



*Nels Johnson, Sr., in 1973.*

1904 – 2002

## Nels Joel Johnson, Sr. A Legend In Arboriculture

*Editor's Note: The author thanks Mr. Johnson's daughter-in-law Peggy Johnson as well as Shia Kapos, a staff reporter for the Chicago Tribune, whose material features prominently in this article.*

*Mr. Nels Joel Johnson, Sr., founder of Nels J. Johnson Tree Experts, Inc., passed away at the King Home in Evanston on November 8. Mr. Johnson was 98. He was preceded in death by his wife and is survived by two sons, N. Joel and Karl; a daughter, Karin; their families and six grandchildren.*

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Mr. Johnson may not have been well known to the younger generation of superintendents, but a portion of his legacy lives on in the first-class tree-care company he founded that still serves hordes of golf courses in the Chicago area. Their name is synonymous with quality work and prompt service. However, the senior superintendents in our ranks recall Mr. Johnson as a very social man; strong-willed with a friendly, but firm, personality. A can-do man, he once broke his leg but immediately hired a driver so that he could continue to service his accounts. He was also known as a very knowledgeable arborist and fair businessman. He enjoyed people and conducted business with the attitude that if you place people first, the business end would take care of itself; sage advice for any era.

His love of nature was cultivated in the land of his birth. In 1904, he was born in Skane in southern Sweden, where the rich farmland and forests of oak, beech and other trees cover most of the fertile land. Mr. Johnson remembered fondly that as a boy, he climbed around the 1,000-year-old oak tree at Bosjokloster Castle. Upon graduating from high school and a university in Sweden with a degree in botany, he set sail for the United States in 1926. Although it was the Great Depression, he arrived on the North Shore of Chicago well-prepared, being fluent in Swedish, German, English and Latin. His clients appreciated his knowledge, experience and ability to identify almost every flower, bush and tree by its scientific Latin name.

After founding the present-day tree-care company in 1930, he studied plant physiology and phytopathology at the University of Chicago, and engineering at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1948, he also earned a bachelor of philosophy degree at Northwestern and became a member of Alpha Sigma Lambda, the scholastic honor society of Northwestern.

In 1953, Mr. Johnson was called back to his native Sweden to serve on a three-member commission to examine the city of Gothenburg's diseased elm trees. While in Sweden, he lectured at Uppsala University and at the Royal Institute of Forestry in Stockholm, where the King of Sweden received him.

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Before leaving for Sweden, Mr. Johnson also received an invitation from the directors of the famed Chapultepec Park in Mexico City to examine its cedars, which were threatened with disease.

Mr. Johnson had long been an advocate of the licensing of tree experts, recognizing that the public should be protected against the charlatans in this field. He stated, "In the medical profession, every cure is predicated by correct diagnosis—the same is true in arboriculture. Without substantial knowledge of botany, soils, plant pathology, entomology and chemistry, and years of practical experience and training, it is difficult to conceive how anyone can correctly diagnose tree troubles and prescribe successful treatments. Certainly, an occupation demanding such diversified and profound knowledge as arboriculture, administering to living trees; creations so indispensable to the comfort, well-being, if not the continued existence of man and of so great and immeasurable beauty, is a profession second to none." That comment certainly portrayed a lively passion for his work and a vision for his industry.

In fact, in 1957, after many years of personal effort, Mr. Johnson became the father of the Illinois Tree Expert License Law. The new law required all commercial experts to pass an examination, oral and written, before a state examining board composed of a plant pathologist, an entomologist, a forester and two commercial tree experts of established reputation. He was subsequently appointed chairman of the Illinois Tree Expert Examining Board by Governor Straton. Mr. Johnson also became founder and president of the Associated Arborists of Illinois.

Also in 1957, in large part due to Mr. Johnson's successful efforts with the new licensing law, he was given the Hutchinson Medal for service to horticulture from the Chicago Horticultural Society. Additionally, he was appointed to the Governor's Advisory Council. At this time, Mr.

Johnson also owned an arboretum in Libertyville. Of course, there were plenty of trees. There were also horses, goats, pheasants, ducks and a giant pond. According to son N. Joel, ". . . we would take walks at night, and he would point to each of them (the trees). It's how I learned about trees myself."

Although highly respected in his field, these were not easy times to conduct business. The tree-care company that Mr. Johnson had worked so hard to build faced strong opposition from local Teamsters. Forty years ago, these matters were not always handled in the open. Threats and physical violence were something he was forced to confront. However, he stood firm, and you get the idea that Mr. Johnson was not the type of man to be easily moved from a stance.

In 1973, King Carl Gustav XVI of Sweden knighted Mr. Johnson for his contributions to Swedish-American relations and support of cultural projects, including educa-

tional exchanges for students in Sweden and the United States. He was also commended for his work in conservation and his distinguished achievements in upgrading his profession's standards. That upgrading included sharing his expertise with students in his own home. His son Joel recalls, "I thought it was strange that he was educating his competition. But he saw the larger picture, and that was to upgrade the profession."

When he wasn't focusing on the natural world, Mr. Johnson earned a seventh-degree black belt in jujitsu and karate, and became a licensed instrument pilot. His love of music was expressed through playing the violin and ballroom dancing. However, his greatest love was for nature and especially trees. His passion for that played out and his story is certainly a very successful version of the pursuit of the American dream.



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