

FROM THE PAGES OF
HISTORY

**Overhead Door:
Tracking Its Early Leaders**

Thanks to new source data now available online, we have uncovered more details about the beginnings of the garage door industry and about Overhead Door's key executives in its early history. The following information comes from records from the U.S. Census, birth and death certificates, military records, school yearbooks, marriage licenses, patents, old newspapers and magazines, and similar sources.



C.G. Johnson, ca. 1927. Photo courtesy of Jim Maguire.



C.G. Johnson's signature, taken from his 1917 registration for the draft.

Milestones

This Aug. 1, 1921, patent indicates that Owen Dautrick (not C.G. Johnson) was the "inventor" of the original overhead garage door. Yet it's possible that C.G. Johnson submitted a patent earlier that year.

1890

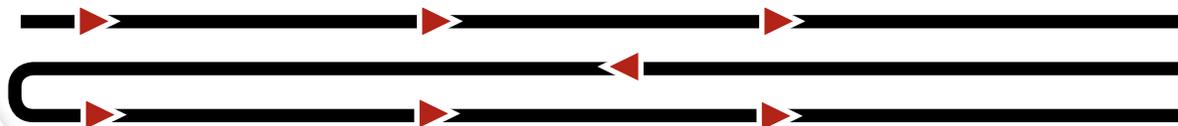
Clarence Gilbert Johnson, son of Swedish immigrants, is born on Feb. 17 in Marquette, Kansas, a small Swedish farming settlement.

1893

Forest E. McKee is born in Okeano, Ohio, on Aug. 26. His parents are Dr. Charles and Effie McKee.

1910

C.G. Johnson, 20, is a farmer living at home with his parents and two siblings in Kansas.



1923

A later account of Overhead Door's beginnings says that C.G. Johnson began promotion efforts by "first demonstrating it at the 1923 New York automobile show." The source of this 1923 information is not identified.

1924

Production of garage doors begins in Hartford City, Ind.

1926

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

On July 14, the Indianapolis News reports that "The Door Control Company" has been formed in Hartford City, Ind., "to manufacture electric controls for overhead doors." H.C. Blodgett is president, C.G. Johnson is vice president, and Clyde Strait is secretary and treasurer.

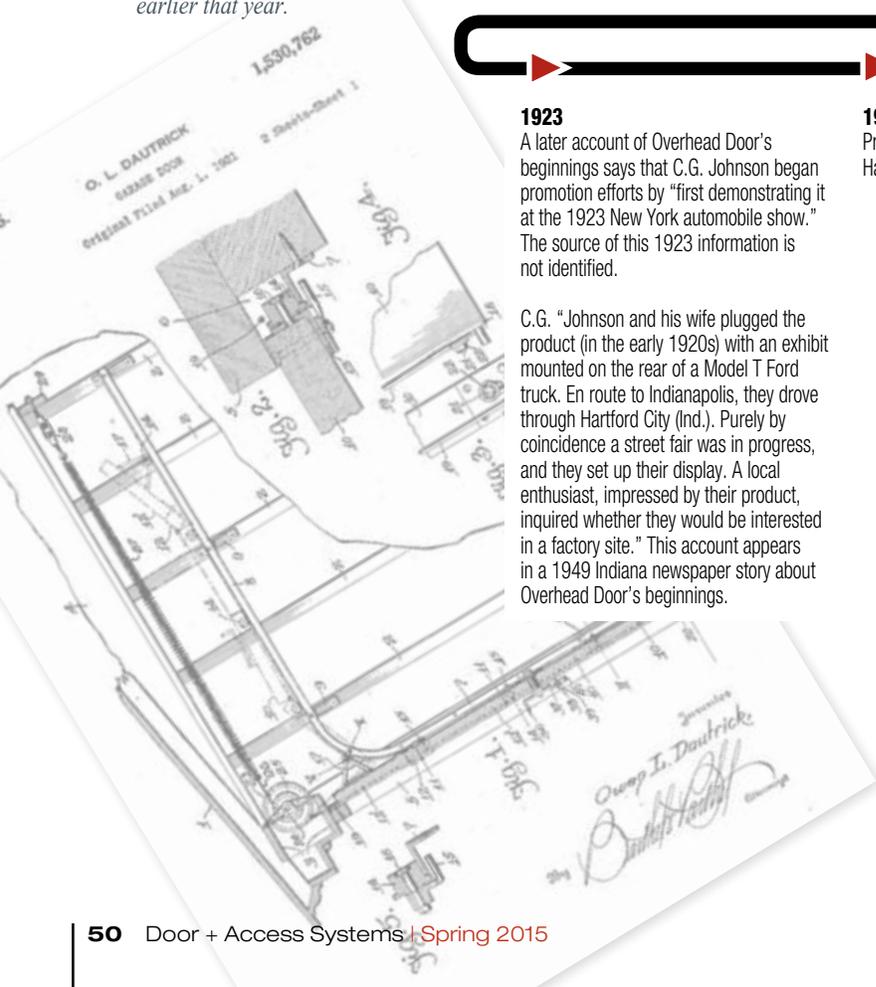
C.G. "Johnson and his wife plugged the product (in the early 1920s) with an exhibit mounted on the rear of a Model T Ford truck. En route to Indianapolis, they drove through Hartford City (Ind.). Purely by coincidence a street fair was in progress, and they set up their display. A local enthusiast, impressed by their product, inquired whether they would be interested in a factory site." This account appears in a 1949 Indiana newspaper story about Overhead Door's beginnings.

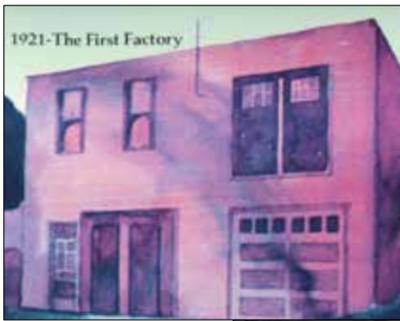


Forest McKee's 1917 yearbook photo from the University of Michigan.



Forest McKee's signature, taken from his 1917 registration for the draft.





THE FIRST GARAGE DOOR FACTORY:

Compare this 1971 depiction of the first factory in Detroit to a 2015 image of the same building at 5065 Rohns (below).

Photo by Henry Tarnow.



1917

Forest E. McKee of Dublin, Ind., graduates from the University of Michigan Law School at Ann Arbor and becomes a sergeant in the U.S. Army. He would later be promoted to lieutenant. C.G. Johnson is a manager and mechanic with Fess System Fuel Oil Burners of Houston, Texas. He would later be identified as a veteran of World War 1.

1920

C.G. Johnson is a "lodger" in Detroit, Mich., working as a salesman in the auto specialties industry.

1921

On Aug. 1, Owen L. Dautrick, who was a superintendent at a Detroit lumber company in 1920, applies for a U.S. patent (see p. 50) 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. Through 1943, Dautrick would receive at least 13 door and window patents associated with various companies including Dautrick Johnson Mfg. Co., Overhead Door, Crawford Door, Dautrick Company, and the Super Door Manufacturing Company.

"Dautrick Johnson Mfg. Co." is set up at 5065 Rohns Avenue in Detroit to manufacture and sell overhead doors to be used on garages and other buildings, according to two different business periodicals. Key individuals at the company are C.G. Johnson, 31; Owen L. Dautrick, 50; and Arthur Kraska, 32. Kraska, a "contractor," lives at 5065 Rohns.

1922

On Oct. 16, Owen L. Dautrick, C.G. Johnson, and Arthur Kraska apply for a U.S. patent for "certain new and useful improvements in overhead doors." All three are identified as the "inventor," while Forest McKee is a witness.

Paul McKee, 22, Forest's younger brother and a cashier at the First National Bank of Dublin, Ind., joins the garage door company's Detroit operation in November. The McKees' father, Dr. C.E. McKee, "aided the two (sons) in getting started in the business" (at Overhead Door), according to a 1949 newspaper story.

1930

C.G. and Flora Johnson are living in Beverly Hills, Calif., with their two children, Clarence G. Jr. and Hal W. Johnson. Their residence includes three servants: a cook, a butler, and a nurse.

In November, a year after the historic Stock Market Crash, Overhead Door of Hartford City announces plans to expand its plant to a total of 110,000 sq. ft.

1935

C.G. Johnson, 45, dies of influenza and pneumonia at the Edinburg (Texas) Hospital on March 22. For seven days prior to his death, he had been in Hidalgo County in south Texas, likely at his recently acquired large ranch. His body is removed to his home city of Houston, Texas.

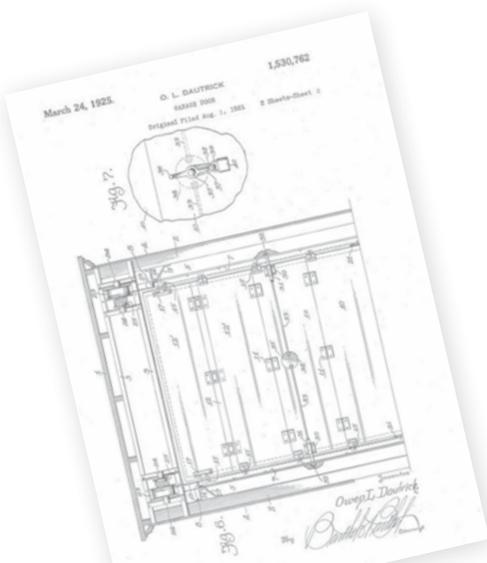
1949

A newspaper account says that the largest employer in Hartford City is Overhead Door, employing "500 to 600 men." The Hartford City plant "sprawls over an 80-acre plot at Hartford City." The company has "eight assembly plants, strung from New York to Oregon."

1951

Forest McKee, 58, is found dead in his bed on Oct. 9, at his suite at the Columbia Club, a private club in downtown Indianapolis, Ind. The Kokomo Tribune identifies him as "the founder and president of the Overhead Door company." An August 1952 newspaper report identifies Forest's estate as \$394,773, with \$385,000 of it in stocks (\$3.5 million in 2014 dollars).

Paul McKee, Forest's brother and the general superintendent of the company in Hartford City, becomes company president.



This 1933 image of Paul McKee was published in an Indiana newspaper when he was elected governor of the Indiana Kiwanis.

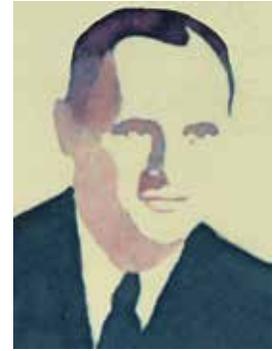
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Overhead Door's 1971 promotion of its 50th anniversary included this sketch of Neil Stewart. Photo courtesy of Jim Maguire.

Dick Wittenbraker was a basketball standout at Indiana University. This is his 1942 yearbook photo.



Bob Haugh, depicted here in 1971, died on Feb. 23, 2013, at age 92 in Dallas. Photo courtesy of Jim Maguire.

1958

When the late Forest and Dorothy McKee's daughter is married in New York City in October, Dorothy is "corporation secretary and a director of the Overhead Door Corporation of Hartford City, Ind."

1965

Paul McKee announces that Overhead Door will move its general offices on July 1 from Hartford City, Ind., to Dallas, Texas. The newspaper article adds, "The company now has 10 plants in the United States and Canada."

McKee, 65, retires, and Neil W. Stewart becomes president of Overhead Door. Stewart had been executive vice president for 10 years.

1968

Neil Stewart retires after 41 years with the company. He "was largely responsible for development of the company's distributor organization which has 380 distributors." He is succeeded by Richard "Dick" W. Wittenbraker, 44, who previously served as president of New Castle Products, a folding door manufacturer in New Castle, Ind.

Robert C. Haugh, 47, is elected executive vice president. The company has general offices in Dallas and 12 plants in the U.S. and Canada.

1970

Dick Wittenbraker dies of heart failure on July 12 at age 47. Robert "Bob" Haugh becomes president. Haugh had come to Overhead Door in 1967 from New Castle Products, the same firm where Wittenbraker was president.

1971

Paul W. McKee, 71, "chairman of the board of directors of the Overhead Door Corporation," dies in Indianapolis after suffering a heart attack. He is buried in Hartford City.

1982

C.G. Johnson's widow, Flora Isabelle Johnson, dies on March 4 in Houston at age 81.

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