson**

### **1. Context- why is he considered historic?**

#### **a. How does his history relate to the earlier history of the community or county?**

Much has been written about the Great Depression Era in America. Vivid photographs of broken lives, lost fortunes, bread lines, New Deal programs, and employment postings resonate vividly in our minds. Vernon, Texas was no different. As a small agricultural community in North Texas, the farmers, ranchers, and merchants were hurting in so many ways. Some folks buckled under the pressure, while others took the reins of leadership. One such individual was T. Edgar Johnson. He had prepared himself well. Coming from a strong knit family, Mr. Johnson got a good education, and with his military background from World War I, had the courage and fortitude to make a difference. Still penniless like the rest, he came up with a plan to get things going again, an idea to help the community and area. As we all know, ideas are not worth much until they are combined with hard work and perseverance.

#### **b. What is his relevance to the broader history?**

With the help of family and friends, Johnson scraped together enough resources to purchase a new and used car dealership in Vernon, Texas, some 110 miles north of Breckenridge. While frequently leaving his wife and daughter at home in Breckenridge, he struggled to start his dealership.<sup>1</sup> In 1930, he incorporated the business.<sup>2</sup> In 1932, Louie Robert Davis, his brother-in-law of Abilene, helped finance the business. This relationship continued until 1939 under the name of the “Johnson-Davis Ford Company”, when T. Edgar bought out Louie.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, T. Edgar

continued to use the name until the dealership was sold in 1960. A Ford dealership still exists in Vernon today.

**c. What took place locally, regionally, nationally that had a bearing on how or why he was important?**

As the depression continued, things were improving in Vernon. In 1937, Johnson served as President of the Vernon Chamber of Commerce. He also served on the Board of Directors for many years.<sup>4</sup> During that same year, the 1937 edition of the State Officials, Boards, and Commissions reflected T. Edgar to be serving on the Board of the Pease River Flood Control District.<sup>5</sup> The Johnson-Davis Ford Company became a local place of commerce and enterprise. Throughout the region, it brought mechanization and transportation to its citizens, especially the farmers and ranchers who depended upon this for their own livelihood.

**2. Overview- the main body of the narrative history with key facts in the story, told in chronological order-focusing on what we think is the historical period of significance.**

Thaddeus Edgar Johnson, attorney and businessman, was born in Fairfield, Freestone County, Texas, on July 31, 1889, to Thaddeus Edgar Johnson, Sr., and Minnie Blanche (Milner) Johnson.<sup>6</sup> He was the grandson of the well-known Civil War Brigadier General Joseph Burton Johnson of Fairfield. General Johnson and his wife, Patience Ponder Johnson, had migrated from Florida and Georgia in 1848, initially settling in Brazos County. In 1854, they resettled in Fairfield in Freestone County. General Johnson was commemorated with an official State of Texas Historical Marker in 1972 in Freestone County.<sup>7</sup>

In 1892, the Thaddeus Edgar Johnson, Sr., family, including their six sons, moved to Waco to begin farming and ranching in McLennan County north of the Brazos River. Thaddeus Edgar Johnson, Sr. died in 1925, and is buried in the Oakland Cemetery in Waco.<sup>8</sup>

Their fourth son, T. Edgar went through grade school and high school in the Waco public schools that then consisted of only 11 grades. He graduated from Waco High School in 1907.<sup>9</sup> T. Edgar often recounted to his grandsons that he had to take a raft across the Brazos to go from the Johnson farm to the Waco schools. He told them of the many cold winters that resulted in ice flows on the Brazos necessitating great caution in crossing this great Texas River. After graduation from high school, T. Edgar attended a college preparatory school in Waco – the Douglas Select School.<sup>10</sup> This school prepared T. Edgar for admission to attend college and law school at the University of Texas in Austin.

He enrolled in the summer of 1909 and immediately after graduation from college enrolled in law school. He graduated with an L.L.B. in May of 1915.

After graduation and passing the bar on June 8, 1915<sup>11</sup>, he returned to Waco where he practiced law for two years and also served as the Judge of the Justice Court.<sup>12</sup>

He served in the United States Army (American Expeditionary Forces) beginning on August 15, 1917.<sup>13</sup> Because of his educational background, he was selected to attend the First Officers Training Camp at Camp Leon Springs north of Fort Travis in San Antonio.<sup>14</sup> There, he was trained in the field artillery. He was one of 71 officers trained and commissioned in Leon Springs, a stage stop during the 1800's on the San Antonio to El Paso Stage line. After commissioning, T. Edgar was assigned to the Regimental Staff of the 344<sup>th</sup> Field artillery. This was part of the Texas Oklahoma 90<sup>th</sup> Division, nicknamed the Alamo division, which was formed

on August 29, 1917.<sup>15</sup> The 90<sup>th</sup> Division sailed from Boston on June 30, 1918, and arrived in England on July 14, 1918. By that time, T. Edgar had risen to the rank of Captain.<sup>16</sup> The Alamo division arrived in France on July 18, 1918. It was engaged in two major offensives that turned the tide of the war, the battle of St. Mihiel in September of 1918, and the second battle of the Meuse-Argonne in the Argonne forest in October, 1918. After the armistice was signed in November of 1918, the 90<sup>th</sup> Division was decorated for its occupation of Germany – Defensive Sector - and the return of peace to Europe.<sup>17</sup> He was discharged on April 4, 1919.<sup>18</sup>

T. Edgar chose to stay in England, and he studied law at Oxford University for one term. During that time, he was admitted to the Inns of Court of London. Upon his return to the States, he chose to resume his law practice with his youngest brother, Walter Blake Johnson, in Breckenridge, Texas.<sup>19</sup>

Breckenridge was in the middle of the latest Texas oil boom and was becoming a city overnight. Thousands of Texans were coming to Breckenridge in the search for oil and jobs. There, he met Breckenridge native Robbie Laurine Davis, herself a recent graduate of SMU in 1919. She was the daughter and middle child of G. R. Davis, local rancher and entrepreneur. They were married in July of 1920 under the pecan trees at the ranch headquarters of Mr. Davis's newly acquired Chimney Creek Ranch, in nearby Shackelford County, just west of Albany, Texas.

In Breckenridge, the new couple settled in and immersed themselves in business, community, and domestic life. They had their first child, Mary Frances, in April of 1921. They had a second child, Robbie Lou Johnson, who only lived 8 months. During the 1920's in Breckenridge, T. Edgar was the post commander of the local chapter of the American Legion in 1921.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Robbie served on the board of the Woman's Auxiliary of the local American

Legion Post.<sup>21</sup> He was on the board of the local YMCA and was instrumental in the fund raising efforts to build the new building on East Walker Street.<sup>22</sup> In 1928, T. Edgar decided to stop the full time practice of law to seek other business opportunities.

*For 1929 through 1937, see question 1, above.*

*For 1938 through 1960, see question 3, below.*

From 1929, until his death in 1972, he was a leading member of the First United Methodist Church, the Lions Club, and the Masonic Lodge in Vernon. As a Mason, he achieved the rank of Thirty-Second Degree in the Scottish Rite. He was a member of Lions Club for over 30 years and served a term as President of the Club.<sup>23</sup>

T. Edgar resided with his wife Robbie, in Vernon, in a home which is now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Gene Willingham of the Waggoner Ranch in Wilbarger County. T. Edgar died on October 28, 1972, at the age of 83.<sup>24</sup> He is buried at the Wilbarger Memorial Park Mausoleum west of Vernon alongside his wife, Robbie Davis Johnson, who died shortly after he did in January of 1973.

**3. Significance- a topic for a marker is considered to have historical significance if it had influences on the course of history or cultural development. Ask: how did he pay a role in history?**

The big business break came in 1938 as America was beginning to recover from the Depression. Texans were now able to afford cars, but there were no cars to be had. T. Edgar heard of some businessmen in New York who had a surplus of used cars. He took the train to New York and negotiated the purchase of over 200 used cars of all makes and condition. He returned to Texas with a train load of cars. He had the only cars available for purchase in the entire North Texas area from Dallas-Fort Worth to Gainesville to Wichita Falls. His dealership became instantly successful

serving Vernon and all of North Texas. It was profitable for the next 20 plus years. It was located two blocks east of the County Court House on Wilbarger Street. This building still exists today as a full service car repair business. The historic role T. Edgar Johnson played during these significant years in Vernon and the surrounding North Texas area was the addition of jobs, commerce, and economic vitality. T. Edgar Johnson's impact lasted three decades, and it still exists today.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4. Documentation**

- <sup>1</sup> Breckenridge Daily American, April 20, 1932.
- <sup>2</sup> Charter of the State of Texas, Department of State, issued March 12, 1930.
- <sup>3</sup> Johnson-Davis Ford Company. Corporate Stock Ledger Book
- <sup>4</sup> Personal Curriculum Vitae (circa 1950).
- <sup>5</sup> Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, Supplementary Edition, 1937.
- <sup>6</sup> State of Texas, Certification of Vital Records.
- <sup>7</sup> Official Texas Historical Marker, April 16, 1972 – Allan C. Ashcraft, “Johnson, Joseph Burton”, Handbook of Texas Online, June 15, 2010.
- <sup>8</sup> Obituary, Fairfield Recorder, Fairfield, Texas, March 6, 1925.
- <sup>9</sup> Personal Curriculum Vitae (circa 1950).
- <sup>10</sup> History of Douglas Select School, Est. 1897, Professor Stephen A. Douglas (1866-1913).
- <sup>11</sup> Supreme Court of the State of Texas, Texas State Bar License issued June 8, 1915.
- <sup>12</sup> World War I, Draft Registration Card, issued May 29, 1917.
- <sup>13</sup> United States of America, Certificate of Military Service.
- <sup>14</sup> First Officers Training Camp, Leon Springs, Art Leatherwood, Handbook of Texas Online, June 15, 2010, Texas State Historical Association.
- <sup>15</sup> 90<sup>th</sup> Division, Division History, Major George Wyeth, DB 90-1.
- <sup>16</sup> United States of America, Certificate of Military Service.
- <sup>17</sup> 90<sup>th</sup> Division, U.S. Victory Medal Clasps, Campaign Participation, DB 90-1.

- <sup>18</sup> United States of America, Certificate of Military Service.
- <sup>19</sup> Personal Curriculum Vitae (circa 1950).
- <sup>20</sup> Personal Curriculum Vitae (circa 1950).
- <sup>21</sup> Breckenridge Daily American, Volume 5, Number 119 (1925).
- <sup>22</sup> Breckenridge Daily American, Volume 5, Number 119 (1925).
- <sup>23</sup> Personal Curriculum Vitae (circa 1950).
- <sup>24</sup> Obituary, Vernon Daily Record, October 30, 1972.
- <sup>25</sup> Randolph B. Campbell, "Johnson, Thaddeus Edgar", Handbook of Texas Online, October 11, 2011. Texas State Historical Association.