

William Johnson

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**Interviewed by Jean Seager
For Midway Village Museum**

Jean Seager: Can I have your name please?

William Johnson: My name is William Gustav Johnson.

JS: And where are you from? Originally?

WJ: I'm originally, I was born in [Isborna], Sweden and I came to Rockford when I was three years old.

JS: Are you married?

WJ: Yes I am.

JS: Okay. And your wife is living?

WJ: Yes she is.

JS: Okay. Do you have children?

WJ: I have two daughters.

JS: Okay. What's your wife's name?

WJ: My wife's name is Lavetta Johnson.

JS: And your children?

WJ: My children's, my two daughters' names are Arduth and Lori.

JS: And you have grandchildren also?

WJ: I have two grandchildren.

JS: Where do you live?

WJ: I live at one of the duplexes at Wesley Willows.

JS: You were educated in this country?

WJ: I was educated in Rockford.

JS: What schools did you go to?

WJ: I started in PA Peterson School. Then we went to. . . I ended up at Kishwaukee grade school and then Lincoln junior high school and I was in the last class that graduated from Rockford High School.

JS: And did you go on to college?

WJ: No, I didn't.

JS: Where did you work then?

WJ: I took an apprenticeship at Ingersoll Milling Machine Company in the pattern shop and I would stay with the pattern trade until I retired.

JS: How many years was that?

WJ: Oh I, I spent about 40 years roughly, I think, in the pattern trade. I worked in Ingersoll's for seven years, but two of those years of course I was in the service. And then I was in a job shop Rupp Pattern Company and when I left there I started my own shop, Rock Valley Pattern. I was there until I retired.

JS: And so what year was it when you came here?

WJ: 1924.

JS: And that was from Sweden?

WJ: Yes. And we got off, we got off the train at the depot there on 7th St and Fifth Avenue. I had an aunt living here in Rockford on 8th Ave and 8th Ave Court and there was a Swedish policeman at the depot when we got there, this is what I was told of course, and when he found out where we were supposed to go he helped my dad with his luggage and stuff and helped him carry it over to 8th Ave.

JS: So who came, you and your parents?

WJ: My parents, my brother was three years older than I, Leonard Johnson, and myself. So there were the two, the four of us.

JS: Why did your parents decide to come here to the States?

WJ: There was a lot of different reasons for it that we were, that was talked about. But I think the main reason was my dad wanted to buy land, he wanted, because land was scarce in Sweden. He came from a large family, so he figured if he left it would be easier on the rest of them. And I think his dream was to go to Texas and because he understood there was a lot of land in Texas that you could get. But he never got out of Rockford. He finally ended up buying a farm in New Milford and he farmed that after he retired from Barber Colman.

JS: Why did you come to Rockford?

WJ: My aunt, my mother had an aunt here and that was the only relatives or the only connection we had. So the idea was to come to Rockford and get a job and make some money and then leave here and head to Texas but we never got out of it. The depression came and that took care of a lot of plans.

JS: Did you come over on the boat?

WJ: We came over on a boat.

JS: Do you remember anything about that?

WJ: Not at three years old.

JS: Okay. What's your first recollection? Of Rockford?

WJ: Being at my aunt's house. And of course when she died then I dad and family, we moved in there when I was, oh I must've been 10 years old when we went in 8th Ave and that's when I went to Kishwaukee. I spent fifth and sixth grades at Kishwaukee School and of course to Lincoln and Rockford High School.

JS: When you came here, where did you live? When you were first. . .

WJ: With my aunt in a place on 8th Ave and then we move down on 9th St between, well just off of Broadway.

JS: And then moved back into your aunt's home after she died. . .

WJ: After she died.

JS: What did your father do in Sweden?

WJ: In Sweden he worked at the [Isborna] factory where they made, and he was in the department where they made the bicycles so he was working, worked on the bicycles. Of course at that time they made motorcycles and there was a big gun factory there too. But he didn't work at either one of those departments that I know of. He also had a family store that was more like a, oh it had everything in it, you know, from groceries to the meat market to whatever.

JS: Did your mother work?

WJ: She worked at the store.

JS: At the store.

WJ: She didn't work in this country.

JS: And they sold all that to come to America?

WJ: No, the family took, it was all family. It wasn't just theirs. I don't remember how many there were. Now in my dad's family but there were several brothers and sisters.

JS: Was there, did you ever hear that there was one particular reason why they made the decision to come to the United States?

WJ: I think things were just rough in Sweden and they heard that the United States was the land of opportunity.

JS: Had, had they, they'd never been to this country before?

WJ: No.

JS: Did it . . . You knew an aunt, your family knew an aunt that was here. Was there any other friends or other. . .

WJ: There were other friends in the area from the same location in Sweden that my dad and mother grew up in.

JS: Did they help you settle here?

WJ: And I think, but I'm not too familiar with that, with them, because I knew that my folks knew them but I never did figure out why they knew them.

JS: Your aunt helped you get settled then pretty much?

WJ: Oh yes.

JS: So when they first arrived here, did, where did, your father went and got a job right away at Barber Colman?

WJ: No, he worked at Mattison Machine Works first. And then of course he was laid off there during the Depression and we went up to Lake. . . yeah, where did we go. . . up by Edgerton. He went to work there at a factory in Edgerton. Fruhoff I think it was. And he would just work there for a summer and when he came back to Rockford he started at Barber Colman and he stayed there til he retired.

JS: The neighborhood you lived in, was it an ethnic neighborhood, was its mainly Swedish people that lived there?

WJ: Well I think it was ethnic in the sense that I think it was both Swedish and Italian. I think I had as many Italian friends as I did English or American friends.

JS: And what area of town was it?

WJ: That's off of Kishwaukee Street, Kishwaukee School, 8th Ave.

JS: What was your life like at home? You mentioned that they spoke Swedish?

WJ: Well of course, yeah, my mother was more comfortable in the Swedish language as long as we lived here really. So it was just as easy to speak Swedish of course as it was not. I never learned how to write it or read it because I never went to school in it but I use it all the time and speaking it.

JS: Was it a difficult thing for your parents to learn English?

WJ: I don't think it was too bad. My dad of course had to learn it right away and my mother used it when she had to.

JS: She resisted?

WJ: Yeah.

JS: And you said she didn't work when she came to the United States.

WJ: No.

JS: So what was your home like? It was just two boys you had, two sons. . .

WJ: Two boys, yeah. It was just a normal, I think just like any, anybody else in the neighborhood.

JS: Okay. And the neighborhood was Italian and . . .

WJ: . . . and Swedish and of course there was, one of my best friends was of course American, as American as you get, he grew up, lived right across the street from me.

JS: Did they, either of your parents, go to school to learn to speak English or was just through. . .

WJ: I think my dad did. My mother never did.

JS: How did she learn?

WJ: Just from going out to church and neighborhood and whatever. And of course my brother and I helped.

JS: Were they pretty fluent in English after awhile?

WJ: After while they were, yes.

JS: Would you say English was your first language at home or was it Swedish?

WJ: At home I think, at first it was Swedish but it developed into English.

JS: And your mother became more comfortable with that?

WJ: She became comfortable with it.

JS: Did your father have a job waiting for him when he came here, that you know of?

WJ: No.

JS: No, so he just came. . . ?

WJ: This is what always amazed me. How they had, they could pick up not knowing the language and not knowing anything else but just having faith and . . . of course my dad could do anything. And the rest is history I guess.

JS: How much school did your parents complete?

WJ: In Sweden? I have no idea.

JS: Were they, do you think they were educated beyond. . .

WJ: I don't think they were educated beyond high school.

JS: What was their attitude about school and education? Did they talk it up?

WJ: They talked it up. They thought it was real important. But with the Depression and everything else you know going to, going to further education that was kind of . . . and then the war came on, so we were in a kind of a . . . what should I say, I don't know. I was, I was real happy to get my apprenticeship as a pattern maker cause I was handy with my hands. My dad of course taught me that.

JS: How about your brother?

WJ: Well my brother, he graduated from correspondence school. Was one of the chief engineers at Ingersoll.

JS: He had a college degree then?

WJ: Well through the . . .

JS: Through the school, at work . . .

WJ: No, the school.

JS: Did your parents emphasize getting advanced learning?

WJ: They did, but of course the apprenticeship was the best, yeah that was the best deal. Correspondence school was what my brother got.

JS: You went to public schools?

WJ: Oh yes.

JS: What church did you attend?

WJ: Well first we were in the Mission Covenant Church and then I started going with the fellow that I told you that lived in the neighborhood to the Methodist Church. I met my wife there at the Methodist Church. And we've been in the Methodist Church ever since.

JS: Which church do you attend?

WJ: Centennial United Methodist Church.

JS: You did not go to college then.

WJ: No.

JS: What was your first job?

WJ: What was my first job. Well I think the first job I had was getting furnaces out of freight cars for one of the furnace companies here in town and that just lasted for a couple of months in the summertime and then I went, right away I went to Ingersoll.

JS: How old were you when you did that?

WJ: 20.

JS: You didn't work before you were 20?

WJ: No not really. Of course I had an uncle that had a greenhouse in Chicago and I spent summers working for him ever since I was 14 and then of course I went in and worked for him on holidays, Easter and Christmas and things. But really that was the only paying job I had until I started working at Ingersolls.

JS: And you also went into the service for a couple of years?

WJ: I was in the Navy for two years.

JS: So what did you do for the, at the, for your uncle? At the nursery?

WJ: We delivered plants, and I transplanted plants and cleaned the place up. Just a little bit of everything.

JS: So who were your friends when you were growing up?

WJ: Had a friend across the street like I mentioned and we were real close and just . . .

JS: Was he the Italian . . .

WJ: No he was just a regular American.

JS: Did you associate with all kinds of . . .

WJ: And then of course when I started going to the Methodist Church there were young peoples there and there was four or five of us that always went to ball games and went out together.

JS: Was your wife Swedish also?

WJ: No.

JS: What nationality is she?

WJ: Well she was born in South Dakota and her parents were English. So she was about as American as you can get I think.

JS: Were the people that you hung around with, were they mostly Swedish?

WJ: No. I think when, when we came here, in fact my dad discouraged us to get involved in anything Swedish. We came over here to become Americans and we were supposed to get rid of our Swedish. So I spent the first 40 years of my life getting rid of my Swedish history and interest, and spending the next 40 trying to get them back.

JS: So you didn't, you didn't, your father discourage you from hanging on...

WJ: Hanging on, or joining any Swedish things. Actually the closest Swedish thing we went to was the Mission Church and at that time there was quite a bit of Swedish involved in that.

JS: Was there ever any fighting with any other ethnic groups or disagreements with . . .

WJ: Well not necessarily with, fighting with ethnic groups but that that was one way I think we just got acquainted when we were going to grade school is to have a scrap with this one or that one and become real good friends afterward.

JS: But there was no, Italians against the . . .

WJ: Not really. I think probably if there was any, discrimination I guess you could call it, if there was any discrimination I think it would be, looking back at it now, that some of the teachers objected to having some of us Swedish . . . so many of us. Turner School is the one I spent some time at. And I think a couple of those teachers resented the fact that there was so many Swedes in the school. Thinking back at it now I feel that way, I didn't realize it at the time.

JS: Why would they object?

WJ: I don't know.

JS: What did they do? What did the teachers do?

WJ: Well I think they just spent more time or took more interest in the ones that weren't Swedish.

JS: How did you meet your friends?

WJ: Just through school and church.

JS: Neighborhood?

WJ: Neighborhood.

JS: How do you think your parents accepted the American culture?

WJ: They pursued it. They figured once they got here they were going to become American. And they . . .

JS: What did they do?

WJ: Well I think they avoided anything that would, should I say hamper them learning or becoming American.

JS: You mentioned your name was changed.

WJ: That was changed in the school.

JS: When you came to this country how was your name spelled?

WJ: J o n s s o n...

JS: Pronounced?

WJ: Yoon-sun.

JS: Why do you think it was changed when you came here?

WJ: Well they, the way I understood it is it was changed because it would be hard for people to pronounce it and to find it in a telephone directory or then directories and then because you'd have to pronounce it Johnson and then I would look for it the way it's, American spelling of it. That was my understanding of it when I questioned it.

JS: Were you upset about that?

WJ: Not really.

JS: About your brother?

WJ: No. Never mentioned it.

JS: How but your parents?

WJ: They just accepted it as part of becoming American.

JS: Do you remember when it happened with the teacher said?

WJ: Not the faintest. I didn't realize it until I was in high school I think. That our names were different. It just never occurred to me. Spelled different.

JS: But was okay with you then, by then . . .

WJ: Yep.

JS: Were your parents open to new ways of doing things, other than to break from the traditional way that they used to . . .

WJ: I think that they were, yes. When they came here they came with the idea that they were going to be as Americanized as they possibly could be.

JS: Did they keep any of the traditions?

WJ: Oh we did you know on Christmas and holidays, we had the food . . .

JS: What kind of food?

WJ: Well, oh for one thing we had the rice pudding, always had the rice pudding in Swedish. Regular, oh I don't know what all exactly, but it was just the Swedish smorgasbord. Whatever you do have, the cheeses and the herring and the siltas and whatever else that was available. Of course it's been a long time now since I've been involved in any of that but. . .

JS: You mentioned Christmas. Was Christmas celebrated differently at your home than may be other homes?

WJ: Well I think it was about the same. I would say it was about the same.

JS: Was there a tradition in . . .

WJ: Well the only thing is probably we celebrated our Christmas, Christmas Eve and probably a lot of the people would spend it Christmas day instead of Christmas Eve. I know that gave us, when I got married, my wife's family always meant Christmas for Christmas Day and my family always celebrated it for Christmas Eve so we had no conflict there, so we could take care of both sides of the family.

JS: So they were open to new ways. What did they think about the traditions here? They were a little different.

WJ: Well I think they really look forward to becoming part of the American . . .

JS: What about superstitions? Were there any superstitions that they brought . . .

WJ: Not that I can recall.

JS: Did you ever disagree with your parents about how to do things in this country, like what to wear?

WJ: Not really I don't think.

JS: Or music. . .

WJ: We were kind of, we just went with the flow.

JS: So they didn't have, there was no conflict as far as the old way and the new way?

WJ: Not really. My, when I decided to get married I was 21 years old and when I told my mother that I had planned on getting married, because I had been going with Lavetta for quite awhile, she asked my brother if he thought was a good idea being the youngest, still excepting the fact that I was old enough to get married. 21. So she asked my brother if he thought it would be a good idea you know, that I decided to get married. So my understanding, this is what my mother told me. Is my brother told my mother, "Ma," he says, "Don't you get involved in that, he said. You've been worried about him for 21 years it's time somebody else worries about him."

JS: And she accepted your wife . . .

WJ: I think so. We've been married for 65 years now. So I think it's a pretty solid . . .

JS: But did your mother accept her?

WJ: Oh yeah. They thought, I think they probably thought more about it, of her than she did me at the end there.

JS: For you ever embarrassed that your parents were different from other parents?

WJ: Not really because most of the people that I knew as I was growing up were in the same boat really. I mean we were, they weren't necessarily Swedish but they were Italian or whatever else.

JS: New to the country.

WJ: New to the country or maybe a second-generation to the country.

JS: Did anybody ever pick on you for being different.

WJ: I don't know if they picked on me for being different but we all, I've always been big so there was very few people that picked on me.

JS: Can you think of any specific Swedish celebrations may be that your parents observed in the home country that they brought over here with them?

WJ: I don't know if it was my parents so much but Rockford of course had the group, and we did participate in the Midsommer festival as a rule. That was about the big, the big point. And then of course Christmas the churches had the early morning Christmas service at six o'clock in the morning. What they call Julotta. And we tried to get to that every Christmas.

JS: You mentioned that as you got older you became more interested in the Swedish culture. Why did you . . . when did that happen?

WJ: After I went over and visited Sweden and visited some of my cousins over there and then I realized that there was people over there that I should be more involved with and, and in fact right now one of my second cousins is over here in the United States. They're 30 years old and they've got a six-month-old baby with them so we've had some good times with them and we wouldn't of had that if I hadn't made those couple of trips over.

JS: How many times have you been over?

WJ: I've been over there three times and the last time was seven years ago when I went over for Christmas. I was there for two weeks over . . .

JS: Did your wife go also?

WJ Oh yes. . . over Christmas. And the people over there speak English better than I do so we have no trouble with the language.

JS: What impressed you about Sweden? Where you lived in Sweden. . .

WJ: Oh I don't know if I was impressed with anything. It's pretty much the same as it is here I think. I think probably their taxes are higher. But nobody seemed to complain about it.

JS: When you were younger, or when you were young, did you have a desire to go to Sweden to see where your roots were?

WJ: Not until I was, well let's just say, until after, after I was 30 anyway. Before that I just never. . . and I never had any connection with anybody over there.

JS: And your parents didn't . . .

WJ: My parents did.

JS: But did they encourage, did they encourage you at all to go over to Sweden?

WJ: Not really. I think they were more concerned about us becoming Americans than they were about making any ties with Sweden. Which I don't think was, which I regret but I think this is what the whole deal was. Because my dad of course corresponded with his brothers and sisters over there. Of course all my relations are over there. The only relation I have here is my brother's children now because my brother passed away seven years ago.

JS: Did his, both his parents were there . . . your father's parents never left Sweden?

WJ: My father's parents, no, they never left Sweden.

JS: Did they visit?

WJ: Never.

JS: Did he go back to visit them?

WJ: My dad, no.

JS: So when he came here he never saw them again?

WJ: Never, well his one sister came to Chicago and they were here for maybe, maybe a year or two. I don't remember because it was before 1929. And of course when things got bad, his sister and her husband went back to Sweden. First time I went back to Sweden she was the only one I had any contact with until I got there and found I had other cousins and relatives there.

JS: And that's when you decided you wanted to know more about . . .

WJ: That's right. That created an interest.

JS: How did you go about doing that? Did they have records, a lot of records the . . .

WJ: Well, my, I had another cousin over there, she's dead now, that knew that I was over to visit my aunt and she got in contact with me. And then another of the cousins found out that we were around and he and his wife now are the ones that have been coming back and forth to Rockford about once every five years. He's real active in the Salvation Army in their music program and it's his son now and daughter-in-law who are here right now that we're visiting with. And I think that family is the one that has kept us the closest in Sweden and of course my other cousin that, who died, her children I still correspond with.

JS: What, if you could think of, what drew you to, what did you find that all of a sudden it was important to do this? Was there any particular. . .

WJ: No, I just, I just was... I just liked to know who they all were and we got along so well when I went over there that we just kept, we've kept it up.

JS: How about your children? Are they interested in doing that?

WJ: My youngest daughter has been over to Sweden a couple of times. My oldest daughter's been there once and we had a big family reunion just last week because of this cousin being over here at my brothers boys, that would be my nephew's home. So the people here now are connected.

JS: Do they, do your daughters keep up with the traditions of Sweden?

WJ: Well, some.

JS: Are they interested. . .

WJ: . . . as much. They are interested in and of course we have a lot of Swedish things around. We have the glassware and the different the [dalahäst] and some of these other things that all of the family has. And we have a, all of the people in this country now, my grandchildren, my daughter, and my brother's family all have pictures of the old homestead in [Isborna] where I was, came from originally. And I think the interesting part of it is, that's gone now of course, there's something else there, but the other relative-- Kurt Dahlquist is the name of the fellow, that comes to this country and it's his son is here now. Him and his wife are real interested in keeping up our connection because he has friends here in Rockford too because of his connection with the Salvation Army. So that is a big connection there that we try to keep.

JS: Do you belong to any Swedish groups here?

WJ: I have belonged, I still do, I belong to the Swedish Historical Society, I was president of the Swedish Culture Society for about 10 years, which is disbanded now because people who have belonged to it have just gotten older. . . and then I, since I went to Sweden that first time I joined the [Vasa] Club too, especially for their herring breakfasts and some of the other activities that they have.

JS: Do you think the younger people now from Sweden have lost interest in doing that, being in these groups?

WJ: I don't think so. I think, I think the world is getting smaller all the time and I think that if there is any connection, I think everybody's concerned to keep them up. That's what I, I mean kind of . . .

JS: Do your children belong to any of those groups?

WJ: Really, no. I don't, but. . . of course, no they don't belong.

JS: When you were involved with the Swedish groups, did you have programs, did you try to continue like the food from Sweden, and all those kind of things?

WJ: We did.

JS: You didn't tell me, what kind of food you had?

WJ: Well. . .

JS: Is that [Lefse] country?

WJ: Yeah that too. But really I don't know what, it's not much different I guess than any food that we have here. We have meatballs of course you know and. . .

JS: Herring for breakfast?

WJ: Oh yeah, herring and all kinds of herring and fish, you know canned fish and stuff. And of course your hard-boiled eggs and things. But you have them here too so it's not that much. . .

JS: Desserts?

WJ: Desserts. . . well of course if you have lingonberries that's the big thing and of course the Swedish pancakes are the must. The big thing. I think the Swedish pancakes are more popular in this country than they are in Sweden.

JS: Stockholm Inn?

WJ: Yep. Stockholm Inn, you bet.

JS: When did your parents become citizens?

WJ: My dad became, my dad definitely became a citizen before I turned 16, I think it was. Because I became a citizen through his becoming a citizen, nationalization.

JS: And your mother also. . .

WJ: Yes, at that time.

JS: When you were about 16. . .

WJ: Oh I don't remember, 14, 15, somewhere in there.

JS: Did they, was that something to be celebrated? Were they pleased about that?

WJ: Oh yes, they were, definitely.

JS: Do you remember that day?

WJ: No, I don't remember that day. But I remember, my dad never missed a time to vote and I don't think I've ever missed a voting time neither.

JS: That was important to them then.

WJ: That was important. They weren't into politics at all but. . .

JS: Were they in, no, you said they didn't belong to any groups. . .

WJ: No.

JS: Did they keep in touch with their family or friends though in Sweden?

WJ: My dad did. And of course my mother's only relatives came to this country. That's the cousin, that's the relative I had in Chicago. So that was the only connection that she had with relatives, that I know of anyway.

JS: How do you keep in touch with them?

WJ: Telephone a couple of times a year. And of course sometimes with Kurt and his family making trips over here we always get together with him.

JS: Letters. Right?

WJ: Some letters. But it's most, it's easier and it's almost cheaper to make a phone call and it's nicer to hear them and visit with them than it is to write something down on paper.

JS: Are there, are there people coming, family members coming even lately, immigrating here?

WJ: Not immigrating, no. There hasn't been any immigration here.

JS: Would you ever consider moving back there?

WJ: No. No way. It's beautiful country but I think if I have any regrets I have a regret that I never really talked to my dad and thanking him for making the move, having the intestinal fortitude to make the move, not having to know, not knowing that language, not having any connection here except my mother's aunt and not knowing the language. It just amaze, with two little children, it amazes me that they could do something like that. And I never really talked to him about it. I guess we just accepted it.

JS: Do you feel that he cheated you out of knowing about these things?

WJ: No, I think if I would choose one or the other I'm glad he did what he did when he did it.

JS: Did you tell your own children about, did they know their grandparents?

WJ: Oh yes.

JS: Did you tell them about their culture?

WJ: Well I think it was, not so much, I mean we had the smorgasbord and things you know at Christmastime and but that was about the only thing that we did as a family with the culture.

JS: Okay this is the last question. How do you feel about the current debate that's going on in this country about immigration? Whether it be illegal or legal?

WJ: Well I think if it's illegal it's against the law. There's no question about that. But in a way I feel that some of these people that are coming over here are coming over here for the same reasons that people went through Ellis Island, they knew that this, for their own families and not necessarily for themselves, but for their children and maybe their grandchildren they would have a better opportunity in this country than they were in wherever they came from. And really you can't fault somebody for wanting to do that although I think it should be done legally.

JS: Okay. Is there anything else you want to add? That we haven't talked about?

WJ: I guess not.