

THE CENTENNIAL OF THE GARAGE DOOR INDUSTRY

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A NEW TIMELINE OF HOW THE INDUSTRY BEGAN



OLDEST GARAGE DOOR BROCHURE: This Dautrick-Johnson Mfg. Co. brochure is the oldest known garage door brochure in the world, dating to 1921 or 1922. Photo courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.



Perfectly Counterbalanced Ball Bearing—Overhead Door

Architects, contractors, as well as the prospective builders have long realized that the old type swinging or sliding doors did not fulfill the complete requirements, hence the overhead door, so constructed and operated to embrace all the features of doors in use along with the following many advantages.

Ease of Operation

The overhead door is perfectly counterbalanced in all positions and equipped with ball bearing rollers, operating on a steel track, permitting a woman or child to open it with ease. When closed, the door rests flush on the floor, eliminating gaps at bottom as well as at sides and top. This is one big feature over all other doors.

Overhead—Out of the Way

When open, it is completely overhead, out of the way, resting in a horizontal position on the track above, giving you the benefit of the entire opening. In a narrow alley or where pressed for space this feature is indispensable. Likewise, you can build out to the property line and confine your doors on your property at all times, eliminating all danger of having the doors damaged by traffic in the alley.

TIMELINE This timeline focuses on C.G. Johnson and the history of Overhead Door Corporation up until the beginning of World War II in 1941. In many cases, the findings below contradict oft-repeated stories of the beginnings of the garage door industry.

- 1890** Clarence Gilbert Johnson, son of Swedish immigrants, is born on Feb. 17 on a farm outside Marquette, Kan. He is the youngest of four children.
- 1900** At age 10, he resides with his family at the farm in Marquette, Kan. His siblings are 17, 14, and 12 years old.
- 1912** At age 22, Clarence Johnson moves to Houston and gets a job as an auto mechanic.
- 1914** In search of a more lucrative occupation, Johnson starts the first jitney service (early form of a city taxi service) in Houston and later runs several cars.
- 1916** Due to increased regulation and competition, Johnson leaves the jitney business and becomes a manager and mechanic with Fess System Fuel Oil Burners of Houston.
- 1917** Johnson registers for the draft in Houston on June 5. He would later be identified as a veteran of World War I and a member of the Air Corps.
- 1919** On Nov. 18, Owen L. Dautrick applies for a U.S. patent for an upward-acting "rollable or flexible" garage door that does not interfere with the vehicle. The invention intends to avoid the "considerable annoyance and trouble" of "ordinary hinged doors." The patent is granted on Feb. 28, 1922.
- 1920** Johnson moves to Detroit, Mich., working as a salesman for Alemite Lubricator, a system for lubricating a vehicle's chassis in only 10-15 minutes. (*This date is an estimate.)
- 1921** On Aug. 1, Dautrick, who had been a superintendent at a Detroit lumber company, applies for another U.S. patent for an "invention (that) relates to garage doors, and has special reference to that type of building door which is bodily raised and placed in a horizontal overhead position." The patent application identifies Dautrick as the inventor and C.G. Johnson as a witness to the application.
- During the week ending Nov. 12, the Dautrick-Johnson Mfg. Co. at 5065 Rohns Street in Detroit is established. The company is to manufacture and sell overhead doors to be used on garages and other buildings. Three principal people are named: C.G. Johnson, Owen L. Dautrick, and a carpenter named Arthur Kraska. Initially, they make one door per day.
- On Dec. 19, at age 31, Johnson marries Flora Isabelle Cederholm, a daughter of Swedish immigrants from Manistee, Mich.
- 1922** In October, Dautrick, Johnson, and Kraska jointly apply for another U.S. patent for "certain new and useful improvements in overhead doors." All three are indicated as the inventor. The patent is granted in 1924.
- In November, Paul McKee, 22, a cashier at the First National Bank of Dublin, Ind., joins the garage door company's Detroit operation. Paul's father, Dr. C.E. McKee, invests in the company.
- 1923** In January, the Detroit Free Press contains two articles that identify the company—for the first time—as "Overhead Door Company." One article reports that over 800 of the company's doors have already been installed in Detroit.



SWEDISH IMMIGRANTS: The family of John Magnus Johnson, ca. 1908. Front row (from left): John Magnus, Clarence (C.G.), and Carolina "Lena" Johnson. Back row: Martin, Elvera, and Ernest.



IN DETROIT: C.G. Johnson, ca. 1920.



POSITIVE PRESS: Only a year after the company began, this story appeared in the Detroit Free Press, Dec. 24, 1922.

Johnson displays the door at the 1923 New York automobile show, held Jan. 6-13 at the Grand Central Palace in New York City. Johnson and his wife, Flora, set out to promote the product, traveling "thousands of miles" around the country with an exhibit mounted on the rear of a Model T Ford truck displaying the door's ease of operation.

In May, while driving through Indiana in search of a location for a factory, Johnson meets insurance agent John Beath in Hartford City. Beath is impressed by Johnson's product and encourages him to locate the factory there. In November, the Hartford City Chamber of Commerce begins to sell stock to build an Overhead Door factory.

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1924 Company sales for 1923 are reported at \$100,000 (the inflation-adjusted equivalent of \$1.4 million in 2020).

In April, a newspaper reports that the "Overhead Door Company of Pennsylvania" will build a plant at Lewistown, Pa. The doors were being made in Philadelphia. The Lewistown Chamber of Commerce agrees to sell \$5,000 worth of stock to finance the effort. In October, the company's board of directors is elected; all are from Lewistown.

In May, the first plant (1,000 sq. ft.) is completed in Hartford City, and production begins with six employees. By June, day and night shifts are running, and by July, 15 employees are reported. That number is expected to double within the next two weeks.

Newspaper ads appear from Oklahoma to the East Coast, seeking "reliable representatives in every town to sell the Overhead Garage Door."



LEWISTOWN: Johnson's portable display was used on several trucks in the 1920s and 30s.

1925 In February, plans are announced for the plant's first expansion. In September, the company has "35 or 40 men" working at the plant.

1926 In February, the company announces a plan to build a new building that will double its capacity.

Forest McKee, 33, an attorney in Detroit and Paul McKee's brother, joins Overhead Door as vice president and serves as general manager of its Detroit branch, where Paul is likely the bookkeeper.

Herbert Cady Blodgett of Kalamazoo, Mich., files a patent application on Feb. 12 for an "automatic electric door control" for commercial garage doors. The patent is granted in 1928 and is assigned to "Door Control Company" of Hartford City, Ind.

On July 14, the Indianapolis News reports that the Door Control Company of Hartford City, Ind., will manufacture electric controls for overhead doors. Herbert Cady Blodgett (1881-1949) is president, C.G. Johnson is vice president, and Clyde Strait is secretary and treasurer. Blodgett is chief engineer at Overhead Door, while Strait is the general manager.

In October, plans are announced for another 41' x 140' addition to the plant.



VICE PRESIDENT: Forest McKee eventually became president in 1935. This photo is from his 1917 University of Michigan yearbook.

1927 In early March, Johnson announces that the company has established European headquarters with interests in France, England, Belgium, and Holland. Johnson and his wife, Flora, spend 10 weeks in Europe, strengthening business connections.

In late March, the company holds its first convention of distributors. The event attracts "nearly 100 distributors and their wives."

A newspaper reports that "Johnson employs 100 persons, has 133 distributors in America, and now the doors are being sold in France, Belgium, England, and Switzerland."

In November, the plant begins another expansion.

1928 Johnson's wife, Flora, gives birth to their first child, Clarence G. Johnson Jr., in Muncie, Ind., on Feb. 9.

In February, Johnson opens a new Hartford City factory to make garage door track. Manufacturing operations continue on a smaller scale in Detroit.

In March, Blodgett files another patent for a garage door opener system. The patent is assigned to Overhead Door and is granted in 1931.

In October, Overhead Door announces the purchase of three additional acres in Hartford City, with plans to double its factory space. Plans for 1929 include a "huge advertising contract, totaling several thousands of dollars."

1929 In November, only days after the historic stock market crash, the company's new "engineering and experimental building" is underway, bringing total floor space to 100,000 sq. ft.

On Dec. 30, Flora gives birth to their second child, Hal Warren Johnson, in Los Angeles, Calif. At the time of the 1930 census, the family is living in a rented home in Beverly Hills, Calif., with three servants: a cook, a butler, and a nurse.

NEW FACTORY UNIT FOR HARTFORD CITY

HARTFORD CITY, Ind., Feb. 10. —Announcement was made here Thursday by C. G. Johnson, manager of the Overhead Door Corporation, of the purchase of another factory which will be moved to this city and made into another department at the local plant. The new department will be a steel rolling and bending mill for the complete manufacture of tracks for overhead doors.

ADDING, AGAIN: Throughout the 1920s, the company was adding new factories every year. Image: The Muncie (Ind.) Evening Press, Feb. 10, 1928.

1930 In November, a year after the stock market crash, Overhead Door of Hartford City announces two plant expansions along with a “job-for-everyone” plan for the Christmas holidays and a 30% discount for all Hartford City people. The additions bring total floor space to 136,000 sq. ft. While other companies are experiencing a 40%-85% drop in business from 1929, Overhead Door’s business is down only 5%.

1931 Johnson is granted U.S. patents for “window construction,” and “a roller device and track.”

1932 Johnson is granted two more patents relating to the overhead door. One pertains to “movable molding,” and the other pertains to “sealing strip construction.”

1934 Overhead Door displays its garage door and “Wireless Control” operator at the Westinghouse Electric “House of Tomorrow” in Mansfield, Ohio. The door opens automatically when the car starts, and the door closes with a pushbutton on the car’s dashboard. A photoelectric cell at the top of the door opening prevents the door from closing while any object is passing underneath it.

C.G. and Flora Johnson move to Houston, Texas.

Forest McKee and his brother, Paul McKee, are the company’s two vice presidents.

1935 On March 22, Johnson, 45, dies suddenly at the Edinburg (Texas) Hospital after a brief bout with influenza and pneumonia. For seven days prior to his death, he had been at his recently acquired 7,000-acre ranch in the Rio Grande Valley. His body is taken to Houston, Texas, where he is buried. He leaves his wife, Flora, and sons, Clarence G. Jr., 7, and Hal, 5.

Company vice president, attorney Forest McKee, 42, becomes president.

1937 About 250 Overhead Door workers go on a six-week long strike in Hartford City. After the strike, workers get a 2.5-cent/hour increase, and they discontinue their affiliation with the CIO (Committee for Industrial Organization).

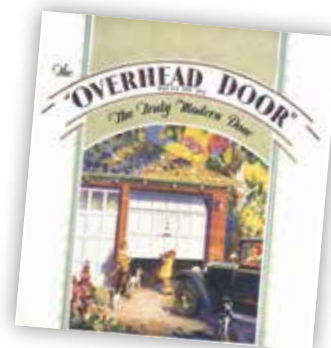
The company expands its national advertising, and it begins to promote its new “ribbon” logo and its patented “Miracle Wedge” with inclined track and a graduated hinge system that allows the door to “wedge tightly but open easily.”

1938 The company’s factory workers vote to join the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners.

1941 Two weeks before the U.S. enters World War II, Overhead Door reports “almost 1,000 distributors and dealers covering every state.”

By the end of the 1940s, Overhead Door’s presence in Hartford City would encompass 80 acres, and the company would operate factories in eight locations from New York to Oregon. The company left Hartford City and moved to Dallas in 1965. At that time, the company had plants in 10 cities throughout the U.S. and Canada.

From the author: A reputable source is behind every detail in this history. Yet there are hundreds of details here, and mistakes are possible. If you have any additions or corrections, please contact me at trw@tomwadsworth.com.



EARLY BROCHURE: This brochure dates no later than 1936.

ILLNESS FATAL TO C. G. JOHNSON

Hartford City Manufacturer Dies In Texas.

Hartford City, Ind., March 22. — Clarence G. Johnson, 46, president of the Overhead Door Corporation of Hartford City, died this morning in a hospital at Edinburg, Tex., where he

SHOCKING NEWS: The Muncie (Ind.) Morning Star of March 23, 1935, announced the sad news.



THE FIRST RIBBON: The logo on the left was used in 1936. The ribbon logo started appearing in newspapers in January 1937.



HARTFORD CITY AERIAL: This early-1960s aerial photo of Overhead Door in Hartford City shows how many small plants were added at different times.