

VALLEY NEWS

A Life: Christmas Tree King John E. Johnson Jr. 'Was Such a Go-Getter'

Jared Pendak, Valley News Staff Writer. Published: 4/10/2016

White River Junction — John E. Johnson Jr. was a multifaceted entrepreneur and hobbyist. He was a collector and appraiser of antiques and jewelry, a buyer and seller of firearms, a wood sculptor and a maple sugarmaker. For the last 30 years, he ran White River Junction's Pleasant View Motel, where there always seemed to be a visitor inquiring about the value of an object, talking guns, or simply enjoying the company of the opinionated and charmingly gruff Vermonter. But Johnson, who died March 5 at 81 following bouts with congestive heart failure and pneumonia, was perhaps best known as the Christmas Tree King, selling the holiday staple in White River Junction. In the 1960s, he rented space under the old drive-in marquee on Sykes Mountain Avenue, festooning it with "Christmas Tree King" lettering and selling trees out of his pickup truck to passing motorists, a clear sign that the holidays were approaching. After initially cutting and selling trees for a period with a brother-in-law, Johnson and his wife, Marion, purchased more than 500 acres in the Northeast Kingdom in 1967 and began growing and harvesting there. Even after the family moved to their Concord, Vt., property in 1971, they always returned to Sykes Mountain Avenue after Thanksgiving to sell the trees.

"Every year at Thanksgiving, all of the Christmas trees would be outside the house in Concord," recalled Johnson's daughter, Sharon Noble, one of their four children. "After



John E. Johnson Jr. takes his children for a wagon ride in White River Junction in the 1960s.

dinner, we'd all get our outdoor clothes on and spend the rest of the day loading the trees into a tractor trailer, getting them ready for White River."

Johnson was born in Gaysville, Vt., from where his father, John E. Johnson Sr., hitchhiked to jobs in White River Junction and Woodstock. The family moved to Mill Road in White River Junction when Johnson was an adolescent, and he got his first taste of Christmas tree harvesting while he was a student at Hartford High.

"He was a naughty boy at school, always causing trouble, so teachers would always be looking for something for him to do," Noble said. "One year they said, 'John, go get us a Christmas tree for the classroom,' and he went into the woods with a saw and got one. That was really how it all started."

Johnson eventually dropped out of school and joined the U.S. Navy in 1951. He was stationed in North Carolina, Virginia and finally the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he met Marion. Trained in mechanics while in the service, Johnson worked at a Woodsville auto body shop and later was a furniture truck driver. "He was driving under the Mascoma Lake underpass in Enfield and the truck got stuck," Noble said. "He walked to the nearest pay phone and quit the job right then and there."

Johnson later ran his own service station as well as various transportation services, purchasing Jacobs and Hanley's Taxi and the Tri-Town bus. He also spent time as a police officer in both Hartford and Woodstock, even without any formal academy training. "He had his experience in the Navy, but I don't believe he ever really got any police training," his son John E. Johnson V said. "But he had a badge, a gun and a cruiser all the same."

In the summers, he requested overnight police shifts and worked a second job to help send his children to camp in upstate New York. "It was \$50 per week per child, which was a huge sum at the time," Noble said. "He'd work all night as a police officer, then drive a water truck until 3 p.m. so we could go to summer camp," Noble said. "It was such a wonderful experience. It was a huge gift that he did that for us."

The Johnsons stayed in Concord until 1985, when they purchased the Pleasant View Motel on Route 4 in White River Junction. While maintaining the Christmas tree business, Johnson ran a gun shop out of the motel and became a learned collector of antiques and jewelry, hired on numerous occasions for estate appraisals and often traveling to buy and sell.

"He was really self-taught with all of that; just spent a lot of time reading books and doing research on the Internet," said brother David Johnson, of Westminster, Md. "I think he might have gotten that from our father, except that instead of being on the computer, our father would read the World Book Encyclopedia every night." Johnson also maintained a maple sugaring house and carved figurines and utensils out of wood. He collected so many gems that he had made into jewelry for his wife that Marion received the nickname "Diamond Lil" after the Broadway play.

"He was such a go-getter, really dabbled in everything," Noble said. "There were so many things he was interested in; some of it for hobbies, some of it for business." Standing 6-foot-4 and roughly 250 pounds for much of his adult life, Johnson was naturally nicknamed "Big John" and had the personality to match it. Staunchly conservative, he wasn't reserved in espousing opinions to friends and virtual strangers alike.

"He was an outspoken old Vermonter; you never really had to guess what he was thinking," said son Alan Johnson, who today runs the family's tree farm operations. "At the same time, he was very compassionate toward people and he wouldn't turn his back on you. I remember when we were kids, one of our cousins went into the Air Force and his family was kind of on hard times, so we took them in. There was another time when a local preacher needed a place to stay and ended up staying with us for quite a while."

Johnson also carried a reverence for the elderly, Alan said, and made a point to listen to others. "He taught us to respect older people and to listen to what they had to say," Alan recalled. "I think that was one of the reasons he had so many friends."



John E. Johnson Jr. with his children and wife Marion in White River Junction in the 1960s.